

The political influences on German science in 19th century Australia

Chris Herde

School of Political Science and International Relations
University of Queensland

Refereed paper presented to the
Australasian Political Studies Association Conference
University of Adelaide

September 29- October 1, 2004

While the contribution of German science to Australia in the 19th century has been investigated, the political influences on the scientists remains unexamined. The numbers of German men and women engaged in scientific pursuits in the colonies was out of proportion with the general Teutonic population. This paper argues that this can be linked to the nature of German liberalism, which developed at a different pace and with a different emphasis than English liberalism. This paper will look at the liberal ideology of two German men of science - Hermann Beckler and Richard Semon - who wrote extensively about their work in Queensland and other colonies during the 1850-60s and '90s respectively. I will argue two major influences on German liberalism - Romanticism and Darwinism - can be seen in their lives and observations while in Australia.

Introduction

The contribution of German¹ scientists in 19th century Australia has been well studied over the last few decades. Chapters in Jurgenson and Corkhill (1988) and Rehs and Voigt (1983) looked at the contribution of individual German scientists while Sumner's book on Amelia Dietrich (1993) and Kynaston's on botanist Ferdinand von Müller (1981) expanded our knowledge. In more specific endeavours, Walker and Tampke's *From Berlin to the Burdekin* (1991) focused on the German contribution to the development of Australian science, exploration and the arts. Rod Home's paper, "Science as a German Export to Nineteenth Century Australia" (1995), investigated reasons behind the large number of German scientists who, like Hermann Beckler (1828-1914) and Richard Semon (1859-1918), travelled to the so-called fifth continent. This paper analyses Beckler and Semon's impressions of Australia in the context of their political attitudes which I will argue

were derived from the German liberal movement. Under this liberal umbrella were two major influences - Romanticism and Social Darwinism, each reflected the political attitudes of Beckler and Semon. These influences can be found in their correspondence² and accounts of their time in Australia - Beckler's *A Journey to Cooper's Creek* and Semon's *In The Australian Bush and on the Coast of the Coral Sea*.

Beckler and Semon travelled Australia from 1856-62 and the early 1890s respectively and their achievements cannot be compared to German explorers/scientists/collectors Ludwig Leichhardt, Dietrich or Müller. This paper is not about their scientific contribution, but rather about how Romanticism, which was at its peak in the late 18th and early 19th centuries influenced Beckler, and how the later Social Darwinism impacted on Semon. Both ideologies were reflected in Beckler and Semon's ideas about humankind's role in both society and the natural world. This paper will examine these two scientists' impressions of nature and the settler and Indigenous inhabitants during their sojourn in Australia.

Beckler and Semon did not suddenly acquire a liberal or more specifically a Romantic or Social Darwinist political philosophy. Rather these men of science acquired these ideologies through the political socialisation process while growing up in 19th century Germany. According to Hyman the political self is shaped through the "socialization (sic) of the individual, his learning of social patterns corresponding to his societal positions as mediated through various agencies of society" (Dawson, Prewitt, Dawson 1977: 6). The agencies which play a role in the political socialisation process include the family, school, media, peer and association groups, tertiary education, pressure groups and political parties (Reynolds 1991: 10). This process applied to Beckler and Semon in 19th century Germany where their ideological baggage was formed before arriving in Australia.

In analysing the influences of Romanticism and Social Darwinism on Beckler and Semon, this paper must also do so with reference to the natural sciences. Ideologies are shaped by the nature of society and in the 19th century, the study, promotion and advances in science impacted greatly on the Europeans' self-consciousness and political attitudes. Science came of age and "transformed European understanding of the natural and human worlds" and the way of acting within those worlds (Fulford 2002: 10). Thus their relationship with science is central

²In this paper Beckler's translated letters from 1855-61 are taken from a chapter by Johannes Voigt in *The Australian Experience of a German Doctor: Hermann Beckler's Letters and Writings on the Fifth Continent*, in *Stories of Australian Migration*, ed John Hardy. His letters I refer to are also in Stephen Jeffries introduction to Beckler's *A Journey to Cooper's Creek*. The letters are not footnoted but can be identified by date and location and are held in the La Trobe Library. Semon's letters are taken from *Forgotten Ideas, Neglected Pioneers: Richard Semon and the Story of Memory* by Daniel L Schacter.

to the development of any Romantic or Social Darwinist influence account of their impressions of Australia.

Romantic and Social Darwinist thought were significant factors within the development of liberalism in Germany and arguably in the development of the German state. The Romantic movement influenced the liberals' quest for German unification which stemmed from the humiliations of the Napoleonic Wars, and a longing for powerful state, while Social Darwinism formed an important part of the Teutonic nationalism of a later industrialised, unified and powerful nation. At their core Romanticism and Social Darwinism were fundamentally different. Romanticism was a reaction against the enlightenment and Social Darwinism a reaction against lingering admiration for the old feudal order espoused by many Romantics. Nevertheless there were similarities between the two creeds.

The Romantics had preached the unity of science and poetic inspiration: at the turn of the century the doctrines of race and of *Sozialdarwinismus* derive their authority in equal measure from their 'scientific' pretensions and from their claims to be a true reflection of nature herself (Stern 1975: 50).

This resulted in the rhetoric of some Social Darwinists resembling the Romantic mold (Kelly 1981: 55) while many Romantics were impatient with reactionary politics and veered towards realism (Willoughby 1930: 126).

