My Favourite Read of the 80s

Though most lefties lay claim to serious reading (at least in public), some can actually relax and read for pleasure. ALR asked a handful of busy activists, academics, and journalists to tell us about their favourite read of the ‘eighties. Here’s a sampling:

Just a bit over the top

Over the past ten years I’ve read a number of magnificent books from Peter Carey through Isabel Allende to Bruce Chatwin but, without a doubt, the best book I’ve read during the decade has just got to be *Pants Off* by those two sporting sages, H.G. Nelson and Roy Slaven.

Okay, on the surface, it’s just a book about sport. But dig a little deeper and you find these two geniuses, while sharing a knowledge of all types of sport unrivalled anywhere in the world for its profundity and sheer scope (how many umpires did the ancient Mayans use in pelota? Roy and H.G. can tell you: which side of his head did Neville Sellwood part his hair? Or, for that matter, Russell Mockridge? (The boys can tell you.) It’s not just sport they’re talking about.

What the boys do is use sport as a metaphor for just about anything else you can think of - politics, literature, philosophy, showbusiness, sex, philately - you name it and the boys know about it. What they’ve done is unlock the wisdom of the universe and dress it up as sport, sport and more sport.

There’s nothing these two estimable gentlemen don’t know about every type of sporting endeavour right around the globe, but that’s only the beginning of it. They are, quite simply, entrepreneurs of knowledge, educators skilled in the Socratic and Platonic traditions right through to the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Allan Border.

And the special features! How many runs did Patrick White score against Dodemaide?

Did you know White and Donald Horne enjoyed a fighting partnership of three before Alderman sent Home’s stumps crashing ten metres the other side of slips with yet another of those incomparable inswingers which then cut the other way (he had to do that to get a batsperson of Home’s quality out). And the steamy stuff of Roy Slaven’s early life poolside and behind the bikeshed which goes some small way to explaining the man behind the microphone.

*Pants Off* is simply the best book I’ve ever read. And if that seems to err on the side of reservation, if it sounds like I’m hedging my bets, afraid to come out and really say what I think about the tome, don’t take my word for it. Go out and buy it from your local ABC shop or, as they say in the ads, any quality bookshop.

- PAUL MURPHY; compere of ABC radio’s PM and journalist on SBS TV’s Tonight program.

Rules for revenge

My favourite book this year has been Fay Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*. It is the perfect revenge-fantasy.

The only thing wrong with it is that it is the book I would like to have written and she got to it first. It is the story of a wronged woman who deviously plots her revenge over many years. Weldon has a very bleak view of the world. All her men are weak, self-centred and manipulative, and most of her women are trampled upon and hurt.

The story-line is as old as the hills and she uses coincidence as a literary form so often that, in comparison, Charles Dickens looks like the master of believable plots.

However, her style is gripping and her wit hilarious, so it is real ‘can’t put down’ stuff. You have to find out if rule number 6 for a she-devil, “to be loved and not love in return” can eventually be achieved.

- MEREDITH BURGMANN; feminist, academic and academic union representative.
Reading for pleasure can seem a vice when consuming books becomes a profession. Calling them texts for classes, titles for review - the very terms we use tend to separate works of literature from the processes of creation or delight.

But there are cupboard readers even in the worlds of teaching and reviewing; and now and then there appears the space and energy simply to relate to a book.

My steady favourite, old friend for re-reading, remains Jaroslav Hasek's The Good Soldier Schweik (Penguin); still funny, bitter, deeply satirical, riotously rude.

... Having searched each drawer in the kitchen I have found a remarkable book that I had bought myself 17 years ago in Moscow. I recalled we had been married for three years to that time ... But I did not remember if my wife had used it whenever.

The book I found is titled Guten Appetit. It was written by two German authors - Gunter Linde and Heinz Knobloch (the last means 'garlic'). It appeared first in GDR and then was translated into Russian: Moscow, 1972. The authors have collected the most typical and most popular cooking recipes all over the world. There are even some descriptions of Australian meals. The best meal in Australia, it says, is a piece of meat. I really did not understand what they meant - steak, lamb or pork, and was amazed why they did not recall such a famous Pavlova cake recipe...

By the way, plenty of cookbooks are published in the Soviet Union. I don't know why. Maybe to compensate for a lack of food itself? For instance, the book titled One Hundred Meals of Eggs and Milk is very popular now. And it's clear why. Because it's a task beyond the capabilities of an ordinary Soviet citizen to buy meat in a butchery (viz epigraph 2). The author of this useful manual is trying to convince us that it's madness to eat meat, because it's highly harmful for our health. I think the fellow simply filled a so-called social order...

