Whip-crack Powers

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Geoffrey Blainey
THE RUSH THAT NEVER ENDED: A HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN MINING, FIFTH EDITION
MUP, $44.95pb, 464pp, 0 522 85009 X

Deborah Gare et al. (eds)
THE FUSS THAT NEVER ENDED: THE LIFE AND WORK OF GEOFFREY BLAINEY
MUP, $39.95pb, 240pp, 0 522 85034 0

‘He looks a bit like Marty Feldman with two good eyes.’ So wrote a journalist of Geoffrey Blainey in 1977. In The Fuss That Never Ended, a collection of essays on Blainey arising out of a Melbourne symposium, Bridget Griffen-Foley no less irreverently compares the historian to a character played by Steven Seagal in a movie she saw on television — not because he shares Seagal’s ‘fake tan, ponytail, high-pitched voice, rippling muscles, kickboxing prowess or lurid, technicolour knee-length leather coat’, but because of his ‘style of investigation’ as a young historian. Blainey, she suggests, was neither bookworm nor archive rat. He went into the field, spoke to real people, visited historical sites. His work even helped his first employer, the Mount Lyell Mining and Railway Company, to exploit long-forgotten mineral deposits. Since producing his history of that company in his early twenties, he has been Australia’s leading mining historian, and one of that industry’s staunchest defenders. It has probably been easier for most people to swallow Blainey’s historical and economic arguments in favour of mining than Hugh Morgan’s biblical ones.

Leaving aside further comparison with Feldman and Seagal, Blainey undoubtedly has star quality. He is the most famous living Australian historian in the country, although not out of it — that honour surely belongs to Robert Hughes. Morag Fraser comments in her contribution to the collection that he draws and holds media attention. As if to prove her point, while I was writing this review the Blainey view on Volume One of Keith Windschuttle’s The Fabrication of Aboriginal History was reported in the press.

Appearing ‘artlessly dishevelled’, Blainey seems at first to conform to the stereotype of the ‘academic historian’. Yet that’s about where the resemblance ends. Blainey eschewed academia after graduating, and instead became what Graeme Davison describes as ‘probably the first academically trained historian in Australia to live by the pen’. He wrote commissioned histories, especially for companies, and established his reputation as an expert on mining history. Although he entered academia in the early 1960s, he has continued to write for a popular audience. Indeed, Blainey is of that select band of Australian historians which has produced work that speaks to both academia and a wide reading public. He has had his own television series, has made regular media appearances, and coined at least two phrases likely to endure in Australian English: ‘the tyranny of distance’ (Geoffrey Bolton’s essay in the collection focuses on the significance of the 1966 book of that title) and ‘the black armband view of history’. Fraser is surely right in paying tribute to Blainey’s ‘whip-crack rhetorical power and nous as a commentator’.

Yet these very qualities are double-edged. The canny phrase-maker can easily become the populist sloganeer; a panache for striking comparisons may lead to dicey scholarship and absurdity in political debate. In an essay on Blainey’s war writing, Ian Hodges wonders whether his claim that the proportionate loss of life in clashes between Aboriginals approached the Battle of the Somme is a valid comparison. Is it legitimate historical method? Does it really enhance our understanding of the scale of violence in traditional Aboriginal society? Perhaps so (Tim Rowse made similar comparisons in his review of Windschuttle’s book in ABR, February 2003), but it’s hard to disagree with Andrew Markus about the absurdity of Blainey’s comparison between Australian multiculturalism and the ‘affirmative action’ of Nazi Germany.

The Fuss is not the first book devoted to Blainey. That honour belongs to Surrender Australia? Essays in the Study and Uses of History: Geoffrey Blainey and Asian Immigration (1985), a collection produced by academics opposed to Blainey’s opinions on Asian immigration. The new collection has the rather different objective of providing an appraisal of Blainey’s ‘role in Australian history, politics and public life’. Yet it is nevertheless haunted by Blainey’s views on Asian
immigration, and by his subsequent hostility to Mabo, Wik and those he calls ‘dark greens’ (extreme environmentalists).

