So now we confront the five reference volumes of *Australians: A Historical Library*. These books' very appearance suggests authority: they are weighty, dignified; they fall open without disintegrating; their typography is conservative but highly legible. They're real books, as opposed to the cheap paperbacks that have perforce become our staple diet. At the same time, they are pitched towards a non-specialist audience. The language is fairly straightforward and they are heavily illustrated, with generous use of colour.

Given the 'slice' approach adopted in other volumes of this 'library', these reference volumes bear a particular load: they have to provide a readily accessible 'quick fix' of basic information that will at least fill in the topography of the rest of the cake. To be blunt, taken as a whole they don't discharge the responsibility very well. While they contain a mass of useful information and embody a lot of good work by a lot of good historians, as a set of reference volumes they have many inadequacies and inconsistencies.

In structural terms, they sit uneasily between the encyclopaedic tradition and younger conventions of academic specialism. Their division of function is essentially genre-based, though it is not without its idiosyncrasies: numerical data are presented in the volume of *Historical Statistics*, maps in the *Historical Atlas*, bibliographical information and commentary in the *Guide to Sources*. The other two volumes are *A Historical Dictionary*, which functions as a mini-encyclopaedia, and a rather odd volume entitled *Events and Places*, which begins as a chronology and ends as a gazetteer (though, unfortunately, it's far too big for my glove-box).

Each volume attempts to be comprehensive within its designated field, but they often retrace the same ground from different perspectives, while elsewhere they leave substantial lacunae. Finding aids, the most essential attributes of an efficient reference work, are grossly deficient. The indexes to the individual volumes are inadequate, and the last-minute publication of a separate volume


These volumes, the General Editors of which are Frank Crowley and Peter Spearritt with John McQuilton, comprise the reference section of *Australians: A Historical Library*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney 1987. 11 volumes, $695.00 cloth.
containing a consolidated index has not remedied this deficiency. For reasons best known to themselves, the publishers only allocated 33 pages of this volume to the index, most of the remaining space being taken up with a kind of Australian book of lists; the space allowed was not even sufficient to consolidate the existing, inadequate indexes to the individual volumes. Taking the series as a whole, it must be asked whether some of the space devoted to illustrating the volumes to make them appear accessible would not have been better used to provide proper indexes that would make the information they contain accessible.

It is both impossible and inappropriate to appraise a reference work by reading it from cover to cover. In an attempt to replicate the way in which these volumes are likely to be used, I thought I would begin by taking a series of ‘dives’ into particular subjects. What follows is not a rigged survey: I am recording seriatim the results of my attempts to gain information from these volumes about particular questions, working in the first instance from the indexes. Some of the dives arose out of my own particular interests; others drew on stock questions that are likely to be asked of people studying Australian history; and others I deliberately set up as test cases, to check out the broad impressions an otherwise uninformed reader would gain by working his or her way through the volumes.

My first dive was an attempt to locate information for my own purposes, for a chapter I was writing in a local history of Fitzroy, the earliest of Melbourne’s inner suburbs. While Sir Charles Augustus FitzRoy appeared in the indexes, along with the river and the crossing named after him, the suburb did not make an appearance; nor did its better-known neighbour, Collingwood. A further check revealed virtually no entries for individual suburbs in any of the capital cities. The treatment was at least even-handed: Toorak missed out as well. But for any suburbanites who wanted to check out a little of their locality’s history, these volumes obviously had little to offer.

