

Clarke, Frank G. , 2002. *The History of Australia*. Westport & London: Greenwood Press.

Reviewed by Frank di Marco

To find a concise history of any nation is always enjoyable but rather difficult, it is delightful that The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations try to do exactly this.

Finally, Australia is on the agenda with Frank G. Clarke, a historian at Macquarie University in Sydney as the author. At the very beginning in the series foreword the series editors state clearly to whom The History of Modern Nations series should be useful: "students and interested laypeople". (p. vii) Writing to this audience can be dangerous for it is always a thin line between being scientifically correct and yet writing a prose that the intended audience can relish. This aim is well achieved in *The History of Australia*. This history is indeed a fine example of good story telling and at times one can even find it difficult to put down. This particularly relates to chapters 2 and 3 on "Aboriginal Australia" (p. 9 – 20) and "European Arrivals and Colonization" (p. 21 – 39) as well as the last chapters dealing with post World War II Australia up to 2001.

The narrative approach to history, as readable as it is in any case, has its shortcomings. To increase readability and flow of the text, Clarke keeps his apparatus of end notes very small. Because of this, it is not always traceable where his information comes from. This is especially evident in the aforementioned chapter 2. In his bibliographical essay he names only three books on the topic, but not from which books the findings on "Traditional Economy" (p. 14/15) for instance come. Thus for an advanced student it is hard to go deeper into specialised fields. The prose of the book is very fluent, as I have mentioned, despite the eager fragmentation of the chapters into smaller units. This makes it possible to read small portions of the book without losing oversight – a concession, I think, for laypeople.

There are two more features of the book that earn mentioning. At the beginning there is an elaborate timetable on three pages that lists the country's most important historical events. Of course any such list is debatable, but I want to ask why the publication of the *Bulletin* in 1880 is the sole cultural event listed and not, for instance, the Nobel Prize awarded to Patrick White in 1973, and if an entry like "2000 Sydney Olympic Games a huge success" (p. xvi) is really on the same historical level as "1901 Inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia; ...". (xiv) The second list is "Notable People in the History of Australia". (p. 213 – 217) Again, Patrick White is missing but he finally can be found on p. 162 in a short paragraph called "The Arts". These shortcomings are, of course, seen from a literary perspective and should not be overly stressed. Yet (particularly to "students and laypeople") the cultural aspect of the development of a nation can also be helpful.

During the reading of the book one interesting fact catches the reader's eye. It is Clarke's dwelling on the effects of the El Nino Phenomenon on the development of Australian economy as a whole, but especially on farming. In the Index, the key word "El Nino" has as much entries as "Fair Go" and almost as much as "Farming". It remains without doubt, that this climatic peculiarity is of major importance with regard to Australia, but it need figure so prominently. As this phenomenon has achieved some public interest in recent years, it seems to me that El Nino's prominence – it is even mentioned on the back cover blurb – is a marketing technique. On the other hand, this is more evident to the fact that Clarke strives for *The History of Australia* to be up to date! Being published in 2002, it encompasses the political events of early 2001, especially the Referendum. To anyone who is involved in or has

a vague idea of how publishing functions, this is really admirable. But, as will be seen below, this actuality has disastrous outcomes.

There are two things in the book that reverse the overall rather positive impression. The first is a technical point and shows that the above mentioned actuality can also have its shortcomings in that obvious mistakes escape final editing. This happens twice in the same context with the same phrase regarding to the 2001 Referendum: "the bicentenary of federation in 2001". (p. 188 and 199) Sic! This mistake is not excusable. The dates 1788 and 1988 seem to be so strongly anchored in the mind of the author and/or the publisher, that any jubilee is a *bicentenary*. The period of 1901 to 2001 to my understanding is a *centenary* as it comprises 100 years not two hundred. The identical phrase appearing twice incorrectly in the book gives me the impression of a loveless haste towards publishing. A little more patience and passion for the subject would have been favourable in this point.

Even worse is the second point I wish to mention. Clarke stresses his political point of view early in his preface when he elaborates his position on the European arrival: "Modern Australia has its foundations in these two cultural strands, and the unresolved tensions between them continue to bedevil a community that still has not attained a reconciliation between black loss and disempowerment and white obduracy and refusal to acknowledge the reality of invasion and theft." (p. xi) Zhey are, however, harsh words for an author who claims three lines below "I have striven for balance and objectivity and to avoid unfairness and bias." (ibid.) This rather liberal point of view surely is accepted in the academia. What he writes on p. 145 under the heading "Australia in a Wider World" with reference to the Cold War however almost knocked me over: "In Europe, the soviet-sponsored communist regimes in Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and East Germany quickly showed themselves to be as repressive and brutal as *anything* the Nazis had organized." (my stress) This sentence is unbelievably silly and inconsiderate. The author implicitly denies the singularity of the Holocaust by suggesting that the regimes in the mentioned states were "as repressive and brutal as *anything* the Nazis had organized". A fact that, at least to a German reader like myself, is very disturbing. Having in mind the intended audience, "students and laypeople" this inconsiderate slip is fatal. It is not only the denial of the singularity of the Holocaust but the accusation of the mentioned states, randomly picked from the post war socialist satellite states of the former USSR, to be as repressive and as brutal as anything the Nazis had organized. Of course, they were communist undemocratic states, but so were Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and others. They were repressive indeed and brutal so some extent, but they did not commit genocide as did the Nazis. Yet, Clarke implicitly claims exactly this. Thus it must be said, that this book has no constructive role to play in classrooms and "interested laypeople" should refrain from buying this book.

To conclude, the book is a superb example of how in an ever faster going world products tend to turn out defective for lack of quality control. Many cars are recalled by the manufactures because they were designed, engineered and finally built under too much time pressure. Such mistakes can happen for the same reason to intellectual products such as books. I doubt that Greenwood Press can or will call back this book –

but I hope that the remaining stock will be replaced by a more carefully edited second edition.