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Book Review

"A few good quotes; Australia interpreted through the methodology of writing a general history"

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(NOTE: This version is a longer version of the review published in *Social Alternatives*)

David Day's general history *Claiming a continent; a new history of Australia*, (1996, revised edition 2001) perhaps deliberately, develops ideas promoted by two earlier popular general historians, Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey. Clark was concerned to interrogate the importance of geography, topography and location, and as he noted in his 1976 Boyer lectures, the "influence of the spirit of place in the fashioning of Australians". In 1980 Geoffrey Blainey published a history of the attempt by Europeans up to the time of federation, to settle Australia. He called it *A land half won*. David Day takes these ideas further and suggests that indeed the full span of history from early indigenous arrival to the new millennium can be understood as an attempt to claim, occupy and exploit the continent. It is now, to continue Blainey's theme, a land fully won. David Day's "new" history of Australia repeatedly turns to the spirit of the place, particularly the indigenous Australian relationship with the land and to non-indigenous strategies for mapping, claiming, re-shaping and profiting from the continent. *Claiming a continent*, first published in 1996 and revised in 2001, is structured around the attempt by both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians to assert ownership, to exploit, to defend, to conserve, protect and govern the land. It is an unorthodox premise for a general history.

There has been a relative flood of general histories in the last few years, not necessarily prompted by the new millennium or the commemoration of federation. Mark Peel did it in a mere 10000 words in 1997 in *A little history of Australia*, while Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart McIntyre took 716 pages to edit *The Oxford Companion to Australian history* in 1998. Michael Cathcart managed to abridge Manning Clark's six volume history into one in 1997 while Stuart McIntyre's *A concise history of Australia* is currently sitting in shopping mall book shops beside Phillip Knightley's *Australia; a biography of a nation* and the reprint of Manning Clark's *A Short History of Australia* originally published in 1963. What is the motivation behind their compilation and continuing marketability and what makes a good general history?

I chose "compilation" to describe the methodology because ultimately a general history is an exercise in exclusion. Only a few people, dates, inventions, turning points and celebrity events make it past the author's scrutiny. They are included as representative of wider patterns and structures that seem to the author to be characteristic of what the past was like in Australia and of the meanings we attribute to those events in the present. To compile the few scraps left after discarding

potentially a dozen volumes of detail is the task that few dare attempt. To compile at best a ridiculously small collection of events, to establish legitimacy, veracity and familiarity, and then to write over them with pertinent generalisations and ideologically motivated perspectives in order to mould everything into a narrative sweeping over 60000 years is not easy. It is to David Day's credit that he does this in one volume, and in an informative, readable and compelling narrative. *Claiming the continent* has a coherent and logical framework, laced with just a few tantalising scraps of evidence from the past. It offers readers a condensed, simplified entry point on to how history is recorded and to what might, and might not be, important in the way we now depict our past. Some general histories demonstrate all these attributes; others are less persuasive. I have always judged John Rickard's *Australia; a cultural history* (1988 and revised 1996) the best of the single authored general histories. It seemed to have all the qualities of a good "Plato to NATO" approach as university first year survey courses were once derided. (Should that now be "Lake Mungo to MTV"?). Rickard's *Australia* was thorough, focussed on culture, arranged in periods yet pursuing broad themes through the triumphs, interregnums and troubled times of the past. It offered a 'from below' glance, yet maintained the major political, economic, military and spiritual themes of more traditional approaches. It was populist history emphasising the social and the cultural but did not ignore that a grand imperial narrative of progress and achievement was important to many Australians understanding of their own nation and self. I still value Rickard's *Australia* highly, but for different reasons I would also recommend David Day's version.

Several general histories, sweeping in focus and written for the popular market but also demonstrating conspicuous scholarship, appeared at the same time as Rickard's *Australia; a cultural history*, mostly inspired by the Bicentenary celebrations for 1788-1988. So contested was the historical agenda that combatants took on amazing projects to assert their position. The four volume *A People's History of Australia since 1788* edited by Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee challenged the ten volume official history *Australians; a historical library* (general editors Alan Gilbert and Ken Inglis) and *200 Australian women; a redress anthology* edited by Heather Radi and *Unsung heroes and heroines* edited by Suzy Baldwin came out to challenge *The people who made Australia great*, the official edition edited by Elizabeth Butel and others. Thirteen years later, this positioning continued and as Marilyn Lake has recently pointed out (*The Age*, 2 June 2001) the touring museum exhibition "*Ordinary women, extraordinary lives*" directly challenges the masculinity of books published to commemorate the centenary of federation by highlighting the previously invisible lives of 260 Victorian women.

