

US AUSSIES

Mal Garvin

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11 **INTRODUCTION - the Australian enigma**

FOR MANY YEARS this country was called *Terra Incognita* – **the Unknown Land**.

A land of contrasts

12 In the northern hemisphere, Australia is seen as the world's last mystery. For many, we are the new frontier – the final hope to escape the pollution and hassles of the world.

To them we look rich and free and friendly, with a relaxed, undemanding lifestyle.

As the British author Anthony Burgess said,

“This great empty, continent, must surely become the new world. **The country breathes promise** and it's a wonderful place for bringing up deep brown, bare-toed children.”

13 **we are still a bit of a mystery to ourselves. A land of enigmas and contradictions, trying to find some cohesion and a way to explain the paradoxes.**

We are a nation where the baddies, like Ned Kelly, have become the goodies. We are the people who tell ourselves the heaven's in the bush, but mostly choose to live in sprawling suburbs. We buy 4-wheel drives to explore the myserious heart of our country but only seven per cent of these vehicles ever leave the highways.

Australian males say the family is the most important thing in their lives, but this week 1100 families will break up. Australia is still the land of the absent father, and is rapidly becoming the land of the working mother!

A sample of any hundred people from Cairns, to Hobart to Geraldton, to Sydney, to Melbourne will **reveal attitudes to authority, to politicians, to home-ownership and the like, that are strikingly similar**. First generation Australians, whatever their parentage, **speak with a striking similarity from one corner of the country to another**.

We appear to be cynical about religion, but eighty seven percent of us sheepishly admit to researchers that we believe in God.

We do a lot of snide talking about sex, but feel uncomfortable with intimacy.

We celebrate the individualist, but find it very difficult personally, to resist the pressure to conform.

15 **THE RISE OF THE BARE TOED CHILDREN**

16 **1 THE BLIND SPOT IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY why our history has been such a bore**

17 “I have stiven to reproduce our English Life as far as possible,” said William with pride and complacency. “I think it's the duty of every Englishman to reproduce English conditions as far as possible wherever be may be. The man who does not is, I don't scruple to say it, a renegade. **What finer thing can he do for Australia than make it another England?** . . . Ours is a race of empire-builders because no Englishman worthy of the name ever yields to climate or environment.” (*Unknown*)

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To the Anglophiles in Australia, and all those striving feverishly to imitate English customs, colonial wine was sour, colonial ale was watery, colonial cheese was rancid, colonial preserved fruits were pulpy, colonial waiters were clumsy, colonial maids when not smashing their mistress's best Royal Doulton, or her imported Venetian glass were taking a swig at their master's favourite Scotch whisky. Colonial pronunciation was nauseating, nasal and insane. Even the colonial sun had a sickly glare. (Professor Manning Clark, 1979)

When I did anything right – rarely, and by accident – they said, “Y’ can’t beat the English blood,” and when I did wrong, which was nearly always, they said, “What can you expect from a colonial?” At school, I had learned much from Mr Souter, the headmaster, but had been taught very little of my native land. The history of our own country was bowdlerized or ignored - - ‘history’ had become a laudation of the ruffians of the Rum Corps and their successors, the pure merinos; and the generalization of all convicts as fiends incarnate. (Joseph Furphy, 1888)

- 17 NO WONDER HISTORY at school was so boring, it was not our story. We learnt about the Greeks, Romans, Europeans and their major wars and what we heard about Australia was the things important to those back in England when the events took place.

We learned about power, about Governors, about explorers, about sheep and wheat because these were all of great interest to British investors – much more interesting than a bunch of cheeky children born of convict parents who were fanatical sports enthusiasts, who enjoyed playing with the Aborigines and who, from the word go, were a different breed.

Cornstalks, gumsuckers, larrikins and currency lads and lasses – our school history books hardly rate them a mention. Why haven't we heard more about them? Where did Paul Hogan, Greg Matthews, Dawn Fraser and Jeff Fenech come from? Why have Ned Kelly, the Man From Snowy River and a song about a suiciding swaggie meant so much to us?

- 18 Often people coming here from Europe have said, “You Australians have no culture, no history” but I want to question that assumption.

The birth of a nation

The Americans, after their War of Independence were free to celebrate their own view of their history; the South Africans, for all their blindspots and prejudices also have their own story. **So too do the Indians Ghandi led to independence from the Empire.** These, and many other nations, have a distinctive social history with heroes and villains. We are probably the only country with no history of a war or struggle for independence that accompanied the pangs of birth. This leaves us with weaknesses as well as strengths in our national foundations. It means that January 16th, the focal point of our Bicentennial, celebrates the action of another people, the English, rather than an act of our own self-determination. **It has meant that for two hundred years we have measured our existence largely from the perspective of others – and we are still doing so.** It has meant that we developed a cultural long-sightedness with a remarkable sensitivity to Europe and the USA but an indifference to those nearest us.

