Adrian Jones review of Chris Feik, ed., *John Hirst: Selected Writings*

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Sample, anyone? Sweet-food companies represented at royal agricultural shows in Australian cities once used 'show bags' to offer ingenious mini versions of their treats. La Trobe University Publishing in conjunction with Black Ink has already offered six such scholarly 'show bags': its 'Australian Thinkers' series. John Hirst's is the seventh in the series, and the second to feature, after Inga Clendinnen's, a La Trobe University author. This footnote-free genre suits master-historian John Hirst (1942–2016), because he spun his sources into the weft of his simple prose. His writing was usually prompted by a quandary he voiced in respectfully ironic ways, such as: 'Was distance really a tyrant?' (1975) in Australia. Hirst's query-driven approach was also evident in his *Australian History in 7 Questions* (2016) and in *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* (2009), only three selections from which appear in this book. Most of Feik's choices in *John Hirst: Selected Writings* derive from his big scholarly books; from public essays arising from them; from long-form journalism; and from essays he wrote in harder-to-find journals of all kinds, scholarly and reader-friendly. Their originals are indicated at the close of the book.

The book begins with brief, balanced and sympathetic appraisals of Hirst's writings by The Australian National University's Frank Bongiorno, and La Trobe's Robert Manne and Alex McDermott. Each analyses different ways John Hirst tilted at windmills, some of which his teachers had helped to build. Feik then selects from different monographs and essays written by John Hirst. Feik decided—rightly I think—to focus on colonial contexts and contests over convict society, and the unusually easy emergence of democracy and federation in colonial Australia. His selection begins with Hirst's poignant autobiographical essay, 'Changing My Mind' (2004), in which Hirst's lucid, plain and insightful prose shows his extraordinary capacity to retrieve—and to honour—past perspectives, shorn of the condescension of subsequent pasts and our supercilious present. In 'Nothing but Bad' (1988), for instance, Hirst notes:

> if these authors had to deal with Attila the Hun, they would criticise him for the skewed gender balance of his horde and the total absence of social workers in his entourage. (p. 132)

In 'How Sorry Can Be We Be' (2005), Hirst discusses the contemporary 'liberal fantasy' (pp. 137, 139) that somehow it must have been possible for the British to migrate to and colonise Australia and not dispossess Indigenous peoples:

> Better, if you must speak of right and wrong, to say that according to their lights the settlers were right to invade and the Aborigines were right to resist them. It is our common fate to live with the consequences of that conjunction. (p. 142)

One of Hirst's great strengths was his unusual capacity to compare Australian colonial and twentieth-century histories with European and American histories. As his former young colleague, I witnessed how he taught for years alongside British history colleagues in a first-year subject exploring British (radical-rural and urban working-class) factors shaping colonial and even federated Australia. He even helped me to teach my subject in comparative revolutions, quietly framing his own thinking for his *Shortest History of Europe* (2009).

Feik's colonial-era selections comprise essays comparing early nineteenth-century Argentine *latifundia* with the squattocracy in early New South Wales and Victoria. Here, Hirst notes how the combination of self-government and selection acts precluded feudalism in Australia, but not in the Argentina. He also locates the long-term consequences of colonial settlers' determination never to have a poor law and workhouses in Australia. Another selection skewers the American historiographical commonplace of their 'exceptionalism' by retrieving, and then subtly redefining, the key dissenting voice of Louis Hartz (1919–1986), who still endorsed 'exceptionalism') from Harvard (1942–74), whom Hirst defended nonetheless for asking the right questions (pp. 80–2). From his first studies of the economy of Adelaide (1973), Hirst was alert to rewards of historical geographies and sociologies. Feik's selections show Hirst pinpointing how Australian egalitarianism (a bit like Mark Twain's United States) was a behavioural and rhetorical agenda of 'manners'—and not some socialist levelling of wealth and incomes. Hirst also notes how Australian egalitarianism was also still premised on market-based property owning and money-making if they were also 'fair and equitable' (p. 101) (unlike the United States of robber-barons, Hollywood and artificial intelligence).

The last half of the book is focused on the puzzle of why Australians have so little regard for the wonder of Federation. Hirst's studies of poetry and politicians showed how late nineteenth-century colonists yearned to shed their 'colonial' pejorative, preferring to form their own version of a free and fair, but still British, 'commonweal'. They created a federal Commonwealth more principled than the Acts of Union that created Great Britain in 1707 and 1800. Hirst criticised his fellow historians who had emphasised business over idealism, and he explains the electoral calculations underpinning the brand new federal government's 'White Australia' policy even though there was very little evidence of unauthorised immigration. In 'Making Voting Compulsory' (2002), Hirst explains the thinking behind Australia's (unique?) federal systems of compulsory voter registration (1911) and then of voting (1924).

Feik has assembled a superb 'show bag' that presents a well-rounded view of Hirst's historical imagination. Feik's selection also deepened my admiration for Hirst's prose. This is a great book to share with friends and students as a model of historical writing that is as open-minded as it is open to controversy. In opening this 'show bag', I wanted to button-hole John Hirst in the corridor again, to test some new ideas, to ignore today's smug consensus and just find a better way to express something. More power to Black Inks's 'Australian Thinkers' series.

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