

Rural Culture and Australian History: Myths and Realities

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In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Australia's European inhabitants conceived of the Bush as providing a range of economic opportunities in terms of pastoralism, farming and mining. 'I believe a man with one or two thousand may make a fortune in a very few years ...', wrote Frank Bailey in 1869 from rural Queensland to his sister Alice in England, 'if he goes the right way to work'. Such sentiments encapsulate the aspirations of generations of those who established rural enterprises.¹ What strengthened these conceptions of rural Australia as a place of opportunity was the extension of modern communication and transport systems in the form of the telegraph and railway lines to many rural areas. Such developments provided rural Australia with access to modern culture, modern values and, most important of all, modern markets. Moreover, while the impact of industrialisation on Australian secondary industry in the late nineteenth century remained modest, highly advanced technology was applied to our rural industries. Ironically, large wheat and sheep properties more closely resembled modern factories than the workshops that passed for 'factories' in Sydney and Melbourne. So large stations, which in the shearing season might employ in excess of 150 men, were fitted with scouring plants, steam presses and dumping machinery, their woolsheds included dozens of electric powered shearing machines, and conveyor belts were used to carry the shorn fleece to the wool room. Such

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stations were described as possessing the characteristic of 'military barracks', of functioning like well regulated machines.²

In the late nineteenth century rural Australia was also seen as a place of freedom, a site to escape from public servants, the police, and landlords seeking back rent. Marilyn Lake has also suggested that the *Bulletin* writers portrayed pastoral workers as heroes because they had escaped the shackles of domesticity.³ But by late in the century most shearers—although probably not most rouseabouts—were married men who became itinerant workers as a means of supporting, not escaping from, their families:

And all day long with desperate haste
They're s hearing for their lives,
The cheques they earn at Castlereagh bring comfort to
their wives.⁴

Indeed, there is strong evidence to suggest that women in the Bush enjoyed more freedom, were bound less by the constraints of the values associated with the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood, than their city counterparts. In rural Australia women ran sly grog shops, owned and operated bullock teams, managed large properties, cleared and farmed selections, and even functioned as swagwomen, humping their swags through the Bush as they tramped from station to station in search of temporary employment. Women participated in hunting, rode in horse races, fought prize fights, and played cricket, at a time when city women for the most part confined their leisure activities to more passive domestic and public recreations.⁵

And at the same time that the Bush was conceived to offer more opportunity and freedom than the city it was also considered a superior physical and moral environment, for the city was associated with overcrowding, poverty, vice, disease and materialism. It was sometimes even conceived of as a parasitic society. An 1890 cartoon depicted 'young Australia' observing a city bereft of cattle and sheep. How, he asks his father, can people live? 'Well yer see', Dad replies, 'they swindle each other and call that business'.⁶

In the twentieth century some of these contexts were reversed. As economic conditions in rural Australia deteriorated in

comparison with those in the cities and larger towns, there was an inexorable shift of population from rural to urban areas. What accelerated this process was the fact that in terms of the provision of modern services and conveniences, of electricity, employment and entertainment, rural fell far behind city life. 'Many witnesses have expressed the view that the provision of an electricity supply to a farm does more to bridge the gap between city and country life', noted the Rural Reconstruction Commission in 1944, 'than any other single factor.'⁷ It was a sign of how broad that gap remained that in 1947 only 12,000 of 83,000 farms in New South Wales were supplied with electricity.⁸ With the emergence of pastoralism, agriculture and mining as enormous enterprises, rural Australia as a place of individual endeavour has also lost much of its appeal. And as the cult of the coast has grown ever stronger so the notion of escaping the city to find freedom in the Bush is now replaced by the ideal of a sea change. For most Australians the dream has become not to live and work on the land but to get a little farther north each year.

