NATIONAL IDENTITY AND EDUCATION IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

This page intentionally left blank

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND EDUCATION IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

BY

JAN KEANE

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

ISOQAR certified
Management System,
awarded to Emerald
for adherence to
Environmental
standard
ISO 14001:2004.

ISOQAR
REGISTERED
Certificate Number 1985
ISO 14001

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Christine Hall, mentor and friend; my daughter Katie; and Robin my 'history man'.

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgements

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

This page intentionally left blank

Preface

In recent times, the populist reaction to globalisation has led to a resurgence of nationalism, often of a very negative kind. The question must, therefore, arise of whether national identity, as distinct from nationalism, can be a force for good and can in some circumstances be inclusive, rather than exclusive and concerned with overcoming 'the Other'. It may be useful to focus on the evolution of national identity as part of the process of nation building in settler countries outside Europe, where the majority of the population are recent or distant migrants from elsewhere.

The case examined here is that of Australia. In this instance, it was necessary to bring together people who had arrived not just from Britain but, in significant numbers, from other parts of the world as well, and to create a sense of belonging and loyalty to this new land. This need was increased by Australia's remoteness from Europe.

This study leads to conclusions about the emerging identity of new Australians which are contrary to much of what has been written on this subject in the past. The approach taken shows the role played by the school curriculum in moulding loyalty to a new identity among young white Australians. Perhaps most important of all, it suggests that national identity can indeed be a positive phenomenon, where it harnesses the common experiences and achievements of people, and the unique and uplifting characteristics of their new home. It does not have to take the form of a wholesale rejection of 'the Other' and is, therefore, quite different from the European experience of nationalism.

However, this study also reveals that in the case of Australia, there was a counter-narrative running in parallel with respect to Indigenous people. Australia's original inhabitants were 'encountered' but never 'embraced' or 'exalted', to use the terminology of Chapter 3. They were largely left out of historical accounts of early Australia, and never considered to be among the 'heroes' of the early projects of settlement. The mythology that built up about them was, for the most part, consistently negative, portraying them as marauding savages. Indigenous people were that part of the 'Other' with whom white settlers, during the period examined here and for long afterwards, never came to terms. Throughout this study the treatment of Indigenous people will be referred to as a counterpoint to the broadly positive white 'Australian' focus of the curriculum publication *The School Paper* in its efforts to unite young Australians and develop in them a sense of national identity.

National identities matter because they have the potential to help people make sense of the world in which they are born and live, help them make sense of their past, and provide them with the identification that supports the political structure and enables visualisation of a common future.

The concept of national identity has been subject to a variety of interpretations over the years. It has been pointed out that it is incessantly negotiated

through discourse (Lane Bruner, 2005). It may be based on mythical rather than factual history, able to integrate apparently contradictory facts – as one observer put it, it is 'the stuff that dreams are made of' (Walker Connor, 1994, p. 210). The nation may exist primarily in the hearts and minds of its members or be built upon perceived past common glories (Renan, 1882); it may be found too in ordinary day-to-day social habits (Billig, 1995). United by 'common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions' (Smith, 1991, p. 11), this imagined community is promoted especially through mass education. For this reason, we need to look not only at the way adults participate in cultural traditions but also ways in which national culture is conveyed to children from one generation to the next (Barrett, 2007). Above all, national identity is always defined in terms of difference from the 'Other' (Bhabha, 1990; Said, 2003).

It is clear, therefore, that identity is central to much socio-political debate in our own time. For both the individual and the collective, the question 'Who are we?' cannot truly be answered without engaging with the social context in which the question is asked. In addition, it will be apparent that historical and literary narratives are likely to be important to the formation of national identity. For all observers, narrative, or 'discourse', is an essential medium through which national identity is constructed and reinforced.

Narrative is a powerful vehicle for spreading values and conveying them to subsequent generations. Children's literature has been described as 'a struggle for young people's minds' (Stephens, 1992, p. ix) in that it is frequently didactic, offers moral codes, and defines for children the nature of their childhood at a particular time and in a particular place. This equally holds for school materials. The purpose of this book is to show how an emerging (white) national identity is both reflected in and constructed through educational texts read by children in Australia.

