



# Blainey outlasts the History Wars

As Australia's premier historian turns eighty, **Richard Allsop** assesses the legacy of Geoffrey Blainey.

**I**n his desire to restore the balance between white man and black man and to make up for our scandalous neglect of the Aboriginal heritage, he has at times swung too far the other way.'

That is the *Sydney Morning Herald* criticising Geoffrey Blainey for being too sympathetic to Australia's indigenous population.

Yes—criticising Blainey for being too sympathetic. These words were published in 1975 and were contained in a review of Blainey's landmark work *Triumph of the Nomads*.

In the early 1970s, Blainey had been the first academic historian in the country to include Aboriginal history in a general Australian history subject. Blainey had come to the then unusual view that the ninety-nine per cent of Australia's history prior to European settlement was worth studying. *Triumph of the Nomads* brought this radical premise to a much wider audience. An integral part of Blainey's argument was rejecting the existing assumption that Aboriginal society had been static. Blainey also believed that previous writers had underestimated Aboriginal economic success. Turning conventional thinking on its head, Blainey suggested that 'by the standards of the year 1800 ... the aboriginals' material life could be compared favourably with many parts of Europe'.

For some, such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* reviewer, he had gone 'too far' in redressing the historical imbalance, but most welcomed the fact that 'radical thinking, long overdue, characterises almost every chapter'.

As well as many positive aspects of pre-1788 Aboriginal life, Blainey also drew attention to some of the less pleasant characteristics of their society such as infanticide and the extent of their inter-tribal wars. These aspects of his work were seized on by certain critics; however, a lot of this seizing did not occur until after 17 March, 1984. This was the day when, at the height of his prestige and influence, Blainey's life changed irreversibly. He concluded a

talk to a Rotary conference in Warrnambool with some comments about Asian immigration that sparked a furore.

Blainey had been involved in controversies before, but debates about whether flax and pine were factors in the British decision to colonise Australia, or whether the Literature Board head office should be based in Sydney or Melbourne, were hardly adequate preparation for this conflagration.

One does not have to have shared Blainey's position on Asian immigration to lament the vitriol that was poured on him. Not content with just debating the actual issue of Asian immigration, many of Blainey's fellow academic historians went back through his opus to find examples of poor practice they could use to undermine his authority.

It presaged a new era in the national discourse, one in which someone with a view with which one disagreed was not just wrong on that issue, but was a bad person. The attacks on Blainey probably mark the beginning of the 'history wars' in Australia, wars in which ideological correctness became more important than any other factor in assessing a historian's worth. Ironically, apart from Blainey, the other major victim of the history wars was Manning Clark who, while obviously disagreeing with many of Blainey's views, nonetheless decried the attempts to silence him.

In many ways, the ground-breaking nature of *Triumph of the Nomads* has been obscured by the fact that promoting it has not suited anyone's political agenda. The left wanted to stereotype Blainey as a conservative while, for many on the right, aspects of the book, such as Blainey's use of the term 'invasion' to describe

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*Richard Allsop is a Research Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs.*

## In many ways, his background in mining history enabled Blainey to provide a more rounded and nuanced view of Australian history than those who spent whole careers within academia.

colonisation and strong defence of the strengths of much of Aboriginal society, were not necessarily to their liking.

Perhaps it is now safe to revisit the book following the official ending of Australia's history wars by prime ministerial edict on 27 August last year. Given Kevin Rudd's attempts to rewrite modern political and economic history in a shamelessly partisan manner, one might doubt his sincerity, but there was at least something appropriate in his making his declaration at the launch of Tom Keneally's book *Australians: Origins to Eureka*.

For, at the height of the controversies of the 1980s, Keneally wrote to Blainey:

I regret very much the impulse of some people to attempt to discredit your history in the simple-minded and intellectually fascist belief that this would somehow undermine your social and political arguments. I don't care whether you accept this or not, but you are for me one of the very finest Australian writers and historians. As for the rest, our disagreements are a matter of record.

There is much to be said for ending the history wars. While history should be debated strenuously and interpreted in a multitude of ways, these discussions should be able to be conducted without every issue being used in a contemporary political debate.

And ending the wars may also provide an opportunity to evaluate Geoffrey Blainey's career in a more balanced and rational manner.

By any measure it has been a re-

markably productive career. Blainey has written almost forty books, been a highly regarded teacher and university administrator, a member of a number of important government committees, and a participant in some of the big debates of recent decades. And he invented the perpetually busy phrase 'the tyranny of distance'.

