EXPLORING AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Heroes, Memory and Politics

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Heroes, Memory and Politics

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

> *The state is invisible [it must be] personified before it can be seen, symbolised before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived.*
>
> — Walzer (1967, p. 191)

The 2001 centenary of Australian Federation celebrations highlighted the roles played by convicts and free settlers in the colonisation of Australia. However, little attention has been given – at least by social scientists – to other colonial and post-colonial figures and their influence on contemporary Australian identity. The purpose of this book is to address this gap assessing the influence of convicts, free settlers, bushrangers (in particular Ned Kelly), the Anzacs, sporting heroes and the nation's other important individuals on Australian identity.

How much influence do historical and popular figures have on the way Australians see themselves in the twenty-first century? To what extent do colonials such as convicts and bushrangers still have an influence upon contemporary Australian identity, and what form does this take?

Often viewed as a successful sporting nation, to what extent is Australian identity influenced by the exploits of sporting celebrities, and are those sportspeople predominantly male?

Situated in the field of empirical national identity research, this book explores the influence of colonial and contemporary figures on Australian national identity. It contributes to empirically based Australian literature, where authors have tried to assess various aspects of national identity (e.g. Pakulski & Tranter, 2002, 2000a, 2000b; Jones, 1997; Jones & Smith, 2001; Phillips, 1996, 2000). For example, Jones (1997, p. 291) identified 'Australian nativism' and 'civic culture', claiming that the former identity type 'looks backward to a vision of Australia that is fading', while 'civic culture, a more abstract and open concept, looks forward to a future already in the making'. Building upon Jones' work, Pakulski and Tranter (2000a, p. 218) suggested that 'ethno-nationals' among other things, stressed 'the importance of more "primordial ties" acquired by birth and long residence, the ties that bind us to the ethnically defined and culturally circumscribed nation', whereas 'civic' identity was characterised by 'the centrality of voluntary ties, interdependence and shared commitments to the core institutions of a society'.[1] Building upon this empirical tradition, we use survey data to explore the influence of Australian colonial and post-colonial figures.

Earlier related studies based their findings upon survey questions constructed to test abstract notions of national identity, such as civic or 'nativist' identity types (Jones, 1997). Our research relates to historical groups and individuals, and the influence they have on the way contemporary Australians see themselves. We conceptualise a more historically grounded form of national identity than previous researchers in this field of research. Of course, claims of historical influence and collective memory certainly have essentialist elements. For example, some Australians are able to

trace their bloodlines directly to the early settlers, convicts, bushrangers and to the Anzacs. Yet if national identity is linked with 'the various sets of lived relationships in which individuals are engaged' (Bradley, 1996, p. 24), we should find that historical groups are associated with certain social and attitudinal dimensions that we can uncover in our survey data.

Smith (1991, p. 14) outlines five features that are common to conceptions of identity at the national level, that relate to the nation. He defines a nation as 'a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members'. Given that nations are complex and abstract as well as founded on the basis of territorial boundaries, it follows that national identity is also multidimensional, formed from the shared myths, memories and culture. The latter are particularly relevant to our research.

Smith (1996) argues that the inhabitants of many nations claim to be a 'chosen people', who have arrived in their 'promise land' and at some stage in their history experienced a 'golden age' of 'heroes, priests and poets'. Smith's conception of nationhood provides an important point of departure for this book. The first golden age in Australia recalls a time of convicts, settlers and pioneers, men and women who developed the British colonies in Australia. A second golden age was set more recently during the post-World War II economic boom. The foundation 'myths' of the first golden age connect modern Australians to early colonists, transported convicts, bushrangers and 'gold rush' miners. They form the basis of the colonial and national history and provide an Australian 'mythscape' (Bell, 2003).[2] In Australia, the 'emigrant-colonists' and free settlers were the 'chosen people' (Smith, 1999, p. 137) who came mainly from England, Ireland and Scotland (Ward, 1978 [1958], p. 47). These early 'white'

Australians 'subdued' the indigenous people and kept at bay 'external enemies' such as the French (Phillips, 1996, p. 116).