My next attempt was more of a test case. Its aim was to locate information about the Chinese in Australia. There was no listing in the indexes to the statistics volume or Events and Places. A browse through several likely spots in the latter, however, revealed entries under Castlemaine, Clunes, Young, the Palmer River, Tingha and various other mining towns, often including reference to racial violence. The Chinese presence in the cities and in the pastoral and agricultural towns did not rate any obvious mention. The dictionary gave three listings, two of which turned out to be references to anti-Chinese riots on the goldfields and the third of which was to a biography of Quong Tart (who, the biographer noted, was ‘at no time a Chinese leader’ — one is left asking why, in that case, he appears to be the only Chinese person to rate an entry in that volume). The entry on ‘Immigration’ also made two brief mentions of the Chinese, though this reference was not in the index. The Guide to Sources gave three references: one to a 1981 article advising people of Chinese origin on how to research their genealogy, and two to a 1981 popular history, Jean Gittins’ The Diggers from China. The atlas gave two entries, one of which turned out to refer to the passing phrase ‘Chinese gold diggers’ in the
introduction to the immigration section. The other took me to a heavily illustrated page which purportedly told me all I needed to know: that the Chinese gold diggers' 'presence provoked fierce racial hatred in Australia, the major motivation for the "White Australia" policy'; that they didn't bring their women with them; that most of them failed to find gold; and that some of them moved to Melbourne. Five of the six illustrations on the page, and about half the text, were confined to Victoria, and the account ended in 1901. That was all. The information provided was scanty, and the overall impression was a very negative one. Furthermore, with the engaged contemporary scholarship (the works of Markus and Cronin,\(^1\) for example) being completely omitted from the Guide to Sources, novices were not even offered a rope to help them climb out of the ideological hole in which the text had left them.

I tried again. Being parochial, I looked up Tamworth, my home town. The index to the atlas gave me two references, one to a section on the 1919 influenza epidemic, the other to a map of population centres in 1921, where Tamworth was shown as a large town. Had it, I wondered, become a small town after that? No; its 1981 entry had merely been omitted from the index. The Guide to Sources reproduced the cover of the town's diamond jubilee souvenir booklet, but didn't mention the local history published by Roger Milliss in 1980. The place didn't get a guernsey in the statistical volume or the dictionary. So, saving up the best till last, I turned to Events and Places. There were no entries under 'events', naturally; nothing ever happens in country towns. But there was an entry in the index under 'places' (it was just as well I started with the index — if I'd been flipping through the volume I would never have found it, as the organisation of the entries in this section is so confusing that the publishers felt constrained to provide a key-map on the title page). Going to pages 244–5, I found an entry that didn't say anything at all about the 'place'. It didn't mention, for example, that Tamworth lies in a fertile but flood-prone valley on the western scarp of the New England tableland. It didn't even give the name of the Kamilaroi people who originally inhabited the area. It did, however, give me a very abbreviated summary of local events. An example:

Water reticulation scheme built in 1898. Fielder Flour Co took over Phoenix Mill in 1900 and became important employer. Co-operative dairy factory estab in 1901. Peel River Co land gradually given up in response to public pressure during first decade of 20th cent: land resumed cut into 234 farms in most important land resumption in NSW. (p.244)

So be it. It's a pity the resumption didn't occur in 1888 or 1938. Maybe then someone would have noticed.

Continuing my vaguely autobiographical track, I thought I'd check out the entries under the Peel River Company's parent, the Australian Agricultural Company, in whose shadow I and most of my forebears on both sides of the

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Great Dividing Range were raised. This was a clique of well-connected Englishpersons who succeeded in snaffling a million acres on the Peel, the Liverpool Plains, the fertile coastal strip of New South Wales around Gloucester and large areas of coal-bearing land in the Newcastle district, all by outright Crown grant. The company wasn’t mentioned in the atlas or the statistics volume. It also missed out on the index of Events and Places, though it was mentioned in the ‘place’ entries for at least seven towns and, on further inquiry, I discovered that the grant of a million acres of land ‘near Port Stephens’ in 1824 did rate as an ‘event’ (p. 32). The index to the Dictionary announced that the company was mentioned on p. 244; I enjoyed reading, and re-reading, and re-re-reading, Susan McKernan’s synoptic commentary on Australian literature on that page, but I eventually convinced myself that there was no mention of the Company there. I did eventually locate a bald, twelve-line entry on p. 24, which mentioned the date of the company’s formation and the extent of its mining and pastoral activities, but said nothing at all about its ownership. The Guide to Sources did not mention Bob Gollan’s commentary on the company’s record as an employer in the Newcastle coal mines, but it did list the company history written by one of its minions, Jesse Gregson, in 1907.

