



Donald Richmond Horne
(1921–2005)

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Professor Donald Horne, who died on Thursday 8 September 2005, was a vigorous promoter of public debate. He possessed a powerful weapon: he wrote clear, engaging prose.

Born on 26 December 1921, the son of a teacher who served in the First World War, Horne was reared in the upper Hunter Valley. He went to high schools in Maitland, Parramatta and Canterbury, but a vital part of his education came from his maternal grandfather, who had been a conductor in a railways' sleeping-car. Horne studied at Sydney University, where he edited *Honi Soit*, the student newspaper—an exciting job in that era—and sat near the feet of the philosopher Professor John Anderson. Anderson aimed his verbal rifle at a variety of important ideas that floated or resided overhead, and Horne also learned to be a marksman.

Eight years as a working journalist, at first in Sydney and then in London, tightened Horne's prose style but did not impair it. Promoted to various editorial posts in the popular press, he moved eventually to the editing of more serious magazines, including the *Observer*, *Bulletin* and *Quadrant*. For three years in the 1960s, he worked for an advertising agency in Sydney.

Donald was essentially a Sydney man: 'my bias in favour of Sydney is obvious', he once wrote. Melbourne did not appeal to him, partly because of its puritanical attitudes but partly because in the 1950s and 1960s it was (for the last time) the hub of political and financial power. He thought Australia was drifting, and Melbourne deserved its full share of the blame.

In 1964, Horne caught the nation's imagination. His paperback edition of *The Lucky Country*—with a painting by Albert Tucker on the front cover and a photograph of an earnest author wearing dark-rimmed spectacles on the back cover—became a persistent talking point. The book pleaded for major changes in Aboriginal affairs and immigration. It claimed that the continent could never be adequately defended. It argued that most leaders of most Australian professions and trades and activities were secondrate, that Australians were not innovative, and that the problem of the seven parliaments was that 'they haven't got enough to do'.

The critic Geoffrey Dutton, rereading the book after a gap of some 20 years, rightly remarked on the 'keenness of Horne's observation' and the fact that many of

the changes he called for had come to pass. There is a tendency to exaggerate the aggregate sales of popular books, but Horne's *Lucky Country* probably sold close to a quarter of a million copies—a huge total for a book conceived in a nation holding only 11 million people.

This decade of national introspection had been heralded by Robin Boyd's excellent book, *The Australian Ugliness*, and by Peter Coleman's vital collection of essays, *Australian Civilization*. But Horne, partly because his judgements on national life were so sweeping and critical, attracted far more attention. Few other Australian books have been more widely discussed at first appearance and few more misunderstood as the years rushed by. The meaning of the phrase 'Lucky Country' came to be flavoured by people who had not read the book. The burst of mineral discoveries in the 1960s persuaded them that this was the lucky country and that—contrary to Horne's actual argument—Australia's future was assured! Part of the fault for this misunderstanding was Horne's: the phrase 'Lucky Country' lent itself to rival meanings.

His history entitled *The Australian People* appeared in 1972. Brimming with ideas and speckled with captivating phrases (NSW and Tasmania were labelled 'the pickpocket colonies'), it seemed likely to attract a following among historians, but somehow it didn't. Horne wrote other books on a diversity of topics, but none achieved the impact of *The Lucky Country*.

From the 1970s to the mid-1980s, Horne taught political science at the University of New South Wales where, close to retirement, he became professor. Later, he chaired the Australia Council and served as chancellor of the University of Canberra. He continued to write prolifically, attacking those he disagreed with: our number did not diminish as the decades went by. Almost to the end, he remained a dashing bee, often pollinating, occasionally stinging, before flying away to new fields.

Geoffrey Blainey

Acknowledgement is made to the Melbourne Age, in which several of these sentences first appeared, on 10 September 2005.