

'APOCALEPUS': THE YEAR OF THE ANGRY RABBIT AND BRADDON'S VIEW OF AUSTRALIA

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RUSSELL Braddon turned twenty one in Changi and spent World War Two variously in Changi and working on the Burma Thailand railway, the experience of which is narrated in his war memoirs *The Naked Island* (1952). In 1949 Braddon went to England. He has written twenty eight plus books (biographies, novels, short stories, popular histories/sociologies), radio and television scripts. He jokes that his 'Japanese captors' saved him from the dreadful fate of becoming a barrister.

This paper examines aspects of Russell Braddon's work and argues it is a symptomatic representation of the gradual diminishing of filiative and affiliative relationships which have until recently marked Australia's position in the world, and that have impacted on the construction of an Australian identity.

Braddon, having been a prisoner of war of the Japanese, emerges as a post war writer at a time when traditional alliance with Britain is in decline and the developing alliance with the US is at best ambivalent. I would assert that these alliances figured in filiative terms effectively obviate the need to construct both an Australian identity and a place for Australia on the world stage.

In a satirical essay, '1788 and All That' (1984), Russell Braddon remarks that in the last quarter of the twentieth century 'as the Japanese made us rich beyond our wildest dreams' we became 'fecklessly, stridently Australian'.

The statement is quite complex in so far as it evokes a nationalism that is problematic and uncertain at the best of times but here is marked by an economic dependency not only on a former enemy but one that symbolises an Australian xenophobia towards Asia. However, Braddon, since his experiences as a Prisoner of War of the Japanese, has recognised that Australia, to forge its own identity and history, must do so in terms of its relationships and alliances within the Asia-Pacific region in which it exists. He concludes his essay:

Our population may have increased from a thousand-odd in 1788 to six million in 1945, and thence to fifteen million today, but our stock is no longer Anglo-Saxon—or anything else that is rooted in a common past. Given time we will have a future; and granted a future, we will acquire a history. For the moment, though, we must accept that history is something that has to be made—and that so far, the convicts and Gallipoli notwithstanding, we haven't even begun to make it. (54)

Regardless of the amnesia here about indigenous people (Braddon is not so forgetful earlier in the essay), there is a concern about the lack of a commonality, what Anderson (1991) calls the 'imagined community' that is the mark of nationhood.

This lack of history is part of the unconscious of Braddon's work. Underlying the two novels I will examine is a suspicion of the bush myth. Rather than signifying a difference and independence from Britain, the myth is read in terms of locking Australia into an

agrarian economic structure with an almost feudal relation to Britain (see Gellner 1987). Federation, it seems, rather than providing the basis for the emergence of Australia as modern nation state sees it located internally into an outmoded economic and governmental structure, and internationally is organisationally imbricated in British imperial structure. Consequently the construction of, and ideological deployment of, a common culture and national identity becomes highly problematic. It is almost done externally.

The advent of World War Two begins to undermine Australia's imbrication within British policy, and sees the development of an alliance with the US. Arguably the British policy of 'Europe first' caused problems for Australia's war effort in so far as Australia found command of its own forces compromised, specifically in relation to its own defence against Japan's entry into the war. Regardless of the appropriateness of the conduct of British war policy, the fall of Singapore in some ways has come to signify the reality of British inability to defend Australia. But in consequence Australia turns to the US for strategic and defensive alliance. At the time this is a logical move, but post war this alliance is strengthened through affiliative rhetorics centred around linguistic and cultural heritage. In other words an alliance with the US does not require too great a cultural adjustment. In hindsight it seems reasonable to ask the question just where Australia would be if it worked harder in post war Asia in establishing a new pattern of alliance? However, the alliance with the US placed Australia within a certain cold war dynamic, while still maintaining empire/commonwealth structures, at least until British policy east of Suez and the move into Europe.

This rather circuitously brings us back to the work of Russell Braddon. His fiction covers a variety of genres—thrillers, romance, war, satire—but can be described generally as returning to a theme of master-slave relationship, often over elaborated and perhaps with too many twists and turns. The novels considered here are both war novels and for want of a better description, science fiction, in so far relative to the time of publishing they are set in the future, a future that appears to be the 1990s. The novels *The Year of the Angry Rabbit* (1964) and *When the Enemy is Tired* (1968) represent the world in confrontational and conflictual terms with a Sino-Japanese alliance figured as the major threat to an Australia that can no longer rely on its traditional illusory alliance with Britain and the US.

The Year of the Angry Rabbit is a strange novel to say the least. It offers the improbable prospect of Australia toward the year 2000 not only becoming a world power but becoming the world power. The novel is satirical and can be read as a commentary both on Australia's complacency and continuing dependency on others while maintaining a comforting illusion of having some significant place in the world. And to a degree the apocalyptic ending of the novel can be read in terms of a punishment for Australia for presuming too much of itself.

