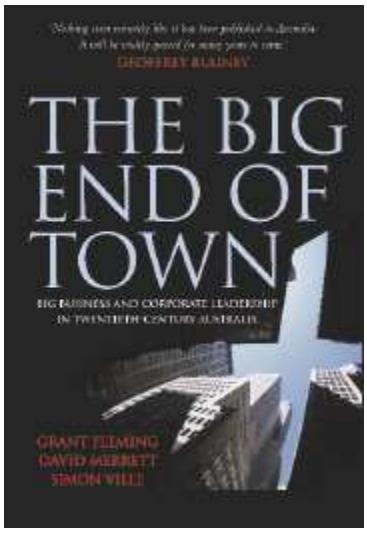
The big end of town: Big business and corporate leadership in twentieth-century Australia by Grant Fleming, David Merrett and Simon Ville. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 310, £45.00, hardback, ISBN 0521833116.



The big end of town is the result of collaboration between three academics, each of whom brought to the project their considerable knowledge in the areas of economics, business management and finance. It is therefore unsurprising that the text provides a very comprehensive account of the last one hundred years of business enterprise in the Australian corporate sphere based on sound analysis and research. This aspect makes the publication somewhat of a rarity in that few texts have attempted to address, even in part, this complex subject.

The scope of the publication is ambitious in both its breadth and depth; however the structure promotes reader access to the abundance of information through its eight chapters. The first is an introduction that provides a background to the research and provides information about the methodology and resources used; this is followed by seven others that cover clearly defined themes such as corporate governance, leaders, strategies and development. Each part is concerned with highlighting distinctive patterns of corporate enterprise and success, and whilst they remain focused on the Australian experience, there is regular reference to multi-national and foreign-owned organisations that help to illustrate the hurdles they faced when operating in a relatively small domestic market.

Although the abundance of facts and figures contributes to the construction of a dense piece of work, the authors have managed to focus on all of the major corporate players during the last one hundred years including Telstra, Qantas and CSR. It is a pity that some of that focus did not fall more heavily on the roles played by innovative and dynamic individuals or some of the less salubrious corporate behaviour of some of Australia's corporate leaders – present and past.

The big end of town is irrefutably an extremely well-researched and comprehensive account of the intricacies of doing business in Australia over a considerable period of time. Nevertheless, this highly academic concern with fine detail makes the book accessible and useful to a relatively small audience. It will be particularly helpful to students of business, commerce or economics, who will almost certainly go first to the conclusion at the end of each chapter before delving into its information-packed pages. For most others, its subject and thesis-like structure would offer little to attract attention.

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