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Blainey revisits his hypothesis

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HAS THIS age of globalisation and instant world-wide communications sounded the death knell for distance as a shaper of history and human events? Is distance still a relevant issue for a country like Australia at the arse-end of the world, as former Prime Minister Paul Keating so eloquently put it?

These are the central questions in the latest revised and extended edition of this seminal history book by a leading thinker of Australia's radical Right, Professor Geoffrey Blainey. Described as the 21st Century Edition, the book has new material in a couple of the later chapters and a new concluding chapter.

The earlier editions of the book sold well over 200,000 copies and, together with other works, have made Blainey one of that rare breed of academics with a wide lay readership. Some critics have even described him as more historical writer than historian.

While the title of the book has become a much used and abused Australian cliché, the work was ground-breaking in its day. From the opening premise that 'distance is characteristic of Australia as mountains are of Switzerland', the book went on to explore how distances within Australia and from its borders to the rest of the world shaped its history. However, after a re-reading of the original chapters it does feel dated. It remains a fascinating journey through Australia's maritime history and a thorough study of its railway and other land transport systems, but it largely ignored important issues such as Aboriginal struggles against the spread of European farming, grazing and occupation of the continent. For them the lack of distance was a tragic tyranny.

The new final chapter aims to address this in one paragraph beginning: 'Aboriginal Australia was likewise shaped by distance; and the effects of that isolation are still at work.' Without much further analysis, the paragraph ends with: 'The main reason why, today, the European and Aboriginal attitudes are often far apart stems from that remarkably long period of isolation.'

Blainey contends that distance from the main population centres has allowed Aboriginal communities in remote areas to retain traditional lifestyles. How much is retained, the quality of lifestyle and how much is due to distance is a matter of great debate.

The book also raises other questions, such as national identity and cultural cringe. The bulk of the original work tended to measure Australia's distance from the British Isles. This has become almost irrelevant as Australia no longer sees itself at the end of a spoke with Europe at the hub.

While not part of Asia, Australians no longer have any doubt about the importance of their relations with Asian and Pacific neighbours. Many commentators have emphasised this with works, such as Radio Australia foreign-affairs correspondent Graeme Dobell's excellent *Australia Finds Home*, published by ABC Books last year.

It is interesting that in the early decades of colonisation Australia and New Zealand were vitally affected by their proximity to Asia, with many of Australia's early exports, such as sandalwood, pearl shells, seal skins, whale oil and timber, being sold largely or entirely in Asia. However, Australia turned to Britain for exports, imports and investment for nearly all of its history. It was not until the second half of the 20th Century that Australia turned again to Asia.

'By the mid 1980s Australia was important for a variety of Asian economies . . . with western Europe ceasing to be dominant and China becoming important, Australia's potential place in the hierarchy of power was improved,' Blainey writes now. 'For the first time they [Australians] had been assigned a place in a globally important region.'

While proximity makes trade natural with Asia, he contends strongly that Australia is not part of Asia. He reinforces this by emphasising that our main Asian trading partners are at the north-east end of Asia, far from the political and population centres of what he terms Australia's 'boomerang coast'.

The new material in Blainey's book often inadvertently underscores how much the original chapters were a product of their time. Blainey himself has always contended that his views and writings belong to certain periods and could change with new developments (not that many have changed).

There's a cultural certainty in the earlier history that is absent in the new writing. Suddenly the complexities of the 21st century, with its telecommunications revolution, information explosion and contentious social and environmental issues, make firm convictions problematical. The broad trends of history are blurred and more debatable. Even the tyranny of distance itself is questioned.

Depending on your vantage point, Australia reaped, and continues to reap, many benefits from distance. Whether distance is a tyrant or a protector has always depended on one's interests, attitudes and point of view.

'The manufacturer in Australia saw the wide oceans as a benefit for often they protected his factory from the arrival of cheap foreign goods. The importer saw the wide oceans as a defect, for the goods imported from other lands were made dearer by the high cost of shipping. The growers of wool and wheat, and the miners of gold, saw the wide ocean as a barrier because they had to pay the cost of shipping their wool and gold to distant markets,' Blainey writes.

He attributes the development of Australia's welfare and industrial-relations systems to Australia's difficulty in attracting large numbers of new settlers. Australia had to offer huge incentives to would-be migrants, either in assisted passages or strong promotional programs. (Blainey now sees a historical shift, with migration applications outnumbering the migrant quota.)

The lack of massive America-like migration has also served to protect Australia's environmentally sensitive areas - a distinct benefit of distance to those environmentalists who believe Australia's dry, fragile landscape unable to support huge increases in population.

Blainey also attributes Australia's peaceful history (if we discount the atrocities committed on Aboriginal populations), its political stability and resultant attractive foreign-investment environment to its distance from the troublesome areas of the world.

But back to globalisation (or shrinking distance?) and whether it will sound the death knell for Australia's world isolation. After a cursory look at jet travel, the Internet, teleconferencing and other features of the information age Blainey concludes that, on closer inspection, distance still reigns over various facets of Australia's contacts with the outside world.

'The social, cultural and political effects of historic distance - of that long separation of Australia from Europe - are alive,' he writes. 'Indeed, several of the fast changes of the new millennium will probably reassert the influence of distance in new ways. Distance is tamed but far from dead.'

It is a pity that the new material does not really explore how this might happen. The original work intentionally concentrated on transport systems, when the messenger travelled at the same speed as the message. However, it has become obvious that the role of distance in shaping events and history has changed radically. The message is far ahead of the messenger. The implications for corporate, military, scientific, industrial and marketing intelligence information and who gets access to what information first will have far-reaching consequences no matter where any particular nation state is located.