

The Torch and the Sword: A History of the Army Cadet Movement in Australia

Craig Stockings

Reviewed by Dr Jean Bou

Army cadets have been part of the military and educational experience of Australian boys, and more latterly girls, since the mid-1860s. Thus it is all the more amazing that this book is the first serious attempt to write a history of an institution that has played a part in the lives of what must surely be hundreds of thousands of people. A few discrete elements of it, such as the so-called 'boy conscription' before World War I, have been examined, a few educationists have done related PhDs, and a number of the more prosperous tradition-minded private schools have produced unit histories (of which this reviewer authored one), but until now no one has tackled the subject in its entirety. For this reason alone Craig Stockings's book is a welcome addition and, one might hope, also a catalyst for more research.

Dr Stockings, a lecturer at the Australian Defence Force Academy, based this book on the extensive PhD research he did there and he can lay claim to considerable expertise on the matter. His book examines the movement from its beginnings in school-based 'drill' in the 1850s, through its evolution into cadet corps proper in the mid-1860s, and then tracks the institution through the vicissitudes of its existence until 2006.

Central is Stockings's view that four key 'pillars' have affected, and continue to affect, the vitality of the movement: first, the military's attitude and degree of support; second, the views and contributions of educators and schools; third, community and social attitudes; and fourth, the effects of finance. These pillars, Stockings contends, support the whole edifice, and an imbalance between them consequently threatens the organisation. 'Four-way tug-of-war' may well have been as suitable an analogy as 'four pillars', however, and the way that military and educational interests, in particular, have competed and worked at cross purposes is remarkable. The periods of genuine harmony have been rare.

In examining these pillars the author's approach is more organisational than institutional. This is a book about policy, military decision-making, educational interests, structures, restructuring, administration and resources. The author makes it clear that this 'a' history not 'the' history and he skirts the multitude of social and cultural matters that a study of cadets might readily lend itself to. No book can be everything to all readers, but this approach does have its limitations, particularly when the book itself repeatedly returns to social topics that seem fundamental to the movement. If, as the author regularly points out, cadets have been presented as

a way to cure youth degeneracy was there ever any meaningful evidence produced to support the idea? Similarly have the charges of youth militarism, which the movement's opponents have made from time to time, been sustainable or not? The book touches on these and other questions but does not address them systematically.

In addition to the four 'pillars', Stockings also identifies two key recurring themes in the movement's history. The first, the identification of a persistent division between private and state school units within the broader organisation, is fascinating. It is clear that whilst boys in state schools have often made up much of the raw numbers, it has been the more organised and generally larger private school units that have dominated the movement. Often possessing the oldest units, tradition-minded and with the resources to keep going during lean periods, the private schools made a contribution that was considerable and perhaps defining.

The second theme is that there has been a noticeably complementary relationship between conservative politics and the cadet movement. That cadets suit the mindset of conservatives seems an unremarkable idea, particularly to those of us born on this side of the Whitlam government's 1975 decision to abolish cadets, but the evidence produced here does not sit comfortably with this broad assertion. Clearly Labor was very interested in cadets as part of a compulsory service scheme before 1914, while conservative governments of the 1920s do not seem to deserve any particular kudos for supporting cadets. When the Scullin Labor government abolished compulsory cadets in 1929 it also, as the author notes, moved quickly to introduce a replacement voluntary system and supported it as well as the Great Depression probably allowed. That the conservative Lyons ministry gets particular congratulations for expanding the scheme in the late 1930s with a better economy, and in a more threatening world, seems incongruous. Similarly Stockings warmly notes a 25 per cent increase in cadet numbers under Menzies during the period 1950-57, but criticises the previous Chifley ministry for allowing stagnation when it had largely overseen a similar-sized expansion in the period 1946-50. Cadets and conservatives may well go together, but this notion needs more evidence, investigation and argument than is produced here.

That aside, this is a book that deserves to find place on the bookshelf of those interested in Australia's military history, as well as on those of educators and other interested readers. I hope it acts as a catalyst for further investigation. ♦

Craig A.J. Stockings, 'The Torch and the Sword: A history of the Army Cadet Movement in Australia', University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2007, casebound and jacketed, 326pp., RRP \$A49.95.

