

[Ely on Baker, 'Preacher, Politician, Patriot: A Life of John Dunmore Lang'](#)

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D. W. A. Baker. *Preacher, Politician, Patriot: A Life of John Dunmore Lang.* Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998. 222 pp. A\$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-522-84822-9.

Reviewed by Richard Ely (School of History and Classics, University of Tasmania) **Published on** H-ANZAU (February, 1999)

The publishers describe this as a popular edition of Don Baker's now out-of-print 1985 *Days of Wrath: A Life of John Dunmore Lang*. Baker does not himself assign the new study to a category, other than to describe it, truly, as 'severely shortened'. The earlier study was well over 500 pages; this one is about a third that size.

The Rev. John Dunmore Lang's involvement in the life of the Australian colonies was of long standing. He arrived in Sydney in 1823 as the colony's first Presbyterian clergyman, and died in that city in 1878. He was active in planting Presbyterian churches, in Sydney first and later in country districts. By means of several migration schemes of which he was a principal organiser, he played a major role in the immigration of mainly Protestant families from the British Isles. Several times he voyaged back to Britain, either to facilitate and organise these migration schemes, or attract Presbyterian clergy. In churchmanship he moved in the early 1840s from less than wholehearted defence of civil establishments of religion to vehement voluntarism and opposition to state aid to all churches. No account of the frequent fracturings among Presbyterians from the 1830s to the 1870s would be complete without innumerable references to Lang. From the late 1830s he moved from social conservatism, and as a corollary acceptance of the penal transportation system, towards a version of chartism in politics and, eventually, republicanism. For many years he was a radical member of the NSW legislature relishing the role of gadfly and ideas man. He could also be a venomously witty journalist and pamphleteer, and his pen more than once landed him in gaol. No account of the radical turn in NSW politics from the 1840s to the 1860s would be complete without frequent reference to Lang.

Baker in *Preacher, Politician, Patriot*, covers the public and ecclesiastical aspects of Lang's activities with fluency and, on the whole, impressive clarity. Given the constraint of considerable abridgment and selectivity, this is a formidable achievement. The process of abridgment has, indeed, one advantage, Baker suggests, with what might be mistaken for satisfaction: it makes clearer the many lies Lang told.

In both the full and abridged study Baker develops his portrayal of Lang by means, mainly, of a kind of moral counterpoint. On the one hand Lang was reckless in describing character and in using the money of others. Occasionally, in relation to the later, fraudulent seems the right word. On the other hand, compelling evidence indicates that the end Lang thereby sought to achieve was public benefit rather than private gain. As an expository narrative structure this 'yes-but' framework is convenient, and on one level fits the evidence (as given in *Days of Wrath*), but I would like to have seen a stronger

effort, in both books, to explore the moral calculus which enabled many of those who knew Lang well to continue to hold him in high esteem. Baker does not, in the end, adequately explain the presence of the many thousands who joined in Lang's funeral procession in 1878.

Baker's moral counterpointing exercises a constricting effect in another way. It is a narrative construct, therefore linked to action-descriptions, and thereby apt, in the interest of keeping up narrative pace, to rely on minimal representation of contemporary discursive issues and the conceptual frameworks and definitions in terms of which these issues were successively argued about and negotiated. Because Baker's 'pride and sorrow' narrative structure makes 'ideas' harder to handle than reactions' it becomes difficult, for instance, to link Lang's concept of the 'true church', as set out in (say) *The True Glory of the Christian Church* (1835), with his eventual voluntarism. Again, it is difficult to link his concept of civil rights (and Archbishop Polding's right to fully enjoy them) with his concept of the Australian colonies as Protestant societies to be protected from Irish Catholic swamping in the 1840s.

The book lacks footnotes and endnotes, and while the full-scale 1985 biography is replete with endnotes, it is thirteen years since this appeared. The effect is that while *Preacher, Politician, Patriot* reflects scholarship (clearly it does), and might stimulate to scholarship, it is, as it stands, not much more than a (very) good read. A serious scholar would absolutely need to consult it in conjunction with the 1985 study. But then, what is the scholarly point of the abridgment, which after all contains little which did not appear in 1985? Possibly, however, these comments should be addressed not to Baker but to the publisher, who may have called the shots. The brief note on sources on pp. 214-5 is very thin. That it refers to nothing published after 1985 tends to imply that nothing significant has been written since then. And that is simply false.

I wonder if I am alone in thinking that, despite the great debt scholars owe to Baker for *Days of Wrath*, it is high time for a new and re-thought biography of the quarrelsome and stubborn Scot.

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