I have been living alone for about two months because my wife, a great talent in cooking, is herding our schoolboy in Moscow. So I have, at least once a week, to wash and cook for myself. My best achievement in cooking is fried eggs with bacon. But it is impossible to eat this meal for more than two days in a row. You will acquire repulsion, for sure! To go for take-away food? Spare me this necessity of going for food every day, thank you! Sometimes I use to work ...

... Having searched each drawer in the kitchen I have found a remarkable book ...
Women take the prize

I've missed several ALR deadlines trying to decide on my favourite book of the 'eighties. How to choose from the hundreds I've devoured over a decade?

Nothing in non-fiction stands out. All the seminal (Oh, the need for a new language!) feminist works which transformed my life belong to the 'seventies. And I haven't read any good Marx or Marxist tomes for ages. (Where are you when we need you, Harry Braverman?)

Some of the biographies and autobiographies of the 'eighties have been outstanding - Vivian Gornick's Fierce Attachments and Kim Cherin's In My Mother's House, both of which deal with the problematic relationships between American communist mothers and their feminist daughters. But none of these have carved out a place as favourite.

A novel perhaps? After a hard day's class struggle, nothing gives me greater pleasure than to curl up with a good novel, often until the wee hours of the morning. Well, almost nothing...

Maxine Hong Kingston's American Chinese classics, The Woman Warrior and China Men; Janine Burke's novel about Australian radicalism in the 'seventies, Speaking; Marion Zimmer Bradley's blockbuster historical romance, The Mists of Avalon; Jane Lazarre's The Power of Charlotte, another book about the communist mother/feminist daughter relationship; and Margaret Atwood's terrifying vision of women's future, The Handmaidens Tale.

Isabelle Allende's The House of the Spirits is a gem. Sally Morgan's My Place is also a revelation, though her often pedestrian style diminishes what is otherwise a forceful account of Koori oppression in Australia. Brian Matthews (even though he is a boy) deserves an accolade for Louisa, his biography cum novel about Louisa Lawson, pioneering feminist and also Henry's mum.

But, I guess my favourite book of the 'eighties is Keri Hulme's The Bone People. It is a wondrous story about a Maori Scottish artist and fisherwoman, much like Hulme herself. It transcends the limitations of the narrative style with strong elements of fantasy and myth, though it doesn't quite fall into the category of magical realism. It's about the creative and chaotic impulses of artistic life and of the often conflicting desires for independence and interconnectedness. It's also about the fierce Maori attachment to place.

Altogether, The Bone People is a whirlwind which blows you to parts you've never known. And it's, sadly, one of the few books which deserved the Booker Prize.

-CARMEL SHUTE: works in the Public Sector Union (PSU), ABC sub-branch and is an insomniac.

To market, to market...

If I were to choose a couple of books from the latter end of the decade which really engage with some of the conundrums in left political thought, they would be Stuart Hall's collection of essays covering the decade from 1978 to 1988, The Hard Road to Renewal and Barry Hindess' Freedom, Equality and the Market.

While quite different animals, the strength of both of these books is that they take the market seriously - not just as an economic category but as a central component of political and ideological calculation.

Both insist that the Left recognise the importance of the market and resist either demonising or lionising it; and both effectively argue, though in quite different ways, that a complete rethink of the dichotomy of market vs public sector is well overdue. Hindess, for example, argues that those positions - liberal, marxist and in-between - that "treat market provision and public control as if they represented distinct and incompatible principles of social organisation ... don't get us very far". Ranging through the classic debates on citizenship and welfare provision, Hindess brings a refreshing - and tactical - realism to debates on social policy.

One of the interests of Stuart Hall's essays is the way in which this theme starts with a murmur in the late 'seventies and then expands through the 'eighties in dealing with choice, consumerism, the politics of social identities and his critique of the forms of social democratic statism. In his conclusion, Hall underscores Thatcherism's achievements in unfolding a "positive conception of the 'enterprise culture'" and puts in an urgent plea for both a reconstruction of the idea of choice as a key element of democratic pluralism; for serious thinking on what a left 'appropriation' of the market might mean outside of the old formulas of caretaker statism and for detailed consideration of the "institutional forms of a responsive (rather than a prescriptive) state".