Turning to more traditional subjects, I thought I’d look up some old standbys for Australian history essay questions. I began with the Eureka Stockade. The consolidated index gave me three references in Events and Places. One turned out merely to be a passing mention on the occasion of Peter Lalor’s becoming speaker of the Victorian Legislative Assembly. The entry under ‘events’ gave me 9 lines, which included the information that 5 soldiers and 30 diggers had been killed in the incident; the entry under Ballarat ran to 4 lines, and included the information that 6 soldiers and 22 diggers were killed. Fortunately, there was also a useful entry in the Dictionary, which not only cleared up the matter of the statistics (the Ballarat entry appears to have been the culprit), but gave quite a thoughtful commentary on the background to the rebellion and suggested some basic further reading (Weston Bate, Carboni, Serle, Currey on the Irish and Molony’s 1984 monograph².) This was probably just as well, as the last two references were omitted from the Guide to Sources.

Next, I thought I’d check out the old chestnut of constitutional development. The only reference to constitutions in the consolidated index was to a Dictionary entry that was so compressed as to be nigh-incomprehensible to a lay reader. It made no mention of the franchise, the relative powers of upper and lower houses, the import of federal constitutional amendments during this century or any of the changes in the states’ constitutions after 1865. It did not discuss the constitutional crises of the 1860s and 1870s in Victoria and of 1932

in New South Wales, nor the events of 1975 at the federal level. Fortunately, there was a more useful entry under the heading ‘Parliaments’ in the same volume (though this also failed to comment on the growth of federal power). The most complete reference, however, was under the heading ‘Government’; it reiterated much of the information in the other two sections, but did at least give an outline of the historical sequence of constitutional change. And eventually, quite by accident, I found an outline of the 1860s Victorian constitutional crisis under the heading ‘Darling Grant’. None of these entries was cross-referenced. Two listed W.G. McMinn’s A Constitutional History of Australia (Melbourne 1979) for further reading; again, this was just as well, as the Guide to Sources only gave that volume an entry under ‘Land Settlement’.

As a final dive, I looked up ‘labour movement’ in the consolidated index, and was referred on to ‘trade unionism’ (the fact that the movement has a political wing had apparently escaped notice). The chronology in Events and Places made no mention of the early trade societies in the 1830s in New South Wales or the 1840s in Victoria. Its first entry recorded the establishment of the Stonemasons’ Society in Victoria in 1850. The subsequent entries marked out a predictable path: the Eight-Hour Day in 1856, the formation of unions in Queensland and on the New South Wales coalfields, the coal strike of 1862, various industrial actions in Sydney and Queensland in the mid-1870s, the passage of a Trade Union Act in New South Wales in 1881, the tailoresses’ strike of 1882 in Melbourne, the lockout of Melbourne bootmakers in 1884–5, the formation of the Shearers’ Union, the 1890 maritime strike, 1891 shearer’s strike, 1892 Broken Hill miners’ strike, the Victorian railway strike of 1903 (the last five indexed only under ‘strikes’, and the seamen’s strike of 1893 omitted), the formation of the ACTU in 1927 (not indexed), etc. The poor devil indexing the chronology had obviously given up when the unions started appearing too often; there were only three index entries for the chronology later than 1889. The entry under ‘labour movement’ in the dictionary was accompanied by a reproduction of a stevedores’ union banner, captioned ‘Britain presides over the meeting of Australian stevedores of the past and present’. Unfortunately, the banner in question was actually that of a British union; it portrayed a British stevedore shaking hands with an Australian workman, and was produced to commemorate the support given by Australian unions to the London dock strike of 1889. The entry itself appeared to have lost its section on the 1930s, but considering that it was attempting to cover a century and a half in the history of the major Australian popular movement in less than a page, it did a competent job. No suggestions for further reading were included. The bibliography in the Guide to Sources was quite extensive, though it stopped in 1984, which unfortunately led to the omission of two major recent works, John Merritt’s The Making of the AWU and Verity Burgmann’s ‘In Our Time’3. There were also some

inexplicable omissions (including the Iremonger, Merritt and Osborne volume on strikes and Fitzgerald’s history of the Victorian printing union⁴). More significantly, perhaps, the fact that the entry only listed published monographs left large gaps in its coverage of a field in which so much of the scholarship has appeared as journal articles, notably in the journal Labour History.

