

The Great Mistakes of Australian History

*Martin Crotty and David Andrew Roberts (eds.)
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When the great debate about ‘global warming’ and the evaporation of the River Murray began a little while ago, Australian scientists discovered that the public at large was seriously confused. The scientists seemed to be endlessly arguing among themselves and were, in effect, cancelling each other out and leaving the impression that they could not be followed. They realised that the public knew only their disputes and not the common stock of agreed truths upon which they all concurred. So they sensibly got together and set out the simple accepted propositions which became the essential framework for any kind of public involvement in the future planning of the subject. This was highly therapeutic and quickly dispersed much unnecessary nonsense from the public mind. Historians perhaps have less common ground, and we often seem to deal in instant polemics and the polarisation of interpretation. It leads outsiders to think that History is a game devised for the pleasure of a bickering and imprecise profession. The present book might easily encourage such a perception.

The Great Mistakes of Australian History in fact is an engaging set of miscellaneous essays but not a compendium of the collected errors made by Australian historians—perish the thought. It is about ‘fateful decisions’ which have reaped adverse consequences over the course of Australian history. The classic example is the lamentable introduction of rabbits and foxes by unthinking colonists. But the authors range much more widely over political, social and economic issues from 1788 to the present, though mostly they deal with public policy. The editors are at pains to point out that their enterprise should not be regarded as too ‘negative’; rather their purpose is to offer ‘cautionary tales’ (p.5). In reality most of these stories are full-blooded denunciations of gross error and therefore the entire volume has a combative air about it.

The idea of the book is methodologically interesting. It entails, of course, a judgmental exercise in hindsight that is evaluating events and decisions in the light of their intentions. Logically and inevitably these judgements imply better and feasible

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hypothetical alternatives, even though, as Eric Hobsbawm says, “History is what happened, not what might have happened” (*Worlds of Labour*, p.8). Bluntly, our judges need to say how Australian history might have been different in the counterfactual scenario. This is rather less easy than simple denunciation.

What happened to the indigenous population of Australia forms the ‘great mistake’ of the first two essays. David Andrew Roberts argues that the British colonisers were gripped by misconceptions about the nature of Aboriginal societies: indeed the very first reports caused to them to accept a generalised psychology that Aboriginal people were ‘unworthy of reasonable treatment’. Such wrong assumptions about the receiving societies provided that ultimate basis for the widespread denial of rights to the Aborigines. These founding errors were not righted and, as Peter Read argues, the Aboriginal tragedy can be identified in embryo during the first decades of the first colony: the operations of the Parramatta Native Institution exemplified the manner in which cultural breakdown occurred at the very start. At Parramatta a rigid institutional framework was clamped on the evolving relations with the Aborigines, that is, their management. They were denied legal recognition, given no decent treatment and thus a tradition of marginalisation was entrenched. It set them on a “path to hell” (p.47). Here the indictment is total: none of it was inevitable, says Read, and Australian history could have been so much better if the original errors had been reversed. Instead the colonisation enterprise became irredeemably “tarnished” (p.31).

Several of these error-laden contributions are about ‘states-of-mind’ which delivered Australia along the wrong track at various critical junctures in its history. Alan Atkinson convicts the explorers of colonial Australia for their malformed ‘geographical imaginations’. They were led astray by misguided enthusiasms ‘and preconceptions about the physical possibilities of the new continent.’ They were “out of kilter with reality” (p.57), creating fantasies for the future which, typically, led the Wakefieldians to grossly exaggerate the economic potential of Adelaide and the province of South Australia. In reality, of course, most reconnoitring was a perfectly rational process of trial-and-error which quickly dispersed the majority of such delusions. Richard Waterhouse is similarly critical of the ‘agrarian idealists’, who perpetuated the romance of the small-scale cultivator, a pervasive model transported as part of incoming English mentalities. This was clearly an important and recurring