The period 1900 to 1918 starts and finishes with events of enduring significance to Australia. These years were a crucial time of nation building when, arguably, Australians embraced a stronger sense of independence from Britain, and developments occurred which crystallised characteristics of the emerging white Australian identity. Many of these traits remain central to the way Australians perceive themselves today. Federation was finally achieved on 1 January 1901. The end of the period was no less significant. By the close of 1918, the Great War was over, and with it came the consolidation of the Gallipoli legend: Australian troops had proven themselves on the battlefield.

The State of Victoria was the home of the first Federal Parliament, and, at the time, one of the most populous and dynamic regions of Australia. The focus here on Victoria is supported also by the fact that the Education Department's own publication, *The School Paper*, was the mandatory reading syllabus for all Victorian state schools and for many denominational schools as well. Moreover, it incorporated reading material from that prepared by the Education Departments of other states, notably from *The Commonwealth School Paper*, *The School Magazine* of the *Education Department New South Wales*, the *South Australian Children's Hour*, and the *Queensland School Paper*. The *Victorian School Paper*, in its turn, was used in other states; the messages

the texts conveyed about national identity, therefore, had a broader currency among predominately white school children within Australia well beyond Victoria.

A criticism commonly made of *The School Paper* is that it included almost no Australian content, and was primarily an instrument through which British attitudes were reinforced among school children, thus perpetuating an Imperial mystique. Yet to date, there has been no really thorough analysis of the publication.[1] The present study sets out to remedy this. Through a comprehensive deconstruction of the publication, it finds that *The School Paper* made a very substantial contribution to the formation of the white Australian identity.

Finally, and critically as implied above, it should be noted that material with *any* mention of Indigenous people has been given particular attention, for these early representations of first inhabitants are vital to the prevailing attitudes held by society and passed down to the young. Indigenous people saw their land progressively invaded by Europeans who denied them any entitlement to it because they had no system of land rights in the European sense. This was not, therefore, simply colonisation of territory by the whites, but expropriation. The denial of recognition to Indigenous people would lead ultimately to decimation of their way of life, and in some extreme cases, to genocide. Thus, messages by white writers included in educational reading materials compiled by white educators for consumption by, in the main, white school children, speak volumes about the colonisers' attitudes towards the Indigenous 'Other'. In the view of Edward Said, it is important to 'defend peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated because they are considered inferior' (1998, p. 7). The framework employed here allows for a thorough exposition of these attitudes.

---

[1]The two main sources hitherto for content analysis of *The School Paper* have been Desmond Gibbs (1987) and Peter Musgrave (1996). However, neither of these works is based on a comprehensive review of this publication for the whole of the period 1900 to 1918. Moreover, national identity was not their primary focus.

This page intentionally left blank

PART I
THE ROOTS OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHARACTER

This page intentionally left blank

Chapter 1

The Australian Identity Prior to Federation

The issue of national identity in Australia has a very long pedigree which can be traced back to the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. At that time, the two main groups of whites who took up residence in the colony that became New South Wales were the large contingent of prisoners who had suffered transportation for their crimes, and the Governor, administrators, warders and soldiers sent to ensure that they served their sentences. These two groups were in a natural opposition to one another: those in authority representing the government in London and those who had already, through their anti-social and criminal behaviour, rebelled against that government. So how was national identity manifest in Australia *up to* the time of Federation?

Russel Ward's book *The Australian Legend*, published in 1958, has for many years been the defining contribution in this area. It is notable that Ward sees one of the earliest manifestations of Australian-ness in the so-called currency lads (and lasses) of the early decades of the nineteenth century. These were the sons (and daughters) of those who had served their sentences in the penal colonies of New South Wales and Tasmania. 'Currency' was the term used to describe native-born Australians of convict stock, as opposed to 'Sterling', meaning migrants of British birth. Ward characterises this new generation of Australian-born inhabitants as naturally outspoken, suspicious of British authority and inclined increasingly to identify with the land in which they had grown up. This did not mean, however, that they followed their parents into a life of criminal activity; rather, they were seen as fiercely independent and determined to make their own way. Currency lads and lasses represented one of the foundations, some decades later, on which the emerging identity would be built.