The narrative is absurd. In an effort to find a bio-chemical solution to a plague of rabbits immune to myxomatosis, the CSIR successfully produce a serum that is fatal to humans and merely makes the rabbits angry. The prime minister Kevin Fitzgerald, otherwise known as Ella, employs the serum/virus to enforce world peace (any weapon with an antidote is not a weapon) and to put in place Pax Australiana. In the interim the infected rabbit population is nuked as the only solution. Consequently, not only are the rabbits angry but they mutate.

Curiously, the narrative is unremarkably accurate in its forecast for the world. A certain Richard Nixon has been elected president of the US at his seventh attempt; South Africa has transformed into twelve independent African States; fourteen new states have emerged from the former Soviet empire; three new African-American states have been

carved out of the USA; Britain's decline signified by a twenty three year restoration of number ten Downing Street; the UN is in decline, unable to broker or keep the peace in a Rhodesian civil war (furthermore the secretary general is a recognised Mafia figure).

However, the villain of the piece/peace at least in the first instance, is a Sino-Japanese alliance based militarily in Singapore.

While the novel envisages Australia as a world power, ideologically Australia is positioned rather ambivalently. Two passages indicate that Braddon's satire can be read as critique and reinscription of filiative and feudal/agrarian structures. Having established world dominance, the Australian government decides to institute a special relationship with Britain, the logic of which is quite extraordinary vis-a-vis the US's power within the world. The reasoning borders on the ludicrous but is indicative of the continuing faith in a limited possibility of natural alliances. The cabinet discussion goes thus:

'Why don't we . . . declare the existence of a special relationship between us and Great Britain?'

'Why should we?'

'Well, because it'd be nice for the Queen . . . and because we're now the world's Number One Power and Number One Powers always have an ex Number One Power as a special relation.'

'Why not a special relationship with the States then?'

'Because Americans are so insular they'd only think we'd change positions with Britain as America's special crawling relation. No—the Yanks have got to learn that they are now a Number Two Power, and that their one-time special relation is now our special relation'. (58)

It should be noted that we are informed of a constitutional crisis when the queen threatens to abdicate as queen of Australia due to some unseemly bowling practices in the 1984 Ashes series. Australia as number one power obviates such a circumstance.

However, of more significance in the narrative is the way in which Australia stage-manages any world conflict. Central Australia is turned into a battle zone, perhaps in keeping with Australia's history of being a nuclear weapons testing ground for Britain. Countries for a very large rental fee can battle the enemy of their choice. Some of the conditions of battle are that Australia is supplier of munitions and provisions, prisoners of war are transferred to Australian work camps and employed on full wages on capital works, wages to be reimbursed by combatants; deserters are encouraged by migration officials to become New Australians. In this manner Australia's infrastructure and skill levels are improved. But the examples given relate specifically to an agricultural and resource based economy. If Australia needs skills in dry land farming it stages a war between Israel and whoever; if it needs cattle farming skills it invites Argentina to the fun. And what Australia demands of the rest of the world, given that its infrastructure provides a base for a sophisticated industrial economy, is that the world buy Australia's wool, wheat and minerals.

It seems impossible to imagine Australia as anything other than an agrarian economy. Structurally, then, it is not in a position to assume the mantle of world power. And throughout the narrative Australian culture remains characterised not as sophisticated but as simple bush egalitarianism, anti-intellectual, laconic and masculine.

The satire then invokes the opposite of the narrative. Braddon remains critical of Australia's insularity primarily in terms of its geo-political and cultural naivety but ideologically, at least in *The Year of The Angry Rabbit*, cannot address or is blind to the

need for structural change.

When the Enemy is Tired (1968) is marked more clearly by an ambivalent attitude toward Australia and its position in the world, particularly its relationship with Japan and other countries in the Asia region. The novel presents a less than positive view of Australia in the future and can be read as a product of a cold war environment, but rather than presenting a story of the Red Menace, the dominoes in Asia fall again to a Sino-Japanese military-industrial complex. Forces have taken Malaysia; Indonesia has virtually surrendered to Tokyo-Peking; troops have moved into New Guinea and are poised to attack Australia. The central character, Colonel Tony Russell, is captured in Malaysia as part of a commando force and as a consequence of incompetence in central command in Canberra. He is subject to interrogation/brainwashing, the principle of which is the telling of one's life story in order for the interrogator to find a weakness and exploit it.

Russell represents a naivety in keeping with Australia's faith in its alliances with Britain and the US, perhaps rehearsing the faith of World War Two. He counters his interrogation by asserting that an invasion of Australia would precipitate World War Three – this clearly in a post European/US dominated world, the US having reverted to isolationist policies. However, the narrative is grounded in two other stories; Russell's family story, and the story of Australia's participation in World War One. The former is central; the second marginal, but perhaps more relevant given Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war at the time of publication of the novel.