The passage of time between Beckler and Semon's sojourns in Australia reflected the evolution of German liberalism in the 19th century through the progressive yet politically fragmented *Vormärz* period before the 1848 revolution; the subsequent conservative reaction; the liberal era in the late 1860s and 70s and its alliance with Bismarckian *Realpolitik*; and finally the loss of the movement's

progressive tolerant reformist zeal and a move to the right.³ It was this evolution which ensured Beckler and Semon represented a contrasting yet linked picture of

³Two excellent books which chronicle the evolution of German liberalism are James's Sheehan's, *German*

their relationship within the human and the natural worlds. Beckler, I argue, was a true German Romantic striving to understand his place in the world. He wrote about his Australian experiences as part of the Romantic search for the so-called universal truth. While Beckler commented in his letters home on political and cultural issues in Australia, Semon was more circumspect. Semon never adopted an extremist Social Darwinist position and commented little about politics or society. Yet, as a devoted evolutionist he accepted the Social Darwinist position of a hierarchy of race and competition that would inevitably see what were believed to be the weaker races die out. Semon's world view was based on finding answers to the great questions surrounding humanity's place in the world but unlike Beckler, whose identification with Romanticism meant an unfulfilled quest, Semon believed Darwinism provided the answers.

Liberalism, Romanticism and Social Darwinism

Liberalism in Germany differed from the English varieties despite promoting the end of feudalism, the rise of individualism, private property, economic competition, secularism, toleration and above all progress. The reasons for this are many but of major importance was the power of the German bureaucratic state, backwardness - especially in the first half of the 19th century, uneven economic development and the fragility of participatory political institutions (Sheehan 1999: 272). These circumstances led to the state filling the central role within the liberal reform process, which to a large degree was dominated by the quest for unification and afterwards by the yearning for a vigorous German role in the world. This ensured an influential place for the nationalist elements of Romanticism and Social Darwinism within German liberal political theory.

Romanticism was part of a wider European literary /artistic movement - which had reached its peak between 1780s-1830s. It was utopian and accepted scientific progress, especially in the natural sciences, yet it looked to the past. It contained strong elements of nihilism but there was a yearning for faith and a Christian revival (Schenk 1966: xxii). In Germany's case Romanticism was an:

attempt to reconcile the demands of the intellect with those of the feelings, reason with the imagination, the outer world with the inner life, reality with the ideal, the past with the present, the West and the East ... on summing up they taught a new conception of beauty, of beauty that was feeling, a mood, an emotion (Willoughby 1930: 9-10).

Right wing Romanticism was linked to reform-minded conservatives, the nobility and later the Catholic Church. Their inspiration came from the Romantic

philosophers such as Goethe and Herder. They were intellectuals and nationalists, not pragmatic businessmen or bureaucrats and were deeply hostile to commercial instinct and capitalist morality. The Romantics had contempt for what they considered to be the vulgarity of the commercial spirit underlying liberal and democratic thought. They also disliked the cold, impersonal character of the legalistic *Staat* which the liberal bureaucrats sought to create. Yet they did not appreciate the levelling, egalitarian element in the radical liberal program, since this was incompatible with the full development of gifted personalities. The right wing Romantics supported individualism and the promotion of talent, a fundamental liberal tenet, but they also accepted the conservative idea for the state to encompass every sphere of life, confining people to the single role of citizenship in the state (O'Sullivan 1976: 59-66).

The left rejected Goethe and Herder because they represented the "aristocratic and conservative statesman" and were not sensitive to the plight of the manual working classes (Willoughby 1930: 127-128). Inspired by the 1830 revolution in France, Romantics such as Heinrich Heine and Ludwig Börne were nationalists who called for a classless society, the sweeping away of the aristocracy or at least reform of the upper classes. Industrialisation was feared by left wing Romantics who supported an idealised agrarianism. They based their values on the *Volk* who represented all that was good in German life against the assault of industrialisation and modernisation, and romanticised the feudal Estates as "living, organic, collectivities, to which the individual is joined, thereby binding himself inwardly and vitally to the state as a whole" (Bramsted 1964: 38).

Darwinism was also based on literature - that of the work of British naturalist Charles Darwin. Social Darwinism applied his ideas - it may be added without scientific foundation - on natural selection, competition and survival of the fittest in the animal world to human society. Germans were one of the first to see the wider political implications of Darwin's work and helped formulate Social Darwinism, which linked the idea of persistent struggle to the fundamental liberal belief of continual social progress. Social Darwinists were nationalistic and radical and sought to "crush superstition, to inform, to liberate, and indirectly to democratize" and extend the spirit of 1848 liberal revolutions against such "bastions of the conservative establishment as the churches and public education" (Kelly 1981:7). It found a natural home in Germany and by providing reasons to pursue materialism, radicalism and scientific popularisation on the grounds that it "dispensed with any external spirit guiding nature and because it seemed to prove that progress was natural" (Kelly 1981: 143).

The most famous populariser of Social Darwinism in Germany was biologist Ernst Haeckel - Semon's tutor and lifelong friend and the man to whom he dedicated his book of his Australian expedition. Haeckel was an example of the shift to the right in liberalism. He was a liberal radical in the early 1860s, became a fervent admirer of Bismarck and a member of the National Liberal Party after German unification and supported the Chancellor's campaign against the Catholic Church in *Kulturkampf* during the 1870s. Haeckel left the mainstream liberals and later helped found the Pan-German League and joined organisations such as the German Naval League and German Colonial Society (Weikart 1993: 473-480). For Haeckel and his followers, politics was based on scientific principles. He had a commitment to a scientific appreciation of humanity and nature that carried with it a "responsibility of challenging supernatural explanations" (Hawkins 1997: 133).