Even if you're not too keen on these two authors, these issues would seem to be pretty important. Think of developments in Eastern Europe. Think of the decline elsewhere of traditional labour movement values, ideologies and organisations and the restructuring of the labour market. "Onwards", as Gorbachev says, "to full-cost accounting!".

-COLIN MERCER: teaches in cultural studies at Griffith University.
The A - Z of good reading


Who wrote it? What is it? Will I like it? Those are the three questions that The Good Reading Guide asks, and it makes a good job of answering them.

According to its editor, Helen Daniel, The Good Reading Guide is designed to meet a need that I've long felt was there. I find the present system by which new fiction reaches the reading community is limited. "New novels are reviewed and for a few weeks or months they're shimmering there on the horizon and then they disappear. It seems to me that we need to extend the life expectancy of new novels. We have some splendid writing from the 'seventies that was helping to pave the way for the fertility of the 'eighties, and I think it's very difficult for readers to keep up with such an extraordinary range of fiction."

The book comprises entries from a hundred reviewers from all over the country, each of whom was asked to choose 50 interesting Australian novels from the last 20 years. All the contributors set-out to write for the casual reader, for someone who is not familiar with an author's history and perhaps won't have read their work before.

The Guide is set out in an A-Z format so that you can look-up individual authors, and when you do, you find a 'critics choice' - the book most liked by most contributors - and a couple of mini-reviews of the author's books.

The result, says Daniel, is "a menu of what's available in Australian writing. It seems to me to be a splendid mix of critical voices, there's no one view of Australian writing being presented. Many of the contributors would disagree with many of the other contributors, but it seems to me like a menu where readers can learn what is offering in Australian writing."

The mini reviews are the kinds of thing a friend tells you when they recommend a book, just a few details that will either make you want to read it, or will put you off it for life. Luckily most of the books mentioned have at least two reviews, so you get a balance of opinions.

Whether you've read a lot of Aussie fiction, and want to know more, or you're an absolute beginner, wanting to know where to start, The Good Reading Guide is going to be invaluable.

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Do-Gooders and Blow-Ins

As the Royal Commission into Black Deaths reminds us, white 'do-gooders' play a significant part in the Aboriginal people's struggle for justice. Yet just how do we stand 'outside' the systematic racism we deplore? Tim Rowse muses on this and other contradictions of white anti-racism.

The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody has again focussed attention on the relationships between Aborigines and police. Whether police kill Aboriginal prisoners or those prisoners make police cells the setting of suicide, it would seem that the occasions when police 'deal with' Aborigines distil all that is ugliest in Australian race relations: bullying, hatred and despair, laced with booze and what, in Australia, passes for machismo.

Gillian Cowlishaw's recent book on institutionalised racism in our countryside does not canvass these issues directly; in fact, the Royal Commission doesn't get a mention. But in what she says about Brindleton, her fictional name for a real town in north west New South Wales, there is much to inform the hopes one might have for the historic sequence of reforms of which the Royal Commission is but one moment. Her perspective is pessimistic: ultimately she doubts not the efficacy but the direction of what she calls (with plenty of irony) 'enlightened' policies.

The Royal Commission is generating its own literature on the social relationships of towns such as Brindleton, writing flooded with the light of the most searching judicial scrutiny that European authority can set in motion. What the commissioners produce will be unique, not only in the circumstances of its production, but in its genres: a series of case studies, biographies which one might call 'tragic' except that the meaning of that all too easily uttered word might have to be redefined. Is it the epic drama of tormented and flawed individuals, or is it the working out, in the instance of the individual life, of an institutionalised racism which is petty, banal, cruel, well-meaning - and, I believe, difficult to blame on any one clearly malign social interest?

And who are we, the readers of such writings? Is there a constituency of 'enlightened' people to whom the meaning of these terrible individual denouements is already clear, because we come to them with an 'analysis' which separates us both from the past and those redneck contemporaries who (we imagine) will never be our peers? I do not mean to question the anti-racist intentions of any reader when I pose the question which clearly increasingly discomfits Cowlishaw: from what position does one observe racism in a racist society? Is there an Archimedean point from which an enlightened perspective is possible and from which anti-racist social planning and political policies can be formulated with confidence?

As a close-quarters observer of racism in an Australian country town, Cowlishaw found that although she had gone there knowing where she stood, the longer she stayed the less confident she became that such a position existed. So her book is not just about racism, but about how the 'enlightened' think about their relationship to it.

