

George Higinbotham and Eureka: The Struggle for Democracy in Colonial Victoria

(Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2018,). pp. xx + 381, \$44.00 paper.

Is there anything new to be said about George Higinbotham? The lawyer, journalist, politician and judge has attracted plenty of attention since his death in 1892 although not, curiously, a modern biography. The absence of private papers was a disincentive: Higinbotham arranged for their destruction after his death. There was no treasure trove for an enterprising biographer such as there was for John La Nauze on Alfred Deakin, and Allan Martin on Henry Parkes. An early memoir, somewhat hagiographical, came from his son-in-law; a later study by Gwyneth Dow focussed on his contribution to education reform. Stuart Macintyre, who provides a foreword to *George Higinbotham and Eureka*, has written memorably on Higinbotham, alongside Charles Pearson and David Syme, as one of three great Victorian colonial liberals. But Higinbotham has remained an enigmatic figure; unapproachable, forbidding and always, it seemed, partially obscured by his own design. He is now coming into sharper focus.

During recent restoration work at Melbourne Trades Hall, a frieze that had been painted over in the 1960s was discovered. Portraits of four men were found: George Stephenson and Samuel Plimsoll – two figures from British industrial and maritime history – alongside George Higinbotham and the man whose cause he championed, Governor Sir Charles Darling. The image of a partially revealed Higinbotham from the frieze appears on the cover of this book; an apt symbol of Higinbotham's place in Australian collective memory and historiography, as well as of the recovery and revisionism that Geraldine Moore has undertaken in this fine book, the result of her doctoral work. If Higinbotham has been mysterious, he now seems a little less so.

How does she do it? In the first place, Moore has uncovered some previously unknown or obscure details of Higinbotham's family background and early life. The role of his forebears and relatives in the founding and history of the Orange Lodge, and Higinbotham's continuing association during his youth with this branch of his father's family, the Verners, are startling findings. Moore indicates that in a colony divided by sectarian animosity, Higinbotham likely felt the pull of loyalty to his own kin in spite of his developing radicalism. He may well have been sensitive to criticism of his connections to conservative Irish Protestantism.

On his mother's side, there was Unitarianism, a different kettle of fish in its emphasis on tolerance and hostility to dogma, and he had a grandfather in the American Revolution. He was also, while living in London as a young man, close to Philosophical Radicals such as Sir William Molesworth and possibly influenced by the Christian Socialist, F.D. Maurice. Higinbotham's obsessive insistence on colonial self-government appears here in a new light. He was an heir to American republicanism in something more than an intellectual sense, and his ideas about responsible government and social justice look more like a product of London's progressive intellectual milieu than personal idiosyncrasy.

Moore also points to business failure on his father's part, which brought a slide in the family's resources and standing, and probably led to the separation of his parents. His mother's fortune was swallowed by his father's debts. Is it going too far to link Higinbotham's later championing of the rights of married women to their own property to this experience? Moore thinks not, and it is hard to disagree. Nor does it seem far-fetched to see connections between Higinbotham's championing of the poor, his family's fall from grace, and his observation, as a student at Trinity College Dublin, of the fearsome suffering of the Irish famine.

This is somewhat speculative but, in the absence of smoking guns, Moore does a very fair job of joining the dots. Her best discovery is the *Melbourne Morning Herald* or, more accurately, a series of editorials that Higinbotham wrote for it between 1854 and 1856. These place him much closer to the heart of the contemporary battles for power that culminated in Eureka, and the debates over Victoria's constitution. Her research points to the significance of Hotham's Minute of November 1855, which claimed ambitious powers for the governor; so ambitious, that they would have negated responsible government in anything like the form we now understand it. That crisis, she suggests, was only averted by Hotham's unexpected death the following month. Higinbotham's editorials, Moore suggests, were critical in this early struggle. His more famous battles of the 1860s against the Legislative Council and the Colonial Office had their genesis in views formed during these earlier conflicts.

If the strength of the book lies in its rereading of the earlier years of Higinbotham's life, Moore nonetheless also provides a splendidly engaging account of later struggles, of Higinbotham's career as a judge, and of his support for striking unionists in 1890. In the positions he took on many of the controversies of his day, Higinbotham often found himself on the losing side. But in his understanding of history's momentum, he was usually wise and prescient. This deeply researched and engagingly written book will be indispensable to students of Victorian colonial politics, as well as to anyone seriously interested in the ideas that have so largely shaped the way we are governed.

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