



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/JVON5553>

Karen Fox, *Honouring a Nation: A History of Australia's Honours System*

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To cite this book review: Karen Fox, *Honouring a Nation: A History of Australia's Honours System* by Jatinder Mann, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 3 (September 2023): 203-204, <https://doi.org/10.52230/MVLG5761>

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Karen Fox, *Honouring a Nation: A History of Australia's Honours System* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2022), 296pp. eBook. ISBN: 978-1-7604-65018

Karen Fox's book is a fascinating history of Australia's honours system, a hitherto neglected area of Australia's history. It opens with a reflection on the general surprise of Australians over former Prime Minister Tony Abbot bringing back knighthoods and damehoods to the Australian honours system, which many argued harked back to a bygone imperial age. But Abbot's decision to award Australia's first knighthood to the late Prince Phillip for his service to Australia resulted in anger and furore. Thus, Fox very adeptly illustrates the contemporary relevance and significance of the issue of the Australian honours system.

Fox's book has three major goals: 'First, to produce the first full-length history of the official honours system in Australia. Second, to understand how the honours system has negotiated the transition from an imperial to a post-imperial context, and the role it has played in the evolution of ideas of the nation. Third, to investigate the assumptions about gender, race, and class inherent in the system, and to analyse how it complements or conflicts with cherished cultural ideals of egalitarianism.' (p. 12). And it achieves all three exceptionally well. A particular strength of the book is the way in which it relates to broader themes of merit, citizenship, and the nation in Australian history. These are actually a recurring overarching theme of the book which is interwoven throughout all its chapters.

In terms of structure Fox takes a broadly chronological approach, beginning with the Australian Honours system from the arrival of British settlers to Federation, then the period from Federation until the First World War, the changes wrought by the First World War, the interwar period (which saw the greatest crisis faced by the system through the sale for honours scandals in the United Kingdom – UK), the Second World War and the post-Second World War period of the second half of the 1940s and 1950s, the late 1960s and early 1970s, the subsequent two decades which saw two honours systems running in parallel, and the last chapter brings the story up to the current day with the 1995 review of the whole system. Fox covers considerable ground but the book flows extremely well and she maintains her focus on her three primary aims throughout all the chapters. Another notable feature of the book is that although its focus is on the Honours system in Australia, it does make comparative reflections on the situation in the other former British settler societies of Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as the UK itself. As someone who also focuses on all of these countries this was something I really appreciated about the book.

Fox ends her discussion of the subject by focusing on some recent controversies surrounding particular recipients of Australian honours. A prominent example is the former Australian tennis player Margaret Court receiving the Companion of the Order of Australia, the highest honour. Objections were raised to this, including by Dan Andrews, the Premier of Victoria (the home state of the Australian Tennis Open) on the basis of Court's very well-known objectionable views towards LGBTQ+ people. As a Gay man myself who is also an avid tennis fan I have always been opposed to Court being honoured in this and other ways including having a major show court at the Australian Tennis Open named after her (incidentally it is one that I have never watched a match in during the several times that I have attended the event out of principle).

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Honouring a Nation: A History of Australia's Honours System*. And I want to actually emphasise the act of 'reading it' as it has a

very clear writing style which I think is sadly very underrated in academia. I recall the contrasting experience I had of reading several books for a prize I was on the adjudication committee for, in which I had to spend quite some time and energy trying to deconstruct what the author was actually trying to say before I was able to understand the substantive content of the books. Fox's book not only reads well but what she has to say is significant and timely. I wholeheartedly recommend the book to readers, both general and specialised, which is a rare thing for an academic book in my experience.

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