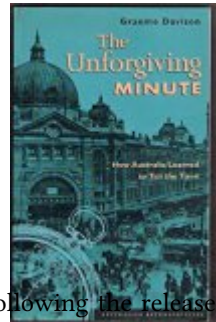


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Graeme Davison. *The Unforgiving Minute: How Australians Learned to Tell the Time*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993. 160 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-553496-2.

Reviewed by Philippa J. Martyr (University of Tasmania, Launceston)
Published on H-ANZAU (March, 1997)



This book, the third in the Australian Retrospectives series, has been around for about a year now. Its task was to present Australia's history of time and ways of measuring this 'in a style accessible to non-specialists', and it has fulfilled its obligations admirably. The book is lively, interesting and comprehensible, and would make an excellent introduction to university-level perspectives on first-year Australian history students, who may have been drilled a little too thoroughly in the convicts-conscription-Kerr sequence of high school Australian history. Marking time, making time, spending time, earning time, saving time, doing time, watching time, measuring time, and keeping time all jostle each other throughout Davison's study, until one feels like Captain Hook, pursued by a perpetually-ticking crocodile.

I must accuse Davison of playing an artful postmodernist prank on his readers. The first two thirds or so of the work, which dealt with colonial time-telling, is rather slow-moving. Then, as Davison enters the twentieth century, the pace increases, until the reader is flung, breathless, into Melbourne Central just in time to witness the hourly performance of 'Waltzing Matilda' from the giant Seiko fob-watch. I quite literally found myself running out of time reading it, no doubt due to my failing to heed Ken Inglis' warning in the foreword. But the warnings recur throughout the book; in fact, on page 80, at the very mid-point, Samuel Smiles pops out from the prompt corner like a mid-Victorian Mr Jordan, and reminds us that "the miscalculation of time involves us in perpetual hurry, confusion, and difficulties; and life becomes a mere shuffle of expedients, usually followed by disaster ... lost time is gone forever."

Davison's view can be at times a little depressing - I am astonished that there has not been a widespread out-

break of clock-smashing Luddism following the release of this book - but simultaneously compelling and fascinating. He covers so many different aspects of Australian life over the last two or three hundred years that it is hard to know where to begin. Aboriginal concepts of the passage of time, colonial time, convict time which is literally 'time', rather than the English 'porridge', the hospital as a closed society with its own rigorous time-schedule, the Eight-Hour Movement, breast-feeding schedules - the only thing I can really find missing is a bit of fun with Gough Whitlam's 'It's Time' election slogan.

Ken Inglis, in his foreword, suggests reading Blainey's *Tyranny of Distance* and Davison's *Unforgiving Minute* in tandem, which I dutifully tried, and only succeeded in generating a two-headed time-and-motion-expert in the 1950s factory of Australian history. Davison's work on its own is quite enough, especially some of his descriptions of urban and industrial time - the Pooteresque dashing for trains and buses in late Victorian Melbourne, and the frets and fears of interwar industrialisation, which parallel the woes of Orwell's George Bowling and Gordon Comstock as they struggle to keep up with an ever-accelerating society, rushing madly towards international warfare.

There are some *lacunae*. While the work is intended for the more general reader, I would have liked more references for certain sections, notably Davison's description of gold-rush Australia - gold-rush *Eastern* Australia - on pages 82-3. The section entitled 'Saving Daylight' was very informative, but was (as can, sadly, only be expected from a Melbourne-based study) replete with the usual chuckleheaded Queenslanders and straw-chewing yokels from the West prattling fables about fading curtains and crazed farm animals. He seems not to under-

stand that the reason daylight saving has been rejected several times by the voting population in these areas is that it is hot there. Exceptionally hot, in some cases. But again this should prompt questions of the hegemony of the 8-hour day as a nation-wide institution - perhaps different parts of the country would operate more efficiently on an 8-hour working day differently divided? Davison's book provides ample scope for just this sort of argument, so if the purpose of the work is to generate informed thinking and debate, it is a success.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-anzau>

Citation: Philippa J. Martyr. Review of Davison, Graeme, *The Unforgiving Minute: How Australians Learned to Tell the Time*. H-ANZAU, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=892>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History, all rights reserved. Permission is granted for the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use contact Paul Turnbull <paul.turnbull@anu.edu.au> or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.