

# Historical Moments and Historical Change

*Turning Points in Australian History*

Edited by Martin Crotty and David Andrew Roberts

University of New South Wales Press, 320pp, \$34.95, 2009

ISBN: 9781921410567

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UNSW Press has certainly chosen an appropriate visual for the cover of *Turning Points in Australian History*. The image of a dark Australian-shaped weather-vane silhouetted against a bright blue sky alludes to the paradoxes that lie within. Like the weather-vane, the history contained within this book both reassures and unsettles. It can appear both fixed and wavering. It is at times becalmed and at other times agitated by the frenetic force of new and unpredictable winds.

Following on from the success of their ironically named volume *Great Mistakes of Australian History* (2006), Martin Crotty and David Andrew Roberts appear to be appealing once again to a wide audience with a hunger for bite-sized chunks of insight as a way to comprehend anew the 'great story' of Australian History. An initial glimpse at the table of contents confirms a re-assuring list of selected dates and corresponding events, one assigned to each of the seventeen chapters that follow. Each stand-alone chapter is written by a different specialist author and is about a specific event and its impact on Australian history, ranging from Tasmania's split from the Australian mainland during Pleistocene Ice Age 14,000 years ago to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

The chronological ordering of these chapters, stretching from the pre-historic to the present, implies overarching narrative and gives an immediate sense of unity and coherence to this volume; a sense which is subsequently reinforced through repeated use of cross-referencing within and between each chapter. However, wary of any temptation toward the meta-narratives of history, Crotty and Roberts, in their somewhat apologetic Introduction, quickly qualify any sense of a strict 'line of causation' by acknowledging the problematic nature and purpose of defining a 'turning point' (2). They are, of course, right to note the subjective nature of their mission in this way but in quibbling over the finer distinctions between a 'watershed', 'milestone', 'crucial moment', 'momentous

action', 'highlight', 'focal point', 'pivotal instance' and 'turning point' there is always the danger in a volume such as this that, whatever you call them, they simply become self-legitimising constructs for an 'ever-upward trajectory' view of history (2).

One of the earliest chapters titled 'The Arrival of the First Fleet and the 'Foundation of Australia' acknowledges the subjectivity and politically charged nature of the varying accounts of the significance of the landing of Arthur Phillip in Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788. Yet, like the next chapter on Lachlan Macquarie and the Bigge Report, which is presented as fundamentally a classic battle between two dead white males, this reader was unwittingly seduced by the sheer force of the unfolding chronological narrative tracing an archetypal human struggle between a pragmatist and an idealist. In these chapters, despite pointing to the controversial fluidities of interpretation, it is the more linear narrative which is perhaps the most compelling force.

Other chapters eschew the controversial altogether by presenting their 'turning points' fairly safely with an emphasis on the uncontroversial 'facts'. Keir Reeves covers fairly well-known territory in his chapter about the discovery of gold by Hargreaves in 1851 and the subsequent gold rush. True, he undermines Hargreaves' claim to be first by noting the earlier attempts by the colonial authorities to suppress news of prior discoveries, but this is not new. His main argument for viewing the gold rush as representing a fundamentally economic event which shaped the future of Australia is timely and well made, albeit briefly. However, again symptomatic of the paradox of these 'turning points', he concludes with the image of the heroic Hargreaves whose 'posthumous fame resides in his role as a key catalyst of Australia's golden age' (73).

Hamstrung by the absence of any one defining moment, Erik Eklund, in his chapter on The Great Depression, gives fairly cursory and familiar coverage of the main events. His implied justification for this 'turning point' is its retrospective significance in light of the long-term consequences for Australia. Like some of the later chapters, there is a sense of unfinished business about this analysis even if granted the limited scope of this work where 'the consequences are too numerous to mention with appropriate detail' (127).

Other chapters focus more explicitly on the development of academic interpretations of their event before positing their own interpretation. For example, Melissa Bellanta's survey of the events and implications of the so-called Great Strike of 1890 is both a succinct identification of the main events and parties involved in the Maritime Strike, Shearers' Revolt and associated events in 1890, and a useful survey of the various historical interpretations of these events since. She shows how interpretation of this ambiguous event has moved through various phases ranging from militarist, revisionist, New Left and Feminist before finally a more recent return to Marxist class-war interpretations.

