



## BOOK REVIEWS

*Patrick Allington\**

### ***A SHORTER HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA***

by **Geoffrey Blainey**

**William Heinemann Australia (Reed Books), Port Melbourne, 1994**  
**xi, 251pp**  
**ISBN 0 85561 599 0**

**G**EOFFREY Blainey squints out from the cover of his most recent book. His face appears weather-beaten and eroded but assured and successful, a visual representation of his account of the wilful landscape and those who shaped it. *A Shorter History* defies categorisation but, as with many of Blainey's books, ought first to be complimented for its elegant narrative. Blainey's particular ability is to energise unusual, unexpected or suppressed detail with evocative language. One well-aimed sentence frequently suffices, as with the wavering British expectations of their new acquisition: "Later, the name Botany Bay came to serve as a symbol in the English language for

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desolation, loneliness and cruelty, but originally the name stood for the wonder and bounty of nature."<sup>1</sup>

*A Shorter History* is written in three chronological and progressively longer parts. The first offers a generalised sketch of pre-contact Aboriginal society (a synopsis of Blainey's earlier book, *Triumph of the Nomads*), and an overview of early colonisation. The second begins with the discovery of gold - "Edward Hargraves, a lethargic man on a slow horse, was the hero of Australia in 1851"<sup>2</sup> - and moves with Federation into nationhood. The third traverses the twentieth century, juxtaposing world wars and economic progress, and including the two contemporary issues which have involved Blainey in much (media) controversy: Asian immigration and *Mabo*.

The dominant idea emerging is that, for Blainey, economic and technological development best illustrates Australian progress. While he regrets space does not allow for more on political and social issues, this emphasis remains emphatic. Subsequently, Blainey considers that his economic/historical interpretations compel from him - as natural outcomes - fixed views about contemporary Australian issues. Two underlying issues emerge from this: first, what is omitted by the preconceptions of the writer and, secondly, what place these interpretations may have in informing the present and the future.

Notably omitted from *A Shorter History* is any reference or noting system, and the bibliography is also inadequate. In previous work, Blainey has implied that unanimity of opposition allows readers to easily find the contrary view "in standard histories of Australia".<sup>3</sup> Here, Blainey states,

The book rests partly on research in original sources - old books, diaries, newspapers, parliamentary reports, bibliographies. A well-read historian will discern where a lot of it can be found. The book also rests on the work of many historians, some dead and some not yet in their prime. Often one can be deeply influenced by people one does not agree with.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Blainey, *A Shorter History of Australia* (William Heinemann, Port Melbourne 1994) p26.

2 As above p65.

3 Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Sun Books, Melbourne 1966) p340.

4 Blainey, *A Shorter History of Australia* preface.

While not doubting the uniqueness of Blainey's contribution to Australian history, it does not follow that the myriad of alternative views are identical. Disregarding "well-read historians", the rest of the reading population, particularly the student body to which this book will appeal, require more information.

More importantly, the mostly anonymous 'acknowledgment' of sources means that only occasionally are 'competitors' directly challenged or endorsed. In one instance, assessing Robert Hughes' "wonderfully written" account of convict Australia, *The Fatal Shore*, Blainey argues that

Hughes was mistaken in some of his conclusions, not least his nonsensical idea that a colony or region settled with convicts was doomed, long after the last convict came, to economic stagnation.<sup>5</sup>

Much more of this would be welcome, particularly as Blainey's rationale for emphasising, and delighting in, the detail and eccentricities of Australian economic development are placed in more precise context.

That is not to argue that Blainey should be more encompassing. Common to intellectual inquiry, his interpretations inevitably contain certain biases and assumptions about what is significant and what is superfluous (and more so given the proportions here). This is desirable, as it hardly seems useful to require him to censor his critical argument and therefore jeopardise the provocative originality that characterises his best work.

That is not to advocate passive acceptance of Blainey's conclusions. A different but related conundrum asks how certain historical stances inform debates on the present and future. In this context, Blainey's discussion of the High Court's *Mabo* case can be seen both for its constructive and perplexing elements. He is disconcerted by the histories offered by the seven judges, who heard "no real evidence relating to the Aboriginal history of mainland Australia".<sup>6</sup> It seems wise for Blainey to distance himself from *Mabo* as history, with its accompanying baggage of judicial searches for apt legal precedent. It is therefore surprising that he allows his historical interpretation to be subservient to *Mabo*.

This point can be explained by returning to an earlier section of *A Shorter History*. On the introduction of sheep Blainey states, "[i]n the history of

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5 As above p61.

6 As above p236.

the world, it is doubtful whether any other large land was changed so quickly by the arrival of any animal".<sup>7</sup> Dramatic changes to the landscape clearly caused great disruption to indigenous cultures. However, Blainey's likening of Aborigines with nature imposes boundaries on 'authentic' indigenous identity as either entrenched in pre-contact or assimilated in the present. He suggests, for example, that "[t]he Aborigines were the silent victims of the sheep moving further inland."<sup>8</sup> But from the early nineteenth century, neither sheep nor even the pastoral leases and people who accompanied them eliminated Aboriginal reaction, which varied from assistance to forced compliance to violent resistance.

Blainey suggests that re-interpretations of contact histories reflect a desire by some to accommodate Aboriginal political agitation. This comment from the preface is reproduced on the front sleeve:

I do not share the desire of many historians and commentators to denounce sweepingly the white history of Australia in order to enthrone the black history and the present-day Aboriginal demands. Nor is there merit in the opposite extreme of denouncing black history as barbaric.<sup>9</sup>

It has been a theme of Blainey's to liken the recollection of the past to a competition, with a 'balance sheet' of good versus bad, "Three Cheers" versus "Black Armband", technology (optimism) versus nature (pessimism).<sup>10</sup> This suggests that one should either be for or against Blainey, unsatisfactory options for this reader. Moreover, in terms of *Mabo*, Blainey not only states his own position but encloses contrary views. I am perplexed, for example, to find that I cannot favour land rights *and* remain a cheerful patriot.

More importantly, it is possible to employ Blainey's history to question his conclusion that the *Mabo* judgments essentially found that much non-urban land in Australia remains the property of its indigenous inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> While questions over what constitutes "ongoing traditional attachment" are unresolved, Blainey's pre-occupation with economic development - particularly as presented in the first two parts of *A Shorter*

7 As above p36.

8 As above p41.

9 As above preface.

10 For example, see Blainey, "Drawing Up A Balance Sheet Of Our History" in (1993) 37(7) *Quadrant* pp10-15; Blainey, *The Great See-Saw: A New View of the Western World, 1750-2000* (Macmillan, South Melbourne 1988).

11 Blainey, *A Shorter History of Australia* p47.

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*History* - reminds us that on mainland Australia the theoretical persistence of native title is accompanied by the possibility of extinguishment. With no neat historical conclusion possible, the demarcation of economic issues from political and social factors becomes blurred, whatever stance is being advocated.

Kathy Laster has suggested (in the context of the Asian immigration controversy) that if Blainey's historical method "ultimately leads to 'unpalatable' conclusions, he must also take responsibility for its imperfections".<sup>12</sup> However, the example of *Mabo* suggests that while historical method can illuminate contact and settlement activity, this increased knowledge is as likely to complicate as simplify modern reactions. The broad point is that *A Shorter History* does not lead naturally or inexorably to any *particular* contemporary justifications, including any that Geoffrey Blainey might hold. Read in that context, *A Shorter History* is a useful summary of the wider Blainey thesis.

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12 Laster, "The Tyranny of History in the Causes of Geoffrey Blainey" in (1992) 38(2) *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 174.