Social Darwinism attracted liberals with its message of change and progress. On the right it was linked through its acceptance of natural selection and survival of the fittest, to racialism, mastery of white Europeans over other races, colonialism, militarism and rejection of welfarism. On the left it was a democratic reform movement which aimed to overpower tradition and promote secularisation, talent and individualisation. Regardless, Social Darwinism had strong links to the aristocracy and middle classes and in its nationalistic guise enjoyed support amongst the working classes. In contrast to England, Social Darwinism in Germany was supportive of state intervention rather than to *laissez-faire* - with both its left and right wing advocates acknowledging that the state would play a role to ensure a successful outcome in the struggle for existence (Sheehan 1999: 256).

Thus in the role of humanity in society, Romanticism and Social Darwinism, while displaying significantly different characteristics, also had similarities. As German political movements both saw the central role of the state as central to the reform process. This role was intimately linked to unification during the era of Beckler's political socialisation and in Semon's to nationalism. While Romanticism contained a conservative flavour, Social Darwinism was radical in its quest to overturn tradition. The Romantics based their quest for change on a return to the past while Social Darwinism explained the past, present and future in terms of the new emerging belief system - science.

Liberalism, Romantics, Darwinists and the natural sciences

German liberals appealed to science to support their progressive political and economic views and sought knowledge at a time when there was no strict demarcation between scientific and socio/political thought. As western European society looked outwards, liberalism sought science as a way of explaining the world. The natural sciences in the 19th century "gave impetus to greater reliance on

biological analogies in late nineteenth-century thought" (Weikart 1993: 473). They also showed that humans and animals shared many of the same anatomical features - thus proving a link to the natural world and upsetting pre-Enlightenment ideas about humanity's uniqueness. Both Romanticism and Social Darwinism used the natural sciences to search for explanations to the natural and human worlds.

While traditionally Romantics looked to the past they were also fascinated by progress and saw Romanticism as a living process with science as part of that way forward. There was a strong link between science and the Romantic mind. With every warning of the excesses of science such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, there was an Edward Jenner poem detailing his work on penicillin or a theatrical display of the newest invention (Fulford 2002: 25-26). Romantics were horrified by the effects of manufacturing on the landscape and the disruption of traditional life but natural science's link to exploration and discovery and "ability to investigate the causes of life as well as death" appealed greatly to them (Fulford 2002: 18).

It was this cooperation between art and science which Romantics believed made them "capable of elaborating a truer and richer conception of God's creation" (Gode-Von Aesch 1966: 31). For them nature was a mystic entity from the "forest with its mysterious darkness, or the mountain because of its elemental mass, or the endless distance, because it awakened longing or remembrance" (Willoughby 1930: 38).

Although Romantics thought themselves as being intimately involved in nature, they also placed people at the beginning of the "last climb, the end of which is God". Taking the idea further they also believed in the idea of the "absolute superiority of man" (Gode-Von Aesch 1966: 94). Yet they also grappled with the idea of descendentalism and Rousseau's idea of the noble savage (Schenk 1966: 42) appealed to Romantics. As contact between Europe and the rest of the world increased, they tried to apply such principles with more scientific rigor. They believed humans were at the top of the ladder of the natural hierarchy, and also accepted the idea that white Europeans were above the other races of the world. Leading to the division of humanity. This led to Romantic scientists collecting and measuring skulls and in turn to the development of quasi sciences like phrenology. One Romantic natural scientist claimed skull differences in the African "brings him nearer to the Ape" while others believed Africans had "better senses and instincts but smaller intellects than Europeans" (Fulford 2002: 10). Yet these Romantic natural scientists did not appear to have a systematic approach to racial theory. Instead they assumed the superiority of Europeans over the other races, although they were still searching for what they believed to be scientific proof.

The link between science and Darwinism is evident. Darwinists were believers in science, and more specifically the science of evolution. Darwin

proposed the idea of advancement in the organic world, “namely multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die” (Darwin 1968 in Hawkins 1997: 25). In *The Origin of Species* (1858), Darwin was careful not to include his thoughts on the evolution of mankind but did so in *Descent of Man* (1871). In *Descent*, Darwin looked at how natural selection operated in human evolution - in both groups and individuals - as in the animal world. Darwinian theory emphasised progress in nature. Crucially for humanity’s place in the world, Darwin believed if members of a tribe possessed a “spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid on another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, (they) would be victorious over most other tribes” (Darwin (1871) in Hawkins 1997: 29). Yet Darwin also believed the struggle was mitigated in advanced civilised society because of the emotion of sympathy which produced welfare and charities thus reducing the biological value of the population. If sympathy was absent then the weaker races of the world would be exterminated (Hawkins 1997: 29). Thus for Darwinian theory the European was at the top rank of natural selection and their largesse ensured the survival of lesser ranked civilizations. Darwin’s idea of where man stood within the natural world was a vital element of his theories, even though his original message was corrupted by the promoters of Social Darwinism as racialism, extreme nationalism and individualism.

In Darwinian theory, humans were part of nature and operated under the same, if more evolved, rules - of self interest and competition. For the shapers of German Social Darwinism like Haeckel, nature was also all-encompassing. Haeckel had a commitment to a scientific appreciation of man and nature and while he used Darwinism to reject religion he also took up the Romantic notion of man at one with nature. Rejoicing in the intimate relationship between science and philosophy, Haeckel advocated quasi-mystical Monism - which he asserted was the “unity of all nature” (Hawkins 1997: 134). While Romanticism had elements of a return to the past, Haeckel’s Social Darwinism contained a yearning to return the pre-Christian past. He believed “the will of God is at work in every falling drop of rain and every growing crystal, in the scent of the rose and the spirit of man” (Haeckel (1900) in Hawkins 1997: 144). To Haeckel, God and the world were one, and since God was equivalent to nature or substance, pantheism was the belief system of the modern scientist.

