

BOOK REVIEWS

Victor Barker, *Baudin's Last Breath*, Adelaide, Crawford House, 2002, 277 pp., \$29.95 (remaining copies available from the author: vicbarker@ozemail.com.au). ISBN 1 86333 237 5.

In his author's note, Victor Barker introduces his novel about the French explorer Nicolas Baudin in the following manner:

When the author was in Paris, researching material for this story, he was suddenly taken ill and found himself in the Hôtel Dieu hospital. From there on his search for the Frenchman took a strange twist that led him into a world of secret societies, stolen documents, a stolen skull, and the discovery of the beautiful woman who changed the captain's life. Nicolas Baudin was real. Victor Barker is real. Most of the characters and incidents in this novel are real. But it is a work of fiction.

There is a dreamy, surreal quality to this novel. Victor Barker has crafted an unusual literary work in which he allows Baudin to recount his story, at the foot of the novelist's hospital bed, and enriches the narrative with reminiscences drawn from his (Barker's) own years at sea.

One should always be careful about judging a work of art as historical fact, be it a tableau of past events or an historical novel. There is, nevertheless, a thesis in this novel which I think likely and which I have already alluded to in an earlier article:¹ namely, that Madame Kerivel, in whose home at the Ile de France (Mauritius) Baudin died, was his lover. Barker would have us believe, however, that Baudin's earlier relationship with the young convict woman Mary Beckwith was asexual. I find this hard to believe. After absconding from Port Jackson, Beckwith shipped in Baudin's cabin all the way to the Ile de France. Lieutenant Henri de Freycinet bluntly recorded her presence aboard: "M. B. le Cen Comdt. embarque avec lui une fille publique pour son usage particulier". According to the journal of Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, Beckwith had affairs with other members of the crew and threatened to commit suicide in Koepang (Timor) when Baudin tried to have her disembarked. Drunk and deeply distraught, she was eventually allowed to return to the captain's cabin and arrived at Port North West at the Ile de France on 7 August 1803.²

Whatever the truth of Baudin's relationship with Mary Beckwith, Barker has written an engaging novel centred on the explorer's relationship with Mme Alexandrine Kerivel. I was charmed by the manner in which

Barker has woven his tale around her and other historical figures such as Alexandrine's brothers Antoine and Jacques, her Jacobin husband Pierre François Kerivel (who was deported from the Ile de France with some fifty others in October 1799 and perished in the wreck of the *Brûle-Gueule*) and the musician Antoine Guth (another Jacobin deportee who had a wife and children at the Ile de France and returned clandestinely to the island as a stowaway on Baudin's *Géographe*). However, Barker's characterization of François Péron is imbued with the current orthodoxy: Péron the popinjay, the demon source of Baudin's woes and clouded reputation:

Every time the young peacock paused I wanted to break in and tell him not to start again. I wanted to demand that Captain Baudin return and give this young upstart the dressing down he deserved. No wonder Nicolas had sounded upset about the scientists and crew that had been wished upon him by the French authorities. Imagine three years at sea, confined in a space one hundred and twenty four feet long by thirty feet wide, with this François Péron—and a hundred similar young men [...]

Then the novelist has Baudin declare:

You're quite right you know. François Péron was a young peacock [...]. He had no respect for authority. He crawled to those who he thought could help him and sneered at those he thought could not. He regarded me from the start as an old, finished person. But worse. Much worse. He had no respect for the ocean [...]. He styled himself a médecin philosophe. Bah!

Shortly after putting these words in Baudin's mouth, Barker even has Péron, the "young peacock", interfering with the novelist's drip in hospital, sending the nurse away, and lecturing him! But a novelist has freedoms an historian can only imagine, and (as I keep reminding myself) art and historical scholarship are not bound by the same criteria—although they are by no means mutually exclusive either. Barker's novel remains fiction imbued with engaging insight. And whatever its veracity, it is a delight to read Australian fiction elegantly woven from such thread.

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Notes

- ¹ Edward Duyker, "In Search of Madame Kerivel and Baudin's Last Resting Place", *National Library of Australia News*, September 1999.
- ² See my entry on Beckwith in the *Dictionnaire de Biographie Mauricienne*, Port Louis, Mauritius, Société de l'histoire de l'Île de Maurice, n° 55, juillet 2002, pp. 1802–1803.

