Review

Living History


Frontier documents European attitudes to Aborigines, as they were being dispossessed, and beyond. It is a sequel to The Other Side of the Frontier which rewrote the history of Aboriginal responses to the European invasion. In his introduction to this history of race relations, Reynolds writes that “the past is still alive, is dangerously alive, in many parts of Australia”. This is brought home to me daily in the Northern Territory where I now live. “Aboriginal issues” have been shown to be statistically second only to economic issues in determining the voting preferences of the electorate. And now there is news of another Aboriginal death in custody in Queensland. This is a history book which really sheds light on Australia today.

Reynolds’ book is purposely broad-sweeping and passionate. Rather than sway his audience with eloquent argument, Reynolds pummels it with fact after fact, quotation after quotation, drawing on events that occurred in all parts of Australia to demonstrate the recurring themes of frontier violence. European rationalisations dressed up as all sorts of theories, and the continuing struggle for land rights from 1788 to today. Hence the book’s three sections: “Conflict”, “Ideology” and “Land”.

“Conflict” details the extent of bloodshed on the frontier. Like The Other Side of the Frontier, it debunks the myth of the peaceful settlement of Australia, revealing the atrocities committed and Aboriginal resistance to the invasion of their land. It documents powerfully Europeans’ fear on the frontier—a dread that outlasted open fighting, and meshed with guilt and rationalising belief in the inherent violence of Aborigines to produce a racism embedded in the national psyche.

“Ideology” briefly outlines the various philosophies that were applied to “explain” Aborigines: the “noble savage”. Enlightenment theories of universality, social darwinism, scientific racism. As well as showing how theories such as social darwinism bolstered European domination, Reynolds gives space to the philanthropists and missionaries who argued against the brutality and injustice, but whose concerns fell on deaf ears. Their voices in the wilderness serve only to condemn more loudly the dispossession. They cannot be pardoned as products of their times when it was they who rubbed the non-expedient and chose the ideologies to justify their practice.

“The Land” questions the historic decision of Justice Blackburn in 1971 in Milirrpum v Nabalco that native title never existed in Australian law, all Aboriginal legal rights being extinguished upon the declaration of sovereignty in 1788. Reynolds compares this decision with Canadian case law to the contrary, and provides evidence that this was not even the universal view in the late eighteenth century—rather, “Sovereignty gave the nation the sole right of acquiring the soil from the natives and establishing settlements upon it”. It did not, of itself, deliver up, unencumbered, all land held by the indigenes. The question of native rights had to be resolved afterwards. And, in that process, it was never assumed that the indigenes were without rights” (p.170) British sovereignty extinguishing Aboriginal rights made Aborigines officially British subjects—supposedly with the attendant protection of property—while actually enabling Europeans to lawfully take Aboriginal land, labelling the resisters criminals, not legitimate enemies in war.

Frontier is not a dry scholarly history, and Reynolds makes no bones about his personal concern to see justice done for Aboriginal people. Because it is intended “to present, in a form accessible to the non-specialist, a distillation of the Australian frontier experience as it was manifested in the relations between whites and Aborigines” this book may frustrate the academic. There has been no footnoting of
individual pieces of evidence, rather references are generalised at the back for each section of the text. The scope of the book leaves little room for more than basic presentation of ideas. There is brief mention in the conclusion of the fact that colonisation “represents the success of the bourgeois revolution in Australia” and “the complete and violent overthrow of one social economic system, one mode of production, by another”. Yet there is little attempt throughout the book to place the fate of Aborigines in the broader context of world economic development. The thirst for land that killed and dispossessed so many Aboriginal people is not linked with, for instance, the needs of Britain’s textile industry. Only brief mention is made of the British government’s original stated concern for the natives in the face of its sanction of the theft of their land, and the contradictory sanctity of property of the new regime.

But while the lack of development of such themes may be a weakness, it also attests to the scope of the book. Frontier probably does not introduce new ideas to anyone acquainted with Aboriginal history. What it does is try to make Aboriginal history more generally recognised as Australian history. The history of European settlement is inextricably tied to the fate of the original owners of the soil. Reynolds neatly sums up the issues, providing a compact rationale to the land rights supporter and a devastatingly persuasive introduction to the alternative, so-long-suppressed history of Australia.

If one doesn’t accept that Aborigines’ rights to land were extinguished in 1788 (and you can hardly do that having read Frontier) then, writes Reynolds, “Aboriginal land rights were extinguished not by official edict but by force, district by district, over many decades. The gradual eviction has gone on throughout Australian history. It has continued up to the present. The moral responsibility for the dispossession was not the burden of any one group or even a particular period of Australian history. It is shared by all generations of white Australians. The modern land rights movement embodies the same moral dilemmas as those faced by early governors and officials. Time has passed, but we have not escaped from our history”. (p.179)

It is almost clichéd to remind Australians of the self-assessment that should go hand-in-hand with the lavish self-congratulation governments are planning for next year. Yet, reading this book one can only join in gasping with indignation “What is there to celebrate?” History is only now being rewritten. Reynolds’ book is a major addition to that rewriting. And a third volume is promised, dealing with the incorporation of Aborigines into the European economy and the policies of assimilation and segregation. A major rethinking of the past and a new look at the present would be a much better thing to celebrate in 1988.

MADELEINE SMITH works in the office of the Aboriginal Land Commissioner in Darwin.

Fantasies?


The New Right’s Australian Fantasy is the culmination of a sustained campaign by Ken Coghill, Victorian Labor MP (and secretary to John Cain’s Cabinet) against the emergence of the newly aggressive Right. Even had he not edited this book, Coghill’s activities would have been noteworthy, rare as it is for a Labor parliamentarian to research and campaign against such an ideologically-focussed extra-parliamentary political force.

The title of the book is taken from a chapter by John Button, federal Minister for Industry, Technology and Commerce, who states that “in the shifting sands of political priorities and fashion there is a significant element of theology and fantasy, and that’s equally true of the political Right as of the political Left”.

Button refers mainly to the New Right’s “fantasy”, although what led to the use of that term was one of the Labor Left’s “fantasies” — the proposed nationalisation of the Commonwealth Oil Refineries and Carlton and United Breweries (the former privatised by Menzies).

Button’s presence as a contributor highlights the main weakness of the collection: its silence about the symbiosis between Labor’s post-1983 conservatism and the emergence of the New Right.

At one point in his chapter, Button lists the reasons for the