

John Hirst: selected writings, edited by Chris Feik. La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc, 2025, pp. 337. Paperback, RRP \$36.99 ISBN 978176064578.

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The publication of Chris Feik's edited collection *John Hirst: selected writings* is very welcome. It includes a wide-ranging and judicious selection of his work plus three perceptive assessments by Frank Bongiorno, Alex McDermott and Robert Manne. As Hirst was an active public intellectual and unashamed controversialist, the collection is inevitably skewed towards his shorter, punchier pieces, although his major work on colonial NSW and Federation is not neglected.

It is almost a decade since Hirst's untimely passing. He was without doubt one of Australia's greatest historians. While we have been fortunate to have produced a number of exemplary practitioners of the discipline, only a select few have had the vital spark that distinguished Hirst. He had an uncanny ability to enter into the eras he was researching and to see things through contemporary eyes. As he put it:

*Great history writing has the poise and wisdom of great literature, not committed to the society it serves but understanding it better than it did itself.*¹

¹ Chris Feik, ed., *John Hirst: selected writings*, La Trobe University Press, 2025, p 132.

An outstanding analytical ability allowed Hirst to evaluate the past in original ways that led to major historical reinterpretations. Added to this was a crisp, lucid prose style that allowed him to make complex issues comprehensible.

It is impossible to put Hirst into a neatly defined ideological box. In his youth he was an ardent Whitlamite; in later life a prominent conservative. He remained an advocate of some traditional left values but mercilessly skewered the shibboleths of fashionable leftism. A defender of Britain's record as a colonial power in Australia, he was an ardent republican. There was, however, an underlying consistency in Hirst's approach as he was inflexibly committed to hard facts and the truths they revealed.

The book opens, appropriately, with 'Changing my mind'. Hirst describes his Gethsemane moment in response to the liberation movement of the 1970s:

It was on this issue that I parted company with left-leaning, progressive people ... When authority is attacked my instinct is to come to its defence ... The danger, as I saw it, was that democratic principles and rights were being applied to all subordinate institutions, which rendered them less able to do their job.²

As demonstrated in this anthology, Hirst's multi-faceted work developed a comprehensive vision of Australian history, culture and identity. He created a new historical assessment of convict Australia, overturning the orthodoxy that it was a sadistic hellhole of clanking chains and cracking whips. The reality was more positive: 'This so-called penal colony was run according to the principles of ordinary English law ... The convicts acquired more legal rights in the colony than they had at home'.³

Frank Bongiorno has perceptively summarised other important Hirst historical revisionism:

So Geoffrey Blainey thought distance shaped Australia? Hirst was doubtful, and he outlined his case to his colleagues with characteristic eloquence ... Russell Ward reckoned that the noble bushman, the pastoral worker, was the typical Australian? What about the pioneer asked Hirst ... ; the conservative and patriotic small farmer who was widely noticed and frequently celebrated? The federation of the Australian colonies was a mere

² Chris Feik, ed., *John Hirst: selected writings*, La Trobe University Press, 2025, p 6.

³ Chris Feik, ed., *John Hirst: selected writings*, La Trobe University Press, 2025, p 16.

*business deal? Hirst wrote a whole book, and a very good one ... putting that one to rest, presenting it instead as the fruit of nationalist idealism.*⁴

Unfortunately, Hirst's intellectual honesty earned him the ire of some in the left intelligentsia which has, to an extent, meant that his achievements are not as well-known as they should be. Hopefully, this readable and stimulating anthology will rekindle interest in Hirst's work and introduce him to a new generation of readers.

⁴ Chris Feik, ed., *John Hirst: selected writings*, La Trobe University Press, 2025, p xii.