Stuart Macintyre and Richard Selleck, *A Short History of the University of Melbourne*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2003, 193 pp., 80 b&w illustrations, hardback, \$24.95. ISBN 0 522 85058 8.

This year we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the University of Melbourne, Australia's second-oldest university (only three years younger than the University of Sydney). The University's Act of Incorporation was passed in 1853, but teaching did not begin until 1855 when three professors took on a mere sixteen students keen to imbibe the classics, history, literature, philosophy and science. Student numbers have risen steadily ever since—though the ratio of teachers has not remained so favourable! The pass rate, however, has improved: of Melbourne's first intake, only four graduated. I am proud to be a subsequent University of Melbourne graduate and I look back with great fondness on my studies at an institution with such a sense of history and excellence. Ironically, it was not until I left Melbourne that I learned that the University's arms bore Nike the Greek goddess of victory. For me, she was always an angel amidst the Southern Cross.

A short history always requires an enormous amount of discrimination and judgement. It is hard to condense 150 years into fewer than 200 pages including index, bibliography and illustrations. Many remarkable men and women have taught and studied at the University of Melbourne. I found myself wanting to know much more, and will no doubt find my way to Geoffrey Blainey's *Centenary History*, and *The Shop* (2003), written by Richard Selleck, co-author of this present *Short History*. I was pleased to see Manning Clark mentioned on page 104, but his *Quest for Grace* (which is rich in Melbourne University lore and reminiscences) is not cited. Perhaps the desire to know more is the mark of an engaging work, but I was struck by the lack of mention of important figures such as Vincent Buckley (though his autobiographical *Cutting Green Hay* appears in the bibliography) and Augustin Lodewyckx (whose librarian son Axel's book *The Funding of*

Wisdom also makes the list of sources). Essentially there is still a need for more scholarship in this area: Blainey's work was published in 1957; Selleck's parallel recent work covers only the first eight decades of the University's history. A lot has happened since. For example, Indian Studies, the department from which I graduated, is no more. Macintyre and Selleck make a brief mention of its demise, but one could be forgiven for thinking (from the context) that this department simply taught Indian languages when in fact it also taught important subjects on the history, politics and culture of a significant chunk of humanity. French fares little better, although the towering figure of A. R. Chisholm is referred to on page 91 as confirmation of a "growing trend for Australian appointments".

This history may be short, but it is also sweet. Despite their rapid pace, the authors are occasionally able to stop and dwell on a tale or two. One charming example, perhaps apocryphal, relates to a hot summer afternoon in 1971:

building workers on a construction site to the south of the Quadrangle were pouring concrete, and to keep it from setting too quickly they played water from hoses onto the formes. From cooling each other in the spray it was a short step to directing streams at passers-by. Suddenly they were confronted by a choleric man in a suit demanding to know what they were doing. They looked at him, they looked at each other, and they turned the hose on him. Thanks to the foresight of his predecessor, the Vice-Chancellor was able to retreat to his adjacent residence.

There were many other issues hosed down at the University of Melbourne over the years. The authors certainly examine problems such as sexism and intellectual bullying (including numerous incidents in which those who held unpopular ideas were driven into the lake and forced to recant before they were released from humiliation and torment). It may come as a surprise to some to learn of the role of Edward "Weary" Dunlop in one such incident of intolerance. The reader is also reminded of how the election of the Whitlam Government and later the Dawkins reforms changed the face of university education in Australia. Today, the University of Melbourne is not just a teaching institution but a centre of excellence in scholarship and research. Yet Australian universities are now at the crossroads and those of us who hope desperately for equality of opportunity in education cannot help but be anxious about the prospect of a two-tier system where

the wealthy can buy admission ahead of those who have merit. This book may be a celebration rather than a controversial summary, but towards its conclusion Macintyre and Selleck do allude to some of the challenges of corporate involvement and changing identity:

The university has always been a cumbrous institution composed of intensely intelligent and stubbornly independent individuals, strongly attached to the ways of their particular discipline; the academic vocation depends on the capacity of teachers and researchers to make their own judgements. If those charged with leading the university sometimes despair of its protean nature, their plethora of plans and targets, incentives and disincentives risks becoming the lightning-rod of resentment. Today's university is a semi-public corporation, increasingly reliant on contracts and customers to make good the deficiencies of public provision; it is more independent of government and yet more dependent on commercial forces beyond its control.

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