

Proposal for Award of Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws

Geoffrey Norman Blainey AC MA *Melb*

Geoffrey Norman Blainey is Australia's most eminent historian. He wrote his first book in 1954, while still in his early twenties, and since then has written another thirty-five that range widely across Australian history and beyond. These works have reached a wide readership, indeed they coined phrases such as 'the tyranny of distance' that have entered into common usage.

Geoffrey Blainey was educated at Ballarat High School and Wesley College, and undertook his Arts degree as a resident of Queens College. Upon graduating with distinction, he chose not to pursue the usual path of postgraduate studies but rather to work on the western coast of Tasmania on a commissioned history of the Mount Lyell Mining Company. That was followed by another commissioned history of the University of Melbourne, and for a decade he produced histories of this kind; he was probably the first academically trained historian to earn a living from his pen.

In 1962 he was appointed to a senior lectureship in economic history at this University and from 1968 to 1977 held the Chair of Economic History. Here he was able to write books of broader scope and arresting novelty: *The Rush That Never Ended*, *The Tyranny of Distance*, *The Causes of War* and a path-breaking Aboriginal history, *The Triumph of the Nomads*. In 1977 he took up the Ernest Scott Chair of History, and further major histories followed as well as a television series, *The Blainey View*, broadcast by the ABC in 1982. He held the chair until 1988 and for six years provided outstanding leadership as Dean of the Arts Faculty. He was Chairman of the Council of Queen's College for 18 years.

Geoffrey Blainey has made a sustained contribution of service on a range of public bodies. He was Deputy Chair of a National Inquiry that put Australian museums on a new footing. From 1971 he also chaired the Commonwealth Literary Fund, subsequently the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and from 1977 to 1981 he was Chair of the Australia Council. His prominence increased following his criticism of migration policy in 1984, when he became a regular newspaper columnist. More recently, he served as Chancellor of the University of Ballarat, was a member of the Council of the Australian War Memorial and chaired the National Council for The Centenary of Federation. He received the prestigious Britannica Award for imparting knowledge in 1988. In 1975 he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia and in 2000 became a Companion of that Order.

Geoffrey Blainey has continued to practise his discipline with distinction, and produced histories that range across mining and football, business and social life. His *Short History of the World* appeared in 2000 and has been translated into many languages. It exemplifies his qualities as a historian: a curiosity that is never satisfied by conventional explanations, a vivid prose that is a delight to read, and a robust independence of judgement. In his historical scholarship Geoffrey Blainey has frequently overturned existing understandings, in his sustained public commentary he has often challenged conventional views. Few graduates of this University have exerted greater influence on national life.