

Earls Cool

[James Franklin](#)

Review of *The Oxford Book of Australian Schooldays*, edited by Brenda Niall and Ian Britain;
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Readers of “lives” of the famous know well the tendency of biography, and especially autobiography, to become steadily less interesting as the subject grows older. A predictable record of challenges met, enemies shafted, honours received and great men encountered often succeeds an account of a childhood that is a highly-coloured and unique emotional drama. Often the best pages are those on the subject’s schooldays, when the personality first tangles with the public realm. As Barry Oakley says of school in a piece quoted in the book’s preface: “Like the stage, it’s an image of life: life accelerated, life concentrated, life more formidable.”

The project of selecting just the highlights of all the stories of Australians’ schooldays promises, then, a high payoff if it is well done. It is a high-risk enterprise, though: a pointillist canvas brilliant in each fleck may easily look like mud from a distance. There are well over a hundred authors here, with only three pages or so each to paint a vignette of school. In fact, the result is an enormous success. The editors have a sure eye, and they and their research assistant, Pamela Williams, have put in the work to find the goods. Almost every piece is gripping, and quite different from the others. The total effect is additive, and is an unexampled insight into how the Australia we know came into being.

The classics are there: Henry Lawson and Patrick White, *Seven Little Australians* and *The Getting of Wisdom*, Donald Horne, Barry Humphries and Clive James. So are the many unknowns whose recollections take us into obscure corners. If there is one overall theme, it is that of sameness, difference and “fitting in”. The effect of the accumulated evidence is rather more subtle than the received ideas on “identity and difference”, multiculturalism and so on. School is where the strangeness of one’s own family, or of one’s own personality, meets the social world – itself perhaps no less weird, objectively speaking, but possessed of resources for ensuring conformity. Bringing lunch on darker bread than everyone else is a major sin in the playground, and there is hell to pay. So is speaking with a Scottish accent, being Aboriginal, preferring reading to football. The bias of the writers is of course against the pressures of conformity, which is reasonable enough, but does underplay its benefits. There is after all some

point to “assimilation”, namely the creation of a common language and common understanding that allows all members of society to deal with one another. Its opposite is not “tolerance”, but class-consciousness and ghettoisation.

The child has two, sometimes conflicting, models that demand conformity, that of the pupils and that of the teachers. It is fellow pupils who pose the lunch problem, and many of the book’s writers leave the impression that teachers and what they think are a complete irrelevance to school life. By and large, they appear as a kind of extended Addams family, a collection of barely human grotesques of disgusting personal habits and incomprehensible demands. There are only one or two pieces in the book that give the teachers a chance to answer back to the little horrors. Nevertheless, some pupils turn out to have been listening all along. They absorb at least the hidden curriculum, which they sometimes appreciate better than the teachers, as in Henry Kingsley’s *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*:

While I was learning the Latin grammar, I learnt many other things besides, of more use than the construction of any languages, living or dead. First, I learnt that there were certain things in this world that must be done. Next, that there were people in this world, of whom the Masters at Eton were a sample, whose orders must be obeyed without question. Third, I found that it was pleasanter in all ways to do one’s duty than to leave it undone. And last, I found out how to bear a moderate amount of birching without any indecent outcry.

Another recurrent theme, at least before the last few decades, is England. England, or at least an image of it, was in the nature of hidden curriculum to which the whole system sought to conform. The mental scenery induced by the books read in school was what one pupil called “a remarkably disembodied world”, full of skylarks and hawthorn. Christopher Koch writes: “Give us a child until the age of seven.’ It wasn’t the Jesuits who had us until that age, it was Christopher Robin, Buckingham Palace, Little Pig Robinson, Mr Toad, Sherlock Holmes, and a school called Clemes College. Our teachers made us keep scrapbooks on the doings of ‘the little princesses’, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. What chance did we have?” Gavin Souter recalls a Queensland schooling that inspired him with Keats’ “The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;/ The hare limped trembling through the frozen ...” It was an intensive training in the imagination, certainly. And England was not adored only in the schools that charged money to produce English vowels, those referred to by their old boys as, in Afferbeck Lauder’s transcription, the “Earls Cool” (as in “Earls Cool Tie”). Empire Day was enthusiastically celebrated in State schools. The success or otherwise of the Old Country cloning project is put into disconcerting perspective, though, by Prince Charles, in a piece written shortly after his

return from Timbertop: “Everyone asks how Australia compares with England, which is a very difficult question, as there really isn’t a comparison.”

The real Jesuits are there, of course. The Jesuit memories of Robert Hughes and John Funder are among the best pieces. But perhaps the only regrettable omission also lies in the area of Catholic education. Jennifer Dabbs’ *Beyond Redemption* is a lightly fictionalised recollection of the author’s education at Star of the Sea College, Gardenvale, and is the classic account of the Catholic childhood of legend. It is at first glance unbalanced by its portrayal of a classmate of the narrator who is quite impossibly sassy, intelligent, tall and pushy. At least, that is how it looks until one learns that Dabbs was a schoolfriend of Germaine Greer. Germaine’s own opinions are included in the *Oxford Book*. Like Dabbs’, they are by and large positive in their view of the school and the nuns. Carmen Callil’s account of the same school at almost the same time is much bleaker. The three together make Star of the Sea in the fifties one of Australian childhood’s sacred sites.

The weakness of the book – and it is not the editors’ fault – lies in its treatment of recent times. There are only half a dozen pieces written by people born after 1950, and even these are below the standard of the rest. Something has gone wrong. They are simplistic, full of modern resentment, emotional thinness and an inability to understand more than one point of view. One begins to appreciate why present-day university students swallow postmodernism. It is just possible that the problem is simply that the best reminiscences of recent times have yet to be written. Let’s hope so.