Thus Romanticism and Darwinism were tied to natural science in the 19th century - the age of discovery. Ironically there were similarities in their belief in the unity of nature yet they had different emphases in regard to man and woman’s place in the world. Although Romanticism placed humanity and indeed Europeans at the top of the hierarchy there was a hesitancy caused by the appreciation of the power of

nature. To the Darwinian evolutionist and Social Darwinist there was no such reluctance - it was all based competition and survival. Beckler and Semon reflected these differences.

Beckler and Semon

Beckler and Semon were born into the *Bildungsbürgertum* - the vanguard of the liberal movement in Germany made up of well educated state employees, clergymen, bureaucrats and professionals - whose activities ensured the "central values and goals" of the German liberal movement. (Langewiesche 1990 : 233). Unlike England, where property was the qualification for entry into the middle class, in Germany it was education which separated the middle from the lower classes. This ensured an aristocracy of the educated where the cultivation of human reason and intellect was revered (Sagarra 1977: 273). It was education which played a major role in shaping Beckler and Semon's political socialisation.

Beckler was born into a Bavarian Catholic family. His father was a cantor and teacher while his mother was the daughter of a doctor. He attended a classical gymnasium and started his studies in 1848 - during the year of revolutions - at the University of Munich. He served in the Bavarian army, completed his medical degree with honours as well as pursuing extensive natural science studies. Importantly Beckler was educated in Bavaria at a time when Romanticism through King Ludwig I dominated the cultural scene. Beckler, who was of "liberal and democratic but not revolutionary political sympathies" never intended to practice medicine in Germany (Jeffries 1993: xvii). Instead he wanted adventure and to practice science. Australia was an ideal destination because it was the frequent subject of scientific publications in Germany and according to Tipping the "exploration of the unknown interior was not only essential but irresistible. It was seen to hold the key to the knowledge and origins of the universe" (Jeffries 1993: xviii).

With a fascination for natural science, and disappointment in the reactionary politics in Bavaria, Beckler arrived in Queensland in 1856 to pursue his dreams. However he lacked patronage and was unable to make a successful living as a doctor or later as a pharmacist and lacked time to devote to his scientific pursuits. Eventually Beckler left Queensland and northern NSW for Melbourne where he worked with Müller cataloging botanical specimens (Voigt in Hardy 1988: 80-84). Finally he was able to realise his dream of being part of a scientific expedition in uncharted lands when he was accepted on the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition which left Melbourne in 1860. He clashed with Burke and resigned but rejoined the supply party and led a rescue mission to save two members of the group, held off

hostile Aborigines and was part of an attempted march to Cooper's Creek. Beckler also saw the death of a number of his companions and despite the deprivations of the expedition, continued to catalogue his scientific observations. He returned to Bavaria in 1862 and in answer to criticism of his conduct during the expedition by Wills' father he wrote his defence in *A Journey to Cooper's Creek* which was not published until after he died. Beckler continued to practice medicine and was politically committed to both "liberal and national causes" until his death in 1914 (Jeffries 1993: xxxix).

Semon was born into a liberal Prussian Jewish banking family. As an emancipated Jew he was educated at the prestigious Kaiser Wilhelm Gymnasium in Berlin and became an enthusiastic supporter of German reunification under Prussian and Bismarckian leadership. Semon's Prussian pride was further enhanced by his education which emphasised old Prussian values of duty and discipline (Schacter 2001: 13-19). He then went to the prestigious Jena University - a centre of German nationalist sentiment which reinforced his Prussian cultural pride. Importantly for his ideological mindset, Semon also came under the influence of Haeckel at Jena (Schacter 2002: 21-30). However politically Semon did not share Haeckel's extreme Social Darwinism. Being Prussian for Semon was part of his nationalist identity and yet Haeckel's extremists views such as quasi-mysticism and Aryan orientation failed to excite him. It appears Haeckel's greatest influence apart on Semon, apart from evolutionary-inspired racialism, was Monism. Semon claims Haeckel's Monism "blended life and research into a living unity". (Semon (1914) in Schacter 2001: 29).

Semon trained as an evolutionary biologist, zoologist and physiologist and was a professor at Jena. Like Beckler he also trained as a medical practitioner before arriving in Queensland in 1892 for a well-funded two years of field work which included journeys to New Guinea and the Moluccas. Semon's *In the Australian Bush and on the Coast of the Coral Sea* catalogued the flora and fauna of the Burnett and Cooktown regions in Queensland, his impressions of the country and his adventures with the locals. When he returned to Jena he converted from Judaism and later sacrificed his professorship by running away with the married wife of a colleague. Leaving Jena University he settled down in Munich as a private scientist (Schacter 2001: 52-56). Semon wrote two analyses of the human memory, including work on Mneme in 1904 but endured harsh criticism for his theories. Semon strongly criticised Haeckel over his mentor's militarism at the start of World War I and after many years of depression and a number of nervous breakdowns he committed suicide in 1918 (Schacter 2001: 66-91).

Associated with their upbringing and education other forces were at work in shaping Beckler and Semon's political socialisation. The pair were part of what Home (1995) labelled the export of science to Australia. In his paper Home stated two reasons behind the large proportion of German scientists in colonial Australia - the influence of Alexander von Humboldt and the nature of Germany's education system. I will also argue two more - Australia was perceived as virgin scientific territory and the German people's high literacy rates promoted a fascination with the non-European world and popular science. These four factors stemmed from the liberal movement's attitudes to ensuring a type of education which would pave the way for progress, create a better citizen and make for a fairer and more inclusive world. Science was seen by the liberals as a vital part of this process.

