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## **THE BLESSED COUNTRY**

*Australian Dreaming: 1901—2001*

John Carroll

This country is obscure. It was hard on its explorers, as if signalling its hostility to being mapped. Tracing its social contours has proved correspondingly tough, producing no more than a largely defunct legend of identity—that of the bushman and his ethos of egalitarian mateship—and a couple of summary phrases like the ‘lucky country’. Claudio Veliz’ designation of Australia as an ‘island off the coast of Sussex’ is a suggestive and necessary starting point, but no more. Some have said that Australia still awaits its Tocqueville. Perhaps a feature of this country is rather its resistance to interpretation.

Once having begun, let me nevertheless proceed, however foolhardy the task. The easy part is the question. What has enabled the new inhabitants of the Great South Land—*Terra Australis*—to start to feel at home in an alien land as far from their roots as they could have travelled? The land which looms as their ‘Never Never’, as merely ‘Down Under’, threatens them, whether consciously or not, as nowhere, other, without identity, of no significance.

The clue, I want to suggest, lies in the people themselves. What is notable, and admirable, about the Australian nation is the distinctive character of its people. They have their own constellation of virtues. It was on show during the Sydney Olympics—and if the first century opens with Federation, it ends with the millennium Olympic Games. *The Guardian* represented British, American and French reporting when it concluded that the Games had not only been the best ever, but Games no other country could possibly equal. As the London newspaper phrased it: ‘The mixture of efficiency, friendliness and boundless enthusiasm is uniquely Australian.’ Everything worked, the sun shone, and a benevolent good cheer swept both athlete and spectator away. On the material human plane, few would question that this was as good as it gets.

Throughout the West there has been rhetoric about a Third Way, one that

might combine the efficiency of American capitalism with a broader, more compassionate social perspective, capitalism with a human face. A number of visitors observed that it actually exists, and is called 'Australia'. In a century in which Western philosophy focussed on *being*, Australia has been less preoccupied than America with *doing*. It has struck a better balance. Recently one State Government, possibly sensing this, changed the words on its car numberplates to: 'Victoria—The Place to Be'.

That the nation put on its best face in Sydney, and was blessed with good fortune, as at its first Olympics in 1956 in Melbourne, is not to doubt—more troubled years may well lie ahead. My interest here is rather in what enabled such an achievement, what it indicates about the nation.

To open in sociological terms: the people have developed their own distinctive form of democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville stressed, in his enduring classic from the 1830s, *Democracy in America*, that the democratic form of political order depends for its success on three things. All concern the limiting of the power of elites. First is the prevalence throughout the society of a flourishing culture of free associations—clubs and societies. They range from sports organisations to charities, from trade unions to churches. Second, there must be an independent judiciary. Tocqueville's third requirement is a free press, able to publicise abuses of power.

Australia has added a fourth. It is pre-eminent. The main check on capitalism, on its inherent tendency to favour the ruthless self-interest of those with economic and political clout, has been the people. There was, for instance, the major role played at the Sydney Olympics by volunteers. They came from all corners of the country and helped to cast an ethos of friendly informality over an event that social commentators had predicted would be remembered as the last global mega-circus, disintegrating in media sparks and scandal. What integrity, it was queried, could issue from a self-serving International Olympic Committee, evasive on drugs, addicted to its own five-star touring?

The Sydney mood was reflected in crowds that responded to Eric the Eel, as he was warmly nicknamed, an African swimmer floundering last in the pool, with no more ability than those watching. It was underscored by Roy and HGs nightly television show, *The Dream*, becoming the great hit of the Games, overshadowing the national triumphalism of gold-medal ceremonies. When the IOC attempted to ban athletes appearing on the medal dais with replicas of Roy and HGs star creation, Fatso the fat-arsed Wombat, rather than the officially credited mascots, it was public opinion that made it retreat in embarrassment.

An increasing number of American competitors appeared on the Fatso show, confessing to having been bewildered by the humour, and the phenomenon, before becoming

captivated. One quipped that late nights watching *The Dream* had cost him first place in his event. Another said he would value his souvenir Fatso pin higher than his own gold medal. One effect of the Games was growing opinion in the United States critical of some of its own athletes for their brashness. The tone set in Sydney had made nakedly competitive pride jarringly out of place.

