A Commonwealth of the People

In 1500 fewer than three million people spoke English; today English speakers number at least a billion worldwide. This book asks how and why a small island people became the nucleus of an empire ‘on which the sun never set’. David Rollison argues that the ‘English explosion’ was the outcome of a long social revolution with roots deep in the medieval past. A succession of crises from the Norman Conquest to the English Revolution were causal links and chains of collective memory in a unique, vernacular, populist movement. The keyword of this long revolution, ‘commonweal/th’, has been largely invisible in traditional constitutional history. This panoramic synthesis of political, intellectual, social, cultural, religious, economic, literary and linguistic movements offers a ‘new constitutional history’ in which state institutions and power elites were subordinate and answerable to a greater community that the early modern English called ‘commonweal/th’ and we call ‘society’.

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A Commonwealth of the People

*Popular Politics and England’s Long Social Revolution, 1066–1649*

David Rollison
History is a discipline widely cultivated among nations and races. It is eagerly sought after. The ordinary people aspire to know it. Kings and leaders vie for it. Both the ignorant and the learned are able to understand it. It serves to entertain large, crowded gatherings and brings to us an understanding of human affairs. It shows how changing conditions affected human affairs, how certain dynasties came to occupy an ever wider space in the world until they heard the call and their time was up. . . . History makes us acquainted with the conditions of past nations as they are reflected in their national character. (Ibn Khaldun)\textsuperscript{1}

Even if all of mankind should need to perish . . . humanity has been charged with a goal, as the loftiest task for all time to come, of growing together in oneness and commonality so that humanity can confront its impending doom as a united entity. This loftiest of all tasks encompasses the sum total of the ennoblement of humanity. (Friedrich Nietzsche)\textsuperscript{2}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Quotation from Rudiger Safranski, \textit{Nietzsche: a Philosophical Biography} (London 2003), 105.
\end{itemize}
Dedicated to the memory of my mother
Pamela Mabel Job (d. 2006)
and James Edward Jones (d. 2007)
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Preface: points of departure

In 1995 the Prime Minister of Australia, Paul Keating, formally announced his support for an Australian Republic. In the course of his speech to the House of Representatives he rejected Monarchy and other formal survivals of empire. His only concession to the European and British past was ‘that the Australian republic retain the name “Commonwealth of Australia”’.1 ‘Commonwealth’ is a word of ancient lineage which reflects our popular tradition and our Federal system’, he said.

More recently a leading Australian novelist, David Malouf, who is of Lebanese-Irish extraction, expanded on Prime Minister Keating’s theme. ‘Any argument for [a republic] based on the need to make a final break with Britain will fail,’ wrote Malouf. This is ‘not because people want to preserve the tie but because breaking it is neither here nor there. The republic will be accepted because we need, as a society, to reinforce our bonds with one another, not break our bonds elsewhere’: bonds of affection and concern that celebrate the gift of one another’s presence and make the community one, as Federation, a century ago, made the continent and the nation one. And we will use for this notion of res publica the good old English word “commonwealth”, as our founding fathers did, rather than the Frenchified “republic”. Nothing very terrible has ever happened under a commonwealth. The same cannot be said for a republic, as many newer Australians, who are pretty familiar with their own histories if not with ours, have good reason to recall.’2

Malouf’s words are worth repeating and remembering for the nobility of the sentiments they express, but evocations of tradition ought to make historians – and citizens – prick up their ears. Prime Minister Keating’s passing reference was the beginning of this enquiry into the historical meanings of the commonwealth family of words.


What’s in a name? Australians should continue to call their country a ‘commonwealth’ because it is a prestigious historical word with appropriate historical associations. What contribution can historical study make to this issue? It was a word I had underlined and queried in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources. To provide a starting point for enquiry, I set out to trace it as far back as I could. When was it first used, who by, in what contexts and with what meaning(s)? The exercise would have value for the study of political thought – the subject I was teaching at the time of Paul Keating’s speech. It would raise questions about how political words and political languages work, in theory and in practice. Do words matter, or is language ‘superstructural’, derivative of general political-economic, demographic, ecological and social ‘structures’? At the other extreme, is language, the main form of our primary sources, self-contained? Do primary sources ever point to a social reality beyond texts and the conventional discourses they embody and express? Do they point to anything beyond discursive and linguistic acts? Traditionally, historians presume they do.

