

*SHOWING OFF: QUEENSLAND AT WORLD EXPOSITIONS 1862 TO 1988* BY JUDITH MCKAY. ROCKHAMPTON AND SOUTH BRISBANE: CENTRAL QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY PRESS AND THE QUEENSLAND MUSEUM, 2004; 128PP, APPENDIX, NOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY AND INDEX; PAPERBOUND, \$29.95.

**F**rom axe heads floating in mercury to the night-time 'light fantastic' parade, this book traces Queensland's official contribution to twenty-three world expositions from 1862 to 1988. Grand events and novel presentations contrast with economic struggle and environmental destruction, all for government propaganda agendas to attract the right kind of British settlers, capital, trade and eventually tourists. Complemented by numerous illustrations which are rich in detail, this is the first publication to provide a comprehensive account of Australian involvement in world expositions. As such it provides an important official historical overview. And McKay 'encourage[s] others to explore this rich and rewarding topic'(p2).

The 'era of expositions' coincides with the period of industrialisation, internationalisation and modernisation which provided world expositions with the rhetoric of progress. Queensland's contribution to expositions is presented in chronological order through seven thematic chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the changing fortunes of the state and its place in the world: the transition from British colony to Australian state; the rise and fall of industries and the economy; the exploitation of resources; the ebb and flow of trade, people and investment; and a later focus on relationships with the Asia-Pacific region.

The next six chapters are arranged according to the ways in which expositions represent Queensland's changing self-image and the purposes these projections of identity have served at specific times. To begin with, Queensland portrayed itself as a resource-rich frontier to attract British settlers, then as a tropical paradise – a land with limitless mineral wealth – a farmer's paradise and more recently as a tourist attraction and place of leisure. McKay documents the innovations and the determination to participate in world expos despite difficulties of transport, drought and economic downturn, so important was their propagandising function. As with expositions themselves, there is a distinct theme of progress throughout the book culminating in the exposition in 1988 hosted in Brisbane.

McKay joined the Queensland Museum South Bank as a curator in 1988 and was able to observe Brisbane's World Expo of that year. The book began as a doctoral thesis for the University of Queensland but was extended with the support of the museum when she was awarded the Queensland Smithsonian Fellowship in 2001. The fellowship allowed McKay to conduct her research in American, British and Australian libraries and archives.

Thus McKay's sources are varied but she is largely reliant on official records. Her sources include: the catalogues of various expositions, government papers and manuscripts, speeches and media coverage. They do not, however,

necessarily provide material for an analysis of the forces behind expositions. Nor do they distinguish between formative influences or the legitimisation of these events. McKay does treat most of the sources critically and succeeds in pointing out their flaws and blatant propaganda up until the Brisbane Expo of 1988, though McKay portrays this expo in a highly positive light: it 'brought many thousands of interstate and overseas visitors to Queensland' and benefited local businesses (pp14-15). One of her few criticisms of Expo '88 concerns the 'modest offering' of the Indigenous Communities of Queensland display (p108). Otherwise, McKay only mentions other sensitive issues in passing, such as the forcible clearance of old industrial and working-class residential areas which made way for the new, modern Cultural Centre and the 'magnificent South Bank Parklands' (p15). Who really benefited from this: a conservative elite with business interests or the general population? The long-term benefits of the Expo promised by the Bjelke-Petersen government are not assessed. That the expo was an intensely local affair with Brisbane residents averaging 7.8 visits each compared to other exposition cities, where the average was two or three repeat visits, is also left unsaid. Brisbane appears to have demonstrated its capacity to put on a show to its own population. Was it really as successful in bringing foreign tourists and investment as the media and the government claimed?

Despite providing an overly rosy picture of the success of the Brisbane expo of 1988, *Showing Off* is a valuable, well illustrated and comprehensive examination of the history of Queensland through its contribution to world expositions. Hopefully this book will inspire further research into Queensland's and Australia's contribution to world expositions.

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