

when he left Van Diemen's Land with a conditional pardon in his pocket. Before leaving, he climbed the paddle-box of the boat and proclaimed to his friends:

Land of Lags and Kangaroo,  
Of 'possums and the scarce Emu  
The Farmer's pride but the Prisoner's Hell,  
Land of Bums—Fare-thee-well!<sup>19</sup>

It was significant that his destination was New South Wales which, at least for Frank the Poet, had outgrown the reputation under which Van Diemen's Land still laboured. It could now be seen as a land of opportunity for the ex-convict, as well as for England's 'surplus population' and for the sturdy and ambitious men who felt their prospects in England were limited.

### 3 A Workingman's Paradise?

To hear him talk you'd think it was a heaven upon earth,  
But listen and I'll tell you now the plain, unvarnished truth.  
—Immigration', anonymous ballad<sup>1</sup>

Between 1830 and 1850, Hell was turned into Paradise. A gradual shift in the needs of both the British and local economies resulted in a new, more complimentary image of Australia competing with, and eventually overwhelming, the old convict image. The establishment of the wool industry turned the gaol into a vast sheep-run which by 1850 was providing half of Britain's wool. Along with other local industries, it continued to demand labour from Britain at the same time that British manufacturing interests were seeking profitable overseas markets. Emigration suited them both, offering labourers as well as markets. From 1832 various schemes of assisted migration were set up and by 1850, had attracted about 100,000 migrants to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, while another 50,000 had paid their own way. They were lured by a new image of Australia as a land of opportunity for all comers, and above all for the working man. This image continued to attract—and deceive—migrants for the rest of the century. No longer a land of convicts and kangaroos, Australia was now depicted as the land of the emigrant. And the emigrants came: by 1851 convicts represented only 1.5 per cent of the population of New South Wales, emancipists 14 per cent and free immigrants 41 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Arcadia in Hell*

Even while the convict image of Australia had been dominant, there had always been an undercurrent of admiration for the new country. It was commonly expressed in relation to the landscape, the favourite comparison being to an English gentleman's park. Underlying this admiration we can detect the aspiration of men of capital to establish

themselves in Australia as landed gentlemen. Sydney Parkinson, artist on the *Endeavour*, had made the comparison in his journal, published in 1773.<sup>3</sup> Arthur Bowes, surgeon in the first fleet, reported that the country around Port Jackson excelled in beauty 'any nobleman's grounds in England'<sup>4</sup> and Elizabeth Macarthur that 'the greater part of the country is like an English park'.<sup>5</sup> In 1802 Port Phillip was thought to fall 'nothing short, in beauty and appearance, of Greenwich Park',<sup>6</sup> while in 1828, country further east was seen as resembling 'the park of a country seat in England, the trees standing in picturesque groups to ornament the landscape'.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mitchell, exploring 'Australia Felix' in 1836, thought the country 'had so much the appearance of a well kept park' that he was loath to drive his carts across it.<sup>8</sup> Such comments reflected fashionable taste for the neo-classical and the picturesque in judging landscape. The irony was that the Aborigines, whose systematic burning-off was largely responsible for giving the country its park-like appearance, were to be seen as pests, obstacles in the way of men realising their dream of becoming landed gentlemen.

The attractions of the settlement were also spread by convicts returning home. Some told tales of horror, but some suggested that a poor man might make good in the Antipodes. As one ballad put it, there was 'a lot of jolly living over there'.<sup>9</sup> There was enough truth in the rumours of the rags-to-riches convict to give some consolation to those about to be transported, and considerable heart-burning to the penal system's administrators. Given the increasingly desperate plight of the British working class from 1815 to the 'Hungry Forties', it was easy for the ruling class to believe that transportation was a 'boon' rather than a deterrent, and to worry endlessly that convicts in New South Wales were better off than free labourers in Britain. They even told themselves that people were committing crime in the hope of being transported. Although the idea had wide currency among those who thought the system too lenient, it seems that this might have been yet another myth associated with the Australian colonies.<sup>10</sup>

\* Attempts were made to tighten up the system but the real problem was that an image which was supposed to strike terror into the heart simply could not be reconciled with one which was to attract sober and industrious workers. William Molesworth had explained the problem in 1840, after his committee had recommended an end to transportation to New South Wales:

It not unfrequently happens that whilst a judge is expatiating on

the miseries of exile, at the same time, and perhaps in the same place, some active agent of emigration may be found magnifying the advantages of the new country... telling of the high wages to be obtained, the enormous fortunes that have been made, and offering to eager and willing listeners, as a boon and especial favour, the means of conveyance to that very place to which the convict in the dock has been sentenced by the judge for his crimes.<sup>11</sup>