Land

In early twentieth-century Australia, nature and the rural environment were fitted into a set of cultural assumptions, a world-view about the past, present and future of the nation and the colonies that had preceded it. Those Europeans who inhabited an antipodean landscape still considered only half-tamed, only half-yoked to European purpose, also conceptualised it in terms of ancient understandings about the meaning of 'civilisation', 'ownership', and the relation of humankind to nature. Such understandings had long European and American histories extending back to the sixteenth century.⁹

By the 1880s the authorities in most colonies were convinced that the policies established under the various selection acts had failed. Those who had proposed the 'unlocking of the land', by opening the expiring pastoral leases to selection by small scale agriculturalists, were driven by two main ideologies. The first was agrarianism, a set of ideas that promoted small-scale

agricultural production as morally virtuous and conducive to a stable and democratic society. The second was *laissez-faire*, a doctrine that sought to establish equality of opportunity by taking away the privileges enjoyed by the squatters and providing all colonists with the chance to acquire land and prosper by it.¹⁰ But within twenty years it was clear that in many areas squatters had engaged in 'peacocking' (picking the out the most fertile land as well as the areas with access to water) and 'dummying' (using employees and family members to purchase land on their behalf) to prevent the creation of small scale holdings. Even where selection on a large scale had taken place, the limits on the size of holdings meant that many families held insufficient land to support themselves. As a result many sold out and once again it was the squatters who benefited.¹¹

In response, most colonies and states abandoned selection in favour of closer settlement, a policy which involved government authorities purchasing large rural properties, dividing them into smaller lots, and selling them to prospective farmers. On the eve of World War I closer settlement was proclaimed as a success. Its adoption co-incided with, and was to some extent credited with, a huge expansion in the wheat industry in New South Wales and the growth of dairying in all the eastern states. Politicians and commentators alike argued that with the spread of agriculture and small-holdings 'civilisation' had triumphed. Rural Australia, they suggested, was losing its sense of temporariness, its semi-nomadic qualities, a change reflected in the disappearance of farmers' 'humpies' and their replacement by 'houses of stone and brick, solid and enduring'.¹² And a settled society, of course, as European Australians understood it, was also a truly civilised society. Such themes were most cogently articulated in James Collier's 1911 account of the history of Australian pastoralism, *The Pastoral Age in Australia*. His was a story of progress, reflected in a process by which pastoralism had given way to agriculture.¹³ And yet this chronicle of 'progress', trumpeting the success of closer settlement and the triumph of agriculture, involved some extraordinary ironies. In the first place, the extension of European settlement and rural enterprise was by no

means a story of uninterrupted progress. In a twenty year period extending from the early 1880s, a combination of the effects of drought, depressed wool prices, overstocking, and rabbit plague caused the abandonment of millions of acres in western New South Wales and Queensland. 'You are treading on dead rabbits all the way from Gundabooka to Wilcannia', wrote one resident of the west in 1892. 'Every step you take is a crunch of bones.'¹⁴ In this context those who worked the land were hardly likely to share Collier's optimism. 'I have locked up my house and paddocks', wrote a grazier on the Namoi in 1903, 'for to look at the wilderness longer would drive me mad.'¹⁵ Such indeed was life in rural Australia. In the second place, both because of the failure of selection in many areas and, in any case, because of the expansion of the pastoral industry into far west Queensland, the Northern Territory and the northern areas of Western Australia, the vast majority of land was still used not for agriculture but for grazing.

Yet the notion of the cultural superiority of a rural society characterised by a farming yeomanry lived on in the twentieth century. The soldier settlement schemes adopted in all states after World War I were based on the ideas underpinning closer settlement. Moreover, the administrative structures that established and maintained them were simply taken over from the pre-war schemes. In promising to settle the ex-servicemen on land suitable and large enough for agriculture with easy access to markets, in guaranteeing them adequate agricultural training and sufficient capital to purchase equipment and undertake improvements, the state governments promised they had learnt the lessons of the past.¹⁶ At the same time, a new optimism developed that with the application of scientific methods, and the development of more extensive systems of irrigation, even non-arable land could be rendered fertile. And sometimes science did provide answers. The *Cactoblastis Cactorum*, introduced in 1925, ate through some 10,000 tonnes of Prickly Pear in four years, allowing the restoration of large tracts of land for pastoral purposes. The moth was valorised, turned into a true blue bush hero, and community halls were named after it.¹⁷ On occasions optimism proved

misplaced. When the cane toad was introduced into the Queensland cane fields in the interwar period, it was hailed as a renowned pest destroyer. So benign were these amphibians, it was suggested, that they made wonderful household pets, even if their 'singing' interrupted farmers' sleep.¹⁸ Only in succeeding years did the true ecological consequences become apparent. Sometimes science and technology were immediately seen to be less successful. In Western Australia, emus ate so much of the wheat crop as to prompt farmers to call in an army machine gun unit. The tactic proved a disaster, with the birds scattering in all directions, while the bullets travelled further than expected, causing panic on neighbouring farms.¹⁹

