Speech

Address By

Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

On the occasion of

Launch of ‘The Cambridge History of Australia’

Queen’s Hall, State Library, Melbourne
2 October 2013

Dr Joy Murphy
Wurundjeri Elder

Mr Richard Fisher
Managing Director Academic Publishing, Cambridge University Press

Ms Kim Armitage
Academic Publishing Manager, Cambridge University Press

Professor Stuart Macintyre, and
Professor Alison Bashford
Editors of the Cambridge University History of Australia

Contributors to this comprehensive publication

I am delighted to join you here at the State Library of Victoria for the launch of ‘The Cambridge History of Australia’.

This much loved institution was one of the first free public libraries in the world, and has been a valuable resource of knowledge for over 150 years[1].

Its impressive architecture, the dramatic Reading Room and this splendid Queen’s Hall, making a bold statement about the importance of learning.

As we gather, I acknowledge the traditional owners of this place.

The Indigenous history and culture of our nation is indispensable in understanding who we are today as together we benefit from the wisdom which has been handed down from generation to generation.

‘The Cambridge History of Australia’ will take its place alongside an impressive list of other ‘Cambridge Histories’ - from Africa to Latin America.

The publisher, Cambridge University Press, itself has an august history – tracing its origins back to the issue of Letters Patent by King Henry VIII in 1534 to print ‘all manner of books’. [2]

To think that the Cambridge University Press was already established when explorers were searching ‘for the fabled Terra Australis’ following Ferdinand Magellan’s discovery ‘that the Pacific Ocean … was connected to the Atlantic Ocean’. [3]

My friends, whenever I am preparing to visit or to host a community group or organisation, I like to have a good understanding...
Launch of ‘The Cambridge History of Australia’
Published on Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia (https://www.gg.gov.au)

of its history.

When was it set up? Why?

Who were the prime movers?

The desire to understand who we are and where we have come from is one I see again and again in many manuscripts and self-published books that I receive from people across our country.

It imbues the work of local historical societies and sparks the deep interest which many people now have in researching their family backgrounds.

In this ‘History of Australia’ we are reminded that ‘every nation is brought into being through the writing of history.’ [4]

Manning Clark wrote in the Epilogue of his six volume “A History of Australia”, that it is the task of the historian and the myth-maker to tell the story of how the world came to be as it is.
It is the task of the prophet to tell the story of what might be.
The historian presents the choice: history is a book of wisdom for those making that choice. [5]

The Cambridge History of Australia provides so much more than a chronology of events.

Our interest is piqued with the themed studies in each volume, topics as diverse as science, religion, gender, the environment, and media.

Our land itself - its structure and how it has been used across centuries of habitation - features as a principal character.

Here are two volumes filled with wisdom that will inform those who make the choices for the future.

The editors have skilfully brought together complementary but contrasting voices by age, gender and location.

Each chapter is superbly researched and written with authority and clear purpose.

It is evident how the wealth of knowledge they contain about the past is relevant for us today.

There are accounts of:

the colonial era being a time in which ‘resources could be exploited cheaply and were abundant in relation to the supply of labour’; [6]

colonial officials by 1788 understanding ‘the requirement for environmental management’ [7] having experienced the start of the El Nino that year (something that Indigenous peoples had come to terms with far earlier by the reading of ‘ecological indicators … rather than a fixed calendar’); [8]

the slow growth of the free settler population in the first four decades of settlement followed by the planned import of migrants with skills that were in demand;[9]

the economic ‘booms’ of the gold rushes, wool and mining industries which stimulated new communities;

the involvement of Australian Forces in international conflicts: South Africa at the start of the 20th Century; [10] the Two World Wars; Korea; Vietnam; the Gulf War; Iraq and Afghanistan.
Our growing role in international peacekeeping: Cambodia; Somalia and Timor Leste;[11]

the uniqueness of our land which provided colonial scientists with what was beautifully described as ‘a new heaven for Astronomy and a new earth for Geology’;[12]

the first-wave of feminism and the excitement of ‘the “woman movement” in the colonies’;[13]

our early relationship with Asia and the Pacific;
an artistic heritage that began with thousands of years of Indigenous art, followed by convict artists and later, distinctive Australian styles such as the Heidelberg School.

We are also reminded that there is no history of Australia which is ‘non-Indigenous.’

From the moment of first contact, settler became part of Indigenous history and Indigenous history became part of settler history.’ [14]

Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre, in their work as editors, have brought together a diversity of intelligent voices and presented them in a consistent and engaging manner which invites us to pursue further reading.

There is something for all of us: teachers, researchers and students – at home or overseas, turning the pages or online and curious laymen who wish to engage in and celebrate our shared story.

I must say I am delighted to have this publication, and I know that I shall refer to these volumes frequently.

It presents a ‘national history shaped by a new generation’. [15]

As I look through the pages, I see the names of many organisations that have contributed to our vibrant community life, some that I am honoured to be Patron of:

the Country Women’s Association, founded in New South Wales in 1922;

the Scouts and Girl Guides;

the Benevolent Society celebrating its 200th anniversary this year – Australia’s oldest charity.

I am also delighted to read about personal heroes of mine:

Caroline Chisholm setting out to make a difference in the lives of young emigrant women;

Christina Stead, innovative novelist of the first half of the 1900s;

Jessie Street, the founding member of The United Associations of Women;

Douglas Mawson and his Antarctic expedition, a man I grew up admiring and was pleased to honour in my visit to Antarctica this year;

Eddie Mabo, his striving for native title rights has had far reaching effects on our laws; and the Reverend John Flynn, founder of the Royal Flying Doctor Service.

The Chronology in each volume comes alive for me as I think of how we mark some of the events mentioned:

ANZAC Day, hallowed every year; significant military anniversaries;

the centenary of Canberra in 1913;

myriad local commemorations of frontiers, challenges and successes that have shaped our development as a nation.

There are also those events that have been hidden until more recently.

I will never forget my visit to Darwin last year to mark the 70th anniversary of the bombing of our northern city, an event which at long last has a rightful place in our memory.

My friends, the contributors to this work of wisdom have brought together the local and the national in a transnational telling of our history, both chronologically and thematically.

I congratulate the publishers - Cambridge University Press, the editors, researchers and contributors.
I also acknowledge those earlier historians, including the late, great Manning Clark, who have inspired the people involved in this work. One of my most treasured possessions is his six volume collection – each one inscribed with words of inspiration and encouragement, my favourite in faith and hope.

History is an important and indispensable subject in any nation’s curriculum.

It is with great pleasure that I launch “The Cambridge History of Australia” which we can claim as ‘our history’.


[12] The Cambridge History of Australia, Vol 1 pg 440 quoting the Rev W B Clarke’s inaugural address to the Royal Society of NSW in 1876