As a site from which to think about racism, the Royal Commission has the advantage of being the product of Aboriginal agitation which has continued to demand answers and results. It may therefore generate the kinds of analyses which can be translated into recommendations. Cowlishaw's book makes three critical points which need to be considered by anyone taking part in that reflection.

First, racism, she says, must be understood as the local idiom of what is really a class oppression. It follows that it is futile to conceive racism as an "outlook" which can be detected in some individuals so that those individuals can be screened out. The structures generating racist responses will be left untouched by such reforms.

Second, though police are the most visible instance of white power, that power is fundamentally secured by "an unholy alliance" of graziers and those whom she (and the white and black townsfolk she studied) call 'blow-ins'. 'Blow-ins' are employees and their families posted to bush towns by such central bureaucracies as education and welfare; they live in Brindleton only a few years, if that. From their ranks emerge most 'do-gooders' and even 'stirrers', those disturbed by local racism who seek to put into practice the 'enlightenment' philosophies of government welfare initiatives.

However, both do-gooders and stirrers remain socially distant from most of the Aboriginal community; their activism not only often embarrasses residents of all colours but also, in its own way, reaffirms dominant white values and institutions. Unable to penetrate and dismantle the most refractory forms of Aboriginal culture, do-gooding (an ironic term for an ironic position, says Cowlishaw) marginalises those Aborigines who do not cleave to 'enlightened' programs.

Third, the most autonomous and dignified Aboriginal culture in the region is that milieu impenetrable to do-gooders and looked down on by local whites. Cowlishaw evokes an Aboriginal "culture of opposition" in which alcohol 'abuse', outlandish public behaviour, a humour both anti-white and self-mocking, and disrespect for property are prominent.

Much of this culture consists of the very practices which solicit the continuous attention of the police who, in turn, are urged on by the many white townsfolk who are worried by what they
see as the leniency of contemporary law enforcement.

In other words, Cowlishaw's book is an assault on the optimism of those who hope that the Royal Commission can achieve something. Though she does not explicitly examine the politics and ideology of that commission and the social movement behind it, it seems implicit in her book that commission-inspired innovations in policing practice and welfare endowment will bear great risk of repeating the failures of 'enlightenment' which she depicts.

White townsfolk will fear any weakening of the agencies of law enforcement and will seek to socialise incoming police into the well-practised procedures of town surveillance and control. Programs to assist Aborigines to live with hope in their future will only renew many whites' outrage at Aborigines' privileges, while confirming, in other do-gooding whites, a sense that Aborigines' self-destructive values and practices can and must be changed by sympathetic intervention. The latter view will animate fresh waves of blow-ins and the few unrepresentative allies that such programs co-opt from the disunited ranks of Aborigines.

I stress that this is not necessarily my prognosis of the effects of the commission's likely recommendations, nor is it an explicit forecast of Cowlishaw. But I think that this sad scenario faithfully extrapolates from her description of Brindleton politics in the late 'seventies and early 'eighties.

Black, White or Brindle: race in rural Australia is therefore a provocative and topical study. Provocative of what? Disbelief? Put the book aside as 'too academic' and too pessimistic?

Most of Cowlishaw's description of contemporary Brindleton is concerned with the whites, rather than the Blacks. To 'study up' (inspecting the powerful) rather than to anatomise the poor and powerless yet again is so unusual in Australian anthropology that we must warmly thank Cowlishaw for this emphasis. It was no doubt prompted partly by a radical curiosity about the world.
point to the powerlessness of those Aborigines who have become teachers' aids to determine curriculum, and to the defeat of an intended parents' strike against racism in the school by Aborigines who identified with the conciliatory rhetoric of senior white staff.

Indeed, in Cowlishaw's account, schooling emerges as the most powerful and controversial apparatus of the 'enlightenment'. Blow-in, do-gooding teachers ally with a stratum of Aborigines to espouse the strategy of advancement through learning.

The purveyors of the new enlightenment theories are struggling in the pool of their own middle-class mores. The modern notions of equality of opportunity, individuality of aspiration and even a limited cultural relativism, are asserted against those, both black and white, for whom such notions are foreign or socialist.

Cowlishaw doubts that there are the jobs to absorb educated Aborigines, apart from the few in public sector welfare and education agencies. Employment in unskilled trades could be expanded to absorb Aborigines without having to qualify in an institution which many of them find racist.

