Book Review


*Charles Strong’s Australian Church: Christian Social Activism 1885–1917* begins with an evocative vignette: the laying of the foundation stone for the first Australian Church on Flinders Street in Melbourne by the grandmaster of the Freemasons, witnessed by 600 attendees on a Saturday in early autumn, 1887. The involvement of the Freemasons in this event was, Maddox claims in her introduction to the volume, ‘emblematic’ of the Australian Church’s ‘open, service-focused and civic Christianity’ (p. 2). So begins a fascinating peek into Christian social action during a foundational period of Australian history.

In eight chapters spread across three sections (Social, Political and Intellectual Currents; Activists and Actions; Limits and Challenges) the contributors to this volume paint a picture of a religious organisation alive with political idealism and demonstrate the complexity of religious actors engaging in grassroots and institutional politics, where progressive ideals are moderated by institutional constraints and—in the case of the Australian Church—middle-class norms. The moderating undercurrent to the Church’s idealism is most evident in the first chapter on ‘Middle-class radicalism’ by Marion Maddox, where she shows how members of the Church, who were mostly from well-educated and financially secure or privileged backgrounds, although describing themselves as (for example) ‘socialist’, tried to improve ‘the material and spiritual condition of the working class and [create] friendship between classes, rather than [abolish] class’ (p. 27).

The collection adds significantly to our understanding of the Australian Church and its place in Australian society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Apart from Colin Badger’s 1971 denominational history, this is the only significant and sustained book investigating the Australian Church. Unlike Badger’s book, Maddox’s collection situates the Australian Church within its particular intellectual, social and political context. A number of chapters in the book also argue
that the legacy of the Australian Church, and its influence on Australian politics and society, should be re-evaluated. Shurlee Swain’s chapter on Charles Strong’s appearance before the Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions, 1891 in Part One argues, contrary to previous biographers, that Strong’s social philosophy did in fact leave ‘a lasting imprint on… social reform movements in Melbourne’. Judith Brett’s chapter in Part Two meanwhile examines the relationship of Alfred Deakin and Charles Strong and argues that Strong had a greater influence on Deakin than is usually thought.

This book and its examination of early religious social action is a valuable addition to scholarship on religion and politics in Australia. We know a lot about the influence of ‘conservative’ religious groups on Australian institutional politics—for which Maddox is particularly well known—and about the extent to which religious and political participation are related. Historical studies such as these are rarer, even more so those examining the ‘progressive’ (for the time) side of political action. That the Australian Church ‘made radicalism and progressivism a defining feature’ of itself sets it apart from most Christian Churches in Australia—with the exception of the Uniting Church, which some contributors claim is the successor to the Australian Church in our contemporary religious landscape.

The book should interest students and scholars of Australian history interested in early examples of ‘progressive’ action. Given the relative dearth of scholarship on religious involvement in the ‘progressive’ side of Australian politics, it is also a useful resource for scholars of Australian religion and/or politics. The chapters vary widely in length but between them pull together a remarkably vivid portrayal of a dynamic and idealistic (if flawed) Church community around the years of the Australian federation.

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