

**Adrian Mitchell. *From Corner to Corner: The Line of Henry Colless.***

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Adrian Mitchell begins the latest book with an impressive succession of publications about Australian history, with the assertion that '[n]obody knows for sure just where they came from, the Collesses' [ix]. This acknowledgement that there are gaps of knowledge when it comes to the past, and that historical sources are sometimes patchy and often uncooperative, sets the tone for a skillful and multi-stranded pursuit of the story of the Colless family, from the early days of the colony of New South Wales.

Mitchell builds a multi-generational account through a careful accretion of historical detail, pivoting his story on the figure of Henry Colless (1838–1934)—an early settler of Bourke, hotel proprietor, establisher of various family properties and interests, and (according to one contemporary account) 'a right jolly good fellow' (145). The detail he presents is clearly the result of extensive research, and this is woven seamlessly into the narrative. While I remain unconvinced by the early universalising assertion that '[t]heir story is, so to speak, *the* story of Australia' [xii, my emphasis], Mitchell's narrative about the Colless line does touch upon, illuminate, and intersect with various significant events, places, players and themes in the broader histories of colony and nation. These intimations of wider historical themes are, to my mind, least convincing in relation to issues of empire and colonisation. While this account does not gloss over the crime of dispossession and the violence of frontier life, Aboriginal experiences are nonetheless recorded incidentally. This sometimes positions the original owners of the land pursued by white settlers as 'bit players' in more vividly-rendered family and community dramas.

A well-developed and, at times, lyrically-expressed, sense of place pervades this book's account of white settlement. Landscapes are described at length and in detail as, time and again over the generations, the story of the Colless family illustrates how close are the ties between human activity, and those of the land, and water, and climate. Mitchell's evocation of settler responses to the land and its resources make an important contribution to the historiography of environmental consciousness in Australia. Rivers and waterways run through these chapters—especially the Nepean and the 'intermittent' and 'treacherous' Darling River (100)—as fortunes rise and fall with water levels, as droughts devastate and floods destroy. Reading these stories, it is little wonder that names such as Jessie Flood and Florence Nepean appear in the Colless family tree.

In fact, Mitchell is at his strongest when he is describing the far-reaching effects of the vicissitudes of weather, economics, politics—and dumb luck—on the lives of settlers and their communities. The role of happenstance is strong in any life, but was overtly recognised in the name of the family property that Henry helped establish when he was a very young man—'Come-by-Chance.' The Colless family, as Mitchell observes, seems to have had a happy facility for creative nomenclature.

This book is never weighed down by its research, nor is it encumbered with academic language. It is clearly intended for a general readership, though there is much to interest more specialist readers interested in local history, settlement history, and rural history. The tone is

light, and the reader is treated to some knowing humorous asides along the way. Mitchell makes judicious use of literary references to anchor the action of his story in wider cultural currents. He refers to iconic Australian narratives from the likes of Lawson, Paterson and Boldrewood, but also to Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Charles Reade.

Scholarly readers may find themselves a little frustrated by the referencing system used in this book, which lacks notation and detail. I understand the impulse to protect readers from too many footnotes, but it is unclear at times whether Mitchell's bold assertions are the result of the author's extrapolation from his own understanding of his 'characters,' or whether they have their origins in primary source material. The fairly specific assertion, for example, that 'Henry was restless . . . [and] missed the large spaces of his property and the pleasure of riding around his cattle and camping out with his swag on the vast plains somewhere' (153) appears to be unreferenced.

The book contains a section of photographs and, helpfully, a family tree. Given the importance of place in the story of the Collesses, however, I would have appreciated the inclusion of a map. By Mitchell's account, the Colless line runs 'corner to corner, through the middle of everything' (227), and the Darling is 'a great long cutting right down through the country' (100). These, surely, warrant a cartographic representation.

*From Corner to Corner* is the result of well-honed research and writing skills. Mitchell's assured tone gives the impression that he enjoyed writing this book, and that he invites his readers to share his engagement with the story of a family that was 'right in the thick of our founding cultural history' (226). The concluding words, however, he leaves to Arthur's grandson, Lindsay Colless, to whom the book is dedicated. They linger in their poignancy.

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