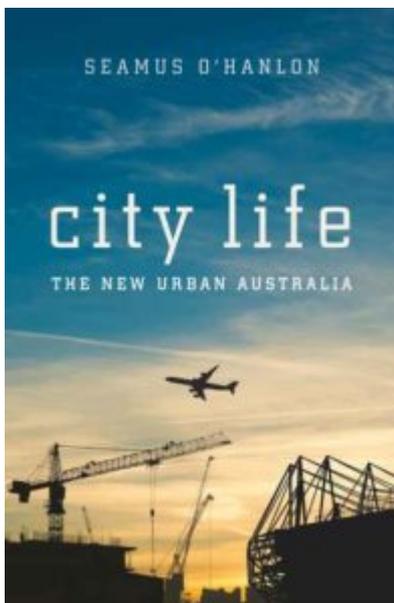


BOOK REVIEW: City Life: The New Urban Australia By Seamus O'Hanlon. (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018.)

Here is my book review of *City Life: The New Urban Australia* by Seamus O'Hanlon. This review was published in [Australian Historical Studies](#) in 2019.

City Life: The New Urban Australia investigates the restructuring of Australian urban economy, society and culture since the 1970s amid the intensification of globalisation and neoliberalism. Its strength lies in its examination of the ways 1970s-1980s de-industrialisation and the subsequent rise of 1990s-2010s service and knowledge economies have reorganised social life and recreated existing built environments.



This Australian urban history book is divided into three equal sections of three chapters for a total of nine chapters. The three sections respectively consider economic, social and cultural processes. The main geographic focus is Melbourne and Sydney: 'where the impacts of globalisation have been most profound' (5). A secondary focus of the book is Adelaide, where O'Hanlon grew up, and which has dropped from Australia's third to its fifth largest city since the 1970s.

The backdrop for *City Life* is a post-1970s mode of urbanism dominated by economic and political neoliberalism. The book begins in 1973 with Queen

Elizabeth II dedicating the Sydney Opera House, an urban icon that Australia would immediately project onto the world stage. A significant moment in global urban history, the early 1970s marked the definitive end of the modernist consensus that had shaped the physical and ideological design of cities over the previous three or so decades. The opening of the Australian economy to the world (through free trade in capital, services and goods) and the diminished role for federal, state and municipal government (through privatisation and light-touch regulation) are the guises that neoliberalism takes in this account. Simultaneously, population growth due to increased immigration, predominantly from Asia (both permanent migrants and temporary workers and students), has meant Australia's cities have, in parts, become larger, richer, denser, and more diverse and multicultural.

O'Hanlon is interested in areas where de-industrialisation has been most keenly felt. Places surveyed include Fitzroy, Collingwood, Broadmeadows and Clayton in Melbourne; Ultimo, King's Cross, Cabramatta and Lakemba in Sydney; and Elizabeth in Adelaide. Former industrial outer suburbs have often been left behind, while inner suburbs have been re-invented. These inner suburbs have become more desirable and built up, spaces for refreshed forms of living (mid-rise apartments), working (creative industries and hospitality) and learning (since the Dawkins university reforms); symbols for O'Hanlon of both gentrification and new Australian ways of life. The extended historical discussions of ethnoburbs and place branding are both lively. From city to city and suburb to suburb, O'Hanlon shows there have been winners and losers from the economic booms and busts and from the waves of internal and international migration.

City Life builds on O'Hanlon's earlier research into de-industrialisation and gentrification and household living types and patterns. The book draws on demographic and census data (up to 2016), which is brought to life through O'Hanlon's firsthand observations (since the 1990s). Although necessarily selective as a survey text, the emphasis on Melbourne and Sydney means key sites such as St George's Terrace in Perth (re-built for skyscrapers for service and knowledge work) or South Bank in Brisbane (renewed for Expo 88), and once-industrial cities such as Fremantle, Newcastle and Geelong, are omitted. The book does not engage with the twentieth-century Indigenous history of the inner

suburbs. The final section on urban culture is strongest in its study of international students. On music, film, and literature, the text is generally autobiographical. O'Hanlon writes of what 'those of us of a certain age fondly recall as the best years of our lives' (198).

City Life exhibits the strengths of the history trade book. The text is readable and will be familiar for Australian urban dwellers, especially for those generations who experienced the transformations described. O'Hanlon also takes on the challenge, relished by generations of Australian urban historians, to make passionate interventions into pressing urban debates. He makes the progressive case for measures to address growing inequality and inadequate urban infrastructure. A future fully-funded research project on the post-1970s Australian city might explore these and other issues in greater detail, drawing on oral histories with city and community leaders to further enrich, enliven and embody the dominant urban processes of this era.

City Life contributes to the historiography as the first urban history monograph on the 1970s-2010s post-industrial Australian city. O'Hanlon also vividly illustrates the critical point that Australia came of age as an urban nation during this period. More contentious is O'Hanlon's claim that the Australian city had to overcome decay and decline on its path towards the post-industrial and multicultural present. After all, given the morphology and dominance of Australia's capital cities, the phenomenon of urban declinism - sustained population, financial and infrastructure deterioration and racial and working-class unrest - was less apparent here than in Europe or North America. As urban historians in Australia and internationally increasingly turn their attention to late twentieth-century cities, a sizeable challenge will be to strike the appropriate balance between narratives of decline and loss, and those of opportunity and diversity.

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