

The Lucky Culture

by Nick Cater. HarperCollins, 2013, 361 pp, RRP \$29.99

Reviewer: David Clune

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It is hard to remain indifferent about Nick Cater's *Lucky Culture*. Readers tend to pan or praise it with equal vehemence. This is unsurprising as Cater has written a provocative, personal anti-left polemic – although he denies the last label preferring to say he wants to start a discussion. His book in some ways resembles a pamphlet in the racy, argumentative 18th century British tradition. By writing in a subjective, accessible style, Cater leaves himself open to charges of crude generalisation and over-simplification, sometimes justifiably. This is perhaps inevitable, if not entirely excusable, in a work that sets out to make a controversial argument rather than an academic case: to argue is to exaggerate.

Cater is guilty of romanticising the past, painting Australia as an egalitarian utopia. Certainly, there were many good things about the old, easy-going 'Wouldn't be dead for a million quid' Australia. Geoff Bolton has written that Australian society was characterised historically by the classical ideal of the *auer mediocritas*, the golden mean or middle way. It was not a land that readily produced martyrs. However, there was also a down side that Cater ignores. A stifling and stigmatising conformity was omnipresent. There were class and religious distinctions. 'Common Catholics' were unwelcome in the leafy enclaves of Sydney's upper north shore and Jews were blackballed at exclusive clubs. Before World War Two, the children of working class families were largely excluded from certain jobs and professions. Veteran Canberra correspondent Alan Reid observed that the traditional way for a working lad to get ahead was through the 'three Ps': pubs, politics, police. Working class life was not all benevolent camaraderie, being marred by hardship, violence and oppression of women. Old Balmain boy Neville Wran once said that being in the working class was all about 'how to get out of it'. Cater's paean to the accepting world of the public bar ignores the fact that many pubs in working class areas were accurately known as 'blood houses'. Intellectuals seeking to commune with the workers were likely to leave minus a few teeth.

Cater's version of Labor history is also marked by over-simplification. He inaccurately describes the ALP as, until the 1960s, the 'party of muscular unionism run by a cadre of shop floor arrivistes'. Historically, Labor was a coalition of the working class, small farmers, elements of the lower middle class and intellectuals. Many of its leaders came up through the unions, one of the few career opportunities open to them, but acquired knowledge and qualifications in areas such as law. Curtin, Chifley and McKell were men of intellect and vision who laid the foundations of post-war Australia. Cater is more perceptive about the dilemmas of modern Labor and the Party's 'new divide' between MPs 'from the working class heartland and those in the cappuccino belt who were obliged to conform to the sensitivities of the tertiary educated middle class'.

According to Cater, until the 1960s the main elements of the Australian world view were the 'absence of self doubt, the assertion of man's dominion over nature, the commitment to the

utilitarian aim of modern science, the expectation that progress benefits not just the few but the many'. His history is more solidly based here and it is hard to disagree. Pride in Australian prosperity, progress and success in taming the bush was widespread and deep-seated. When Sir Timothy Coghlan in 1887 produced the first edition of what was to become the Official Year Book of NSW, he proudly entitled it *The Wealth and Progress of NSW*. Cater argues that Australia has a 'lucky culture': 'When fortune smiles, it is not by chance or benevolence; it is the dividend of an investment of human ingenuity, enterprise and energy'. Australian society was distinguished by its 'egalitarian optimism'.

However, the post-war growth of higher education has produced a 'new elite'. Australia now has a 'Knowledge Class' according to Cater: a cohort of 'tertiary educated professionals with a particular outlook that sets them apart ... They remain a minority, but the positions they occupy ... grant them a disproportionate influence on public affairs'. The 'Australian consensus' is being challenged by this 'knowledge-owning nobility that presumes to possess superior insights and manners to the broad mass of the people'. The new patrician class 'values cultural wealth over financial wealth, and accords status to those who observe its mores and obey its morality'. Cater claims that those who conform to these 'modish patterns of thought' ironically pride themselves on being 'individualists'. In fact, their world is a closed one 'of moral absolutes: equality, rights, sustainability and cosmopolitanism'.

Cater argues that the divide between the 'Knowledge Class' and the rest has become 'the dominant fault line on the cultural, social and political landscape'. Much of *The Lucky Culture* is a critique of the core tenets of the 'Knowledge Class': environmentalism, which Cater blames for the destruction of the traditional faith in science; progressivism; multiculturalism; atheism; human rights. Other chapters examine the alleged dominance of this 'elite' in the ALP, ABC and universities.

The reception Cater's book has received in some quarters tends to support his argument that the battle of ideas has become 'a contest of personal integrity. Compromise, the saving grace of democratic civil debate, is simply not on the table; debate becomes polarised between two incompatible positions'. *The Lucky Culture* has been ridiculed and trivialised as the right wing ravings of a Murdoch press hack. In reality, it is a thoughtful and thought-provoking book. Many will take issue with some or all of what Cater has written. This is what he wants: 'The *Lucky Culture* comes with an open invitation to disagree. Australia is a country that thrives on discussion ... I sincerely hope that vigorous debate will ensue'.