Others also had difficulty reconciling the two images. George Loveless attempted to distinguish between the people and the place: in one breath he condemned the prevalence of corruption, drunkenness, robbery and rape among the inhabitants, and in the next praised the country's beauty, climate, 'rich and luxuriant' soil and evergreen trees.<sup>12</sup> David Mackenzie faced the same problem. He had been recruited by J.D. Lang to teach at Lang's Australian College, but preferred making money out of sheep to making gentlemen out of his students. In his 1845 guide for emigrants, he asked his readers to

Picture to yourselves... a vast forest diversified with mountains and valleys; innumerable plains without a tree... large tracts of open forest-land, resembling a gentleman's domain in England... extensive lagoons, darkened with legions of wild duck and teal, the property of any man who may choose to shoot them; innumerable birds of the most beautiful plumage, chirping on every branch around you; flowers of every hue and shade of colour strewn your path, wherever you go; above you an Italian sky, without a cloud or speck, and the air you inhale pure and balmy; a fearful silence pervading the forest around you, and vividly impressing upon your mind the idea of solitude and desolation—*that is Australia*.

He realised that such a pleasant picture, full of all the fashionable exemplars of beauty, was open to ridicule. A 'mischievous wag' could just as easily paint a picture of a land of convicts and bushrangers, swindling and drunkenness, selfishness and irreligion, mosquitoes and drought, a land of 'never-green' rather than evergreen. In the end Mackenzie reverted to the image of Australia as a land of contrarities.<sup>13</sup>

The need for a new, more complimentary image was accompanied by a search for more appropriate names. Originally the names Botany Bay, New Holland and New South Wales were popularly but inaccurately used to refer to the whole continent. All were associated with the convict system and none could be expected to attract many migrants. As Archbishop Whately pointed out, 'The name of *Botany Bay*, &c. could not, for generations, become connected in men's minds with

honesty, sober industry, the higher qualities of the British character'.<sup>14</sup> In 1814 Matthew Flinders, whose circumnavigation had proved New Holland and New South Wales to be part of the same land mass, had suggested the name Australia, 'being more agreeable to the ear, and an assimilation to the names of the other great portions of the earth'.<sup>15</sup> It stuck. Vague classical allusions were felt to be more acceptable than the prosaic names provided by Cook, names which had so quickly lost their meaning in their disreputable associations. Men like Wentworth and Lang began to make an ostentatious habit of signing themselves 'an Australian' without the fear of being taken for a pick-pocket or a savage. For the same reasons, the name Van Diemen's Land was replaced by Tasmania, from the 1820s in popular usage, formally in 1854. When the Moreton Bay District became a colony in 1859, it was hoped that the convict stigma would be buried by renaming it Queensland.<sup>16</sup> The changes were not always successful: as late as 1882, a Tasmanian was complaining that 'not one in a hundred . . . knows this island by the name of Tasmania; but it is well known as Van Diemen's Land; the land of white slavery'.<sup>17</sup>

### *Salvation for All-Comers*

Several groups contributed to and stood to benefit from the portrayal of Australia as a land of opportunity for the emigrant. Men of capital in England could see profit to be had. There were many of them in the 1830s and 1840s with accumulated profits burning holes in their pockets.<sup>18</sup> Manufacturers could see in colonisation 'an enterprise which would convert . . . paupers into customers'.<sup>19</sup> Colonial reformers saw emigration as a means of easing poverty and distress in England, which otherwise threatened to erupt in revolution. Caroline Chisholm's proud boast was that she had convinced a Chartist that the solution to social problems in England was to emigrate.<sup>20</sup> Shipping agents benefited more directly, particularly from the assisted passage schemes of the 1830s. Their posters exaggerated the virtues of New South Wales to such an extent that in 1840 the Colonial Office stepped in to regulate their activities.<sup>21</sup> The Colonial Office itself saw emigration as an economy: it was a cheaper solution to working-class distress than police and gaols, since it was paid for by land sales.<sup>22</sup> Finally colonial capitalists themselves, seeking to attract workers and respectable families, were not averse to a little exaggeration in their attempts to advertise Australia as a land where all could make good. It should be added that working-class organisations, in both Britain

and Australia, often opposed the encouragement of emigration to Australia: as one English working-class paper put it, 'we will not quit our fatherland to companion with demi-savages and kangaroos', but such efforts to undermine Australia's new image did not generally succeed.<sup>23</sup>

The supporters of emigration to Australia painted a picture of an idealised Arcadian society, a rural Utopia, an Eden before the fall. Very different imaginations could produce surprisingly similar visions of Australia's future. W.C. Wentworth, full of Oxford scholarship and classical allusions, hoped the 'new Arcadia' would soon 'teem with simple swains'.<sup>24</sup> He had already written *A Statistical, Historical, and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales* in 1819, in which he tried to show the advantages for migrants of New South Wales over America. 'What a cheering prospect' he thought

for the philanthropist to behold what is now one vast and mournful wilderness, becoming the smiling seat of industry and the social arts . . . What a proud sight for the Briton to view his country pouring forth her teeming millions to people new hives.<sup>25</sup>