Blainey will turn 80 on 11 March this year; a year which also marks the 60th anniversary of his public debut as a historian. It was in 1950 that *Historical Studies* published an article by the undergraduate Blainey dissecting the work of a well-known authority on Federation, Professor R.S. Parker. Blainey found that Parker's assertions about the economic interests of particular voters were not matched by the evidence. As one observer put it 'here was this young undergraduate applying departmental research techniques to confound an authority ... it was quite remarkable'.

However, this was not the only example of the 20-year-old Blainey's preparedness to challenge authority and conventional wisdom. He found theory and method of history classes at the University of Melbourne so abstract that he declined to participate and negotiated with the lecturer an alternative solo reading program of great histories.

More significantly, Blainey rejected the example of other successful history undergraduates by exhibiting no interest in pursuing postgraduate study at Oxford. Instead, Blainey headed off to the isolated west coast of Tasmania to write the history of the Mt Lyell Mining & Railway Company, the start of an initial ten-year career as a freelance historian, making a living from writing books.

From late 1961 onwards, Blainey did follow the more conventional path for a historian of working in a university. However, his early departure from the University of Melbourne, after the controversies of the 1980s, means that he has spent a slight majority of his sixty-year history-writing career outside the academy. Blainey's work has clearly derived benefits from his time spent both inside and outside the academic tent.

Operating as a freelance historian, writing company and institutional history, certainly gave Blainey a different perspective on history to other historians of his generation. Crucially, it enabled him to write a version of Australian history which has different emphases, and one that takes account of a range of important factors that other historians have tended to neglect.

Whereas many students with a humanities background may have balked at writing about the technical issues of mining and the remote 'blokey' western Tasmanian location, Blainey revelled in it. Not only did Blainey enjoy the study of mining (so much so that he said his second choice of career would be as a geologist), he also enjoyed living in the local community. Whilst based in Queenstown, Blainey played for one of the local football teams, The Smelters, which played on the town's famous gravel-surfaced oval.

While never subsequently throwing himself into the work and community in quite the same way as at Mt Lyell, Blainey's interest, empathy and even pride in what was achieved on Australian mining fields is ever present in his work. In many ways, the background in mining history enabled Blainey to provide a more rounded and nuanced

view of Australian history than many of his contemporaries and successors who spent whole careers within academia.

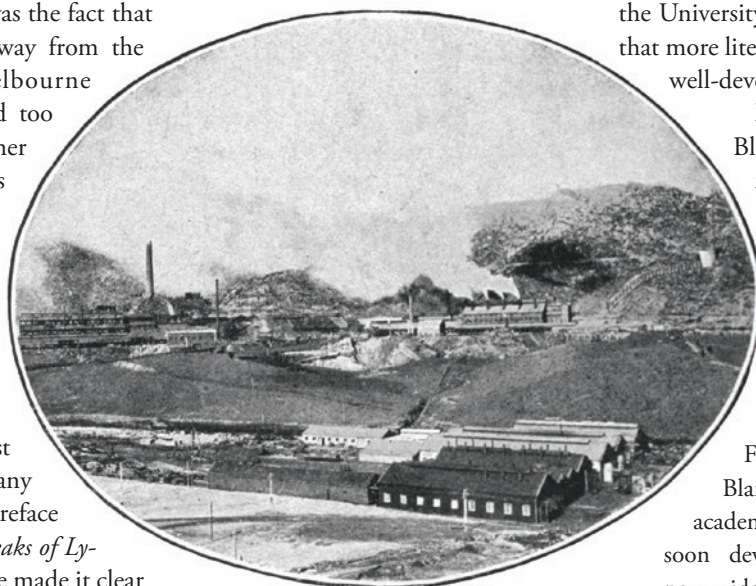
One of the first advantages that studying business, and mining in particular, contributed to Blainey's understanding of the nation was the fact that it drew his attention away from the Sydney–Canberra–Melbourne axis that often attracted too much of the focus of other writers. The early focus on mining also ensured that Blainey appreciated the importance of technology to the prosperity of the nation.

Blainey's company histories are never just regurgitations of company achievements. In the preface to his early book, *The Peaks of Lyell*, published in 1954, he made it clear that 'this story is more than a company history ... it is the story of a wild region of mountain and mines—some mines rich, many poor ... it is the story of the men who found them, floated them, worked them, and died in them'. The actual mining company that is the subject of the book does not make an appearance until page 55. By describing all the ebbs and flows of the various other mining fields and companies until that time, Blainey weighs the roles of luck and skill, an ongoing theme in much of his subsequent work.

Another recurring theme of Blainey's mining histories is the crucial role of unlikely heroes such as Paddy Hannan in Kalgoorlie or Campbell Miles in Mt Isa. Miles is the archetypal Blainey character. The reader meets Miles as 'a bushman taking horses to the Northern Territory' who when he enters the camp of four other characters has with him specimens of ore. The five men sit around 'drinking black tea in the shade of the bough shed ... the rocks which

they handled so casually were the ores of Mt Isa, the greatest Australian mine of this century'.

