

Stuart Macintyre review of Geoffrey Blainey, *Before I Forget: An Early Memoir*

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Most historians' memoirs bear the mark of their authors' calling. They relate their own lives with an unusual precision, giving full details of antecedents, for example, and are attentive to chronology and context. Historians use this scaffolding to make sense of their lived experience, so that a disciplinary understanding of the past directs and supplements memory. In looking back on their lives, moreover, they are concerned to explain how it was that they found their vocation. This can involve the identification of formative influences, teachers, interests and opportunities that shaped their careers. It can also impart a teleological cast, the life following a predetermined path.

Geoffrey Blainey observes in this memoir that when he studied history more than 70 years ago, he was not informed that 'ordinary people could be precious sources'. Trained as an undergraduate in the interpretation of written sources, it was only as he embarked on research into mining history that he came to the conclusion that an informant with little education was 'more likely than a professor to retain an accurate memory of events they had actually experienced'. An early informant was Jimmy Elliott, one of the first prospectors to pitch his tent at Mt Lyell, who could relate distant incidents with a plenitude of detail. 'Jimmy enjoyed talking but did not like me writing notes in his presence', so it was only when the young historian checked these recollections against other sources that he came to appreciate their accuracy.

The emphasis here is on the reliability of memory, though the comparison with the professor of history hints at the suggestion that a reliance on records weakens the capacity for recollection. The difference between oral and literary forms of the past is not taken up here, though it was discussed in the essay 'Antidotes to History' that Blainey published in 1968. Rather, *Before I Forget* affirms the importance of direct experience, of being there, listening, observing and responding. He began writing the book at the turn of the century, he says, believing that his memory might become weaker. Upon returning to this draft 15 years later, he found the occasional error and only then verified episodes with the aid of diaries and correspondence. And even though he uses knowledge acquired later to explicate circumstances, he proceeds always from what he remembers.

At times, indeed, *Before I Forget* ventures into the territory of *Black Kettle and Full Moon*, the compilation he published in 2003 of 'daily life in a vanished Australia'. We are told of the household economy of the inter-war years, his mother constantly darning, mending and putting up preserves; of the reliance on the kettle for hot water, and the way that linen had to be boiled in the copper and put through the ringer. The characteristics of the automobile of that period are recalled, cranking the ignition, the tail-light switched on manually, a waterbag hung at the front, luggage stowed on the running board, and the children bagging (or bagsing, as some would have it) the window seats. Multiplication tables were chanted at primary school and there were games such as hoppo-bumpo and footballs improvised from rolled-up newspaper. From his first sight of the old Corio Oval in Geelong, football becomes a consuming passion, recalled here with the magical scene of the contrasting colours worn by Geelong and South Melbourne, and the smell of eucalyptus from the changing-rooms.

The detailed evocation of a past way of life extends to the tasks the young boy undertook to earn pocket money. He used a billycart or wheelbarrow to collect horse manure from a nearby bakery and sell it to neighbours, collected bottles for sale to the 'bottlo' (though his father's teetotalism robbed him one source of revenue, beer bottles). We are reminded how a morning paper round was more respectable than street selling. Later, when eggs were rationed during World War II, he bought half a dozen hens and became a small-scale producer; and on Saturdays he served as assistant to a greengrocer selling house to house.

Then there are the games that he invented. He was far from unusual in laying out a miniature farm in the backyard, but created his own form of imaginary football with a brother, which used cigarette cards laid out in position on the carpet of the best room and a marble to determine the score. This ritual extended to his walk to and from school, where cars travelling in one direction were credited to Geelong, those in the other direction to their opponent, and even the Sunday morning church service, where the hymn numbers became forecasts for the scores on the following Saturday. Later still, he became intrigued by elections and compiled a list of all federal electorates with each candidate's vote determined by throws of the dice.