In any case, neither governments nor scientists proved to have all the answers, and in the thirties large areas first opened up to agriculture under soldier settlement after World War I proved unsuitable for crop growing and were abandoned by the occupants. In the Victorian mallee, sand drifted into the irrigation channels and blocked them, providing an all too vivid demonstration that irrigation was not always the solution it was proclaimed to be. So bad was the sand drift in many areas that the chances of returning them to grazing was considered remote.²⁰ Visiting the land west of the Darling in the mid-thirties, the writer Ion Idriess acknowledged that it was no longer the landscape the European pioneers had known. Instead of plains and gentle rises, saltbush and mulga, it was bare, sandy and wind swept.²¹

Oddly and ironically enough, it was the debate about the form soldier settlement was to take after World War II that resulted in a collapse of the consensus about the value and viability of a yeoman class. Rural residents questioned the economic sense of breaking up large and viable properties to establish small, non-viable units. They asked why rural landholders should be singled out as the medium for assisting ex-servicemen.²² Rural businessmen suggested that the idea was not practical, that men and women would not stay on the land simply for the sake of an ideal or a way of life. The drift to the cities over the last 50 years had already proved that. Farmers, they argued, had to be scientists and economists, to make rational decisions about what could be

grown and produced. In many cases, that involved mixed farming—a combination of grazing and agriculture—a practice not quite in keeping with the yeoman ideal. Indeed a number of soldier settlement schemes adopted in the aftermath of war were designed to limit government liability and ensure farmer viability. Sometimes the schemes were initiated and administered by organisations like the AMP rather than by governments. By the 1950s farming was considered another business, nothing more, nothing less.²³

Representations

The optimism evident in Collier's work was also present in the celebrations held to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the 1813 crossing of the Blue Mountains. The extravagant rhetoric of government officials and politicians in speeches delivered at Mount York on 25 May 1913, the valedictory stories which appeared in the Sydney and rural New South Wales press, identified the achievements of Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson as the most important in the history of the nation. They were compared to a collective Moses who had found a path through the 'sullen walls' of the Blue Mountains, a path that allowed the antipodean Israelites into the Promised Land. Their exploits allowed the transformation of a small penal colony on the edge of the ocean into a rich and extensive commonwealth. These celebrations emphasised the progress and prosperity that rural Australia had brought, and continued to bring, to the nation:

Where then the cloak of desolation lay
The humming townships stand and thrive today.
While through them rush, in streams that never cease,
The swelling stores of metal, grain and fleece.²⁴

Accompanying this theme of progress was another, which portrayed the men and women who had first occupied and established properties and farms, villages and towns, as 'hardy pioneers', sturdy members of the 'Anglo-Saxon race', united in their quest for progress, prosperity and a united nation.²⁵

Yet throughout the nineteenth century the colonists had

acknowledged that the frontier was occupied by men and women representing a range of occupations—squatters, squatters' daughters, selectors, selectors' wives, shearers, and rouseabouts, to name but a few—and that the interests of these various social and economic groups and classes were often at variance. An 1883 report presented to the NSW Legislative Council found numerous examples of conflict and antagonism between selectors and graziers, as they ruthlessly competed for land at the expense of honesty, truth and the law.²⁶

Still, at various times all of the frontier dwellers were valorised as quintessential Australian heroes. In the 1870s both fictional and non-fictional accounts of squatters often described them as rough and ready, but nevertheless good-hearted types, the stuff heroes are made of. But as a consequence of the fierce conflicts that surrounded the process of 'unlocking the land', the popular image of squatters underwent a metamorphosis. They came to be identified as monopolists, depriving both their own workers and the small-scale farmers of a fair go:

The owner lives in England now
Of Kiley's Run
He knows a racehorse from a cow;
But that is all he knows of stock:
His chiefest care is how to dock
Expenses, and he sends from town
To cut the shearers' wages down
On Kiley's Run.²⁷

In late nineteenth-century melodramas about the Bush, melodramas that proved enormously popular with urban and rural audiences alike, squatters with names like Ralph Seymour attempted to seduce women with names like Nell. Others with give-away names like Money Maxwell were simply obsessed with the accumulation of wealth, to the detriment of their neighbours and indeed the whole community.

Women were portrayed in complex terms in melodrama and literature, sometimes as brave and independent, virtually unrecognisable as Victorian stereotypes. But they were also described, in the case of selectors' wives, as often worn down by



A VERBATIM REPORT

SWAGMAN (*to squatter*) : "Any work, boss ?"

