

## ANDREW LEMON

### An historical Cannon

Academic historians, being human, are inclined to be jealous of popular authors and journalists who turn their hand to history and achieve sales and celebrity. The animosity – sometimes deserved, sometimes not – is most often expressed not by direct attack but, rather, by the cold shoulder: by exclusion of the gilded authors and their books from mainstream academic discussion. Undergraduate students quickly learn of the gaucherie of footnoting the works of such writers in history essays (Patsy Adam-Smith's groundbreaking *The Anzacs* (1978) is a notable example). Yet, the amateur historian, the journalist and the populist have more often than not been leaders of public discussion in matters historical. Ernest Scott, appointed professor of history at the University of Melbourne in 1913 and pioneer of the academic study of Australian history, held no university degree and was previously a journalist and parliamentary Hansard reporter. It just happened that he was an original researcher, a fine mind and a good storyteller.

Journalist Michael Cannon, as he was in 1966 when Melbourne University Press published the first edition of his runaway bestseller *The Land Boomers*, was another who could not be ignored. The originality of his research, his uncompromising view of the world and the boldness of his writing were evident from the outset. At the time when his book appeared, the teaching of Australian history in schools and universities concentrated on a few key themes: the exhilarating and appalling story of Melbourne in the land boom

of the 1880s and the financial bust of the 1890s was not one of them. Cannon's work changed that.

Thanks to Cannon, the expression 'the land boomers' entered the Australian vernacular. Three-word slogans in the 1960s were elegant instruments. Supplied by a handful of brilliant writers, they encapsulated Australian experience, and have endured: Geoffrey Blainey's *Tyranny of Distance* (1966), Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country* (usually misconstrued, 1964), and Robin Boyd's *The Australian Ugliness* (1960).

Now, 50 years later, Michael Cannon – almost retired after an extraordinarily productive career as journalist, writer, researcher, historian, editor and publisher – has turned his hand to memoir. It is right that he has favoured the State Library of Victoria, through the *La Trobe Journal*, with a preview instalment of his autobiography, because the State Library was where *The Land Boomers* began. At the time of Cannon's research it was the quiet and distinctly dusty basements of the then Archives Section of the State Library of Victoria that held his treasure trove. These were the old Supreme Court insolvency files, especially the records of the so-called secret compositions of the 1890s – legal instruments that allowed failed, and often unscrupulous, investors to pay just a tiny fraction of their debts to avoid bankruptcy and public humiliation. These were public records but they had never been made public.

Cannon, way ahead of his academic counterparts, had the perspicacity to see that these original records – barely 70 years old when he started writing – had the power to illuminate not only late-Victorian Melbourne but also his contemporary society. Descendants of the entrepreneur boomers, and the institutions that they supported (including some of the newspapers for whom Cannon had worked) still wielded real power in the Melbourne of the 1960s. Unease at his revelations brought threats of censorship, suppression and libel actions. Such threats naturally did wonders for sales, and *The Land Boomers* boomed.

Cannon was still in his 30s when *The Land Boomers* appeared, but could already claim two decades of practical experience. At an age when some historians were still collecting degrees and establishing teaching careers, Cannon had been out in the wider world.