The childhood was punctuated by moves around Victoria. Geoffrey's father was a Methodist minister, transferred regularly from one church to another: Jeparit, then Terang, Leongatha, Geelong and Ballarat. Geoffrey was 3 in 1933 when the family moved to Leongatha, but the rolling hills of central Gippsland made a lasting impression. Geelong, where they shifted when he was 7, is remembered as a bustling town with trams, factories and a busy port; in Ballarat, where he began secondary school, there was the wide expanse of Sturt Street and the mullock hills left over from the goldmines: 'I vaguely felt that the nobler buildings and archways, cobblestone workyards, numerous spires and towers, were all trying to speak, but remained silent'.

Every 4 years the Blainey children had to make friends afresh. They did so at school but principally through the church. The parsonage was a calling point for the members of the congregation, whether seeking advice and assistance or bringing gifts of local produce. Methodism laid emphasis on fellowship, with 'tea meetings' where families brought a plate to the church hall for a communal evening meal, and Sunday school carried over into sport and recreation. Like other denominations, as John Button recalled of his Presbyterian childhood in Geelong, the Methodists did their shopping and other business with co-religionists.

He clearly found this companionship congenial and at the same time liked to go further afield. In school holidays he worked on the farms of relatives, travelling 160 kilometres by bicycle on one occasion to the holding of an aunt and uncle at Cororooke. In the summer after completing school, he and a friend hitchhiked to Sydney, via Mildura, and returned through Canberra; and as an undergraduate he made similar excursions to Tasmania and central New South Wales, to see Lawson's outback. As he describes these adventures, he was both intrigued by the countryside and increasingly drawn to its historical associations.

How, then, did this interest in the past form? His mother's father was an early influence. Grandpa Lanyon was a schoolteacher with a keen interest in public affairs—when the early Commonwealth Parliament was inspecting sites for the federal capital, he rode his pushbike to look them over. He had a 'pleasing library' and his reverent attitude to books was noticeable. He presented Geoffrey 'at an absurdly young age' a copy of the Commonwealth Yearbook, a harbinger of an absorption in such reference works, and later introduced him to the reading room of the State Library, a 'breathhtaking site'. The author of a history of his local Methodist church, Grandpa Lanyon's reminiscences 'helped to infect' the boy with an interest in distant events. Entering his teens, he was 'becoming conscious of history without quite knowing what it was'.

He already had a capacious memory. In 1942 'Master G. Blainey' won a prize for correcting a wrong answer given on a radio quiz show on the birthplace of Muhammad. He plays down the scholarship he won to Wesley College in the following year: it was offered to sons of Methodist ministers and only one other competitor sat the exam. Though initially he found himself some way behind his classmates, he made rapid progress. It was at Wesley that he was first taught history, by a teacher who mixed passages from Ernest Scott's *Short History* with reminiscences of those who figured in it. The accomplished literary critic A.A. Phillips exerted the greatest influence, partly by purging his prose of excess ornamentation, partly by encouraging independent thought and partly by promoting involvement in theatre, debating, the library and the school magazine. By this time the family had moved to a church in Thornbury, though Geoffrey continued to board and used vacations to read newspapers in the State Library. He shared the exhibition for history and won a general exhibition in his final exams.

His account of the time as an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne from 1948 to 1950 is revealing. He pays handsome tribute to his teachers, especially Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Max Crawford, Manning Clark and John O'Brien, but says little of what they taught him. His circle of friends at Queen's College and editorship of *Farrago* take up more space than his studies. It was a slightly older undergraduate at Queen's, Ken Inglis, who taught him how to take notes and the companionship of other contemporaries that introduced him to the great ideas ablaze at the time. He found little attraction in 'the abstract ideas and colourless principles' that constituted the much vaunted honours subject Theory and Method of History, and characteristically told the teacher that his interest was in method rather than theory. He read widely outside the syllabus, began collecting books and continued to read files of nineteenth-century newspapers—'I was learning Australian history my own way'.

