

Civilising civilisation

(These paragraphs are from 'Born free: wage slaves and chattel slaves' for a collection of lectures on the foundational fictions of South Australia, to be published later this year by Wakefield Press.)

The latest front to open in the culture-cum-history wars is the Right's promotion of Western Civilisation, underwritten by \$15m. to the University of Sydney, from medical over-servicing billionaire, Paul Ramsay.¹ Often as not, the case for the Western Civilisation rises on the plethora of commodities, or slides into defending the bad against the worst: the benign Britisher against Kipling's 'lesser breeds without the law.' There is no denying the existence of Western Civilisation or gainsaying its worth, both of which are the outcome of struggles against the forebears of the people who now have the lucre from their expropriating the surplus-value of wage-slaves to fund a further closing of the Australian mind.

The Faustian bargain struck by capitalists between indulgence and accumulation² allowed space for slave-based fortunes to endow the theological *Hibbert Journal* and the Codrington Library, All Souls College, Oxford, as well as many a stately home besides Fontill Abbey and Bromley Hill Place. Inheritor of wealth from the West Indies along with the Lascelles peerage, the seventh Earl of Harwood directed the 1988 Adelaide Festival of the Arts.³ As Walter Benjamin remarks: 'There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.'⁴ 'The glory that was Greece/ And the grandeur that was Rome' were paid for out of dehumanising toil, from which the Athens of the South was not to be exempt.

Such civilisation as the world now enjoys has been won by men and women who broke bad laws. Slave revolts pricked consciences before the

¹ Simon Haines, 'An Education Manifesto for Western Civilisation', *Quadrant*, vol. 61, no. 12, 2017, pp.14-17, its manner and matter would affront both Allan and Harold Bloom.

² Karl Marx, *Capital*, I, London, Penguin, 1976, p.741.

³ Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, New York: Capricorn, 1966, pp.88-90 and 94.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1973, p.259; see my 'Barbarisms and civilisations', *Temper Democratic*, Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 1998, pp.217-26. The Earl of Chatham thought it 'barbarism' not to 'consider the sugar colonies as the landed interest of this kingdom', quoted Williams, p.95.

abolitions of 1807 and 1833.⁵ The secretary of the Builders' Labourers Union, Samuel Champ, explained to a Domain crowd in Hobart in 1916:

British liberties had not been won by mining magnates or stock-exchange jobbers, but by genuine men of the working-class movement who had died on the gallows and rotted in dungeons and were buried in nameless graves. These were the men to whom we owed the liberties we enjoyed today. Eight hours and other privileges in Australia had been won by men who suffered gaol and persecution.⁶

Freedom of the press owes somewhat more to Richard Carlile and the printers who followed him into prison in the 1820s by defying the four-pence duty on newspapers than to 'The Thunderer' (*The Times*), or to 'Mass' Murdoch. The engine behind the Abolitionists' victory in 1807, Thomas Clarkson, kept a brick from the Bastille on his desk while William Wilberforce promoted Acts to criminalise working-class resistance to wage-slavery.

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⁵ Peter Burroughs, 'The Mauritius Rebellion of 1832 and the Abolition of British Colonial Slavery', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. IV, no. 3, 1976, pp.243-65.

⁶ *Daily Post*, 24 June 1916, p.11.