This raises another attribute of general histories – the need to include everything fashionable. David Day accordingly notes "Black arm band" debates and disagreements over the terms invasion and settlement and over the numbers killed on the frontier. In terms of the other generally accepted major periods in Australian history, how does *Claiming a continent* fare? It gives perhaps scant acknowledgment to the sixty years of convict history, the gold rush era, the crucial years of the 1890s and 1930s and to post-war immigration schemes. They are mentioned, but if claiming and despoiling the continent is Day's main theme, it is surprising he does not offer readers more access to the various ways that the convict era, gold rushes, depressions and rapidly expanding population changed the face of the land. Burke and Wills, pastoralists, squatters and selectors were not the only ones to claim and reshape the

land. It should be noted that the histories of women, children, youth and the aged are also under-represented, as are the popular culture pursuits of Australians, the role of Churches and military history. If “claiming” Australia is the theme then it is noticeable that Day also misses the power of film, theatre, prose, music and art as a means by which indigenous Australians are claiming back their proprietorship. Similarly he misses the many ways that the 150 or so migrant communities, other than Italian-Australians that get some coverage, have also become “Australian” and claimed the continent as their home. This long list of gaps and omissions might seem overly critical, but general histories are prone to this sort of page counting and index checking. Readers want to see their own concerns and social memories reflected in History. *Claiming a continent* does acknowledge most of these themes, and introduces some “new”, interpretations and previously ignored events. It’s focus on “claiming” is bold, but like all general histories that sweep across long periods and rapidly changing social, political, economic and physical environments, they are always liable to be pilloried for omissions rather than praised for “newness”.

Where is the impetus for this recent surge of general histories coming from? One answer can be seen in the proliferation of “studies”, multidisciplinary approaches, and the increasingly myopic investigation of narrower and narrower topics that have long waited a diligent researcher. The scope, depth and innovation of Australian historians are remarkable. So armed now with details denied, expurgated or invisible on an earlier canvas, historians like David Day think it an appropriate time to reflect again on the big picture, to absorb all the minutiae arriving daily in monographs, collected editions of essays and conference papers, and indeed backlogged in the two journals, *Australian Historical Studies* and *Journal of Australian Studies*. As one of the few historians to tackle the *longue durée*, David Day stepped back and drew a wide brush over 60000 years of history. The original release of *Claiming a continent* was well received though lost among a swag of other historical and historiographic publications that arrived in that period. In the latest edition he has revised by adding a selection of recent events that support his main premise. As a general history solidly grounded in scholarship and very aware of historical debates it will appeal to fellow historians, but it should be promoted as an accessible story for general readers.

The early chapters are more scholarly in their organization as Day has taken the approach of discussing not so much the event itself, but the historian’s interpretations. These surveys make good reading and summarise the range of views on earliest arrivals, Portuguese mapping and the motivations behind the First fleet. This approach is dropped in subsequent chapters but could well have been pursued in regard to convict women, federation and the home-front impact of 1914-18 and 1941-45, and other topics that have attracted recent historiographic interest.

Historians tackling general histories often escape the necessity to include everything by introducing a little-known event or person and thereby gave the appearance of adding something “new” to an already well-known story. For example, David Day does this by citing several times the Sydney journalist David Penton’s *Advance Australia where?* a 1943 book not often noted by other historians of this era. David Day uses Penton to draw attention to the doubt many Australians had during the war years about the Empire relationship and the future, but it exaggerates Penton’s role in comparison to other more influential Australians shaping events as they dramatically unfolded during the war and in the post war reconstruction years. On the positive side,

Claiming the Continent is enlivened throughout by Day's choice of small events, ordinary Australian characters and quotes from sources less well known. For example, in the chapter on the 1930's both Menzies and Scullin receive lengthy coverage, but so does the lobbying of William Cooper of the Australian Aborigine's League. While the urban and rural social dislocation of the depression is perhaps ignored, Jewish immigration and local controversies, for example, in Innisfail over Italian immigration, are discussed at length by reference to local pamphlets, speeches, poems and magazine headlines. David Day has achieved a fine balance between the already familiar broad chronology, and the empirical detail that legitimises generalisation and justifies what the publisher's blurb claims is a provocative reinterpretation.

