

Carroll, John, ed. Introducers in the Bush: The Australian Quest for Identity. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

1. The Bushman Legend

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*The Australian Legend*¹ presents the results of Dr Russel Ward's research into the historical origins and development of the national self-image. Its thesis is that a specifically Australian outlook emerged first and most clearly among the early bush workers in the pastoral industry ... and that this group has had an influence, completely disproportionate to its numerical and economic strength, on the attitudes of the whole community.² The author claims that the myth of the 'typical'—not average—Australian, although exaggerated and romanticized, has reality, not only because it is rooted in a nation's real past, but because it influences present-day ideas of how Australians ought 'typically' to behave.

In Ward's view, the stereotype of the myth is commonly regarded as

... a practical man, rough and ready in his manners, and quick to decry affectation. ... He is a great improviser ... willing to 'have a go' at anything, but ... content with a task done in a way which is 'near enough'. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard. ... He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. ... He is usually taciturn ... stoical ... and 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

... 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 ... embodied in military officers and policemen. Yet he is very hospitable and, above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin. ... He tends to be a rolling stone, highly suspect if he should chance to gather much moss.³

Ward maintains these characteristics were widely attributed to the pastoral workers of last century: a group described by Anthony Trollope in the 1870s as 'a nomad tribe'. Drawing upon historical documents, literary writings, and folk ballads, the author traces the process by which the distinctive ethos of the bush worker spread upwards through Australian society, and outwards from the interior, to influence subtly the manners and mores of the whole population.

The aim of this chapter is to present a condensed version of Ward's major arguments in support of his thesis. The sub-headings used throughout replicate the chapter titles of *The Australian Legend* from Chapter Two onwards.

The Founding Fathers

The national 'mystique' of this country owes more to the convict influence than is generally supposed or acknowledged. For almost the first half-century of its existence, White Australia was primarily an extensive gaol, with 'Old Australians'—convicts, ex-convicts, and native-born people (Currency)—outnumbering free settlers and officials by seven to one in 1828, and remaining a majority of the population until the discovery of gold in 1851.

The lack of an established aristocracy in Australian society encouraged many of the more respectable free settlers and officials to strive towards attaining upper-class exclusiveness, chiefly through the maintenance of English attitudes and connections. This meant that not only the native-born, but poor immigrants generally, aligned themselves with the emancipist

class, and tended to adopt the manners and mores of the ex-convicts. The result was a disproportionately weighted lower-class in pre-Gold Rush Australia, which greatly intensified the erosion of traditional beliefs and attitudes occurring in all English-speaking societies in the nineteenth century.

Class divisions and hostility were further reinforced by the labouring class in Australia initially being almost entirely composed of assigned men or ex-convicts. Nevertheless, the perennial labour shortage, and the necessity to adapt to the difficult conditions of life in the colony produced attitudes among the workers which were variously described as 'manly independence' or 'insolent insubordination' according to the view-point of the observer.

If the convict influence was strong in early Australia, what was its particular nature? Undoubtedly the brutality of the prison system and harshness of life in the colony reinforced many vicious aspects of convict behaviour, but the same conditions also fostered traits usually regarded as characteristic of the convict in this country: a collectivist anti-authoritarian morality, physical endurance, and resourcefulness. Added to these germinal elements of the Australian mystique was the greater degree of social mobility occurring in comparison with older societies which, combined with the insatiable demand for labour, tended to have a generally levelling effect without diminishing class consciousness and hostility.

Celts and Currency

While convicts had a disproportionately strong influence upon the nascent Australian ethos of the working class, within this class, Irishmen and native-born similarly exerted a disproportionately strong and increasing influence.

In the 1840s, there were three times as many people of Irish descent in New South Wales as in the British Isles, and more than half of the assisted immigrants reaching the mother colony were Irish. Most were extremely poor working people who brought with them a strong antipathy to British rule; an anti-

pathy already present among the political prisoners transported after the 1798 rebellion in Ireland. This anti-British feeling aided the growth of nationalism by weakening attachment to England and Empire, while the Irish-Catholic outlook in general played an important role in shaping the developing nationalist feeling among the working class in pre-Gold Rush Australia.

