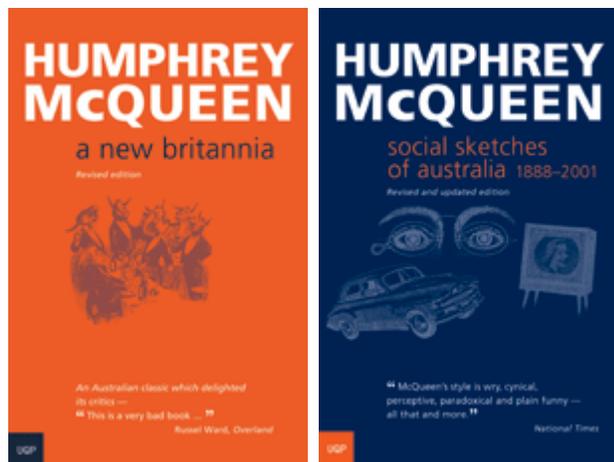


A New Britannia by Humphrey McQueen. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, revised edition, 2004, pp. X + 326, A\$24.95, paperback, ISBN 0 7022 3439 7.

Social sketches of Australia 1888-2001 by Humphrey McQueen. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, revised edition, 2004, pp. XII + 418, A\$24.95, paperback, ISBN 0 7022 3440 0.



Humphrey McQueen was not so much an angry as an arch young man when he published *A New Britannia* back in 1970. A New Left attempt to make sense of Australia in the Vietnam era, it brusquely dismissed the self-congratulation of the Australian Legend to argue that if the Labor party was inadequate and the working class nasty, greedy and racist, at least both were logical products of mainstream historical forces.

Many established historians hoped McQueen would simply go away, but the condemnations of Russel Ward and Donald Horne cited on the cover of this latest edition merely remind us that he is still around.

Yet for a book that professed to surf the wave of Australia's past, *A New Britannia* seems in its latest manifestation to defy the inexorable forces of history. In the 1970s, its bold generalisations upset the purists, to whom all simplification amounted to distortion. But the general reader accepted that bold brush strokes were needed on a giant canvas, and the text could be accepted as empirical iconoclasm. Through successive editions, a lengthening 'Afterword' has stripped bare the ideological bones. In an age when Marxists are grouped with Morris dancers as relics of an absurd past, Humphrey McQueen proudly identifies himself with Lenin and Gramsci as he deconstructs his own text in unfashionable self-criticism. It is cheering to find someone who can still be perverse after thirty-four years.

His *Social sketches of Australia* first appeared in 1978, so that the latest edition is appreciably larger than the first. Each chapter, McQueen explains, is built around seven running themes: work, urban life, rural life, health, Aborigines, whiteness and views of the world, with other issues on the fringes and an occasional year or controversy in more specific review. He insists that the book 'is not history in any meaningful sense'. Presumably that pretentious m-word means 'ideological' or 'analytical', for there is no doubt that McQueen provides a good read.

Queensland University Press has produced two robust paperbacks.

GED MARTIN
24 November 2004