Over the last few years in our country there has been a growing sense of struggle toward national identity. There seems to be a developing feeling inside many of us, as Australians, that we do have a future in spite of our present economic strains and political tensions. We have somewhere to go and something to become – even though we may not quite know where you are and what it is. **It has been said that before you can know where you are going, you must know where you have come from.** And as simple as that may sound, it is one of the major dilemmas of our people, because largely, as will be shown later, the Australian face has been missing from our history.

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There have been hints of it all the way through our popular culture, but it has been generally overlooked in our formal education and histories. The result is that, **as a nation and as individuals, we have tended to be uncertain of ourselves and to have a profound sense of inferiority about our place in the world.**

Peter Carey wrote, in his novel *Illywhacker*, ‘**Australians, in comparison (to Americans) lack confidence and it is this, not steel mills or oil wells that is the difference between the two nations.**’

Now as we grapple for some sense of national identity and purpose, it is imperative for us to recapture our own past, to rediscover those first white

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Australians who were to lay the foundations of our present way of living, feeling and thinking.

The trees were different, the birds were different, the insects were different, colour was different, the light was different, the very scale of the landscape was different, sounds were different. The flowers, though violently chromatic and prodigal in variety, were without scent and strangely bristly.

There was a profusion of insects of the **oddest type and an extraordinary range of reptiles that seemed to have survived from some long lost world.** The birds were bewildered, the fish improbable, the animals absurd. The Aborigines seemed hardly to belong to a human species . . .

The iron-hard eucalyptus trees defied axe and adze and auger. The soil had no affinity for the plough; indeed it must have laughed to feel the puny tickle of those first picks and shovels. And every dawn greeted the settlers with the crazed cackle of the kookaburra as if the land was mocking its reluctant invaders. It was as though the old continent could have thrown them all off with one brief shrug of its huge shoulders.

(Robert Goodman and George Johnstone, 1966)

New arrivals in an old land

To understand the self-concept of a nation, particularly a nation established by trans-marine migration, - such as South Africa, Canada, New Zealand, and ourselves, - it is said you look at the first sixty years. Through that initial period the social structures of the Old World are transformed by the new environment and the emerging generation’s adaption to it. That is where Australia’s story begins.

It is almost impossible for us to understand what it must have been like for those first Britishers to arrive here. Those who had grown up with the ‘ordered woods and gardens’ running through their veins.

Here was a land that had never seen a garden. No pick, shovel or mattock had ever dared tame it. Everything was back to front. The bark, not the leaves, fell off the trees – and what trees! Ugly, twisted eucalypts and banksias. One of the first British arrivals called it ‘a fantastic land of monstrosities’. The second judge of the Supreme Court believed the Australian bush was the clearest evidence that God had cursed the ground because of man’s sin.

The trees were jarring to the European sense of what should have been. The birds, the insects, the colours, the light, the sounds were all **discomforting and unnatural. And what animals! The biggest rats they had ever seen bounding about on their hind legs. Giant birds with long scrawny necks and bald heads crashed through the scrub with a look of mad hate in their eyes;**

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and yet another bird with a sense of humour looked down at them and seemed to kill itself laughing at their predicament. It was as if they had landed on another planet!

Add to that the weather – the seasons were the wrong way round; the blistering heat of a Sydney summer suddenly transformed by thunderstorms with raindrops so large they fairly knocked you to the ground. Very different from the predictable London drizzle. Poor Governor Philip even had lightning barbeque five of his precious sheep! **His visions of creating a southern British utopia were soon water-logged.** In fact, many times that early little settlement teetered on the brink of total despair and collapse. The threat of starvation continually gnawed at them, for as yet their own crops had not taken on and survival depended on supplies from home, half a world away.

It did not even enter their English minds that a dark race, whose dreaming had taught them to conserve and harvest the fruits of the southern land, had anything approaching wisdom to offer. They simply increased the penalty for anybody found stealing food.

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It is probably no wonder that many Aborigines were more bewildered and fascinated than frightened. They probably had trouble taking the white men seriously, who charged round the bush in the noon-day summer sun wearing heavy red woollen coats, scaring off all the game which could hear them coming a mile away. There are instances where the Aborigines took pity on the white people, leading them to water so they could survive. One such place is Emma's Well in Vaucluse, Sydney named in honor of an old Aboriginal woman who first showed the spring to the white settlers.

22 There were the irrepressible Cockneys. Among the seven hundred and fifty convicts that first landed in Australia around two hundred years ago was a large bunch of Cockney Londoners, somewhat out of the same mould as Andy Capp, Benny Hill and Ronnie Barker; witty, cunning, able to work the system and bubbling with their own colourful way of talking. They greeted the top British officials with a knowing wink at their mates and a causal "Ow ya goin' Guv?" **Outward compliance but an attitude that said, 'Don't expect to completely control me.'**

They avoided work as though it was the plague. One document of the time says, they were likely to hide 'tools in the bush, ceasing to work the moment the guard turned his back.' Philip soon concluded **'these people are more frightened of work than they are of punishment.'**

It seems we owe more than our ambivalence about work to the Cockneys. **They were the main influence on the way we talk today.** (It is often amusing to hear an American try to take off an Australian accent – it sounds like he has come straight from the streets of London). (It is an interesting thought that of the many Australians who have gone to America etc. they still call Australia home – Olivia Newton John, Greg Norman, Mel Gibson, Peter Allen) **The capacity of the Cockneys to laugh at themselves and to knock down tall poppies has also been an enduring influence. They were keen to point out with a grin that the first white Australians were picked by the best judges in the world, and for decades we have unfortunately believed them.**

Toward a National Identity

Until recently most Australians feared to look into the past for fear of the clink of convict chains but those early Cockneys were not the first white Australians. While they had a special influence on us, there is another group of people who, I believe, hold the key to understanding the Australian mind.

