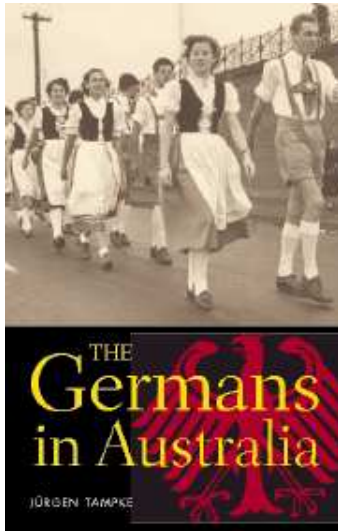


The Germans in Australia by Jürgen Tampke. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp.xi + 188, £18.99 Paperback, ISBN: 9780521612432.



This book deals with the fourth-largest group of European settlers in Australia before World War I, and the ‘the sixth-largest ethnic group in Australia today’ (p.166). But as Australian politics abandoned the preference for White Australia in immigration policy from the 1970s and Germans tend to be less interested in coming to Australia permanently from the 1980s, the relative importance of Germans in Australia is now diminishing. And even before the 1980s Germans ‘assimilated too readily into the Australian lifestyle’ (p. 167) to have an important and lasting impact on Australian culture. If we follow Tampke, the only things that will probably remain are the Oktoberfest, the Christmas tree, cake, sausages and sauerkraut. Should we read a book about that?

We should. First, this is a work of impressive knowledge. Tampke sums up a lifetime’s work on Germans in Australia. He traces them in the economy and in high culture, in politics and in society. He tells tiny stories full of meaning and generalises carefully. It is not only the Old Lutherans of the 1830s and the Displaced Persons of the late 1940s that are there, but also a whole range of individuals and groups – from convicts of the First Fleet with German origins to German ‘refugees’ from the second Cold War of the 1980s. The latter might not feel much more secure now while Prime Minister Howard is waging war on terrorism, Tampke notes ironically.

Secondly, Tampke has his decided and well-grounded views on several issues of historiographic debate. The missionaries of the nineteenth century are, he states, ‘too often ... dismissed as incompetent, blinded by their religious faith, and failing to understand the life and culture of Indigenous people’ (p. 71). They may have not been very successful in their attempts to convert Aborigines, but they seem to be the only Whites that Indigenous Australians ever met who were not part of an inhumane economy. And by doing their missionary work they sometimes saved the lives of Aboriginal people and sometimes their memory. During World War I, Tampke shows Australians of German descent were not altogether badly treated. Only a few German Australians were interned, and often the Australian government had good reason to do so. ‘No doubt there were cases of injustice’ (p. 120), but ‘for most German-Australians, life went on as usual’ (p. 125). Even the anglicising of family names was not a product of forced adaptation. It ‘occurred well before the Great War’ (p 114).

Thirdly, the story of the Germans in Australia turns out to be a version of the Australian story in general. Since the Germans adapted to Australianness so easily, Tampke is easily able to follow them along the well trodden paths of Australian history and historiography. He organises his narrative according to the chronological order of Australian history. The major themes mirror the ups and downs of Australian historiographical fashion. The scientists and explorers are there – Ludwig Leichhardt figuring prominently among them. There’s even an aside on the Windschuttle controversy in the missionary chapter.

This small book is easy to read, takes less than a day to get through, and afterwards you are well informed. You will then have the evening free to make some history yourself.

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