# Crocodile Dundee or Davy Crockett? What Crocodile Dundee Doesn’t Say About Australia

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*To celebrate our 75th birthday, we’re presenting exceptional works from* Meanjin’s *past that have defined and challenged Australian literary culture.*

When the shorts for *Crocodile Dundee* appeared at the movies, it was clear that attendance would be compulsory. Not that the content looked irresistible. Rather, it seemed that this film would provide a statement of Australia’s cultural self-understanding, or at least one perspective on it. The reasons for this inference are obvious. The first part of the film was set in the Australian bush and the second in America, making it possible to draw comparisons between the two cultures. And the leading role was to be played by Paul Hogan, the supposedly archetypal Aust­ralian hero (or anti-hero), whose status had been reinforced by his involve­ment in local and overseas campaigns to promote Australian tourism. It was even possible that, in the wake of Australia’s victory in the 1983 America’s Cup, a new-found national confidence would inspire the film to make some statement of Australian identity, to indicate how Aust­ralia differs from its great and powerful friend.

Since its release, *Crocodile Dundee* has been spoken of in just these terms. To the*National Times*, Hogan was ‘just what an Australian … what you expect an Australian … what an Australian should look like.’ Not just the protagonist but the film as a whole has been seen as oozing ‘Australian-ness’. As Jim Davidson put it in the March issue of*Meanjin*, *Crocodile Dundee* is ‘clearly [an] Australian comedy playing on Australia’s image and identity’. Furthermore, the film’s enormous box office success in the US has been taken as clear evidence that Australian cultural products can succeed in the overseas market.

Since the film’s release, several commentators, among them David­son and Veronica Brady, have voiced criticisms of the film’s political stance. Davidson pointed out that the film denigrated the Aborigines and espoused a bankrupt frontier code of ethics, while Brady suggested that it was attuned to the politics of the New Right. Michael Davie also stirred up a storm of correspondence to the *Age* by suggesting that the image of Australia propagated by *Crocodile Dundee* was ‘a sentimental caricature originally developed, with the help of some city-slicker ad-men, to sell Foster’s Lager.’

One can go further to query whether the film is in any sense an authentic Australian product. A close analysis of *Crocodile Dundee* reveals that the assumption that the film says something about Australian-ness is largely unfounded. Those who look for any substantive statements about what Australia is like find that the film has little to offer. It does, however, say much about what Australia is *not* like. Indeed, much of its humour and entertainment is derived from using satire to challenge popular images about Australia. If this appeals to Australian audiences, who see in it an example of our national ability to laugh at ourselves, the satirical comments nonetheless remain negative. Most of the definite statements in the film relate to American culture, and its depiction of America contains little that American audiences would find unsettling. This may go a long way towards explaining the film’s popularity in the United States.

The way we are introduced to Mick Dundee gives a hint that the film is about exploding myths. American journalist Susan comes to outback Walkabout Creek to interview this extraordinary Australian, who is reputed to have wrestled with a crocodile, survived minus a leg and dragged himself hundreds of miles for help. However, it emerges that this is just a tall story. Not entirely deflated, Susan ventures into the outback with Mick, and in tracing their journey the film exposes several other images of Australia as also being tall stories. Mick eschews his barbequed goanna for a tin of baked beans; he tricks Susan into believing that he shaves with his hunting knife, but uses a razor when he is not observed; he casts a discreet glance at the nearest watch when pretending to tell the time by the sun. We are repeatedly reminded that the distance between this rugged outback Australian and civilisation is not so great after all.

The film is also iconoclastic in its treatment of that epitome of Aust­ralia’s unique fauna, the kangaroo. It is only Susan who evinces any concern for the ‘roos that are being slaughtered by a group of drunken louts. Mick’s main interest is in putting the ‘city cowboys’ in their place. When he props up a dead kangaroo to make it appear to shoot back, he is assailing the pugnacious trio rather than making any statement in defence of Australian wildlife.

