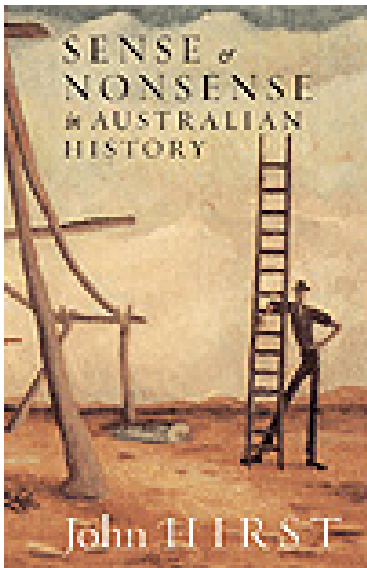


**Sense & Nonsense in Australian History** by John Hirst. Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2005, pp. vii + 325, \$34.95, paperback, ISBN: 0 97507 699 X.



John Hirst is not only a distinguished historian but also an outstanding essayist in the great tradition. He has an almost Orwellian ability (if not Orwell's political outlook) to turn a cliché inside out and ask what it really means; thus, Australia is a 'new' country, but does this mean it is recent in settlement or novel in design? This publication is to be welcomed for bringing together nineteen superbly written pieces, both reflective and polemical, plus a brief envoi which looks affectionately towards the future. 'I do not have the temperament of a liberationist', Hirst writes (many would say, 'confesses'). 'When authority is attacked my instinct is to come to its defence.' (p. 6) But most Australian history has been written by those whom he calls 'left-leaning progressive people' (p. 1). Given the predominant outlook of the mainstream, it would be easy to dismiss Hirst through syllogistic labelling. Conservatives tend to be male chauvinists, racists and monarchists. Since Hirst writes from a conservative point of view, he must bear the sins of all similar deviants. Hence even though he may occasionally seem to lay a decorous punch on the liberal consensus, his success is by definition illusory because his underlying principles can be dismissed, by left-leaning progressives, as fallacious.

But Hirst cannot be so simply pigeon-holed. I have never met him and would be disqualified on gender grounds from forming an opinion, but he does not sound like a male chauvinist. Rather, his quarrel with Australia's feminist historians (of course, to presume to quarrel at all is suspect) is that they refuse to contemplate the existence of companionate marriage in colonial Australia; they can see only patriarchy and power, discounting the possibility that men and women shared their lives because they enjoyed one another's company, and shared out their responsibilities along lines that they felt made sense. Far from being a racist, his charge against the official proponents of multiculturalism is that it is they who have defamed the so-called 'Anglo-Celtic' population nucleus. Not only does it distort historical reality to lump the founding groups together in such a way, but it is entirely contradictory to define the civic culture to which all Australians should subscribe in precisely terms of the values of decency and democracy that were nurtured by the much-traduced host community.

Several of these essays deal either directly or by implication with Aboriginal issues. Hirst insists that the term itself is a construct, a by-product of European settlement. Black people in 1788 did not define themselves under any such umbrella classification, nor, presumably, would they have expressed their claims in the modern-day language of human rights. Hirst is happy to respect the innate value of pre-contact cultures (note the plural) although he notes a disturbing tendency for successive versions of official publications to omit any reference to violence or cruelty in indigenous societies. He also dismisses the notion of an Aboriginal 'civilisation', since civilisation is

by definition inseparable from urbanisation. In any case, he sees it as far too late to attempt to restore the traditional ways of life. Rather it would be far more honourable to face up to the appalling conflation of alcohol, deprivation and violence which passes for the Aboriginal lifestyle in Australia's country towns.