Among the Currency population, nationalism found its main expression in a pride based upon a high valuation of the 'practical' virtues, and consequent contempt for the 'new chum' middle-class Englishman. Currency Lads were famous—or infamous—for their precocity, rough behaviour, dislike of authority, independence, and thorough-going egalitarianism based on a relative economic security. Convicts, emancipists, native-born, and immigrant workers alike shared the conviction that, morally, Australia was 'their' country, and resented that so much of it should be given by the government to rich newcomers. This resentment was to find its clearest expression in the elevation of the bushranger to the role of folk hero.

Up the Country

It has been seen that many of the principal ingredients of the Australian myth—a collectivist morality, an anti-authoritarian egalitarian outlook, independence, toughness, resourcefulness and adaptability—sprang from convict, Irish and native-born sources in early Australian society. After the crossing of the Blue Mountains in 1813, these streams were to converge and coalesce beyond the Great Dividing Range, where the particular conditions of the Australian interior would transmute them '... into something new, which yet included them all'.⁴ What was the nature of this distinctive ethos?

Unlike the American West which promoted small farm settlement and therefore the ethic of individualism, the nature of the Australian interior and the economic conditions of the nineteenth century created large single properties employing many casual hands. This brought into being a semi-nomadic rural proletariat, overwhelmingly masculine in composition, and

strongly collectivist in outlook. The hazards, hardships, and extreme loneliness of bush life made the practice of 'mateship' not only essential for survival but, in the absence of white women and organized religion, virtually the only vehicle for emotional release, altruism, and commitment. Several bush songs and stories suggest the extent to which mateship became for many bushmen a substitute for religion.

A further necessity for survival in a nomadic lifestyle is a free and easy hospitality, and this, too, became a tradition of life in the outback, although operating always on the two levels of 'house' and 'hut'. Toughness and adaptability were similarly essential abilities for bush workers, with stringy-bark and green-hide coming to symbolize the outback Australian's capacity for improvisation.

The lack of white women and the practice of paying off workers at the end of a season helped establish the custom of 'work and bust': the drunken spree which became a ritual of outback life. The custom probably also had its roots in the widespread belief among the workers that Australia's land laws made it impossibly difficult for a poor man ever to become a land owner.

Nevertheless, the wages offered by the squatters on the stations were high, and this, together with the promise of a free, vagabond way of life, attracted many 'old Australians' to the bush. Newer immigrants to New South Wales were generally repelled by the strangeness, hardships, and isolation of bush life, and preferred to remain in or around Sydney. Hence, Australians came to be viewed by newcomers as typically men of the outback complete with stockwhip and cabbage-tree hat, because, relative to the rest of the population, that was where most were to be found.

The particular ethos which emerged as a result of these social, geographic, and economic conditions therefore had as its major elements a comradeship independence based on group solidarity and relative economic plenty, an intense loyalty to one's 'mate', a capacity for improvisation, physical endurance and physical prowess, a reckless improvisation, and the conviction that the working bushman was the 'real' Australian.

The Gold Rush

The germinal nationalist feeling which developed among the working people of Australia in the first half of the nineteenth century found its clearest expression in the bush ethos described above. What, however, was the effect of the gold discoveries upon the men of the outback and the growing spirit of nationalism?

Although the Gold Rush brought many dramatic changes to Australian society and greatly strengthened the middle class in the cities, its influence upon 'up-country' life was small. For a start, its impact was felt less in New South Wales than in Victoria, for although the population of Victoria increased six-fold during the 'golden decade', that of the mother colony merely doubled, and more than half this number were ex-convicts or native-born. Nevertheless, the gold-fields were a natural attraction for the adventurous and vagabond pastoral worker, and many more were encountered on the diggings by newcomers than would have been the case had the immigrants remained in or near the cities.

