

## REVIEWS

*The Centenary Companion to Australian Federation*. Edited by Helen Irving. Cambridge University Press, Melbourne and Cambridge, 1999. 474 pp. Aus. price: \$49.95. ISBN 0-521-57314-9.

CENTENARIES and similar occasions have a way of encouraging historians to face daunting problems. Australian federal historians have to deal with vast research materials and a paucity of public understanding. This eminently readable volume faces these problems. Rather than attempting a synthesis, it has chapters by experts on each colony/state. These follow the largely political history of the federation movement, especially in the late nineteenth century. Intended as a resource book for people interested in politics and history, a third of the book is given over to Short Entries which deal with themes and people. This allows some of the larger issues to emerge and points readers towards aspects of federation history beyond the political and constitutional.

The longest of the Short Entries is a valuable essay by Philippa Mein Smith which deploys evidence from the 1900-1 Royal Commission, among other sources, to suggest why New Zealand did not federate with the other colonies. New Zealand is present, in fact or by implication, at a number of points, not only in the participation in the meetings of 1883 and 1890-1, but also because editor Helen Irving, not content with a simple Whiggish narrative of progress towards the Commonwealth, shows the uncertainties and the reluctant participants. Indeed, she starts with a brisk counter-factual view, asking the reader to consider Australia without federation, separate states each having their own currency, passports, defence forces, TV stations and so on: 'The Australian states would be to each other as New Zealand is now to Australia: attached by co-operative schemes and a shared history, but no more than this'. And the story ends with New Zealand and Western Australia both trying, with limited success, to intervene in London in 1900 to secure last minute concessions for themselves.

Each of the chapters has its own interest. Brian de Garis's chapter on Western Australia is a polished account of why it was that much, and sometimes rough, wooing was needed before the referendum in 1900 brought that colony in as the last original member. There is interesting material here on the influence of Britain on Australia's federation. Queensland, too, only spasmodically participated in the movement towards federation and the distinctive character of that colony is well assessed by Geoffrey Bolton and Duncan Waterson. There is an excellent case study of the Darling Downs, informed by a close knowledge of those for and against federation. South Australia has been a centre for recent federation history and J.C. Bannon, historian and former Premier, writes a chapter incorporating much of the new material. He emphasizes the key role of Kingston and a strong core of South Australians in sustaining the movement and keeping the pressure on the politicians of other colonies. Indeed he emphasizes the importance of a cluster of politicians who came to know and work with one another while they held power continuously from the mid-1890s, in a way unusual for the fragile ministries of colonial Australia.

In the referendum of 1898 the Northern Territory, then part of South Australia, produced an overwhelming Yes vote, but we learn that there were only 800 names on the roll. The population statistics in this volume record a perhaps conservative estimate of 27,235 Aboriginal people in Northern Territory. Although there is a Short Entry on 'Aborigines' there is no reference in this volume to the continuing contemporary resistance of Aboriginal people in northern Australia. Captain William Russell, New Zealand delegate at the 1890 Australasian Federation Conference, predicted that the proposed Federal Parliament would be a body that 'cares nothing and knows nothing about native administration'.<sup>1</sup> He spoke from within a glass house but it may be possible to adopt, from another context, American literary critic Toni Morrison's comment in *Playing in the Dark*: a close look at 'blackness' is necessary to discover the nature, even the cause, of 'whiteness'.

Helen Irving contributes the longest of the chapters, on New South Wales. Without losing the narrative thread, she picks up some of the major points in the historiography. She concludes that New South Wales, the mother colony, had a contradictory role throughout, advancing federation but then slowing the advance in order to secure dominance.

Marian Quartly's treatment of Victoria is well focused. Building on her special studies of the Australian Natives Association she probes 'what Victorians thought they were supporting', bearing in mind that Victoria was consistently federalist. This involves an investigation of the nature of Australian democracy at the time, tracing Victorian liberalism and the way in which, when the 'advanced liberals' of the 1890s spoke of 'the people', they 'spoke of a different collectivity from their fathers, but they imagined the same enemies'. She shows sympathy for Stuart Macintyre's view of the so-called people's movement as a hand puppet for the politicians, but traces the way in which the Australian Natives Association changed during the 1890s. She is able to point to an extension of democratic principles in the constitution by the time of the 1897 Convention, which considerably amended the 1891 draft.

Irving's volume will provide a firm floor for further writing and a constant source of reference. It belongs in the libraries of all those interested in the political constructions of this part of the world.

LUKE TRAINOR

*Christchurch*

1 Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation*, Melbourne, 1997, pp.112–13.