

# Reviews

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**Raymond Evans, *A History of Queensland*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007, ISBN 1 3978 0521 8769 26 (hb) 1 3978 0521 5453 96 (pb), xxiii + 328 pp., \$99.00 hb, \$36.95 pb.**

Writing general histories is a thankless task. Publishers impose strict word limits, particularly on a book such as this, which is part of a series, and the author has to be concise and cover a vast amount of material. All readers will find something left out, or that they think should be included in more detail, or with a different interpretation. And Raymond Evans is not the first to write a general history of Queensland. Inevitably, Evans' book will be judged against others from the recent past, particularly Ross Fitzgerald's two-volume work (1982–84) and Ross Johnston's *The Call of the Land* (1982). However, it is a long time since Fitzgerald's and Johnston's books, and Evans has provided an updated history of Queensland, and brought his own unique credentials to the task.

For many years a historian at the University of Queensland, Evans pioneered teaching and writing about race relations, and has written on a variety of Queensland topics, from charitable institutions to Aborigines, the convict era which began European settlement, society during war, Brisbane's 'red flag riots' in 1919 when the Russian community was attacked, gender issues and popular culture. Evans is the most accomplished historian of Queensland and is well known throughout Australia as one of the nation's most important social historians. His entire career has been an excellent preparation for this book. *A History of Queensland* is thus a summary of a life's work, augmented by the writing of his colleagues, some of whom were once his students. Always on the left of historians and slightly ahead of the game, Evans' work has a radical tinge. He writes history on the edge, not mainstream history, and his interest has always been the out-groups of society, not the solid upwardly mobile working class and middle class. Evans has always viewed the mainstream from the sharp edges where friction arises from social forces rubbing up against each other, and has used this technique as his *modus operandi* in this book. Evans uses chronological time as his main sorting mechanism, but he shines when he uses Queensland's brittle edges to contrast with the whole.

The book proceeds through nine chapters and includes a useful chronology, six maps and 24 plates. The time divisions are much as one might expect: 'Millennia' to discuss the Indigenous beginnings, 'Confinement, 1820–1840s' to cover the convict years, 'Blueprint, 1841–1859' for the years as a pastoral settlement while

still part of New South Wales, ‘Consolidation, 1860–1879’ for the middle years of the new Queensland colony, and ‘Statehood, 1880–1905’ to deal with the mature colony and its entry into a federated Australia. The twentieth century is divided into ‘Battle, 1906–1939’ to signify the class conflict during these years as Queensland came to terms with the Labor Party and the growing strength of trade unions, ‘Crucible, 1940–1967’ as Queensland was occupied by the American forces and faced further labour and ideological strife, ‘Hubris, 1968–1989’ to cover the years dominated by Joh Bjelke-Petersen, and ‘Aftermath, 1990–2005’. The direction of the nine chapters can be encapsulated in the nine key words, and through them Evans has deftly summarised Queensland’s history. However, it is not quite as neat as that, and some themes run throughout, particularly the nature of Aboriginal Queensland; indeed, it is possible to read a history of Indigenous Queensland as the most prominent theme. The message is quite devastating and, viewed in the long *durée*, Evans has written Indigenous Queenslanders into the book as no other historian has managed to do before.

It is easy, as I said at the start, to find points to criticise. Occasionally Evans shows his personal involvement a bit too strongly. For instance, the 1968–89 chapter, a time when Evans was very politically involved, is so caught up in criticism of Bjelke-Petersen’s trampling on civil liberties that there is little acknowledgment of the infrastructure development that was carried out to save Queensland from decades of ALP neglect, when the party was caught up in an agrarian romance that was long out of date. Neither is Bjelke-Petersen put into context of his several autocratic predecessors as premier, men like McIlwraith, McCormack, Forgan-Smith and Hanlon, some of whom provided him with his enabling legislation to create the gerrymander and the extreme powers of states of emergency. There is also too little statistical rigour to provide a framework, and little on the ‘normal’ upwardly aspiring British-origin working-class Queenslanders who were not involved in any of the ‘sharp edges’ of Queensland’s history. Yet, in accepting the limits of a 270-page book, is it fair to ask for more, given that this reviewer accepts Evans’ technique of using the areas of friction as the main motifs? How much more could have been accomplished without diluting the message? As it is, the publisher demanded that the original text be reduced in length, and the final outcome is a very readable and informative summary of Queensland history.

There is another, official, history of Queensland being prepared for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Queensland. In 2007 there was an unfortunate exchange in the *Courier-Mail* when questions were asked about the way the contract was let for the coming book. Evans’ book was mentioned as a possible contender as the official history, but in my opinion no government would ever be comfortable with Evans’ book as its record of the past. This is not because it is a poor book, but because it is too truthful and often makes the reader uncomfortable. This brings us to the core of what is good history and what is palatable history for the masses. Evans’ book will be lauded by fellow historians for its honesty and accuracy, and its sophisticated technique, but it is not the sort of book a

government would sponsor, although this is a sad comment on the nature of government, which prefers to create pleasant, easily swallowed propaganda, not history. Raymond Evans has reason to be proud of his latest book, and it should be read by anyone trying to understand why Queensland is a little different from the rest of Australia.

— **Clive Moore**