Humboldt was an example of the scientific traveller having "adventure for a serious purpose". The patriarch of exploration science, Humboldt's exploits in South America were examples of the Romantic search for the unified understanding of nature "in all its complexity" (Home 1995: 16). While exhaustingly empirical, Humboldt also displayed a Romantic sensibility in his writings which inspired a generation of men and women. For Humboldt, nature "was a path to moral and spiritual uplift" (Kelly 1981: 12). While he rejected Romantic philosophers such as Schelling, Schopenhauer and Fichte's *Naturphilosophie* which was an attack on mechanist science, he was strongly influenced by the Romantic movement - to the extent of using Romantic images and poetry in his books. Humboldt "developed natural history in the direction of ecology in a manner analogous to (the Romantic poets) Wordsworth and Coleridge's holistic approach to nature" (Fulford 2002:7). Beckler and also Semon, through Haeckel whose own exploration of Sri Lanka was inspired by the great scientist, were profoundly influenced by Humboldt. Indeed Beckler arrived in Australia with a letter of introduction from the great man himself (Voigt in Hardy 1988: 68).

Beckler's Romantic quest for adventure and discovery marked him a Humboldtian disciple. He was trained in the German Romantic/scientific tradition and wanted his writing to "embrace a visionary aspect that would transcend the purely instrumental and utilitarian approach of much Anglo Saxon natural science" (Jeffries 1993: xxxiv). His identification with Romanticism's preoccupation with the glory of nature can be seen in his writing and the fact he was also a compulsive sketcher while on his travels in Australia. Before disembarking at Moreton Bay he wrote in the ships log book that "Australia is to be the place where I shall make comprehensive studies and assess them. Someone who resides for years in foreign lands without having something new or valuable to report does not deserve the gift of life" (Beckler (1856) in Jeffries 1993: xx).

While there was this ambition to follow in Humboldt's footsteps, the role of the explorer/scientist could not be filled without possessing the suitable scientific expertise. The reform of the German higher education system gave scientists this expertise and placed Germany on an educational path different from other European nations. As a reflection of early German liberalism, the reforms instituted a secular secondary school system in which the classics were made a central part of the curriculum in preparation for university. Unlike in Britain, German universities placed the main emphasis on scientific research and laboratory work rather than teaching and examining and also employed professors who possessed originality (Boyd and King 1977: 336-7). Thus both von Humboldt and Haeckel were given the opportunity to research and promote their theories and thus inspire a generation. Beckler and Semon and indeed most of the other explorer/scientists who came to Australia in the 19th century were socialised by the unique German education system⁴.

⁴For a thorough examination of an explorer's education see (1990) "*The Education of An Explorer: Ludwig Leichhardt*" by

Australia was seen as virgin ground for the explorer/scientist. Australia was perceived as a continent unexplored scientifically and offering the explorer/scientist the chance to discover new species and find adventure in the Humboldtian Romantic tradition. The journey of Leichhardt, himself a Humboldtian disciple, inspired Beckler. In a letter to his brother Beckler wrote of one of Leichhardt's expeditions to northern Australia:

His journey is, I believe, one of the most wonderful thing that a person can undertake, and although he had nothing to suffer but privation, misery, hunger, thirst and difficulties of all kinds, nevertheless he had every reason to be thankful to fate for his journey's success (Beckler (1958) in Jeffries 1993: xxii).

Through Social Darwinism, German scientific exploration assumed a "national character" in the start of the colonial era and was intimately linked to colonialist ideology (Short 2001: 465) especially in the Pacific and Africa. While Australia was not part of the race for German colonial possessions promoted by Haeckel, it was still seen in Germany by Darwinian evolutionists such as Semon as a "land of missing links". Semon claimed Australia was an Eldorado for the naturalist with its unique wildlife such as egg-laying marsupials and living fossils such as the lung-breathing fish the *Ceratodus*. He thought if more could be discovered about them then gaps in Darwinian theory could be filled (Semon 1899: 2). Thus for Beckler the Romantic and Semon the Darwinian evolutionist, Australia was a land of scientific and adventure opportunities.

Finally, the high literacy rates in Germany produced by the liberal education system, and aided by nationalism, produced a demand for tales of exotic places (Tampke in Voigt 1983: 214). For every Humboldtian tract there were thousands of so-called "penny dreadfuls", based more on vivid imaginations than science. However the natural sciences - the study of flora and fauna, geography and Indigenous societies - fascinated the reading public. According to Short, science "did not redeem a popular book from its jingoist-colonialist contents; it sanctioned and legitimised them, just as colonial adventure added lustre to science" (Short 2003: 462).

Beckler and Semon's books and letters catered for this thirst for tales of adventure in far off lands. Beckler's telling of his journey with the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition contains confrontations with Aborigines, death and hardship as well as observational scientific accounts of what he encountered. Semon's journey

was less eventful yet also within the framework of a scientific account he wrote of disasters and strange encounters. Both wrote their books for a public interested in natural science and adventure. Semon in the preface to his book acknowledges this by saying he hoped “this simple narrative”, will offer some special interest to the naturalist and the reader “who likes to accompany a traveller to foreign shores and nations” (Semon 1899: viii).

