
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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Michael Duffy’s John Macarthur: Man of Honour is more than a biography of John Macarthur, second-fleeter and pioneer pastoralist in New South Wales. It is a history of the beginnings of a society, so precarious at times that one is almost surprised that it could survive.

Duffy has immersed himself in the cultural and intellectual atmosphere of late eighteenth century England and come up with a compelling theory to explain the behaviour, bewildering to the modern mind, of Macarthur and men of his class. The climax of his book is the rebellion in 1808 which deposed Governor Bligh – commonly known as the Rum Rebellion. But Duffy sets out to argue that rum had very little to do with it. The code of honour, which ruled the lives of gentlemen of the time, provides a more convincing explanation.

John Macarthur was not of what was regarded as ‘gentle’ birth. His father was a linen draper in Plymouth, successful enough to be able to afford to educate his son. Duffy argues that Macarthur’s tenuous claim to the status of gentleman made him more enthusiastic about the code of honour than others more secure of their position. Certainly something about Macarthur made him unusually belligerent and ready to take offence. At the same time, he was unusually manipulative, clever and probably unscrupulous.

Duffy provides fascinating details of the way affairs of honour were settled. ‘While many readers will regard the institution of the duel with a combination of derision and abhorrence,’ Duffy says, ‘it actually – in the
absence of alternative methods – served a valuable social purpose by restricting
the effects of masculine aggression and violence.’ (p5) Macarthur fought three
duels during his life, and Duffy suggests that the rebellion against Bligh was in a
way also a displaced duel, since it was not practical to challenge the colony’s
governor to a duel. Mutiny, it seems, was often condoned in Georgian Britain
under the code of honour, as long as it was conducted by gentlemen.

This book is an example of the best kind of historical writing. Duffy has
gone to great lengths to understand – and convey to his readers – not just the
events but the spirit of the time, without which history becomes meaningless
chronology. As he says, ‘Anyone whose view of Macarthur’s world is impeded
by the mammoth edifice of Victorian England, and the efficient and effective
power structures it established, needs to try to see around it and back to the
wilder world of the Georges.’ (p293) This is certainly not an historical novel,
but it is as readable as a good novel. The characters are vivid, and the research,
adorably thorough, has not been overused. Duffy has been a political journalist
and editor for some years. However, this is his first book, and his skill in
maintaining the momentum of the narrative is exemplary. The book keeps the
reader continually engaged and interested throughout, despite its length – well
over 300 pages – and wealth of detail.

One of the advantages of writing a book on an historical subject as non-
fiction is that awkward decisions do not need to be made about suiting the style
to the subject matter, a problem many recent historical novels have failed to
resolve with unfortunate results. Duffy’s style is colloquial and expressive,
addressing the reader as one twenty-first century person to another. Without the
need to pretend he is writing in a different age, he allows himself plenty to
scope to explain in the most straightforward way how his subjects were different from us.

Macarthur was to some extent a product of his age and his code of honour, but he was also an extraordinary individual by any standards. Duffy obviously finds him a fascinating study – ‘What a strange man,’ (p202) he exclaims at one point. Without exactly committing himself to admiration of this complicated, and to his contemporaries troublesome, man, he concludes, ‘if one believes that commercial activity is a civilising force and the property ownership is the basis of democracy, John Macarthur can be seen as both trader and hero.’ (p334) For better or worse, Macarthur contributed to the development of Australia, and Duffy’s book gives as good an explanation of his life and times as any I have encountered.