Because it is in the advance-guard of 'enlightenment', schooling arouses another kind of critique from the more overtly racist whites. The help that Aborigines get with their schooling, particularly the grants to secondary students, is one of the measures most resented by many whites as government favourites towards those who will not help themselves.

The Aboriginal beneficiaries of 'enlightenment' are therefore truly 'interstitial': subordinate to those who really control 'enlightened' programs, resented by hard-line racists for their privileges', and accused by less respectable kin of seeking their own advancement by identifying with whites' values.

But do we need to go to the next step and agree that such people are not representative? Unless we read this phrase only in the rather trivial sense of statistically 'atypical', then answering this question requires that we first answer another: What general Aboriginal interest might the interstitial ones be failing adequately to represent? After reading Cowlishaw's description of what she takes to be the essentially oppositional

Aboriginal culture of Brindleton, and noting that she hardly mentions the issue of land rights (apparently rendered a non-issue by enlightenment's emphasis on self-improvement), I am still unsure of the nature of Brindleton Aborigines' interests.

Cowlishaw's conception of their interests is elaborated by putting forward a dynamic conception of Aboriginal culture. She draws on anthropological writing about NSW Aborigines in the 1940s and 1950s by Beckett, Bell, Kelly, Reay and Stillington to show a continuing tradition of Aboriginal reaction to the way whites have mistreated them. That tradition - the "rebellious display of disreputable behaviour" - is alive as contemporary Aboriginal culture, not so much a remnant of precolonial culture, rather a complex formed in response to colonialism itself. She argues that the value of this culture is that it allows Aborigines a dignity in one another's eyes which they cannot have in the eyes of whites. It is "their defiant reaction to rejection, and their haven from the indignities meted out to them".

Some of this culture is humorous: a street that is covered with broken glass is jokingly called "crystal city". There is amusement also at frightening whites and outraging their notions of respectable public behaviour, particularly with public drunkenness. Parents show tolerance of children's misdemeanours when urged by teachers to rein them in. Figures in authority are targets of abuse. Being called a "white cunt" and having one's car scratched has sometimes reconciled some do-gooders (particularly teachers) with Brindleton attitudes which they first thought racist.

Cowlishaw does not turn her eyes from the destructive effects of alcohol in this culture, particularly violence. It seems that Aborigines bash each other rather than whites, and much of this assault is inflicted by men on their female companions. Consequently, one of the important breaches of community solidarity against white authority is women's willingness to call the police and seek court orders to offset the physical threat which some of their menfolk pose.

Acknowledging the element of "social pathology" in this culture, Cowlishaw nonetheless concludes that in a hostile environment it is the shameless affirmation of values which are an affront to
white propriety that are the positive face of Aboriginality.

If that conclusion seems to some readers to accept rather a lot of misery as part of the logic of cultural opposition, and to judge, as testament of that culture’s strength, the persistent intensity of police surveillance, then such readers are in good Aboriginal company. For those (including, of course, Cowlishaw herself) who would attempt to make the definition of Aboriginal include aspects of the culture that are in opposition to the dominant world of whites, and to define these differences in a positive way, are in conflict with those who do not want to be oppositional.

In other words, in defining the “positive face of Aboriginal culture” as she has and in characterising as “not representative” those who make the effort to be more respectable, Cowlishaw is taking sides in a major cultural dispute among Brindleton’s Aborigines. Nothing wrong with taking sides (I’m not pleading for social science neutrality), but one does not have to agree with Cowlishaw, especially when her sympathy for the oppositional culture leads her to overstate greatly both its autonomy and its oppositional force.

Cowlishaw’s exaggeration of the force of the culture of opposition stems from her understanding of the term ‘hegemony’.

Given this oppositional culture’s rejection of pride in property (they had none), refusal of respect for the wealthy and powerful (the oppressors), and the repudiation of the judgments made by white society (which held them to be inferior), Aborigines naturally presented a threat to white hegemony.

This threat to hegemony persists, she argues. I don’t find this convincing.

If ‘hegemony’ refers to one group’s control of resources secured by its political and ideological leadership, then it is hard to see how Brindleton Aborigines are, or have ever been, a threat. Has white proprietorship of land ever been in doubt in this region? Have political structures ever allowed Aborigines to articulate interests which might undermine the collective interests of whites? No. Then where is the threat to ‘hegemony’?