Myths continue to be shattered in the film’s portrayal of Aborigines. Mick claims that the Aborigines can traverse the land with ease, even at night (‘They think their way. They are telepathic’). This idea is challenged when his aboriginal friend, Nev, stumbles in the dark and curses. Nev’s jeans and cowboy belt also suggest his Westernisation. The sacred, exclusive character of the corroboree is ‘shown’ to be a fiction when Nev announces that he participates only to avoid upsetting his father and again when Mick takes part. Later, Nev tells Susan she can­ not photograph him—not, as she infers, because it will ‘take away his spirit’, but because her lens cap is still on. The film’s highly secular, Westernised image of the Aborigine is of a piece with its debunking of the image of the white Australian bushman—both satirise popular images of Australia.

Yet the film provides few alternative conceptions of the ‘reality’ of Australian life. The dominant positive image to survive the film’s work of destruction is that of Dundee entrancing a buffalo that is blocking the road. This could be taken as implying that there is still some mys­tery left, that Dundee does have a special affinity with his environment. Didgeridoo music is heard in the background. Mick, it seems, is heir to the Aborigines’ special relationship with nature (again eroding any idea of Aboriginal uniqueness). However, the creature he controls is no native. The image of the buffalo is familiar to American audiences from their own frontier mythology. Even here, the distance between Australia and America is being minimised.

Clearly, then, the American journalist’s sortie into the Australian wilderness (and with it the American audience’s journey) is dotted with familiar touchstones. This foreign terrain is demystified, its ‘otherness’ reduced by the constant eruption of the familiar. Only the landscape remains distinctive. In this section of the film the camera frequently ranges across the outback, displaying its raw, natural beauty, much in the manner of a travelogue. Thus the film’s major ‘statements’ about Australia are mute presentations of its visual delights. When Susan tries to articulate her response to the landscape, all she can speak of is its ‘strange empti­ness’; here, too, the film presents Australia as something of a vacuum. But even these barely positive representations of the landscape are undercut by the dialogue, which repeatedly ridicules the idea that Aust­ralia might be a desirable tourist destination. Mick and Wally’s tourist enterprise, Never Never Safaris, is rudimentary to say the least (‘Never go out with us or you’ll never come back’, jokes Mick). Car doors, when they exist, don’t work; what Wally calls ‘headquarters’ Susan calls an ‘old tin shed’. The point is made most plainly when Wally says to the local shopkeeper, ‘They’ve got nothing like this in America’. The audience can only agree as the camera pulls back to show ramshackle buildings, an unsealed road and a neighbourhood deserted but for a hand­ful of strolling cows. Australia here is shown as different from America—but what is conveyed is not just difference but inferiority.

The second part of the film takes the naive outback Australian to the high-speed, hi-tech American city. This scenario could offer many oppor­tunities for reflection on differences in national lifestyles, or for social criticism. But neither is pursued. Contrary to Davidson’s suggestion that the film challenges America and questions modern values, it rarely if ever satirises the ultra-urban New York way of life. Throughout, the object of humour is Mick and his attempts to master his new environment.

There is little that is identifiably ‘Australian’ about the way Mick responds to life in the American fast lane. To be sure, he greets people with ‘G’day’ and asks the black chauffeur what tribe he belongs to, but for the most part Mick could be any ‘cousin’ from any country, any innocent from anywhere abroad.

The parvenu’s reflections on American city life would only comfort and reassure an American audience. Dundee evolves very quickly from an awe-struck newcomer bewildered by American society to an initiate who manages successfully within it. This paragon of rugged self-reliance adjusts to being waited on by the porters and chamber-maids of a plush New York hotel; he triumphantly masters the mysterious bidet; and he also masters the New York twang when greeting the porter—so even his linguistic difference is downplayed. He acquits himself toler­ably well at a dinner party given by Susan’s wealthy father, though here he is in a milieu totally alien to his own, not just culturally but also in class terms. In this scene, Susan explains to Mick why people of her circle have psychotherapy; but this potential avenue for social criticism becomes a cul-de-sac when Mick makes light of the issue, joking inno­cently about ‘loony-bins’ and claiming to be crazier than any of the guests.

