

GEOFFREY CURGENVEN BOLTON AO

1931–2015

FELLOW · ELECTED 1974

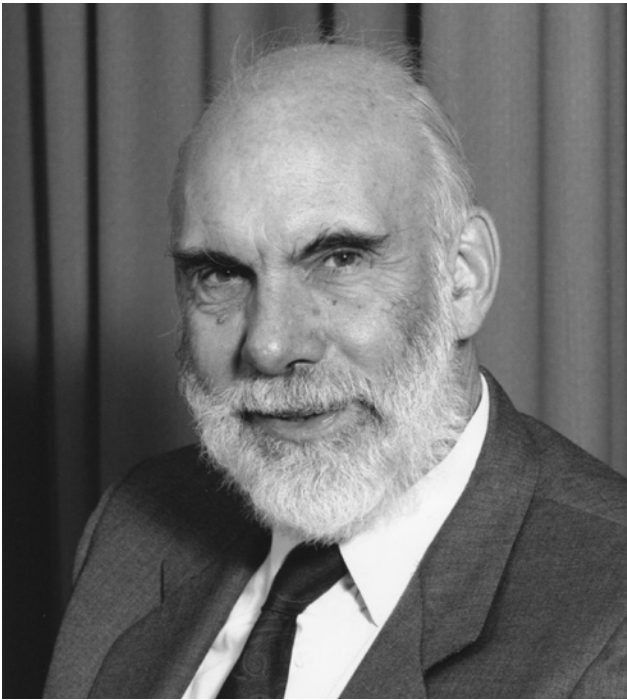


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Geoffrey Bolton was the most versatile and widely travelled of his generation of Australian historians. After completing a BA and MA at the University of Western Australia, a Hackett fellowship allowed him to study overseas, and he followed many earlier historians in choosing Balliol College in Oxford. Keith Hancock recruited him to the burgeoning Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University (ANU) and after that he was an early appointment at Monash University. He returned to a chair at the University of Western Australia in 1966, at the age of thirty-five, but in 1973 was attracted once more to pioneering in a new university, Murdoch. The stint there was punctuated by three years establishing the Australian Studies Centre in London, and in 1989 he accepted a chair at the University of Queensland. His final academic post was back in Perth at Edith Cowan University, though following retirement in 1996 he became the Chancellor of Murdoch University.

Geoffrey's interest in history began with reference works and historical fiction in the family home. The elder son of English-born parents, he displayed a precocious intelligence and at the age of eight could recite the regnal dates of the British monarchy – as throughout his

life he could passages from Charles Dickens' *A Child's History of England*. A secondary scholarship took him to Wesley College, where at the age of sixteen he won the State exhibitions for History and English, with distinctions in Latin and German. At university he contributed scripts to the ABC's local radio station, won a state quiz competition, helped establish the forerunner to the literary journal *Westerly* and edited the undergraduate newspaper, *Pelican* (with John Stone as business manager and Rolf Harris as cartoonist). He first travelled beyond his home state in 1950 by arranging a conference of university newspaper editors in Melbourne. His counterpart there, Geoffrey Blainey, wrote to say he saw no need for such a conference and, in an odd anticipation of their later debate over the tyranny of distance, Bolton replied that he would if he lived in Perth.

For his honours thesis Geoffrey explored the career of Alexander Forrest, surveyor, politician and businessman, which he expanded into a monograph while completing a Masters thesis on the Kimberley pastoral industry – his informants included Mary Durack and Don McLeod. At Oxford he was taught by Richard Southern, Christopher Hill and E. H. Carr, and obtained first-class honours in Modern History before undertaking a DPhil. His thesis, published subsequently as *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union* (1966), recast the traditional interpretation of the measure with a command of detail and felicity of expression that became his hallmark. Participants in a conference to mark the bicentenary of the union more than thirty years later declared that his book remained the authoritative account; its findings were regarded as 'axiomatic'.

