

BRIAN HINTON FLETCHER OAM FRAHS FFAHS FAHA

1931–2018



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Brian Fletcher was a gentlemanly scholar of distinction among a generation of highly productive post-War Anglo-Australian historians. He published foundational research on land and society in colonial Australia, which was later widened to reflect his deep involvement in the public culture and educational institutions of his new home society.

Continuity and tradition mattered as much to him as change – perhaps best symbolised by his sense of a dual-identity and his life-long High Anglicanism. In retirement he posed himself the difficult question: emigrant or émigré? His answer lay somewhere between the two. He never lost his identification with things English; and his approach to Australian culture and history reflected that influence. His wife teased him when barracking for the English cricket team when it toured. But he balanced this enduring sporting loyalty with an admiration for Australian society: ‘I welcomed the absence of a class system, the fact that every effort was made to provide opportunities for all, [and] the friendliness of the Australian people...’

Brian nurtured many cohorts of undergraduate and post-graduate students in modern Australian history,

while he also gave selflessly to community organisations. Appropriately, in 1987 he became the foundational Bicentennial Professor of Australian History at the University of Sydney, a prestigious chair funded in part by the State Government.

Brian Hinton Fletcher was born on 24 September 1931 the first son to a middling English family (his father was a clerk and his mother a seamstress). The family lived in Uxbridge, then a semi-rural county market town on the outskirts of Greater London. He was named for his father, who left the marriage when Brian was aged six. His mother married again – to a handsome and dashing Australian actor, Carl Schaeffer – by whom she had further sons. It was he who brought the family with him when he returned from England in late 1948.

Brian had fortunately become a scholarship boy by virtue of success in the famed English ‘Eleven Plus’ examination. This gave him access to an ancient English school – Maidstone Grammar in Kent (established 1549) – with its Ovid motto ‘*Olim Meminise Juva*’ [“One day it will be pleasing to remember”]. Traditional learning and discipline, English sports, chapel and cadets, were at the centre of that formative experience. Along with High Church Anglicanism, Brian also imbibed pride in Britain’s imperial and wartime achievement, a reverence for monarchy, and a commitment to conservative Protestantism. This was an outlook that he was to retain for the rest of his life.

The Second World War became part of Brian’s teenage years as Maidstone was on the flight path of German bombing raids and with an RAF aerodrome close to Maidstone at Malling. Allied victory brought joy along with severe rationing.

The family were to join the wave of post-war United Kingdom immigrants. Rupture as much as adventure marked Brian’s transfer to Australia, a country which at first struck him as unfamiliar and lacking the cultural institutions and qualities which were so important to him. Eighteen-year old Brian immediately enrolled at the University of Sydney on a Commonwealth Scholarship and where over the next few years he completed a BA with Honours, MA, and Diploma of Education. He then taught briefly at Westmead Junior Technical School.

Completion of his research Masters Degree earned him a recall to the University as a teaching Fellow and then

temporary Lecturer in History in 1956. He returned briefly to secondary school teaching at Drummoyne High School in 1958 only to be offered yet another stint as a temporary Lecturer at the University of Sydney. This time he found himself sharing an office with another talented young scholar, Miss Beverley Wright – who had initially been admitted to study Medicine – and whom he was subsequently to marry. This brought domestic happiness and eventually five children – Stephen, Martin, Geoffrey, Angela and Nigel – but it also temporarily ended Beverley's career in Educational studies, since the University did not permit husbands and wives to work in the same department. Beverley later became a distinguished staff member at Sydney Teachers' College, and then in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney.

When Brian was offered a tenured Lectureship at UNSW in 1960 he moved to the Kensington campus. There he was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1968 and completed his PhD thesis, in 1971.

During his years at Kensington Brian was required to teach courses in European history that extended from the French Revolution to the end of the Second World War. A significant product of this teaching was his book *The French Revolution and its Wider European Impact* (1967).

In 1973 Brian returned to the University of Sydney as a Senior Lecturer in History. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1977, and appointed to the Bicentennial Chair in Australian History in 1987. While he had greatly enjoyed his years at UNSW, and had pondered hard over leaving, it is fair to suggest that he viewed the University of Sydney as his spiritual home. Here he could focus on teaching Australian history, and indeed contribute in a significant way to expanding the Australian component of the History Department's curriculum. Until then the Department had offered only one course in Australia history, and that was at third year level. In collaboration with other colleagues, Brian introduced a range of Australian courses at second as well as third year level, focussing his own offerings on the pre-Federation period. He also taught the MA by coursework program, which included an advanced comparative course in 'British settler societies' with Deryck Schreuder, the 4th Challis Professor from 1980.