‘Post-structuralist’ critique has implications for the way we read primary sources (in this case ‘commonwealth’ usages). What are they sources of? The problem goes deeper than written sources. Surely, experience tells us that ‘people remember what they want to remember, not what actually happened.’ Everyone colours events after his fashion, brews up his own mélange of reminiscences. Therefore getting through to the past itself, the past as it really was, is impossible. What are available to us are only its various versions, more or less credible, one or another of them suiting us better at any given time. The past does not exist. There are only infinite renderings of it.


4 Keith Jenkins, The Postmodern History Reader (London and New York 1997) is a useful collection. For accounts which accord with the general approach pursued in this book: Adrian Jones, ‘Word and Deed: Why a Post-Structuralist History is Needed and How it Might Look’, Historical Journal 43:2 (2000), 517–41 is a salutary exploration of ‘ways to re-assimilate historical studies of discourses with older historiographies of classes, institutions, social structures and ideologies’ (517); to the proposition ‘either discourse or structure’, Miguel Cabrera, ‘Linguistic approach or return to subjectivism? In search of an alternative to social history’, Social History 24:1 (January 1999), 82–3, answers ‘both’: for Cabrera, ‘The fact that the new history attributes to discourse an active role in the production of meanings does not imply, whatsoever, that it replaces social causality with a kind of linguistic determinism, or that it denies the existence of the real, as is sometimes foolishly supposed’.

5 Ryszard Kapuscinski, Travels with Herodotus (New York 2007), 262.
My generation often calls the discovery of this ‘treacherous and complicating’ aspect of the human condition ‘post-modernist’, ‘post-colonial’ and ‘post-structuralist’. For Ryszard Kapuscinski, the ‘greatest discovery’ of his life-long literary travelling companion, Herodotus, the father of History, was that ‘we are never in the presence of unmediated history’. There is only ‘history recounted, history as it appeared to someone, as he or she believes it to have been’.6 Does it point to anything beyond itself? The answer offered in this book is that authenticated archival and archaeological sources provide a field of certainty within which differences of interpretation are inevitable. The Norman Conquest, the deposition of Edward II and the execution of Charles I definitely happened. What they signify is subject to enduring disagreement.7

Enquiry into the historical provenance and meanings of the ‘commonwealth’ words involves investigation of another, past society tackling the same problematic as twenty-first-century countries like Australia: the perennial business of constituting and reconstituting institutions and identities. It would serve as a testing ground for theory debates. Is History necessary? Are our circumstances today not so different from any that have existed in the past that historical studies no longer have any practical relevance to us? How high a priority is the study of past constitutions? Should it not be left to specialists to advise specialist politicians as to the correct and appropriate use of words?

I put it to students that whatever their instinctive responses, these questions should not be answered in advance. I recommended an ‘empirical’ approach. Always start with an attested primary source. If you want to know what Aristotle, Cicero, John of Salisbury, William Langland, Machiavelli, Shakespeare, Mary Wollstonecraft, Marx, Nietzsche or Michel Foucault thought, read what they wrote and reconstitute their contexts on the basis of other contemporary evidence. The question of what it means for a country to call itself a commonwealth is even more demanding. The amount of time we devote to it will depend on how important we think it is. It becomes more important when we have children and grandchildren who are bound to feel the need for ideas and to ask questions. What should be passed on?

The issues are interdisciplinary. We need to lay prejudices and preconceptions aside and gather information about how (of what) ‘Australia’

6 Ibid., 272.
(or whatever country it is that we are seeking to name) is actually 'constituted'. How should we visualize the whole thing: as landscape traversed or mapped from a bird’s-eye view? Should we reduce it to institutions, as constitutional studies often do? What are its component parts? Is it an ‘imagined community’, as Benedict Anderson wrote of all modern nation-states? How is it imagined and by whom? Ethnicity and religious affiliation have always been prominent in private and public discourse in Australia (and many other countries). Is it always so? Were ethnicity and religious affiliation implicated in earlier usages of the commonweal/th words, or did other issues predominate? What about class? Class was an especially lively topic of discussion at the University of Western Sydney, where a higher proportion of students identified themselves as ‘working class’ than is true of more prestigious (older) universities in more expensive regions of Sydney. What values do the different parts and members of the Australian commonwealth hold dear? And it is clearly crucial for the student of political and constitutional thought to address the nature, distribution and sources of power.

