

Kritikos

agora reviews

Available online at agora.htav.asn.au/reviews

Books available for review are listed online at agora.htav.asn.au/books



Lessons from History

Edited by Carolyn Holbrook, Lyndon Megarrity and David Lowe

July 2022

NewSouth

432 pp, paperback

ISBN: 1742237479

RRP: AU\$39.99

Review by Matthew Allanby, Xavier College

Lessons from History contains contributions from distinguished Australian historians who have much to offer on the importance of history when dealing with Australia's contemporary challenges. There are twenty-two chapters that advocate and explain the importance of history to Australian public policy. Three chapters are on how historical knowledge makes better policy, and nineteen chapters trace the history of various contemporary debates. The topics range from David Lowe's 'Foreign Aid: Australia's Reputation at Stake' to 'The Neglected North: Developing Northern Australia from the South Since 1901'. Each chapter is fourteen to eighteen pages, so the

book does not have to be read in its entirety or sequentially, but I would encourage the reader to do so as it provides memorable quotations such as, 'History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme,' (p. 95) and 'Students find the violence and tragedy of the First World War fascinating but are uninspired by the greybeards of Federation' (p. 343). Each chapter ends with 'lessons from history', which returns to the central question: what can history teach us about Australia's policy conundrums?

The breadth of issues discussed is a strength of the book. It is well-written with no images, but the occasional graph illustrates the author's argument. The writing styles fluctuate from each contributor but include some beautiful prose, such as, 'Like a soft but insistent bass, history thrums the rhythm of human experience' (p. 349).

In my opinion, the most impactful chapter is Hugh White's 'War with China: What Can History Teach Us?' because it focuses on Australia's motivations to join previous wars and what can be understood from these engagements if war were to arise with China. White finishes with, 'We also need to recognise and meditate on what might have happened had "our side" not won the last two major power wars. Because we may not win the next one.' Another excellent chapter is 'How Can We Fight the Far Right' by Evan Smith, which traces the rise and fall of the far right throughout the twentieth century to show that the contemporary far-right has many precedents and places Hansonism in its historical context.

There are two limitations for the History teacher. First, the book is already slightly out of date given many of the articles were written

before the 2022 federal election and during the peak of COVID-19. Second, there are few practical and clear implementations in the classroom for the History teacher, except as extension for VCE students. However, the book is not exclusively intended for teachers, so these limitations are expected, and it is a wonderful read to nourish teachers' content knowledge.

In conclusion, *Lessons from History* affirms the work of History teachers and historians. Although increasingly dated and with few applications for the classroom, it provides an excellent historical overview of contemporary issues, and advocates for the importance of history in our public life. This book is an asset to our contemporary debate and invaluable for the informed History teacher.