This is a useful and succinct survey, but it is her argument for a re-interpretation of the event in terms of it being an expression of the utopian ideals prevalent in Australia in the 1890s which is the most compelling. Nonetheless, her argument that this event was ‘bound up in turn with the precarious hope that society might be transformed’ is also open to re-interpretation in the future (86). After all, all that is needed to shift the ‘precarious’ weather-vane of history from utopia to dystopia is a puff of interpretative wind.

Other contributors to this volume focus on answering just one key question that arises from their event. In Chapter 6 the question is: ‘why should such a crucial moment in Australia’s development as Federation in 1901 have had such a lack of resonance with its population?’ (89). Was it ‘because no-one died?’ (91), or because it was ‘overshadowed emotionally by the death of beloved Queen Victoria?’ (91), or because it lacked ‘martial sacrifice or revolution?’ (92), or because the ‘sycophantic, monocultural, racist, sexist and somewhat paranoid’ (94) nature of the event meant that people felt, and still feel, guilty about its commemoration? The answer again appears to lie in one’s perspective. The ‘turning point’ of Federation is thus seen as part of a discursive framework upon which subsequent generations can interpret and ‘evolve’ (97).

Such compelling contemporary re-interpretations of ‘turning points’ can be found in David Day’s chapter regarding the foreign policy significance of Curtin’s 1941 New Year radio message. Day convincingly argues that it was not a straight shift from the UK to the US but ‘it was Britain that was moving away from Australia, rather than the reverse’ (140). Similarly, Russell McGregor provides a new interpretation of the 1967 Referendum on Aboriginal rights, suggesting that the context and nature of the ‘yes’ campaign was misleading and inaccurate, and the outcomes of the reforms less significant than previously imagined. Both these studies further support the logic of this volume, which is that ‘turning points’ are a matter of perspective and remain as shifting as a weather-vane.

At the centre of the collection is the ambitious chapter on what has become perhaps the most embedded ‘turning point’ of Australian history—the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli on 25 April, 1915. Here, Crotty acknowledges the birth of a nation myth but then quickly debunks it. He concludes, however, that the event itself has succumbed to the myth, which in turn justifies its ‘turning point’ status. This is an argument which we are presumably asked to apply to the entire volume. As the notion of ‘turning points’ becomes more ambiguous the role of interpretation, translation and categorisation becomes even more important in creating its own reality.

The ambiguous notion of ‘turning points’ becomes even more tenuous in the later chapters of the volume where the selection of events seems purely thematic and topical. These include Susan Magarey’s study of gender through an account

of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, Melissa Harper's chapter on environmentalism in her case-study of the Franklin Dam Protests, and Ray Broomhill's chapter on economics through his investigation of Paul Keating's 'banana republic' speech in 1986.

The essays collected in this volume cover a diverse field, with varying results. The pointed lack of any specific date in the title of Magarey's chapter on women's liberation is another intellectual tease but one which is complicated by her tendency toward sentimental nostalgia and a self-referential style (she quotes herself) that can be unsettling. On the other hand, Brett Hutchins's chapter on sport, which ostensibly appears somewhat forced, actually works by successfully embedding it within the specific 'turning point' of the opening of the Australian Institute of Sport on 26 January, 1981. This allows him to trace the process by which 'top level Australian sport moved from impoverished amateurism to generously funded elitism through the profuse expenditure of public funds' (199) while being used as 'a weapon in Cold War international politics' (203) in order to show how 'the conjunction of sport, politics and nationalism was perfectly distilled in to a single moment' (206).

In a final attempt to come to terms with the notion of historical 'turning points', Robert Manne turns to very contemporary events in the final chapter, 'From Tampa to 9/11: Seventeen days that changed Australia'. Here, while noting 'the rise of populist conservatism, voluntary re-dominionisation, the embrace of a mimetic foreign policy style, the creation of a new anti-terrorist legal structure and the militarisation of the political culture' (254), he makes the salient admission that in the end 'historians are notoriously ill-equipped to see into the future' (254) and only time will tell whether these events represent a genuine historical turning point.

And so in one sense, after the buffeting of each chapter, this reader has not really moved on. My preference for sturdy reference points and directions regarding the 'big history' questions has been appeased. At the same time, I enjoyed the thrill of reading a variety of self-consciously subjective viewpoints. Like the foreboding weather-vane itself, this book balances chaos with order and, while it may not (or cannot) be accurate in ascertaining where the next gust will point us, it is very useful in helping us understand from whence some of the past winds of change have come.

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