Beckler and Semon’s political socialisation placed them in the German liberal movement. Importantly their respective “scientific fathers” Humboldt and Haeckel merged Romantic and Social Darwinist influenced science with political philosophy and had a great influence on them. Humboldt linked elements Romanticism and the idea of infinite interrelationships in the natural world impacted on Beckler while Haeckel’s Monism and Social Darwinist racialism influenced Semon. Both Beckler and Semon arrived in Australia as German liberals but with shades of Romantic and Social Darwinist thought.

Beckler and Semon’s attitudes to nature, and white and black society

Beckler and Semon saw their work in Australia as a way to advance their careers and marry adventure with the pursuit of science. Both were excited about the continent and its strange and new animals and plants and were interested in the development of white culture in a new land and their encounters with Indigenous people. The foundation of their observations however were their twin ideological impulses - Romanticism and Darwinism.

Both men were careful observers of the natural landscape and flora and fauna. Beckler was an ardent sketcher while Semon took photographs and later sketched the results in his book about his travels. Beckler fitted well into the tradition of the German Romantic who was “struck by the changing picturesque phenonoma of nature” (Willoughby 1930: 38). This mystic wonder of nature meant Beckler was appreciative of all nature including the arid inhospitable land he encountered with Burke and Wills. In a Romantic anti-materialistic mood at the start of his trip in to the interior with Burke and Wills he wrote “whoever has learned to love nature finds her fascinating everywhere, whereas the squatter, thinking of profit, refers only to uniformly good pastureland as ‘beautiful country’” (Beckler 1993: 27).

Semon’s description of the Australian landscape was less effusive. He described in detail landscape, flora and fauna, which Beckler also did but without his older contemporary’s searching Romanticism. Semon’s book also continually made references to evolution theory, discussed Darwin and the co-discoverer of

natural selection Alfred Wallace's theories on sexual selection (Semon 1899: 187). Even a description of a flood which forced him - at great peril to himself - to leave the camp to seek help was more factual than gripping (Semon 1899: 110). If Beckler had been in the same situation, arguably he would not have been able to contain a Romantic's urge to be in awe of the power of nature. Semon appeared to be in control of his emotions. However he was still appreciative of the solitude which the great expanse of the Australian bush could give. Semon said the solitude at first used to bring him "lonely hours" but eventually he felt a "great and mighty revelation" that gave him the chance to look into his most "innermost self" in relation to the:

great, ever-creating, ever destroying Nature. No other circumstances favour an intimate relationship with nature like this, the living free and alone among her works, without a house, without any vestige of human culture, without any human society (Semon 1899: 75)

Semon's account of his trip to Australia was not one of poetry and deep contemplation of the human and natural world. He did not look at nature in passionate terms like Beckler but with a scientific respect. Semon the Darwinian evolutionist was sure of his place in the world. In describing the startling moonlight in Australia he did not rhapsodise romantically, instead stating that he was not a poet but a naturalist with the desire to analyse:

What is the reason of this wonderful effect, this magic and mysterious element in the moonlight landscape, which makes it an object of folklore and poet's fancy, which peoples it with the dainty shapes of fairies and spirits, and makes it the scene of a 'Midsummer Night's Dream', as conceived by one great and many lesser minds? The answer to this question is near at hand. The effect of moonshine owes its peculiar character to the circumstance of it giving light enough on clear nights to illuminate a surface directly exposed to its rays (Semon 1899: 173-174).

Both men were torn between the pride in German culture and the wonder of the freedoms in the new land. Although thinking nostalgically of the Alps and forests of Bavaria, Beckler was struck by the difference in Australia, commenting to his brother Carl upon his arrival "what a free nation" (Beckler cited by Voigt in Hardy 1988: 69). Yet he also was exasperated by the "damned Englishmen" who failed to realise there was civilization outside of England complaining that the Sydney mob had no

taste and “no notion of continental elegance” (Beckler cited by Voigt in Hardy 1988: 71). While Beckler was sentimentally attached to Germany his Romantic and certainly left wing liberalism shone through in letters to his brother :

I don't want to live in a land of slaves. In this hot region, where no trace of comfort and refreshment softens the heat of the sun, I am longing for a cool drink from a fountain in Germany, and for the grass full of scent and shade in a German oak-forest. But I reject those delicious things. I am not prepared to pay for them with slavery (Beckler cited by Voigt in Hardy 1988: 78).

A few months before leaving Australia, a bitter Beckler wrote to his brother asking that he send no more copies of the German newspaper *Allgemeine Zeitung* saying it reminded him of the despotism at home. He claimed to have become a human being in Australia and like the frustrated left wing Romanticism noted his disgust of “processions, Hofbraeuhaus, professors, smelling officials, smelling soldiers ... patriotic rabble” (Beckler cited by Voigt in Hardy: 1988: 80)

Semon also was a torn by his admiration of the homeland commenting about “my dear German soil” (Semon 1899: 130) and his pride in the industriousness of the German settlers who British Australians told him were “modest, industrious and thrifty” and not surpassed by any other nation. However Semon did lament that a spirit of enterprise on a large scale was lacking in them because they were generally from a lower class. He was also concerned that many had become “perfect Australians ... hardly able to express themselves in their mother tongue” (Semon 1899: 22). Perhaps Semon’s greatest demonstration in Australia of his Prussian pride in the traditional virtues of duty and discipline can be seen surprisingly in his admiration of an ant colony which he had tried to kill with cyanide. He compared its aftermath to a “battlefield” with all traces of cyanide gone but half the ant colony dead through its “death defying courage” in fighting for the possession of their home. Semon ends his description claiming the “little men” who showed such endeavour, surpassing man in their “heroism and “self-sacrifice and loyalty”. He said it made such an impression on him that he never tried to poison them again (Semon 1899: 147-48).

