

Brisbane: Squatters, Selectors and Surveyors¹

(Brisbane History Group Papers No 16)

Edited by Rod Fisher and Jennifer Harrison

(Brisbane: Brisbane History Group, 2000), pp.159, RRP \$30.00, pb.

The Brisbane History Group is a collective of academic, professional, and amateur historians interested in the history of Brisbane — the capital of Queensland, its environs, and, occasionally, its extensive hinterland. The BHG, as well as conducting “historical” tours, publishes source materials and conference papers grouped loosely around a central, and sometimes forced, organizing theme. This current collection of twelve papers mostly originates from conference papers marking Brisbane’s sesquicentenary (1992) as a free settlement after two decades as a colonial penal outpost. Thus it focuses mainly on the people who helped to shape the urban settlement in the 1840s — the entrepreneurial *squatters* whose overriding commercial needs pressured government to open Moreton Bay to free settlement, the *settlers* whose small business enterprises ensured the vibrancy of the settlement, and, last but not least, the often-neglected *surveyors* whose technical expertise legitimised land ownership and town planning.

Regrettably, perhaps inevitably, the collection is of varied quality and interest. A few papers contain original insights, a few rework existing material imaginatively, and a few simply rehearse known material, albeit competently. Helen Gregory’s archetypal study of the merchant advertiser, John Williams, depicts the “rugged individualists” necessary for early social formation, while John Mackenzie-Smith — focussing on Andrew Petrie, the “father/midwife” of Brisbane — elucidates the bitter power struggles between key entrepreneurs to “boost” the three competing centres of Brisbane, South Brisbane, and Kangaroo Point. Jennifer Harrison usefully places the settlers in context of the Sydney-headquarters Brisbane-branch office nexus. No portrait of Brisbane in the 1840s is possible without the fortuitous reminiscences of “Old Tom” — Thomas Dowse — whom Mark Gosling characterizes as Brisbane’s “Samuel Pepys”. Rod Fisher imaginatively uses Dowse’s memoirs to create a virtual web-cam tour of the Brisbane scene in 1842. Colin Sheehan’s brief chronology of the slow collapse of the government’s fifty-mile exclusion zone for free settlers is a useful clarification. Papers on pioneering squatters — Arthur Hodgson and the Archer brothers — while competently rehearsing the problems of the pastoral frontier, do not sufficiently focus on their impact on Brisbane. The two papers on surveyors, similarly, are competent but mainly factual studies. A novel contribution is Robyn Buchanan’s description of the tension between Brisbane and rival Ipswich, seen through the eyes of their respective newspapers, as “Athenians v Thebans”.

Overall, a commendable cameo presentation of early Brisbane, well-supported by apt illustrations, thoroughly referenced, and with a good index. The last is much valued, as there is considerable repetition of information throughout the collection — one of the pitfalls of conference publications.

¹ This is the Accepted Version of French, Maurice (2004) *Book review: Brisbane: Squatters, Selectors and Surveyors (Brisbane History Group Papers No 16) Edited by Rod Fisher and Jennifer Harrison (Brisbane: Brisbane History Group, 2000)*. Australian Journal of Politics and History, 50 (3). ISSN 0004-9522

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