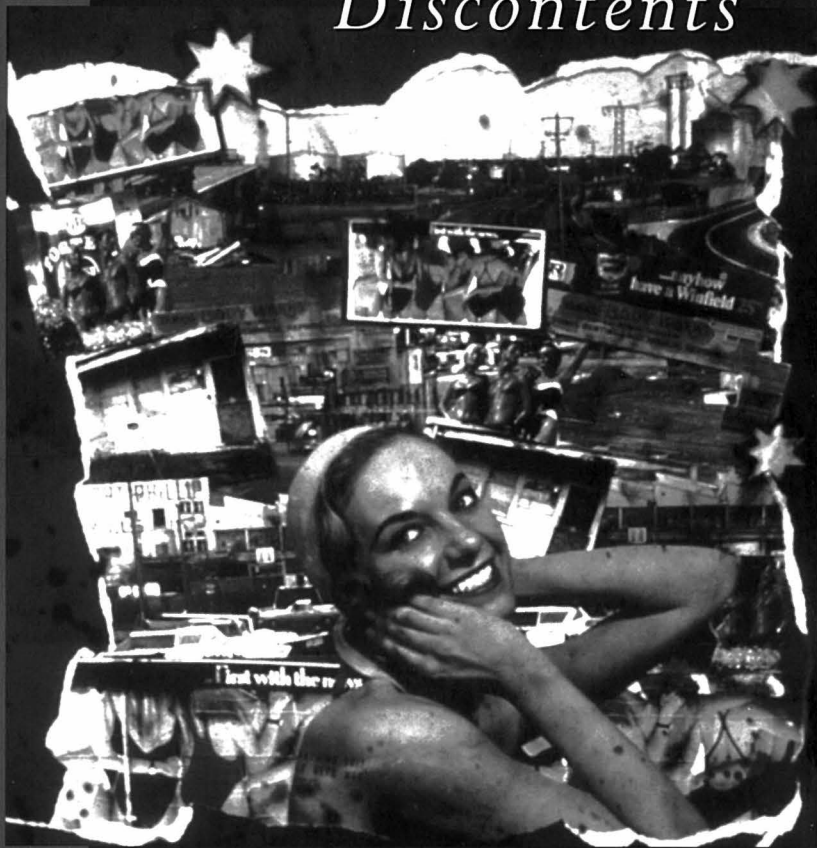


AUSTRALIAN STUDIES READER

*The Australian
Legend and Its
Discontents*



Edited by Richard Nile



Australian Public Intellectual
API
NETWORK

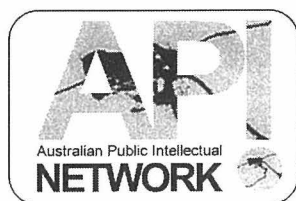
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The Australian Legend
and
Its Discontents

Edited by

Richard Nile

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For Booka and Jerra
Legends of the Heart

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Introduction

Richard Nile

The Australian legend is a storyline that has influenced and given shape to nationalist interpretations of Australia. By highlighting and privileging select aspects of the settler experience — indigenous Australians do not figure — the legend acts as a narrative that seamlessly weaves together otherwise complex and sometimes differentiated events, circumstances and characters. It is exclusive, narrow and hierarchical. Women make cameo appearances but only in subordinate and supportive roles. Yet the legend gives the appearance of being wide-ranging and generously embracing, as a story whose heroes are the common stock of the nation. Its bias, 'offensively Australian', was appropriated from Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903) by 'old left' radical nationalists in the first half of the twentieth century. More recently, conservative-right elements, for example, the short-lived fireball of 'One Nation', have authorised themselves as the legitimate inheritors of the legend.