It was Beckler and Semon’s attitudes to the Indigenous inhabitants which gives a greater insight into their ideological heritage. For the Romantic

the idea of the noble savage was still strong, despite recognition that the height of civilization as European. Beckler could be effusive in his vision of Australia yet believed the Aborigines were a dying race. In a typical Romantic mood he wrote to his brother Carl saying he could imagine a return of the god of nature to his wife "Australia" who greeted her husband with the words:

This magnificent island has been desecrated, stigmatised and dishonoured and covered with disgrace, as our white children whom we ousted a long time ago, could hardly heap upon themselves in millennia. Our black and faithful children, who are obedient to nature, who praise our glory and power with wild songs and moonlit nights, they die in numbers that will soon let the last of them depart from this world (Beckler cited by Voigt in Hardy 1988:75).

Beckler displayed an admiration for Indigenous music, telling his brother Aborigines were musically gifted with some songs reaching perfect harmony. To the Romantic, music was the art which probed more deeply than any other and had quasi-religious overtones. It was claimed by the German Romantic Friedrich Schlegel that music "constituted as it were the only universal language in existence" (Schenk 1966: 203). Beckler went to a corroboree in Queensland and afterwards wrote:

If I tell you that the best conductor is not able to keep better tone and time than they do, you may believe me. There must have been many (Aborigines): I guess a thousand. I write down the melody of this nightly choir singing, which moved me more than any other music which I have heard in Australia (Beckler cited by Voigt in Hardy 1988: 73).

In contrast Semon was dismissive of Indigenous music. Armed with his belief in the hierarchy of culture he complained that Aboriginal melodies were "monotonous and childish" and their singing and dancing, accompanied by the clapping of hands and rhythmical stamping or the knocking of shields or clubs was "characteristic of a low civilization" (Semon 1899: 224).

While admiring the great strides made by the white community in Australia, Beckler noticed the disastrous effect of European civilization on Aborigines. He described their situation as pitiful. He wrote to his brother that only a few earned a living through working and the rest beg in the streets

and the men “drink brandy like water” (Beckler cited by Voigt in Hardy 1988: 73). While on his trip with Burke and Wills he conceded a number of times that the party were aliens on someone else’s land. During an attack on his small party he told of his admiration of Shirt, the leader of the hostile Aborigines which threatened them. He described Shirt as a “born diplomat”:

It is one of the most interesting experiences of our journey to see an Australian savage display the same characteristics and the same behaviour that we would normally associate with the concept of a ‘diplomat’ even though he had never seen a European apart from Mr Burke as he passed through quickly. There was an unmistakable calm in his features and in his movements (Beckler 1993: 167).

After Shirt fell wounded during an attack described him as a “hero from head to toe” (Beckler 1993: 173).

Semon, as stated earlier in this paper, did not follow Haeckel’s extreme Social Darwinism and this can most clearly be seen in his at times contradictory attitude to the Aborigines who collected specimens for him. Semon’s Social Darwinism saw him matter-of-factly believing some races would die out on contact with so-called superior cultures including the Australian Aborigines (Semon 1899: 222). Yet he strongly condemned previous accounts who described Aborigines as the very “quintessence of bestiality, resembling apes rather than human beings”. Semon rejected the extremist Social Darwinist link between Indigenous Australian and monkeys, but stated they were “human creatures through and through” although he followed his mentor Haeckel in stating that amongst the “inferior” human races the Aborigines had much in common with the lower races” (Semon 1899: 206). Semon believed it was important to value the peculiarity in races and claimed there was “nothing brutal in the Australian type” (Semon 1899: 207). However, while appreciating the Aborigines, he still gave them a lower brain capacity than Europeans:

Their brains are not productive enough to invent anything new. Thus in the place of religion they possess nothing but a certain dull superstition, which has engendered some confused notions about demons and spirits. They rarely go so far as to invest these creations of their brains with any definite shape, whereas the higher organised brain of the white man consciously or unconsciously invents more or less groundless fictions (Semon 1899: 142-143)

According to Semon, natural selection has failed to improve Indigenous Australians supposed low intellect and poor language but “shaped to perfection” their ability as a race of hunters with an “excessively sharp power of observation,

topographic sense and memory and a particular faculty of drawing conclusions from the smallest signs and traces, as to the whereabouts, the occupations and the actual state of the games". He claimed it was a "grave error" to represent the Australians as a "half-starved miserable race struggling for life under the harshest conditions" (Semon 1899: 217).

Semon, while valuing Aborigines' ability to capture specimens for him, believed they were like "grown-up children" (Semon 1899: 53). With his stiff-backed Prussian sense of duty, he could not understand how after handing wages at the end of each week he would return to camp to find that men, women and children of the camp were drunk (Semon 1899: 55). Eventually relations broke down and they left his employ and he claimed they were "restless and capricious" by nature and that regular work becomes "disgusting to them and they long for a change. However Semon said he admired their independence with their "perfect freedom from want is the main reason why all well-meaning efforts of educating these blacks have hitherto failed these races do not bow before the advancing European, but die away by his contact" (Semon 1899: 101).

Semon places all humans within nature's realm. He claimed that some people may feel it as a "degradation to the human race" if science finds that humankind is an "issue from animal inhabitants" and even Caucasians are closely related to the "nomadic savages of Australia". Yet for Semon, the moderate Social Darwinist, the pursuit of science, and through science progress, was the answer in itself. Beckler was committed to science but as a Romantic he was searching for his place in the world. For Semon it was markedly different.

