

Learning the Lessons of Multiculturalism : The Demise of the Australian Legend and the Rise of Its Others.

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I am aware that today I speak to an audience predominantly made up of Japanese economists. Since I am neither Japanese nor an Economist this poses an interesting problem for my choice of topic. I am an Australian cultural historian and I intend to speak about what I know best but I hope that what I have to say will be useful to you. Not just useful general information about a different and perhaps exotic history but useful in your studies as economists. The Japanese know very little about my country. This is not surprising. Although Australia provides a significant amount of the primary materials required by your industry it is relatively unimportant to Japan. In the next decade or so as the focus of Japan's economy shifts from industry to technology Australia is likely to become even less important. This only need be the case, however, if Japan allows purely economic issues to determine its interests. My message to you today, as a cultural historian talking to a group of economists is that Economics should never be considered in a purely disciplinary context. The study of Economics should always also be a study of culture.

If you are going to transact business with a country then you need to know something of the people and the culture with whom you are dealing. This is not merely in order to transact more efficient business but also to ensure that your economic policies do not have unethical effects upon the different cultures you may trade with. The economic system is not in itself an ethical one and good business is not always going to be just action. The experiences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 should by now have taught us the dangers of pursuing any body of knowledge without proper consideration of the human, social, and cultural repercussions. This is especially so of economics which, if one is to believe Karl Marx, is the motivating force of culture.

I have not come here today, however, to give you a lecture on business ethics. I have come to tell you a little about the history of my country and the way in which that history is expressed in the cultural values and attitudes of my countrymen. Where possible I have tried to draw attention to the relation between broadly economic considerations and the production of the national culture. Since your knowledge and the knowledge of your professors in this area more than likely exceeds mine I will leave it to you to ponder the implications of my gaps and simplifications for the account I am about to give you.

Just over 200 years ago Australia was invaded by the British who saw in it a solution to their overcrowded prison system. Many of the convicts transported to Australia were emancipated and some were given grants of land. Agricultural and pastoral success saw an influx of free settlers and an injection of British capital which saw the initial points of British occupation expand inland and along the coast.

Australian history has often told the story of this invasion as a natural, peaceful, even arcadian settlement of an empty land devoid of a human history. It was not. Australia has an aboriginal history which stretches back many thousands of years. This long history of settlement had produced a sophisticated indigenous culture which the British refused to recognise. They refused to recognise Aboriginal ownership of the land, they failed to respect the indigenous culture, and they frequently connived at the destruction of the Aboriginal people. Nineteenth century Social Darwinism reassured them that they were a superior race and that the 'primitive' indigenes would 'naturally' die out. Convinced of their European superiority the British relegated the aboriginal people to non-human status and in this way legitimised their destruction and the theft of their land. There was aboriginal resistance of course. Hundreds of the invaders and thousands of the indigene were killed in sporadic disputes over territory. The British adopted a series of overt and covert strategies in what effectively resulted in a program of genocide. They conquered the continent and erased the indigenous peoples from their official histories. Australia they said was 'settled' by Europeans who brought Civilisation, Culture, and God for the first time to an empty land. The question of how best to do justice to the indigenous peoples of the Australian continent remains today one of my country's most pressing social issues.

There have been a number of Nationalist phases in the history of my country and the collection of colonies which preceded its federal form. These phases can be

attributed in part to the shifting native/migrant mix of the population. Following the invasion of 1788 the white population of the Australian colonies remained predominantly migrant. By this I mean they were mostly made up of people born in the United Kingdom and Ireland who emigrated or were forcibly brought to the continent. The first wave of nationalist feeling began to emerge in the 1840–50s when the native descendants of the first immigrants began to become a politically significant proportion of the population. The rich alluvial gold discoveries of the 1850s and 1860s quickly changed this, however, when they sparked a wave of immigrant gold seekers. The native born population did not again become a politically significant proportion of the population until the 1890s, the decade which led to the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901.

The gold seeking wave of migration should not necessarily be seen as a negative phenomenon by contemporary Australians in search of a myth of origin. The gold seekers differed from the colonies' initial immigrants in that they came from a broader spread of countries. This greatly contributed to the ethnic mix of late nineteenth century Australia. These people were often refugees from political and social persecution in their native lands and this experience, together with the diversity of their cultural knowledges and traditions, helped to expand the agenda of the debates which were taking place over the composition of the Nation. Their different ethnicities helped to make the emerging country something of an innovator in social welfare and political reform.