The Australian legend draws on a rich vein of nation building history, in which, typically, convicts appear as proto-nationalists, the dispossessed poor transported to Australia for minor offences; bushrangers figure as social bandits protesting against unjust authority; diggers and miners are romantic idealists; and Anzacs are everyday Australians caught up in very un-Australian circumstances. Generally speaking, the Australians of the Australian legend, and their successors, are conceptualised as being robust egalitarians, whose values and ethics are staunch and homespun and whose inclinations are communal rather than individual. They look out for one another in times of hardship or crisis but are otherwise unobtrusive and non judgmental. For all the criminality implied by the benefactions of history, the inheriting Australians are said to

possess basic integrity, as opposed to the dubious ways of 'ethnic foreigners'. Yet they retain a sense of irony and scepticism as a charm against too much honesty. We tend to be crafty rather than intellectual and pragmatic in our truths.

Like many national legends, the Australian legend has passed into popular discourse as a series of self-evident qualities concerning national character. Apart from the observation that they are communities of men and that the principal figures 'come from a land down under', what really do convicts, miners, bushrangers and soldiers share in common, and why ought these be of greater historical significance than, say, Aboriginal resistance fighters, missionaries, colonial governors, military officers, pioneering women, Chinese market gardeners, German educators, Afghan camel drivers, Melanesian labourers, or suffragettes? We can discern, in the unpacking, that the 'typical Australian' of the Australian legend is hardly any more typical than these or any other historical invention and that he is certainly not, despite the appeal to be just so, an everyday, ordinary character. 'But if you're talking legend ...', Wal Riley (John Meillon), of 'Never-Never Safaris', tells the New Yorker, Sue Charleton (Linda Kozlowski), journalist for *News Day*, in the Rimfire Film production of *Crocodile Dundee* (1986),¹ and so the figure, like the story, is made to be 'natural'. In this process of 'naturalisation', the legendary Australian appears to be both 'real' and 'representative'. He is privileged because he is 'typical'.

Fourteen years after *Crocodile Dundee*, song-writer and performer, Chris Franklin, added his name to a long list of pop music fantasies involving the ways of Australian men, including Men at Work's *Land Down Under* (1980), when he penned his lyrics, *Bloke*, to the music of Meredith Brook's pro-feminist song *Bitch*. If *Crocodile Dundee* grossed nearly \$50 million at the Australian box office in 1986, Chris Franklin's *Bloke* became the best-selling single in Australia in early 2000: 'I'm a bloke, I'm a yobbo and me best mate's name is Robbo, I'm a labourer by day, I piss up all me pay, You know you wouldn't want me any other way'.

The central character of the Australian legend, the noble frontiersman, can be reduced down to type: an able-bodied white male with very few personal attachments who ekes out a modest existence with honest work. He is harmless and mostly good-natured, able to poke fun at himself as well as others — something you can do

when you're not marginal. Though often a solitary figure, the legendary Australian carries out his life according to the dual creeds of mateship and egalitarianism which are his articles of faith and his guiding principles.

As reductive as the legend is, the mystique surrounding its central figure has been reproduced and reinterpreted countless times in the creative arts, from the *plein-air* painting styles of the 1890s to late twentieth century folk arts; he has been an ongoing presence in national cinema from early silent films to more recent popular features; from Chips Rafferty to Jack Thompson, Paul Hogan and Bryan Brown, the legend has informed the principal characterisation of Australia's most recognisable screen actors — Mark Lee and Heath Ledger are too beautiful, Nick Giannopoulos and Alex Dimitriades are too 'ethnic', Ernie Dingo and David Gulpilil are too Aboriginal, Judy Davis and Cate Blanchett are too female; and he has been reiterated on the small screen from long running television series such as *Blue Heelers* to travelogues such as the *Bush Tucker Man*.