At that point I gave up. In the trade, it is widely known that some of these volumes were rushed and under-resourced, especially in the latter stages. The tendency is to be lenient on the unfortunates who were lumbered with the impossible task of getting them to press in reasonable shape. But one must ask why they were so under-resourced, particularly when the production of the series is so lavish and the price-tag so high. To raise a topical issue, is this merely another example of the Australian private sector’s preference for putting money into tinsel rather than into research, in the belief that near enough is good enough as long as you package it attractively?

The problem is not merely one of system or accuracy. It is also one of ideology. These volumes display many signs of ideological tension, sharpened both by the authoritative status of the enterprise and by the publishers’ desire to make the books as palatable as possible. The liberal historians who guided the project were clearly sensitive to allegations that they were constructing a celebratory history. They attempted to forestall objections by a compensatory approach, consciously ensuring that the volumes would cover Aboriginal history, family history and the like. The ideological difficulties of these volumes are most evident when this conscious attempt to be ‘fair’ lapses. But the fact that such an effort has to be made in the first place is an indication of the uneasiness that plagues the liberal historiographical tradition, an uneasiness that arises from its failure to reappraise its basic categorical structure, its canon of ‘important’ questions, its criteria of relevance, in the light of the challenges posed by Aboriginal, feminist, ecological, political/economic and non-Anglo critiques: in short, its failure to de-centre itself. These shortcomings are more evident in the ‘reference’ volumes than in the ‘slice’ volumes, and are possibly more dangerous because the authoritative appearance and tenor of these tomes discourage lay criticism, while their presentation invites lay readership.

The Historical Atlas is a case in point. It is rather alarming to see it follow its mandatory section on Aboriginal landscapes with a section on exploration asserting, inter alia, that ‘In the 1840s the interior of the continent was unknown and the mystery of the inland sea unresolved.’ The atlas also has a strangely myopic quality. With the exception of a few regional and world maps, one showing the source of the influenza epidemic, another concerning the 1930s depression and others in the section on the wars, it makes no attempt to place Australian history in any wider context. Australia is the stage, and to stray outside the

limelight spells oblivion. So, apart from a crude representation of how the entities that we now call continents might have fitted together to make Gondwanaland, the palaeogeography section focuses only on the Australian continental zone; if an earlier continental formation extends beyond that zone (as most of them did), it is simply cut off by a thin black line. The tunnel-vision becomes more extreme when significant social phenomena originate outside Australia (there is no space here for detailed exposition, but a mere glance at the exploration maps on p. 47 or the ‘immigration’ grid on pp. 144-5 will make the problem clear).

The atlas’s structure appears to be the fruit of an uneasy compromise between orthodox geographical taxonomy, chronology and thematic social history. Its basic categories do not hold up. It begins with a section on ‘Place’, proceeds to a section on ‘People’, and concludes with a section on ‘Landscapes’. Yet the section on ‘Place’ includes two chapters on urban and rural landscapes, an odd sequence on ‘natural’ disasters (although the definition of these phenomena as such is self-evidently socio-economic) and a couple of pages on Aboriginal art. Even if Paul Carter had never written The Road to Botany Bay (London 1987), it would be trivially obvious from a glance at this table of contents that it is impossible to separate ‘Place’ from ‘People’.

