

*The Vision Splendid. A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia.* Richard Waterhouse. Curtin University Books: Fremantle, 2005. Pp.320. \$35 paper.

Richard Waterhouse is the son of a country schoolteacher in New South Wales whose career produced a number of moves for his family. I share such an upbringing, and like Waterhouse, I think, my fondness for what he calls 'the Bush' lives on despite my own largely urban adult life. That gives me some feeling for the book's enterprise, as does having written two books myself on the same field.

*The Vision Splendid* is a largely successful, Australia-wide social history of the European settlement of rural Australia. If in what follows I spend more time on what might appear to be the limitations of the book, let me emphasise that Waterhouse has done an excellent job of bringing together what happened in the several colonies, and that is a major achievement in itself. His work on theatre and entertainment in the rural areas is new and fascinating, and the illustrations are well chosen, illuminating and numerous. If you want to find out about rural work, leisure, or what he calls 'representations (how the Bush was pictured by others, for example), then this is a first-rate reference. A great deal of good work has gone into it.

And yet, I wanted more. Waterhouse has eschewed the political, on the ground that there is already 'a plethora of studies' in that domain. He lists three, one of them mine; all were written 40 years ago. I can't myself think of any major studies since. Avoiding the political means that he can't say much about notions of identity, of 'countrymindedness' — about how country people feel about themselves and others, rather than how others picture them. And that is a pity, because those feelings, common across rural Australia for the past century and more, are bound up in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia.

One needs to bear in mind the ambition that country towns had about their futures, in the 1880s, at the height of the 19<sup>th</sup> century wool boom. A block of land in Glen Innes's main street then sold for £1 a square foot. A hotel proprietor in Braidwood, population 1000 or so, built a large ballroom on the first floor of his hotel. Australia was going somewhere, and the towns thought they were at the heart of the movement. One of the book's photographs is of 'Iandra' homestead, on a major wheat and sheep property near Young in NSW. It is not the Iandra that I know, better known as 'Iandra Castle', whose towers can be seen for miles away. I think it is the biggest house I have seen in New South Wales, and it too is a sign of that ambition. The self-awareness of country Australians seems to me a most important part of their story. 'Country versus City' football matches were once common, as was 'Country Week' in tennis; their importance has gone with the arrival of national television, better roads and regional air services.

As a history undergraduate fifty years ago I was told authoritatively that 'history is about chaps, geography is about maps'. Numbers, I was also told, were for the economists. Well, I missed some maps in this book, as I did some numbers: how large settlements were, the size of population movements, when things happened, and so on. I accept that Waterhouse has a feeling for flow and

evolution, in which there are no sharp boundaries. But I think there is something to be said, when one comes to find meanings in the flow, for markers like the end of the gold rushes, the strikes of the 1890s, and the Depression of the 1930s. The emphasis of the book, if I can turn to numbers again, is very much on the 19<sup>th</sup> century: 176 pages cover the 1788 to 1914 period, while 82 have to serve for the last ninety years. I think that is a pity, for it makes the pace of the last half-century rather breathless.

The final notes should not be critical. This is an important study of a part of the Australian story that is easy to overlook, if you're one of the 90 per cent and more who live in urban areas. The closest that many people get to the Bush is buying Country Road clothes or Rivers shoes, yet the Australia we have was built on what went on outside the towns. There is pathos as well as pride in the story of rural Australia, and Waterhouse has captured it well.

DON AITKIN  
CANBERRA