

Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950-1970

Anna Haebich
Perth: Fremantle Press, 2008, 460pp. AUD \$29.95

In her introduction to *Spinning the Dream* Haebich states that the central focus of the work is the ‘imaginings of assimilation in the 1950s and 60s’ (p. 14) and, while the title of this work places it within the key period of mass migration to Australia and the indigenous ‘issues’ of the time, Haebich’s study extends well beyond these years, in either direction, to consider her subjects within the much broader context of Australian immigration and indigenous history, policy and perception.

Haebich’s consideration of assimilation as not just a policy or an ideal that was imposed upon post-war migrants and Indigenous Australians in the period, but as a broader concept or philosophy that was ‘spun’ to, and grasped by, an anxious post-war society is an important premise of the book. Furthermore, the importance and necessity of understanding this ideal of assimilation in Australia’s history is highlighted by the fact that although formally abandoned, this ‘phoney dream’ and imagined ideal of a united Australian nation is one to which we remain susceptible in today’s climate of global fears of terrorist threats, continuing migrations and renewed issues of national identity and nationhood. As Haebich herself explains, one of the most important underlying premises of this work is the need to ‘set the record straight on these distorted imaginings’ (p. 9) and to place in context the potential nostalgic appeal of a simpler, safer time where, ‘once they agree[d] to cast off their differences and *become* the same’ (p. 8), immigrants and Indigenous Australians, could live as one in suburban dream homes.

Physically the book is divided into four parts. Part one, *White Nation*, looks at the period in question placing the beginnings of assimilation into the broader historical setting both within Australian and within the wider world. Australia, an anxious nation, under international pressure in the more humanitarian immediate post-war period, looked towards assimilation as a compromise solution ‘to contain change within the parameters of a *modified* White Australia’ (p. 81). In part two, *Selling Assimilation* suggests this solution had to be sold, not only to immigrants, Indigenous Australians and the world, but also to the white citizens of Australia themselves. In

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part three, *Assimilation in Nyungar Country*, the focus of the work moves to Western Australia and shifts towards the attempted Indigenous assimilation of the period. Finally, part four, *Cracks in the Mirror*, considers the paradoxes, the gaps between the rhetoric of assimilation and the actual practical experiences of the people upon whom it was applied.

Through all four sections, there is extensive use of cultural artefacts both as sources and as indicators of the period. Through such artefacts we gain insight into the governmental propaganda (spin) that was applied to the issue of assimilation and how the general population perceived it. The use of such a broad array of cultural sources, from exhibitions such as *The Family Man*, events such as the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, official films and photographs, the popular press, feature films, books, organisations such as the Good Neighbour Movement and even the use of good old British/Australian colloquial idioms such as ‘a cup of tea, a Bex and a good lie down’, provides a wonderful mental picture of the spin from a number of different perspectives.

A large number of examples of the paradoxes of assimilation, such as the increasing interest in Aboriginal art and culture at a time when Australian officials aimed at assimilation or the contrast between the rhetoric of the spin and the reality of the life of post war migrants, help to highlight Haebich’s underlying theses. Furthermore, her admitted personal connections to the subject, in her own migrant heritage, and the indigenous heritage of her partner, add to both the personal nature of assimilation and the broad impact it has had on Australian society in general, especially when we consider that so many of us today are descendent from the 1.3 million post war migrants at whom this policy was aimed.

As Australia has moved on from this period of its history and as it now emerges from the more recent period under the Howard government, this book and Haebich’s important premise labelled ‘retro-assimilation’, that is the ‘paradox of public denial of assimilation and hidden allegiance to its tenets’, (p. 8) is particularly relevant.

This well written, engaging read, is extremely well researched (with an extensive bibliography) and easily accomplishes its aims in placing the policy and practice of

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assimilation within the context of Australian history and providing a critical framework with which to assess more recent immigration trends, refugees and current Indigenous issues.

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