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Introduction

James Curran & Stuart Ward

The essays in this work bring together a lifetime of scholarship and a lasting contribution to the story of Australia and the history of ideas in this country. Since the 1960s Neville Meaney has been asking new and probing questions about Australia's self-image and its engagement with the world. As the essays in this volume show, his efforts to try and unravel what he once memorably called 'the riddle of Australian nationalism' has raised important and often unsettling challenges for Australians as they try to make sense of their past and how it connects to their present and future. Bringing together the political, cultural, intellectual and diplomatic dimensions of the national experience, his work has been dominated by one overarching question: how have Australians attempted to reconcile their British heritage with their Asian moorings?

Neville Meaney's career as a historian began in earnest at a critical time in Australian history—the 1960s—when the certainties and orthodoxies of the British past were starting to crumble under the weight of changing domestic and international circumstances. The collapse of empire in Australia caused uneasiness and uncertainty about the nation's orientation on the world stage, a time when, according to one observer, historians didn't have the maps to make sense of a more fluid and multipolar world. Influenced by the modernist critique of nationalism pioneered by Hans Kohn, Neville Meaney took aim at a series of myths he felt were hindering an understanding of the nation's role in the world. In 1976, writing the preface to the first volume of his history of Australian defence and foreign policy, *The Search for Security in the Pacific, 1901–14*, he dedicated the book to his fellow Australians during what he called 'a spuriously dubbed period of new nationalism'. Here was a period when the 'ministers for nationalism', as he dubbed them, were ransacking the back catalogue of Australian history to discern a serviceable past. But Meaney would have none of it, suggesting that too many historians were becoming entangled in their own myths and 'slavishly' imitating European rites and rituals. He searched instead for the complexities and contradictions that rendered Australia's experience of nationalism different from elsewhere, and looked to discern the tectonic forces of history that moved beneath the surface of political events.

His second volume in this history, *Australia in World Crisis, 1914–23*, appeared at a similarly auspicious time—2009—when the country was seemingly in thrall to a new kind of sentimental nationalism. According to this reading, Australians were putting aside their characteristic reticence in overt expressions of national pride; flaunting the flag, bellowing the anthem with a new gusto at sporting events and crowding wartime commemorative sites abroad. A key aspect of this nationalist resurgence came in the form of the Anzac revival, and the torrent of works on Australia at war that have saturated the book market since the early 1990s—unit histories, soldier diaries, and the view from the trenches. Yet few paused to consider the response of the Australian political community, as a whole, to

this world crisis. This second volume, as journalist Paul Kelly pointed out, 'threw a brick' at the mythology surrounding Australia's great war experience. As Meaney demonstrated, Australians fought that war on two fronts: a 'hot war' in Europe against Germany and its allies, and a 'cold war' against a rising Japan in the Pacific.

Those two volumes remain the signature works of his professional career. But the essays gathered here display the reach and breadth of his historical range and interests. It is appropriate that in the opening essay, Meaney is again giving consideration to how history can help to inform the public debate. In this 2011 lecture, presented first to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute and then to the Australian Institute of International Affairs, he asks whether a study of the rise of nationalism and modernisation in the West and Japan might help us better understand, and perhaps even anticipate, current geopolitical pressures in East Asia. At a time when so much of the debate over the United States and China is mired within an already tired 'zero-sum' paradigm, Meaney's lecture challenges current strategists and policymakers to look again at the underlying patterns that give shape to human affairs.

In section two, Meaney's three essays on Britishness and Australian nationalism are unified for the first time. Taken together they demonstrate the evolution of his ideas about Australia's response to the era of mass nationalism. He shows that there is every reason to suggest that Australians professed their Britishness in a more extreme, more intense form than in Britain itself. Far from being a cause for embarrassment for today's Australians, he argues that this phenomenon points to one of the central problems for Australian historical scholarship: how the country's European heritage has been 'adapted to environment and experience'.

The third section illustrates another key dimension of Meaney's intellectual life: the attempt to understand the nation's evolving response to Asia and how a historically Western nation has sought to come to terms with its geopolitical and geocultural environment. A challenging comparative study of Australia and Japan's post-war trajectory considers how both countries have been engaged in the task of becoming 'normal' nations: Japan by shedding its imperial past and Australia by gradually coming to terms with a world without Britain.

Throughout these essays several themes stand out—the evolution of Australia's Pacific policy, the coming of the Cold War, doubts about the American alliance, the Communist threat, relations with Asia and the end of racial discrimination in immigration policy. His interest lies chiefly with the intellectual origins of Australian ideas about the world and the problems faced by politicians and policymakers in giving them expression. It is fitting, then, that the final two chapters in the collection bring this forensic eye to the world-views and careers of Frederic Eggleston and H.V. Evatt, two of the most influential thinkers and actors in the history of Australian foreign policy.

Our primary purpose here, however, has been to combine these essays into one volume so that they might continue to stimulate the debate and discussion that Neville himself unfailingly encouraged amongst his students. These articles, then, represent only the public dimension of his contribution to scholarship in Australia. The time given to his students, of which we were great beneficiaries, perhaps symbolises his enduring contribution to the profession and to Australian intellectual life.

We first encountered Neville in the 1990s—a decade where Australian political history was in abatement and a new cultural history was making rapid headway. Neville was untroubled by the demise of the old diplomatic history, recognising that international relations needed anchoring in the broader political culture of the nation, and required more than a faithful account of meetings, cables and policy briefs from the archival coal face. Its value and potential were diminished if treated as a limited sub-specialization. But he was sufficiently old-fashioned to believe that the past held out themes of defining significance; that not everything was 'contested' or 'unstable', and that the study of politics and ideas remained a valuable point of entry into the national psyche. More to the point, he saw politics and international relations, not as a cul-de-sac of elite mannerisms, but as an extension of wider social, intellectual and cultural trends, particularly in democratic societies where political leaders are obliged to seek a popular mandate.

His postgraduate students will of course recall the many soirees at his waterfront home in Balmain. On these occasions one student would present a paper to his peers. These periods of intense questioning and argument were always preceded by a convivial meal—usually Neville's version of Irish stew, or flat steaks done (often charred!) under the oven grill—and a bottle or two from his seemingly cavernous wine cellar. In this environment of casual and easy congeniality, mixed with unrelenting rigour, was created a mutually supportive community of research students. Of course, the steep incline of his driveway provided a challenge when the evening came to a close—when each of us, particularly the presenter, was burdened neither by the food nor the wine but by the troubling yet invigorating cargo of new issues and new problems raised by the evening's reflections. It is to be hoped that the essays in this volume demonstrate once again Neville Meaney's passion for ideas and his unrelenting quest for new questions and new possibilities.

James Curran and Stuart Ward
University College Dublin and University of Copenhagen