Like all the other convicts, soldiers and officers the Cockneys were British and always felt their Britishness. Despite being marooned for life in a country thousands of miles away, whatever its economic advantages, home would always be in Britain. Many early settlers, whatever their rank, would import trees and plant English gardens that would temper the pain of living in direct confrontation with the rugged Australian environment. On one occasion thousands lined up at Port Jackson in Sydney simply to see one English primrose on a newly arrived ship. Early artists painted what they wanted to believe the Australian environment was like. Bay windows might have been nice in England, where you wanted all the sun you could get, but it would be another generation who recognised the greater need of the big verandah to live comfortably with the Australian sun.

Strewn across our map are names that tell their own tale of the alienation of the European mind – the mind that never quite felt at home.

23 **Cape Tribulation, Cape Catastrophe, Denial Bay, Mount Hopeless, Bald Head, Cape Arid, Cape Disappointment, Cape Grim, Cape Barren, Dart moor, Great Stoney Desert, Termination Island are not names given by a people comfortable with the land.**

It would be a new generation of white Australians who, in the words of Manning Clark, 'Learned to look on the Australian bush with the eyes of a lover, rather than that of an alien'.⁴ The seeds of that new generation arrived with the second boat load of two hundred and twenty five convict women to arrive in the colony.

Five years later that early colony was not so much a tense tinderbox ready to explode – **but more like a Sodom & Gomorrah.**

If you were to put a female prison in the middle of a male prison, without any entertaining diversions such as colour television, or good books to read, the result is predictable. A baby boom.

It was the early clergyman, Samuel Marsden, who described the already blossoming colourful culture in this way, **'Gaming and drunkenness, robberies and murder are common crimes. The colony was deluged with every species of sin and iniquity.'**⁵

⁴ C.M.H.Clark, A Short History of Australia, New American Library 1963, p.52.

The quickest way out of the colony was on an upended bottle of rum or a quick sexual encounter.

Quite a different start to the idealistic beginnings of America where the Pilgrim Fathers had gone to establish the Kindgom of Heaven on Earth! Australia began somewhat more pragmatically as a result of the London bureaucrats' dilemma of what to do with the rotting hulks full of convicts once, they had lost the American colonies. Remembering a lump of dirt Cook found at the bottom of the Pacific they decided to try the 'out of sight out of mind' trick.

From these unlikely beginnings was to grow a hybrid^a race of lanky, olive skinned people. A generation who knew only Australian soil; to whom Britain was just a mythical place out there somewhere; a generation who were open to what the black man could teach them about the bush; a generation who would learn to love the twisted gums, the heat and glare of the sun, the bright blue sky. A generation who would proudly call Australia home and enjoy teaching the Poms how to play cricket.

139 TAKING OUR PLACE IN THE SUN

12 FACING THE THIRD CENTURY TOGETHER

It has been said that without a sense of the past people have no feeling for the future

...

141 This freedom also permitted their statesman to verbalise the meaning of their existence and their special place on the globe. These opportunities were denied to an emerging Australia

Each of these countries is enthusiastically defining its future, so we find ourselves in the middle of a remarkable situation where a new energy is breaking out on the globe, energy that no longer remains in the powers that ruled the world before the Second World War.

The great question for Australia is, 'Will we take off, and find our special place in history – or will be swamped by internal paralysis and lack of orientation?'

Finding our place in the sun

Brought up by a colonial parent who was part of another world, Australia is, in many ways, like an adolescent struggling for her own identity and mind, looking for her own place in the sun, but wearing blinkers from the past which prevents her seeing her potential and place in the contemporary world. We are like a frustrated youngest child who always feels left out of the family discussions in the northern hemisphere and is continually struggling to feel significant – too often looking to Europe and America for legitimacy.

⁵ Historical Records of Australia, Vol ii, p.185

^a 1.n. Offspring of two animals or plants **of different species or varieties; person of mixed origins;** (fig.) thing composed of incongruous elements, esp. word with parts taken from different languages. 2.a. bred as hybrid from different species or varieties; heterogeneous; (h)ibrida **offspring of tame sow and wild boar, child of freeman and slave, etc.**
hybridixe,-ise 1.v.t.subject (species etc.) to **cross-breeding**. 2.v.i. produce hybrids; (of animal or plant) **interbreed**.