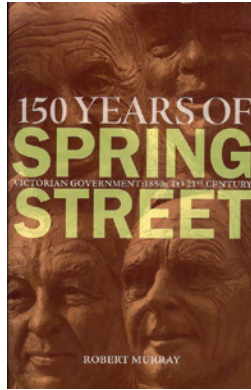


A fine work of 'mere' craftsmanship

Richard Allsop reviews

150 Years of Spring Street Victorian Government: 1850s to 21st Century

by Robert Murray
(Australian Scholarly
Publishing, 2007, 244 pages)



to provide bricks, mortar and salaries and teaching was for the experts.

Murray presents both sides of almost every political issue that he covers and he carries his quest for fairness into a generally charitable attitude towards politicians. He argues, for instance, that while politicians can be criticised for their behaviour in the 1880s' land boom 'it is hardly fair to single out one group' when people at all levels of society were caught up in the speculation. He also laments the fact that 'those who have had to make the tough decisions in Victorian politics have usually been disparaged'.

He works good short descriptions of many of the significant Premiers into the narrative and the reader's appreciation of these characters is enhanced by the book's liberal use of cartoons, extending from *Melbourne Punch* in 1856 to Mark Knight in the *Herald Sun* in 2002.

The only real criticism that one can have about this book is the Foreword by academic historian John Lack. Most of what Lack writes is a neat summary of the book, but in his final two paragraphs he manages to combine factual error, left-wing ideological prejudice and a patronising attitude to non-academic historians.

Lack says that 'like Geoffrey Blainey, he [Murray] is a craftsman whose writing gets you in'. Maybe if a few more academic historians had a greater interest in, and understanding of, political history, we would not have to give so much thanks that there are mere 'craftsmen' such as Murray around to fill the void so adequately.

The current debate about the appropriate role of the States highlights the need for good writing about their political histories. This has not been a particularly well-hoed field, especially in Victoria.

It is thus fortunate that the 150th anniversary of responsible government has triggered two new works. Last year, two political scientists, Paul Strangio and Brian Costar, edited a book of essays, *The Victorian Premiers: 1856-2006*, and now Robert Murray has produced an excellent short history of the evolving politics of the colony and the State.

Murray brings a confident hand to the task. He was the Victorian political writer for the *Australian Financial Review* from 1964 to 1975 and has also written extensively on political history, probably being best known for his history of 'The Split'.

Given his knowledge of the role of sectarianism in politics, it is not surprising that he is particularly adroit at analysing issues to which there was a religious dimension, such as the debates around State aid in the 1860s and 1870s and again in the 1960s. He also spots the fault lines on issues such as temperance and Sunday observance which

became important features of the Protestant hegemony for much of the twentieth century.

Murray challenges the common view that the period from Federation to 1952 was, in the words of *The Victorian Premiers*, a period of 'arrested development'. Murray argues that 'Victoria was regarded as both a national and world leader in the semi government agency operating at a remove from the government of the day'. Some consideration of contemporary criticism of such bodies, such as F.W. Eggleston's critique, may have rounded out his discussion on this topic.

Murray is very perceptive at pointing out some of the political contradictions that seem to escape other writers. An obvious nineteenth-century example is the fact that 'the liberal side was the pro-tariff side in Victoria, whereas liberals supported free trade in both Britain and New South Wales'. He also observes how, under the later Bolte Government, Victorian students became early victims of the trendy educational agenda.

It was a paradox that this momentous change slipped in under an otherwise conservative government, taking the old view that the government's job was

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