

**Martin Crotty and David Andrew Roberts (eds), *The Great Mistakes of Australian History*,
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If John Howard's preference is to advance a national history that narrates glory, heroism and achievement, then in *The Great Mistakes of Australian History*, Crotty and Roberts attempt to offset this parochial celebration by concisely describing and explaining some of the most important and consequential errors made in Australia since colonisation. It is in the context of the ongoing history wars that Crotty and Roberts have collated the great mistakes of Australian history. Their goal is not to promote a sense of national guilt and shame, but rather to demonstrate to readers the complexity of history in which the historical actors are both noble and ignoble, and the outcomes can be positive and negative (p. 5). Despite the collection of major blunders, the editors remain quite upbeat about the 'commendable Australian achievement' and argue that the purpose of the volume is not to disparage historical actors but to try and to understand the consequences of their errors (p. 6 and p. 12). The editors explain that the aim of the volume is to present informative and concise narratives of the great mistakes in Australian history and to explain the situations, contexts and ways of thinking that led the protagonists to make their ill-fated decisions. In addition, the contributors also outline the legacies of these errors and lessons for contemporary Australia. This volume makes an important and innovative contribution to popular history in Australia.

It is evident that this volume has been written for a general readership: each chapter is informative and concise with strong, personal narratives and clear explanations. In his chapter on the deportation of non-Europeans after the Second World War, Klaus Neumann adopts a bottom-up approach by providing personal stories of four couples separated as a result of the Labor Government's repatriation policy. Generally, the contributors have described the contexts and

situations faced by the central characters and explained the reasoning behind their poor decisions. In the chapter on the introduction of red foxes and cane toads, Manda Page and Greg Baxter explain that foxes were introduced for their familiarity, while cane toads were introduced to protect sugar canes from root-eating beetles. Page and Baxter argue that the newly settled Australians introduced foxes and cane toads because they erroneously imposed their Eurocentric views and ignored Indigenous knowledge of the land, resulting in considerable, and irreversible, economic and ecological damage (p. 80). Adding to the popular appeal of this book, contributors implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, ponder the what-might-have-beens? Marion Diamond wonders: if one of the three settlements established along the northern shoreline in the mid-nineteenth century had succeeded, would the distribution of the Australian population, and even our attitudes toward Asia, be very different (p. 160)? Similarly, Clive Moore considers the consequences of including some Pacific Islands, such as the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Guinea, within the Australian nation at Federation. He argues that with a larger Indigenous population, there would have been no White Australia Policy and the nation could have developed friendlier relationships with its Asian neighbours (p. 174).

In a sense, this volume is just as much about the present and the future of Australia as it is about its past. The editors have framed these great mistakes as lessons for contemporary Australia. Page and Baxter warn the reader that we continue to risk doing serious harm to our ecosystems until we learn to value and to understand this continent (p. 92). In his essay on the failure of the Singapore strategy during the Second World War, David Day argues that more than 60 years later, the lesson of this mistake is yet to be learnt by government ministers who are quick to deploy Australian troops and resources to far-away conflicts in return for promises of protection by 'great and powerful friends' (p. 138). David Andrew Roberts argues in his essay that the failure of the British colonisers to address the status and rights of the Indigenous population has had the lasting consequence of perceiving 'Aboriginal interests as marginal and illegitimate' and

fears that the problems and divisions have become so intractable that resolution will be very difficult (p. 31).

While the effort to link past mistakes with contemporary problems may appeal to some readers, I think that the comparisons across time detract from the overall quality of the volume. This emphasis on the contemporary relevance of past mistakes means that some contributors have fallen into the trap of present-mindedness. Klaus Neumann draws comparisons between post-war Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell with Philip Ruddock, the Immigration Minister between 1996 and 2003. But the link between Calwell and Ruddock is ahistorical: it ignores, or at least minimises, the historical particularities and specific factors that have influenced the formation of the asylum seeker policy of the Howard Government. In other words, Neumann has taken the asylum seeker policy of the Howard Government out of its historical context. The comparison is simplistic and unnecessary. Of course, comparisons across time can yield insightful conclusions, if handled carefully. The comparisons from the past to the present in this volume, however, appear to be an afterthought and lack sufficient research and analysis. The problem with linking past mistakes to contemporary problems is that it implicitly suggests that Australian history is a series of repeated misjudgements and reoccurring miscalculations. History is never that neat. The contributors should have focused their essays on the event in question.

The editors state that the aim of this volume is to narrate the situations, contexts, and ways of thinking that encouraged the historical actors to make their unfortunate decisions, and also to consider the legacies of these errors of judgement. On this basis, the editors have reached their goals, presenting an informative and concise narration of the great mistakes in an engaging fashion. As a collection of essays for the general reader, this volume is an important addition to an area of popular history that is at risk of becoming dominated by stories of national achievement.

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