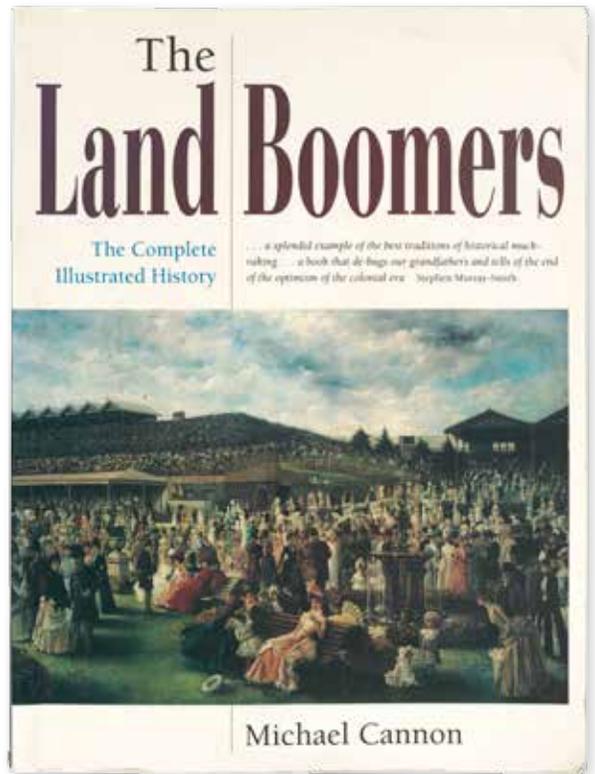
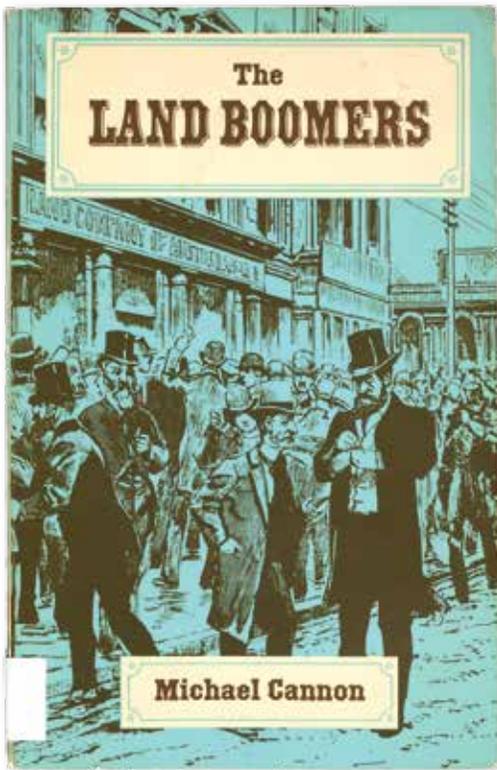
*The Land Boomers* may have bought its author temporary freedom from the daily demands of journalism, but Cannon writes frankly of the challenge of following the bestseller success of a first book. He channelled his prodigious energies into a succession of historical projects including reprints and facsimile editions of 19th-century publications – and once again the State Library

of Victoria was a prime resource. The digitising and internet revolution of recent years has placed old, illustrated newspapers and photographs readily into the public domain. Long before that, Cannon saw the storytelling potential of original documents. He harnessed changing printing technology to produce his publications at affordable prices. He then turned to writing general histories that were based on what he had learned. Most of his books commanded impressive sales.

Cannon brought his flair to one further significant project, which, by any yardstick, deserved academic recognition. In the late 1970s he was enticed back to the archives, by then the Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV), to take up a specially created position as foundation editor for the compilation and publication of the handsome eight-volume series *Historical Records of Victoria 1836–1839*. Insights from this research, and especially into the original records of the official Protectors of Aborigines in this era, furnished his revisionist book *Who Killed the Koories?* – later reissued as *Black Land, White Land*.

It is tempting for me, still a paid-up professional foundation member of the Australian Society of Archivists, to take issue with Cannon's dismissive swipe at archivists as 'only glorified filing clerks'. They must have seemed this way to him in the early 1980s as he was lured in to give some credibility (by way of high quality publications) to a failed administration, one that had no hope of living up to the ambitious *Public Records Act* of 1973 that had separated the Archives Section from the State Library. It was the universal view of the tiny complement of staff who had worked at the PROV over the previous decade – especially a new breed of young university graduates – that the chief archivist throughout those years, Harry Nunn, was way out of his depth. Blocked by him in their efforts to obtain professional archival training, as on offer in New South Wales; warned off from involvement in the new Australian Society of Archivists; thwarted in their efforts to bring the parlous condition of the state archives and its administration to the attention of the Chief Secretary's Department, they had left, while their seniors had retired in desperation. There was little corporate memory surviving when Cannon came to the organisation. Nunn's successor as Keeper of Public Records, Chris Hurley, and those who followed are the ones who deserve the credit for building the PROV into an effective cultural institution. Cannon's work reminded historians, archivists and governments that the PROV was one of the key custodians of Victoria's past.

*The Land Boomers* went through several editions and revisions; Cannon was determined it would not go out of print. It became the expanded *Land Boom and Bust*, published through his own Heritage Publications in 1972, before



Left: *The Land Boomers* was first published in 1966 by Melbourne University Press as a hardback. It was followed by this paperback edition in 1967.

Right: The 1995 edition, *The Land Boomers: the Complete Illustrated History*, was also published by Melbourne University Press, and is still in print.

reverting to *The Land Boomers: The Complete Illustrated History* (Lloyd O'Neill) in the 1980s, and was reissued by Melbourne University Press in the 1990s. The State Library now holds its copy of the 1966 first edition in its Rare Books Collection. History students at the university can cite the work with impunity. Fifty years after its first appearance, it is a classic, and can truly claim to have changed the way we see our history.

Apart from popular recognition and his success as an author, Michael Cannon has received several accolades for his work, including a Commonwealth Literary Fellowship and an Australia Council Writers' Emeritus Award. But the world of academic history has been surprisingly niggardly in honouring a lifetime's achievement, a body of work that brought our own history alive. Where is the honorary doctorate from the university whose press first championed his work? Let's hope it happens soon.