SQUATTER : "No!"

SWAGMAN : "Well, can you give us a feed, then ?"

SQUATTER : "Have you any money ?"

SWAGMAN : "No!"

SQUATTER : "I have fed too many of your sort lately."

SWAGMAN : "Well, can you lend me a bucket ?"

SQUATTER : "What for ?"

SWAGMAN : "To boil me dorg in." (*Bulletin*, 3 October 1891)

poverty, hard work and an unforgiving landscape:

Land where gaunt and haggard women live alone and
work like men

Till their husbands, gone a droving, will return to them
again.²⁸

Itinerant workers—shearers and rouseabouts—were valorised in the *Bulletin* in the eighties and early nineties as embodying the values of collectivism, republicanism, mateship, and a distrust of authority, although this Australian ‘type’ was not reported and promoted as much as historians like Russel Ward subsequently claimed. Moreover, in the wake of the failure of the shearers’ strikes of the 1890s, the *Bulletin* representations of itinerants tended to portray them as pathetic and downtrodden, the dying remnants of a passing Bush culture. Instead, selectors, small farmers, were often represented as the backbone of the nation, credited with turning waste country into farmland, with little help from a technology they could not afford and despite constant harassment from squatters.²⁹ Such representations were epitomised in Steel Rudd’s *On Our Selection* stories, which began to appear in the *Bulletin* in 1895.

In the post-1914 period, against a background of mostly ill-conceived soldier settlement schemes, selectors continued to be portrayed, in particular via the stage and screen versions of *On Our Selection*, as genuine Bush heroes, foolish and naïve, but stoic, honest and hard-working nevertheless. Dad and Dave were the antipodean embodiment of the yeoman ideal. The Pioneer Legend also retained its vitality. Now it was applied not to the men and women of the Bush, but rather to those of the far frontier, the outback. European men and women who owned or managed outback stations were often fitted into this mythology, as were those who founded and serviced the Flying Doctor Service. Because of its emphasis on shared and common purpose, it remained a conservative legend, one least likely to cause political division. It still features on memorials erected to commemorate the achievements of the founders of rural towns. Some thirty years ago the old cemetery at the end of Point Frederick in Gosford was ‘relandscaped’ and renamed ‘Pioneer Park’. In its centre

stands a concrete monument, featuring the profiles of stereotyped pioneers, men and women, timber workers and farming entrepreneurs.

In the twentieth century the Bush Legend, valorising the itinerant bush workers as tough and resilient, committed to mateship and defiant of authority, was privileged by radical and nationalist journalists and historians, playwrights and scriptwriters, in ways that were not evident in the nineteenth century. In effect journalists like C. E. W. Bean, writers like Vance Palmer, and historians like Russel Ward were crystallising a particular Australian mythology rather than articulating an historical interpretation.³⁰ Over the past twenty years or so rural types have figured far less prominently in representations of Australian character and identity, and when they do, as in the case of the 2000 Olympics Opening Ceremony, the tongue is often firmly in the creator's cheek. The values and ideals reflected in the Selector/ Yeoman Farmer, Bush Legend and Pioneer Legend myths are perhaps no longer considered either sufficiently inclusive or relevant, for they seem anachronistic to the inhabitants of an urban and multi-cultural society, most of whom have little knowledge or experience of rural life.

The Indigenous Peoples

The 1913 celebrations also indicated that Australians had come to believe that the European occupation of the interior was a peaceful process, with the Aborigines rendered more or less invisible. Such a view is neatly encapsulated in Paterson's 1913 poem 'The Explorers':

And lo a miracle! The land
But yesterday was all unknown
The wild man's boomerang was thrown
Where now great busy cities stand.
It was not much, you say, that these
Should win their way where none withstood;
In sooth there was not much of blood
Nor war was fought between the seas.³¹

But the reality was different. Europeans and Aborigines, of course, came into conflict almost as soon as the First Fleet arrived in Sydney. Watkin Tench, a military officer, recorded the killing of two convicts and the abduction of another dozen by Aborigines in January 1788.³² The Europeans assumed that Aboriginal occupation was confined to the coast and anticipated discovering an inland that was largely uninhabited. Experience not only quickly taught them that this was not the case but also that resistance would be fierce and well planned. It was a sign of the intensity of the conflicts that took place that when Europeans reached the areas they wished to occupy, they built their huts in ways that allowed them to be defended against Aborigines. Usually the huts were loop-holed for musketry and on occasions faced each other around a square. In travelling from one outstation to another in search of new pastures, the Europeans were usually armed, and many took the precaution of camping without fires to avoid alerting the local inhabitants to their presence.