Mick also shows himself capable of managing successfully in the thick of American street life. He averts potential difficulties with transves­tites, prostitutes, pimps, thugs and street thieves. While the film does not deny that contemporary American life has an underside, Mick’s responses make it appear unproblematic. When Mick and Susan are accosted by a gang of street youths, she is terrified and urges immediate surrender. Mick, by contrast, is not at all intimidated and deals with the youths by outdoing them. The resolution of this conflict is devoid of social questioning. Instead, it suggests that ‘might is right’ (a notion that is alive and well in Reagan’s America). Mick prevails, not because he has ‘good’ on his side but because he is capable of overpowering his opponents. He does not challenge the logic of their position, but simply outdoes them in their own terms: ‘You call that a knife? *This* is a knife.’

Perhaps Mick’s greatest victory over mass society comes when he and Susan proclaim their love in a crowded subway. This scene, with its numberless strangers crammed into enforced intimacy, could easily have become a comment on the chaos and anonymity of modern life. Indeed, one of the commuters complains to Susan that ‘We’re jammed in here like sheep’. But instead the crowd becomes a *Gemeinschaft*. These strangers not only witness and participate in communicating the couple’s ‘inti­mate’ exchanges, but the crowd literally supports their reunion when Mick pulls himself up and walks over the sea of heads and shoulders. He takes Susan into his arms and the crowd bursts into spontaneous applause, as friends might at a celebration.

As this romantic resolution intimates, another of the issues *Crocodile Dundee* deals with, albeit tacitly, is feminism. Initially Susan is portrayed as the post-feminist woman*par excellence*, able to combine career, sexual appeal, a sense of humour and the idea of marriage in a seemingly happy synthesis. She is not the sort of ‘girl’ Mick is used to. Indeed, he offends her pride by suggesting that as a female she would not be able to con­duct herself around the bush. Susan asserts her autonomy by going it alone. Before leaving, she astounds Mick with her ability to use his rifle; it seems that Mick may have to revise his sexual politics. However, any such hope is dispelled. Susan is nearly devoured by a crocodile. In true romantic tradition, Mick comes to the rescue, and at the moment of crisis the liberated woman falls back into the role of helpless, dependent female. Feminism is shown to be not so threatening after all. How reassuring.

Davidson has described the final romantic scene as a ‘triumph’ for the Australian abroad. But if Dundee wins his sweetheart, it is only because America has first won him. Dundee is not ‘accepted for him­self’, as Davidson suggests, but accepted because his character poses no real challenge to his host society. The film could only be an emollient to American audiences. Their society is witnessed through fresh eyes and found not to be wanting, or at least not in ways that a healthy dose of frontier morality can’t cure. Nothing about America is ultimately a cause for disquiet—not because the potentially disturbing features are suppressed or denied, but because they *are* broached and resolved or readily dismissed. Blacks are in their place (as servants and attendants), women are in theirs, and even street terrorists are vanquished by the threat of a dose of their own medicine.

How can we place Mick Dundee in the wider debate about what Australian culture is, how it is or should be presented, and how it is per­ceived overseas? This debate is one of growing concern. Australia in the 1980s is caught between the twin poles of growing national self­ confidence and increased pressure to integrate our economy into the world market. This has its impact on the film industry as on any other. Because *Crocodile Dundee* has been hailed as proof that authentic Australian cultural products can be successfully sold overseas, it presents an opportunity to examine the ramifications of the ways in which these are packaged for export. If one considers it important that a multiplicity of cultural forms survive, not only within this country but at a global level, in the face of the rising pressures towards homogenisation that emanate from America in particular, then films such as *Crocodile Dundee* pose some significant questions.

First, regardless of what aspects of Australian life are portrayed in our films, it must be asked how far these need to be modified to cater for an international palate. While it is important that our cultural products avoid becoming trapped in a mire of parochialism and that international audiences should see aspects of Australian life as interesting and entertaining, problems arise if a sanitised picture of Australian life is presented for the sake of the international market. Yet, with the growing cost of film-making, it is becoming impossible to recover an investment, let alone make a profit, without overseas sales. Here, the sheer size of the American market makes it the most crucial. In this context it is interesting to note that, according to Michael Davie, *Crocodile Dundee* was ‘relentlessly’ test-marketed in the US, being shown to teenage audiences and modified in accordance with their responses. It would seem that we are faced with a Faustian dilemma: do we sell our souls or become impoverished martyrs to the cause of cultural fidelity?