¹⁾
Native/Immigrant Mix in Australia

Emerging Group	Native/Migrant	Date
1 Aborigines	Native	—
2 Convicts/Jailers	Migrant	1788 +
3 Free Settlers	Migrant	1830 +
4 Native born	Native	1890 +
5 Non-Anglo-Celtic	Migrant	1950 +

The Australian nationalist movements of the late nineteenth century, however,

1) From James Walter. "Defining Australia: A Case Study." *Australian Studies: A Survey*. James Walter, ed. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1986. 18–39.

did not welcome ethnic diversity. The overwhelming majority of the population were Anglo-Celtic and they wanted to see the new country maintained as an ethnically consistent nation. In particular they wanted to maintain the purity of what they implicitly believed to be their genetically superior British bloodline. The 'White Australia policy' was a feature of both the conservative and radical nationalists. It was a feature, that is, of those people who wanted to see Australia remain an important outpost of the British empire as well as those who wished to see it move in the direction of a fully independent republican social democracy.

The 'whites only policy' can partly be seen as an inevitable function of the imperialist knowledges of nineteenth century Europe. Its deployment in the Australian setting, however, had a particular urgency. The insecurities which resulted from its status as a young racist European society in an Asian geographical space and the effects these insecurities had upon Australian cultural, political, and social perspectives can be traced through the image of the national hero which emerged around the time of federation. The figure of the lone bushman as he was depicted in the stories and poems of writers like Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson were used to provide an object through which the Australian people could assert their common character and values. The Australian Legend provided a mechanism for the formation of the imagined community which Benedict Anderson has shown to be one of the constitutive features of a Nation.²⁾

The features of the Australian Legend are significant because they demonstrate to the Australian people the way in which they ought to behave as 'Australians'. It provided, in short, a Myth which tried to exact a conformity in the behaviour and values of the Australian people. The Legend of the typical Australian was a legend of a lone bushman, a solitary figure who had been taught by a vast and hostile climate and country that life was dangerous and unpredictable. This meant that it was all right to take things easy, to exert as little effort as possible, because action was predominantly futile and one's strength was to be reserved for when fate inevitably turn bad. At such times of crisis the legendary Australian was capable of enormous exertion but generally he was content to take things easy.³⁾

2) Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. 2nd ed. London: Verso, 1991.

3) Russell Ward. *The Australian Legend*. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Oxford U P, 1966. 2.

The rhetorical mode of this man was laconic. He was given to little speech. If language, as the French cultural theorists tell us, is an expression of subjectivity and identity, then the typical Australian demonstrated the insecurities of his sense of identity through his refusal to speak. Language as an expression of action, of identity, of life, was anathema, it seemed, to the typical Australian whose 'boast was not we live but we survive'.⁴⁾ The 'typical' Australian kept his thoughts to himself and remained silent.

The dominant social mode of this character was the male fraternity of mateship, a form of male bonding in which men would protect themselves from the inevitable failure that a hostile landscape brought to their agricultural and mining endeavours by having a drink with a few friends. The legendary Australian's philosophy was stoic. The ultimate virtue was to hang in there at all costs, to be independent, resourceful, and to survive. Success was a short lived illusion. Survival was the best that could be hoped for.

Most important of all, the Australian Legend, was white and male. Its function was to exclude the non-Anglo Celtic peoples and women from inclusion in the imaginative community of the Nation. If the Australian Legend defined the typical Australian then it was a definition which intentionally rejected women, aborigines, continental Europeans, and Asians.

This image of the lone bushman was secured in its mythologisation as the national hero by the First World War. The Australian soldier or digger combined all the features of the lone bushman into the image of a resourceful fighting man. The courage of the Australian soldier in the face of extensive casualties demonstrated to Australians that the mix of British genes and Australian geography had produced a race of people who were as good as any the earth had to offer. The Anzac legend of the Australian fighting man remains today an enduring symbol of nationhood in my country. Every year in April we have a national holiday to remember the achievements and sacrifices of our soldiers in all wars but particularly those who fought in what has been called the Great War. More than 13% of the Australian male population at the time saw active service in the war. Almost 65% of

4) A. D. Hope. "Australia." *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*. Harry Heseltine, ed. Ringwood: Penguin, 1972. 190.

Australian troops were wounded, 25% of these were killed.⁵⁾ Most families lost someone intimately connected with them. Very nearly every Australian town, no matter how small, has a memorial to the soldiers of the first world war. The National War Memorial in Canberra is by far the largest Museum in the country.

The Bushman myth and Anzac legend tell a great deal about Australian attitudes up until about 1970. Both of them tell stories of men who behave with courage and endurance in circumstances which make success difficult if not impossible. Such a myth is of course conservative in its bent because by displacing the blame for individual failure onto the physical environment it exempts the individual from responsibility for his social environment.⁶⁾ The Australian male failed not because he was inadequate, nor because he lived in an unjust social system, but because he lived in a land which made purposeful action difficult if not impossible. Australian identity is expressed in these myths in terms of an opposition between an independent, stoic, and heroic, white Anglo-Celtic male and an alien, malevolent, Asian geographical space. It expresses an identity which justifies a white Australia policy and legislates for a prolonged confrontation with an unfamiliar and unfriendly environment.