In light but scathing prose, he forces us to confront one of the dafter fantasies of an alternative story of colonisation. The first white people to arrive would have sat down to negotiate with the black inhabitants, through an unspecified representative structure, using an undetermined common language based on an idealised set of shared values. The Europeans would have explained that they planned to introduce several million woolly animals (a scheme which in reality only began to dawn on them a couple of decades after colonisation had started). These creatures must be off-limits to spearing even though they would eat most of the grass and damage drainage systems, but this would not be a problem for the indigenous people since the land would now 'belong' to the incomers. The settlers would throw in horse-riding, try to do something about smallpox (no promises mind you), and they would appreciate a helping hand in the supply of sex, water and local knowledge generally. The fantasy assumes that the Aborigines would have replied that this was all a jolly good idea, and Australians of all colours would have lived happily ever after. Hirst poses the awkward question:

What would have happened if the Aborigines on being fully appraised of the invaders' intentions had refused to negotiate any of their land away?" (p. 83)

It seems unlikely that the First Fleet would have headed back to Portsmouth.

This argument comes from the one previously unpublished essay, 'How Sorry Can We Be?', which contests the view that Australians of European descent should apologise to the descendants of the first inhabitants for past injustices. On general grounds, I am sympathetic. Telling people who believe they have a grievance that you are sorry they have been badly treated may simply reinforce the stridency of their own victim-hood. But I am less easy about one strand of Hirst's argument. 'We are all a long way from 1788', he argues. If we must cast a moralistic eye upon the early days, we can only conclude that 'according to their lights the settlers were right to invade and the Aborigines were right to resist them.' (p. 87) The problem with this line of argument is that it assumes a dividing line between something called the past and something called the present. This unspoken assumption runs counter to other aspects of Hirst's theorising, for instance his claim that when he teaches about classical Athens, he is introducing his LaTrobe students to one strand of Australia's history (and not a recent multicultural one either).

Obviously the conventional wisdom has moved from Proposition A, the Aborigines make no observable use of the land and so have no right of ownership, to Proposition B, the Aborigines have (or had) innate rights of possession even if they did not cover Australia with useful facilities such as holiday homes. Even so, the conventional wisdom does not account for everybody. Presumably there were a few freaky people back in good king George's glorious days who subscribed to Proposition B, although they do not seem to have washed up in early New South Wales. Nowadays there almost certainly remains a stubbornly larger minority who subscribe to Proposition A, although they have the good sense to do so only in the secret company of fellow

chauvinists and monarchists. So we are dealing with an intellectual continuum, not a violent break. Somewhere along the line, there must have been what is now called the tipping point. Perhaps it may be that the death of an elderly racist in Rockhampton at 8 p.m. on 22 March 1962 swung majority opinion from reactionary A to progressive B. (We shall never know just when the point tipped, but I should guess more recently than 1962.) We may be ‘a long way from 1788’ but we are not living on a wholly separate planet. Indeed, Hirst himself comes half way to that position, by allowing that an apology is due to Aboriginal people who were taken from their families and subjected to forced assimilation, simply because the victims of that policy are still around. Past and present form a continuum from which we cannot wholly escape.

I am more persuaded by another strand of Hirst’s argument against privileged status for modern-day Aborigines, in which he invites us to imagine a family of youngsters who have one indigenous great-grandparent. One teenager identifies with that side of her heritage, as she has every right to do, but her siblings decline to classify themselves as Aboriginal. Why, he asks, should that young woman possess rights not claimed by members of her own family?

Hirst’s standpoint is that many modern-day Aborigines are partly European in ancestry. But equally we can invert the assumption, and posit that many thousands of people who take for granted that they are of dinkum Anglo-Celtic stock themselves have an Australian ancestry stretching back thousands of years. If we assume an average thirty-year interval between birth and parenthood (a generous time-span since part-Aboriginal females were probably vulnerable to sexual exploitation at least from puberty), then we are six generations from the explosion of pastoral frontiers in the 1820s. Imagine children born then to a white father and a black mother: if their descendants bred entirely within immigrant stock for the next 180 years (unlikely, it may be thought), their present-day bloodline would be less than one percent Aboriginal. It is a fair bet that, as with the embarrassment that grandfather was an old lag, somewhere down the line that black forebear would have quietly excised from the family folklore.

