

The Patrician and the Bloke: Geoffrey Serle and the Making of Australian History. By John Thompson. Pandanus Books, Canberra, 2006. xix, 383pp. Australian price: \$34.95. ISBN 1-74076-152-9.

THE LIKELY INTEREST FOR READERS OF THIS JOURNAL in this book is that Geoffrey Serle (1922–1998) helped to pioneer Australian historiography in much the way that Keith Sinclair prompted and promoted a ‘nationalist’ New Zealand historiography. Rather than submitting to the cultural cringe and seeing their respective countries’ pasts in imperial and British contexts, Serle and Sinclair treated them as histories in their own right. Brought up in Melbourne, Serle was a Rhodes Scholar who returned to the University of Melbourne in 1950 to teach Australian history following the departure of Manning Clark to Canberra University College. The flamboyant Clark is generally seen as the father of Australian historiography and Serle has been somewhat cast in his shadow. Yet Serle’s contribution to Australian historiography was arguably more solid. As well as undergraduate teaching, postgraduate supervision and his writing there was the institutional work: his efforts on behalf of the proper preservation and administration of public archives, his support of libraries and art galleries, the long-term editorship of *Historical Studies* (1955–1963), and co-editorship then sole editorship of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (1975–1988). Clark was a creative spirit, turbulent and in the public gaze. The unassuming Serle was far more oriented towards the discipline.

The book’s title derives from ‘the streak of elitism in Geoffrey Serle sitting in apparent contradiction with himself as “ordinary” Australian, easygoing, democratic, laconic’ (p.9, see also p.303, n.40). Actually there is no necessary opposition between the two qualities, although in Serle’s case the contrasts were noticeable enough to have been commented upon. He was the private school boy from the leafy suburbs who embraced radical nationalist values. He marked himself off with his ubiquitous pipe (much like J.C. Beaglehole), assumed familiarity with the Melbourne establishment and sent his children to their schools, but he remained his own man and a man of the left. John Thompson convincingly demonstrates other dualities: an outward modesty and quiet self-doubts coexisting with an inner sense of self-worth; a strong sense of being a good academic citizen that sometimes surrendered to an anxiety to protect his turf against perceived rivals. There was also a growing feeling on Serle’s part that the world was moving on in ways that he did not like and, sadly, he ‘settled into the stubbornness and cantankerousness of old age’ (p.281).

Thompson carefully traces the development of Serle the historian. The 1950s and 1960s were taken up with writing his two-volume history of Victoria, which Serle felt obliged to point out were the fruits of original research rather than of synthesis. His next book was a history of high culture in Australia, *From Deserts the Prophets Come* (1973). Serle did not complete his intended trilogy on the history of Victoria. Feeling that he had prepared the ground for others, he moved into biography. His first and most substantial contribution to the genre was *John Monash* (1982), who was Australia’s greatest soldier. Throughout, Thompson assesses Serle’s work, its somewhat mixed reception and how the work itself so closely mirrored Serle’s personality. A puzzling omission is the lack of any mention of Bill Gammage, whose view of Monash (and the war correspondent C.E.W. Bean) differed from Serle’s. Gammage, moreover, obliquely criticized Serle’s exclusive access to the Monash Papers. He was troubled that others were not getting access, and by the effect this was having on scholarship.

In certain respects *The Patrician and the Bloke* is an oddly unbalanced book. In terms of clarity, choice of word and felicity of phrase, Thompson is an accomplished writer. At a structural level, however, *The Patrician and the Bloke* is over-written and repetitive. From a biographical standpoint there are similar disjunctions. The lengthy chapters on Serle’s childhood are useful in showing how his upbringing impacted upon his adult

sensibilities. The largely biographical mode continues until Serle returns from Oxford and then the book largely transforms into intellectual history, as if the adult Serle was bereft of a personal life. There is little such detail beyond Serle sending his three sons to his old school, despite the financial sacrifice (p.82) and his acknowledgement, in general terms, that 'a household of harmony and stability' was the bedrock of his productivity (p.203). It is not altogether clear whether, or to what extent, the reduction of Geoffrey Serle the historian into a professional cipher or automaton was at the behest of Mrs Jessie Serle (p.ix). Intriguingly, these same issues of balance and emphasis are evident in the sort of biographies that Serle wrote. The lack of 'tautness and concision' (p.221, Thompson's phrase) that a colleague discerned in Serle's work is plain to see in this biography of Serle himself. Similarly there are traces in *The Patrician and the Bloke* of the same reticence and restraint that typified Serle the biographer, who separated the public and private spheres. That said, one can turn to the final chapter on Serle's legacies to find a revealing summation of the works *and* their maker. He was a remarkably decent, intelligent and widely read man, but there was a feeling among his peers that he was not quite in the front rank.

Geoffrey Serle was no show pony. He was a workhorse, the perennial retainer for whom nothing seemed too much in the service of the greater cause: 'dry of utterance, angular and utterly reliable' was a colleague's description (p.297). Were there only more like him.

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