J.D. Lang, the staunch Presbyterian, published his *Historical and Statistical Account of New South Wales* in 1834. With his more biblical style, he described his vision of currency lads, 'each of whom, on attaining man's estate, goes forth with his axe into the vast forest to extend the limits of civilization, and to fill the wilderness and the solitary place with the habitations of men'.<sup>26</sup> It was a vision reminiscent of the America he admired and believed Australia should imitate, and it was more appropriate to the American mid-west than the Australian outback, particularly when he spoke of 'peopling her vast solitudes with a numerous, industrious and virtuous agricultural population' and celebrating 'her moral wilderness to blossom as the rose'.<sup>27</sup>

A third vision was that of Caroline Chisholm, a convert to Catholicism, who saw Australia as a refuge for the poor, particularly the Irish poor. Almost one million Irish starved to death in the Great Famine of 1846-47. Lang believed she was simply trying to populate the place with Papists, but her own vision of her work was of a 'God-like undertaking', establishing 'a well-fed peasantry',<sup>28</sup> bringing 'Comfort to the Poor' and the benefits of rural family life to an uncivilised wilderness. Her appeal was to sentiment—she was, after all, an associate of Charles Dickens. So after the famine she asked:

Is it not sad, is it not awful, is it not harrowingly painful, to think, to know, that since that period,—within the twelvemonth,

—that a vast, a magnificent tract of country, rich in pasture, intersected by fine rivers, untroudden by European foot before, has been discovered by that indefatigable and successful explorer, Sir Thomas Mitchell, in the heart of New Holland, able to maintain millions of families, and yet that thousands upon thousands of poor have died around us of starvation?<sup>29</sup>

The remarkable thing about these varied visions of simple swains, pioneering families and well-fed peasantry was that they had nothing at all to do with the Australian reality. In fact, Australia's economy, and British interest in the colonies, was to be based on big sheep-runs, mining and large cities. Nor was Australia to be an extension of rural England: Australia's connection was with industrial England, providing wool for its factories and markets for its goods. These hard realities were ignored. Rather the romantic visions were an imaginative response to industrialisation in England. Behind all the admiration for Australia's fresh air, its greenness, its sense of space, its Arcadian innocence and its imagined social harmony, there lurked an unstated comparison with a cold, crowded, polluted, industrialised and socially-divided England. The industrial revolution was still, for many, a traumatic shock. The visions of rural innocence in Australia appealed to a deep-seated emotional resentment against industrialisation.

The result was that the supporters of emigration saw Australia becoming the sort of society they imagined England to have been in the past, before it disappeared under the grime of the industrial revolution. The *Edinburgh Review* made it quite clear: 'by colonisation nations are able to retrieve the past'.<sup>30</sup> For E.G. Wakefield, the most influential of the systematic colonisers, Australia was to be the means of recreating a rural squirearchy; for Samuel Sidney, another propagandist for emigration, it would allow the labouring classes to reclaim their patrimony, recreating a more equal society, for men at least, with 'every striving man who rears a race of industrious children ... living on his own land, looking down to the valleys to his herds — towards the hills to his flocks, amid the humming of bees'.<sup>31</sup> The romantic image of an ideal rural society would continue to influence Australia, and helps account for the continuing opposition both to vast sheep-runs and to large cities. Dispersal and urbanisation were equally crimes against the Arcadian dream. In 1883 someone who had never been to England was still dreaming of Australia 'casting off her un-British fashion of lonely sheep-walks' and becoming 'with green fields and neighbourly, contented country life, like the England of Shakespeare and Milton'.<sup>32</sup> Through the Selection Acts of the

1860s, through closer settlement schemes and talk about decentralisation, the image lingered on, and continued to attract its share of immigrants.

Although often carried away with their own powers of description, most writers with first-hand knowledge of Australian conditions sounded a note of warning. Only particular classes of emigrants could be expected to succeed, although there was some confusion over exactly which classes these would be. In 1827 Peter Cunningham thought only families with at least £1200 should migrate to Australia — otherwise, America offered better prospects.<sup>33</sup> In the 1830s, when the colonies were trying to attract free labourers and female emigrants, respectable single middle-class women were warned that they could not be assured of finding wealth and happiness—in the form of a husband—in New South Wales.<sup>34</sup> Unskilled labourers were told that Van Diemen's Land was not 'the garden of Eden for emigrants the deluded people of England imagine'.<sup>35</sup> In 1834 'respectable young men' hoping to be clerks, were warned off by J.D. Lang who thought New South Wales 'the preferable country for a gentleman-farmer' or for 'respectable families of moderate capital',<sup>36</sup> while in 1839 it was said there were good prospects for 'labourers of all classes'.<sup>37</sup> By 1848 one visitor was accusing wealthy landowners of deceiving the poor with 'distorted and exaggerated accounts ... of the flattering prospects afforded to all classes ... and the almost certain wealth which awaited them', although 'Any good tradesman, of whatever denomination, can do very well'.<sup>38</sup> Another Emigrant's Friend advised that Australia was 'flooded with clerks' but 'mere labourers and shepherds', small farmers and large capitalists were all likely to succeed.<sup>39</sup>