What is a new history? Does it apply new paradigms, suggest cutting-edge theoretical agendas, reveal evidence hidden from predecessors, synthesise the monographs from diverse historical and multidisciplinary fields into a single Australian History or merely update the story to include recent events? Some general histories have pushed research and teaching into revisionist directions while others merely reflect the good work of colleagues scattered across Australia and overseas. Some general histories change the way we think about Australia. Blainey's "tyranny of distance", Clark's epic themes of religious rejection, barbarism, town versus country and philistine versus nationalist sentiment, the slice approach of the *The Australians; a historical library*, Pat Grimshaw and others *Creating a nation* and briefly Paul Carter's "spatial history" have been influential. David Day's *Claiming a continent* will not join this "A" list. It will instead attract attention because it represents a particular genre of historical writing – an innovative style of general history in the literary sense rather than the purist sense of scholarly eruditeness and synthesis. This is a new style rather than a new history because of the way *Claiming a continent* has been coherently sequenced in relatively stand-alone mini-stories and because of interesting "tricks" it applies to create a novel-like continuous narrative. For example, the first half of the book is characterised by a repetitive device in which each chapter notes one or two events from the preceding chapter, even using the exact wording. This is distracting at first, but becomes a sort of motif, and gives the narrative a novel-like structure, making the reader feel they are not so much following a chronology of great and minor events, specific details and grand themes, but reading a story. *Claiming a continent* should have been called "a story of Australia" rather than a "new history". An indication of the success of this approach is that the first edition of *Claiming a continent* won the South Australian non-fiction Festival Award for Literature in 1998. I once put together a list of quotable quotes from John Rickard's *Australia; a cultural history* and suggested to Australian history students that they could do no better than recycle Rickard's telling phrases and sharp syntax. David Day's *Claiming a continent* might well attract the same recommendation.

Finally, general histories are judged by their index – not so much by how useful it is to find references on events and people you are curious about, though that is a criteria (and *Claiming a continent* is well served by its index) but for what is "in" and what is "out". The crude measure is to judge the book by the fact, for example, that 235 individuals are named and of those named, 210 are non-indigenous males. There are only eleven non-indigenous women, ten indigenous men and four indigenous women named - a poor record for a "new" history and certainly an omission that opens the book to "great men" and "dead white male" criticisms. Yet when reading *Claiming a continent* as a story, rather than using it as a reference work, it is obvious that David

Day has focussed on indigenous themes and issues consistently and it is possibly the best of the general histories in this regard. Less favourable opinion would declare that surely more women could have been named and found worthy of inclusion. As a “new” history *Claiming a continent* should also reflect if not the latest historiography and research in indigenous Australian histories at least the familiar benchmarks and turning points. It does. Lake Mungo, Pemulwuy, Trucanini, Bennelong, the Black Line, Wave Hill, Coniston (though not by name), *Terra Nullius*, Mabo, Sally Morgan’s *My place* and the tent embassy are all discussed though Jimmy Little and Central desert “dot painters” are not. These last two topics of course reflect this reviewer’s own preference but this is the sort of scrutiny a general history is subjected to. In the case of *Claiming a continent* the balance is generally positive. Breaker Morant and Ned Kelly are there along with Eureka, Henry Parkes, Kokoda, Donald Horne’s *Lucky country*, the Snowy Mountains scheme and the Sydney Olympics. In terms of the broad span since indigenous Australians first settled here, *Claiming a continent* is comprehensive, but could have given more recognition to the convict era, gold rushes, suburban and urban growth and the sporting and cultural pursuits of Australians.

To repeat the point made earlier about variations within the general history genre, some general histories work quite well as a quasi-national encyclopaedia or even as a reference work on a smaller range of seminal and important events. *Claiming a continent* belongs in a separate group of general histories – those that compress 60000 years into a story and like all good story telling, they engage, challenge and question the memory of the reader. The *Oxford Companion to Australian history* with 317 contributors and 1600 entries serves one segment of the general “History” reference market. *Claiming a continent* will in comparison claim a well-deserved place in the popular non-fiction market. I read it quickly and easily. It made me doubt a few things I was previously been sure about and prompted a check on events I had overlooked. Even readers coming to *Claiming a continent* with only the flimsiest understanding of Australia’s past will find their memory challenged and their ideas questioned. Ultimately, it forces readers to make up their own mind about what Australia is – and about who is best equipped to answer that question.

David Day, *Claiming a continent; a new history of Australia*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2001, ISBN 0732269768, Biblio, Index, 352 pages, PB \$27.50

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