

**Dreamers and Schemers: a political history of Australia, by Frank Bongiorno. La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc, 2022, pp. 472. Paperback, RRP \$39.99 ISBN 981760640095.**

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Writing a single volume political history of a nation is a particular challenge. As it is a history rather than a chronicle, what is omitted is as important as what is covered. The art is to be discerning and perceptive about what to include and exclude – the work cannot become bogged down in detail but must provide a comprehensive account. It is rather like crossing a broad stream via stepping stones. While achieving this, an author has to avoid superficiality, inaccuracy, and over-simplification. Another challenge is to maintain readability, which readers rightly expect in such a volume, while synthesising a vast amount of material and drawing meaningful conclusions about the nation’s narrative.

In his recently published *Dreamers and Schemers: a political history of Australia*, Frank Bongiorno succeeds in meeting all these challenges admirably. He achieves breadth without sacrificing quality. Indeed, he adds insights and corrects previous misinterpretations.

Another challenge facing Bongiorno is that the nature of ‘history’ has changed, with traditional accounts of Australian history as a Whiggish story of progress and achievement being challenged by those who have explored previously ignored racism, discrimination, and gender inequality. He seamlessly integrates these new perspectives to produce a less celebratory, more balanced account that remains refreshingly objective.

The book begins ‘in deep time, amongst indigenous people who lived on this continent for millennia, and ends in the age of COVID-19, the latest of many external shocks to

affect Australia's political system'. It tries to 'capture the promise and possibility that Australians have seen in political life over the course of their history'.<sup>5</sup>

In a defence of politics echoing that of Bernard Crick, Bongiorno says that he is telling the story of a political system that has adapted to challenges:

But it has not done so through some automatic mechanism, nor in a way that that benefits everyone equally. The durability of the political system has relied on people capable of making it work, and that has demanded ingenuity, ambition and – when politics has been at its best – imagination and creativity.

It has been a politics of 'ideals, visions and dreams as well as of roads, bridges and electric wires. Of dreamers and schemers'.<sup>6</sup>

As well as being authoritative history, *Dreamers and Schemers* is extremely readable. Bongiorno has a fluent, elucidatory, compelling style that keeps the narrative moving. My only complaint is that he occasionally drops into colloquialisms, such as a 'piddling' amount, which I find jarring.

*Dreamers and Schemers* establishes Bongiorno as one of our greatest historians.

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Bongiorno, *Dreamers and Schemers: a political history of Australia*, La Trobe University Press, 2022, pp. 4, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Bongiorno, *Dreamers and Schemers: a political history of Australia*, pp. 3, 4.

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