This volume deserves to rank as one of the most significant studies of church history in Australia. Over the years there have been a number of quality local and diocesan Anglican histories as well as biographies, notably of bishops. This is, however, the first overall account of Australian Anglicanism. It is important not only for the self-awareness of the Anglican Church but for its potentiality in making possible a more balanced recognition of the place of Anglicanism in the history of the nation.

It is a composite work with thirteen contributors. They are generally committed Anglicans with the perceptive insights of insiders, but they are also professional historians who have maintained a high degree of scholarly objectivity. It is no idealised picture of the church that they paint, but nor is it dismissive in the style of some Australian secular historians.

The book has two parts: a narrative section of six chapters providing a broadly chronological account of the Australian church from the first settlement to the end of the twentieth century, and a section looking in more detail at seven particular themes. Opinions will differ as to whether this is the best approach. It results in a modest degree of repetition. Brian Fletcher's final chapter on Anglicanism and the shaping of Australian society, for example, builds on ground already covered in the narrative section, but the approach does permit more detailed study of what are perceived to be significant themes. As Colin Holden, editor of the thematic section recognises, some major themes miss out, notably the church's involvement in education, its contribution to music, and its response to the intellectual challenges of the past century, and more.

In his chapter on Anglican identity Bruce Kaye points out the two dominant factors that have shaped the history of Australian Anglicanism. One is the transition to the Australian environment of an English church that was so much intertwined with English culture. The other is the regional diversity which typifies Australian life and has issued in a church more federal than central in structure. Certainly the Anglican Church of Australia is far less centralised than either the parent Church of England or most of the other churches of the Anglican Communion. This has meant that ecclesiastical traditions have tended to harden along diocesan boundaries. It would be an interesting further study to examine the relationship between regional secular attitudes and those of the church. Is the apparent similarity, for example, between the hard-nosed ecclesiastical politics of the church in Sydney and those of the New South Wales Labor Right simply coincidence?

The narrative chapters are straightforward and on the whole uncontroversial. That is not to say that there are no differences in interpretation. Brian Dickey's study of the period 1861–1900, for example, is critical of bishops, synods and any movement towards centralised authority beyond the local congregation, and this results in a fairly negative
view of developments during that period. It was certainly a time of strengthening of the institutional life of the church, which most historians would see in positive terms. In fact, Ruth Frappell in the following chapter (1901–1929) sees her period as a time when ‘the Church of England in Australia never stood in higher esteem’. Dealing with the most recent years is never an easy task for a historian, but David Hilliard’s chapter on the period from 1967 to the present is as balanced and perceptive a study as could be hoped for within such limits of space.

Throughout the book, the critical role of the Diocese of Sydney is never far from the surface.

This reflects the history of Australian Anglicanism. Sydney is the mother diocese historically, it is the largest in population and wealth, and it has a theological ethos which makes it distinctive not only in Australia but in the whole Anglican Communion. Throughout the twentieth century as Sydney diocese moved more and more in a monochrome and radical direction under the influence of Moore College theology, the diversity of stance on a variety of issues between Sydney and much of the rest of the Australian church influenced the shape of events.

Bill Lawton’s chapter on Australian Anglican theology reflects this. At first sight the degree of emphasis on the Sydney evangelical tradition, and in particular on Broughton Knox, who wrote no major theological work, might seem unbalanced. Certainly it did not represent the theology of much of the church. Yet the influence of Knox and the Moore College students whose theology he shaped has been immense and has probably been the distinctive contribution to theology from Australian Anglicanism. Opinions will vary about whether that has been for good or ill. Lawton’s assessment, as a graduate and sometime teacher at Moore College who is yet very critical of its theology, has particular interest.

The same is true of Stuart Piggin’s chapter on Australian Anglicanism in a world-wide context. He too is a Sydney evangelical who is critical of attitudes and policies which prevail in the diocese. The contrast which he draws between pan-Anglicanism and pan-Evangelicalism is very helpful in explicating varying attitudes in the Australian church to the wider Anglican Communion and to the ecumenical scene.

The chapter by John Harris on Anglicanism and Indigenous peoples is particularly valuable at the present time. His massive research in this area, which has already resulted in two major books, gives an authoritative character to his contribution. In contrast to much of the material that has been published on the subject, which either uncritically praises or severely denigrates the impact of missions on Australia’s Indigenous peoples, Harris paints a mixed picture of apathy and concern, of failure and achievement. There is plenty to repent of, but also some things to rejoice in.

It is not possible to review every chapter, but overall this book is a notable achievement. Bruce Kaye, the General Editor, is to be congratulated on envisioning the project, convening seminars of scholars engaged in research in relevant areas, and on editing so effectively (with his associate editors) the whole book. It will undoubtedly stimulate further research and enable historians generally to be better able to assess the role of the Anglican Church in Australian history than has often been the case in the past. Not the least valuable part of the book is its comprehensive bibliography.
There are some flaws: occasional wrong dates, some incorrect spellings of names and a few places where misleading impressions are given. One thing that is puzzling about the layout is the positioning of photographs which seem unrelated to the part of the text where they are placed. But these are relatively small quibbles, easily correctable, in a work which is a major contribution to Australian historiography.