The impact of ‘White Australia’ on the development of Australian national identity in the period between 1880 and 1914

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MHIS109 The Making of Australia

The ideal of ‘White Australia’ formed the foundation upon which Australian national identity in the period 1880-1914 rested. An individual’s self-identification as belonging to the nation in which they live is an empathic connection facilitated by national identity, which becomes an “important component of self”\(^1\). National identity is a “socially constructed idea or myth”\(^2\) unifying its population; its espoused characteristics often reflect ideals the population desires their nation—and thus themselves—to be seen as embodying. Shared heritage typically provides common ground from which more elaborate, coherent national identity and values can be developed. Mutual self-identification as white subjects of the British Empire became the basis for such unity in colonial Australia. The search for a national identity in which the population could take pride during 1880-1914 was influenced by racial anxieties from within and without the Empire. ‘White Australia’ remained at the core of Australian national identity, filtering popular reactions to those influences, altering only in its manifestations.

The origins of Australian national identity can be found in the commonalities between its inhabitants. The late nineteenth-century Australian population consisted largely of emigrants from the British Isles, or their descendants; the majority of the populace thus shared common language, history, and customs. This ‘Britishness’, Meaney suggests, was a myth more appropriate to Australia, where its traditions were homogenised, than in Britain, where it existed as an experience of tensions.\(^3\) Collective self-identification as British shaped Australian national identity providing a national myth of a country settled, occupied and ruled by white subjects of the British Empire—a ‘White Australia’. Such a monoculture was, in this era of the rising nation-state, the preferred norm. National identity is absolute by nineteenth-century definition, uniting a specific people; any other peoples are excluded from that identity, and the nation.\(^4\) By perceiving Australia as a land occupied only by the British, colonials rejected the presence of any other culture. Aboriginal Australians’ presence, far from disproving this


\(^3\) Ibid., p. 81.

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 78.
belief, contributed to the insistence on the inherent superiority of the white race. Social Darwinism theorised that superior, advanced races triumphed over inferior, primitive races. Circumstantial evidence revealed the extinction of Aboriginal Australians directly resulting from contact with white civilisation, affirming belief in white superiority. The native population, dispossessed, faded into society’s periphery both literally and figuratively. The “moral law of progress”\(^5\) justified their assumed demise and demonstrated the lengths to which the white settlers had gone in order to claim Australia as their own. The white national identity of Australia provided the moral basis for colonial presence on the land, and a self-identification in which the population could take pride.

The rapid, disconcerting changes associated with the fin de siècle forced a shift in the Australian national identity towards anxiety and insecurity, as familiar Anglo-Australian values of British heritage, and the inherent superiority that heritage entailed, were rendered suspect. National racial homogeneity remained desirable, and belonging to the white race remained sufficient justification for exclusive occupation of Australia; the debate lay in whether colonials were British or “fictive Europeans”\(^6\), victims of racial degeneracy. Fears of “Australian deterioration” in tropical climes, the climate playing “Old Gooseberry with the fine primordial stock”\(^7\), were revealed in literature of the time. Traditional perceptions of colonial inferiority still irked Australians, fearful that they were created from British “dross and detritus”\(^8\). ‘Whiteness’, colonials increasingly felt, needed to be proven, not simply assumed. In response, the immigrant generation mimicked British attitudes, belittling “everything Australian”\(^9\). This ‘cultural cringe’, however, ran counter to natural desires to take pride in one’s nation and identity. Pearson’s National Life and Character: A Forecast proposed a “fatally attractive”\(^10\) alternative in 1893: Australia could become the last, best hope of the white race and “higher civilisation”\(^11\). This role of preserver of white bloodlines, however, entailed the burden of maintaining and protecting Australian racial purity. Sporting successes and physical prowess often indicated racial stock breeding true; colonial victory over the English cricket team in 1887 was reported in the Australasian as thoroughly refuting fears of physical degeneration.\(^12\) Similarly, imperial loyalty,


\(^{7}\) Joseph Furphy, Such is Life (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1975), pp. 201-202.


\(^{9}\) W.J. Sowden, quoted in C.M.H. Clark, Select Documents in Australian History 1851-1900 (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955), p. 796.


\(^{11}\) Charles Pearson, quoted in Ibid., p. 42.

\(^{12}\) Birrell, Federation, p. 99.
and military enlistment—the Boxer rebellion, the Sudan Crisis, the Boer War—often stemmed from desires to allay racial anxiety. Authenticity of colonial ‘whiteness’ determined colonial worth. ‘White Australia’ became the ideal vision for the nation’s future, and the short-term goal that would justify the nation’s right to that desired future.

