In the district under Inspector Murray’s supervision (which includes Illawarra), there were in operation during the year — 59 Public schools, 3 Provisional school, 8 Half-time schools and 2 Evening schools. These two latter were established at Sherbrooke and Marshall Mount, but received such scant support even from those in whose interest they were established that they were soon discontinued. The cost of building and furnishing the Woonona school was £900 14s 1d; Bulgo, £130 15s 6d; Goondarin Creek, £225 1s. 84.5 per cent of schools were above the standard; 7.2 per cent were up to the standard; and 8.7 were below the standard. The condition of the schools is thus shown to be considerably above what it was last year. Organization, discipline, and attainments are all reported as satisfactory. There is sufficient accommodation for 4845 pupils. The total enrolment at time of inspection was 4152; average attendance is 3077, and the ordinary attendance 3317. The accommodation is nearly equally distributed throughout the district. At Mount Kembla and North Bulli only was the accommodation less than that required for the pupils in attendance, and in these the deficiency was shortly to be made good.

ILLAWARRA’S RELIGIOUS HISTORY: A BOOK REVIEW
Faith of Steel, A History of the Christian Churches in Illawarra, Australia.

In July 1984 our Society enjoyed a lecture by Dr. Piggin in which, as he said, he experimentally tried out on us a chapter or so of what has since become this book. The result was very favourable. That early promise has been amply fulfilled. Published for the Sesquicentenary of Wollongong, the work was researched, written and produced in about a year, which was a prodigious feat, even allowing for the assistance of seventeen helpers whose names appear on the title page. Yet the book has a unity and coherence which affirms Dr. Piggin’s master-minding and strictly impartial sense of direction.

Part of the book’s success is its production, with good paper, clear type and spacious setting out. These qualities, however, are not entirely supplemented by design, which is a little lacking, in that bolder type in title page and chapter headings could have resulted in a more elegant book. Even so, the University press is advancing steadily, particularly in proof-reading, because there remain very few indeed of those sneaky misprints which seem to survive the closest vigilance; but the imps scored a wicked revenge when the surname of Cardinal Moran crept in as Moron.

These, however, are matters of mere form; as to substance, Dr. Piggin believes this to be “the first regional study ever written of all Christian denominations covering almost 200 years of Australian history”. The innovation caused much concern as to method and presentation of “a vast volume of source material”: including, it is flattering to note, “a
copious store of relevant material” which was culled from our Society’s Bulletins over the years; Dr. Piggin said at the time of his lecture that many of the personal and real-life touches, the things that put flesh on the bare bones of history, came from our modest recordings.

That concern has paid off handsomely. The danger with histories of this nature is that all too often they degenerate into assemblages of isolated facts: a work of “scissors and paste”. But that is the last thing that could fairly be said of this book. Each of the ten chapters, it is true, is preceded by a table of events, annals which put developments such as the establishment of individual churches, appointments, and - well, events - in perspective, so that the salient detail is available surely enough. Yet that is not allowed to obscure the progression of trends and changes; and all are set in their overall social and economic context - be it of wars, depressions, epidemics, disasters, the humdrum smoothness of the daily round, immigration or the welfare state - not only for Illawarra, but for Australia and, where necessary, the world. Thus new movements are related back to their origins, wherever the place, and traced through growth in Australia into their adaptation in our region. There they are seen linked where necessary to primary and secondary industries and the broad life of the people. In this way the great post-war immigration policy is seen to have introduced a richly varied multiplicity of new religious persuasions.

The fact which emerges in particular form all this is what a snug fit religious life is within the best-known outlines of our history. For example, the churches played a vital part in the public and private tragedies of the Bulli and Kembla mining disasters; so they should have, of course; but what is unexpected is that it was a two-way relationship; one coffin was at first left out of the combined procession at Bulli because its occupant had been deemed a blackleg, until the outraged priest insisted on its inclusion “in the name of charity”. And in turn those tragedies called many people into a more active church life, with a stimulus towards spiritualism thrown in. Again, industrial leaders were quite frequently leaders in religion. Examples such as these could be multiplied to show that religion and church life are a much more potent strand in communities than is generally allowed. Indeed, this book shows that they are inseparable and not to be ignored.

In short, this aspect of Illawarra’s history will be neglected by future historians at their peril. Conversely, those who take it into consideration may well find, among many warm, human stories and several very amusing ones, insights into unsuspected corners of our general history. Perhaps there could be no greater compliment than this to the underlying research behind this path-finding work of scholarship. It illuminates what we thought we already knew.

Moral: buy it, read it, and don’t forget it.

E.B.