The doctoral thesis was completed on a research fellowship at the ANU, which Keith Hancock arranged in 1957 so that Geoffrey could write a regional history of North Queensland. Before leaving Oxford he married Carol Grattan, who had read English at Lady Margaret Hall, and they arrived with no intention of settling permanently in Australia. After completing his book on the Irish Act of Union, Geoffrey embarked on a biography of William Eden, an influential diplomat, administrator and member of Pitt's Cabinet, and he would subsequently write an innovative survey of *Britain's Legacy Overseas* (1973) that anticipated later interest in 'The British World'. But the time at the ANU was formative. His North Queensland study, *A Thousand Miles Away* (1963),

confirmed an aptitude for historical fieldwork; he was drawn into Hancock's interdisciplinary wool seminar and collaborated with Ann Moyal, then laying the foundations of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, on a biographical register of the Western Australian parliament. This was followed in 1967 by a biography of Dick Boyer who had recently retired from chairing the ABC, a man of humanist and liberal views with which Geoffrey identified.

John Legge, Geoffrey's former teacher at the University of Western Australia and foundation professor of history at Monash, recruited him to a senior lectureship there in 1962. Partly because Geoffrey Serle taught Australian history and partly because Geoffrey Bolton wanted to keep his horizons wide, he took responsibility for European history. He soon developed the style of lecturing that intrigued generations of students. Dispensing with a script he spoke in a measured tempo, sometimes examining the floor and sometimes the ceiling as he searched for the best order of exposition, but never for a name, date or correct syntax. The beard adopted at this time reinforced an impression of capacious sagacity.

Appointment to a chair of history at his old university in 1966 stimulated the next book, *A Fine Country to Starve In* (1972). It was an early exercise in social and oral history, and also introduced his argument that Western Australia's isolation and cohesiveness allowed it to weather the hardship of the 1930s with less internal conflict than other states. Younger historians cut their teeth by assaulting this 'gentry myth' of Western Australian exceptionalism and Geoffrey made a mild reproof in a second edition of the book in 1994. Far from upholding local ways, he wanted to broaden teaching and research in the History department and Faculty of Arts, which he served as Dean. At the same time he was drawn into the work of the state museum and library, chaired the state working party of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and played a leading role in preserving and promoting the Dutch shipwrecks recently discovered on the state's coast.

He began at this juncture to feel his career might resemble those of earlier men such as Fred Alexander in Perth or Gordon Greenwood in Brisbane, 'destined to pursue a fruitful career as teacher, administrator and minor public figure in a middle-sized state capital, but not quite equal to the writing of first-rate Australian history'. In this spirit he threw in his lot with the new Murdoch University, becoming a foundation professor in 1973 and pro-Vice-Chancellor in the early years. There he introduced an imaginative new history program in an interdisciplinary setting, and his own course on environmental history led to the widely praised *Spoils and Spoilers* (1981). By that time he had been commissioned to edit the *Oxford History of Australia*, and devised a plan of five sequential, single-author volumes, in contrast to the

planned *Bicentennial History* with its mammoth team of scholars working on five reference volumes and five 'slices' of a single year of the Australian past.

But his plans for Murdoch were thwarted by the economic downturn in 1975 and the freeze on university funding over the subsequent decade. He grasped the opportunity to establish the Australian Studies Centre in London in 1983 as a respite from too many calls on his time, but found the duties of the post left little opportunity to advance the Oxford History and other writing projects. Return to Murdoch in 1985 brought no relief and he continued to take on more commitments. He travelled regularly to meetings of the Academy (to which he was elected in 1974), though was more active in the Academy of the Social Sciences (of which he became a Fellow in 1976). In 1985 he became an inaugural member of Council of the National Maritime Museum and service on other national bodies required frequent travel. Appointment to a chair at the University of Queensland in 1989 brought respite from distraction and a chance to consolidate at a time when things started to go his way.