The problems with this atlas are too many to enumerate, so I will concentrate on a small sample. The first chapter is devoted to physical ‘facts’ — palaeogeography, geomorphology, physiography and climate. Most of the illustrations are surface projections of the continent as a whole, and a single map is usually made to suffice for each subject. As a result, much detail is lost (the section on palaeogeography, for example, does not even advert to the existence of volcanic activity) and opportunities for historical analysis are denied. While the commentary on ‘Soils’ notes the extent of soil degradation since white settlement, it is not made clear whether the accompanying map refers to the continent’s orginal or depleted soil distribution. ‘Vegetation’ is allotted only a single page, with a map of the continent’s natural vegetation before white settlement and a tiny figure suggesting the levels of ‘disturbance’ since; there is no indication of how far the forests have shrunk today, let alone a sequence of maps suggesting the timing and extent of the process of ‘disturbance’. Yet, a few pages later, droughts and floods are judged worthy of no fewer than eighteen maps extending over three pages.

The atlas has persistent problems both with its balance and with its level of generality. It seems slightly odd that housing should rate only three pages and no case studies, while bushrangers get eight pages. There does not seem to be much system in the oscillations between Australia-wide coverage and local or state studies. The volume, alas, does not include a comprehensive series of regional maps; state, regional and local material is slotted in rather haphazardly to illustrate particular topics.

But it is the treatment of Aborigines that really tips the balance. The second chapter, entitled ‘Aboriginal landscapes’, starts with the platitudinous sentence, ‘Sites and artefacts can be important sources of archaeological evidence.’ This
gives a fair indication of what is in store — a series of archaeological case studies, individually interesting (some more than others), but definitely not the stuff of an atlas, let alone of the chapter that is supposed to bridge the gap between physiography and European settlement. To locate the information that should have bridged that gap, we have to skip 92 pages to the beginning of the section entitled ‘People’. Here we encounter a sequence of maps under the heading ‘An Immigrant Nation’, with the sub-heading ‘Aboriginal colonisation’. Given that the term ‘colonisation’ has been eschewed in all previous sections (whence conquest luxuriates in the guise of ‘discovery and exploration’ and later ‘pastoral landuse’), its use in this context seems distinctly sinister. It is reminiscent of nothing so much as the rationalisations taught to white South African schoolchildren. I found these features deeply disturbing, especially in a reference work.

There are similar oddities in the Events and Places volume. The chronology begins in 1788. Information on Aboriginal life and on previous European contact with the continent is compressed into a fold-out, inserted between the entries for April and June 1953. In the case of the gazetteer, although most of the regional introductory essays make some mention of the Aborigines, few of the individual entries discuss Aboriginal occupation, before or after white settlement. Questions of gender are largely ignored (for example, local changes in masculinity/femininity ratios are submerged into total population figures), and the class composition of particular localities remains largely implicit (see, for example, the entry on Newcastle). There is also a pronounced rural bias. While tiny country villages receive a lot of attention, the major cities are treated briefly, as relatively undifferentiated entities; as my earlier attempt to find information on Fitzroy suggested, the suburbs barely rate a mention unless they were once villages in their own right. And, as a general point, the entries in both parts of this volume are extremely abbreviated; without a comprehensive index, it is hard to see how such condensed information can be put to work.

The dictionary is considerably more useful, and infinitely more readable. It tackles with assurance matters that are elided by the foregoing volumes. Though it does not include specific entries on particular non-Anglo, non-Aboriginal groups, the initial entries on Aboriginal experience are quite powerful, and the volume addresses class, gender and environmental issues from a number of perspectives. The longer entries are generally thoughtful and interpretative, and the references given for further reading more up-to-date than those in the Guide to Sources. The volume has a strong sense of balance and control; many of the entries have a measured pace that contrasts strongly with the clipped language of Events and Places. This has been achieved by a careful selection of subjects. The introduction acknowledges an obvious debt to the Australian Dictionary of Biography, but this dictionary has been framed to complement the ADB rather than compete with it. Most of the biographical entries are short and to the point, and they are not permitted to dominate the volume. There may be a slight twentieth-century bias in the selection of subjects, but this, too, can be seen as compensatory. Checking over my backlist of nineteenth-century pluto-
crats, I was pleased to see that wealth and opportunism alone did not qualify one for admission (though inevitably there are quibbles — if Richard Goldsborough and Thomas Elder are included, for example, then F.W. Dalgety should probably rate a mention, and H.G. Turner qualifies on more than one count). The overwhelming impression left by this volume is that, given more time and space — in particular, careful cross-referencing, a more extensive index, greater consistency in the provision of bibliographical notes and very careful proofreading — it could form the nucleus of an invaluable reference tool. It is only a pity that its coverage did not extend to ‘places’. The encyclopaedic tradition beckons alluringly.

