

Malcolm Wood, *Presbyterians in Colonial Victoria*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2008.

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**Reviewed by Peter Price
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This book fills an important gap in the historical records of those individual faith traditions that have become part of the amazing reality known as the *Uniting Church in Australia*. Internet searches, for example, reveal that the sister tradition of Methodism has multiple histories available, whereas similar searches on the Presbyterian tradition reveal much more material on doctrine, devotion and church order than on explicit histories of the tradition in this country. When something as major as the joining of various traditions into a single entity occurs, there can be a danger of losing the stories of the individual traditions prior to union, in favour of the story of unity and its emerging shape. For this reason, quite apart from the internal merits of his work, Malcolm Wood has made a significant contribution to the religious history of Australia.

Malcolm Wood, son of a former Moderator of the Presbyterian tradition, completed his doctoral thesis at the Australian National University in Canberra, in 2005. His history of the Presbyterian Church in Colonial Victoria, with its significant influence on civil and political life in Australia, has been transformed from his successful Academic dissertation into a very readable published history, which is well documented, with a fine range of illustrations, photographs and archival materials included, the latter being well interpreted and integrated.

When launching the published book, Monash University historian Graeme Davison, argued that in the context of growing secularization in Australia, Wood's purpose was neither to justify or condemn, but simply to 'describe and understand, almost anthropologically, a way of life that has largely disappeared', further noting that the 'cultural legacy' of Presbyterianism is

probably no longer recognised, since 'secularization, ecumenism and historical ignorance have rendered it largely invisible'. If such is indeed the case, and it most probably is, the broad foundational influence of a tradition that comprised about fifteen percent of the Australian population, with even higher visibility in earlier times, needs to be understood. It is arguable that nowhere was their influence stronger, nor their visibility greater, than in Victoria between the years 1837 and 1901, years that form the chronological boundaries of Wood's work.

Wood's work narrowly avoids the tag of 'Elitist' history, wherein only the stories of major figures are narrated, relating their agency in the major events that shaped the growth of the Presbyterian tradition in the colony of Victoria. Narrowly, because the book is largely peopled by the major figures of Niel Black, Francis Ormond, James Balfour (onetime Premier of Victoria) several other members of the tradition who became powerful politically, and some of the key founding clergy such as Adam Cairns, James Forbes and Alexander Marshall. Nevertheless, the book does make some effort to tap into the 'grass roots' of Presbyterianism in Victoria, alongside these giant figures. I had wished that this element might have been stronger.

The major contribution of Wood's work is an understanding of how the Calvinist principles of austerity and moral integrity influenced commerce, politics and the manners of polite society up to the end of the nineteenth century. The Scottish spirit of thrift and hard work, not a little influenced by what has become known as the 'Protestant Work Ethic', pervaded much of the business, social and political customs and principles of an era that was deeply religious at its very foundations. Here in the secular twenty-first century, the examination of our origins, not as we might see them with third millennium eyes, but in their own context, is an essential methodology. For the Presbyterians, material and social success was very much part of the godliness of their tradition. Understandably therefore, their story is very much aligned with the story of the wider polity, as much as its own Whiggish focus on progress.

My own upbringing in the middle of the twentieth century was infused with similar Protestant spirit. In my ancestral line are several Protestant Ministers (as well as a much earlier convict strain). Just as it is difficult to understand oneself as an individual outside the context of the religious influences, which remained strong in our families and communities until the late 1950s, and were infused into the fundamental ideology of the nation, so is it difficult to understand a developing nation without understanding the religious traditions that were strong in its making and shaping at more public levels. Of these traditions, perhaps the Presbyterian with its energetic sense of social progress was among the strongest.

The author has been able to look clearly and as objectively as any historian can at the tensions, conflicts, and inner politics of the Presbyterian tradition, as well as its religious and material milestones of success. Both sides are essential for understanding not just the past, but the road towards modern unity with other Protestant traditions, a progress also characterized by multiple tensions.

Malcolm Wood has written a well-researched history of the Colonial era of Victorian Presbyterianism. It is worth reading for any number of reasons – for understanding our nation and ourselves, for identifying where secular society has created discontinuities with our past and where it has had minimal influence over strong religious traditions, and most of all for recording the stories of a very interesting group of people, whose numbers as a separate communion are now relatively small – the Presbyterians of Colonial Victoria.