We agree with (Bradley, 1996) that national identity is multifaceted, complex and fragmented. It is frequently contested, and implicit (sometimes explicit) in this concept are questions over belonging, who is a member of the nation and who is not? As Weeks (1990, p. 88) claims,

> [A]t it's most basic it gives you a sense of personal
> location, the stable core to your individuality. But it
> is also about your social relationships, your complex
> involvement with others.

Building upon Weeks (1990), Bradley distinguishes personal and social aspects of identity. Personal identity refers to 'the construction of the self: our sense of ourselves as unique individuals, how we perceive ourselves and how we think others see us' (1996, p. 24). In contrast, social identity 'refers to the way that we as individuals locate ourselves within the society in which we live and the way in which we perceive others as locating us' (1996, p. 24).

There are three dimensions of identity that need to be discussed at this point; the passive/active, essentialism/social constructionism and ethnic/civic notions of identity. Bradley (1996, p. 25) distinguishes passive from active identity. In our research, we consider claims to convict ancestry as an aspect of national identity that is predominantly passive, but one that may also be expressed actively, for example, through participation in genealogical societies (Lambert, 2002). Public interest in convicts is more broadly expressed through the popularity of convict tourist sites, such as the former Tasmanian penal colony at Port Arthur, or re-enactments of convict experiences at Sydney Cove.

Calhoun's (1994) distinction between essentialist and socially constructed notions of identity is critical for our

analyses. Calhoun (1994, p. 13) points to the problematic nature of 'essentialist' identity claims where 'individual persons can have singular, integral, altogether harmonious and unproblematic identities'. Alternatively, social constructionism 'challenges at once the ideas that identity is given naturally and the idea that identity is produced purely by acts of individual will'. In addition, Calhoun (1994, p. 13) takes issue with 'accounts of collective identities as based on some "essence" or set of core features shared by all members of the collectivity and no others'. An example would be those who believe that the only 'true' Australians are those who are born in Australia.

Bell (2003, p. 73) also cautions against essentialist identity conceptualisations, maintaining there is 'no singular, irreducible, national narrative, no essentialist "national identity"'. Instead he champions the idea of the 'mythscape' where 'the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, reconstructed and negotiated constantly' (Bell, 2003, p. 75). Constructionist understandings of identity were advanced by Anderson (1991), who famously maintained that nations are

> *imagined, because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. (1991, p. 6)*

Cornell and Hartmann (1998, p. 101) point to the interactive process of identity formation, arguing 'neither actions nor circumstances alone create groups, for our actions depend on how we interpret circumstances and circumstances ultimately are the products of human actions'. One of the main foci of this research is to identify important components of the 'collective memories' associated with the Australian nation, in this case, colonial and post-colonial aspects of the Australian *mythscape*.

In the United States, Schwartz (2008) argues that stories concerning the birth of nations are 'foundational' and important for generating collective memories and beliefs. Schwartz's (1998, 2008) research on changing 'memory' in the United States demonstrates the decline of meta-narratives regarding 'the myth that answers ultimate questions about national origin, purpose and fate'. Similarly, Schuman, Schwartz and d'Arcy (2005) argue that heroic narratives that attempt to answer ultimate questions about the origins of societies are less convincing. For example, the claim that Columbus 'discovered' America has declined in salience from the late twentieth century onwards, due to revisionist attacks on his reputation in the 1970s (Schuman et al., 2005, p. 11).[3] However, Schuman et al. (2005, p. 13) found that many Americans continue to regard Columbus as having 'discovered America', with only a small proportion attributing villainous qualities to the explorer, suggesting such revisionist critiques may have been overstated.

