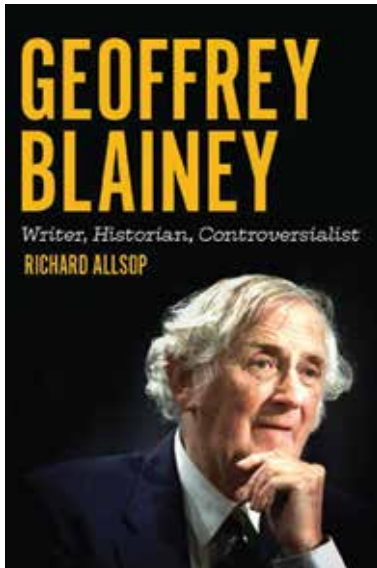


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Geoffrey Blainey: Writer, Historian, Controversialist

By Richard Allsop

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This is an insightful, meticulously researched and thorough biography of the renowned Australian historian, Geoffrey Blainey. Author Richard Allsop explores the life and career of one of Australia's most renowned, influential and controversial historians: Geoffrey Blainey. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this biography and the detailed research in footnoted Chicago 16th referencing style, which documented Blainey's

critical books such as *The Tyranny of Distance* (1966), *Triumph of the Nomads* (1975) and the *All for Australia* speech (1984) that gave him his reputation as 'a controversial' and 'conservative historian' sparking 'one of the most heated political controversies in Australian history' (p. 140). However, Allsop undermines this predominate view of Blainey being a conservative, right wing historian where 'Blainey's historical writing, both in method and outlook, has been far from conservative' (Allsop, blurb).

The layout of the chapters moves from the introduction, where Allsop gets to the heart of Blainey's reputation as 'controversial,' and then goes onto show that this view of him undermines him as a great historian who did not prescribe to any historical school of thought but rather was someone who was balanced, progressive and unique in his historical methodology and writing style.

Allsop is an engaging storyteller whose narrative of Blainey's life was interesting and kept me intrigued. A key example of this is when Allsop begins his first chapter on Blainey, 'Early Influences,' with the words: 'Geoffrey Blainey could have easily died when he was just a few weeks old.' This is an immediate narrative hook that engages the reader.

The first chapter also pinpoints the people who were key influences for Blainey: his father Clifford, a Methodist minister; his mother, Hilda; and his teachers at Wesley College, specifically his History teacher, 'Mr Gwillim, whose head was a filing cabinet full of quotations,' (Aiton '10 Things' cited in Allsop, p. 9)

and his English teacher, A.A. Phillips, who coined the phrase 'the cultural cringe'. Phillips in particular, with his snappy and memorable phrases, seems to have inspired Blainey's own memorable quotes: 'the tyranny of distance' and 'the black armband of history.' It's interesting to note, too, that 'many of Australia's most prominent historians had fathers who were ministers of religion' (Allsop, p. 2). Notable among these are Keith Hancock and Manning Clark, who are also frequently aligned with Blainey in 'the conservative historians' camp.'

Allsop continues to show the many different mantles Blainey takes on as a historian, from 'freelance' to 'academic' to 'progressive,' where his roadblock became his 'Immigration Controversy' speech, which forced Blainey to resign from his position at The University of Melbourne and become a 'freelance historian' again while constantly being labelled as 'the controversialist.'

It is also crucial to note that Blainey had a crucial role to play in the History Wars with Stuart McIntyre and Anna Clark, who were labelled by Blainey as wearing 'the black armband of history' while the aforementioned historians retaliated, accusing Blainey, Clark and Hancock as all wearing 'the white blindfold of history.' Allsop then moves to perfectly summarise Blainey's prevalence as both an 'Australian historian' and 'world historian' in the conclusion of the book.

This book is an interesting read that will help teachers and students of VCE Australian History understand Blainey's role as a pre-eminent Australian historian.