“GROWING UP IN THE ILLAWARRA”

Winifred Mitchell and Geoffrey Sherington, Growing up in the Illawarra, The University of Wollongong, 1984; small quarto, paper­back, pp. 160 and preliminaries; illustrations, index; our copy $9.95

“Perhaps the academic historian”, says the eminent American historian Barbara Tuchman, “suffers from having a captive audience Keeping the reader turning the page has not been his primary consideration.“ all too often this is a valid comment; but it is not true of this book, academic in approach though it is.

An admirably succinct preface lays before the reader an exposition of the authors’ intentions, which become clearer again in the five chapter headings. The first, entitle “Beginnings”, embraces something of the little that is known of local Aborigines, and follows through to European settlement, land­owning and general development. Because of the relative paucity of the known records which the authors need to fulfil their purpose, this is not so much the growing up of people in Illawarra as the growing up of the region itself. That region is the true traditional entity of Illawarra (roughly from Helensburgh to Gerringong) without the misleading breaches of those confines erratically indulged in nowadays for mainly governmental purposes.
This sense of region comes out well in the next two chapters, both headed “Nineteenth Century Illawarra”. Chapter 2 tells of life in the rural community (mainly the southern segment), whilst Chapter 3 studies life in the northern mining villages. It is only here that the available source material permits the authors’ methodology to emerge. True, there are still not many letters or other writings, and least of all personal recollections as social history; but the authors surely struck pay-dirt in the report of the Board which, administering relief funds, visited household bereaved by the Bulli mine disaster of 1887. The reading of extracts is like stepping inside the houses, glimpsing something of their cleanliness and good order (or otherwise), the courage, the despair, the poverty. In the revealed reality of everyday life it is the shape of things to come in the book.

Chapters 4 and 5 cover the 20th century, with World War II the dividing point. Here immigration plays a very large part, and education even moreso. Indeed, one feels that education is over-stressed until reflection reminds the reader of what a large part of growing of it embraces. Not that other aspects of life are neglected; far from it, for all find their due place. It is here that oral history comes into its own. The days have gone when newsy letters kept people in touch with each other; nowadays a telephone call is easier. Nor do people often keep diaries. So whilst written records of this nature are rare enough in the past, in recent times they have become virtually non-existent, with the result that the modern historian has literally to quiz people to find out about the lives of themselves and their like. It is hard work, and time-consuming; but the product is usually far superior.

This is what makes the two concluding chapters of this book such a revelation. The bulk of material the authors and their research workers have collected must be huge, even though the number of people interviewed does not seem to have exceeded much more than forty. Even so, the collators of this rich corpus of information would doubtless agree with Tuchman’s description of the tape recorder as a “a monster with the appetite of a tape-worm”. But the reward is vitality and diversity, and a record superior to what can usually be gained from the chanciness of old-time documentation. The assembling of sources of modern social history has entered a new and better age. And this book is by definition a social history.

The forty-seven illustrations are excellently broad in interest, the earlier ones in particular getting away from the tired old items so often reproduced; these are all fresh and comprehensive. The index, full and accurate, will be a useful tool for future researchers. The text is fully referenced. Production is adequate, or nearly so, although there are far more misprints than a university - or any other- press should tolerate; and the binding of this reviewer’s copy does not promise to match the lasting usefulness of the text.
A few minor inaccuracies were detected in Chapter 1. On the whole the text avoids the current solacism of speaking of the Illawarra, ungrammatical as it is (do you live in the Wollongong or Kiama?), and an insult to the integrity of the genuine Aboriginal place-name, which should not be contaminated by bad English. It is regrettable that a lapse was permitted in the title, although this is known to have been a deliberate choice.

But one feels mean to mention pinpricks when there is so much of general excellence. And perhaps it is unnecessary to add that, for all that excellence and fullness, much remains to be done. As an instance, the subject of juvenile delinquency is only touched upon. Experience shows that such cases derive in high proportion from broken homes, homes broken by death, desertion, divorce, neglect, conscious rejection of the family as a basic social unit - one could go on. So it follows that further studies of growing up in Illawarra - as elsewhere - must overflow into the lives of adults. To complete the picture we need books on being grown up, and growing old, in Illawarra. Moreover, it must be a continuing process which must largely fall into the hands of academic historians and their research workers. But let them please write up their findings as Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Sherington have done, keeping the reader turning the pages out of unflagging interest. We need a lot more much books.

E.B.