Advertisers make a virtue and a healthy living out of the legend which can sell almost anything 'Australian' from alcohol to cars and suburban lifestyles. Beer is marketed as the Australian national drink and is allegedly consumed as the birth right of Australian men — 'I Can Feel a XXXX Coming On', something that may amuse and confuse unsuspecting north Americans, and 'As a Matter-of-Fact, I've Got it Now', which just adds a bit more sparkle and froth to intercultural dialogue. The work vehicles of these hardened, hard-working, hard drinking, Australian men are 'Built Tough' with names like 'Work Mate' and 'Break Away'. Cattle dogs, meanwhile, serve to reassure the 'female of the species' that their family wagons and saloons are sufficiently national, in intense market-place competition with off-road four-wheel drives that jostle for space in shopping town car parks, with such names as 'Discovery' and 'Jackaroo'. Just driving over a speed-hump in a 4X4, while ferrying kids across the city, can provide suburban mums with: 'Oh, what a feeling'. At week's end, families gather in backyards and relax under 'Outback Patios, Verandahs and Pergolas', with dad cooking 'snags' — barbecue-speak for sausages but popularised in the 1990s as the acronym for Sensitive New Age Guys — on his 'Jumbuck', with mum tossing the salad and smiling out of the top of her floral dress, and with kids chiacking in their matching 'Billabong T-Shirts and Shorts'.

With their smoke mirrors and concoctions of goanna and emu oils, politicians habitually invoke at least some aspects of the legend in their efforts to legitimate and sell their messages to the electorate. They huff and puff and they contrive to share with voters certain cultural and linguistic assumptions. In eight second sound-bites and audio visual grabs they conjure up bunyips and yowies about what is Australian and what is 'un-Australian' and they argue the toss with one another over the 'fair go' and about who better represents the 'battlers', the 'mums and dads' and the 'ordinary Australians'. In talking up the 'mainsteam', they have shown a tendency to align themselves with rural interest groups who became effective lobbyists into the twenty first century by proclaiming proprietorship over a range of images which that have been construed as being 'typically' Australian, as opposed to, say, the 'dubious values' of 'reconciliation', 'multiculturalism' or 'women's rights'. Television images of drought affected farmers and emaciated livestock, it might be argued, mobilise national sympathy in a way that the circumstances of Aborigines do not, the closing down of country post offices and downgrading of telecommunications systems pull on national heart strings more so than the plight of refugees, while 'battling' bush people as an identity group are considered to be more deserving of national assistance than, say, supporting mothers.

The phrase, the Australian legend, was popularised in the middle part of the twentieth century by the historian, Russel Ward, who sought to 'trace and explain national *mystique*'. In his influential book, *The Australian Legend* (1958), Ward argued that the 'spirit' of being Australian is 'intimately connected with the bush and that it derives rather from the common folk than from the more respectable and cultivated sections of society'.⁵ This has translated down the decades to mean that common bush people are more authentically Australian than city dwellers, however common these may be.

Ward drew on the frontier theories developed by F J Turner who argued, among other things, that wilderness exerts a powerful influence over American imaginings. 'The wilderness masters the colonist', Turner argued, 'It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought', but it takes 'him from the railroad cart and puts him in a birch canoe'. The frontier disturbs European frames of reference. It is 'too strong' and a 'new product' emerges that is distinctively national. According to Turner, and we might

suppose Ward in his translation to Australia, the frontiersman 'must accept the conditions' of the frontier or 'perish, and so he fits himself into Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails'.⁶ He does not, however, 'go native'.

That the Australian frontiersman is to an extent indigenised but not indigenous may be discerned from a reading of Ward's oft-quoted definition of the 'typical Australian' who, 'according the myth', is a 'practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others':

He is a great improviser, ever willing 'to have a go' at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is 'near enough'. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause. He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. Though he is 'the world's best confidence man', he is usually taciturn rather than talkative, one who endures stoically rather than one who acts busily. He is a 'hard case', sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, probably a good deal better, and so he is a great 'knocker' of eminent people unless, as in the case of his sporting heroes, they are distinguished by physical prowess. He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when these are embodied in military officers and policemen. Yet he is very hospitable and, above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin, even if he thinks they may be wrong ... He tends to be a rolling stone, highly suspect if he should chance to gather much moss.⁷

Such sentiments are celebrated as being distinctively Australian only when the subject is unambiguously white and male. No? Imagine, then, just for a moment, a switch in subject. Imagine 'shock jocks' of talk back radio, 'You know what I mean', deploying Ward's paradigm to describe an Aboriginal man. To alter one variable only, but to remain with its gendering, the indigenous Australian: has little regard for the rule of law; is unreliable in employment and prone to go walkabout; abuses alcohol; is dishonest and violent; is reluctant to enter into confidence outside his own kind for whom he will lie even when he knows that they are wrong.