Among the other foundations was the predominance of working-class Irish (around a third of the total residents and over 50 per cent of the assisted migrants arriving by ship) in the population during the early decades of white settlement[1] (Ward, 2005, p. 47), and it was these poor and unskilled people, by

---

[1]Australian census figures at the time did not record the birthplace of inhabitants, but did record their religion. In the 1851 census for New South Wales, 30.4 per cent of the population was Roman Catholic.

and large, who became the rural workers, and who displayed many of the characteristics that were associated with those later known collectively as 'bushmen':

> [...] the semi-nomadic drovers, shepherds, shearers, bullock-drivers, stockmen, boundary-riders, station hands and others of the pastoral industry. (Ward, 2005, p. 2)

These are the men of Ward's 'Australian legend', who, he argues, influenced the way the rest of the Australian community perceived itself. The attributes of Ward's 'typical Australian' have often been quoted. He is white, a man of few words, hard-working, courageous, sceptical, profoundly independent and anti-authoritarian. He shows unquestionable loyalty to his mates, and, above all, he is not a woman.

The final and perhaps most important ingredient of this Australian myth was the 'bush' itself. The journey into the interior, referred to colloquially as 'up the country', transported these men to a place of isolation and hardship, against which they had to fight and adapt for survival. The resultant ethos was based on solidarity, loyalty and trust – essential ingredients of the cult of 'mateship'.

This myth was maintained and strengthened by events during the gold rush and the activities of bushrangers, and was carried from one generation to another in the form of traditional ballads, as well as songs, poetry and prose. The work of Banjo Paterson (1864–1941) and Henry Lawson (1867–1922), in particular, has been described as 'the chief vehicle for spreading a democratic, collectivist, national mystique' (Hirst, 2006, p. 182). Paterson and Lawson were perhaps the best-known nationalist writers of poetry and prose during the 1890s.

Bushrangers can be seen to reinforce this legend. Men like Jack Donahue and Ben Hall and the Kelly gang were hopelessly disadvantaged by their miserable physical circumstances. The sympathy felt for them by the rural poor was the defining factor in their contribution to the national character. Bushrangers were commonly admired as men opposing British tyranny (White, 1981).

By the end of the 1890s, the 'noble bushman' had become fundamental to the nation's self-image, even though by this time the cities had become more populous while the nomadic life of rural workers was beginning to disappear. This dominant narrative remained after Federation as the nationalist model for a collective identity.

Graeme Davison, in his essay 'Sydney and the Bush' (1978), believes that the role of the urban intelligentsia in the creation of the bush legend was far greater than Ward implies. In his view, the image was in large part created, not just reflected, by poets, painters and writers leading claustrophobic lives in rundown city boarding houses. Nationalist leaning publications such as *The Bulletin* reinforced this. The freedom of the bush, particularly during the depression years of the 1890s, became a psychological antidote to the grimness of urban life, a fantasy world of open spaces populated by noble bushmen. There was a market for this escapist work – Paterson's poem 'Clancy of the Overflow' is a perfect example of the genre. This poem was first published by *The Bulletin* in 1889 and

compares life in a 'dingy little office' with Clancy's life in the bush, surrounded by 'sunlit plains' and 'everlasting stars'.

It was thus ironic that many of the artists whose work played a major part in celebrating the myth were themselves city-born or town-bred, and not from the bush itself. In 1892, Henry Lawson travelled to the Queensland border in order to experience 'up country' for himself. He didn't enjoy it, and on his return to Sydney, he wrote the poem 'Up the Country' for *The Bulletin*. These are the first four lines:

> I'm back from up the country − very sorry that I went −
> Seeking for the Southern poets' land whereon to pitch my tent;
> I have lost a lot of idols, which were broken on the track,
> Burnt a lot of fancy verses, and I'm glad that I am back.