Time would alter the reality behind some of these judgments. The depression of the early 1840s in Australia meant that no group could expect much. The abolition of transportation eventually improved the chances of labourers since they no longer had to compete with cheaper convict labour. The gold rushes at first offered the slim chance of a fortune to men on the diggings and later, in a more complex society, openings were created for a wider range of groups. But even in 1873, Anthony Trollope made a point of warning off 'The would-be government clerk, the would-be governor, the would-be school-master, lawyer, storekeeper or the like'.<sup>40</sup>

The warnings usually went unheeded. While visitors were at pains to stress that Australia could only offer salvation to a few, too often it was seen as offering salvation to all. From the 1830s until the 1890s, the image of Australia as a land of opportunity for all-comers remained

the popular one, and it was one which was encouraged by colonial employers seeking labour. Over that period the image changed little although for a time it acquired a distinct golden tinge. The discovery of gold had enormous social and economic effects on Australia, but it did not greatly alter the prevailing view of Australia: Samuel Sidney simply extended it to 'an El Dorado and an Arcadia combined'.<sup>41</sup> Gold popularised the image immensely, increased the numbers attracted by it, and hastened the demise of the convict image. But still, Australia was portrayed as the land of opportunity, a paradise for those to whom Britain offered nothing, and the hope remained, as the Selection Acts made clear, that the idealised vision of small farms and pioneering families would be given substance in Australia.

The pervasiveness of the idea that Australia offered salvation, indiscriminately, to all-comers, can perhaps best be seen in the English novel: emigration, to Australia, the United States and elsewhere, became a rather hackneyed literary convention for getting rid of embarrassing characters, particularly sympathetic characters such as fallen women or worthy workers who, through no fault of their own, found themselves unable to arrive at a conventional happy ending in English society as it was. Since few writers advocated overturning the system, they were left with three alternatives. Such characters could be killed off, with an appropriate effusion of Victorian sentimentality; they could come across an unexpected, but rarely convincing, inheritance; or they could be sent off as emigrants. Emigration was not an issue in the novel, simply a convention, a solution to an artistic problem which in fact reflected deep-seated problems within English society.<sup>42</sup> Australia was portrayed as a haven from industrial capitalism, the easy solution, not just for those who might succeed in Australian conditions, but indiscriminately, for all and sundry.

The result was that many authors packed off a great cavalcade of minor characters to Australia. The most remarkable mass exodus is found in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, published in 1850. At the time he was giving active support to Caroline Chisholm's emigration schemes. All his characters who could not expect a happy ending in England were packed off to Australia: Martha, the kind-hearted prostitute, the fallen Emily and the Peggottys ('No one can't reproach my darling in Australia'),<sup>43</sup> old Mrs Gummidge, who even got a husband, and most successful of all, Mr Micawber and family, who thrived in Melbourne although they could never make ends meet in England. Other writers sent out declining landed gentry, the too-well-educated, black sheep 'to be whitewashed',<sup>44</sup> socially embarrassing relations, suspected thieves, middle-class bankrupts, the

hopelessly incompetent, and steady labourers who could not find advancement.<sup>45</sup> Often they were the very groups warned not to emigrate, but most writers knew or cared little about the colonies. Some sort of salvation had to be found for the 'failures' inevitably produced in the struggle to survive while Britain industrialised. Once the character was on the ship, success was assumed.

### *The Emigrant as a Failure*

The result of this was to give a further dimension to the image of the emigrant, and so to that of Australia. There were two main attitudes to the emigrant in Victorian Britain, both of which reflected bourgeois attitudes to the working class. The more conventional view was that the emigrant was a failure whose economic difficulties in Britain were caused by personal instability rather than an unjust system. It was an attractive view for the complacent middle class, one that can be clearly seen in the novels of Henry Kingsley who migrated to Australia, without much success, in 1853. Five years earlier his brother Charles, the more successful novelist, packed his most famous working-class character off to America.<sup>46</sup> Henry displayed great fawning sympathy for the landed gentry forced to Australia to bolster their declining incomes, but he despised the ordinary class of emigrant: 'their mere presence in this colony proves them to be unable to manage their own affairs with any success';<sup>47</sup> they were 'a lazy independent class . . . with exaggerated notions of their own importance', and were addicted to 'independence, godlessness, and rum'.<sup>48</sup> In 1843, James Backhouse, the Quaker missionary, had taken a similar view. His harsh puritanism gave cold comfort to the poor of the 'Hungry Forties'. In his view, migrants were fired with 'a restless spirit', an immoral refusal to submit themselves to the places ordained for them by God; dissatisfied with their lot, they were 'unwilling to believe that the fault is in themselves'. While he admitted that some 'sober, industrious and prudent persons' could legitimately improve their lot in Australia, he held out little hope for the majority, whose 'inefficiency and instability' would soon lead to 'hopeless degradation'.<sup>49</sup> In 1852, Earl Grey, the Secretary of State for Colonies told Charles Dickens that emigrants were 'necessarily far below the average of the working population in respect to steadiness and strictly moral conduct . . . in every rank of life it is not the steady and well conducted that are the most disposed to emigration'. He conceded that emigrants might have more 'energy and intelligence', but these were not qualities the middle class sought

in workers.<sup>50</sup> The logical extension of this view of the emigrant was the portrayal of Australia as simply the 'dustbin of the unwanted and unsuccessful'.<sup>51</sup>

