

'The Plumb Trilogy' and the modern world

Maurice Gee, (b 1931) is the author of *The Plumb Trilogy* which is composed of three novels, *Plum*, *Meg* and *Sole Survivor*. This has been one of the most rewarding reads I have had in a long time. The novels follow the history of the Plumb family whose father George begins his working life as a Presbyterian minister in New Zealand but who reads his way out of the faith to become a self promoted speaker on all things political and religious. He and his wife have eleven children and the second novel follows one of them, Meg and the third Meg's son Raymond Sole.

George Plumb spends most of his life in his study reading Emerson and the great poets and writing tracts in support of free thinking. He flirts briefly with the Unitarian Church. In other words, George loses his faith to Enlightenment rationalism and is forced to resign his parish simply because he no longer believes. His time in his study includes meal times and a system is arranged for the children to have time with him by turns: not for fun and games with their father, but for intellectual pursuits.

Gee gives us access to George's thoughts and feelings especially to his love for his long suffering wife who brings the children up pretty much alone. He is searching for the light which he has experienced on brief occasions. This is an illumination that comes from intellectual work, a light that comes from understanding but also has a mystical air about it. The search is a solitary pursuit, George has male and female friends who support him, but there is no community, no church because all of the churches are deemed to have got it wrong. His attempts at evangelism are a failure.

The Plumb children are not well equipped for life. Much of the three novels is an account of their quest for solid ground. Oliver continues in the Presbyterian Church and becomes a prominent judge whose life is so hedged in by piety that he becomes inhuman. Esther marries a con man and in her quest for a good time drinks herself to death. Alfred is discovered in a homosexual embrace by his father and banished from the family. Robert joins a commune of religious loonies after serving time for conscientious objection. Fiona, much to everyone's horror, becomes a Roman Catholic.

The second generation does little better. Duggie Plumb reaches the heights of political life but does it with cruelty and manipulation. Even Raymond Sole, the Sole survivor whose initials are made much find of, is a hollowed out person set adrift by the suicide of his wife.

It is interesting to know that Maurice Gee is a member of the New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists. This surprised me because I have read the trilogy as a description of the discontents of the modern age, not its affirmation. For surely the books are about the loss of faith and the repercussions thereof. Surely they chronicle the emptiness that rationalism brings to people, the absence of an overarching story that structures their lives with meaning.

Gee's membership of the Rationalist Association means that he must have been oblivious of the spiritual wreckage that Enlightenment thought has produced even while describing it in intimate detail. George Plumb was, after all, a product of Enlightened thought and the test of the validity of this thought is played out in his children's lives.

This is not altogether fair because none of his children followed in his intellectual footsteps, they all live out the rejection of their father perhaps because the father's rationality could never be accessed except by the specialist. This "faith" never became incarnate, never created a celebration of itself and remained always in the mind.

Plumb remained a religious man all his life even though he rejected all religions and all churches. His whole life was dedicated to the search for the light.

Such is the economy of religious thought that most seeming escapes from it lead back to it by another name. One only finishes sweeping the gods out of the house to turn around and find that new ones, more vicious than before, have taken up residence.

The irony of the novel and of the author is that the central character proceeds with all the best of intentions, reads all the best writers and poets and men of letters in an attempt to bring forth a new humanity cleansed of the barbarism of religion and superstition only to find that the children of this immense and sincere effort become forsaken. This is another example of the futility of culture that lacks the one essential ingredient.

The quest for spiritual depth is alive and well even though miss-directed. For example in a recent edition of *The Weekend Australian Magazine* we find Garry McDonald telling us that he is more spiritual than religious, that God isn't the problem - dogma is the problem. There is something very Plumbish about this statement. Let us clear the field of all dogma left over from the ignorant past and seek a truly human spirituality that will enable us to see who we are and find a firm place to stand in the world.

The failure of George Plumb to do this, despite the author's affections, gives the lie to the attempt. The idea that we can have any concept of God without talk about God or theology, is just silly. Dogma is just theology that the church for more than 2,000 years has decided is a firm basis for faith. This is not a decision that has been made as some kind of power play to support the hierarchy of the church, or some practical measure to ensure that public morality is upheld, or indeed so that the weak-minded can have something to cling on to in the face of death, but an attempt at truthful speech.

It is the arrogance of modernity to dismiss a tradition that has refined itself over such a long time span, and has fought off heretical attacks that would corrupt the truth it seeks to enunciate. Christian theology is far deeper and more subtle than its glib characterisation by people like Richard Dawkins who refuse to treat the tradition at its best but rely on its corrupt expressions to prove their point that rationalism is the only path that we have to the truth.

And we must wonder about the content of the spiritual that the likes of McDonald seek. Is this not just another name for the spirit of the age? How could it fail to be in the absence of a tradition that confronts it?

The Plumb Trilogy is still in print and I recommend it to you.

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Peter Sellick is Senior Research Officer at the Department of Physiology, University of Western Australia and Deacon Associate at **St Andrew's Anglican Church, Subiaco, WA.**