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A voice from the past

Book Review
By Clare Wright
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The Story of Australia's People: *The Rise and Rise of a New Australia*

GEOFFREY BLAINEY VIKING, $49.99

Can you teach an old dog new tricks? Do you need to when the tried and true magic still holds a rapt audience in awe and wonder? Does the dog in question want retraining?

These are questions that spring to mind when reading Geoffrey Blainey's second instalment in his two-part history, *The Story of Australia's People*.

In the first widely praised volume, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Australia*, Blainey updates his 1975 classic, *Triumph of the Nomads*, reassessing his past views of Australia's Indigenous and early British history. He has a change of heart on key aspects, presenting, as John Maynard wrote in his review for The Age, "pre-invasion Aboriginal society as a triumphant culture with much to celebrate".

The Rise and Rise of a New Australia revises *A Land Half Won* (1980), documenting events and characters from the gold rush to the present day.

ANU Professor Tom Griffiths has called Blainey "the great phrase-maker of Australian history", "the tyranny of distance" and "black armband history" among the axioms that have slipped into popular parlance. This latest work demonstrates that the octogenarian historian has lost none of his flair for evocative language.

Descriptions of landscape ("the scalloped tops of the Petermann Ranges") are beautiful but not florid. Blainey's vistas are, at times, cinematic. He envisions the rabbit invasion of northern Victoria's sheep runs in 1883 as "a wide grey tide".

The word pictures often come with astute observations. For Blainey, the rabbit plague of the late 19th century, though a scourge, also "indirectly became a form of social welfare". Thousands of professional rabbiters who would have otherwise been unemployed instead made substantial incomes as they trapped, netted, poisoned and hunted the varmints. In 1906, a staggering 22 million frozen rabbits were exported to England, doing more for Australia's balance of trade than beef exports.

Like a delectable rabbit pie, you can dip into this book at nearly any page and extract such juicy morsels of fact, fairly dripping with tangy asides. The book is a compendium of rich and fascinating detail, the result of Blainey's undiminished

curiosity about and admiration for human endeavour.

While his story is built on an accumulation of data, he is notably short on detail at crucial narrative turns. Hence we are told that the Forrest brothers "briefly clashed with Aborigines" on their journey from Geraldton to Adelaide in 1874, but what that means in precise terms is left unexplained.

Blainey's protagonists are largely "mighty men", "courageous" and "hardy", who had "victories" over the "forbidding terrain". Without evidence or explanation to the contrary, one can only assume the outcome of the "clash" was not pretty.

Which is all to say this book is vintage Blainey. Not a hint of polemic or rant. Polite to a fault. If you love his clear, melodic prose, congenial tone and sanguine faith in the imperial project, you won't be disappointed. But if you are infuriated by Blainey's conservative ideology masquerading as apolitical, detached observation, you should have asked Santa for a cordless drill.

For this might be a history of "new Australia" - implying modern as opposed to "ancient" Australia - but it is not a new history of Australia.

Where The Rise and Fall heralded fresh appraisals, The Rise and Rise displays a stubborn refusal to engage in the past four decades of scholarship and scientific research. Paradoxically, Blainey treats environmentalism, feminism, class and race analysis as simply intellectual fads, not the pre-conditions for or effects of an advanced Australia.

Blainey is an unreconstructed progressivist, believing in the inexorable improvements that come with development and "civilisation", a word he remains staunchly fond of despite its racialised connotations.

One of the difficulties with the teleological model is it suggests that forces of historical change are benign and inevitable. This means that in practice - on the page - social reforms that were in fact the result of decades of campaigning, dissent, sacrifice and even incarceration or death, are reduced to sheer matters of practicality

Take, for example, women's suffrage, which Blainey sees as a simple act of common sense, not the culmination of 60 years of activism: "A democracy that called itself enlightened could hardly continue to give the vote to illiterate men who had no stake in the country ... but refuse the same vote to educated women, some of whom were born in Australia, owned a stake in the country, paid taxes and played an intelligent part in the controversies of the day."

The inability to bestow historical agency on women leads to other blind spots in Blainey's account of Australia. He positions colonial women as "unobtrusive allies in secular campaigns". Hence "they made the rebellious blue and white flag that flew at the Eureka rebellion" but were somehow not rebels themselves. To Blainey, women could be "prominent" at rallies in favour of higher wages or safe working conditions but only "for the sake of their husbands and children".

And what of the "new Australians" in Blainey's new Australia? Unsurprisingly, he is

still no fan of multiculturalism, though he concedes that "the nation has become strikingly cosmopolitan in the last 40 years", favouring the old-fashioned 19th-century term for pluralism.

As for contemporary Indigenous Australians, Blainey almost gleefully points out that "while assimilation is an unfashionable word, it goes on and on". Four out of 10 Aboriginal people own their own homes, while "large numbers" belong to the teaching, legal and medical professions and sit on "countless" government boards and committees. You would never know this, according to Blainey, because "indigenous grievances and disadvantages still permeate the media".

Blainey paints a very different picture of immigration from the Middle East in the 1980s. "By Australian standards," he argues, "an unusual proportion of the newcomers were unemployed and lived on social welfare." Many Muslim leaders "regretted that Australian society, as they experienced it, defied their beliefs and preachings". These few lines - the only ones in the book about Muslims - are followed by passages about September 11 and the threat of Islamic extremism to Australia.

So while we can presumably feel comfortable that Indigenous Australians are more "mainstream" than ever, and it is only a malevolent media suggesting otherwise, we should reasonably fear Muslims, who the press is, presumably, portraying in an objective light.

The real problem for Blainey is that the so-called "revisionist" version of Australia's story - the one that sees Indigenous/settler relations from the other side of the frontier, the one that ascribes historical agency to women, the one that embraces the role of non-European migrants as part of a global economic and social success story, the deep time one that views Australia not as the "new world" but as the oldest continent on earth - no longer radical and fringe. It is the mainstream, not only in scholarship, but also in popular culture. This account of Australia and its past is seen on our television screens, taught in our schools and reflected in advertising campaigns - even those of the mining industry.

Blainey's brand of conservative populism looks dated, a record of partial truths and unexamined assumptions. To update his story of the Australian people, he didn't return to the archives, or the last two generations of history books, and ask himself a fundamentally new question: who are the Australian people? He remains locked in an "us and them" mentality.

Blainey might have found a tad more room for "them" in his narrative, but the "us" remains steadfastly white, male, middle class and Protestant. A bit like the old dog himself.

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