

Australian History in 7 Questions

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The most stimulating historians do not just search out fuller information; they also suggest trends, pattern, meaning. Inevitably this is contentious; different viewpoints and questions influence what material is selected as relevant. At its best, the subsequent discussion of rival interpretations is interesting and constructive.

John Hirst's flair for productive debate has already been demonstrated in important books like *Convict Society and Its Enemies*, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy*, *The Sentimental Nation*, and *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*. All but two of his seven structural questions here are further treatment of such earlier theories.

Three linked questions deal with Australia's struggle for an independent identity ("How did a penal colony change peacefully to a democracy?" "What effect did convict origins have on national characteristics?" "Why is Australia not a Republic?"). Hirst reminds us that our beginning was not as a penal colony, rather as a colony of convicts run on the principles of ordinary English law and offering opportunities for convicts and ex convicts to make life more comfortable. He also notes that the achievement of self-government, more democratic than in Britain itself at the time, owed much to the British colonial masters' "great record of statecraft" (p53). In particular their intervention thwarted plans of the squattocracy to entrench constitutional provisions to keep the colony safe from Yankee notion of democracy.

In the tricky area of national characteristics, he is critical of those who contrast English and Australian characteristics and seek to explain the difference as a result of colonial experience including convictism. He argues that the colonists are better interpreted as a British fragment ("the working class writ large." P128). They brought with them already formed attitudes like unruliness. "If we find stropky workers in Australia, we don't have to look for convict influence." (P124).

Instead Hirst stresses the British context and the colonists' problems of building a nation within an Empire. "Independent Australian Britons" (p190) were ambivalent about independence. Their strong emotional connection to Britain and its symbols lasted at least until the late 1950s, before Britain left the Empire behind. As well, Britain dominated Australian trade and was looked to anxiously for Australia's defence.

A further difficulty in Australia's rise to nationhood was the trauma associated with its origins, which gave rise to self doubt and concern about Australia's reputation. Hirst suggests this as an explanation of the reverence for Gallipoli and other military and sporting achievements, which could be seen as evidence that Australia had outgrown its tarnished origins.

In discussing "Why did the Australian colonies federate?" Hirst challenges the view that horse trading business deals produced federation and then a nation. A fuller engagement with R.S.Parker's work on the influence of economic interests and political pressures on federation might have been useful here.

Arguing that such interests alone would never have produced federation, let alone nationhood, Hirst explains federation rather as a consequence of national sentiment. The pro-federation politicians, poets, patriots, Australian-born "natives" were devoted to a noble democratic crusade and worked to achieve it.

In "Why was the postwar immigration programme a success?" Hirst stresses the extent of the transformation achieved with so little social strain. Clearly there were mutual benefits. Push factors were strong, especially for the huge numbers of displaced people. In the context of full employment and prosperity, locals could be reassured that their jobs would not be at risk and that the New Australians would have to assimilate. The programme was sold as an orderly and necessary contribution to Australia's economic development and capacity for self-defence.

Yet the most interesting feature of the programme was the disjunction between official policy and what was happening on the ground. When assimilation or integration was the goal, migrant enclaves were unwanted, but national associations were formed, mainly for contacts and socialising. Despite the official policy, the policy makers funded them as lobbyists and welfare agencies.

By the 1970s, multiculturalism was the official policy, implying that different groups lived together while maintaining their diverse cultures – a social mosaic. Instead Australia became a "melting pot" as immigrant groups within a generation or two intermarried and moved out of the enclaves.

Hirst suggests that Australian habits of face-to-face interaction contributed greatly to the absorption of so large an influx. The Australians of 1945 had strong prejudices against foreigners but also some experience of containing old world conflicts and some distaste for the unpleasant hassles likely to be associated with an attempt to translate their prejudices into action. Systematic exclusion was not their way (except for Aborigines). Face to face they could live and let live, even offering some commitment to an egalitarian fair go.

For some thirty years cautious, pragmatic governments were trusted to keep control of the process. Immigration was bipartisan with no attempt to exploit natural misgivings for political advantage. How far migrants integrated was related mainly to the length of time they had been in Australia. Hirst suspects that Muslims' strong attachment to

their religion may well keep them separate. But that and the ugly political opportunism of the “stop the boats” campaign are not the story that Hirst is examining here.

Two remaining questions deal with recent Hirst interests. “Why was Australia so prosperous so early?” reflects his reaction to Ian W. McLean’s important new economic history *Why Australia Prospered*. He notes that even early colonial living standards were high, largely at the expense of British taxpayers. But the colony was also well endowed with natural resources. Its rural productivity was high for a series of staples attractive to overseas markets – sealing and whaling industries, wool, gold especially, wheat, and later many other non-renewable minerals. The colonists’ very British institutions provided supportive governance and advantageous interaction with British markets, investment for further development, and immigration.

In the second half of the 19th Century conditions were favourable for an open economy producing foodstuffs and raw materials for export. Through the 1870s and 1880s Australia had arguably the world’s highest living standards. By contrast, some experts see 1890 to 1980 as a period when the economy was closed and protected, with a sluggish growth. Like McLean, Hirst doubts that the formula of the current experts will always produce good results or that, between the wars, building manufacturing behind a tariff wall was so misguided.

An open, dependent economy is also a vulnerable economy subject to external shocks, including recurrent severe depression. Is there here an opportunity for a further Hirst Question to explain our welfare state pioneering and fondness for bureaucratic and legal measures, like arbitration, to control social conflict?

In considering “Why did Aborigines not become farmers?” Hirst dismisses the suggestion that Australia’s soils, climate and plants were not suitable for agriculture. He refutes explanations in terms of a backward people who might be “improved” or even be congenitally incapable of development. That they did not lack that capacity is made clear. Their firestick farming reconstructed the landscape. They developed new technology like shell fishhooks, even built stone houses beside waterways they had constructed to trap eels. Because of their empathy with animals they were better suited to herding than to settled agriculture. Yet they harvested the native grass nardoo, added new foods to their diet and developed an impressive knowledge of country.

Hirst’s alternative explanation is the strength of the hunter-gatherer mindset. Aborigines simply did not see the European way of life as superior. They might have been right. As “prosperous nomads” (p17) they did not envy Europeans’ abundant possessions. “Since Aborigines had few wants, they were not going to do work they did not like.” (p22). That was reinforced by powerful spiritual and social forces, like connection to the land and kinship patterns.

Clearly, Hirst enjoys arguing. Long may it be so. The new book is very welcome – a good read, making fair-minded challenges and constructing persuasive alternatives. This is another very worthwhile Hirst contribution to constructive debate about Australian history.