Indigenous Australians, perhaps more so than any other social class, disrupt the smooth flow of the Australian legend. According to Gelder and Jacobs in *Uncanny Australia* (1998):

It is only recently that Aboriginal people have been accused of having 'too much' — and certainly, it is a novel and contemporary rhetorical ploy to align them, as [National Party federal politician, Bob] Katter did, with 'the rich'. It has, of course, been usual to think about Aboriginal people as not having *enough*, as lacking: for example, lacking their land, self determination, justice, adequate health and housing, and so on. There is certainly no denying that Aboriginal people are radically disadvantaged. But there is also a modern perception which sees Aboriginal people as in receipt of special privileges, that they are unique beneficiaries of what is often called 'reverse discrimination'.⁸

Perhaps racial discrimination could do with some reversing.

Comedian and performer, Kevin 'Bloody' Wilson, in the 1980s included in his routine a song, *Living Next Door to Bondy*, which tells of a 'privileged' Aboriginal family that receives a windfall from the government and relocates to the 'millionaires row' of Jutland Parade, Perth. At the time, Bond was a national hero. From humble beginnings as a sign-writer, credited with painting the red dingo figure on the 'Dingo Flour Mills' at Fremantle, he made his fortune as a corporate raider. In 1983, 'Bondy' won the America's Cup for Australia: 'And, they said you'd never make it'. He defended it unsuccessfully within sight of the dingo, to the theme song of *Land Down Under* which was appropriated for the purpose and again topped the charts: 'He said are you trying to tempt me, because I come from the land of plenty.' Bondy was subsequently found guilty of Australia's largest corporate fraud and jailed in the late 1990s. The unintended irony of Wilson's ditty was now that by going to jail for however short a time, Bondy was actually moving next door to Aborigines who are incarcerated at twenty times the rate of the rest of the Australian community. In the days leading up to Bond's early release on appeal in March 2000, a fifteen year old Aboriginal youth was found hanged, another statistic of black deaths in custody, in his Northern Territory cell, where he was serving a mandatory sentence for stealing some stationery and paints. No career as a sign-writer for this poor boy. Dingoes had stolen yet another black child.

The Australian legend is not the root cause of such manifest injustices, but it does assist Australians explain away those paradoxes that question our self perceptions of being a pretty good mob, down to earth and easy going, once you get to know our ways and idiosyncrasies. As Australians, we may not feel, especially, that we are the authors of our destinies, though we often sense that the future is on our side. The future, we tend to say, will look after itself and, in the process, look after us. 'Relax, take it easy. Kick back and enjoy'. Yet we are, most assuredly, the creators of our traditions. Our storylines are what we choose them to be. This may boil down ultimately to arguments concerning 'white-blindfold' versions of history versus 'black arm-band' versions of history but the choices we make for ourselves, like the stories we tell, our Australian choices. And they define us.

The Australian Legend and Its Discontents brings together leading Australian public intellectuals who investigate and interpret narrative constructions of Australia. This book is divided into seven interrelated sections: 'Nation and Narration', 'Inventing Tradition', 'Frontiers', 'War', 'Coastlines', 'Romancing the City' and 'Mainstreaming the Nation'. Our common purpose in writing this book may be anchored by Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend*, but we are also interested in the discontents, those who do not slot readily into the story or who are excluded or marginalised in the telling. More broadly and more importantly we are concerned to evaluate and better understand our Australian storylines and the politics of Australian story telling, whether these be in the fields of creativity, social and cultural dialogue, history or governance.

Endnotes

- 1 *Crocodile Dundee*, Rimfire Productions, 1986.
- 2 Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1958, p 1.
- 3 *ibid.*, p 239.
- 4 *ibid.*, pp 1-2.
- 5 Ken Gelder and Jane M Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne, 1988, p 15.