This previously untold story of economic history in Australia exposes the centrality of economic thought and scholarship to Australian intellectual and political life. Deftly positioning economic history in an innovative institutional, place-based and person-focused narrative, Claire Wright entangles economics with the history of education to produce a tale of university interdisciplinarity, influence and impact. Written with vitality and bursting with both data and anecdote, this book makes an exceptional contribution to the intersecting fields of history, economics and higher education studies.

– Hannah Forsyth, author of *A History of the Modern Australian University*

Few readers would expect to find a classical tragedy in the story of an academic field. Yet that is what Claire Wright shows us in this study of Economic History, as it has been practiced in Australia. She traces the field from legendary beginnings to triumphant growth to organizational collapse – and renaissance on other terms. Carefully researched and vigorously written, this book raises questions about disciplines and interdisciplinary fields, universities and markets, and social bases of intellectual work, that are relevant to all fields today.

– Raewyn Connell, author of *The Good University*

Australia proved a pioneer in the study of economic history, nurturing a discipline with innovative data and understanding of material trends. Yet by the 1990s economic history departments closed as senior scholars retired and the field was subsumed by conventional economics. In this absorbing study, Dr Claire Wright challenges the conventional account. She is tough-minded about financial and institutional pressures on the field, but cautiously optimistic about the future. It is a mistake, she argues, to see institutional representation as the benchmark of influence. Instead, the interdisciplinary nature of economic history has encouraged new research and teaching across the humanities and social sciences. With close attention to individual scholars and their university departments, and a deep sense of the trajectory of the field, *Australian Economic History: Transformations of an Interdisciplinary Field* is an original and important contribution to Australian intellectual history.

– Glyn Davis, Distinguished Professor of Political Science in the Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University
AUSTRALIAN ECONOMIC HISTORY

TRANSFORMATIONS OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FIELD
# Contents

List of figures ix
List of tables xi
List of abbreviations xiii
Acknowledgements xv

1. The interdisciplinary space 1
   Universities and interdisciplinary research 7
   Structure 20

2. Early economic history in Australia 21
   Colonial writings 22
   Interwar 25
   Wartime transition 42

3. The big bang 45
   The words and the numbers 46
   Orthodox recruitment 52
   The revolution 62
   Conclusions 66

4. A moment in the sun 69
   Growth 70
   Enclaves 79
   A fragmented community 111

5. The resistance 113
   The crisis in Australian economic history 115
   Adaptation and survival 138
   Conclusions 161

6. Renaissance 163
   The revival 164
   Persistent challenges 173
   Conclusions 185

7. Epilogue 187

Appendix and data 191
   Departments of economic history in Australia 191
   Oral history interviews 199

Index 201