Some essays deal directly with Blainey’s intervention in these controversies. Markus, one of the editors of Surrender Australia?, sees Blainey as having played a critical role ‘in breaking taboos’ over race in Australian politics, and helping to shape a brand of nationalism and populism that has provided ‘the ideological underpinning’ of both John Howard’s amalgam of liberalism and conservatism and Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party outside its Queensland seedbed. Rowe, in a perceptive essay, points to Blainey’s quite legitimate insistence on a massive ‘moral discontinuity’ between the Europeans who settled Australia and Aboriginals who were already here, but criticises his failure to historicise important aspects of indigenous experience. The result is a sense of Aboriginal people as anachronisms, rather than as human beings who share some ‘moral ground’ with Europeans. For Rowe, this is ‘a huge and disabling gap in Blainey’s sensibility, both as a historian and a public intellectual’. Tom Griffiths points to Blainey’s obvious discomfort with the world made by the 1960s cultural revolution, and suggests that he tends to impose a ‘progressivist template’ on environmental history that can be both simplistic and disempowering. Deborah Gare insightfully suggests that, although the young Blainey seemed little interested in Australia’s Britishness, the older Blainey has become defensive about this heritage, and a staunch defender of Anglo-Australia in the face of multicultural and republican threats. Joanne Scott explores Blainey’s somewhat patchy and uncertain treatment of gender relations. The Fuss is an important study, but, to my mind, it is marred by a failure to consider adequately Blainey’s role as a teacher. After all, he was engaged in teaching and supervision for well over two decades, arguably the prime of his career. Only Tom Stannage, Graeme Davison (both in passing) and Stuart Macintyre (in more detail, in a survey of Blainey’s relationship to the historical profession) give any attention at all to teaching, and only Macintyre deals with his administrative work. I find this neglect puzzling: why do academic historians, most of whom teach or have taught, recoil from taking it seriously as historical practice when they write about other historians? I recall Blainey as a gifted and inspiring lecturer, certainly among the most engaging I’ve encountered — although I confess it’s the image of his bouncing hair as he sprinted down to the lecture podium carrying a massive pile of books (from which he would quote at appropriate junctures) that remains most vivid from one of his 1987 classes in first-year European History.

The publication of The Fuss coincides with the appearance of a fifth edition of The Rush That Never Ended. It was first published in 1963, a crossroads in Blainey’s career, when he had just begun teaching economic history at the University of Melbourne. The Rush was his first attempt at synthesis. The book has grown considerably since the appearance of the second edition in 1969, which is the one I found on my bookshelves, and remains an essential starting point for any consideration of the history of metal mining in Australia. It also exemplifies both the best, and some of the most problematic, features of Blainey’s work.

There are plenty of engaging stories, witty phrases and striking comparisons. Around 1870, he remarks, Victoria ‘had at least six sharebrokers to every ten clergymen, and was not irreligious’. At Coolgardie, ‘salmon gum … gleamed like oiled wrestlers’. There is also the irony of which Blainey is a master. At Roxby Downs, the uranium ‘was a source of electricity for the Japanese city of Nagasaki’. Sometimes, however, his political irony is more forced and, at its worst, degenerates into crude propaganda, as in his account of the Coronation Hill controversy. Here, Bob Hawke is ‘a tolerant atheist who was not normally attracted to a sacred site’. But Blainey’s most brilliant and subtle use of irony is in his now-famous treatment of the Eureka uprising. Eureka has enjoyed a privileged status in labour and radical nationalist mythology (perhaps even more so in 1963 than today), but, in Blainey’s view, it ‘paved the way for the rapid and orderly growth of capitalist mining and the accumulation of large fortunes in a few hands’. As a way of positioning his own history in relation to an existing body of writing, this is at least as effective as Henry Handel Richardson’s decision to have Richard Mahony, at the beginning of Australia Felix, on the ‘wrong’ (that is, government) side in the digger rebellion.

On the evidence of The Rush, Blainey is indeed ‘half the determinist’ he has said he is, because he recognises that there are grand forces that constrain even the bravest mining adventurers, factors such as the availability of capital (which is, in turn, influenced by the existence of other outlets for investment) and the accessibility of mining fields to the coast. ‘The more men walk over ground that is rich in minerals the higher the chance that they will find and recognize the minerals,’ writes Blainey in determinist mode. Depressions, he argues, also stimulate mineral discovery.

But Blainey has much less to say about mining’s political dimensions than its geological and economic sides, with the notable exception of the period since the 1970s, in which he sees the industry as having been under siege from environmentalists and Aboriginals. Moreover, as Charlie Fox comments in his contribution to The Fuss, Blainey tends to view mining from the perspective of management rather than workers, and has little to say about unionism. Blainey excused himself for not having dealt properly with unionism in his 1963 preface by remarking that ‘class struggle’ and ‘industrial friction’ had been exaggerated in relation to metal mining, but a reader who didn’t know better might imagine that Australia’s mining workforce had been largely non-unionised over the last century. Class also barely rates a mention, and Blainey seems to find it difficult to sustain interest in ordinary wage-earning miners and their cultures. For Blainey, it’s the bold discoverers, the hardy prospectors, the brave investors, the brainy managers, engineers and scientists who have made this industry.

An individualist in his historical practice, Blainey is most at home when describing the efforts of individualists in other fields of endeavour.