Experiments in Regions of Recent Settlement: Australia, Argentina and Canada', draws on the New Zealand Liberals of the 1890s and provides a useful analysis of the political philosophy underlying their social legislation.

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A FUNNY title, but not a funny book.

Professor Platt makes two points: the first loudly, and often; the second once, and then by constant implication.

First, statistics collected from Victorian times through to 1913, and often beyond, are highly selective and dangerously insecure. Yet book after book refers to a handful of summaries without question, setting up an apparently authoritative series of sources, all nevertheless dependent, at the end of the chain of reference, upon a handful of dubious guesses. The quantitative assertions that result are often 'random, unexplained and unascribed'; and some of the world-scale speculations are little more than 'a highly imaginative piece of intellectual fun'.

The antidote is not, immediately, a more secure battery of figures but common sense. Often, the question 'Is it likely?' More respectably, perhaps, 'How could they possibly know?'

The second point: 'In the most primitive terms the economist seeks first to create a "model" and only then to confirm it from evidence; the historian, ideally, looks first at the evidence from which he only then derives conclusions'. Well, there we are, scarcely at the bottom of page 1, and I fancy the rug has been pulled from under the feet of many an historian. And we learn why at once: 'all of which was explained more suitably in a friendly engagement between Robert Fogel and Sir Geoffrey Elton'. Battle lines have been drawn up! But the prejudice does lead to a reasonable conclusion: silence is better than bad numbers.

The book is written with passion. There are 56 individual villains (and a few groups); their guilt is reinforced throughout the book, for they bear an asterisk at every mention, like a badge of shame; and bold type in the index directs us quickly to their major sin. Braudel is among them, so we still know where we are. But the Lucifer of demons is Michael Mulhall, of Dictionary of Statistics fame, attended by his over-quoted acolyte, the luckless Sir George Paish. Our own J.B. Condliffe is a marked man also: 'The Commerce of Nations is widely based and well presented, but it belongs to the school of international civil servants ... for whom the source of a figure, if published under sufficiently impressive authority, remained unmentioned'.

The judgement points to a major and worthy anxiety: the potential misuse of shoddy research. Not only, according to the author, do empire-building economic historians hunger for numbers, any numbers; they also work, as often as not, within the orbit if not under the direct patronage of international and semi-political organizations. Yes, it is conspiracy time again, or at least time to beware of the hidden agenda. Above all, of course, in Professor Platt's eyes, we must bewail the influence of debate on world trade, on the supposed — the badly documented — imbalance between rich and poor, imperial and colonized.

That seems an acceptable warning, given the merciless exposure here of careless trust. Certainly, this short book is worth a quick read, if one is planning a foray into the modern
economic field. The arguments for control versus freedom, the concern for international justice, may well have coloured authoritative works upon which so many of us are tempted to depend. Whether those insecure generalities are also put to sinister use by advocates of economic reform is another matter; and Professor Platt is wise enough to let his doubts do their own work, without any unhistorical declarations of his own.

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THIS IS a book worth knowing about, whatever one’s field — partly because it makes available, in an excellent translation, the methods and interests of a continental academic stable, but chiefly because it combines with the techniques of a sociologist both the perceptions of anthropology and the raw material of history.

One has customary misgivings: in spite of her avowal that ‘now is not the time for a general theory’, there are many instances where the isolated particularity of the evidence inspires only partial confidence in the author’s conclusions; and inevitably much of her ‘raw material’ is lifted from other secondary works, where its argumentative purpose may have sifted out already its less predictable implications.

But the general logic of the book is stimulating and informative, allowing as it does a movement on the part of the reader from a consideration of kinship generally, through the dynamics of the parent-children group, to an examination of the family’s relationship to and impact upon the economics and power structures of a wider society; all presented with constant attention to historical change.

PHILIP ROUSSEAU


HISTORIES PRODUCED to mark school centenaries are notoriously prone to a celebratory Prize Day version of the past. They are generally designed to publicize and promote the school in question, and to inspire the pupils of the present to follow in the footsteps of their successful and illustrious forebears. Such works, like school magazines, are potentially useful sources that express the official ideology, the rationalizations and self-image, even the doubts and contradictions, of the institution. They give comfort to past pupils who can organize themselves in the unfolding pageant. At the same time, they reinforce a notion of a distinctive school ‘tradition’ that usually legitimizes existing structures and ideals. The historical value of the enterprise, on the other hand, is strictly limited by the conflicting pressures which are at work to sanitize the past and to make it suitable for celebration. One might have hoped that a history of Auckland Girls’ Grammar School, a school that has so often resisted the stereotypes imposed upon it, could have avoided this tendency. It is therefore something of a disappointment that Heather Northey’s centenary history of AGGS makes no attempt to do so.