The Guide to Sources is more of a curate’s egg. It starts impressively. Stuart Macintyre’s essay on ‘The Writing of Australian History’ belies its bald title to speak with power of the ways in which the nexus between past, present and future has been constructed. Its opening trope is a careful discussion of the contrast between Aboriginal oral tradition, which conveyed a knowledge built up over thousands of years with the immediacy of something learned yesterday, and the white settlers’ attempts ‘to impose order by the puny means of an attenuated historical continuity’. Macintyre goes on to discuss, with erudition, insight and wit, the conditions under which Australian historiography has been produced, concluding with the hope that, in spite of the pressures towards a narrow professionalism, the writing of history might sometimes be practised by people who ‘will accept the challenge to trace the connections between the past and the present, and to give shape and meaning to life in this country’.

Unfortunately, there is not a lot of shape or meaning in the chapters that follow. Chapters two to eight attempt to provide nuts-and-bolts guides to the use of particular types of repositories of information — archives, libraries, museums, etc. The rest of the volume comprises a series of specialist chapters on particular subjects, each consisting of a bibliographical essay followed by an annotated alphabetical list of sources. The sources listed in the specialist chapters are almost entirely confined to monographs, and many of them are already beginning to show their age (most chapters were obviously written in 1984). Given that much of the transmission of ideas occurs through journals anyway, the outcome for the assiduous student who goes to the trouble of working through these compendia and locating the references cited can only be disappointing. Several major bibliographical tasks have been side-stepped. The section on English language and literature, for example, does not attempt to offer even a selection of Australian creative writing, but merely lists major works of criticism; and writings, creative or otherwise, in languages other than English do not receive attention.

The chapter structure has some other quirks: the section on the economy concentrates heavily on primary and secondary industries, and even within manufacturing its focus is very much on areas that have traditionally been classified as men’s work. The growth of the tertiary sector and the expansion of women’s employment do not rate a separate mention in these sections dealing with the ‘public’ sphere; though Peter Love valiantly attempts to make good the
deficiency by listing some of the major works in his section on labour relations, discussion of women's work is largely relegated to the chapter on domestic life.

Another thing that is missing is information about the ways that different kinds of texts can be read. Macintyre's essay gives clues to some ways of reading historical works against the grain of the text, but it is not followed up. The sections on archives and manuscripts, for example, do not outline the creative ways in which these sources can be read to extract the information they disclose in spite of themselves, against the conscious intentions of their authors. The chapters offer little detailed criticism of the works they cite. They seem to assume that, given pointers to the 'right' sources, readers will be able to make their own way. All in all, the volume falls between two stools — its narrow range of offerings limits its usefulness to the informed reader or student, while its failure to provide methodological pointers to assist the general reader, coupled with the rather formidable character of its lists, make it unlikely to have general appeal.

The Historical Statistics volume has some of the same problems. The formula is similar to that of the Guide to Sources: each chapter comprises a brief essay, followed by a series of tables; the sources of the data and any methodological comments are relegated to the endnotes. In an attempt to dress the volume up a little, the tables have been printed over a coloured background (usually a rather ghastly combination of grey, green and mauve), and are supplemented by coloured graphs. The visual effect is often fairly messy, and the colours do not make the tables any easier to read. I suspect the whole would have been more accessible if the text had been interspersed with summary tables at least. Again, the question is one of giving the reader some guidance on how to tap the information provided. The present format leaves no scope for authors to present text and tables in an interactive way. They have no opportunity, for example, to highlight particularly interesting tendencies evident in the statistical data, or even provide basic explanations of the terms used.

