

Richard Selleck. *The Shop: The University of Melbourne, 1850-1939*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003. Pp. xix, 855.

Readers of Selleck's *The Shop* who believe that universities represent long traditions of rational planning and civilized social intercourse are in for a shock. Those who have experienced the nasty side of university life will perhaps feel vindicated. Selleck's book is long and detailed, but generally well written and absorbing with more than a little wry and sometimes ironic humour. His accounts of the backstabbing and bickering that characterized much of the early years of the University of Melbourne are often incredibly captivating. Although informed by concepts of gender, class, race, or imperialism, the author is primarily a historian considering the evidence as he recounts and explains the establishment and first ninety years of the university. Selleck scrutinizes university Council members, professors and instructors, students, and other local professionals, showing the university to be a complex site of human interaction with colourful and sometimes brutal politics, intrigue, pathos, and occasionally virtue. Here and there, Selleck hints that disputes of yesterday around such issues as university governance and academic freedom are not so different from those of today.

Selleck presents a narrative of significant events, explaining, for example, the reasons behind the university's establishment and constitution, new professorial appointments (and their efforts to obtain institutional power), the general nature of the curriculum and matriculation exams, the locations of buildings, and the admission of women. In the first fifty years, when the University of Melbourne existed primarily to maintain social class distinctions and secondarily to impart useful knowledge, stories of political in-fighting take centre stage – the removal of the flamboyant and unconventional first music professor occupies twenty-four pages, a third of chapter seven. University administrators, professors, and even students fought bitterly for their places in the institution. Nor did representatives of local professions keep quiet, as lawyers, physicians, engineers, the clergy, and others built their links with the university.

The greater involvement of government in the early 1900s did little to improve the politics. Increased funding for research or teaching in a wider range of “practical” disciplines simply gave government additional leverage to direct matters. Although I anticipated a note of progress when the university shifted from a state-supported fiefdom to an increasingly state-directed fiefdom – how could it not be better? – there was no such implied improvement. Patronage, war-induced xenophobia, favouritism, and larger-than-life ambition easily balanced the arrival of a few competent and considerate professors.

Such an approach works well, but the emphasis on politics in the higher offices means that other themes are not always consistently or deeply considered. Selleck notes intellectual and economic factors, but with less detail. He is sensitive to gender, showing how the admission and hiring of women had its own particular politics, but in other cases, such as the role of a colonial university in advancing imperial culture at the expense of an indigenous population, the theme is less developed. There is little space to consider who the students were and what they did after attending the university, although Selleck makes some general observations. By presenting detailed accounts of key administrative events, we read less about the university community as a social group or, for that matter, day-to-day educational experiences. Although we gain some insight into the intellectual lives of some of the professors, we rarely have a sense of what many of them thought of “education” other than to replicate conventions from “the old country.” So although we gain insight into the highs and lows of university life, we see less of the ordinary and less of the impact that the university had on local affairs.

Selleck is a well-known, established historian who has written a number of respected works on Australian education. However, the reader who is less familiar with antipodean activities (like this writer) may find that much of the background context is taken for granted. Descriptions of Melbourne or Australia to set the general stage for events at the university are few and far between, making *The Shop* of more immediate interest to the Australian specialist than to the student of universities elsewhere. Similarly, Selleck makes few international comparisons despite the frequent references to England (Melbournians sought to make their university a southern Oxbridge) and the occasional nod to developments in other European countries, the United States, Japan,

and even Canada. How did the University of Melbourne adapt to or avoid world-wide trends? This is left to the reader to decide.

Like some other reviewers, I found the book to have a couple of awkward elements. The first is that a book of this length and detail can easily lose the reader; I often found myself flipping back sometimes one hundred pages to remind myself of key events or people. Second, at times it seemed that the author had fallen into an organizational rut: for each time-period indicated by the chapter, there were a few pages on institutional leadership, then a discussion of key professors and/or faculties and/or departments, a note on women, a comment on student activities, and examples of involvement by university outsiders. Following chapters often repeated the same round. This approach certainly can work, but sudden endings to sections made for a little choppiness.

As university histories so often celebrate the great deeds of the author's home institution, *The Shop* is refreshingly critical, although written with sympathy to the ideals of free scholarly inquiry, collegial governance, and a democratic, educated citizenry. Selleck, Emeritus Professor at Monash University, claims in the introduction that he will recount and explain the good along with the bad, but although we read of the occasional Councillor, professor, or student who was talented, thoughtful, and considerate (and the number slowly increased), one wonders whether the author was entirely fair; there is enough dirt here to question the whole point of the institution's existence! In our current era of academic entrepreneurialism when a romanticized history might be a useful ideological tool, this is a brave perspective. Or perhaps it is cautionary. Selleck also wrote the first two chapters of *A Short History of the University of Melbourne* to celebrate the university's 150th anniversary, but presented few of the follies described in his larger work. The *Short History* will probably be more widely read, but those who persevere with *The Shop* will have a much richer understanding of an intensely political and, as Selleck himself contends, non-rational institution.

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