Missing Voices

Tony Birch

Tim Flannery (ed.)
THE BIRTH OF MELBOURNE
Text, $32pb, 392pp, 1 877008 38 9

Jeff Sparrow and Jill Sparrow
RADICAL MELBOURNE: A SECRET HISTORY
Vulgar Press, $45pb, 220pp, 0 9577352 3 5

When I was a kid, my father liked to shop at The Leviathan menswear store on the corner of Bourke and Swanston Streets. I think I can safely claim that he was the only Fitzroy City Council labourer with his own account at this sober ‘gentlemen’s’ establishment. Whenever I accompanied my father into his store, he would be greeted with ‘Good afternoon, Sir’ as we stepped from the old wire-cage lift onto the third floor, where he would then be fitted for a jacket.

I always enjoyed these forays ‘into town’ on the tram with my father. I relished the buzz of the city: the noise, the crowds and even this theatrical display of manners. While my dad was being fussed over with a measuring tape and tailor’s chalk, I would stand in a large window overlooking the street and watch the endless movement below. Each Christmas, I would stare across to the adjacent Woolworth’s corner, where a giant figure of Santa Claus would stretch from his heavy black boots above the ground floor awning to the tip of his red cap, which sat above the roof of the department store several flights above.

Woolworth’s is gone now, along with Father Christmas. The corner is multi-tenanted, with a Nike superstore occupying the premium space. Immediately prior to the Sydney Olympics, the slender figure of Cathy Freeman adorned the same wall formerly dominated by the more portly Santa. This may have represented a defining post-colonial moment for Melbourne. Many other buildings within the Melbourne CBD contain pasts similarly hidden by changing circumstances, be it the invasiveness of ‘American imperialism’ or modernist development. Who would now remember that a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in Bourke Street once sold contraceptives alongside political writings supporting socialist ideology? Or that the Communist Party of Australia appeared to move house quite often?

In Radical Melbourne: A Secret History, Jeff and Jill Sparrow map the ‘radical’ history of Melbourne, with visits to fifty sites throughout the city. Uncovering layers of paint, advertising hoardings, demolitions and retro-fits, they expose a past that has too often escaped the eye of more official and Establishment-conscious commemoration in Melbourne. Radical Melbourne provides readers with the micro-histories of leftist organisations, including the Victorian Socialist League, the Melbourne Anarchist Club and the Communist Party of Australia, which features prominently. The book uses both photographs and illustrations effectively, juxtaposing the contemporary use of buildings with an historical narrative.

While some of the places of interest include sites of direct political action (hence the title), with riots, strikes and protests featuring prominently, the strength of the book is the Sparrows’ written narrative. It engages the reader with an at times genuinely radical, humorous and appropriately facetious commentary. For instance, while the authors provide a serious critique of the political power emanating from the smoking room of the Melbourne Club, in Collins Street, they also ‘take the piss’ out of this establishment, which attempted to ‘develop the manners and habits befitting those born to rule’ amongst a group of ‘uncouth looking men’ who walked around the club with the arse out of their pants. Likewise, when discussing the death of an early nineteenth-century squatter, Charles Franks — ‘clubbed to death, presumably by the local Aborigines’ — the Sparrows rightly deduce that Franks had committed a ‘grievous offence [namely] greed’ against Aboriginal people by running ‘five hundred sheep, far more than he could ever personally consume’.

Radical Melbourne provides a social and political context for buildings known too narrowly by their physical architecture or by the institutions that occupied them. Students of urban history will find this book not only a valuable source of information but also an invaluable aid to thinking about how to do history.
The Birth of Melbourne, a collection of nineteenth-century documentary sources that also deals with Melbourne, has been edited by the ‘naturalist, explorer and writer’ Tim Flannery, who has also written a ‘pre-history’ introductory essay for the book. It provides a rich insight into Melbourne’s colonial past, although the text privileges the narratives of Melbourne’s colonial kingpins, such as John Batman, Robert Hoddle and an array of booster journalists. It celebrates the growing metropolis of the ‘Marvellous Melbourne’ of the 1880s. Some entries provide a futurist take on both Melbourne and Australian cultural life. In 1858, for example, the Argus newspaper detected that ‘football seems to be coming into fashion in Melbourne’.

Three years earlier, in 1855, during a Victorian parliamentary select committee dealing with Chinese immigration (or ‘interrogation’, as Flannery introduces it), John Pascoe Fawkner questioned Howqua, a Chinese migrant. The transcript provides an insight into colonial society’s fear of non-Anglo ‘outsiders’, particularly those from Australia’s north. Fawkner’s question, ‘Do you think that 500,000 are likely to come here within the next twelve months?’ is not dissimilar to remarks made today in Australia because of the fear and anxiety engendered by the issue of asylum seekers.

The Birth of Melbourne seems to have been a widely researched book. But, with the exception of William Barak, who appears briefly in the text, there is no original writing by Aboriginal people. The book is lacking because of this omission. And this is not because, as the colonial historians forever mutter, ‘They’re just not out there’. Both the Victorian Public Records Office and Australian (Commonwealth) Archives contain extensive written testimonies by Aboriginal people, including observations of the Port Phillip district and colonial Melbourne during the nineteenth century. The inclusion of these voices would have enriched this book. In the absence of Aboriginal voices, some entries in The Birth of Melbourne read like laments for the passing of the Aborigine — a convenient colonial mythology. Other entries, such as the writing of a visiting French aristocrat, Ludovic de Beauvoir, in 1866, produce disparaging stereotypes, referring to local Aboriginal people as ‘degraded’, ‘repulsive’ and ‘miserable’.

I am not suggesting that such observations should have been censored, or that they did not reflect the reality of life for some Aboriginal people, dispossessed of their own land and culture. But those interested in ‘the birth of Melbourne’ would also be interested to know that, throughout the period covered here, many Aboriginal people were using the technology of the written word to demand their inherent rights as indigenous people, as well as more basic human rights. Such was the extent of this project that, in the early 1880s, the manager of the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve in Gippsland, Reverend Bulmer, noted that the worst thing that colonial society had done to the Aboriginal communities of Victoria was to give them ‘the power of writing’.