The people led during the Olympics, the media followed—megaphone rather than opinion setter. Under the surface the same is true for politics. Indeed, Australia has inverted the civic axiom of ancient Rome, which had counterbalanced power to the people with authority to the Senate. Here, the people have kept the authority, while uneasily ceding power to government.

The attention politicians pay to talk-back radio is to hear what the people are thinking. To take a recent example, the public made their views clear when the Federal Minister for Workplace Relations, Peter Reith, was found to have defrauded the taxpayer of fifty thousand dollars by lending his son a government telephone card. In terms of levels of corruption—here probably unwitting—this case was trivial. What the people did not like was the way the Minister handled the scandal. He refused initially to accept responsibility, scurried for cover, all the time attempting to shift blame to others—and he a Minister who had loudly harangued against trade union rorts. With his character on trial he was judged guilty of not being worthy of high public office.

The example is commonplace, and not new. A treasure trove for reading the nation was the ABC television series, *Calypso Summer*. It documented one of those times of subtle cultural change. The occasion was the extraordinarily successful visit of the West Indian cricket team in the summer of 1960-61—a team farewelled by half a million people crowding the streets of Melbourne. To select one incident. Richie Benaud, the Australian captain at the time, reports how during the Second Test in Melbourne he appealed when the cap of West Indian batsman Joe Solomon fell on his stumps, dislodging a bail. The umpire had no option but to give Solomon out—a decision applauded on the programme as correct by the great West Indian all-rounder, Gary Sobers. The rules are the rules.

Benaud recounts with wry, self-deprecating amusement how among the 70,000 present at the MCG that day there were only eleven who did not boo him. So much for one-eyed jingoistic crowds! It was the people who had educated their captain, defending the spirit of the game, its code of good sportsmanship. They were expressing their native hostility to letter-of-the-law bureaucratic controls. The older Benaud had also ingested the culture's distaste for bragging, posturing and pride.

A singular theme in the nation's history has been care taken to avoid conflict.

John Hirst has outlined a range of cases in which institutions were planned in their foundation—government schools to name one—so as to minimize the sectarian strife between Protestants and Catholics that had plagued Britain and Ireland. Following the First World War, a similar attention went into choosing words for remembrance occasions that would be acceptable to all faiths. A Returned Servicemen’s League inclusive of all religions was one fruit. Australia, in its first decade as a nation, exhibited the same impulse when it set up a government-run industrial arbitration system, unique in the world, which successfully helped to limit conflict between workers and employers.

Indeed industrial arbitration was just one component in the Deakinite Settlement which framed the nation’s political economy. Linked with a basic wage, tariff protection and controlled immigration it set the terms of government—to guarantee a decent standard of living for all. The people’s ethos of a ‘fair go’ was thereby institutionalised after Federation.

In the last half-century, the vast immigration of peoples from hundreds of different backgrounds has been overwhelmingly successful. The host society has, as human societies go, been welcoming and exceptionally tolerant of diversity. It has made it clear to newcomers from wherever they came that they would be treated as equals, free to practice their traditional customs, as long as they left their ethnic conflicts behind them. Groups with a history of bloody violence—Greeks and Turks, Serbs and Croats to name two—have learnt, as ‘New Australians’, that there is a better way to live together.

Australia has been far less culturally coercive than the United States. It has put less pressure on its citizens, new or old, to conform to uniform customs, from those of marriage to forms of public behaviour such as the patriotism of the ‘American way’. It has offered liberty in the fuller practical sense of freedom of choice of everyday life. The most telling illustration occurred during the First World War when the people, at referenda, twice voted against conscription—Australia, unlike Britain, the United States, Canada and New Zealand, would not force any individual to fight for it against his will. Australia would develop this unique conjunction: on the one hand, compelling its citizens to express their opinion, through compulsory voting, on the other relying in all its dangerous encounters, from war to fire to surf, on volunteers. The troops at the Western Front had voted overwhelmingly against conscription.

The exception to Australian inclusiveness has been treatment of the original inhabitants. The country houses in essence two peoples and two cultures, with problems of coming together that continue to loom as intractable. True, there are emerging signs of fraternity—highlighted in the pride and delight taken in Cathy Freeman, through the length

and breadth of the society, chosen as national ambassador to light the torch at the 2000 Olympic Opening Ceremony. There is growing acknowledgment in the White majority that the Aborigines have not, in general, been treated well—and at times shamefully. Yet the distance remains, and with it the most severe challenge to the people’s capacity for inclusiveness.

