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AN HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF  
MODERN AUSTRALIA

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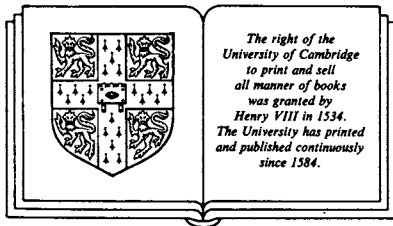
# AN HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF MODERN AUSTRALIA

The restive fringe

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J. M. POWELL

Reader in Geography, Monash University



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## Preface

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With a remarkable blend of enthusiasm, indignation, escalating confusion and laconic reserve, Australians are moving towards an agreeably ambiguous celebration of the bicentenary of white settlement. At the time of writing – that is, two years before the appointed events, and in the midst of deep-seated social change and freewheeling, haphazard educational reform – it takes no great feat of patriotism to dismiss all the trivia and the countless examples of administrative ineptitude. Whatever the final outcomes, our hot and cold preparations have been matched by a rising demand for searching reviews in every quarter, and in academia the bicentennial punctuation will be far less significant in the longer term than the present episode of sober reflections, when anxious professionals have taken the cue to etch out the lines of ‘accountability’ dividing indulgence and service.

For example, all traditional secondary and tertiary subjects have been under intense public scrutiny, yet some of the most creative and rigorous investigations are best described as ‘in-house’ or intra-subject analyses. In the process, it has been shown that Australia’s geography fraternity can point to a distinctive national heritage, including extraordinarily deep roots in vernacular modes of environmental appraisal and frequent engagements of leading researchers in the clarification of prominent regional, national and international issues. That signals a major motivation guiding the present study. In addition, it helps to explain the concentration on changes in the twentieth century, which allows geographers favouring historical approaches to seek a productive dialogue with their immediate colleagues in other systematic fields and with social, economic, regional and environmental historians in the wider scholarly communion.

So many geographers express the highest of humanitarian aspirations in their collective efforts to write the ‘book of the bond’ between nature and society. And, given the renewed self-doubt within academia and the current desire for *rapprochements* with the community at large, the Australian experience may yield a peculiarly interesting chapter in that daunting tome,

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because multi-layered forms of geographical reasoning have been equally well represented in sophisticated and commonsense environmental appraisals effecting prodigious landscape changes. Accordingly, designs in historical geography may essay the kinds of timely practical syntheses which colleagues in various branches of geography, and fellow-travellers in other subject areas, do not usually expect from such 'purist' endeavours. Admittedly, that judgement mainly reflects a personal concern for what I believe is a peculiarly Australian context for historical geography, but it also hints at the orientation of what follows. Similarly, 'modern' is used advisedly in the title of the present volume, for it alludes to purposes as well as contents. And yet it seems unfortunate that one must add that what is offered herein is an overview, not an exhaustive treatise: why is it readily accepted that there can be no single 'history' of any place, but that somehow *the* historical geography might be written? The necessity for such tired old disclaimers has perplexed several generations of historical geographers. Therefore let it be established at once that the present volume is simply offered as a broad interpretative synthesis incorporating some of my own responses to the changing milieux, professional and otherwise, in which Australian geographers now operate.

An axiom of white Australian history declares that it is not profitable to attempt to separate the winning of geographical knowledge from the much wider setting of speculative thought, enterprise and dominating personalities. Non-Australian readers will be familiar with this contention but not, perhaps, with its more recent elaborations. Banks, Hooker, Darwin, Huxley, Cook himself: the star of science illuminated early European interpretations. From the great South Pacific voyages to the heroic era of land exploration and the singularly impressive botanical expeditions, cumulative appraisals of the expansive new territories drew heavily on contemporary scientific lore and repaid the debt with innumerable novel observations. But some interpretations also incorporated utilitarian, strategic and aesthetic considerations, whether veiled or brazenly declared, as well as the unsung results of strictly local preoccupations which escaped the purview of conventional science. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, contemporary geographical knowledge of Australia was essentially a rich amalgam of fact, fiction and rampant guesswork. For the remainder of the nineteenth century too it has been shown that, in its conceptual and practical expressions, Australian geography transcended mere 'book learning'. For example, 'empirical testing' of the novel environments began in the earliest days of the convict establishment and became a central characteristic of the learning process, dominating the complex reciprocity of nature–society relationships. Certainly, British and Australian officials experimented with some rudimentary theories of regional planning in an attempt to manage the emerging geography of settlement expansion, but in the