At first Aborigines were acknowledged, at least on occasions, to be particular sets of indigenous peoples, attached to specific locations and possessing unique forms of culture. In this context, Aborigines were sometimes referred to in the early literature as 'Indians'.³³ But it was a sign of the way in which Europeans came to depersonalise their conceptions about Aborigines in the late nineteenth century that the term 'nigger' was increasingly applied to them. Once a derogatory colloquialism used to describe African-Americans, now it came to be a term applied to all those deemed, according to the principles of social Darwinism, to be racially inferior.³⁴ A new form of technology, repeating rifles, contributed to European detachment, because it allowed Aborigines to be killed methodically and from a distance. And so the explorer James Ricketson, making his way through the Kimberleys in 1884, came across a party of Aborigines. When an 'old man' gesticulated at him with a boomerang from fifty yards away Ricketson dropped to his knee, took careful aim and fired. Without emotion he recalled that the Aborigine '... staggered about as if he were drunk and finally sat down in the sand and twisted round and round clutching handfuls of sand'.³⁵

The Europeans brought with them to the Australian frontier some long held English views about land, culture and civilisation, for England's emergence as a powerful European power gave its inhabitants a sense of confidence in the nation's centrality, and promoted a widespread belief in the superiority of its culture. At the heart of the English world-view (which was similar to that earlier held by the Spanish) was the notion that a 'civilised' society was both settled and agricultural as well as Christian. It was possible for a society to be settled and civilised without being Christian, as the ancient Greeks and Romans had proved. But it was impossible to be Christian without first becoming settled and civilised. It followed that nomadic or semi-nomadic societies did not make the best use of the land they occupied, and therefore had no entitlement to it. Those nomadic cultures which sought to resist occupation were considered to be hindering progress, and their destruction was justified in the name of 'civilisation' and 'Christianity'. At the same time, the English assumed their right to command and the obligation of indigenous people to submit.³⁶ And such arguments were used to justify the European occupation of the interior. 'I am one of those who think this fine country never was intended only to be occupied by a nomad race who made no use of it', wrote a Queensland colonist at mid-century, 'except going from place to place and living only on the wild animals and small roots of the earth and never in any way cultivating one single inch of ground'.³⁷ And yet neither he nor other colonists paused to consider whether pastoralism involved cultivation either. Indeed, had they bothered with such considerations, Europeans might have noticed that in terms of their own cultural arguments they were hardly more 'entitled' to the land than those they dispossessed. Later in the century, social Darwinist principles were overlaid on these assumptions, providing them with a modern vocabulary and a set of 'scientific', to re-inforce pre-existing 'cultural', arguments. 'For untold centuries the aborigines [*sic*] have had the use of this country', wrote another Queenslander, Thomas Major, 'but in the march of time they, like the extinct fossil, must make way ... the sooner they are taught that a superior race has come among them, and

made to feel its power the better for them ... To temporise with them is the greatest cruelty. Survival of the fittest is nature's law.'³⁸

When Aborigines resisted European occupation by spearing stock and shepherds, and sometimes even attacking homesteads, the colonists found it incomprehensible. 'They seem to fail to understand our method of stock raising and consider the animals are imported here for their own convenience', claimed the explorer William Hovell, without any sense of recognition of Aboriginal rights and needs; 'every effort is made to convince them their place is outside the fence.'³⁹ And so increasingly Aborigines came to be viewed as 'pests', to be exterminated just like the native animals that were also considered to threaten stock and pastures. In the same way that poison was laid for native dogs, Aborigines were given brandy, milk and flour laced with vitriol, copper sulphate, arsenic and mercury.⁴⁰ A common method of eliminating kangaroos and wallabies was to drive mobs of them into gullies and shoot them by the thousands. In imitation of this practice, in the Kimberleys in the eighties when Aborigines killed some miners, other diggers responded by driving a group of Aborigines up a gully and slaughtering them with repeating rifles.⁴¹

