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Review: People and Politics in Regional New South Wales

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Review: People and Politics in Regional New South Wales

Abstract

Histories of Australian towns and local areas abound, usually the work of enthusiastic local residents distributed through community based museum and historical society networks. Aimed at local audiences, these histories tend to be triumphalist, cataloguing 'progress' in terms of population changes and infrastructure growth. There is little in the way of explanation or analysis; local identities appear as a 'cast of characters' rather than as flesh and blood historical agents; politics is noticeably absent. For one state, the two volume *People & Politics in Regional New South Wales, 1856 to 2006*, addresses this political absence. Given the huge size of NSW, its geographic and demographic diversities, and the extensive period of history selected for study, the task is enormous. Beyond the ability or resources of a single author, the project has been tackled by fifteen professional historians with expertise and interest in the regions they write about, headed by, and including, veteran political and regional historian Jim Hagan. Their task was assisted by the contributions of two research assistants, and more than one hundred interviewees, librarians, archivists, and people with specialised local knowledge.

a poverty and a hunger that sharpened those memories, and immigration was a burning issue. The Legislative Council, in which those without substantial property had no representation, appointed nine select committees on immigration between 1835 and 1847. Each of them provided an occasion for mass meeting and demonstration, as did attempts to reintroduce the transportation of convicts.

The organisation of these protests came not only from the labouring classes. They did have their own trade organisations, but particularly in the early phase of the movement, radical thinkers and Sydney businessmen supplied leadership, newspaper propaganda, and premises. The businessmen had their own good reasons for not wanting to be excluded from the kind of legislature that would result if the would-be 'Bunyip Aristocracy' got their way with Her Majesty's Government. One of the great strengths of the book is the way in which Irving traces the subtle and changing relationship between the groups of Sydney businessmen and operatives.

Irving's explanation of the timing and form of responsible government is based firmly on the political economy of the period as it was experienced and interpreted by the people of Sydney in the thirties, forties and fifties. The evidence he presents is exhaustive, and carefully documented and interpreted. The argument that results is forceful and compelling. There is no need for the extra assumptions made by Professor Woollacott to link frontier violence to a masculinity which in turn inspired the political movement towards responsible government in Sydney.

Jim Hagan (editor), *People & Politics in Regional New South Wales, Volume 1, 1856 to the 1950s, 350 pp.*; Volume 2, the 1950s to 2006, 336 pp. The Federation Press, Annandale, 2006. \$54.95 (Set).

Reviewed by Rowan Cahill

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For one state, the two volume *People & Politics in Regional New South Wales, 1856 to 2006*, addresses this political absence. Given the huge size of NSW, its geographic and demographic diversities, and the extensive period of history selected for study, the task is enormous. Beyond the ability or resources of a single author, the project has been tackled by fifteen professional historians with expertise and interest in the regions they write about, headed by, and including, veteran political and regional historian Jim Hagan. Their task was assisted by the contributions of two research assistants, and more than one hundred interviewees, librarians, archivists, and people with specialised local knowledge.

The project adopts its definition of the eleven regions discussed from the statistical and administrative geopolitical divisions used by the NSW Department of State and Regional Planning. While these have, over time, undergone numerous boundary changes, to a great extent they have remained territorially stable entities. Complicating the understanding of regional political behaviour are the sizes of the regions, the existence within these of discrete sub-regions, electorates, parts of electorates, and the fact the regions are democratic communities in which political differences exist. The Sydney metropolitan area is, of course, not part of the study.

Sources drawn on by the authors include official data like censuses, various departmental records, reports, statistical registers, parliamentary debates, and inquiries. The authors also benefit from unpublished academic research, theses, and published scholarly articles. A common and major resource is the local press. Regional newspapers flourished in NSW from the early 1870s onwards. As the authors demonstrate, these are invaluable when it comes to the identification of local issues, and the ways in which wider issues, particularly at election time, have been locally framed and discussed.

The first volume of *People & Politics* deals with the period 1856 to the 1950s, from the beginnings of responsible government to the early years of the Cold War. Voters variously organised politically to secure the way they earned a living from the major regional industries: dairying, grazing, farming, pastoral, mining, and transport. Up to World War 1, the Labor Party had a strong regional base, largely due to unionism in the mining, railway, and pastoral industries. However, this base was weakened by the conscription divisions of 1916/1917, party infighting during the 1920s and 1930s, exacerbated by persistent, at times violent, sectarianism from the 1920s onwards which cast the Labor Party, especially in electorates with significant

protestant majorities, as an Agent of Rome.

The period from the 1950s to 2006 is the subject of Volume 2. Between 1910 and the early fifties, the pattern of political representation was relatively stable across regional NSW. There were regions, and sub-regions within them, that consistently voted Labor over four decades, a pattern also reflected in the regional anti-Labor vote. But this stability was not to remain; the second half of the twentieth century brought significant changes to regional NSW.

Staple regional industries underwent profound changes as governments abandoned domestic protectionism in favour of exposure to the fierce ruthlessness of global competition. Privatisation and corporatism reduced the size of government workforces; improved road and air transport eroded the dominance of the railway system. In the pastoral industry, improved technologies reduced the size of workforces; synthetic fibres reduced the demand for wool. Not only did the economic forces that influenced voters change, but populations shifted as people uprooted in search of employment.

All of which changed traditional voting patterns. Established political loyalties weakened in the fall-out. Symptomatic, and symbolic, of this weakening was the proliferation of new political parties in the regions, some of them based on single issues, and Independent candidates. The focus of Volume 2 is the examination of the changed circumstances of regional NSW during the second half of the twentieth century, the choices voters had, and the explanation why they made the choices they did.

Overall, *People & Politics* is successful. A team of seasoned and professional historians has written the first account of regional politics in NSW. A worthy and valuable achievement, which the publisher has attractively packaged. Many of the team members have significant labour history credentials, and the two volumes reflect this background in terms of historical emphasis. The focus of the project is regional politics related to the institution of parliament; the project was supported by the Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government in NSW Committee, chaired by former ALP Minister for Education, Rodney Cavalier. This focus and pedigree have tended to take the raw, often nasty, edge off regional political contest and class conflict in favour of a cleaner, institutional, version of politics.