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mindset still invoked as late as the middle of the 20th century. It persuaded governments to set aside land for uneconomic closer settlement, to produce environmental degradation, waste, and lashings of social tragedy (p.65). It is certainly salutary to be reminded of the power of the received agrarian ideology, the recurring idea of creating a yeoman class as the backbone of antipodean society, and based on little more than fantasy. Waterhouse is also perceptive on the cycles of 'rural miracles' and the strength of 'the rhetoric of progress and optimism': they deluded some regions of Australia in more recent times into a series of errors, not least those involving rice and tobacco, cotton, macadamia nuts and avocados (p.75). Moreover the vestiges of such ideology lives on in the current notion that new immigrants should be sent off to the outback to avoid contributing further stress to the great urban blight, in which light our cities are currently regarded.

Employing the marvellous benefit of hindsight, egregious error is also exposed in the damage done by the introduction of wildly inappropriate new species into the long-sealed Australian ecosystem. Manda Page and Greg Baxter tell us that foxes were foolishly brought to Adelaide in 1869; the cane toad in the tropics were another horror story of how Australians 'ignored Indigenous knowledge of the land and imposed a Eurocentric view' (p.80). This depressing litany concludes with further 'grievous mistakes' perpetuated in the Australian urban environment, best exemplified by Sydney's Ashton-Cahill Expressway. The baleful authors offer no stories of successful adaptations of non-natives to Australian habitats, and this will no doubt disappoint our national cheerleaders.

Crotty believes that Australians have been repeatedly lured into foreign wars without understanding the human costs and realities of these distant conflicts. He contrasts the bravado, rhetoric and noble ideals of war-leaders with the grotesque consequences of war. He also gives prominence to the divisive domestic turbulence on the Home Front, reminding us of the food riots in Sydney and Melbourne in World War I, as well as the way in which citizens turned against fellow citizens. He quotes Carl Becker on the 'futile exhibition of unreason' at such times, and in which Australians fully participated and were always prone to forget (p.120). David Day revisits the 1930s and the particular decision entailed in 'the Singapore strategy'. It was, he points out, an attractively cheap but wrong-headed option for Australia; in a well-rehearsed

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account of the debate, he argues the historical unwisdom of Australia in committing its forces to distant conflicts at the expense of home defence. Day clearly believes that learning from such historical errors can promote better policy for the present and for the future. Ilma O'Brien deals with the treatment of aliens, especially Italians, in wartime Australia and suggests unsurprisingly, that racial intolerance was exacerbated during such times. More surprising was the intervention of Arthur Calwell in 1943, protesting that there had been 'too much racial and other prejudice' against 'many naturalised British Subjects living in Queensland' (p.148).

Marion Diamond provides a long perspective on Australia's reluctance to engage with Asia, the origins of which she traces back to the early 19th century. She finds lost opportunities of creating a multiracial trading post in the north, and which she argues set the nation on the path leading towards racial exclusivity and white-ness (p.169). Her account connects nicely with Clive Moore's chapter: at Federation, he suggests, Australia might have looked towards much wider horizons, with the inclusion of Papua-New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (p.174). This proposal entails an heroic hypothetical alternative in which Australia would have become a multi-racial society with a larger population and moreover, would have led 'Asian and Pacific nations... [to] see Australia as part of their world, rather than a cuckoo in their nest'. (p.174). Klaus Neumann usefully reviews the operation of White Australia by way of four famous test cases which expelled non-Europeans after the Second World War—including the Gamboa episode. He berates Calwell for the damage he did to relations with Asia in the process. Finally Wayne Reynolds returns to the 'Dismissal' of the Whitlam government in 1975 and the many errors entailed in that event.

The authors thus present 'the case for the prosecution' which, however passionate the advocacy, is arguably not the most persuasive mode of serving history. But *The Great Mistakes of Australian History* is an engaging exercise and provides rich fodder for historical argument and will be useful for teaching purposes. Balanced they may not be, but these lively essays nevertheless offer very good historical provocation and stimuli to prod the conservative mind.

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