It is certain that the 'old Australians' influenced the gold-seekers more than they were influenced by them. On the diggings, only the Chinese remained a distinct group; the British tended to merge with the existing population and learn their ways as quickly as possible. In the words of one observer '... it is a constant ambition among the "new-chums" to be taken for old hands in the colony'.⁵ Later arrivals on the gold-fields were to find their predecessors already strongly influenced by the indigenous outlook.

Mateship, and an anti-authoritarian, collective morality were two important elements of the bushman's ethos taken over by the diggers. The first aspect was evident among the small groups of men who worked the mines, and who were universally known as 'mates', while group solidarity was reinforced by the miners' shared antagonism to the licence-hunting officials.

The diggings were also forcing grounds for other outback traits such as adaptability, physical endurance, independence,

and egalitarian relationships. The presence of the Chinese injected a new element, that of racism, into the developing ethos. Another new element came with the increased literacy of many of the newcomers in comparison with the pre-Gold Rush inhabitants. Before this time, the sentiments of the bushmen had largely been embodied in song and speech, but increasingly what was felt to be distinctively Australian was captured in prose and verse. The result was to make the 'nomad tribe' more self-conscious, and aware of its distinctive ethos.

It is clear that the flood of immigrants during the decade 1851-61 did not have the effect of swamping the existing social mores of the Australian working class as is often supposed. Some elements were reinforced by the conditions of life on the diggings. Neither was the developing spirit of nationalism destroyed by the influx of newcomers; at most, it was temporarily delayed and superficially overlaid. The sentiment re-emerged powerfully in the last decades of the century to deeply influence and colour the political and literary outlook of the middle class.

The Bushrangers

One reason for the importance of the bushranger in the Australian legend has already been noted, but there were other reasons why bushrangers enjoyed such great prestige during the convict period.

Apart from the fact that the romantic aura surrounding the highwayman in European society was at its height at the end of the eighteenth century, bushrangers in Australia gained prestige in the eyes of many colonists simply by being professional opponents of the police. Originally, nearly all the New South Wales police force were convicts or ex-convicts, who were detested by their fellows for breaking the first principle of the 'government man': loyalty to one's mates. Throughout the nineteenth century there is evidence of constant complaints against police brutality, stupidity and corruption. Even in Victoria—a state which prided itself on its lack of convict ancestry—anti-

authoritarian feeling was quick to flair up whenever a bushranger embarrassed the forces of law and order.

Most bushrangers were runaway convicts, and many were Irish. The convict system 'manufactured' bushrangers, not only because of its brutality, but because the chronic shortage of labour was a constant temptation to free settlers to prolong an assigned servant's sentence, particularly of those who worked hard and behaved well. What began, however, as an alternative to despair, continued for so long because of the widespread popular sympathy and admiration the outlaws enjoyed. The bushranger exemplified the outback ethos in its most extreme form, being more completely independent, anti-authoritarian, tough, resourceful, and loyal to his mates, than the most thoroughly acclimatized bush worker. To lower-class people generally—and usually to themselves also—bushrangers were the 'wild colonial boys': Australians *par excellence*. In a newly developing society which lacked war heroes it was not surprising that '... folk tradition clothed their crimes in nationalist garb'.⁶

The Bushman Comes of Age

Before being enshrined in the national self-image, the bushman had to reach full stature in his up-country life.

Although the influence of the Gold Rush had been felt more in the cities than in the interior of Australia, some changes had taken place in the outback as a result of the gold discoveries.

One important development was a great strengthening of nationalist feeling as a consequence of the anti-Chinese agitations on the gold-fields, and contempt for the English 'new-chum'.

Another effect of the Gold Rush had been the fencing of sheep runs as a result of the shortage of labour in the inland. This did away with the need for shepherding, considered by most outback workers to be a degrading occupation, and the virtual disappearance of the despised 'crawler' greatly enhanced the *esprit de corps* among the bushmen. Nevertheless, hier-

archical levels of prestige among shearers, overlanders, cattle-men, and sheepmen were still evident.

The pattern of 'work and bust' continued, but in the later part of the century there appears to have been some moderation in the bushman's drinking habits. This was possibly due not only to the increasing presence of white women in the outback, but to the outback workers growing self-respect and self-awareness.