In another challenge to Ward's concept of a noble bushmen, John Hirst argues that this was not the only national legend and makes a case for those who settled the land, that is the pastoralists and farmers − the 'selectors' who acquired crown land cheaply under the provisions of the Selection Acts 1860. Hirst elevates the lowly selector to the role of a nation builder. This national rural myth, which he calls 'the pioneer legend', 'is democratic in its social bearing, conservative in its political implications' (Hirst, 2006, p. 196). Moreover, Hirst's pioneers and Ward's bushmen were, it may be said, on opposite sides of the fence, the former being owners and the latter being employees. Despite the differences in these two legends, Hirst argues that they originated around the same time and were promoted by the same poets, painters and writers. He cites *The Drover's Wife* as Lawson's 'most powerful contribution to the pioneer legend' (2006, p. 181), and the poem 'The Song of the Future' as Paterson's 'classic pioneer piece' (2006, p. 185).

It is widely recognised that what it means to be Australian owes much to British intellectual and social thinking as well as to locally developed views. This is sometimes referred to as the 'cultural baggage', which was a part of the 'world view' of every British arrival on Australia's shores from the First Fleet onwards. However, these imported convictions were absorbed into the creation of the Australian legend (White, 1981). So too the growing sense of (local) identity in early Australia grew hand in hand with loyalty to Britain, creating a conflict between the promotion of imperial ties and the need for a degree of independence from the control and edicts of London (Galway, 2008).[2] Early debates about Australia's identity had to accommodate these conflicting agendas.

Traditional stories are still used to define the national character of Australians today. The durability of the bushman and pioneer legends was demonstrated in the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics in 2000. The lone stockman,

---

[2]Elizabeth Galway makes this point in respect of Canada.

bushrangers, farmers and shearers were some of the many enduring colonial symbols selected to showcase Australia to the world. And even though these stereotypes were presented in an upbeat almost 'slapstick manner', their purpose was clear.

> The power of the story is unquestionable. The opening moment with the spot-lit stockman and his horse was designed to elicit pride, not self-deprecating humour. It was an image presented to Australians […] as a quintessential idea of who they are, not as a joke about how outdated this sense of self may be. (Elder, 2007, p. 34)

Elder is concerned about the people and the ideas that are excluded from the texts; this is a vital and telling aspect of the developing identity, for 'exclusion is intrinsically built into the idea of the nation' (2007, p. 28).[3] One of the dominant narratives is the 'very powerful story of Australia as white'. Indigeneity and ethnicity were distasteful issues for the predominantly Anglo-Celt colonial population. Australian-ness did not embrace Aborigines – indeed the expression 'indigenous culture' meant that which was developed by local whites, not local blacks, who were seen almost universally as 'suppressed and exterminated'. This view is integral to the '*terra nullius* and eradication stories', the means by which, first, the colonisers were able to see the land as empty, and were then able to justify their claims by marginalising Indigenous people out of existence as 'a dying race' (Elder, 2007, pp. 115, 119, pp. 147−177). Thus, Indigenous peoples, although not entirely absent from the narratives, have none of the qualities of Ward's legend. They are shown rather as primitive, childlike and irresponsible, savages, but not noble savages – the ultimate 'Other'.

The representation of diverse ethnicity (as opposed to indigeneity) – in other words, the portrayal of the great variety of ethnic backgrounds among Australia's immigrants at the time of the gold rush − poses different problems. The Chinese may be the most contentious here, as legislation was passed specifically restricting their arrival in the colony of Victoria. Growing concern about the 'vast' numbers of Chinese pouring into the goldfields provoked the imposition of a punitive £10 levy on all Chinese newcomers to the colony. Other

---

[3]Indigenous people and their culture also played a central part in the opening ceremony; it is unlikely that national events 100 years ago would have included Aborigines in any capacity other than that of side-show freaks or curiosities. The Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, 1900, made scant reference to Indigenous people. Aborigines were present during the Federation celebrations in Sydney but their contribution involved 'demonstrations of savage warfare, war dancing, and corroborees [which] were loudly applauded' (Keenan, 1904). Even the narrative of the opening ceremony in 2000 ignored contentious indigenous issues, particularly that of land rights, and the doctrine of *terra nullius* was in no way questioned. Thus, 'while going some way to acknowledging other stories, [it] still reinforced the dominant narrative of Australia' (Elder, 2007, p. 37).

strategies were the Passenger Act of 1854, which stipulated the number of Chinese allowed per ship, and an increase in the duty payable on rice and opium. Eventually, further restrictions were mutually agreed upon by all the colonies. These were extended to other 'coloured' groups, notably the Kanakas introduced from the Pacific Islands to provide labour for Queensland's plantations, and the Afghans, imported earlier to manage the camel trains used in inland expeditions, and subsequently for the transport of goods.