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interim the big ranchers (or ‘squatters’) swept across the southeastern crescent, and their opportunistic mode of settlement brought the first great regional evaluations. Later, caught up in the urgent migrations associated with every type of farming frontier, big and small managers alike became intimately involved in creative and destructive geographical activity: in other words, as part of the very *raison d’être* of pioneering, they were daily engaged in the business of interpreting environments, transforming landscapes.

So geographical thought and practice became incorporated into the material and spiritual styles and strategies of survival in the white communities – as it was, in a much more pervasive sense of course, in Aboriginal society. Again, the contributions of a few powerful bureaucrats in key resource management roles – Surveyors-General Thomas Mitchell and George Goyder, for example, and Government Botanist Baron von Mueller – are properly described as instances of ‘landscape authorship’. They influenced regional settlement and land-use patterns, and were involved in the selection of land uses, hundreds of township sites and forest reserves, the planning of regional transportation networks and the internal morphologies of towns, enduring demarcations of vast marginal territories, stabilisations of settlement advances via biological control methods, and the introduction of exotic plants and animals. Clearly, these talented individuals and their senior colleagues must be seen as archetypal public servants *and* practical geographers. Their bold signatures across the land proclaim an intrusive human agency in the modification of enormous tracts which, taken together, easily exceed the entire land area of Western Europe. And the tradition continued during the formative years of advanced geographical education in Australia, when pioneering researchers chose to define the subject by its application, developing enterprising critiques of the great public issues of their day.<sup>1</sup>

An increasing appreciation of this distinctive heritage is beginning to improve our perception of geography’s mission in a young nation of immigrants. In the schools, colleges and universities, there is a growing awareness that our professional activities may make us active participants in geographical change, not merely its observers or interpreters. Quite as much might be said of the geographers’ vocation in other lands, but in Australia we discern the special immediacy of a vitally tangible contact with our predecessors in and beyond academia. Unequivocally, we declare that the ‘Australian Experience’ now being sifted through at every level is incomprehensible without meticulous examination of the relentless engagement of an immigrant population in the kinds of landscape transformations and environmental transactions which still form the core of our teaching and research. Yet so many of Australia’s geographical researchers are themselves immigrants, profoundly conscious of their psychological and

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occupational investments in that wider context of vernacular and professional thought and action: we reach out, make contact, transform ourselves, put down roots, seek authentic citizenship. Therefore an historical geography of Australia in the modern era may also aspire to a modernity in approach via an unreservedly *reflexive* tone.<sup>2</sup>

All such strands are readily drawn from the sustained series of exemplars produced by a small band of specialist historical geographers over the past twenty years. Familiar characteristics of these works include the following – individualistic ‘essayist’ styles which are probably linked more frequently with the preferences of historians and humanities scholars than with geography’s established social sciences/natural sciences perspectives; concentrations on the social and political framework of rural settlement and related themes in environmental perception; questions of regional evaluation and the contextual play of regionalism itself; the origin and diffusion of technical innovations and environmental concepts; the influence of individuals, groups and public agencies in the emergence of distinctive landscapes.<sup>3</sup> The earlier historical-geographical efforts served to introduce geographical interests to a more numerous band of social, economic, regional and urban historians. That wider informal fellowship has been maintained, and it is possible that, to a greater extent than its closest companion fields in Britain and North America, Australian historical geography admits the centrality of certain ‘non-geographical’ writings and implicitly rejects all narcissistic forms of ‘disciplinary’ boundary riding. The last remark probably exaggerates: these may be matters of opinion which can remain with the *cognoscenti*.