There is a manner in Australia, different to that met, say, in Britain. It may justly be called a democratic manner. Not only at the Sydney Olympics, but inside the local suburban ballet school on Saturday mornings, the tennis club, in pubs and restaurants, shops, even passing through Customs on arrival in the country, there is typically an openness, a willingness to engage the stranger. Going into shops, even on the street, the elemental human interaction is less governed by ritual predictability, or the platitudes of formality. There is some likelihood of an ironic twist, certainly a personal exchange in which the outcome is unclear, even testing. An effort is made.

Here we experience a type of public vitality, of warmth and interest in the nuances of everyday life, of making the most of them. Ordinary incidents—a lemon tree dead in the backyard—may be deepened by a saying—She’s decided to turn up her toes. Many Australian jokes focus on the meeting of strangers, and their laconic, playfully jousting banter. The film *Crocodile Dundee* exploited this trait.

In Roy and HGs Olympic comedy, respect for sporting feats was subtly filtered through a rational lens, which casts all sporting events as absurd—Greco-Roman wrestling came in for special ridicule. A major attraction of the show was the deeper undertone in its jocular conversation—wrestling with the paradox that is at the heart of most engaging human endeavour. It is the strange mixture of taking the activity, whatever it might be, with ultimate seriousness, with devotion, striving to complete it with godlike perfection, while realising that it is of its nature arbitrary.

These themes are present at the MCG during a packed One-Day Cricket Match, when the Mexican wave gets going, circling the ground. As it reaches the Members segment it stops, giving way to booing, before taking up again, in rhythm, on the far side. The booing is good-natured, even affectionate, a way of saying we know there is some sort of social hierarchy in this country—differences of wealth, position and status—but don’t imagine that you are better. We are all here together, unified by the match, the experience, and being Australian. On display once again is the talent of the people for inclusiveness.

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Two and a half thousand years ago, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle outlined four character virtues. The concept of the cardinal virtues endures as a handy gauge, and for measuring the temper of peoples. There is courage. There is moderation, or balance, an evenness of mood and reaction. There is justice, knowing what is right and fair. And finally there is practical intelligence, perhaps we would call it common sense. This is a capacity for thinking clearly given the problem at hand, thinking that is balanced, directed to determining the right course of action, and conducted with an independence from fashion and coercion that may require courage.

I have now reached the second stage in my argument. A people, to feel free to let their character virtues speak unimpeded, must be at ease in themselves. One of the leading symptoms of insecurity is a tendency to extremism, to fanaticism or fundamentalism. Peoples, like individuals, take flight into ideology, dogmatism, moralism and ranting when they feel under inner threat. It is a leading mark of Australia as a political culture to have always and without exception been sceptical of idealism, hostile to extremists, innately drawn to the moderate, the sensible, the unassuming. This parallels the openness to existential questioning. It points to a fundamental security of being.

Australia's equanimity is a mystery. Especially given the circumstances! After no more than a hundred years as a conglomerate of dependent colonies, safely nestling under mother England's wing, a fledgling nation establishes itself. It does so during the twentieth century, a century in the West typified by political upheaval and cultural disenchantment. This was the century in which the old European civilizations, from which modern Australia derives socially and culturally, became themselves uprooted. If they—steeped in the security of their own long traditions—turned themselves metaphysically adrift, if the parent lost confidence in its identity and direction, what hope was there for the child? It is hard to imagine less propitious conditions in which a young offspring society might find its own feet.

So how did it happen? Here, I suggest, is the central question about this country. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt put the problem for the United States—in her 1963 book, *On Revolution*. She asked how the new society had managed to find belief in itself—legitimacy—after breaking free from England in its War of Independence. In answer she posited that Americans turned the act of foundation itself into their anchoring authority. The *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution* became the sacred texts. The 'founding fathers' as they were grandly called—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and later Abraham Lincoln—had special powers attributed to them, those of immortal ancestors. Arendt argues that without this monumental act of higher self-justification the United States

would, like most other new societies, have foundered in instability. