

*The Europeans in Australia: A History, Volume 2, Democracy.* By Alan Atkinson. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2004. xxiii + 440 pp. Australian price: \$59.95. ISBN 0-19-553642-8.

IN THE FIRST VOLUME OF *THE EUROPEANS IN AUSTRALIA: A HISTORY*, Alan Atkinson examined the origins and early years of European settlement in Australia. Now, in volume two, subtitled *Democracy*, he deals with the period from the 1820s to the 1870s. He is currently working on a third volume that will take the story to the end of World War I.

The trilogy gains its distinctiveness from the fact that it is intended as ‘a history of common imagination in Australia’. Volume one examined the ideas and imagery of people of all classes, but it paid particular attention to the governors, whose autocratic power made them especially influential. Volume two, however, says much less about governors or leading politicians, for the very good reason that it covers a period in which power was increasingly dispersed. In Atkinson’s analysis, the chief agent in this dispersal of power was a ‘revolution in communications’ caused by rising literacy, the proliferation of books and newspapers, improvements in transport, reforms in the postal service and the introduction of the telegraph. This revolution disseminated knowledge more widely, it promoted self-reflection and debate, and by linking the colonies to intellectual and political currents in Britain and the United States it promoted ‘attitudes that might be called global’ (p.xiv).

The most striking outcome of this globalization of attitudes was the growth of ‘democracy’. The term embraces, of course, the introduction of responsible government, manhood suffrage and the secret ballot, but Atkinson does not dwell on these reforms. His main concern is a wider democratization of society and culture that drew support even from those who opposed extension of the suffrage. Its manifestations included the emergence of a more democratic ‘information order’ in which committees of inquiry sought the knowledge and opinions of ordinary people; the development of free enterprise and ‘a moral and self-respecting workforce’ to replace the economic controls and forced labour of the convict system; the rise of a literate class of skilled workers, with a sense of their own identity; the passing of selection acts that ‘unlocked the lands’ in the interests of small farmers; the development of railway systems that provided decent and affordable travel for the poor; the growth of literacy among women, together with their growing involvement in churches and charities; and a changing view of matrimony, in which ‘husband and wife were more often seen as friends, even as equals’ (p.297).

This might sound like a Whiggish account of history as the story of progress, but Atkinson recognizes that democracy had as yet scarcely addressed the disabilities of women, and he shows that it fostered the growth of racial discrimination. Because democracy was seen as ‘a special creation of the Anglo-Saxon race’, it implied the exclusion of Chinese immigrants who were held to be incapable of appreciating it (p. 336); and policies towards the Aborigines took a backward step when responsible government transferred power from imperial administrators to elected politicians who represented settler interests. In the second half of the nineteenth century, moreover, imported doctrines of scientific racism dulled some of the earlier ‘whisperings of conscience’ at the fate of the Aborigines.

Individually, most of these points are well known to specialists in Australian history, but Atkinson brings them together in a new way. Where other historians have analyzed reform from the perspective of political history, Atkinson examines it through the lens of cultural history. His book gives only the scantiest details of legislation and it has little political narrative. What it offers instead is an account of change ‘from the inside’ — change wrought by people who re-imagined their society as they read, listened, talked and wrote in the context of a globalizing culture of ideas, information and values. It is this which gives the book its originality.

Atkinson writes very well, and his account is engagingly quirky, packed with insights and fascinating detail. He works mainly from the primary sources, and even when he makes a familiar point he nearly always illustrates it with a fresh example. The book, however, is not for novices, and readers who have little background in Australian history will find its structure confusing. They will also struggle because although Atkinson's thought is rich, his points can be subtle, and his manner of exposition is sometimes suggestive and elliptical rather than explicit and analytical. Even specialists in Australian history will reap rewards if they give key parts of the book a second reading.

It is hard not to compare the first two volumes of Atkinson's trilogy with Manning Clark's multi-volume history of Australia. There are obvious similarities. Both histories are written 'from the inside', both address profound moral concerns and both take religion and idealism seriously. But there are also striking differences, for they operate on different levels. Much of the grandeur of Clark's work is generated by its conscious search for the tragic and by a schematic framework based on the clash of broad social visions linked to Catholicism, Protestantism and the Enlightenment. Atkinson's account is less structured around the tragic, less schematic, more suspicious of standard categories, more sensitive to idiosyncrasy and multiple voices. It therefore lacks the exhilarating sweep and grand simplicity of Clark's account, but it engages more with the complexity of its subject matter. It is also more broadly sympathetic. Clark had great powers of empathy, but sometimes he chose not to use them. His history has a residual category, 'the philistines', to which he consigned people devoid of vision, driven solely by the pursuit of mammon. He deplored their influence, but never tried to understand them. Atkinson, by contrast, tries to understand everyone about whom he writes. Reading his history, therefore, is not just an intellectual experience, but a humanizing one.

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*History, Historians and Autobiography.* By Jeremy Popkin. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2005. 339 pp. US price: \$35.00. ISBN 0-226-67543-2.

THERE ARE NOT MANY FULL-SCALE BIOGRAPHIES OF HISTORIANS, but a surprising number of historians have written their autobiographies. Popkin's bibliography itemizes over 160 book-length autobiographies and approximately the same number of autobiographical chapters, articles and published interviews by historians. Even so, Popkin makes no pretence to exhaustiveness (he excludes, for example, unpublished autobiographies) but instead seeks 'to define and analyze the issues that such works raise'. Not confined to the English-speaking world, Popkin's sample has a goodly quota of French and German examples. Broadly speaking, Popkin seeks to show the interconnections between history, historians and autobiography and stresses the extent to which historians have made a contribution to the autobiography as a genre. To simplify a complex argument, he contends that historians' autobiographies, for all their variability, are fundamentally different from conventional historical monographs, that autobiography is to be judged according to its own rules (which includes 'a respect for verifiability'), and thus disputes literary theorists who assert that autobiography is akin to fiction.

Drawing on theorists such as Paul Ricoeur, Popkin explores some complex (and complexing) theoretical questions surrounding the relationship of autobiographers and their texts, and the relationship between autobiography and other genres. Those who believe that theory emerges out of practice may have misgivings about pronouncements on the nature of autobiography (or history or biography for that matter) from those who have never written one, especially when their findings are expressed in an arcane language that Popkin replicates in his second chapter ('Narrative Theory, History and Biography').