table, / the teenager stares at his reflection / in the butter-knife blade" (60). Correspondingly, the structure of *Awake Despite the Hour* is circular. As mentioned earlier, the collection concludes with the title poem "Awake Despite the Hour." This circularity, whilst obviously intentional, is ambiguous. The structure both supports and undermines humanity's pursuit for perfection, the quest for material and intellectual excellence.

Mitchell's close observations of the minutiae of life impart a deep concern with the global. The universality of human experience explored in this collection asks this reader to question assumptions, to take that step over the intellectual and imaginative threshold into the unknown.

Russell McGregor

HISTORY AS HUMANISM

John Hirst. *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*. Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2006. 325 pp. AUS $34.95. ISBN 097507699X.

Fittingly for Australia's foremost conservative historian, John Hirst's essays in this collection are pithy and provocative while at the same time resting on firm foundations of historical scholarship. All but one of the essays has been previously published, the earliest in 1975, the most recent in 2004. This long time-span, together with the diversity of topics canvassed, inevitably lends a certain unevenness to the collection. So too does the fact that while Hirst is usually astute and insightful in his observations, he can at times lapse into an academic stiffness bordering on pedantry.

In the introductory chapter, "Changing My Mind," Hirst provides a fascinating account of how he, as an historian schooled in the left-liberal orthodoxies of the discipline in the 1960s and early 1970s, drifted toward a more conservative outlook over the later 1970s. His is a conservatism in the true Burkean sense, not the make-believe conservatism-of-convenience of the likes of John Howard. Hirst recounts how he came to disbelieve in the 1970s libertarian "promise that the loosening of social ties would produce a better world" (6) while at the same time he held firm to "the old left causes of a fairer distribution of wealth and opportunity" (6). It was, he explains, partly his historical researches into the nature of convict society in colonial Australia that led him to both a renewed appreciation of the role of authority in maintaining social cohesion and an increasing recognition of the agency of marginalised social groups; and with these realisations, the conventional leftist dichotomy of ruled and ruling classes lost credibility.

Subsequent essays tackle a vast array of topics, ranging from whether distance really was a "tyrant" as claimed by Geoffrey Blainey, through the shortcomings of feminist historiography, to "Five Fallacies of Aboriginal Policy." They include some of Hirst's most significant contributions to Australian history, such as "The Pioneer Legend" which offers an exceptionally acute reappraisal of Russel Ward's "Australian Legend," and "Federation: Destiny and Identity" which summarises his work repositioning nationalist idealism at the centre of the federation movement. At his best, Hirst demonstrates the virtues of what some might call "conventional historiography," combining a sharp logical intelligence with detailed empirical evidence (though in view of the centrality of empirical evidence to his arguments, the editorial decision to omit all references is questionable). In "Australia's Absurd History," for example, he shows how the tolerance of modern multiculturalism must have derived from features intrinsic to Australian culture, not to characteristics brought by the immigrants themselves; while in 'The Communist Threat' he highlights the contradiction at the heart of standard leftist histories of communism in Australia, which simultaneously cheer it as a great, progressive movement for fundamental social change and decry its critics for taking communism seriously as a threat to the status quo.

Sometimes, however, Hirst's forensic style is less apt. In his short piece on "The Gallipoli Landing," for example, he comes close to special pleading on behalf of the exceptional quality of Australia's military forces, while unnecessarily excoriating scholars such as Robin Gerster who have attempted to understand the cultural significance of Australian war literature. Whether Hirst is right or wrong about the military quality of the Australian forces, he misses the point of Gerster's arguments. More aptly, and more pungently, in "Labor and Conscription" he shows how during the debates over conscription in both world wars it was Labor that staunchly upheld the individualist principle of voluntarism, while Labor's opponents (the ancestors of today's Liberals) stood firm for collective commitment. Ideological rigour seems to have been a stranger to both sides of Australian politics.

The only original essay in this collection, "How Sorry Can We Be?" is Hirst's contribution to Australia's so-called "history wars." Even-handedly, he criticises Keith Windschuttle for both his extravagant faith in documentary evidence and his deficiency of sympathy for the dispossessed Aborigines, while piling scorn on the "liberal fantasy" that the Australian nation could somehow have come into being without the violence and bloodshed of conquest. He makes some telling criticisms of the contemporary obsession with apologies and the failure of many left-liberal nostrums to get to grips

with the reality of Aboriginal disadvantage. Yet Hirst does not distinguish sufficiently clearly between critiques of colonialism and apologies for colonialist actions. Even if, as he claims, it is morally incoherent for the descendants of settler Australians today to apologise for the conquest on which their own nation rests, it does not follow, as he insinuates, that critique of the colonialist conquest is necessarily misplaced. Many cries for "sorry" are soft targets for Hirst's keen intellect, but many critiques of colonialism in Australia are harder-edged than he acknowledges here.

Some recurring themes thread through many of the essays: the fundamental importance of the European heritage to Australian society and culture, the distinctive evolution of democracy and egalitarianism in the Australian colonies, the primacy of pragmatism over ideology in Australian politics. Insofar as the essays cohere as a collection, however, it is not so much through theme as through style and approach. Original and insightful, Hirst is unafraid to tackle fashionable orthodoxies and to thumb his nose at the politically-correct proprieties of many of his fellow historians. Yet in doing so, he does not at all come across as an embattled history warrior, intent at all costs on victory for his own presumed truths. His empathy for other people, combined with his awareness of the intricate complexity of human history, are too great to allow an easy lapse into such certitudes. Committed to history as a humanistic discipline, Hirst is not attempting to distil some unassailable residue of facts from the documentary evidence, but to explore some important aspects of the human condition, specifically in relation to Australia. Some other historians who claim the mantle of conservatism — as well as those of different political orientation — could well heed the example.

Claire Brennan

WEATHER MAKERS: ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Tim Flannery. *We are the Weather Makers: The Story of Global Warming.* Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006. 275 pp. AUS $32.95. ISBN 1 921145 34 X.

There are interesting contrasts in this book, signaled from the beginning in its deliberate presentation as a non-scholarly paperback. The book is presented with endorsements on its cover (from Dr Karl Kruszelnicki, an Australian populariser of science, and from Bill Bryson, a journalist, travel writer, and popular writer on language and history). Inside its front