Book Review

Harold H Paynting and Malcolm Grant (eds.)
Victoria Illustrated. The James Flood
Harold Paynting Charity Trust. $250.00
pp. 534

What more can be said about this book; especially when one has already reviewed it for a newspaper?

Its size, price and weight have been commented on by all those who have read, bought or carried it, but remarkably few reviewers have commented on the lack of index.

The more one thinks about this omission, the more it looms as a fundamental and unpardonable error.

Even a crude index would have been acceptable. This is easily attainable these days with a word processor, without recourse to the services of a professional indexer, and with neither culling nor further refinement. After all, with this book no reasonable purchaser was expecting a definitive historical treatise.

Now that the first impact of this giant tome on our cultural landscape has been accepted, cool objective judgements can be made.

The first must be the obvious comparison with Heritage of Australia, published four years earlier. Each has its faults, but each is a significant achievement and will become a classic work of reference.

The disparate backgrounds of the two mammoths must be considered.

One was the product of an omnipotent national government making a gracious gesture towards the world of conservation and preservation. This is a world with which that government had little empathy but one which it regarded as politically significant and worthy of cultivation.

The newer book, according to its editor, was a true labour of love assembled by the editors in their spare time with unpaid contributors.

The photographs, in the main, come from the incomparable files of Harold Paynting, himself and from interested bodies like the various historical and public agencies represented.

The publisher was the Footscray Rotary Club and the profits are earmarked for various charities in Melbourne's western suburbs.

This sponsorship puzzled one reader of my review of Victoria Illustrated, published in The Age. She telephoned several times to ascertain further details. She didn't want her money to go to a 'communist group'. She had been duped before.

Finding out such important facts quickly and cheaply is a facility unique to this publication. How many times can a reviewer (or a politically sophisticated purchaser) check a book's background with only a local telephone call?

Such a direct and cheap line to publisher, editor and contributors was a novelty to me and I took full advantage of it. I contacted Mr Paynting by looking up the H Payntings and, selecting the appropriate suburb, I was right first go.

I wanted more details of the stock and the printing operation (how was it that Heritage of Australia, The Australian House and Leaves of Iron - none of which exotic publications come up to the reproduction standards, of Victoria Illustrated were all printed in Asia, and yet Victoria Illustrated was a product of our own Port Melbourne?)

I got all the information I sought but I still cannot find a satisfactory explanation as to how this book could have been printed locally at a time when the publishing industry says this is impossible. (The

Historic Environment, 1V, 4 (1985)
paper I learnt was Northstar and the editor has a letter from APPM thanking him for his help.)

Most reviews have made much of the book's physical standards (and its equally impressive price which remains impervious to discounts). In the week following the newspaper review, 2000 copies were sold out of a run of 6000.

It is the best picture book for years and everyone loves a picture book.

The book does contain at least two excellent articles: 8000 words by state historian, Dr Bernard Barrett (called a Preface) and a shorter, elegant piece by Dr Carlotta Kellaway on a recently-discovered album of water colour and pencil sketches by one Charles Norton (1826-1872).

These two articles have been presented with physical definition. Perhaps these honorary but professional contributors set down some stipulations or even requested proofs.

But an extremely long article did not receive the same treatment. This is the historic survey (of about 35000 words) by one B J Savill who laughingly describes herself as an 'enthusiastic amateur'. Entitled simply, Melbourne, the article begins on page 66 and weaves its way successfully across the 19th century only to be interrupted about 1880 by John Noone's fold-out photographs, taken in 1869.

These ten panoramic views, taken from atop the city's highest buildings, are considered by many to be the best items in the entire book; yet they do not rate a mention in the table of contents.

Later Ms Savill is bisected by the ANZ Ambrotypes and a contribution from the Port Authority. She also writes on Melbourne's Ports (surely an unjustifiable plural), our Bridges and Ferries and our Exhibition Buildings (a plural, justified, but only just). Still undaunted, Ms Savill offers 15000 words on our entertainment history starting with balls in 1830 and ending with the opening of the State Theatre in 1966 in its new form; the State Theatre in Flinders Street that is, not the one across the bridge.

But in between this contributor's pieces, articles by others of varying degrees of erudition have been inserted with only a passing relationship with their flanking photographs.

As an example of the anarchistic nature of the book's layout; immediately before Our Ambulance Services and Our Fire Services, comes the four-page fold-out of Our Transport Mural.

I've studied the intricacies of this mural for quite a time and I have read the call to 'note the charming baby carriage' but in all the multi-wheeled melange I have yet to find that damned pram.

Finding anything in this fascinating book is difficult.

The lack of an index is, one must regretfully conclude, symptomatic of the publication's low level of professionalism, but as the illustrations are so wonderful, why carp?

Reviewed by NEIL CLEREHAN