



## Book Review

Stuart Piggin and Robert D. Linder (eds.), *The Fountain of Public Prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian History 1740–1914* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2018), pp. xiv + 674. ISBN 978-1-925523-46-1 (hbk). RRP \$49.95 or £38.50.

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*A milestone, diligently researched and engagingly written:* These are some of the adjectives that spring to mind when one opens this handsomely produced *magnum opus* on which the leading Australian Evangelical historian, Stuart Piggin and his US American associate Robert D. Linder have been collaborating for almost 30 years. It has been worth the wait. Those who are serious about ‘honest history’ will welcome this book on a dimension of Australian history studiously avoided or misunderstood by the ‘secular Mind’. As Piggin is at pains to document there is a ‘parallel universe’ in this country occupied ever since the arrival of the First Fleet by men and women who were *different* because their lives were dedicated to living out what they perceived was the genuine Christian ethic. And these people had exercised considerable creative influence on society through their engagement with trade unions, political parties, the struggle for the rights of the indigenous inhabitants and of course, their activity within the non-Roman Catholic churches themselves. Piggin and Linder invite/urge us to look again at the sweep of Australian history and examine our prejudices towards what many fellow citizens might call ‘wowsers’. These were/are people whose sense of morality allegedly drove them to deprive others of their sinful pleasures, especially liquor. A leading Australian secular historian, Stuart Macintyre, assessed them in volume 4 of the *Oxford History of Australia* (Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 112–13), saying: ‘The achievements of the wowsers were impressive; they passed laws that restricted obscenity, juvenile smoking, raised the age of consent, limited gambling, closed down many pubs in 1915–16, established a 6 pm closing hour for pubs which lasted for decades.’

All this and more is born out in the present volume. The authors, of course, are very well aware that ‘wowsers’ were considered a problem by many fellow citizens, indeed they were people of essentially a killjoy mentality. But their ideal, or self-perception, was that they were really public-spirited citizens who derived their values from the Christian Gospel. That is what ‘Evangelical’ means for them. They perceive themselves as the ‘true’ Bible-believing Christians and this is what imparts to them their sense of superiority over catholic-minded Christians whom they regard as hung-up on sacerdotalism and sacraments when all a good person needs is the *sincere milk of the Word* (1 Pet. 2.2) to be taken in like mother’s milk, of course.

Clearly Evangelicals of this mindset inhabit all non-Roman Catholic churches and are permanently at war with their more ‘liberal’ co-religionists. Obviously, the

latter, including the socialist-oriented Anglo-Catholics (remember Fr John Hope of *Christ Church St Laurence* in Sydney) would applaud the social reforms championed by the Evangelicals, but they have serious reservations about their intellectual integrity. Their capacity to inhabit two universes and their lack of inclination to 'look over the fence' theologically/philosophically is seriously questioned. For example, Evangelicals never seem to enquire about the origin of the Bible which they regard as their infallible guide, indeed 'God's propositional Word' (James I. Packer). The historical fact is that the New Testament was assembled from a range of primitive writings related to the life and ministry of the Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth by the people who had been his followers. They were, in fact a Jewish sect out of which grew the Christian Church largely due to the missionary efforts of Saul of Tarsus (St Paul). In short, the Bible is a human artefact and so cannot be regarded as 'God's propositional word'.

The irksome aspect of the kind of Christian so admired by Piggin and Linder is that they seem never to have heard of the famous German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1972) and his epistemology, and what is equally disturbing, neither are they at all interested in anything beyond their purview. For example, the achievements of human culture, especially in Church music, is for them a distraction as is also everything political unless it impinges on their parochial concerns. They prefer to live in a *parallel universe*.

It is nevertheless the great merit of the present authors to have been so diligent in producing this book which may be regarded as required reading for all intelligent citizens who really want to understand what drives and has driven the 'wowser' section of the antipodean community. These are good people inspired by an 'Evangelical' ethic who, nevertheless, in the practice of their beliefs while capable of doing a great deal of communal good, can and do inflict a massive amount of personal harm on the 'other' who does not share their commitments.

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