In the southern colonies many Aborigines survived by working for European employers, acculturating in part to European culture and yet at the same time maintaining traditional practices, customs, rituals and beliefs. Amongst Europeans there grew the belief, again founded on social Darwinism, that the Aborigines were a 'dying race'. Denounced as 'filthy and objectionable', as standing as symbolic barriers to progress, they became increasingly segregated in many rural areas, excluded from hospitals and schools, banished to the fringes of towns and beyond.⁴² On one occasion, in 1899, a rural publican refused to serve an African-American, probably a professional stage performer. The customer returned with the local copper who told the publican to serve him, asking rhetorically if he couldn't see that the man was not an Aborigine. 'No I can't', said the publican, 'Aboriginal means black an' this here feller's as black as the ace of spades!'⁴³

Perhaps the tale is apocryphal—it comes after all from the *Bulletin*—but it illustrates the point, that in rural as well as in urban Australia, Europeans now simply equated Aborigines with other non-European ethnic groups, all of whom were judged inferior and deserving of exclusion from Australian society.

But I cannot end this discussion of Aborigines and rural Australian culture without noting two extraordinary ironies relating to Aboriginal culture and Australian history. First, as the sheep and cattle industries expanded into the remote areas of central and northern Australia, the pastoralists discovered that with European labour virtually non-existent, Aboriginal labour was essential. ‘These parts were not made for white people’, commented the *Australian Town and Country Journal*, reflecting the common European view that only the ‘coloured races’ were capable of living and working in the tropics.⁴⁴ Those Europeans who ventured into the Deep North were astonished to discover that on most stations Aborigines undertook virtually all the work. As some of them observed, the resilience and adaptability of Aboriginal culture seemed to challenge the notion of the ‘dying race’.⁴⁵ Even as colonial politicians pronounced the virtues of ‘White Australia’ the north was emerging as a society characterised by multi-racialism. Noting the extent of miscegenation in Cairns between Europeans and Aborigines, Japanese and Pacific Islanders, the *Bulletin* was led to question ‘What will the future Queensland be like?’⁴⁶ The obvious answer challenged the ‘warmth and comfortableness’ of European expectations.

Second, in the twentieth century, as Aboriginal became increasingly segregated from European society in the urbanising south, so European conceptions of Aboriginal culture became locked in nineteenth-century stereotypes and caricatures. The notion of the ‘dying race’ persisted both as a popular belief and a scientific ‘truth’. Caricatures derived from those originally based on African-Americans and performed on the vaudeville stage were also common. Sometimes, as in the case of the musical *Collit's Inn* (1933), Aborigines were portrayed as exotic natives in the tradition of the Noble Savage.⁴⁷ Even the attempts at

authenticity were unfortunate. In 1953 Beth Dean, seeking an 'authentic background' on which to base the choreography for a ballet version of John Antill's *Corroboree*, visited Arnhem Land to study Aboriginal dances, initiation ceremonies, songs and folklore. On one occasion Aboriginal women performed a secret dance for her, on condition that her husband left. Presented in abridged form before Queen Elizabeth II during the 1954 Royal Tour and then enjoying a successful regional and capital city tour, *Corroboree* was acclaimed as presenting 'the real Australian continent—the first outback'. It was also described as 'an Australian masterpiece'. But what it presented too, as perhaps the Aboriginal women sought to indicate to Dean, were sacred and secret rituals, and her 'adaptation' amounted to nothing less than appropriation.⁴⁸ But in 1990, *Bran Nue Dae*, billed as the first Aboriginal musical, and composed by Jimmy Chi and the Broome band Kuckles, pointed in a new and radical direction. The score reflects the influence of country music, musical comedy, rock opera, the Catholic Mass, and traditional Aboriginal music, and thus symbolises the survival of Aboriginal culture through adaptation and re-invention. At the end of the story all the characters, even the Europeans, discover they are Aborigines. Perhaps here lies the answer to the *Bulletin's* 1899 question not only in relation to Queensland, but also to Australian culture generally. For *Bran Nue Dae* locates the ultimate source of Australian identity and character not in the values generated by European bushmen or 'hardy pioneers', but in the reality of 60,000 years of Aboriginal creativity.⁴⁹

