

THAT BETTER COUNTRY: THE RELIGIOUS ASPECT OF LIFE IN EASTERN AUSTRALIA, 1835–1850, by John Barrett. *Melbourne University Press*. London and New York: *Cambridge University Press*, 1966. Pp. 213. 60s.

Solid, balanced, and well-written Church history should need no champion. There are, however, some special reasons why John Barrett's scholarly study should be commended. For it seems to be unfortunately true that, at a time when a great wave of migration is renewing and multiplying personal contacts between Great Britain and Australia, it remains possible for English readers never to see or read a work written and published in the Antipodes. This is the more to be deplored where, as in the present case, the author has not aimed merely to please a specialist public or the few examiners of the doctoral dissertation from which this book has evolved. Dr Barrett can, in fact, claim to have contributed to the general literature of religion in a plural society. He has certainly furthered our appreciation of the early Victorian Age in its Australian manifestation.

Dr Barrett is a Methodist minister as well as an academic historian. He presents his views modestly, but is always reliable, impartial, and humane. He never allows himself to lose sympathy with his *dramatis personae*, that stalwart generation which sailed across the world from a far, small group of off-shore islands in the North Sea to consolidate the somewhat shaky foundations of a free society in what had not long since been a pathetic penal farm. English, Irish, and Scots moved uneasily toward community in a vast and difficult land which early Catholic explorers had once named *Austrialia del Espiritu Santo*, but which the official mind had turned into a receptacle for convicts. With them came the institutions, manners, habits, hopes and fears of nineteenth-century Britain. Though a recent history of South Australia was aptly titled *Paradise of Dissent*, the spectacular achievements of this formative period in the Eastern colonies took place in the field of material advance rather than in the attainment of Christian brotherhood or in the pursuit of 'that better country', in comparison with which, asserted the Van Diemen's Land Colonial Missionary and Christian Instruction Society in 1843, 'all the possessions of the world are a bauble'. But there was a religious dimension to this raw and bustling frontier, and the author sets himself to show how 'the Churches, State, and people

reacted to each other in eastern Australia during the critical years before the gold rushes'.

British precedents and experience found reflections in the colonial mirror, but often experiments were carried out in Australia which time-honoured custom and the drag of tradition made unthinkable at home. Provision was made for the increase of clergy and the building of more churches and schools. State aid to organised religion, however, brought financial and political problems, and the author shows how a society with as yet only the embryonic structure of democracy strove to find a *modus vivendi* in a delicate sphere where opinion was divided and resources easily over-taxed. By 1850 many future developments had been foreshadowed. The Anglicans, despite a considerable head-start, failed to attain the status of established ascendancy their leaders had coveted. The Irish, a very substantial minority indeed, the Scots Presbyterians, and the dissenters acted confidently enough to take advantage of the real denominational equality which began to emerge. There were predictable rivalries, clerical inefficiency, narrow jealousies, and much apathy: but there was also enlightened tolerance, conventional piety, devoted public service, and even heroic Christian witness. Practical considerations of geography and finance, as well as pressure for a national system and the principled opposition of secularists, led inevitably to closer scrutiny of the Church schools. Though his emphases are his own, Dr Barrett gives an unbiassed account of the fluctuations in the fortunes and attitudes of the various paladins who became involved in the passionate initial debates about education: Robert Lowe, the Anglican Bishop Broughton, the Sydney Benedictines, Wesleyan teachers, and a number of remarkable Catholic laymen. The final section briefly examines religious opinion and practice, and contains many insights into the nature of religious belief and its social role, all well-grounded on contemporary evidence.

No respectable library of Church History or Education could afford to neglect this judicious and coherent book.

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