Science, however, does not care whether her results be pleasing to the taste of the individual, but solely whether they are in accordance with truth. I myself do not see anything degrading in the thought that we belong to a society which has worked its way step by step from an animal origin through phases represented by Veddahs, Australians, and Dravidians, up to the present, to my feeling, pretty modest height of Caucasian civilization. On the contrary, I feel elated by the certainty that the development of humanity has not come to its end either in a physical or in a moral sense, and that our present civilization, rich in faults and shortcomings as it is, will, for our far off posterity, present but a stage of development to be regarded by them with the same smiling and indulgent superiority that we have for the intellect and for the civilization of the Australians and Veddahs (Semon 1899: 237-8).

While the evolutionist Semon, looked at Aborigines with a clinical eye, his humanism still surfaces. He ended the account of his great journey with what he considered to be a fundamental truth of Great Theme - the Monistic idea of the unity of the natural world. He said he will carry back to Jena University with him the certainty that:

The mainsprings of action are the same in Australians and Germans, in men and women all over the world. He will learn the same passions, failings, and virtues repeat themselves with endless variations, and that one Great Theme, transposed into a variety of keys, may be heard wherever human beings live, love and hate (Semon 1899: 536)

Conclusion

Beckler and Semon described their experiences in Australia in terms of the ideological framework which stemmed from their socialisation into German society. Both were from the liberal class but separated by time and ideological influence. Beckler's response to the challenges of the human and natural spheres go to the heart of his Romantic quest to find his and indeed humanity's place in the world. He was a Romantic seemingly politically on the left wing and was a culturally proud Bavarian. However he was also appreciative of the wonders of nature and the attributes of the Indigenous Australians. Semon's response to the same challenges were quite different although his Monism, with its emphasis on the unity of nature provided a link with Beckler's Romanticism. Overall Semon was an evolutionist touched by Social Darwinism. Yet his Prussian nationalism, scientific rigor and racial attitudes to Aborigines ensured a *Weltanschauung* different from Beckler's. While Beckler searched for his place in the world, Semon felt he was sure of his and used Darwinism as the measure of his certainty.

Bibliography

Articles

Home, Rod, 1995, "Science as a German Export to Nineteenth Century Australia", *Working Papers in Australian Studies*, No. 104, Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, London.

Short, John Phillip, 2003, "Everyman's Colonial Library: Imperialism and Working-Class Readers in Leipzig, 1890-1914", *German History*, Vol.21, No.4, 445-475.

Weikart, Richard, 1993, "The Origins of Social Darwinism in Germany, 1859-1895", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.54, Issue 3, 469-488.

Books

Beckler, Herman, 1993, *A Journey to Cooper's Creek*, translated by Stephen Jeffries and Michael Kertesz, introduction by S Jeffries, ed S Jeffries, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Boyd, William and King, Edmund, 1977, *The History of Western Education*, Adam & Charles Black, London.

Bramsted, EK, 1964, *Aristocracy and the Middle Classes in Germany: Social Types in German Literature 1830-1900*, Phoenix Books, University of Chicago Press.

Dawson R, Prewitt K, Dawson K, *Political Socialization*, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1977.

Fulford, Tim (ed), 2002, *Romanticism and Science*, Vol.1 Routledge, London.

Gode-Von Aesch, Alexander, 1966, *Natural Science in German Romanticism*, AMS Press Inc, New York.

Hawkins, Mike, 1997, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought 1860-1945*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Jurgenson, Manfred and Corkhill, Alan (eds), 1992, *The German Presence in Queensland over the last 150 years*, The Department of German, University of Queensland, St Lucia.

Kelly, Alfred, 1981, *The Descent of Darwin: the Popularization of Darwinism in Germany, 1860-1914*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

Kynaston, E, 1981, *A man on the edge. A life of Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller*, Allen Lane, Ringwood, Victoria.

Langewiesche, Dieter, "German Liberalism in the Second Empire - 1871-1914, 1990 (eds) KH Jarausch and LE Jones, *In Search of a Liberal Germany*, Berg New York.

O'Sullivan, N, 1976, *Conservatism*, JM Dent and Sons Ltd, London.

Reynolds, Paul, *Political Sociology*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991.

Sagarra, Eda, 1977, *A Social History of Germany 1648-1914*, Methuen and Co Ltd, London.

Schacter, Daniel, *Forgotten Ideas, Neglected Pioneers: Richard Semon and the Story of Memory*, Psychology Press, Philadelphia, 2001.

Semon, Richard, 1899, *In the Australian Bush and on the Coast of the Coral Sea*, Macmillan and Co Ltd, New York.

Sheehan, James, 1999, *German Liberalism in the Nineteenth Century*, Humanity Books, New York.

Stern, JP, 1975, *Hitler: the Führer and the People*, Fontana/Collins, London.

Sumner, Ray, 1993, *A Woman in the Wilderness: The story of Amalie Dietrich in Australia*, NSW University Press, Sydney.

Tampke, Jurgen, 1983, "Amateurs analyze Australia. Some Comments on the 'Reiseberichte' about the Fifth Continent before 1914", in Voigt, Johannes (ed), *New Beginnings: The Germans in NSW and Queensland*, Public Institute for Foreign Relations, Stuttgart.

Voigt, Johannes, 1988, "The Australian Experience of a German doctor: Hermann Beckler's letters and Writings on the Fifth Continent" in Hardy, John (ed), *Stories of Australian Migration*, NSW University Press, Sydney.

Walker, David, and Tampke, Jürgen, 1991, *From Berlin to the Burdekin: The German contribution to the development of Australian science, exploration and the arts*, NSW University Press, Sydney.

Willoughby, LA, 1930, *The Romantic Movement in Germany*, Oxford University Press, Milford.