It seems that all that Cowlishaw means by ‘hegemony’ is value consensus. That is, many Brindleton Aborigines conspicuously maintain a value system which is different from what most whites and some Aborigines think proper. No doubt this is so. But to be a pitied and despised public embarrassment because one violates value consensus is only in a very weak sense to be a threat. One could argue to the contrary, that such ‘opposition’ maintains a cultural separateness which arises from and reinforces one. The oppositional culture is meant to bestow some dignity on its participants, yet some young Aboriginal men seem now to be falling into suicidal despair.

Perhaps, then, the oppositional culture of Brindleton is a culture without interests, eschewing the political process to celebrate an Otherness without future, sustained economically by welfare cheques without end.

This harsh conclusion leaves me feeling very uncomfortable. At least Cowlishaw can see something positive, some spirit of defiance, pride, humour, solidarity (maintained partly by marginalising “coconuts” - “not representative”) - in short a kind of Survival, to use the word Aborigines voiced so joyously and angrily throughout 1988. What do I see, in reaction to her vision - pathology and powerlessness? And is not my account even bleaker than hers, given that I am persuaded by much of what she has to say about the political weakness of Aborigines who have attached their fortunes to the new institutions of ‘enlightenment’?

Rather than invite the reader to choose between what two white academics have to say, as if one of us must be right, I would argue that the difference between us is indecideable and is an example of the difficulty of continuing to write with some pretension to authority about what we refer to as ‘Aboriginal culture’.

Cowlishaw’s book shows that ‘culture’ is rather a heterogeneous series of responses to a colonialism which gives certain real but limited kinds of recognition and encouragement to a people dispossessed of a useful and dignified relationship to their land. How does one place oneself, as a sympathetic white observer, in relationship to that variety of Aboriginal responses? If we think we are on Aborigines’ side against institutionalised white racism, what remedial or revolutionary actions do we support? In particular, which Aboriginal responses are we to be guided by?

Judging from her remark about the difficulties of her fieldwork, Cowlishaw appears to have felt very sharply the difficulty of answering these questions. The most ‘positive’ face of Aboriginality is that which is least likely to be turned, in sympathetic co-operation, towards her. Her sympathy for them, however, has much to do with her wish to distance herself from two features of her own culture: Anthropology and ‘enlightenment’.

In a number of recent essays, Cowlishaw has criticised Australian anthropology’s persistent severance of Aboriginal culture from history. In particular she accuses anthropology of ignoring the Aboriginal culture that developed in response to European colonialism, and of prejudging those changes as mere degradations of the ‘essential’ precolonial culture which it was anthropology’s task to reconstruct.

But Cowlishaw’s praiseworthy commitment to putting history into accounts of Aboriginality seems to me to be marred by its own essentialism. The theme of Aboriginal adaptation, she has argued, is ‘resistance’. Therefore the distinguishing features of contemporary Aboriginality are its oppositional, stubbornly autonomous, practices. My worry is that, while this argument certainly historicises Aboriginal culture, it does not free the concept ‘culture’ of essentialism. Cowlishaw’s is a political essentialism: Aboriginality equals resistance, and other strategies and styles of life (such as those of the interstitial group) are aberrations from Aboriginality’s basic historical trajectory. Though Cowlishaw often shows us the dispersed and heterogeneous quality of contemporary Aboriginal responses to colonialism, like the anthropologists she criticises, she has her own conception of what is truly an essentially Aboriginal.

Cowlishaw is sceptical of the over-anxious definitions of Aboriginality which are now common in public utterance and accepted in public policy for such notions have a tendency to repress those features of Aboriginal life which are repugnant and embarrassing to the enlightened Europeans who support the policies of the last decade at a half. Cowlishaw accordingly wished
to dissociate her perspective from that of local do-gooders who are necessarily committed to that sanitised vision of Aboriginality. Such people naively suppose they know what Aborigines need (and need to leave behind); they cultivate and promote Aboriginal people who agree. Her distance from do-gooders allows her to see how they fit into Brindleton’s tensions and solidarities, and how they support what she calls hegemony in the ‘unholy alliance’ mentioned above. But is there a political alternative to do-goodism? Or is the alternative merely to do nothing but observe that the flourishing of some Aborigines is part of ‘enlightenment’s’ wider failures?

In fact, Cowlishaw does not find it so easy to differentiate her views from ‘enlightened’, stirring and do-gooding blow-ins.

One of the qualities of Brindleton Aborigines which whites find most abhorrent is their perceived aggression and violence (directed, as she points out, at each other). One of the difficult things about being even a little ‘pro-Aboriginal’, according to Cowlishaw, is that other whites force one to defend or explain away such qualities.