The research of Schuman et al. (2005, p. 13) on Columbus mirrors the decline and subsequent revival of public support for the Anzacs in Australia, with the size of Anzac day marches declining during the 1970s in response to the Vietnam War, but recovering strongly since the 1990s (Lake & Reynolds, 2010). Although contested, Columbus' role in the American foundation myth is central, while equivalent figures such as Captain James Cook are less prominent in the foundation narrative of Australia. Historically, expressing adulation for 'heroes', placing people 'on a pedestal' (with the possible exception of sportspeople), is tantamount to anti-Australian behaviour (Horne, 2008 [1964]). Goals of equality, a 'fair go' and egalitarianism are (at least ideally) upheld as key Australian values, while hero-worship has traditionally been frowned upon, and those who are elevated tend to be 'cut down', a process referred to as the 'tall-poppy' syndrome

(Macintyre, 2009, p. 255). A major aim in this book is to identify the historical and contemporary national figures who exemplify these Australian values.

As citizens of a settler society, many Australians appear to appreciate the role played by early ('white') immigrants in the formation of their national identity. Yet the role of those early involuntary settlers, the convicts – who were the very reason eighteenth century British colonies emerged in Australia – tends to be downplayed. The 'convict stain' persists in Australia, in tension with more recent celebrations of 'convict chic' (Bennett, 1988; Sayle, 1988). The oft-romanticised bushrangers appear to have little relevance for contemporary understandings of Australian identity, with one exception, the 'armoured outlaw' Ned Kelly, who has (for some) transcended his negative reputation to emerge as a romantic outlaw hero. Nevertheless, the very fact that a rural outlaw remains a hero of an advanced industrialised nation, more than 125 years after his death, signals the continuing importance of the Australian bush in the construction of the Australian national mythscape.

For Smith (1991, p. 91) 'at the broadest level nationalism [is] … a form of historicist culture, and civic education', an ideology 'that overlays or replaces the older forms of religious culture and familial education'. The nation must boast 'a glorious past, a golden age … to give meaning to its promise of restoration and dignity' (Smith, 1991, p. 161). When was this golden age of 'saints and heroes' that tells Australians what was 'authentically theirs' and how to see themselves in a modern nation state (Smith, 1991, p. 67)? Settler societies such as Australia, America and Canada 'attempt to coalesce the cultures of successive waves of (mainly European) immigrants' (Smith, 1991, p. 40) rather than incorporate indigenous history and traditions. We identify the Australians who exemplify popular notions of national identity, by quantifying 'important

Australians', the heroes who contemporary Australians see as reflecting or contributing to national identity (Smith, 1991, p. 161; Hobsbawm, 1990, pp. 72−73).

Due to the short history of 'white' Australia and the under recognition of indigenous history and leaders, Australians have limited historical figures to draw upon. Some nations have long, written histories filled with heroic figures to choose from, such as Churchill, Nelson, Washington, Lincoln or Napoleon. As a settler society with a short history of European colonisation, Australians have fought in several theatres of war, but have never fought a war on home soil, and have not experienced a civil war or revolution apart from local rebellions such as the Eureka stockade, Castle Hill or the 'Great Rebellion' in Sydney. Australia lacks easily identifiable military or political foundation heroes. Indeed, the best-known Australian war heroes are the Anzacs, a laudable group rather than notable individuals, who, while they fought bravely, were defeated by Turkish forces at Gallipoli in World War I. Admiration for the underdog and a dislike or ambivalence regarding those elevated to higher office is allegedly part of the Australian character (Hirst, 2007). The lack of identifiable foundation heroes goes some way to explaining why a nineteenth century outlaw is arguably the only 'heroic' colonial figure recognised by the majority of contemporary Australian citizens.

Theophanous (1995, p. 281) maintains that 'prior to the development of multiculturalism' there were 'two strands' to national identity in Australia: 'one that emphasised our British heritage, and one that emphasised a limited form of egalitarianism and commitment to social justice'. Another potential reason why Ned Kelly remains an iconic figure is that he straddles both of these identity dimensions. Kelly's stance against the colonial police taps into historical elements of Australian identity where the British authorities were seen as colonial overlords.