More importantly, it should be explained that most of the time of most of Australia’s scholars is devoted to addressing non-specialist undergraduates on highly diverse liberal arts/liberal science campuses. Immigrant professionals importing narrow, highly refined interests have been severely tested by the far greater mixture of interests and abilities in the lecture theatres of their adopted country. Simply put (as it is all too often), they have had to deal with ‘American’ class sizes and ranges of achievement-orientation, despite the community’s presumptions about an inheritance of British ‘standards’, while the minuscule amount of graduate teaching in Australia has never offered the large compensations provided in the much-maligned American system. Furthermore, in general, Australia’s library networks have been disgracefully underfunded for many years, and they cannot support advanced teaching and research in a number of fields. Again, since the intense academic recruitment of the 1960s and 1970s necessarily depended on immigration, the utility, resilience and adaptability of every imported skill and preference were placed on trial. University geography was pointedly underdeveloped until the boom, and it remains the province of a largely immigrant group. The historical geographers

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mainly came from Britain, North America and New Zealand with strong training derived from the classical schools and practical experience in intricate, long-established scholarly systems. Australian history, another late starter, was rapidly gaining respectability in the 1960s. At that time there was still a great scarcity of reliable secondary sources, but massive quantities of unsorted, mutilated and forgotten records were being uncovered by a new generation of persistent researchers who felt no desire to escape to the great imperial centres.

In this exhilarating pioneering phase, the 'new chum' historical geographer was simultaneously field archivist, biographer, local historian, writer, map collector, and initiator of foundation teaching programmes. That has never been well understood internationally, or even within Australia. It needs to be said here because it helps to explain a certain distinctiveness of style and purpose (and in my case at least a trace of nationalism, to which I freely admit), but the sketch is not yet complete. Striving like so many of their immigrant colleagues to come to terms with new circumstances, Australia's historical geographers sometimes stood apart from those controversies which belonged to other places and which they had begun to consider uninteresting or less than urgent. Contemporary debates over the application of quantification and the 'artificiality' of approaches to the 'geography of the records' (that is, rather than 'geography of the times') provide relevant examples: to those who were contributing in a modest way to the exponential growth of a national historiographical enterprise it seemed natural, obvious, to start with 'context'; although methods and materials were not the least of their worries, there was no apparent reason for making them goals in their own right.

After the busy establishment phase, for various reasons the main corpus of empirical work was augmented by a little theory and philosophical rumination, and some lively discourse was commenced with 'mainstream' geographers in the 'human' and 'physical' camps. In the process, Australia's historical geographers moved in from the subject's periphery. An ingrained respect for continuities encouraged some of them to extend their teaching and research interests into interpretations of twentieth-century changes, not only to explore the palpable antecedents of current geographical arrangements but also to examine matters of significant public interest in development or resource management strategies, environmental hazards, conservation themes and the like, which demanded competent historical analysis. None of that argues for a new-found 'centrality', and it would be misleading to suggest that a unique kind of historical geography has been emerging in Australia, and that it is indivisible from the evolution of a new social and professional milieu. Even so, the present study has been tentatively prepared to take proper account of these kinds of sensitivities.

