

Geoffrey Bolton, *Land of Vision and Mirage: Western Australia since 1826*, UWA Press, Crawley, 2008; pp.270; RRP \$34.95 paperback; ISBN 978 0980296 402.

In a 1998 interview for this journal, Professor Geoffrey Bolton spoke with Deborah Gare of his desire to write a 'short history' of Western Australia to update the research on this state's history since Stannage's *New History of Western Australia* (UWA Press, 1981) and Crowley's *Australia's Western Third* (Heinemann, 1970). Now, a decade on, Bolton has realised this ambition with the concise and accessible *Land of Vision and Mirage*.

His monograph spans from Christmas Day 1826 to the present day, shaping Western Australia's history around the central narrative of hasty and sometimes reckless decision-making by the state's leaders, a theme which he foreshadowed in his interview in 1998: '[T]he way in which time after time entrepreneurs and speculators turn up, painting the most rosy dreams of what can be done with Western Australia, where you have a short period of excitement followed by a long period in which the little people have to do the hard work. For example, they have to get the wheat farms going after Jimmy Mitchell has been 'boosting', and further back they have to make the Swan River Colony work after Captain Stirling has picked up his profits and gone home; it is happening now with the movers and shakers of the 1980s' (*Limina* 1998, p.95). These 'rosy dreams' that can turn to dust are at once the vision and mirage of Bolton's title, a symbol that he returns to throughout the book.

As an historian of both Western Australian and Australian history for nearly fifty years, it is not surprising that Bolton reprises some material from earlier works. For instance, his chapter titles refer to previous books, including 'A fine country to starve in' (UWA Press, 1972, 1994) and 'Happily ever after?' (*Farewell Cinderella*, UWA Press, 2003).

An important refrain in Bolton's work is his emphasis on the state's geographic isolation, which for better or worse, has been an influential element in WA's distinct political, economic and socio-cultural development. Echoing his 1992 Boyer Lecture *A view from the edge*, Bolton argues that this remoteness, combined with WA's seductive size and resources has inspired Western Australians to dream like optimistic Cinderellas.

Land of Vision includes the subjects typical of such histories, yet Bolton goes further than these traditional topics of politics, economics and society. He emphasises the importance of sports in WA culture, particularly in bridging the Nullabor and community divide. Also discussed in detail is the development of an artistic sphere of 'native talent', which grew in part from the Perth Modern School and University of Western Australia from the 1930s.

Bolton writes of WA's history in his usual fashion, emphasising themes of social justice, social welfare and environmental protection. He shows how the stories of the state's Aboriginal peoples have been so intertwined with the European narrative since settlement, that they can not be separated or silenced. He describes the inequities and discrimination ever-present in this state's society, between urban and regional WA, Europeans and Aboriginal peoples, convicts and settlers, and notes that Western Australians have a long way to go to remedy these problems. He is damning of the men of vision who were responsible for the urban and regional development that have brought great costs to the state's natural and built environments. Yet while Bolton pays service to these themes, he does so in a seamless and natural fashion, always taking the 'middle way' in his approach to history.

With Bolton's wry humour sprinkled throughout the narrative and its attractive presentation, this volume provides a useful introduction to the study of WA history, most suited I would suggest to the general reader than the scholar.

Ruth Morgan
University of Western Australia.