The crimson thread of medievalism: haematic heritage and transhistorical mood in colonial Australia

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Abstract

When Henry Parkes, in his now-legendary speech at the 1890 Melbourne Federation Conference, claimed a “crimson thread of kinship runs through us all”, he demonstrated that blood was an eloquent motif across the ideological spectrum in the nineteenth century, serviceable not just to advocates of the ‘ethnological unity’ of Empire, but also to those seeking to enshrine ethnocentrism within a vision of political separation. The political preoccupation with blood was, moreover, complemented by a widespread cultural engagement with what Douglas Cole calls ‘haematic ideas’ of colonial identity. This paper will examine the cultural politics of nineteenth-century Australian ‘haematic medievalism’ as it was expressed through the heraldic fetish in colonial society. In his book Pounds and Pedigrees, Paul de Serville offers an account of how ambitious colonial Australians’ “craze for honours” led to the hot pursuit either of individual knighthoods or of pedigrees proving a sanguinous link to ancient English families and ancestral lands. The motives for this genealogical craze certainly involved the desire for social distinction; but this should not lead us to overlook its affective dimension, in which a deeply-felt connection to history and to imperial ideals (De Serville describes an interest in genealogy as nothing less than “a declaration of love for the home country”) was fused with keen anxieties about the shame and loss of caste resulting from the colonies’ recent penal history. Looking at examples from colonial novels, popular verse, and cartoons from newspapers and periodicals, I will reflect on how, as a medievalist practice, heraldry functioned to express a potent and confused range of emotions about colonial and, eventually, national identity.
The History of Australia (1851–1900) refers to the history of the indigenous and colonial peoples of the Australian continent during the 50-year period which preceded the foundation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. The discovery of gold, beginning in 1851 first at Bathurst in New South Wales and then in the newly formed colony of Victoria, transformed Australia economically, politically and demographically. The gold rushes occurred hard on the heels of a major worldwide economic depression haematic heritage and transhistorical mood in colonial Australia. Louise D’Arcens.

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