



BOOK DETAILS

Format: Paperback

ISBN: 9781925322910

RRP: \$35.00



Nick Richardson is an author, academic, and journalist who has written for a range of publications in England and Australia. He has a PhD in history from the University of Melbourne and is Adjunct Professor of Journalism at La Trobe University. He lives in Melbourne.

An engrossing account of a pivotal year in Australia’s history.

This book debunks one of the hardest clichés in Australian history: that the 1950s was a dull decade, when the nation seemed only interested in a quiet life, a cup of tea, and a weekend drive. The truth is that, by the time the ’60s came around, Australia was already expanding its outlook — politically, economically, and culturally — and central to this were the events of 1956.

This was the year when Melbourne hosted the Summer Olympics, the first edition of the Games to be held outside Europe and North America. It also heralded the arrival of television in Australia. In this year, Prime Minister Robert Menzies grappled with world politics, when he opened the country’s doors to refugees from the Hungarian uprising, allowed British nuclear tests at Maralinga, and tried to resolve the greatest diplomatic episode of the decade: the Suez Crisis. In these ways and more, the world came to Australia’s doorstep in 1956, challenging rusted-on habits and indelibly shifting the nation’s perception of itself.

Nick Richardson peels back the layers to reveal Australia at a critical moment in time. He brilliantly recreates the broader events surrounding the Melbourne Olympics at the end of 1956, as well as the dramas of the Games themselves. Throughout, he also follows a range of men and women who were touched by this transformation, to illuminate the personal consequences of being part of Australia’s pivotal year.

REVIEWS

‘Nick Richardson captures the feel not only of a unique Olympics, but of a unique time in Australian history. He uses the Olympics as the lens through which to view some of the most profound developments in Australia and the world ... This book pulls back the blinds on what was a vitally important year in Australian — and world — history ... Nick has the rare ability to blend an historian’s eye for the critical detail with a journalist’s nose for the underlying human story to deliver a compelling read ... simply an excellent storyteller.’

— MICHAEL GLEESON, *THE AGE*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The book opens with two quotes: one is from former Victorian governor Sir Dallas Brooks, who says Australia was ‘fully conscious of our shortcomings’. What does that sentiment say about Australia’s self-perception at that time? What has changed since then?
2. The second quote, from US sports journalist Red Smith, describes the archetypal Australian as being ‘smart enough to prefer playing to working’. Are we still like that? Why do Australians care so much about their recreation and sport?
3. Sir Robert Menzies’ treasured relationship with Britain is at the heart of many of his political decisions, especially in 1956. What was the impact of that relationship for Menzies and for Australia?
4. One of the remarkable aspects of 1956 was how unprepared Melbourne — and Australia — was for the international element of the Olympic Games. In the end, what actually made the Games such a success?
5. Dame Edna Everage made her debut on the eve of 1956. She is still performing all these years later. Does this mean that Dame Edna is a creature of the 1950s and we love the nostalgia, or is there something else going on?
6. The Cold War came to Australia in the 1950s, and Ukrainian stewardess Nina Paranyuk’s escape from the Russian ship in Melbourne for the Games became something of a cause célèbre. What does Nina’s story reveal about the Western perceptions of Soviet Russia at the time and the West’s role in combating Communism?
7. Why did it take an American rock and roll song to trigger the emergence of Australian teenage culture? Were Australian teenagers of 1956 different to those teenagers everywhere else?

8. The UK nuclear tests might well have occurred in remote parts of Australia, but Indigenous communities were still put at risk and never given appropriate protection. What were the attitudes towards Indigenous Australians at that time? How had they changed since the early days of paternalism?
9. Reflecting on 1956, what do you think was the most significant development, event, or moment in the year? What made it so significant?
10. Was 1956 Australia's pivotal year? What are the other candidates for that title?