His overdue volume of the *Oxford History of Australia* proved a success. Covering the period 1942 to 1988, it presented a wide-ranging, deftly constructed narrative of the country's fortunes from wartime emergency to Bicentenary celebrations. The history was responsive to the new currents of historiography, especially gender, ethnicity, Indigenous and environmental history, which are woven into the treatment of economy and society. The actors are drawn with characteristic deftness: Chifley, 'whose calm and adroit managerial skills hid a hard core of anger against privilege'; Menzies, 'a politician of consummate professionalism who places a low value on ideology'; Whitlam ('on the fourteenth day Gough rested'); Joh Bjelke-Petersen, 'as usual going to extremes'. For his title Geoffrey chose *The Middle Way*, and reminded readers that it was a guiding precept of Chinese classical civilisation as well as that of ancient Greece. Australians also eschewed extremes. If they were slow to apply native intelligence to their own needs and opportunities, leisure and pleasure kept them out of trouble.

Almost immediately, Geoffrey was invited to deliver the ABC's Boyer lectures for 1992, the name of this prestigious annual event as gratifying as the national audience it delivered. He drew his title, *A View from the Edge*, from 'working experience' in two cities in the southwest and northeast quadrants of the country, using the ABC's acronym for its outlying studios, BAPH (Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart) to remonstrate against the aggrandisement of Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. Although Geoffrey had long offered public commentary (he was a regular contributor of 'Notes on the News' for the ABC), he had been an observer rather than a controversialist. In projecting a historical

perspective onto current predicaments, his Boyer lectures signalled a greater public engagement. He blamed the excesses of the 1980s for the painful recession, and reminded listeners that earlier generations showed resilience in adversity. He regretted the short-sighted pursuit of economic growth, the adversarial rancour in public life and weakness for symbols at the expense of substance, insistent that Australians were capable of learning from their mistakes. 'A nation gains confidence to shape its destiny from an improved understanding of its past experience.' This was an exhortation to maintain the middle way.

Geoffrey had a deep attachment to his native Western Australia. He took the opportunity to return to a chair at Edith Cowan University in 1993 and worked there, with a visiting fellowship at All Souls in Oxford in the second half of 1995, until retirement in the following year. That did not end his academic involvement. Murdoch offered an attachment that led to him becoming Chancellor in 2002, and he was no stranger to the other Western Australian universities, but they were now points of reference for a seemingly endless round of public activities – speaking, chairing, launching books and attending ceremonies, mentoring, counselling, lobbying and trouble-shooting. He wrote and spoke of Western Australia's heritage with an authority and public recognition unparalleled in any other part of the country. He was named Western Australian of the Year in 2006 and an avenue on the Perth Esplanade was named after him in 2014.

In his retirement he wrote several commissioned institutional histories, and continued to produce articles, chapters and pieces on demand. Three major works

were completed in this period. *Edmund Barton* (2000) rehabilitated the reputation of its subject as a genuine statesman who exemplified the constructive qualities of mediation and consensus, the 'one man for the job' of making a federal compact. A short history of Western Australia, *Land of Vision and Mirages* (2008), distilled his remarkable knowledge of the subject with a vivid thematic unity. *Paul Hasluck* (2014) paid close attention to Hasluck's career as a diplomat, his ministerial direction of Aboriginal policy, Papua New Guinea and foreign affairs, and finally his execution of the office of Governor-General; but above all it explored with penetrating empathy the character of an intensely private man of public affairs, often disappointed but steadfast to his standards.

Geoffrey was also a man of probity; when invited to contribute an essay to a collection on the deadly sins he chose hypocrisy as perhaps the most common. He was also a singularly kind and supportive man who found comfort in his family, with an ease of manner in dealings with all. He had unusual gifts: erudition, prodigious memory and literary grace. If he was uneasy with abstract systems of thought, he applied a subtle and independent intelligence to a wide range of historical subjects. He drew from a remarkable stock of knowledge with a grasp of context and command of detail employed with a dexterity that gave his writing such lucidity. He worked across specialist fields, his interests diverse and his sympathies responsive to contemporary concerns. Above all, he was happy in his vocation and to the very last put himself at the service of history.

STUART MACINTYRE AO FAHA