Colonial Australian racial anxieties were exacerbated by isolation: already on the periphery of the Imperial socio-political hierarchy, Australia was geographically isolated from the culture with which it identified. Nineteenth-century anthropologists depicted human history as “collisions between discrete racial entities”13, where winners would inevitably dominate over losers, both physically and culturally. Colonial insecurities regarding their fragile hold on a “vast land set in an Asian sea”14 suggested that should conflict arise, Asia—the older, established culture—would be victorious. Inevitabilities of racial conflict could only be avoided through exclusion.15 ‘Coloured’ immigration, although at a statistically low ebb, was thus strongly resisted. In May 1888, Melbourne and Sydney refused entry to the steamship Afghan’s 268 Chinese passengers. Its arrival sparked demonstrations in Sydney and in Brisbane drunken youths rioted. The realisation that an alternative to ‘White Australia’ was e a practical possibility focused attention on what Australians were defending. The populace united in self-preservation. The invasion fear of imagined Asian hordes—the ‘Yellow Peril’—preoccupied society with its “enduring narrative power” 16, its most notable presentation in William Lane’s 1888 serial White or Yellow?17 Unlike immigrants, Aboriginal Australians were largely ignored as a threat to white superiority; the assumption of a primitive character to some degree forestalled the active, fear-based discrimination aimed at immigrants. ‘Coloured’ immigrants within Australian borders were viewed as purveyors of “physical and moral pestilence”, whose “noxious parasitical fibres”17 would destroy the white race: a danger to national and individual identity which caused Australians to cling to the “atavistic idea of community”18. Each colony, intending to forestall degradation of national racial character, independently introduced immigration restriction legislation during the 1880s. Thomson, in 1888, equated patriotism with anti-Chinese feeling; a “Chinese war”, he claimed, would “immediately federate our states into one nation”19. The threat to ‘White Australia’ posed by the perceived encroachment of other races led to solidification of its desirability. A more concerted effort to preserve the ‘white’ national identity emerged at the turn of the century.

13 McGregor, Imagined Destinies, p. 53.
17 R. Thomson, quoted in Clark, Select Documents in Australian History, p. 794.
19 Thomson, quoted in Clark, Select Documents in Australian History, p. 794.
Popular resentment of British perceptions of colonial Australian inferiority consistently sparked efforts to refute that judgement, typically through proving ‘whiteness’. Demographic changes in the Australian population ensured that, for the first time, Australians born in Australia outnumbered those born overseas. Rather than denigrating the colonial landscape and lifestyle, as had the immigrant generation as “relocated Englishmen”\textsuperscript{20}, the attempt was made during the 1890s to establish a uniquely Australian national identity, proving Australian merits without becoming a “servile imitation of England”\textsuperscript{21}. A counter-movement to the cultural cringe preceding it, its architects were largely writers and artists conscious of their position in the movement. Their ideological preoccupations transformed into pillars of an Australian ethos: anticlericalism, nationalism, race prejudice.\textsuperscript{22} Supposedly derived from the working-class and unique experiences of the Australian outback, this masculine constructed identity of egalitarianism, collectivism, and mateship presented the bushman as the idealised figure representing Australia and its values, which emphatically included a ‘White Australia’. The bushman was tied to the invasion narrative as an “exemplar of the defiant White Man confronting mobile Asia”\textsuperscript{23}. \textit{Such is Life}, written with “offensively Australian”\textsuperscript{24} bias, aimed to identify Australian characteristics as exemplified in the bushman. Furphy’s characters were caricatures ridiculing the attitudes of other racial ‘types’, or stereotypes and presenting a white-centric identity. Asian characters speak pidgin, are called “Manchurian leper”, “unbeliever”, “heathen”\textsuperscript{25}. Egalitarianism was reserved for the white population. The bush became the Bush, yet this perception had been constructed not in the rural Australia it romanticised, but in urban centres, where 1890s literature and art were produced. Palmer argues that the “spiritual core” this movement created gave “real possession” of Australia.\textsuperscript{26} Although weaving the landscape into folk legend would indeed facilitate attachment to nation, Palmer’s hypothesis is perhaps flawed. The ideals of mateship and fairness endured as desirable national characteristics, but the realities of the 1890s economic depression, the tensions of colonial hierarchies—of class, sectarian, racial, and ethnic distinctions\textsuperscript{27}—rendered them applicable only in the abstract.

