

Andrew Brown-May & Shurlee Swain (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Melbourne*,

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Car owners, delivery drivers, flat-hunters: each cherishes one book above all others – the *Melway*. It is now forty years since this enormous street directory first appeared, so enabling Melbournians to navigate like never before around their city. Similar in scope and even bigger in size, *The Encyclopedia of Melbourne* unfolds before its readers another set of coordinates with which to situate and explore. In time, one hopes that this more recent publication will come to conquer the suburban bookshelf as the *Melway* has conquered the seatback pocket.

General editors Andrew Brown-May and Shurlee Swain adopt a factual and thematic alphabetical approach, sensibly omitting personal biographies in favour of detailed information about specific places (such as the Melbourne Cricket Ground) and broader discussion on factors – like class and public transport – which structure city life. Taking its cue from the recent ‘spatial turn’ within the academy, *The Encyclopedia* takes a fresh look at familiar city icons and reveals hitherto hidden histories amidst less well-known metropolitan byways. The best contributions ask how places and people have shaped one another; weaker (often shorter) sections furnish basic facts.

Melbourne’s indigenous history, early settlement and subsequent boom are well-covered; the Moomba festival and West Gate Bridge Disaster are amongst those events from the twentieth century to also merit inclusion. Sceptics, no doubt, will be pleased to find that the first substantial entry on football comes in the form of the Anti-Football League, a body composed of iconoclasts who wear square red badges (for something square cannot be bounced) and award the annual Wilkie Medal to the person who has done least to further the game. League members swim against a strong tide,

however, and Melbournians' love for sports generates innumerable references across the *Encyclopedia's* 800 pages. Most of these are well-balanced and informative, though special mention must be made of a co-authored entry on Sporting Culture which manages to stick the boot, so to speak, into Sydney's comparative want of sporting zeal no less than five times in its first paragraphs. Such assessment confirms the opening gambit of Richard White's thoughtful entry on the harbour city: 'Sydney has always been a touchstone for the development of Melbourne's identity'.

Editorial meetings to settle upon content must have been inspired: few other histories or works of reference consider facets of city life like smell, seasonal variation, or gay culture, and certainly not within the same volume. How, then, does *The Encyclopedia* compare with others in the same field? Progenitors include the encyclop(a)edias of New York, London and Chicago. Each adopts a similar format, with entries assiduously cross-referenced and illustrations sprinkled liberally throughout. Melbourne's big book trumps its overseas rivals, nevertheless, in terms of the diversity of entry topics (even if some of these, particularly the discussions of several suburbs, are treated in a cursory manner), quality of images (the unusual view of Flinders Street Station on page 273 is a good example of a fresh take on a familiar subject) and the inclusion, every 50 pages or so, of opinion pieces by current and former Melbournians. Included among these, Keith Dunstan recalls the pressurised drinking atmosphere created by early closing regulations – the infamous 'six o'clock swill' – whilst Barry Dickins presents a moving account of healing in the front pew of St Paul's Cathedral. Substantiating Walter Benjamin's claim that it is the child who grows up in closest proximity to the metropolis, it is notable how many writers select a scene from childhood over which to reminisce. Kerry Greenwood, remembering her eleven-year-old self and the associated lure of Collins Street, encapsulates this sentiment. 'I had never', she enthuses, 'been given a plaything so endlessly fascinating as a whole city'.

The liberating effect of leaving out biographical details (information easily accessed in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*) has allowed room for

some of the best entries in the *Encyclopedia*, in the form of mini-essays on thematic subjects. Des Cowley and John Arnold's five-page discussion of literature inspired by Melbourne is superb, Graeme Davison's analysis of images of the city equally noteworthy. Read in concert the mini-essays weigh up the forces for unity and division which have often been enacted on metropolitan streets. Anti-war and peace movements; poverty and wealth; sectarianism; the multicultural experience: these are among the recurring influences teased out by contributors. Climate, a perennial topic of conversation in Melbourne, is granted an enormous section which brims with statistics but fails in the final analysis to consider the fascinating cultural effects of changeable weather upon such habits as dress. Similarly, the further reading suggestions are not attached to enough of the entries, something of an opportunity missed. That said, it would be churlish to dwell on points of minor disappointment. In such a book as this there will always be gaps and oversights, stronger and weaker entries. 'Great cities deserve great encyclopedias', states the dust jacket. *The Encyclopedia of Melbourne* (and its companion website) fulfils this mission, representing, like Melbourne itself, a triumphant work in progress. Whether read in a Toorak mansion, a Housing Commission flat or the State Library of Victoria (each of which is treated herein), investment in *The Encyclopedia* is sure to strengthen a sense of place and prompt ventures anew amidst the splendours of 'Marvellous Melbourne' and the hybrid culture of its later inheritance.

Simon Sleight,

School of Historical Studies, Monash University.