Afterword

During the course of the nineteenth century rural and urban Australians became increasingly positive about the prospects of the Bush, its capacity to deliver wealth to the colonies and to the nation, although at times this optimism was tempered by the limited success of selection, falling commodity prices, and the impact of droughts and rabbits. This heightening optimism was stimulated in part by developments in technology and science

that seemed to promise the possibility of harnessing the resources of nature. During the difficult economic times of the inter-war years, reflected in the partial failure of soldier settlement, rural optimism was once again blunted. After World War II hopes for the future of rural Australia were once again on the rise, and expectations of the prospects of the 'vision splendid' were perhaps even greater than in 1913. The success of irrigation schemes along the Murrumbidgee and the Murray, as well as in the Goulburn Valley, were cited in support of the further construction of dams, cuts and channels. The cultivation of land in the Ninety Mile Desert, following the application of zinc, copper, nitrogen and superphosphate, was offered as proof that even the so called arid lands were really fertile. The Snowy Mountains Scheme was hailed as Australia's greatest developmental project, and high expectations were held of the Ord River Scheme. 'I hope to see water shining behind the scarlet ranges in a spectacular panorama', wrote one visitor to the project in its early stages, 'that at present escapes even my imagination'.⁵⁰ But more and more Australians too were aware that 'progress' in the form of intense and extended agriculture, pastoralism and mining came at a heavy ecological cost, and called for the balancing of enterprise and conservation. 'We have just finished a bitter struggle for our social freedom', wrote one commentator in 1946, 'but this will not be a reality until we also learn to preserve the freedom of lesser creatures that inhabit the land, the plants which adorn it, and the soils from which they arise'.⁵¹ More than fifty years later we are still in the preliminary stages of that education; we still have not acquired the will to guarantee that essential balance. In any case, in the rush of historians to insist that Australia is, and almost always has been, an urban nation, we should not forget the critical role that rural Australia has played in determining our prosperity, our values, our 'place' in the landscape and the myths we have woven about our past, present and future.

Notes

- 1 Frank Bailey to his sister Alice, 22 November 1869, Mitchell Library, MSS 3073.
- 2 *Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, 15 November 1892, 16 May 1910.
- 3 Marilyn Lake, 'The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context', in Susan Margery, Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan, eds, *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, Sydney, 1993, pp.3-4.
- 4 A. B. Paterson, 'A Ballad of Shearing', *Bulletin*, 2 February 1894.
- 5 Richard Waterhouse, 'Recreation in Rural Australia', unpublished seminar paper, 2002.
- 6 *Bulletin*, 8 March 1890.
- 7 Rural Reconstruction Commission, First Report, 1944, 45-46.
- 8 *Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, 16 June 1947.
- 9 For the standard histories of landscape and memory and the cultural assumptions applied by Europeans both to nature and indigenous peoples see Simon Scharma, *Landscape and Memory*, London, 1995; and Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, Chicago, 1991.
- 10 David Goodman, *Gold Seeking: Victoria and California in the 1850s*, Sydney, 1994, pp.105-35; D. W. A. Baker, 'The Origins of Robertson's Land Acts', in J. J. Eastwood and F. B. Smith, eds, *Historical Studies: Selected Articles*, Melbourne, 1964, pp.114, 122, 125.
- 11 'Report of the Inquiry Into the State of the Public Lands and the Operation of the Land Laws', NSW Legislative Council, *Journal*, vol.34, part 1, 1883, pp.18, 25, 34. Hereafter referred to as 'Report'.
- 12 *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 19 April 1905.
- 13 James Collier, *The Pastoral Age in Australia*, London, 1911.
- 14 *Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, 15 December 1892.
- 15 *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 14 January 1903.
- 16 For the most balanced and persuasive account of soldier settlement to date see Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return*, Melbourne, pp.118-42. Garton argues that while many soldier settlers were forced off the land in Victoria in the interwar period, about half remained. In other words, it was not an unmitigated disaster. He also concludes that because it was more cautiously and carefully handled the scheme adopted after World War II had a much lower failure rate.
- 17 Libby Robin, 'Ecology: A Science of Empire', in Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths, eds, *Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies*, Melbourne, 1997, p.69.
- 18 *Walkabout*, 1 April 1938.
- 19 *Walkabout*, 1 May 1949.

- 20 *Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, 16 February 1932, 16 January 1937, 16 December 1938, 15 January 1939.
- 21 *Walkabout*, 1 August 1935.
- 22 *Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, 15 June 1946.
- 23 *Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, 15 September 1945; *Walkabout*, 1 May 1952.
- 24 *Blue Mountains Echo*, 30 May 1913.
- 25 For the history of the idea of the pioneer legend see John Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend', *Historical Studies* 18 (October 1978): 316–37.
- 26 'Report', p.29.
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