Upon graduating he was invited to become a tutor, the staging post for Crawford's ablest students who would proceed to further study in England and an academic career. His response to Crawford, 'Are you short of hands?', indicated a preference for writing over teaching. Fortuitously, Crawford had recently been approached by a board member of Mt Lyell Mining wanting a company history. Entering into life on the west coast of Tasmania, Blainey learned his craft, accumulating notes 'in absurd quantities' and then composing his account in vivid, sensual prose. It was his publisher, Gwyn James, who suggested the title, *Peaks of Lyell*, and his preference thereafter was for the visual over the abstract.

For the next decade he worked as a freelance, producing a string of mining, banking and other institutional histories. Some, produced for anniversaries, were written remarkably quickly (the centennial history of the University of Melbourne in just a year, that of the National Bank even more quickly) but none showed signs of haste. It was Blainey's practice not to seek such work on the grounds that his bargaining position would be stronger if the client made the approach. Most of his commissions came from boardrooms and it was remarkable how the young man won the confidence of business leaders. He undertook to write a history that was 'fair and true' and more than one was held up or never appeared because he would not alter the typescript. He also had to learn to say no to requests from publishers and editors, a necessary safeguard for 'blazing my own track in the direction I wished to travel'.

There was a streak of obstinacy in this independence. Upon completing his degree Blainey refused to graduate, deeming the fee for doing so 'a tax on knowledge'. It was the credit squeeze of the early 1960s that spurred the decision to take an academic post and the memoir concludes with his early years back at the university. He explains that there was no valid reason for halting the account when he reached the age of 40: I simply thought that I had written enough.

We therefore finish some way short of Blainey's later years as a controversialist, though a few threads of those of controversies are apparent. Reflecting on life in the parsonage, he remarks that such tight-knit church congregations have largely vanished and are 'no longer viewed sympathetically in the media and sections of some universities'. Recalling A.A. Phillips's celebrated essay on the cultural cringe, he observes 'the day was to come when many Australians tended to "cringe" slightly in the presence of the multicultural'. He relates how he invited Brian Fitzpatrick as a guest lecturer and explains there was much greater tolerance then than now 'to allow opposing views to be heard or even fostered'—a proposition that would have startled Fitzpatrick. Of his John Latham lecture lamenting the 'black armband' view of Australian history Clark had nurtured, Blainey says that he continues to admire his friend as a distinguished exponent of the craft of history writing but that 'while we rode comfortably in the same train we got off at different stations'.

This is a book of remembrance rather than self-examination. Blainey goes to some lengths to record his political views. Partly through the influence of teachers, he found himself 'veering to the left' at Wesley and read George Bernard Shaw with admiration for his prose, his skill in mental combat and 'impudent cheerfulness when arguing and rebutting'. In school debates he liked to take the unpopular side. The use of the atomic bomb to end World War II shocked and depressed him, but also inoculated him against subsequent Cold War crises. By the time he left school, then, he was already 'on the middle of the political road' and at university he shed any remaining faith in schemes of human betterment. Of his subsequent views he remains silent.

Of the childhood faith in which he was raised the memoir is perplexingly reticent. His father had a substantial theological library but there is no mention of the son using it. At Wesley the chaplain asked him if he would join the Methodist church. He recalls the exact spot in the cloisters where the request was made and rejected, but not the reasons; nor does he indicate any discussion of the matter with his parents. At university he was not attracted to the Student Christian Movement in which a number of Queen's College students were active. He did attend college chapel and in his first year went to services in just about every church in the city: Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, Lutheran, Swedenborgian and even Theosophical (though not, it appears, either of the cathedrals). Again there is no indication of what he was seeking, nor of any subsequent engagement with questions of faith.

This, then, is a restricted memoir that eschews subjectivity. It tells us a good deal about how he became a historian and sheds new light on the works he wrote during this period. But the enigma of this singular historian remains.

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