Many colonists shared this uncharitable view of the working-class immigrant, since they shared the social attitudes of the British middle class. Concerned to attract labour, they complained that the assisted migrants arriving after 1831 were not the 'sober and industrious' workers they desired; they accused Britain of 'shovelling out paupers', of dumping in the colonies 'the very refuse of the counties', and they demanded the introduction of a more 'moral and industrious population'.<sup>52</sup> In Van Diemen's Land in 1835, convicts and immigrants were considered equally depraved, a 'mingled mass of vice and villainy'.<sup>53</sup> The attitude to female immigrants was even more harsh, since it embodied Victorian attitudes to sex as well as class. J.D. Lang's view that female immigrants were turning New South Wales into 'a sink of prostitution'<sup>54</sup> was a common one among the colonial bourgeoisie.

The more charitable view of emigrants was that, failures though they were, it was rather the British social system which was at fault. This was the view that appealed to Victorian sentiment, depicting migrants as more sinned against than sinning, forsaken by their homeland which offered them only poverty or exile. It produced the sort of sentimental verse which comforted the young Henry Parkes when he boarded an emigrant ship, the sort of verse which began:

Oh! Emigration! Thou'rt the curse  
Of our once happy nation's race!  
Cannot our fatherland still nurse  
Its offspring . . .<sup>55</sup>

It produced the sentimental painting, *The Last of England*, painted by Ford Madox Brown after farewelling a friend to the Australian gold-fields. As Brown himself suggested, the sentimental view was an appropriate one when the emigrant was middle class: he had, 'in order to present the parting scene in its fullest tragic development, singled out a couple from the middle classes, high enough through education and refinement to appreciate all they are now giving up'.<sup>56</sup> But the image of the departing emigrant, of whatever class, was not just an excuse for sentimentality. Many writers, particularly in the 1840s, condemned the system which forced people into exile to find openings, and the result was an image of Australia and other emigrant societies as the saviours of what was callously called Britain's 'redundant population'.



Ford Madox Brown's painting, *The Last of England* (Birmingham Art Gallery), was painted after farewelling his friend, Thomas Woolner, a sculptor who emigrated to the Australian goldfields in 1852. The sentimentality is reserved for the middle-class couple in the foreground, the implication being that the working-class migrants behind them felt nothing of the refined emotions of respectable people.

However the two attitudes to migrants were not always so clear-cut. Dickens's Micawber, for example, was sympathetic, good-hearted and deserving of something better; but he was also pompous, hopelessly impecunious, financially incompetent, and really a joke. The system did not allow him to succeed in England, but nor did Dickens see him as deserving of the success he had in the colonies. The joke rubs off on Australia: it might be a haven for the poor but, as a society

where someone like Micawber could make a splash, it cannot be taken seriously.

It is an intriguing, but ultimately fruitless, question to ask whether either of these images of the migrant was accurate—fruitless because in the final analysis such images reflect social prejudices rather than reality. Did Australia attract only the deserving and undeserving failures, the Micawbers and the good-for-nothings? Was there in fact something fundamentally second-rate about Australia? Certainly many migrants achieved far more in colonial life than they ever could have in Britain, particularly the group of gold rush immigrants who transformed themselves into a bourgeois establishment. Certainly there is something Micawberish and rather whimsical about the fortune of men such as Henry Parkes, who left England after business failures, graduated to business failures in Sydney, but ended up the grand old man of Australian politics, regarding himself as another Gladstone; or Redmond Barry, squeezed out of an over-crowded Irish bar, who could become a Supreme Court judge, founder of the Public Library, University Chancellor and, most respectable of all, the sentencer of Ned Kelly, yet still not marry the mother of his four children. On the other hand, what of men such as Robert Lowe, radical New South Wales Legislative Councillor, or Hugh Childers, first Victorian Auditor-General, men who could return to Britain and still be at the centre of things, both coincidentally becoming Chancellors of the Exchequer and Home Secretaries in later life? Clearly their prominence in Australian public life cannot be considered unmerited, yet the image of Australia as a haven for the second-rate was always strong in Britain, and was often shared by intellectuals in Australia. It helped justify their disdain for those they considered their social or cultural inferiors.

