

Stuart Macintyre & Sean Scalmer (eds), *What if? Australian history as it might have been,*

Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2006.

ISBN 0522851746

As a field of serious historical enquiry, counterfactual history or ‘allohistory’ has undergone a significant rate of growth in recent years. Since the appearance of Robert Crowley’s edited collection *What If?* almost a decade ago, numerous titles – ranging from the laudable to the atrociously bad – have appeared on our shelves, seeking to chronicle the ‘paths not taken’ at key points in the military, political, cultural and legal history of the world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast bulk of existing counterfactual history is concerned with incidents of the American and European pasts, and military history in turn makes up the majority of these studies. Stuart Macintyre and Sean Scalmer’s collection may therefore be regarded as the inevitable antipodean response to having been ‘left out’ of the mainstream, Atlantic version of ‘world’ history, and an attempt to give Australian audiences a chance to ponder the *What ifs* of their own rich historical heritage. The result is a volume which is somewhat mixed in its success both as an exemplar of an established genre and an innovative response to the challenges posed by counterfactual history.

Divided into two sections, the first section covers the *What ifs* of Australian ‘Statecraft’ and the political and military realm. Jim Davidson’s essay on the possibilities of a Tasmania colonised by the French launches the entire collection extremely well, conforming as it does to the expected subject-matter of counterfactuals and yet presenting it in a refreshing fashion. Marilyn Lake’s essay concerning the possibility of an Australian Declaration of Independence (courtesy of the enigmatic Alfred Deakin) is also well fashioned, and in itself provides a model both of the *What if?* genre itself, but also of the more common (and less publicised) fact that historians are always asking ‘What if?’ whenever they seek to question old shibboleths and break new ground (in this case the great importance of America and American models from an early

stage of Australian history, neglected by those who seek to explore the more pervasive 'Britishness' of Australian politics and society).

The 'Statecraft' section also contains all the 'obvious' counterfactuals of Australian history: Gallipoli, the Dismissal and a failed Federation; making Frank Bongiorno's selection of the obscure scenario of the non-payment of New South Wales MPs until after 1901 seem out of place. In exploring this rather esoteric area, Bongiorno strays too far from what is essential in all good counterfactual history: broad-based popular appeal. In order to be successful, counterfactuals must retain a semblance of this 'popular' nature, and appeal both to those outside the academy who do not possess specialist knowledge, and also to a wider constituency than 'true believer' Labor, in order to prompt non-historians to think about historical issues. At the risk of sounding smug, it is worth wondering 'what if' the capable and incisive Bongiorno had tackled a more broadly interesting aspect of Labor history, such as the DLP split never taking place, or a Calwell victory in 1960.

The second half of the collection (dealing with 'Society and Culture') is perhaps where *What if?* is at its most successful, breaking new ground in its genre. As I mentioned earlier, the majority of counterfactual history to come out of the northern hemisphere has dealt somewhat predictably with the alternative outcomes of decisions by the great and powerful (Lee winning at Gettysburg; Pilate sparing Jesus' life; Hitler occupying London). While catering very well to their audience of war-obsessed, predominantly white males, such scenarios are over-done and are only palatable in small doses. The contributions by the likes of Ann Curthoys, Peter Read and Sean Scalmer eschew this form of latter-day 'great man' history and instead focus on the impact of alternate events on ordinary people. Read's exploration of the impacts of a less assimilationist policy on a number of Wiradjuri people is perhaps the finest essay of the whole collection, not least for the highly engaging parallel narrative structure he adopts to deal with actual events and their alternatives (literally parallel – actual events are chronicled on the even-numbered pages, facing the narrative of *What if?* on the odd-numbered pages).

This said, not all of the essays in this section are as engaging as Read's, as in seeking to breaking new ground, they follow Bongiorno in drifting too far from the necessary 'popular' precondition for successful counterfactuals. Virginia Spate's exploration of an alternative Australian art movement and Tom Griffiths and Tim Sherratt's examination of a proposed Queensland irrigation scheme are fascinating in their own way, but deal with subjects too obscure to hold the interest of a broad spectrum of readers. I do not believe that this could have been remedied by the simple replacement of an essay on high culture with one concerning something so mundane as the *What ifs* of 'Bodyline' or Phar Lap, but rather a greater consideration needed to be given to what holds Australians' interest most when it comes to their history.

It would be fair to say that the deficiencies I mention here are not so much the fault of the individual authors (all of them engaging writers and rightfully distinguished practitioners of their craft), but rather the manner in which the collection was constructed editorially. Sean Scalmer mentions in his introduction the 'free hand' which contributors were given in the selection of scenarios for counterfactual treatment, and the lack of a rigid 'house style' for the contributions. This liberal (note the small 'l') editorial policy certainly resulted in a collection of remarkable variety, but also one in which only a selection of the essays possess broad-based appeal. Such is the richness of Australian history, the home-grown *What ifs* always had the potential to emulate the Robert Crowley volume and spawn a number of sequels, and a much more tightly-constructed first volume would have served better to establish the Australian counterfactual as a worthy companion to its Atlantic brethren, before embarking on a more experimental course in successive volumes. A focus on the more widely-known aspects of Australian history might also have eliminated the need for the 'coda' which appears at the end of each essay (except Read's) and is intended to explain what *actually* happened, although given the current controversy over the lack of historical consciousness in the Australian population, perhaps these were necessary after all. Despite its weaknesses, *What if?* is largely a successful book, and to the informed reader, an entertaining excursion into alternate reality.

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