Thus do-gooders will explain at somewhat tedious length that the bad behaviour is caused by certain bad experiences: that drinking and petty crime are the result of boredom and depression; that the Aborigines should be helped to overcome feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem and that the grant (for secondary pupils) is one element in the solution.

Yet this is precisely what Cowlishaw does: “the inspiration and the justification for both drinking and domestic violence came originally from the white man, and have been sustained in conditions of dependency.” And:

“This violence is in turn a response to the violence which has been endemic in the controlling of Aborigines since the first settlement. It began with killings, and continued with the violence of the Aboriginal Protection Board, reserve management and police intrusion. The fact that police must now be called frequently to stop blacks hurting each other is a final ironic tragedy.”

Indeed, and even more ironic that recommended changes in police procedures might also reduce the rate of Blacks’ suicide.

Cowlishaw, for all her irony about do-gooders, privately admits that, unavoidably, she is one. What makes her book valuable is her (intended or otherwise) demolition of the illusion that there is a secure vantage point from which to judge others’ representations of Aborigines’ interests.

Perhaps if there is a fine line separating Cowlishaw from do-gooders/stirrers is that the latter do not yet have (or perhaps cannot, as activists, afford to acquire) her sense of the irony and the tragedy of both the oppositional culture and its ‘respectable’ but politically circumscribed alternative.

But, for me, to celebrate this irony would be to find solace in what is really only the uneasy expression of an impossible detachment. There is a tough-minded wisdom in Cowlishaw’s book, but it is not an enabling knowledge.

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A Popular Panorama

One of the historical events of the decade was the four-volume People’s History of Australia, published last year. Eric Fry looks on all four volumes with hindsight.

Who are ‘the people’, and do they have a history distinct from that of the nation or society?

The people about and for whom Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee assembled the volumes under the collective title A People’s History of Australia (1) “are predominantly of the working class but not exclusively so. They are the vast majority of Australians who, on balance, have had the pattern of social relations weighed against them”. The editors want to recapture and review the experiences of those neglected in conventional histories - Aborigines, women, ethnic or racial minorities, and the working class in general.

In the four volumes, the editors bring together eighty contributors to pursue a common purpose in different ways. The pattern is revealed in the arrangement and contents.

The first book, A Most Valuable Acquisition, based on the nineteenth century but often reaching to the present, begins with the white conquest of Australia, the dispossession of the Aborigines, their struggles to defend and regain their land. It shows how the country was carved up by its new owners exploiting the labour of convicts and migrants in a capitalist economy, part of the British empire economically, racist in the White Australia policy, militarist in Britain’s wars. The essentials of white Australia’s historical development are laid out clearly in authoritative chapters stripping the disguises from the orthodox stories.

Making a Life focusses on work at home and in earning a living, the daily tasks ignored in most histories, especially when performed by women.

It presents interesting accounts of the kitchen and family diet, of clothing and fashion for ordinary folk, of health care and of the cold charity of government welfare. Despite the changing pattern of family life over a century, the subordination of women in their double workload remains. We look with fresh eyes at childhood in our unequal society and see how the landmark depressions of the 1890s and 1930s stamped the lives of the poor and passed by the rich.

That takes us to the paid workplace with studies of technology, the factory floor, the computer desk and the legal framework regulating employment. As workers organise, the development of trade unions follows, as does an arbitration system which enmeshes workers with the state and abets inequalities of status and gender. These are displayed in practice in pictures of work life on wharves, in steel mills and in offices.

Taking culture broadly to be activities which are part of everyday life, Constructing a Culture shows these are shaped by capitalist society and regulated by the State, not abstract creations of mind. Human made, they can be unravelled and rebuilt.

Birth, marriage and death over two centuries lead to a clear-sighted evaluation of schooling and its purposes, reflections on how crime is defined and mentally disordered disposed of; an illuminating study of prostitution as work and a moral question; lively pieces on gambling and drink, sport cementing social bonds, the ownership and policies of the media in which a version of daily life is depicted. Australian humour, religion, writing and music are observed; popular culture is defended against highbrow detractors.

The first part of Staining the Wattle exposes the ways in which the people have been kept in place, the second the unceasing movements for change.