### *Myth and Reality*

The success of men such as Parkes and Barry raises another issue: was Australia, in fact, the land of opportunity it was so often painted? While Australia never did conform to the popular dream of small farms and pioneer families, did it nevertheless offer to all-comers, and especially the working class, a better way of life? The image of Australia as a 'workingman's paradise' had long been fostered, particularly in the colonies. Even in 1844, in the midst of depression, Archibald Michie, later a prominent Victorian liberal politician, could proudly compare the working man's lot in Australia with that of

London, where he would 'linger out a short and shivering existence, and pine and starve and die, in courts, and alleys, and mouldy garrets of cheap lodging houses'.<sup>57</sup> During the gold rushes when immigration was at its height, it had been suggested that 'a voyage to Australia is the working man's only road to the future'.<sup>58</sup> By the 1880s, when the phrase 'a workingman's paradise' was most often heard and immigration was again high, self-congratulation was in the air. In 1881, H. Mortimer Franklyn, editor of the *Victorian Review*, judged that, for domestic servants, 'Australia is, indeed, the paradise of Bridget and Sarah Jane' and 'No working man, who is prudent, temperate and industrious, need occupy a house that is not his own... To the operative classes, Australia is a veritable land of promise'.<sup>59</sup> During the Centennial Celebrations of 1888, the *Sydney Morning Herald* observed that 'poverty is a comparatively rare thing among us... If elsewhere there is a possible danger of people getting too little, we are not entirely free sometimes from the danger of having too much'.<sup>60</sup> By 1893, during another depression, the New South Wales statistician was compiling aggregate figures that showed impressively that the general standard of living was higher in Australia than in Britain, Europe and even America.<sup>61</sup>

However, although this picture of a 'workingman's paradise' was a widely accepted one, there was always a thread of resistance to it, particularly among some working-class spokesmen. In 1843 a large group of workers, possibly 700, emigrated from Australia to Chile, 'under the firm conviction that in no other part of the world can their present condition be worse, or their future prospects less cheering'; they 'astonished' W.C. Wentworth, and pastoralists denied that conditions were really so bad, but the workers went all the same.<sup>62</sup> In the late 1850s, the Queensland government's attempts to attract labour by portraying the colony as a 'land of promise' met with the response from a popular ballad that:

... men who come a living here to try  
Will vegetate a little while, and then lie down to die.<sup>63</sup>

In the 1880s Australian trade unions attempted to dissuade would-be emigrants from leaving England,<sup>64</sup> while in 1888, in response to all the self-congratulation, Henry Lawson was writing in the *Bulletin*:

They lie, the men who tell us, for reasons of their own  
That want is here a stranger, and that misery's unknown.<sup>65</sup>

During the depression of the 1890s the resistance was still stronger. William Lane, the trade union activist, wrote a novel attempting to

expose 'the much-prated-of "workingman's paradise"' by describing in detail the slums of Sydney.<sup>66</sup> Another writer commented that 'if Australia at present presents the Working Man's Paradise, I should hardly care for a glimpse even of the Workingman's Hades'.<sup>67</sup>

Clearly both sides were prepared to exaggerate. The idea that Australia was a 'workingman's paradise' gives a clear illustration of the way in which images can be constructed to serve the interests of particular groups. Colonial governments and employer groups sought to attract labour by painting a picture of a land of promise; equally it was in the interests of trade unions to maintain their members' conditions by discouraging immigration and constructing a bleaker image. But it is more complex than this. Historians disagree on the question of working-class affluence,<sup>68</sup> but it is true that, despite the general assumption that the Australian standard of living was high, there were very large areas of both rural and urban poverty throughout the nineteenth century. Comparisons with Britain are hazardous, but Australian slums were just as bad—in 1859 Sydney's health officer thought them even worse.<sup>69</sup> Factories could be just as confined, exploitative and unsanitary, and conditions deteriorated as much in an Australian summer as in an English winter. Public health could be further behind when, for example, the state of the water supply was bad enough for a judge to dismiss a charge of intoxication on the grounds that beer was all there was to drink.<sup>70</sup> Yet, despite the evidence of inquiries into social conditions, factories and public health, there are several reasons why, when compared to England, Australia continued to be seen as a 'workingman's paradise', apart from the direct economic interests of employers.

In the first place, all migrants compare their adopted country with the country they left, but often the comparison is a false one because it is based on a dated idea of the old country, and ignores changes that have taken place since they left. So when migrants talked about a 'workingman's paradise' in Australia in the 1880s, the England they pictured in their minds as a working man's hell was not contemporary England, but the England that they had known 20 or 30 years earlier. For non-migrants the comparison was even less valid, being based on hearsay, their parents' memories or the vagaries of a national myth. This time element is crucial in making any comparisons with Victorian Britain because, from the 'Hungry Forties' until about 1900, real wages had shown a steady and marked improvement. Industrialisation in Britain had reached the stage where it was turning workers into consumers, of transport, clothing, food and household goods. The use of a basic commodity such as sugar, for example, rose from

17lb per head per year in the early 1840s, to 90lb 50 years later.<sup>71</sup> There was a gradual, although painfully slow, improvement in hours and conditions of work and in the political influence of the working class.