We can be forgiven for sharing the response of Bertolt Brecht’s ‘worker who reads history’: ‘So many reports! So many questions!’ Arguably, England was the first nation-state in world history. At the beginning of its journey it had a handful of classical literary sources concerning the forms of city-states and empires to compare its own experience with, but the ‘kingdom’ of England was neither of these. It had no easily comparable predecessor: hence the constant theme of a people trying to make sense of events after they had occurred.

All the disciplines of the human sciences must contribute to this question of how a society is actually constituted, how and why it differs from other human communities – as opposed to how it/they is/are supposed to be. The epigrams at the beginning of this book are intended to invoke two larger contexts of human studies as I conceive them. Ibn Khaldun reminds us that every culture and civilization of which we have any knowledge had a special place for Herodotus’s discipline. This book is a study, in Ibn Khaldun’s words, of how ‘past conditions’ (a ‘long early modern’ period encompassing the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries) created English ‘national character’ and how both were shaped into a force that ‘came to occupy an ever wider space in the world.’ Ibn Khaldun laid down a number of principles that apply to the study of early modern England, including the idea that ‘producers who delegate security to others, to specialists of government and war, become politically and militarily emasculated.’

was far from politically emasculated in the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries was that it was armed and trained. The patriarchal reference is intended and unavoidable: this was a reflexively patriarchal culture. I will touch on Nietzsche in due course.

The people to whom I am most indebted, dead and alive, are in the footnotes: this is a work of synthesis, and I have tried to make sure the giants upon whose shoulders my conjectures are based are properly acknowledged throughout. In the research I tried to follow my own advice and start with primary sources. An Australian Research Council Large Grant (2001–3) enabled me to spend two years shuffling between the Library of the Institute of Historical Research and the British Library. No praise is too high for the quality of the resources and facilities offered by these institutions and their staffs. Without the generosity of Paula and Trevor Hammett, Paul and Britt Clement, and Cathy Shrank, London would have been beyond our means. Many of the early ideas were tried out at meetings of Sybil Jack's Sydney Renaissance Society or Andrew McCrae's early modern symposium at Sydney University, and then at the biennial conferences of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (ANZAMEMS). Since then various bits and pieces of the story have been presented at seminars and conferences too numerous to list. I hope I listened carefully enough to the responses, which have been extremely important. I am especially grateful to my fellow members and associates of ANZAMEMS for the critical encouragement and advice they gave when the project was an infant. The 'school' I most closely identify and associate with is that of Keith Wrightson, his students, and (most recently) their students. I have my own sense of the limits and possibilities of the ship Peter Laslett launched back in the 1960s, what might loosely be called 'Cambridge reconstitutionism'; I am certain, nevertheless, that the most substantial advances in the recent historiography of the English thirteenth to seventeenth centuries, and of early modern Europe in general, have been made by social, economic and demographic historians whose work begins with microstudies using difficult and previously neglected archives. Sorting the archives of everyday life into coherent histories is not as easy as its practitioners often make it seem. Conal Condren, Patricia Crawford, Phil Withington, Alex Shepherd, Andrew McCrae, Michael Bennett, Vivien Brodsky, Charles Zika, the editorial board of History Workshop Journal, anonymous readers for Social History, Cultural and Social History and the William and Mary Quarterly, James Holstun, Steve Hindle, Garthine Walker, Pat Hudson, Simon Middleton, Peter Thompson, Rob Sweeney, Wythe Holt, Keith Wrightson and Paul Griffiths commented on parts or all of earlier and succeeding drafts. John Arnold was a valued guide to my early forays into...
medieval history and tried his best to correct my Latin. I am especially grateful to Andy Wood for patiently and sympathetically commenting on so many successive drafts, and for many valuable suggestions.

Dafydd Rollison urged me to write down something about the history and politics of industry. By presenting me with two grandsons during the long genesis of this book, Ben and Amanda Rollison reminded me why history matters. The ‘English explosion’ idea emerged from years of trying to explain to students with no background in English history and historical culture how and why what happened in early modern England was of some significance to their lives. I would like to thank generations of students at Sydney Technical College, the University of New South Wales and the University of Western Sydney for instant feedback that some of my ideas worked, at least as heuristic and mnemonic devices. In Australia, twelve thousand miles from the imperial mother country, it was worth pondering silly questions like ‘Why are we doing this in English?’ What follows is my answer to that question. My greatest debt, as always, is to my lover, companion and comrade, Christine Rollison.