

Australia Imagined: Views from the British Periodical Press 1800-1900.

Edited by Judith Johnston and Monica Anderson, University of Western Australia Press: Crawley, WA, 2005.

Australia's growth from penal colony to fully fledged nation runs almost parallel to the rise and exponential growth of the British popular press during the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, both Australia's birth and growing pains have been well documented in its prolific pages. *Australia Imagined* is an intriguing sampler of selected periodical articles that trace in print Australia's journey towards adulthood.

Organising the material for this book must have been a daunting task for, as the editors announce in their preface, the choice of material was "almost boundless." The problem was solved with a simple but effective strategy: collating the articles under ten discrete headings representing what they consider to be the key historical movements of the Australian experience. By arranging the pieces within each heading chronologically and using as their first and last headings "Transportation" and "Federation," they manage to engender an appropriate sense of dynamic nation-building progression; an appropriate gesture towards the Victorian fascination with "improvement." Within and between these two sections stretches a fascinating miscellany of opinionated history beckoning the reader steadily onwards or inviting a dip here and there. A wide range of popular periodicals are represented together with some of the better-known journalists of the day, including Thackeray, Catherine Helen Spence, William Jardine Smith, WH Wills of *Household Words* (with Dickens, perhaps the most famous name of all, at his elbow) and many more. Other famous names, in an era when anonymity was seen as giving writers the chance to produce hard-hitting copy without fear of reprisal, shelter under the ubiquitous pseudonym, "Anon."

The concept in the title of the press *imagining* the new land into life is a useful one since it not only acknowledges the fictive element inherent in all journalistic endeavour, but is also elastic enough to encompass the diverse nature of the material available. The introduction stresses that editorial focus is not on the press as an artefact but as a voice – a conduit of "talk" and "story" – telling its tales about the political and cultural emergence of Australia both to readers in the mother country and, because Australians were also enthusiastic periodical readers, to the nascent subject itself. There is an interplay here that must have been engaging and polemical then but is perhaps even more so now for readers with the benefit of hindsight, particularly since many of the problematic issues discussed remain with us today (albeit in twenty-first century terms) such as water management, treatment of aborigines, what constitutes a "fair" society, and dubious immigration policies.

Catherine Helen Spence's *Cornhill* article (1866) comparing England, on her return there after twenty-five years, with her Australian homeland notes the limitation of arable land and unreliability of rainfall in the colony urging that in the future "we must change our tactics, and bestow more careful cultivation." On the subject of a fair society, Spence questions the "enormous disparity of conditions" between the wealthy and the poor in

England, intimating that in Australia such conditions would never be tolerated. The English view of Australia's reluctance to accept foreign immigrants – here the Chinese – is the subject of historian John Fortesque's "The Seamy Side of Australia," part of a debate generating three articles between Fortesque and colonist Howard Willoughby in the *Nineteenth Century* (1891). Fortesque maintains that the minutes of a Colonial Conference held in Sydney (1888) had been manipulated to silence Chinese complaints of harsh treatment. An extract from the *North British Review* (1845) deals with the British governments refusal to recognise Aboriginal land rights; here as in the other articles mentioned the resonances for modern readers are apparent.

Imagining Australia certainly alerts readers interested in the Victorian period to the possibilities for historical research offered by access to nineteenth-century journalism. As we read, however, we soon become aware of what the editors have already warned: this book sits on the tip of an iceberg; ironically the enormous repository of possible articles lurking below diminishes its scope and appeal. We want more, but how are we to get it? The provision of a list for further reading is useful but sourcing the suggested periodicals is easier said than done since in Australia most would be held in university libraries scattered throughout the country. The logistics of perusing a single specific article, except for the most dedicated researcher, would be rather daunting. Yes, online catalogues would make the task easier but how many would you have to search in order to discover where your target is held – and if they have the number run you need. Yes, some periodicals have been digitised on the 19th Century Master File but access is strictly limited to members of the subscribing institution and there are very few of them in Australia. With this in mind, the fact that many of the articles in *Imagining Australia* have been truncated could also present a problem for those who want to read past those frustrating ellipses.

Succinct, informative annotations are the key to the comprehension and enjoyment of historical documents. Here each article is prefaced by a brief annotation but many would benefit from just a little more development. To take a couple of examples from just one section: "British Emigration." In the *Household Words* piece about Caroline Chisholm's strategies for female emigration, "Safety for Female Emigrants," the annotation makes no mention of the fact that Dickens, the proprietor and chief contributor of the popular weekly, promoted Chisholm's society by publishing several articles between 1851 and 1852 and this is one of them. Also, that the character Mrs Jellyby in *Bleak House* was based on Caroline Chisholm. Similarly, the *Saturday Review*'s article "Miss Rye's Emigrants," a hard-hitting critique of Marie Rye's proposal to send educated women out to Australia as governesses, would benefit from the reader being informed that the *Saturday Review* was famous for its provocatively polemical editorial policy. This would have prepared readers for the strenuous, tongue-in-cheek, and dare we say, anti-feminist attack – so typical of the *SR*.

Imagining Australia is certainly worth perusing. It is a modest book both in physical production and content and it probably won't sell many copies except to university libraries which is a pity because it deserves a wider audience than a purely academic one. Anyone interested in Australia's beginnings and development can't fail but to be

intrigued – and moved – by the immediacy of the history evoked in its pages. Then, as now, the popular press is the voice closest to the people.

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