The Federation movement represented the deliberate attempt by leading political figures to forge a coherent, unifying national identity. Pre-existing colonial rivalries—dichotomies of worker and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Birrell} Birrell, \textit{Federation}, p. 99.
\bibitem{Clark} The \textit{Bulletin}, 18 February 1888, in Clark, \textit{Select Documents in Australian History 1851-1900}, p. 804.
\bibitem{Furphy} Furphy, \textit{Such is Life}, p. 190.
\bibitem{Palmer2} Palmer, \textit{The Legend of the Nineties}, p. 169.
\bibitem{Lake} Lake, “On Being a White Man, Australis, circa 1900,” p. 106.
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employer, rich and poor, Protestant and Catholic, radical and conservative, urban and rural—precluded the popular support Federation required. Its promotion therefore required reconciliation of these tensions, the drawing together of threads of common feeling among the population, creating the necessary “strength of purpose and belief”28. One common element was resentment of assumed colonial inferiority: “Why,” Henry Parkes questioned in 1890, “should not the name of an Australian be equal to that of a Briton?”29 The key motivator was upholding ‘White Australia’. The egalitarianism offered by the Bush Legend developed the notion that citizenship afforded an individual equal status: Australian national identity, Birrell argues, as defined not by racism, but civic ideals.30 This statement offers stark contrast to the contemporary belief that federation of the colonies would automatically mean “exclusion of all Asiatic and coloured races”31, but is less contradictory than it initially appears. The democratic liberalism sought by the federation movement established “equality within its borders”32. That racial tension produced inequality was a supposition sustained by contemporary examples: America, experiencing the “greatest racial trouble ever known”33; India, demonstrator of “brutalising effects” of a “coloured servant class”34. Australia could not “police the whole world”35, but Australian ideals could be maintained within the nation through the exclusion of the potential inequalities represented by non-white races. Commitment to ‘White Australia’, Davison states, shows colonial inability to recognise that multiculturalism is “not necessarily a threat to national unity”36. Pre-Federation, however, national unity did not yet exist: Constitutional Convention debates disagreed whether a constitution was intended to provide for “unification of the Australian nation”37. The sole common ground amongst the contemporary factions was belief in ‘White Australia’. Despite Davison’s anachronistic imposition of the modern multicultural paradigm, the success of the Federation movement in 1901 was achieved due to the unifying capabilities of monocultural values.

Post-Federation, the Australian national identity appeared to experience a “resurgence of British imperial sentiment”38, abandoning the created legends of the 1890s for renewed political,

28 Paul Keating, quoted in Birrell, Federation, p. 10.
29 Henry Parkes, quoted in Clark, Select Documents in Australian History, p. 475.
30 Birrell, Federation, p. 15.
31 W.H. Groom, quoted in Clark, Select Documents in Australian History, p. 220.
38 Birrell, Federation, p. 18.
economic, and military dependence upon the Empire. This resurgence leads revisionists—Stephen Castles, Hugh Mackay, and Donald Horne among them—to argue that Federation created neither an independent nation nor a national identity.\footnote{Ibid., p. 1-2} This is to some extent true: Australia was the “Reluctant Nation”,\footnote{David Day, quoted in Meaney, “Britishness and Australian Identity,” p. 78.} unwilling to break Imperial ties in a society where ‘nationalism’ often meant ‘Imperialism.’ Australia first celebrated Empire Day in 1905, a decade before Britain. Australian citizenship is not a Constitutional term; Australians’ “real status” was as “subjects of the British Crown”.\footnote{Edmund Barton, quoted in Birrell, Federation, p. 158.} While cultural loyalties remained firmly attached to the British Empire, however, the geopolitical divide between Australia and Britain manifested in more ambiguous political loyalties, a developing multipolar view of Empire. Australia sought to defend the nation from a looming Asian threat Britain scarcely acknowledged. Most of its early policies reflected this determination, often in direct disregard of British wishes, to safeguard Australia from ‘coloured’ races. Of these policies, the most notable—and notorious—was the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. Others included tariffs, creation of an Australian Navy, and compulsory military training. The exclusion of aliens to preserve an Anglo-Saxon identity remained the driving force behind development of national identity and provoked a “healthy spirit of national pride”.\footnote{Hearn, “Cultivating an Australian Sentiment,” p. 361.} Political disagreements over Australian status within the internal workings of the British Empire notwithstanding, in 1914 Australia immediately followed the British example in declaring war. Post-Federation Australian national identity, although incorporating anti-British feeling, nevertheless did so in the manner of binary opposition, revolving around a central core of ‘Britishness’ when not directly simulating it. Shared Imperial heritage remained the fundamental Australian unifier.

The ideal of ‘White Australia’ has today been rejected because of its racism. The current dominant paradigm is now multiculturalism. Early Australian national identity, given its association with the policy and ideal of ‘White Australia’ that has been so thoroughly condemned, is thus often seen as tainted, a reminder of shameful and guilty racist past. Yet while ‘White Australia’ neither applies to modern society nor is accepted there, it united Australia in a common strength of purpose and belief, without which Federation may well have been impossible. Its influence lingers in our systems of government, controversies over refugees, debates about Aboriginal land rights and the content of school curricula, and finally in pervasive desire to adhere to the sensitivities of political correctness, and avoid the label of ‘racist’.

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\footnote{Ibid., p. 1-2}  
\footnote{David Day, quoted in Meaney, “Britishness and Australian Identity,” p. 78.}  
\footnote{Edmund Barton, quoted in Birrell, Federation, p. 158.}  
\footnote{Hearn, “Cultivating an Australian Sentiment,” p. 361.}
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