We then get a quite detailed study of the life story and character of Miles, including learning that 'some of his



Smelters of the Mount Lyell Mining and Railway Company, featured in Geoffrey Blainey's 1954 book *The Peaks of Lyell*.  
Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office

characteristics' may have been inherited from his father who remained a bachelor until 49, but then sired nine children. Unlike his father, Miles had not married in later life, indeed 'he had not even attended a wedding as a guest, though he did recall once seeing a bridal party emerge from a church in Cloncurry'. Miles lived till 82, ascribing his good health to shunning fresh fruit.

Another lesson of Mt Lyell and his work in other mining communities was that it developed Blainey's understanding of the value of oral history, an area in which he was a trend-setter. He discovered that much of the history of Mt Lyell was in the early 1950s 'still preserved in the minds of men who blazed and cleared the trail'. He later admitted that he had been a bit slow to realise what

a valuable resource the recollections of ordinary people were, commenting that 'I was slow to realise how accurately these men remembered events they had witnessed, especially in their younger years'. Later, when writing the history of the University of Melbourne, he found that more literary people often have less well-developed memories.

Right from the start, Blainey's historical method marked him out as being different. *The Peaks of Lyell* does not contain footnotes. This feature of Blainey's early work has been acknowledged as path-breaking by Stuart Macintyre:

From the beginning Blainey wrote for a non-academic readership. He soon developed the method, now widely imitated, of relegating his references to the back of the volume and keying them to the text without forbidding numerical superscripts or unnecessary formalities.

Just as a decade freelancing influenced Blainey, so did becoming an academic in the early 1960s. Firstly, he learnt a lot from the students, their interests and questions, and more than one book began life as part of a subject he taught to undergraduates. Unlike some academics, Blainey enjoyed teaching undergraduates and believed in regularly changing subjects to keep his teaching fresh.

A number of commentators have discussed the impact Blainey's move to academia had on his historical writing, describing a move away from empiricism towards what was variously called a 'mechanistic sociological' or a 'positivist' approach. One keen observer of Blainey's work, Graeme Davison, has placed significant weight on

## The best Geoffrey Blainey books you haven't read

Most readers will know the famous Blainey titles—*The Tyranny of Distance*, *Triumph of the Nomads*, *The Rush That Never Ended*, *A Short History of the World*, but there are many other Blainey classics.

### ***The Peaks of Lyell* (1954)**

Where it all began on the remote West Coast of Tasmania. The company may have gone but by taking a risk on the 21-year-old Blainey, its history, written in what was already distinctively lively Blainey prose, remains very rewarding reading.

### ***Across A Red World* (1968)**

Blainey was one of the very few westerners to travel through China at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Both in China, and then in the Soviet Union, the ever observant Blainey provides a revealing insight into the Communist world.

### ***The Steelmaster* (1971)**

The only biography Blainey has written. His subject was Essington Lewis, long-time BHP boss and wartime supremo, one of the most important Australians of the 20th century.

### ***The Great Seesaw* (1988)**

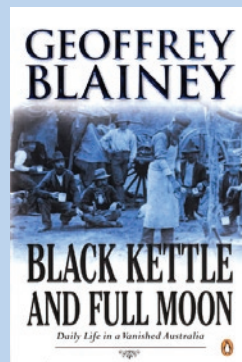
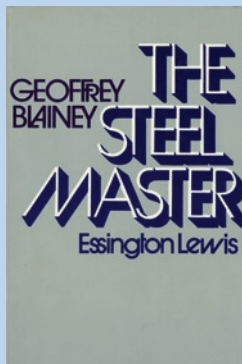
Blainey charts how, for the last 250 years, the intellectual mood in the Western World has regularly shifted between optimism and pessimism. He shows how the prevailing mood has profoundly influenced the events of each era.

### ***Jumping Over the Wheel* (1993)**

This book tells the history of Pacific Dunlop. Blainey skilfully charts how via many mergers and acquisitions a small Melbourne tyre company became a diversified industrial conglomerate. The company's range of interests makes it effectively an economic and social history of Australia.

### ***Black Kettle and Full Moon* (2003)**

Blainey's keen eye for detail comes to the fore as he considers many forgotten aspects of daily life in Australia from the 1850s to 1914. He not only charts how Australians lived, but also answers the questions about why they lived that way.



the fact that when Blainey became an academic it was not in a history department, but in the 'very different intellectual environment' of the Faculty of Commerce, teaching economic history. Davison believes this led Blainey towards writing a brand of history designed 'to compete with the confident claims of the social sciences, especially economics'.

