

*BOTANY BAY: WHERE HISTORIES MEET* BY MARIA NUGENT. CROWS NEST, SYDNEY: ALLEN AND UNWIN, 2005; 256PP, ILLUSTRATIONS, BIBLIOGRAPHY, INDEX; PAPERBOUND, \$34.95.

When I was asked to review *Botany Bay: where histories meet*, I readily agreed. I was keen to read it: it had received from the Australian Historical Association the inaugural Allan Martin Award for innovative research which makes a significant contribution to Australian history. From all accounts, including the five-star quotable quotes on the back cover by Ann Curthoys, Greg Denning and Bain Attwood, it was a good read. And this review, with its necessary deadline, gave me the perfect excuse to queue-jump the book to the top of my tottering 'to read' pile that forever grows beside my bed.

But I approached the actual *reading* with some trepidation. You see, the only 'spare' time I had to read this promising book was on my daily train ride to the city. *Botany Bay: where histories meet* might be a worthy recipient of the Allan Martin Award, but could it compete with and (more importantly) capture my attention from the inevitable distractions of the commuter train: the hot, overcrowded carriage with standing room only; the boisterous high school students conversing loudly in the vestibule; or the snatches of one-sided mobile conversations about Saturday night's exploits, the awful day at work or 'who's going to pick up the milk'?

I needn't have worried. Maria Nugent is blessed with a clear writing style, that makes the complex seem naturally simple, and an ability to meld theoretical discussions with narrative drive. I was captivated.

As the title and the illustrated cover of the book suggest, Nugent presents the layered histories of Botany Bay. The narrative is structured thematically and roughly chronologically, covering the major 'events' and urban development that have occurred at and around Botany Bay. Nugent charts the bay's transformation from sandy 'wasteland' for social outcasts to tourist destination, the emergence of and contestation over the Aboriginal reserve and more recent impacts inflicted by suburbanisation and industrial development. She contests the historiographical tradition that Aboriginal people quickly disappeared from the landscape of Botany Bay. A common thread running through the narrative is that there has always been a permanent Aboriginal population living at Botany Bay.

This straightforward structure belies the subtlety in which Nugent presents the historical narratives of Botany Bay. She is concerned not so much with the events themselves than with the stories that have been told and re-told about Botany Bay. She presents the history of a landscape and illustrates how competing stories and histories define a place and its meaning/s in communities, be they local, regional or national. Throughout the book there is an emphasis upon names: the naming and re-naming of the landscape; who is named in memorials and histories; who is remembered and who is not. Such namings, Nugent argues, are important for what they reveal about contemporary

historiographical understandings and political needs. *Botany Bay: where histories meet* is not just a local history. It is also a history about landscape, place-making, memorialisation, historical remembrance, myth-making and national identity.

To some this may sound dry and theoretical but the narrative is driven by the people and their stories. Oral histories and memories feature throughout the book. It is a compelling read. The book is well illustrated with images placed beside the relevant text rather than being presented in plates. The extended captions reinforce Nugent's points and enhance the overall presentation of the argument.

*Botany Bay: where histories meet* presents several histories all at once. First, it is a history of a place. Second, it is the history of people's connection to a place. And third, it is the story of the formation and transformation of historical remembrance of a place. And it succeeds on all levels. This book should become a standard Australian history text in schools and universities and it deserves to be taken up by the general reading public.

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