Although class lines were almost as sharply drawn as in convict days, squatters and men were united in their antipathy towards the selector. Most small farmers were desperately poor and over-worked, and could neither afford to pay the migratory bushman the high wages offered by the squatters, nor provide the traditional bush hospitality obtainable on the stations. The term 'cocky' applied by the pastoral worker to the small farmer was synonymous in the 1880s with meanness and stupidity.

In spite of these changes, however, the most striking thing about the manners and mores of the bush lay in their continuity: the later bushman exhibiting even more clearly than his predecessor the 'manly independence' and egalitarian collectivism whose sum was comprised in the concept of mateship. By the end of the 1880s, mateship in the outback had become such a powerful institution that contemporary writings imply it could be perilous to refuse an invitation to drink. Bush songs and stories of the period clearly underline the predominant values: the greatest good was to stand by one's mates; the greatest evil, to desert them. The fictional characterizations of bushmen by Furphy, Lawson, and Paterson, the great nationalist writers of the nineties, clearly reveal the prototype at the turn of the century; a prototype which is supported by many of the more factual writings of the time.

Apotheosis of the Nomad Tribe

The process by which the romanticized figure of the 'noble bushman' became the core of a nation's self-image culminated in the surge of nationalist sentiment towards the end of the nineteenth century, the ideal giving strength and cohesion to

the dominant, but disparate social forces at work in Australian society during this period.

Underlying the surfacing of this powerful current and the emergence of the symbol was the newly predominant influence of the native-born, and the decreasing isolation of the bush. Railways and other forms of communication had not only brought the bush closer to the city, but had made city dwellers aware as never before of the old up-country ethos. As the nomad tribe of pastoral workers disappeared from the real world, their distinctive outlook and lifestyle became embalmed in the national consciousness as myth.

The myth-making process was greatly accelerated by two events in particular: the rapid growth of the trade union movement, and the discovery of the bush by literary men. Trade unionism was shaped and coloured by the pre-existent bush ethos and drew much of its early strength from the Amalgamated Shearers' Union, but although the movement helped spread the ethos widely through the whole community, it was probably literature, being less class-bound and operating at a deeper level of consciousness, which was the more important force in the osmotic process. As Vance Palmer states:

It is hard to realize now the excitement caused by such ballads as Paterson's 'Clancy of the Overflow', or such stories as Lawson's, 'The Drover's Wife' but to the people who read them they seemed to open up new vistas.⁷

By the time of Federation, the extinct bushman of the writers of the nineties was firmly enshrined in both the literary and popular imagination as the culture-hero upon whose characteristics many Australians tended—consciously or unconsciously—to model their attitudes to life. The myth was to become particularly potent in wartime, when so many of the conditions of active service reproduced the conditions of life among the nomad tribe.

Two Noble Frontiersmen

The steps have been traced by which the distinctive ethos of the Australian pastoral workers of last century came to have a quite

disproportionate influence on the Australian mystique. There remains the question of why this should have happened.

A partial answer is suggested in the 'frontier theory' put forward in 1893 by the American historian, F. J. Turner. Before this time, American historians had tended to explain successive developments in American history by reference to European influences, but Turner argued that indigenous influences—and in particular the frontier influence—were no less important to an understanding of American history, the two most important effects of the frontier being the promotion of national unity and sentiment, and the promotion of democracy.

It has been argued that the Australian outback has been a similar kind of forcing ground, although important differences exist between the two nations' concepts of democracy. To the pioneer of the American West democracy meant freedom to get to the top; to the Australian pastoral worker it meant freedom to resist authority by combining with one's mates against the wealthy squatter, an attitude epitomized in 'Waltzing Matilda', Australia's most popular folk ballad.

Australia, like America, has needed to develop national cohesion and identity through differentiation from its origins. In the nineteenth century's partly unconscious search for a culture-hero to symbolize the nation, the interior offered a candidate whose outlook and lifestyle least resembled those of his British or European ancestors. While it is true, therefore, that the Australian frontier has promoted the growth of nationalism, it is also true that nationalism has promoted the romanticization of the frontier.