Blainey acknowledges that in this period of his career he 'became very strongly interested in the chance of finding statements of probability and generalisation'. In some ways his controversial stands in 1980s were a continuation of the desire to make predictions. Trying to identify trends, be speculative and make predictions was less common amongst historians, than in the social sciences, and many historians therefore attacked his practice, particularly when they found his conclusions unpalatable. Hence, they criticised him when he predicted that there could be negative consequences from the Hawke Government's immigration policy, but remained silent when he predicted negative consequences because Hawke and Keating were cutting tariffs too quickly.

At the same time that Blainey was building his academic career, he also wrote some of his most important books. Between 1966 and 1980, he produced three works, sometimes considered a trilogy, which took his reputation to a new plane. *The Tyranny of Distance*, *Triumph of the Nomads* and *A Land Half Won* were not written as a trilogy. Published individually between 1966 and 1980, they were joined in a boxed set by the publisher, MacMillan, in 1982, and given the collective title, *A Vision of Australian History*. These three books took Blainey from being a prolific and engaging writer in the niche of economic, business and mining history, to a contributor with a distinctive vision of the major themes in Australia's history.

Macintyre commented on how the trilogy contributed to Blainey's rise:

When he took up academic employment in 1962, he was an accomplished scholar with an established reputation. He built on that reputation and achieved his enormous popular success with a series of volumes on major themes of Australian history. *The Tyranny of Distance*, *Triumph of the Nomads* and *A Land Half Won* led to the television series *The Blainey View*.

Blainey's career progression reflects his changed status. In the mid 1960s, he was a lecturer in economic history in the Commerce faculty at the University of Melbourne. By the start of the 1980s, he had moved to being Professor of History at the nation's leading history department, was chair of Australia's leading cultural body, the Australia Council, had written opinion pieces for major newspapers and had come to rival Manning Clark as the nation's best known historian.

All three books in the trilogy challenged conventional views about their subjects, which helped generate some controversy in reviews of the work and meant that readers were getting an original and argumentative perspective on the subject matter. By coining the phrase 'tyranny of distance', Blainey also contributed along with Donald Horne's 'lucky country' and A.A. Phillips 'the cultural cringe' one of the three best-known, and often misunderstood, phrases of modern Australia.

*The Tyranny of Distance* provided Australia with a central theme, distance, to explain the country's history in much the same way that Frederick Jackson Turner had developed frontier theory to explain the history of the United States.

The passions that *The Tyranny of Distance* aroused were generated, not so much by Blainey's general thesis that distance was the central factor in Australia's history, but from what Blainey saw as the historically neglected reasons, such as the need for new sources of naval supplies, why Botany Bay had been chosen as a destination for British convicts in 1788. In fact, Blainey's arguments about the motivation for Britain establishing a colony in New South Wales stimulated such significant debate, that one historian has written that 'no article or chapter by any historian of Australia has provoked so much extensive and detailed rebuttal'.

There are differing interpretations of whether Blainey's departure from the University of Melbourne was forced or voluntary, but the result of it was that Blainey had to return to writing freelance history and in the 1990s he produced a number of commissioned histories of outstanding quality. And with a few commissions under his belt, he was able to move onto works that interested him, most notably histories of Australia and the world.

These two books meant that the breadth of Blainey's work delivered an unusual quadrella to people who live within the boundaries of what was the City of Camberwell in the east-



ern suburbs of Melbourne. These people have what must surely be the unique distinction in the world of having had the one historian write about their locality, their state or province, their nation and the world.

Of course, not everyone approves of the breadth of Blainey's interests. Those who have a particular historical specialty sometimes feel that Blainey either has not considered, or given due weight, to it. This feature was notable in the book of essays about Blainey published in 2003, *The Fuss that Never Ended*, where amongst some interesting general contributions, there were chapters where specialists were given a small area to measure Blainey against. Perhaps the strangest criticism of Blainey's broadness came in the wake of the publication of *A Short History of the World*, when one critic decried a generalist having a shot at a task which, in his view, really needed to be left to specialists 'world historians'.

Just as the breadth of Blainey's work is remarkable, so is the longevity of his career. There is no doubt the two are linked. Both are the product of his insatiable curiosity to find out about the past, and to explain it to others by writing about it in beguiling prose.

Highlighting the continuing interest in his views, he was quoted in the *Herald Sun* on the first day of the New Year on whether we are likely to call this year 'two thousand and ten' or 'twenty-ten'. Based on historical precedent he favoured the latter. And just to show that there are always new topics to explore, the book on which he is currently working is a history of Christianity.

In each of the past six decades, Blainey has produced works of great interest and importance. Odds are that the twenty-tens will be no different. Let's hope they can be read on their merits and not through the prism of the history wars.