

REVIEW

Malcolm Prentis, *The Scots in Australia*.
Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2008.
Pp. VII + 352. ISBN 9781921410215. AUS\$39.95.

One of the most pertinent observations to emerge from much of the recent focus on Scotland within the discipline of diaspora studies, is the inherent difficulty of offering generalisations. Well aware of the challenges that face any researcher trying to make sense of immigration into Australia, Prentis prefaces his work with questions of inclusion, ethnicity and identification. Whether one looks to affinity Scots, blood Scots, or civic Scots, there is difficulty making out their characteristics without essentialising their identity, especially in comparison to 'denial' Scots who steadfastly refuse - consciously or not - to participate in, or consume, what might be regarded as the standard set of ethnic markers. Nor do we, Prentis insists, deal adequately as historians with the Scottish failures, those migrants who were intemperate, who were lazy, who stole, who abused their family members, and who patently did not stand by the values of thrift and Christian duty (pp. 3, 6-7).

The book begins its analysis with a brief overview of emigration from Scotland to Australia, the latter being a notable example in Scotland's diaspora story as a destination for transported convicts. The second chapter considers the socio-economic and religious structure of the Scotland the migrants left behind, providing some headline estimates of the numbers of passengers, hinting at the emotional heartache caused by the decision to uproot self and family. Of course, consideration is given to those for whom the decision was imposed upon them, the Scottish convicts transported to this British penal colony between 1787 and 1840. Generally this was a much smaller per capita list compared to that produced by the English penal code, yet the smaller numbers sent out by the Scottish courts were more likely to comprise the most

serious of offenders (pp. 38-41, 43-5). Interestingly for any analysis of how ethnic symbols were to be used by the Scottish community in Australia, the majority of these convicts came from Lowland courts or were of urban origins. It hints at the complexities and contradictions in the construction of a Scottish-Australian identity simmering throughout this study. Indeed, the Scots sent out after 1840 by English courts were generally more representative of the working-class population in general, neither the worst of migrants nor the 'labour aristocracy' found in migrations to North America and elsewhere (pp. 52-3).

Some of the most useful summaries from Prentis come in chapter four's focus on the Scots who arrived in their new home. He examines these people by looking at their geographical spread, the periodisation that marked their arrival, and their personal characteristics, notably their religion, their level of literacy, their Lowland/Highland origins, and the skill-set they brought with them to a new economy. Attention is given to the Scottish contribution to agricultural science in Australia, and to industry, finance, shipping and trade. Interestingly, Prentis concludes that the Scots and Scottish-Australians were to be found disproportionately amongst the leaders of industry and commerce. There is also some suggestion of the Protestant work ethic and its characteristics of industriousness and thrift being discernable from the surviving evidence of personal histories (p. 119). The issue of Scottish over-representation in positions of political as well as economic influence is a feature of many analyses of the Scottish diaspora. The promotion of Scots within the colonial administration was a notable instance, with the first six governors of New South Wales claiming Scotland as their nation (p. 121); and again the narrative explores whether the success of Scottish migration is measured by integration into the dominant Australian culture or by charting exemplary lives that illuminate the success of the group. This tension is addressed most explicitly in back-to-back chapters 11 and 12 examining Caledonian and Australian culture. That, Prentis concludes, Scots could readily appeal to their own culture, 'risking nostalgia', and still contribute to the forging of an emerging Australian culture, 'risking disappearance' (pp. 217, 266-279) is a useful way of deepening the story. Importantly, as with all the major themes examined in this book, Prentis takes the

study forward in time to the recent past and thus provides one of the few works that acknowledge both the complexity of the historical legacy and the continued vibrancy of ethnic and civic identities in the examination of migrant group formation.

The range of variables examined in this book over a long temporal span makes it an excellent overview of the Scots in Australia, an admirable starting point for future studies. Prentis has done remarkably well to summarize a wide range of secondary sources, applying them carefully to census and other numerical data. It is important that he makes plain the challenge faced by the researcher when the extant evidence directs one to biographies of success and to explicit signs of an ethnic footprint. Doing otherwise creates an erroneous tendency to drag conclusions away from those Scots who struggled in a new environment and who lived their lives in ways better studied by the student of social class, politics or gender, or by the historian of everyday minutia. Inevitably with such a breadth of topic and period, some will find this book a little thin in places. At times Prentis teases the reader, hinting at more to come yet still crafting a coherent narrative. Of its clear and concise chapter conclusions, one might quibble and ask that they be elaborated upon to bring out the greater complexities that surface in the analysis. The book is beautifully illustrated with images that are never hackneyed, and its tables are varied and informative. In sum, this is an excellent contribution to what has become an area of study gaining quickly in political relevance as the Scottish parliament reaches out to the global Scottish community.

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