The image of the typical worker changed too. In the 1840s the worker was seen as dirty, wretched, exhausted, demoralised—and dangerous. By the end of the century, a new image had developed: vulgar, independent, self-confident, flashily-dressed, newly-literate, sports-mad, technologically-competent. They were less likely to be called mere 'hands': given the Victorian middle class's passion for the machine, its operator was held in higher regard and called an 'operative' or a 'mechanic'. James Smith reflected such attitudes when he observed in 1866 that 'The operative is rapidly being transformed into the guide, controller and director of infinitely ingenious and inestimably efficient mechanical agencies'.<sup>72</sup> Those two common images over-stated the change: the first reflected the fears of the middle class, the second their complacency and condescension. Working-class life remained hard, the improvements often only applied to particular groups of workers, and at the end of the century government investigations and social reformers could still 'discover' great areas of appalling poverty in both Britain and Australia. Nevertheless, the change was there, gradual but noticeable enough over any period of a decade or more in the later nineteenth century. G.C. Mundy, the conservative New South Wales Adjutant-General, had asked as early as 1852:

[if] the feodality of feeling existing between master and man has departed altogether out of the land?—departing out of *all* lands? I have been inclined to think so ever since the last groom and valet I had at home—a modernising fellow, who attended his club twice a week—taught me to look upon myself, not as his master but as his employer.<sup>73</sup>

Other observers noticed the change in Australia, but assumed it was distinctively Australian, and proof that they were in a 'workingman's paradise'. In fact, as Mundy suggests, it was a more general change taking place in Britain, North America and parts of Europe as well. Believers in the 'workingman's paradise' often confused changes over a period of time with differences between England and Australia.

The second reason for the persistence of the image of Australia as a 'workingman's paradise' is the way in which it legitimised the role of the colonial bourgeoisie. Emigration often did result in individual social mobility. Those migrants who had risen into the colonial



bourgeoisie from more humble origins in Britain, who found themselves in positions of influence they would not have reached at home, were the one group most likely to foster the idea that Australia was a 'workingman's paradise'. They viewed their own experience as proof of it. They were now in a position to suggest that they too had suffered the oppression which was identified with England, and had risen in the freer air of Australia. This meant that some would improve the conditions of their own workers: master stone-masons who had themselves started as workers could help initiate the movement for the Eight-Hour Day in their industry.<sup>74</sup> However it also meant that others could turn a blind eye to oppression alleging that in a working man's paradise it was the working man's fault if he failed to prosper. Thus in 1883, W.H.S. Blake, a tailor and a leader of the Early Closing Association, favourably compared Australian conditions with the England he remembered, where he had been forced to work 100 hours a week.<sup>75</sup> In that year, mill engine-drivers in Australia still worked up to 100 hours a week.<sup>76</sup> But more significant is Blake's exploitation of his own workers as a master tailor: in 1902 he was working female apprentices without pay (for theoretically a 60 hour week), paying the best of them five shillings a week after 18 months and dismissing the others.<sup>77</sup> The 'workingman's paradise' clearly suited Mr Blake.

The conviction that Australia was a 'workingman's paradise' helped preserve the social order.<sup>78</sup> It helped reconcile the working class to an unequal distribution of wealth. When poverty could not be ignored, it helped at least to explain it away. H.M. Franklyn argued that poverty in Australia was caused by an 'immense amount of that unthrift and self-indulgence' which accompanies 'abundance'.<sup>79</sup> Poverty in the land of promise was explained by personal failings. The local bourgeoisie could not justify their position by pretending they were born to it; rather, in a land of promise where all white men were equal, success and failure were the result of individual character. And so they could believe, as one of them said, that 'whenever men fell from health and happiness into disease and misery, in nine cases out of ten it was through their own fault and misconduct'.<sup>80</sup> In a land of promise there was no reason to resent the social order; indeed, employers muttered to themselves, a 'workingman's paradise' suggested that if anything workers were too well off.

Finally the image of a 'workingman's paradise' was supported at the time by evidence that some sections of the working class simply were better off in Australia. It was common to point to better food, working-class home ownership, pianos in working-class parlours. Such evidence needs to be treated cautiously. The fact that, with the

help of building societies and land speculators, a minority of workers did own their own homes does not mean they were necessarily better off since rents in Australia were generally higher.<sup>81</sup> Caroline Chisholm's much-trumpeted promise of 'meat three times a day'<sup>82</sup> could be a mixed blessing, as one Rockhampton labourer pointed out to Trollope: 'If you knew what it was,' he said, 'to have to eat mutton three times a day, day after day, week after week, month after month, you would not come here and tell us that we ought to be contented with our condition'.<sup>83</sup> It was not, in any case, a very healthy diet.

