broader, if not deeper) would surely add ballast to assertions about Anglo-Saxon and Iberian psyches, and might test hypotheses about the economic consequences of particular political institutions.

These are exploratory essays, raising questions and proposing lines of enquiry. It would therefore be unfair to make too much of their unfinished quality. However, while we welcome this break-out from some of the restrictive mental habits of the 1950s, we should be cautious about the insistence upon idealist (as opposed to materialist) lines of enquiry, and sceptical about general statements which rest unsteadily upon a sample of two cases.

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Such was Life: Select Documents in Australian Social History. Vol. 3 1914–1983. Edited by Russel Ward and John Robertson. Alternative Publishing Co-operative Limited, Chippendale, N.S.W., 1986. 458 pp. Australian price: $16.95 paperback.

THIS IS the third and last book of documents in a series covering Australian history from 1788 to the present. Like the first two it is presumably aimed at the school and undergraduate market, and should be assessed accordingly. Reading the documents one by one there is much to interest and occasionally something to delight. Here is a cornucopia of Australian types, circumstances, and experiences: premier Robert Askin, inconvenienced by Vietnam protesters lying in front of his vehicle, gives instructions to 'drive over the bastards'; Mrs Monica Sheehan, well-bred resident of Hunters Hill, and Mr Jack Mundey, Communist secretary of the New South Wales branch of the Builders' and Labourers' Federation, work together to save Kelly's Bush from the developers; Eddy, an old Aboriginal man, teaches Robyn Davidson 'something about flow, about enjoying the present' as that young lady travels by camel from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean; 61-year-old Cliff Young wins the Sydney-to-Melbourne marathon by starving himself of sleep. If the editors' sole aim was to place before students episodes of the near past and to enliven and illustrate what is to be found in the textbooks, then they have succeeded.

For the reader in search of what has been important for the Australian people since 1914, this book, however, is unlikely to satisfy. It has the advantage over Professor Frank Crowley's rival collections of documents of being arranged in topics, rather than on purely chronological lines. The proclaimed intention of Ward and Robertson was a selection in 'social history'. Nevertheless, the total effect is close to that of a rag-bag. The nebulous concept of social history has lost all meaning when, as here, whole sections are given over to economic and political history and there are documents dealing with foreign relations.

To a large extent the editors are not to blame; they are only reflecting something general in the profession — a loss of a coherent picture of what Australian history is about. The book in its topics reflects the many sub-histories that now flourish and which have fragmented the once single genre of Australian history. But even in the present uncertainties the editors might have managed a better-proportioned selection. Surely post-war immigration from Europe is of such importance that it merited more than a couple of documents? Television, that innovation of awesome if controversial social impact, gets the most fleeting glance. Secondary and tertiary educa-

tion do not rate a mention in the index. 'Secret Government' — security police, spies and the like — warrants a whole section, Medibank four words.

The editorial comments are not always models of scholarly objectivity or temperate language. I suppose there is no harm in school students knowing that historians have political views, but the standing of the discipline can only suffer if these views are allowed to twist and distort the presentation of the sources. Sir John Kerr is introduced to the reader as 'the egregious Governor-General'. Professor Leonie Kramer is described as the only literary critic in the English-speaking world who did not hail Patrick White as a genius. The wording of the Commonwealth constitution 'conferred on the Governor-General powers . . . vast enough to do almost anything he pleased'. The first of these statements might be defensible, but egregious for what? I suspect that the second is factually incorrect. The third is certainly so.

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The Phosphateers: A History of the British Phosphate Commissioners and the Christmas Island Phosphate Commission. By Maslyn Williams and Barrie MacDonald. Melbourne University Press, 1985. xvii, 586 pp. Australian price: $24.00.

THIS BOOK is an important contribution to the historiography of the South Pacific. Based mainly on the records of the British Phosphate Commissioners, it is concerned with the enormously profitable exploitation of rich phosphate deposits on the small islands of Nauru and Ocean Island — profitable for the imperial mining enterprise, though disastrous for the unfortunate Banaban inhabitants of Ocean Island, whose homeland was despoiled and made uninhabitable.

Williams, an Australian film producer and author, wrote the first two parts of the volume, dealing first with the pioneer antecedents of the British Phosphate Commission (BPC), and then with the work of the BPC itself, from 1920 to World War II. He writes entertainingly for the general reader. He is concerned primarily with personalities such as Albert Ellis, a New Zealander who discovered in 1899 that a doorstop in the Sydney office of the Pacific Islands Company contained high-grade phosphate of lime. From that discovery flowed the British annexation of Ocean Island and the formation of the Pacific Phosphate Co. to mine the phosphate rock both there and on Nauru. The company was London-based, though with a substantial German shareholding, reflecting the fact that Nauru was a German colony.

In 1914, Australian armed forces occupied Nauru, and Prime Minister Hughes, recognizing the economic value of the island, was determined to hold on to it. New Zealand was equally determined to secure a share of cheap agricultural fertilizer for its farmers. The outcome was an Empire mandate over Nauru, and the formation of the BPC to mine Nauru and Ocean Island as a monopoly, taking over from the private company. Britain, Australia and New Zealand each appointed a commissioner, New Zealand's choice being Ellis. These developments, and the subsequent clashes between the powerful BPC and governments, and between one commissioner and another (each resident in his own country), are adequately described.

There is also some interesting material on the political influence of the Pacific