

“A secondary education for all”?: A history of state secondary schooling in Victoria

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The field of educational history in Australia, and in Victoria particularly, is long established, extensively researched and well documented. It encompasses accounts of school systems; biographies of key actors and decision-makers; studies of the legislative and constitutional origins of systems, state-level policy-making, and intergovernmental policy-making in a federal system; histories of individual schools; the movement of theories, ideas and changing sets of assumptions; accounts of teacher training; curriculum and subject histories; analyses of committees of inquiry; studies of teacher unions and so on. As suggested by these features, the canon is diverse. There is a parallel diversity in the arrangement and presentation of historical material. Some published works, for example, accord priority to accounting for the causes and effects of particular decisions and events, while others emphasize the chronological ordering of those events and still others give preference to advancing thematic understanding.

The authors of “*A Secondary Education for All*”? were commissioned by the History Council of Victoria to write a centenary study of post-primary education in Victoria. Their title (although not the question mark) is taken from the words of A.E. Shepherd, a Labor Minister of Education in 1955. In their book, the authors draw on some of the features just summarized to attempt what might be characterized as a combination of big picture and small picture history, an account of secondary schooling that is about both the trees and the wood, a bird’s eye view along with a worm’s eye view. The text is arranged in nine thematic parts, of which the key ones are government responsibility for education, students, curriculum, teachers, and schools and communities. Within these broad over-arching frameworks, the authors then synthesize the incredibly broad sweep of the educational services that have been provided by the state of Victoria since 1872. Many of these amounted to little more than the political whims of particular ministers of the day, while others were the outcome of extended and hard-fought battles by interest groups and communities. Some initiatives and programmes endured, others vanished. By weaving backwards and forwards through time within each themed area, the authors are able to convey a strong sense of historical continuity and discontinuity, lull, hiatus, doldrums, momentum and mobilization around emerging issues. One cannot help being struck by a number of features: the indelible footprint left by Frank Tate, the first Director of Education (1902–1928), in giving shape to the overall system, the post-Tate period of woeful neglect of state education consequent on post-Depression penny pinching and the appalling political instability of the 1940s, the enduring efforts of subsequent ministers, especially J.S. Bloomfield (1956–1967) and L.H.S. Thompson (1967–1979), who provided much-needed stability and yet struggled to resource the rapid expansion of post-war secondary schooling and, finally, the politicization of secondary schooling by succeeding ministers of all political hues from about 1980 to the present.



Cutting through these thematic developments there are liberal sprinklings of vignettes and personal reminiscences (by various authors) which illustrate, personally and organizationally, how individuals caught up in the developments described, experienced and contributed to the passage of events. Bill and Lorna Hannan, for example, provide (in what is arguably the most penetrating analysis in the book), an account of the burst of innovation that flowered in Victorian secondary education from the 1960s. Other on-the-ground perspectives are offered by people in schools in densely urbanized, inner suburban, outer suburban, regional and extremely isolated rural locations. There are lots of invaluable bits and pieces here, even about such seemingly mundane events as the journey to school, which bring the overall account down to a very human level by reminding readers that the experience of school (and learning) is by no means confined to what transpires in classrooms and playgrounds. One theme, milestones, is used to communicate a sense of chronology and is akin to the slicing technique adopted by historians for the 1988 Bicentenary, only in this instance the key features of succeeding decades (12 slices in all) are summarized. There is also a cross-cutting theme which highlights special events and their impacts on schools: wars, commemorations, royal tours and jubilees.

When reading this book, a particular characteristic which stands out is the Cinderella status of state secondary education in Victoria for so much of its history. With a combination of persistence, ingenuity and subterfuge, however, Tate managed to secure more than a toe-hold in a secondary schooling market which was monopolized, principally in Melbourne, by the registered (mainly Church) schools. His successors (some of them educated in that sector, incidentally) battled until Second World War to maintain the legitimacy of its high school sector. Subsequently, its rapid expansion and future were guaranteed by post-war population growth and immigration. The contrast between Victoria, in which the first secondary school (the Melbourne Continuation School) was established in 1905, and New South Wales, where high schools had been opened in the 1880s, could not be starker. Testimony to the fact that Tate's efforts and those of the other early pioneers have been rewarded is the number of early established schools that are over or fast approaching 100 years in age (e.g., Frankston High School in 2024). Apart from the high schools, the other main component of the Victorian secondary schooling, of course, was the (junior and senior) technical school sector, and it is dealt with extensively in this book. Following a major review of post-compulsory schooling in the 1980s, however, the technical schools no longer exist, although debate about the wisdom of the decision to cull them persists and is well documented by the authors.

With "*Secondary Education for All*"? Andrews and Towns have brought a degree of welcome coherence to an at times rather unwieldy Victorian secondary system. Their account is comprehensive and multilayered, although there are some gaps. As a sports-mad product of the state system, I could find very little mention of the interschool sport that was so keenly contested by boys and girls for so long across a number of codes. The writing is accessible, although every now and then with the use of our, as in the section headed "Our inspectors of education", the implanting of occasional "Did you know"-style headings of dot point lists, and the resort to slogans (such as "Government schools are great schools" to head part 9), the tone of the authors' writing, in their urge to celebrate, tends to be marred by chattiness or becomes unduly cheer squad-like.

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