In sum, the dominant story of Australia as white did not recognise that there might be non-white narratives at all.

In the years preceding Federation, one of the principal characteristics of the political relationship between the imperial powers and their colonies was hostility towards the pre-existing populations in those places. What existed in Australia at this time was a local expression of this ubiquitous racism. Not only did this manifest itself in behaviour towards Indigenous people, Australian-ness could happily encompass attitudes which supported the exclusion of further non-white immigration, and reinforced the oppression of such people already settled in the colonies. Consequently, racism must be seen as an integral part of the emerging white Australian national identity.

Another concern is the largely negative portrayal of women, and relatively minor position afforded to them in the colonial narratives. Miriam Dixson examines the role of women in what she sees as the essentially masculine culture which, to a certain extent, still defines Australian-ness today. From the very beginnings of white settlement, women were marginalised. Convict women, for example, were considered to be even worse than their male counterparts, and were variously described in contemporary records as being 'excessively violent', 'the most disgusting objects that ever disgraced female form' and 'generally the refuse of London' (Dixson, 1976, pp. 124–126). Dixson also focuses on the low standing of Irish women, and on the paucity of frontier narratives which record female accomplishments.

In another feminist contribution to the debate, Kay Schaffer sees attitudes to women as conditioned by the Australian landscape. The nineteenth-century bushman aimed to subdue and conquer the land, and thus it became the primary object of desire. It was categorically 'no place for a woman!' (Schaffer, 1988, p. 12), and they (women) are rarely the subjects of contemporary narratives. Schaffer illustrates the gender differences by contrasting the work of Henry Lawson with that of Barbara Baynton. Baynton (1857–1929) had several short stories in *The Bulletin* during the 1890s, but is best known for her book *Bush Studies*, published in 1902; of these, 'Squeaker's Mate' is perhaps the finest example. Lawson's stories essentially confirm the masculine character of Australia at this time, while Baynton's challenge this male authority by allowing women the role of 'protagonist' victims, and by refusing to glorify the terrible hardships of the bush. In this way, 'her writings shake up, disturb and deflate masculine values' (Schaffer, 1988, p. 149).

Elder (2007) looks for evidence of the 'invisible woman' in colonial narratives. She concludes that the gender binary of male/female exists even when the women are off stage. In the early narratives of exploration, women are

conspicuous by their absence, but are there in spirit, supporting the men in their activities. In pioneer stories, women act as a necessary yardstick against which to judge a man's courage and endurance. Thus, the stories which frame the idea of the nation, whether from the nineteenth century or the present, largely cast women in the subordinate position.

Judith Kapferer's contribution to this discussion (1996) is her conviction that history provides the 'fundamental' building blocks of national identity. With respect to women, they were noticeably absent in historical descriptions of colonial exploration and settlement; the heroes of the time were the governors, explorers and founders of cities. Women had a supporting role, as a moral authority on the one hand and as sexual objects on the other, or, as put so very succinctly in the title of Anne Summers' 1975 book, *Damned Whores and God's Police*.

It can be seen, therefore, that the unique landscape of the 'bush' became a backdrop for the development of a new cultural 'self', and the national character emerged, in some measure, from the collective re-shaping of recent history and the creation of a new mythology. The vehicles for this were oral, written and visual narratives. These incorporated significant incidents and episodes in the interaction between the settlers and the natural environment on the one hand and the settlers and the British authorities on the other. They did not, however, treat with the plight of the Aboriginal population in any serious way.

Thus, a definable Australian identity began to coalesce.