The recent successes of our film industry, television productions and rock groups have been seen as putting an end to the Australian cultural cringe. But is this really the case if what we produce is increasingly determined by what is acceptable to American audiences? Will we benefit by prostituting our film industry to satisfy the American distributors’ lowest-common-denominator assessments of what their public wants? Or doesn’t it really matter? It could be argued in *Crocodile Dundee’s* defence that it has opened a door to the international market through which other Australian films will now be able to pass. Therefore, even if *Crocodile Dundee* does sacrifice the distinctively Australian, the films that follow will be able to reflect the diversity of Australian life more faithfully.

The problem with this argument is its failure to recognise that *Crocodile Dundee* has gained such unprecedented access to the American market precisely because of the sort of film it is. And its very success raises the danger that it will become a paradigm, setting the parameters within which other Australian films must fit if they are to succeed overseas (already we are told there is to be a sequel). Just as period pieces such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* *We of the Never Never*, *The Man from Snowy River*, *Breaker Morant*and *Gallipoli* became a distinct genre, reinforcing a stereotype of Australian films in the US, the success of *Crocodile Dun­dee* may well inspire a spate of imitations. This could create a false impression of what Australian cinema is and can be like, depicting it as a tradition that will neither challenge Americans’ often complacent sense of self nor even portray the distinctiveness of Australian life.

In *American Dreams, Australian Movies*, Peter Hamilton and Sue Mat­thews discuss the reception Australian films generally have enjoyed in America. They argue that ‘seen through American eyes, Australian movies restate American myths’, that the Australia our films depict is America as it was (or likes to think it was). In a similar vein, Professor Charles Milne of the New York University Film School has referred to the Ameri­can desire for an:

*affirmation of something that is true, strong, confident and independent. I think that independence of spirit, that feeling of one against and with the land that was indelibly stamped onto the American character can now be seen in the Australian character through (their] films.*

Elsewhere, he refers to Australian films as ‘holding up a mirror to the better part of ourselves.’ Similar comments have been made about *Crocodile Dundee*. Peter Ackroyd of *The Spectator* wrote that:

*Life in the Bush does in fact resemble that of the Old West… Dundee, wearing his Australian version of the stetson, acts like some representa­tive of the old cowboy and thus reminds the American cinema audience of its more manly, heroic and…good humored past.*

This brings us to a second issue: that, aside from the concerns raised above, the*particular* image of Australia that becomes popular currency both here and overseas is important. A number of Australian films have attempted to represent dimensions of Australian life that go beyond cliched images. Among these are *Moving Out*, *Monkey Grip*, *Puberty Blues*, *The Fringe Dwellers*, *Don’s Party*, *Dogs in Space*, *Cactus*, *The More Things Change*, *Malcolm* and *Fran*. We do not wish to suggest that any one of these varied visions of Australian ‘reality’ is more authentic than any other. What does matter is that films which are hailed as offering an insight into aspects of Australian life should indeed do that; they should not represent some Americanised vision of our existence.

This is important, not just for the image of Australia that foreign audiences will take away with them, nor for the sake of the local film industry, whose survival in any meaningful sense would be threatened should the notion of what constitutes an ‘Australian’ movie be too nar­rowly defined. Just as important is the fact that Australia’s own cul­tural self-understanding will be crucially influenced by the way in which our artistic products portray our environment and social context. If we want to protect local mores, idioms, symbols and values, then these must be reflected in our cultural products. The portrayal of varied aspects of one’s own traditions as legitimate, valuable and entertaining is impor­tant in its own right. It may also foster a sense of national self-confidence which could have broader ramifications for the way Australia presents itself on the international stage, not only in the cultural but also in the political realm.

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