

Richard Waterhouse*, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia*, Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005. 320 pp.

While the bush has been central to past representations of Australia and Australian identity, ones which still have much popular currency today, in recent decades Australian historians have focussed more on previously neglected areas such as urban history and women's history. When rural Australia has featured, it has been in ecological and regional histories or as the backdrop to heated debates over the nature of frontier conflict between settlers and Indigenous Australians. One historian, Graeme Davison, has even argued that the values popularly associated with bush life, such as mateship, collectivism and egalitarianism, were actually projected on to it by *Bulletin* journalists of the 1890s. *The Vision Splendid* takes its title from 'Banjo' Paterson's poem 'Clancy of the Overflow', first published in the *Bulletin*. Richard Waterhouse's aim has been to write a general history of rural society and culture, covering life in country towns as well as in the outback, and identifying key rural cultural values and institutions.

About two-thirds of the book is devoted to the period from 1788–1914; during much of this time more Australians lived and worked in the country than in the city. Waterhouse divides his material into four chapters, opening with a descriptive account of 'The Land and its Peoples'. He explains how the early focus on the ideal of the yeoman farmer was fairly soon followed by the realisation that wool provided a staple export that could be transported to European markets without loss of quality. This in turn led to the squatting system, with authorities having to allow the relatively large tracts of land required for wool growing to be leased rather than purchased. Following the rapid growth in European population after gold was discovered at mid-century, attempts were made through the selection acts to revive the

yeoman farmer ideal and break-up the squatters' large land holdings, generally with little success. Chapter 2, 'The Culture of Work', describes the different cultures associated with the pastoral industry, with farmers and selectors and with itinerant rural wage-earners. Waterhouse identifies three primary sets of values among European rural Australians during this period: 'one relating to entrepreneurship, a second to (a reluctant) self-sufficiency or subsistence (with aspirations towards entrepreneurship), and a third grounded in opposition to authority'.

'The Culture of Leisure' describes the major domestic leisure activities of most squatters, farmers and selectors as socialising, often around the piano, and reading. As Waterhouse notes, English novels, newspapers and magazines were especially prized, though he is a little astray in listing Fielding along with Dickens and Scott as one of the most widely read authors. Eighteenth-century novelists went out of favour very early in the nineteenth century; by the 1840s cheap editions of novels by James Fenimore Cooper and other Americans were circulating widely throughout rural Australia. He does, however, provide a good overview of public recreations, including hotels, sport, theatre and cinema, not forgetting the more uplifting 'Cultures of Religion, Reform and Reason'. In his chapter on 'Representations of the Bush', Waterhouse, like most who have written on this area, gives too much emphasis to the role of the *Bulletin* in promoting images and ideas that were already in wide circulation in the culture before it began publication in 1880. As Raymond Williams has outlined in his *The Country and the City* (1973), for example, the association of rural life with peace and virtue and the city with sin and depravity goes back at least to the Greek and Roman classics. For the nationalist critics of the 1890s, too, a genuine Australian literature needed to be 'racy of the soil', closely associated with landscapes and life-styles that could not be found anywhere else in the world. Hence the inevitable nostalgic focus on pioneering and on bush life, even as more and more of the population was moving to the cities.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, as Waterhouse

notes, 41.3 per cent of Australians lived in rural areas; a hundred years later, this had fallen to 14 per cent. His final chapter, 'Change and Continuity' examines the period from 1914 to 2003, using the same themes of 'work', 'domestic leisure', 'public recreations' and 'representations'. The yeoman farmer ideal continued to resurface, especially in the soldier settler schemes after the First and Second World Wars. The results, especially after 1918, were often as poor as for earlier attempts at closer settlement, and for similar reasons: the allocation of too small or otherwise unsuitable blocks to ex-soldiers with little farming experience. The more selective allocation of land after 1945 initially seemed more successful, though once the high prices for wool and wheat in the first decades after the war began to drop, farmers again left their blocks. New farming technologies continued to favour consolidation of larger holdings as well as reducing the need for farm workers, while big development schemes based on irrigation were rarely as successful as hoped. Major changes occurred also with respect to the position of Indigenous Australians, with the Mabo decision finally repudiating the founding doctrine of *terra nullius*. Leisure activities were also considerably changed with the coming of the telephone, the car, radio and television. Motels and clubs challenged the former dominance of hotels, though country race meetings were revitalised when TAB betting and Sky Channel made them accessible to city gamblers. Despite the increasing shift to the cities, the myth of the bush as the real Australia continued to be reinforced through radio and television programs and films made by both Australians and non-Australians. As Australian cities became more and more multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, rural dwellers remained predominantly Anglo-Celtic. Hence the divisions that have been exploited in recent years by politicians such as Pauline Hanson: our culture continues to endorse rural Australians and their values but they are no longer central to our economy. Like the Humanities in a contemporary university, they have a proud past but are increasingly seen as irrelevant, except when it comes to cultural tourism.

The Vision Splendid, however, demonstrates why research in the Humanities remains essential. It is important for Australians, wherever they live and work, to understand how we have got to where we are and why rural Australians share particular values and beliefs. Given his wide-ranging sweep, there will inevitably be points of disagreement with some of Richard Waterhouse's interpretations, but his lively and well-illustrated book provides an excellent introduction to the social and cultural history of rural Australia.

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