

Book Reviews

Outback Heroes
Patsy Adam-Smith

Lansdowne Press, Dee Why, N.S.W., 1981
rrp \$25 (hardcover) 255pp

Reviewed by Geoffrey Bolton

I have never understood those academics who sneer at 'coffee-table books', those large and handsomely photographed productions which take Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* for their text or guide their readers around the scenic wonders of the Great Barrier Reef or tickle the nostalgic sentiment with portraits of yesterday's Australia. There is after all a large and not illiterate section of the public who are never going to read serious academic textbooks but who might be beguiled by glossy pictures and attractive print into attempting areas of non-fiction into which they would never venture otherwise. They are not just following Francis Bacon's precept that 'Books do furnish a room' but may be making a commitment which in some cases will lead them to want to read more and deepen their understanding - and even if they don't there are many worse ways of investing their surplus cash.

But it's a problem to review such a book, since the standards of its general reader may not be the standards of the academic historian. I am not here thinking so much of pedantic accuracy as to details of fact, though it must be confessed that points could be scored against the author of *Outback Heroes* in this respect; but it doesn't much matter that she spells Kanowna 'Kurnowna', or in a day-by-day account of the Victorian bushfires of 1939 follows Friday 13 January with Monday 14 January. Having in moments of aberration committed myself in print to the assertions that John Forrest's expeditions rode camels and that the Sydney district is built on limestone, it ill behoves me to comment. My concern is with the organization of the book and the points of view which she is endeavouring to communicate to the reader.

Beyond doubt it was a good idea of Lansdowne Press to invite Patsy Adam-Smith to compile *Outback Heroes*. She is already well and favourably known for her writings on earlier generations of bush workers, in the course of which she has recorded and used a good deal of oral history. Not surprisingly, the early part of *Outback Heroes* draws strongly on her collections of reminiscences from country railwaymen. But then the collection becomes more of a miscellany. There are descriptions of the Author's travels in the Kimberleys. There are classic pieces of Australiana such as the story of Bishop Gsell and his 150 wives and the saga of Mary Watson, the young wife of a Cooktown beche-de-mer fisher who was ousted from their camp on Lizard Island by hostile Aborigines and kept a diary while dying of thirst with her infant son. There are disasters galore: floods, fires, children lost in the bush, and entombed miners - and these include some of the less well remembered dramas of recent times, such as the loss of the *Willwatch* in Bass Strait in 1956. There are well known poems: 'Past Carin', 'Conroy's sheep along the Castlereagh', 'O Botany Bay', and the virtually unexpurgated text of the 'Daly River O!' All these yarns are offered in no particular sequence of time or geography. It is as if Patsy Adam-Smith set out to imitate the meandering anecdotes of campfire yarning, or the haphazard character of a station homestead scrap-book.

The resulting product is undeniably readable. It is enlivened by humour, pathos, and the author's total sense of enthusiastic commitment to the way of life she is describing. It will succeed in its aim of communicating to city audiences much which might be forgotten about the hardships and the values of outback life. But - it is sometimes annoying when she breaks off abruptly from one piece of narrative to hurry us on to something completely different in time and setting. And it has to be admitted that in a work of this kind it is too easy to duck the hard issues.

This is particularly apparent in the sections dealing with Aborigines. Now that historians have woken up to the importance of the Aboriginal role in Australian history we are all familiar with the view from the other side of the frontier; but we have not yet really begun to grapple with the problems of integrating these new insights into the classic Australian legend of the pastoral outback. (Goodness knows how the Stockman's Hall of Fame will cope with this). *Outback Heroes* is all over the place in its approach to the Aborigines. There is nothing about land rights, but there is a generous appraisal of Don McLeod and his mob. There is a fair and uncondescending account of Tommy Windich, but elsewhere 'the blacks' are the hostile robbers who beheaded Nat Buchanan's cook and attacked Mary Watson's island home while her husband was away. Patsy Adam-Smith's own attitude comes through most clearly in 'The Daly River O!':

Naturally enough, feelings between the few Aborigines left and white settlers have been strained. The Aborigines of the area were strong and fierce, the white men battlers... Men with the guts necessary to settle an area such as the Daly had neither the training nor the time to appreciate the ethnic idiosyncracies of the natives when they were battling for their very lives as well as livelihood... How many members of committees working for the advancement of Aborigines would... have banned the song that so racially sings 'Three whites, two chows, four bucks and a gin', yet how many could have opened up land...

But, she adds, the Territory battlers 'formed some sort of alliance with the blacks. Of course it isn't the alliance which the city committee member understands...'

Yet this is precisely the sort of issue about which it is the historian's duty to increase understanding. It is no good feeding the city reader with stirring yarns and pretty pictures about the perils and pleasures of the outback, and then claiming that the city reader is somehow doomed to the inferior standing of an outsider who will never understand what it is really all about. It is no good telling the story of Don McLeod's mob and then saying that the reasons for the failure of their wolfram venture of 1951-54 and for their consistent antagonisms with the native welfare authorities of Western Australia are too complex to unravel. It is the historian's job to face up to the hard questions and to attempt their unravelling - and then to communicate to a wider public. Otherwise history becomes no more than light entertainment, or at most a basis for self-congratulatory mythmaking. Patsy Adam-Smith's kind of history is redeemed by the enthusiasm generated by a lifetime's personal experience among the people she describes. But in some respects it is a dangerous model.

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Can Ministers Cope? Australian Federal Ministers at Work
Patrick Weller and Michele Grattan

Hutchinson Group, Melbourne, 1981, 231p
rrp \$17.95 (paperback)

Reviewed by Michal Bosworth

The question which Patrick Weller and Michele Grattan pose in the title of their book is one which they chose to try to answer by interviewing fifty ministers or ex-ministers, twenty-five from the Liberal party, eight from the National Country party and seventeen from the last Labor ministry. Public servants were also interviewed, twenty-five permanent heads from 23 of the 27 departments which existed in 1979, and a range of other senior officers. Nothing which anyone said in any of the recorded interviews is directly attributed. The technique which the authors favoured led them to generally ascribe opinions, 'Some ministers thought...' Sometimes the opinions are given a party label, 'Many Liberal ministers believed...' which is perhaps more useful than 'one Labor minister said'.

The book serves a useful purpose in that it delineates the structures within which ministers must work. There are chapters entitled 'The Minister and the Department', 'A public service view of the Minister's job', 'Ministers and Cabinet' and 'Ministers and the Prime Minister' and so on.