Brian also wanted to return to the University of Sydney because it meant that he could work collaboratively with two History professors – John Manning Ward and Marjorie Jacobs – whose understandings of Australian history and views of the role of universities he shared and admired. Like them, he valued an approach to history that was meticulous, empirical and restrained. He also shared their distrust of the nationalist school of Australian historiography, arguing instead for an approach to Australia's past that located it within a

British Liberal Imperial context. His jointly edited text of Ward's posthumous work, *The State and the People: Australian Federation and Nation-Making, 1870-1901* (2001), epitomised that vision. In this context he declined to embrace the new social and cultural histories with their particular theoretical concerns for race, gender and wider global contexts. Instead, he adhered to a style of social history rooted in an older English (Imperial) historiography.

Brian also shared the understanding of the department's professors that they had a particular obligation to lead the department – by making appointments, determining the curriculum and directing the research culture. When, in 1972, the sub-professorial staff began what became a sustained campaign to limit professorial power – and bring about a more consultative administrative system – Brian sided with the professors. In the end, changes were made and consultative systems introduced – although the more radical demands for complete 'democratisation' were abandoned. These were tumultuous times; but throughout it all Brian exerted a stabilising influence. He promoted a spirit of collegiality that bridged the factions, ensuring that divisions in the department were eventually healed. As Head of Department in the mid-1980s, in particular, Brian adopted a consensus style. When he became a professor he sometimes lamented that professorial status and authority were not what they once were, but he also acknowledged that the University needed to move with the times. Sometimes he wistfully suggested that had professors retained their traditional authority they might have prevented the transformation of universities into instruments of the state. With a chuckle he even sometimes reminded a former 'radical' who became the inaugural Head of School, that he was less consultative and more authoritarian than John Ward had ever been!

For his contribution to Australian history Brian was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities, a Fellow of the Royal Australian Historical Society and a Fellow of the Federation of Australian Historical Societies. He was to be the author of some 14 books covering an extraordinary array of subjects. Many were academic, research-based books, dealing with such subjects as grazing and farming in NSW, colonial governance and politics, and Australian historiography as it applied to both professional and amateur historians.

Brian's commitment to the promotion of history in the wider community is reflected in his fine histories of Mitchell Library and the Rotary Club of Sydney. For many years he served on the NSW Board of Studies Modern History Syllabus and HSC Examination Committees. Brian was a long term member of the Council of the Royal Australian Historical Society, and co-editor of their journal for 26 years. In his later

years, however, he became increasingly focussed on the history of the Anglican Church in Australia. In part this reflected his strong High Church allegiance; in part also his need and determination to find a persisting English cultural influence in a society which was increasingly moving away from its original anchorage in a British cultural heritage.

Brian will be especially remembered for two of his major scholarly works. The first, *Landed Enterprise and Penal Society: A History of Farming and Grazing in New South Wales Before 1821* (1976), is based on his two postgraduate theses. It details the key role of agriculture in ensuring that NSW quickly became self-sufficient in food production, and how primary production stimulated both individual and colonial prosperity. It remains a pioneering study in Australian social and economic history.

The second was *Ralph Darling: A Governor Maligned* (1984). Brian's aim was not only to rehabilitate the career of a colonial Governor whom contemporaries and historians regarded as both possessed of poor political judgement and authoritarian tendencies, but also to assess colonial conservatism more positively. While the study did not meet all of those aspirations, Brian nevertheless demonstrated that the NSW system of governance was then not without its virtues, and that colonial liberals were not without their vices.

As an Emeritus Professor Brian retained his connection to the University of Sydney after his retirement in 1999. Although he continued to supervise PhD students he

became less interested in writing academic history than in producing books that appealed to a wider community, especially Anglican church-goers. He and Beverley made regular trips to the United Kingdom, worshipping at many of the historic London churches. These visits deepened his commitment to Anglicanism and re-affirmed his life-long belief that he remained as much English as Australian. He addressed numerous historical societies, family history groups and University of the Third Age classes. He received a Centenary of Federation Medal for contributions to Australian history in 2001; and in 2007 the History Council of NSW awarded him its Annual History Citation. He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 2012. He also remained a dedicated Rotarian, and in 2005 was awarded a Paul Harris Fellowship for his dedication to and work for the organisation.

Retirement provided Brian with more time to spend with Beverly, his children, his grandchildren and his garden. But if he was comforted by the stability provided by his domestic life he remained puzzled (and sometimes disturbed) by the rapid changes that took place in the University after his retirement, and he never quite approved of the History Department's absorption into the multi-disciplinary School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry. But as a colleague, always supportive and cheerful, he remained admired and respected. He is surely missed. *Vale Brian*.

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