More important is the fact that most of the benefits of a 'workingman's paradise' were only available to a minority of the working class: sections of the skilled, white, male workforce. The benefits did not extend to men out of work, when employment could be very insecure. In 1859, two-thirds of Sydney's building trades workers, some of whom had achieved the Eight-Hour Day, were out of work.<sup>84</sup> The benefits did not extend to women and children who worked; the hours and conditions of work for women could be appalling, while in the 1870s in Melbourne, despite a factory act and compulsory education, there were still children working 60 hours a week for 1½d an hour.<sup>85</sup> Nor did the benefits usually extend to unskilled labourers whose hours were longer, wages lower and employment more precarious than skilled men. Often, they did not extend to lower white-collar workers, the 'shabby genteel', the clerks and shopmen whom Nat Gould thought 'far worse off than the labourers'.<sup>86</sup> Even worse off were the kanakas in the sugar industry, the Chinese in laundries, market gardening and furniture manufacture and, worst of all, the Aborigines who were working extensively in the pastoral industry often for less than subsistence rations. England did not contain equivalent racial groups exploited for their labour. Finally there were many selectors and their families, scratching hopelessly at poor, inadequate land, who had struggled closest to the dream of small agricultural holdings. For many it was a shattering, miserable existence. Among them was Ned Kelly.

The benefits of the 'workingman's paradise' only went to a minority. The workers' cottages described by Twopeny, with all their 'manifest virtues',<sup>87</sup> were owned by skilled workers: building societies described their clientele as 'thriving artisans and prosperous tradesmen with neither too much nor too little of worldly goods'.<sup>88</sup> The Eight-Hour Day, another central feature of the 'workingman's paradise', only applied to the skilled building trades when it was first negotiated in Victoria in 1855, and only to stone-masons in New South Wales. Its gradual and haphazard extension only applied to the aristocracy of

labour. The popular image obscured the very different conditions of workers; it implied the 'workingman's paradise' was open to all, at all times. That veneer of prosperity was ominously thin, and could easily be shattered by unemployment, recession, illness or old age.

The idea of Australia as some sort of paradise could mean many things. For sections of British society it could be an imaginative reaction against industrialisation, or a convenient salvation for the failures of industrial society, or merely a scrapheap, a dustbin for the sweepings of the poor-house. For migrants it held out hopes that would often have been illusory. In Australia it could be used deceptively, to attract labour and ignore poverty, or complacently, to prop up the system, and imply that the worker had all he or she could possibly hope for. Needless to say, it also reinforced discrimination against women, children, non-whites, the unemployed and other sections of the working class, since only the successful, adult, white male fitted the image of the 'workingman'. It was rarely an accurate description of the Australia that the working class knew.

But for that one group, white, skilled males in secure jobs, it had more meaning, especially when some of them became employers themselves. In Australia's different social structure, they had more prominence and more status than in England, and this was perhaps why they were always noticed by visitors, and taken as evidence of egalitarian prosperity. In 1883, Twopeny had seen the plumber as typical of 'the Australian working-man', struck by the fact that he had to try four before he could get one to take on a job, who then did not turn up.<sup>89</sup> In the twentieth century the plumber continued to be seen as typical, particularly when regarded by the middle class as a perfect example of workers earning too much. A long string of observers also saw the plumber as a symbol of equality, because when the plumber called he frequently drank tea with the housewife.<sup>90</sup> Perhaps he does, but if it proves anything, it is not that Australia is an egalitarian paradise, but that the upper working class attract more than usual respect in Australia. It remains true that no-one ever asks the garbage man to tea.

## 4 Another America

The people of this colony resemble the Americans in their presumption, arrogance, ignorance, and conceit.

G.T.W.B. Boyes<sup>1</sup>

The question of Australian identity has usually been seen as a tug-of-war between Australianness and Britishness, between the impulse to be distinctively Australian and the lingering sense of a British heritage. However this attitude to the development of an Australian identity only became common towards the end of the nineteenth century, when self-conscious nationalists began to exaggerate what was distinctive about Australia. The result has been that those aspects of the Australian identity which were not distinctive have been underestimated ever since. In fact, during most of the nineteenth century, it was generally accepted that Australia had a clear political and cultural 'image' which was considered neither particularly British nor Australian. Australians saw themselves, and were seen by others, as part of a group of new, transplanted, predominantly Anglo-Saxon emigrant societies. The basis of this shared image varied. Sometimes the emphasis was on being new; at other times, on being colonial; later a more explicitly racial element was added, so the emphasis was on being Anglo-Saxon or, as these societies grew more confident, on being the most vigorous branch of Anglo-Saxondom. The Irish had a slightly different view of them as societies freed from British representation. But certainly, the question of a distinctively Australian identity was not the burning issue it was to become for later historians.

### *Australia as a New Society*

It was accepted, both in Europe and in the new societies themselves, that they all—the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, southern Africa, occasionally Argentina, Uruguay and other parts of