There are also some irritating Freudian slips. When representing the ethnic origins of brides, for example, the graphic designers have chosen to colour the Australian-born gold, the other Anglophones green and non-Anglophones a grubby brown (pp. 18–19); the volume repeats the Atlas's procedure with regard to the Aborigines, putting their population estimates in the immigration section; and I could find no methodological cautions about the deficiencies of a quantitative regime that equates production with production for the market, so bypassing both the traditional Aboriginal economy and the post-settlement forms of domestic production.

Within these constraints, many of the individual chapters in this volume offer good summaries of their fields. Their levels of aggregation are often well-judged to suggest major trends within a very limited space (the demographic chapters and that on housing, for example, by-pass the mechanistic division by colonial and state boundaries to highlight urban-rural contrasts at key points). Most of the chapters embody very substantial research efforts. Nevertheless, the structure of the volume is slightly odd, and some important subjects appear to
have slipped through the gaps between the chapters. There are also some notably weak contributions.

The first section, ‘People and Land’, has a series of demographic chapters followed by one on climate, but does not take the obvious opportunity to present summary statistics on land ownership and on changes in the physical environment. Instead, we are given separate chapters on agriculture and mining post-1850, which appear out of place in view of the fact that the next section, entitled ‘Wealth and Progress’, begins with a very interesting summary by Butlin et al. of the results of recent research on the economy to 1850, followed by a chapter by Butlin on the Australian national accounts. The statistical aggregates given in the early chapters on agriculture and mining are derived from the colonial Statistical Registers and the 1966 work of Kalix, Fraser and Rawson respectively; though there is no comment on the fact, they differ substantially from the equivalent figures in Butlin’s chapter.

The most disappointing chapter in the second section is that on ‘Labour’. Not only does it reproduce a number of dubious series without adequate commentary (for example, none of the unemployment series it offers can be classified as reliable, as the discrepancies between them make clear), but its coverage is extremely thin and it includes a number of errors. The table giving indices of weekly wages on p. 154 has been misprinted so that the indices appear as money amounts. The table on the following page includes a misleading set of figures for so-called ‘minimum wages’ in the 1890s (there was no legislative minimum, and a brief glance at any wages records for the period would make it clear that the figures given here bear no relation to reality). While some of this chapter’s deficiencies are remedied by the later chapter on manufacturing, many important questions still remain unexamined — for example, shifts in the wages share of the product, patterns of employment by race and ethnicity, occupational and industrial distribution by gender, and regional and state variations in workforce composition.

The final section in this volume, ‘Society, Politics and Religion’, begins with a sequence of strong chapters on crime, health, education and housing. The next three chapters are less useful. The chapter on social welfare, in particular, takes an extremely narrow view of its subject. Rather than looking at the wider social phenomena that generate poverty, it concentrates exclusively on state and private provision of welfare ‘benefits’. There is a heavy emphasis on the institutionalisation of children but no mention of its relationship to racial policy. The chapter on sport and recreation also takes a narrow tack. It does not, for example, assemble any information on film or the performing arts, and the print media seem to have fallen somewhere between the stools of ‘recreation’ and ‘communications’: there is no information on newspapers, magazines, journals or books. And, while the section on politics includes detailed voting tables, it omits to inform us of who actually won the elections in question.

Looking back over the volumes as a whole, it seems a pity that they were not planned in a more comprehensive manner. By the standards of our Cinderella profession, the resources that have gone into this project are massive, and the
opportunity to produce a work on this scale is unlikely to recur for many years — perhaps not until the nation's 250th birthday party. The opportunity was there to produce something of world standard. If the moment has been lost, it is due in considerable measure to the fact that petty distinctions between genres and disciplines were allowed to govern the structure of these reference works. The task urgently called for an integrated approach, interweaving essayistic prose, maps, statistics, pictures and bibliographical information; the compartmentalised approach adopted here can only produce confusion. Readers and students are perhaps entitled to ask whether, after ten years' intensive work, drawing in turn on over a century of historical endeavour, this is the best that the profession can serve up to the world.

Meanjin

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