

*The Europeans in Australia. A History, Volume One. The Beginning.* By Alan Atkinson. Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1997. 429 pp. NZ price: \$59.95. ISBN 0-19-553641-X.

*THE EUROPEANS IN AUSTRALIA* is a complex and interesting book. As would be expected of an historian of Alan Atkinson's formidable quality, it is erudite and exhaustive. For a work which aspires to the general informative coverage of this kind, its approach is unusual, even innovative. As Atkinson writes, 'This is a history of the common imagination in Australia, and by "common" I mean both ordinary and shared. It is an attempt to describe the ordinary day-to-day intellectual notions associated with life as an Australian among Australians, one of the conquerors of a new world, the denizen of a certain space, a subject and a social being.' To render it down to its essentials, this is a history of the idea — and ideas — of Australia, a theme on which there is much recently written, it being currently fashionable, but nothing of this extended and coherent kind.

One can offer nothing but praise for this sustained and insightful performance: it is a thoughtful historian's book, crafted by one for the delectation of those of similar casts of mind.

But, given its aspiration to be more than itself — it is the first of three volumes on the history of Australia — it invites wider questioning. First, the title, *The Europeans in Australia*. Atkinson uses this, he explains, because both 'British' and 'English' imply a power relationship, whereas his concerns are much wider, seeing that history as an outgrowth of European civilization. It is clear, reading the book, what he means, but the term 'European' is also heavily laden with Australian implications which confuse and mislead. This is particularly so in relation to an enterprise whose subsequent volumes will conclude in 1914: or so it seems — it is never declared when the whole work will end but that seems, by implication, to be the concluding date. The popular understanding of the European influence (a very great one culturally) on Australian history lies more than 30 years after that date; that is, from 1947. At the risk of appearing to engage in a petty cavil, the fact is that the impact of 'real' Europeans has been felt in Australia's recent history, and that while taking Atkinson's point, so valuably made, about Australia's intellectual origin in a common European civilization, the word has connotations. It is in danger of being misleading and of diverting attention away from what is centrally English and Irish.

Another major question: this volume, *The Beginning*, goes up to the 'Coming of the Macquaries', that is 1810. That means that the following two volumes, presuming the end point to be 1914, cover 100 years. Certainly most of the first volume is given to prehistory and context, but the situation is still one of 22 years from 1788 being dealt with so far, with 100 still to come. It is unfair to prejudge the enterprise at this point, but it would have been good — that is, intellectually satisfying — to have some idea of where Atkinson proposes to go, some map of future directions to be followed from this point. It is not enough to imply simply 'wait and see': if that be the case the reviewer should suspend judgment until the whole work is complete. It is bewildering to be left in the present position. The detail of the passing landscape is excellent, intriguing, but where are we going? As it now is, here is a most admirable mystery tour.

Another related thing: that much neglected Australian historian, T.L. Suttor, wrote, back in 1965, 'It is utterly impossible to write a sensible history of Australia without using the terms moral cowardice and intellectual dishonesty'. The head of Suttor's department, Manning Clark, did not, to my recollection, use precisely those terms, but he did use others very like them. The Clark story is drama-ridden, full of tortured goodies and baddies, measurers, inhabitants of an age of ruins. This may take matters of historical judgment too far. But to my mind Atkinson does not go nearly far enough.

It is very hard, if not impossible, to know where he stands on the big questions, however interesting and perceptive he is on plumbing the complexities of those which are lesser. Nor does the interpellation of brief Aboriginal Dreamtime mythological overviews (supplemented by Aboriginal artwork on the cover) in the three major parts of the book work happily or bring much illumination.

In saying all this I am conscious of breaking my own rule that one should take a book for what it is and does, rather than what you think it should be. This is a highly valuable and stimulating investigation of the ideas and people that made early Australia, and should be warmly welcomed as such.

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