Russell's family/personal history is focused on the thirties depression, after the 1890s, the period that is viewed as a time when the Australian myth of the battler repeats itself. And to a certain degree Tony Russell's family history mirrors that myth except that Russell's family is irretrievably upper middle class. Nevertheless, egalitarianism reigns supreme, at least from the perspective of childhood memories but not necessarily in the eyes of Russell's interrogator. The story is exquisitely ordinary to the point of becoming classless – Russell's father is a barrister working the country circuit, yet his mother has to build a wardrobe out of old crates. Any other work is carried out by the extended family – house and car repairs being done by the myriad of uncles. This cooperation brings links to a digger tradition. Yet Russell's life is marked as different even if only marginally. His grandparents are relatively wealthy; the family house is marked as a soft touch for door-to-door panhandlers – generally ex World War One veterans. Life is ordinary in the eyes of a child.

The story of World War One, told in passing, seems contradictory to the myth with which we are familiar. There appears to be some ambivalence toward the ANZAC tradition, signalled in a possible xenophobia (see Nile 1991). Russell says:

My father and all his friends had 'been on the Western Front': Uncle Dick had 'gone to Gallipoli'. My father and all his friends had either been gassed or blown up, or both, by Huns: Uncle Dick had been bayoneted – in the leg, many times – by the Turks. . . . clearly [the war] had been won by my father, his two brothers and all my uncles except Uncle Dick, who had *lost* to the Turks because he had a wounded leg.

In this passage, the phrases 'been on the Western Front' and 'gone to Gallipoli' are in quotation marks and the word *lost* is italicised. The result is to distinguish the proper war from the side-show; to identify the true enemy from an up start other. In other words true war is signalled by bombs and blasts and victory over an equal enemy, while bayoneting and loss to a lesser enemy is no achievement at all. For their heroics Russell's father and his friends become professional men and marry 'girls they met at dances or tennis

parties,' whereas Uncle Dick becomes a farmer and marries 'his first cousin'. Condemned to live an unimportant and insular life.

The narrative changes modality when its focus shifts from the telling of Russell's life story and becomes focused on the exchange between Russell and his interrogator, Colonel Lim. Russell's voice shifts character, transforming from the familial to the philosophical and political. Noting that the novel was published in 1968, we should not be surprised that at some point that reference be given to the Vietnam war. When it is revealed that Russell's son was killed in Vietnam, Lim asks 'You approved America's war in Vietnam?' Russell's response is intriguing in so far that it represents a view of world geo-politics that accepts while not necessarily approving imperialist structures. Russell replies:

No. I thought both the Vietnams and Cambodia and Laos should be given to China: but I saw no reason why China should also take Thailand, the whole Malay Archipelago and Australia. I don't approve of Asian imperialism anymore than you do of American imperialism. (163)

Later in the narrative, Russell proclaims a very British position in explaining why the two Vietnams should be ceded to China:

... it's my belief no equatorial country is capable of running itself. If I had my way, I'd assign every country on the equator to the permanent custody of an imperial power. (234)

Regardless of acceptance or disapproval of American or Asian imperialism, Russell's world view is confirmed as determined by an Australian concern for British political interests in Europe. Russell concedes that Australia has been too interested in the tension between Russia and Germany, and regards it as a 'mistake for thirty years' (164).

Australia's position and relations in the world is given further historical context through discussion of World War Two. Britain is regarded as invulnerable and more than capable of restraining Hitler. But more significantly in the course of his family history Russell incorporates the parenthetical remark about Britain '(which our parents, quite properly, called home)' (198). However against this filiative pronouncement, there is an embrace of a new Australia figured in a post World War Two world. In a further exchange with Lim regarding refugees, Russell responds

We dismissed 'em simply as 'bloody reffos', if you must know. A sort of last, lurid affirmation of our Britishness. After the war, we called them 'New Australians. Naturally, we still *meant* bloody reffos; but we said New Australians. In the end, though, we quite took to the idea and began to mean what we said. Funny how things change. (201)

In spite of the utopian inflection in Russell's statement, Lim quickly responds to note exceptions to this development – people from Asian countries.

Nevertheless, as a tentative conclusion, given there is one other text I want to incorporate into the discussion, we can see that Braddon's work can be read as symptomatic of an ideological crisis within Australia. Clearly there is an ambivalent attitude toward traditional alliances structured as they are in filiative terms because they obviate the need to actively produce a national culture and identity. The filiative does this for us. But once those alliances become diminished how then should Australia imagine itself;

how then should Australia position itself in the world?

To a degree Braddon recognises that Australia had to do this in regional terms but again there is an ambivalence. The narratives I have examined homogenise the near and far north, reinvoing the myth of an aggressive and belligerent yellow peril figured in a Sino-Japanese alliance. However, at the time of writing and given his wartime experience perhaps there were limited representations available to Braddon, yet what appears to be at issue is that Australia needs to reconsider its reliance on Britain and the US and go its own way. But that is impossible in terms of late twentieth century geo-politics. Braddon may not concur but Australia must negotiate a position in the Asian region.

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