No doubt, to the frustration of the racists, physical appearance is not a reliable guide to forebears. The white Australian leader who most notably looked as if he had Aboriginal ancestry was the ageing Henry Parkes, the product of one hundred generations of Warwickshire. Estimating how many modern-day Australians unknowingly have indigenous ancestry is a guessing game, but even with modest projections (and remembering the production of first-generation mixed-race Australians was not confined to the 1820s), the potential implications are startling. There must be hundreds of thousands of people and maybe even several million who are part-, even if only a tiny part-, Aboriginal – and without knowing it. Short of apartheid-style mass DNA testing, we shall probably never know how many and who they are. But, if we deduct the immigrants and their children, a remarkably large proportion of the host population may well be of (slightly) mixed blood. What does this do to the idea of a white-to-black apology? Who would be saying sorry to whom?

If Hirst is not the identikit conservative, he is definitely the typical provoking historian. As practitioners of our craft, we love paradox, and in his career he has delivered it in spades. He began by turning upside-down that hell-on-earth, the outdoor prison called New South Wales. Previous historians had approached it through the prism of a penal settlement, but he viewed it as ‘a normal British colony’ (p. 4) which just

happened to have a convict labour force. It is an invigorating revision, although one might question the first adjective. Later he turned his attention to the causes of federation, dismissing (rightly) the interpretation that it was the outcome of a squalid bargain inside the boss class, arguing instead that it was the idealists, the dreamers, the poets who brought the Commonwealth into being. It is hard to credit that Hirst is right but (and I write as someone interested in the causes of federation), it is exceedingly hard to disprove his thesis. (One reservation is sparked by Hirst's own argument that it was possible to be a 'gentleman' in Australia while energetically engaged in the very ungentle pursuit of money. Similarly, when Alfred Deakin was not being a free-trader, he doubled as a mystic, and other workaday public figures imagined themselves to be literary giants, with Parkes himself pushing to the gut-wrenching limit as a self-proclaimed poet. If everyone was a poet, the claim that it was the poets who achieved federation becomes more tolerable, even if less illuminating.)

But there is one more throw of the paradox about John Hirst, a culminating disavowal of identikit conservative nastiness. He believes Australia should become a republic, and he has publicly supported that cause. On most issues he maintains the tone of a great essayist, one that quietly combines passion with an indulgent view of the sheer absurdity of human folly. But the mask slips occasionally when he reveals his irritation at the tactics used by opponents to win the 1999 referendum. Oh for the pen of a John Hirst to dissect a campaigning organisation that was so determined to fight for democratic symbolism that it incorporated itself as a limited company to prevent its own supporters from tinkering with its platform! 'Towards the Republic' is the only essay in the book that rarely rises above flat narrative – but, as he says, the issue is not going to go away, and maybe that should worry his admirers. One day, and not far distant, John Hirst may actually find himself on the winning side. Perhaps that will indicate that Australia is at last experiencing a brief interval of sanity, but in cosmic terms there will surely be something wrong if he finally finds himself among a majority in what he affectionately terms 'this bugger of a country' (p. 103).

The eighteen previously-published sections are reprinted without their original references. Only sad people read footnotes, but I did miss them. Possibly the apparatus of referencing has been omitted to disguise the fact that some of the essays were originally written for learned journals, others for campaigning periodicals. Yet there is no real difference between the methodology and the quality of argument between Hirst assailing Geoffrey Blainey's *Tyranny of Distance* in [Australian] *Historical Studies* and his chiding of the left-progressives in the pages of *Quadrant* for failing to appreciate that Australia did indeed face a Communist threat during the Menzies years. But if Hirst is intellectually consistent, he escapes simplistic categorisation. Some conservatives write history because they believe we are immutably shaped by our past and should learn to kiss our fetters. John Hirst believes that we can take stock of our inheritance, discard the dead wood and so ensure that the future will enjoy a healthier relationship with the past. If we grasp why Australians of earlier days revered a distant monarchy and feared the populations of Asia, we can appreciate just how much times have changed, thus ushering in a republic and a multi-ethnic society. He closes with a vision of the streets of Sydney in fifty years from now, bustling with 'a new people who will have darker skins', citizens no longer tagged by their ethnic origins but all of them simply and equally Australian. 'I

am sorry I will not live to see that day, for the Australians are going to be a beautiful people.' (p. 313)

GED MARTIN