Traditionally, a major concern of 'New World' historical geography has



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been to portray expansions and contractions at the edge of settlement, and its practitioners have attempted to elucidate the associated changes in land use and the environmental impacts. Those predilections are less easily sustained in our interpretations of twentieth-century experiences where so much of the story involves re-orientations within existing settlement zones; yet some of the *idées fixes* of frontiering were still highly influential in Australia during the inter-war period, and indeed they repeatedly re-surfaced in the 1960s and 1970s. With the very important exceptions touched upon in various parts of this volume, it has largely been in the area of public debate and fretful controversy, and only occasionally in examples of hard landscape transformations, that modern examples of 'pioneer settlement' have continued to attract considerable scholarly attention. The settlement frontiers patently offer some of the most significant geographical and historical themes for students of pre-federation Australia, but that cannot be said of the twentieth century, especially the period after World War 2. The focus has shifted, rather, to the forceful economic, social and political influences which have been shaping the geography of an increasingly urbanised and industrialised new nation. Urbanisation *per se* was well established by the end of the nineteenth century and so it is not intended to explore the process in any detail. I believe that Australian cities – not only the capitals – deserve a separate historical-geographical treatment. The much broader canvas preferred in this book tries, rather, to communicate some of the distinctive qualities of the nation-space as a whole. Yet the changing perceptions and aspirations of a urban culture have contributed critically to those qualities, and they provide major ingredients of the text.

*An Historical Geography of Modern Australia* is partly intended to service an immigrant profession's continuing adaptation by probing the muddled pursuit of development and sense of place in a grammar that geographers often feel they have made their own and which is, in reality, deeply embedded in the conventional wisdom, fears and ambitions of our wider Australian society. And for the most part the story is directed to students in several branches of geography and in cognate subject areas, and not primarily to those specialist historical geographers who might be expecting stronger fare. The specificities of context once more provide mitigation – or, as I believe, justification. In a young nation geography is not too badly placed to offer a positive response, with intellectual and practical service, to that whining old complaint which has recently reappeared in modern disguise: 'In all probability the advancement of science in a new country is better obtained by constructing good roads and excellent railways than by setting up telescopes and gazing at the stars'.<sup>4</sup>

It will soon become clear that the regionalisation signalled in the sub-title of this book operates at both the intra-national and international scales. The general scheme is also highly significant at intensely personal levels. Like

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my fellow-immigrants, I have had to learn to live with ambiguities and endless journeys. The native-born have dubbed us ‘migrants’, as though we were still on the move, and perhaps we are: accordingly, no definite resolution was required or expected in the preparation of a manuscript which is itself another personal trek. Seeking the centre, I must also find a way to admit readers to the process of accommodation, adaptation.<sup>5</sup> In my view the natives and immigrants are not easily or satisfactorily separated, and ‘restive’ applies to both. As the following three-part story relates, in the second century of white occupation Australians continued to experience many difficulties in ‘coming to terms’ – with one another, with changing relationships in the wider world, and with a challenging matrix of constraints and rewards characterising the physical setting of a distinctive national territory.

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This book was probably conceived in the autumn of 1978 during an interesting sojourn at the University of Cambridge. But it was written entirely in the period February–October 1986, sandwiched between my normal teaching engagements in Australia. My Monash students and colleagues – sometimes unwittingly, but always generously – helped in the process. I am especially grateful to Stuart Duncan, Stephen Legg, Chris Maher, John McKay, David Mercer and Martin Williams for advice and encouragement. The librarians at the National Library of Australia, the State Library of Victoria and Monash, Melbourne and Australian National Universities have been courteous and efficient. Some parts of the book have appeared in article form elsewhere, and the editors of *Australian Geographical Studies*, *Australian Geographer*, the *Journal of Australian Studies* and the *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* have kindly granted permission for revisions of my earlier material to appear herein. Several researchers have allowed me to employ modified versions of their maps or diagrams; their kindness is noted in the appropriate captions. Of course in any synthesis the debt to other workers is incalculable, as the reference notes and select bibliography testify; I suspect the strong preference for certain themes will not meet with universal approval, but that does not diminish my gratitude to the long list of authors consulted. I also thank Alan Baker, Robin Butlin, Les Heathcote and Donald Meinig for their interest and support down the years.

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*Monash, November 1986*

J. M. POWELL