In Australia, repression began in convict days; self-government was used to defend property; ‘community’ was constantly invoked to disguised class divisions. In times of crisis the rulers did not hesitate to call on the armed forces of the state and prepare their private armies. These hard facts are no reason for despair; on the other side is the resistance they called forth. This volume includes fine studies of the women’s and peace movements, of the working class and labour in action, of radicals and socialists over a century. We hear the voices of Aborigines, homosexuals, young protesters, environmentalists. The rulers are always challenged and changes grow out of the conflict.

This wide range of subjects in four volumes goes beyond usual histories, as the editors intended. They succeed in their aim to view the world from the kitchen as well as the best room and to illuminate everyday life. Their actors are ordinary people, not the ‘great men’ of politics, business and warfare who dominate the standard texts of a previous generation.

Women receive special attention, as we would expect. More fundamentally, the aim of dealing with the private sphere as fully as the public domain and recognising the essential role of unpaid family labour in production and reproduction requires that familiar subjects are analysed afresh. A People’s History makes as much progress as is present possible in redressing the neglect of women, a continuous process of recasting history which these volumes carry forward.

I have not named authors because they form a co-operative and are too numerous for individual mention. They include notable scholars and activists who have won respect over decades, others whose names are well known and many new voices from whom we will hear more. One in three is a woman. Most are professionally trained, usually working or having worked precariously in higher education. In their background and employment they are representative of the Left intelligentsia in the social sciences, in their numbers a heartening roll call of radical historians.

The limitations of these volumes result from the task they attempt. The chapters are uneven in quality and in substance, ranging from mature studies to preliminary sketches. The wide ground could not be covered in any other way. Often, the information is scanty or selective - history from below is hardest to write because ordinary people are the silent majority whose lives have not been recorded. ‘New social history’ taking the whole of life...
its province can easily become diffuse, lacking boundaries. The editors for all their labour can do no more than arrange their contributions in a loose structure of State power and political economy, material life, culture and conflict, providing some coherence without imposing uniformity.

They would not wish to do so. Disclaiming any intention of producing a complete or definitive history, the editors need not be concerned about overlaps, inconsistencies and different views. These four volumes bear the marks of their composition and invite their own revision. The description on the dust jacket is modest: "A People’s History opens new windows on the story of Australia since 1788”.

Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee tell elsewhere how, in 1981, they decided with Peter Love to attempt a people’s history as an alternative to the official Bicentennial publications which the seniors of the university History establishment were preparing, supported by public and private funds. It was a bold step which would call on all their courage and humour.

Their point of departure was that the Bicentennial history by ‘slicing’ Australia’s past at fifty year intervals would preclude examination of how any state of affairs originated or changed over time or might be altered in the future. They expected, too, that officially sponsored history would become celebratory and self-satisfied. Setting out on their venture for reasons of principle they appealed to all who would help them on ideological grounds. The popular style and critical tone of the project followed to make it accessible and a spur to action.

They had little to go on. In nineteen century Europe the bourgeoisie invoked people’s history along with political democracy to create nation states under their leadership. That did not apply in the British-Australian tradition, particularly in these colonies where our past was seen as part of the British heritage and our brief white history as an extension of the imperial record. This had not altered much by World War Two although the radical nationalists championed local culture embodied in ordinary folk.

A people’s history of Australia had been mooted by communist and socialist graduates of the 1940s, the first large numbers of leftwing students to win places at Australian universities. It did not get far because we soon realised we did not have the writers, resources or knowledge to carry it through and we could not overcome these deficiencies in the time of the Cold War. Australian history continued to be neglected in universities or serious study.

By the 1980s a people’s history had become possible, as the editors have proved, not least because of the increased output of Australian history.

Our rejoicing in the new nationalism should be tempered by the realisation that we are now a dependency of multinational capital - US, Japanese and European - so the culture moves towards cosmopolitan commercial. The international marketing format has a niche for local scenery and characters.

Leaving aside such speculations we can recognise the practical foundations for a people’s history by the 1980s - the ground gained by labour, women’s, Aboriginal and minority history and theory over two decades. These new waves challenged notions of what history should be, making historical writing one of the liveliest arenas of ideological contest. A People’s History brings together these critical studies and many of their authors, marking a new stage in the ways we can see our past.

A People’s History is a hard-won advance, its limitations the mark of its time and circumstances, inviting successors which will see further because they stand on its shoulders. Consolidating the radical scholarship of decades around the questions of today, it is informative and stimulating, a reference book and a guide to action. There is something in it for everyone who wants to understand the past and change the world.

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