One can identify the motivating incidents behind the pessimistic character of this legend in a number of events particular to the 1890 s. The world depression, the defeat of labour in the great shearers' strikes, anxieties over the decline of the British empire and the waxing power of Asian countries — in particular Japan. The horrors of Gallipoli and the Somme in the war gave added emphasis to this negative note. The survival of the legend in the period between the wars and after, up until the 1970 s, is due no doubt in part to its refusal to question and reform the system and partly because in an isolated settler country national myths were hard to come by.

After the second world war Australia required an expanded work force so that it could add an industrial arm to an economy dominated by agriculture. It filled this work force and built this industry through a selective program of immigration and high tariff protection. It sought most of these immigrants from Britain but the

5) Patsy Adam Smith. *The Anzacs*. Melbourne : Nelson, 1985. 336.

6) Graeme Turner. *National Fictions : Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative*. Sydney : Allen and Unwin, 1986. 37.

shortage of shipping which resulted from the war meant that it was forced to accept many Northern and Eastern Europeans. Australia saw a significant influx of immigrants from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. Many of these people met with racist treatment and many more suffered from problems associated with coming to terms with a foreign society and culture. They gradually made the transition and many of them began to find their way into influential positions in the public and private sectors, the union movement, education, sport and the arts. These people began to agitate for reforms which would address the racial, cultural, and economic problems which Australia presented for its substantial migrant population.⁷⁾

Many of the migrant peoples particularly the Eastern and Southern Europeans formed ethnic enclaves in particular regions of the country. They set up schools and established festivals to preserve and promote their original culture and traditions. This caused racial tension with the dominant Anglo-Celtic population whose distrust of ethnic difference led them to insist that the migrants assimilate the Australian way of life. The pressure was for them to forget their old ways and adopt those of their new country.

The increasing ethnic diversity of the country in general, and the rise to public and private prominence of many first and second generation migrants since the 1970s in particular, have helped to bring about a change in the Government's official attitude to the problem of the migrants transition to their new country. The Australian Government's attitude to the ethnic diversity of its constituency has changed from assimilation to multiculturalism. Ethnic minorities are now encouraged to preserve and celebrate their original traditions and cultures and the multicultural diversity which results is being promoted as a good thing for the country.

The contributions of post-colonialism, post-structuralism, and second wave feminist knowledges have been a significant factor in this change. They have developed critiques of the centralised power structures which produce culture and in the process they have given us an understanding of the ways in which social, cultural and political oppression functions. They have demonstrated the way in which national stereotypes like the Australian Legend oppress us by restricting our

7) Geoffrey Sherington. *Australia's Immigrants*. Sydney : Allen and Unwin, 1980. 160.

diversity and limiting our individuality. They have made substantial progress in renovating the concept of 'Australian' through the reinclusion of women, aboriginals, and non Anglo-Celtic migrants.

I am not trying to claim here that Multiculturalism is a desirable thing for all nations. My country is a large country with a small population and we need migrants if we are to fully develop it. In an overcrowded and under resourced world we have an international responsibility to do this. And I would be misleading you if I did not concede that ethnic diversity brings with it an array of social and cultural problems. The positive acceptance of multicultural diversity, for example, is not an ethic which everyone in my country subscribes to. It is a concept which many Anglo-Celtic traditionalists in particular would like to see rejected. There is no united multicultural Nation of Australia and there never will be. This is no surprise, however, as John Tulloch points out, Culture 'grows out of the divisions of society, not its unity'⁸⁾.

Some historians have argued that the concept of Nation is an invention of the nineteenth century. If this is true then it may well be the case that it doesn't survive long into the twenty-first century. The European Economic Community represents a post-national block of significant diversity. As technology shrinks the world National borders are beginning to seem somewhat archaic institutions. It is hard to say what multiculturalism will do for Australia. I personally believe, that the experience of living in a diverse and often contradictory culture, of learning other people's languages, customs and traditions, of being socialised from birth by a culture which is familiar with diversity and affirms it as a positive thing, will go a long way towards producing individuals capable of accepting the challenges of a post-modern, or should I say post-national, world. Multiculturalism is not a cure all for my country, but one thing that it will do is ensure that Australia will continue to function as one of the world's most significant social laboratories. Australia's multicultural social formation provides a fascinating resource for scholars interested in the problems associated with cultural difference and the often repugnant political, social, and personal conflicts which that difference is wont to inspire. Ultimately

8) John Tulloch. "General Editor's Foreword." *Celebrating the Nation: A Critical Study of Australia's Bicentenary*. Tony Bennett et al. ed. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992. vi.

multiculturalism might just provide Australia with an important and challenging way of developing its most important resource : its people.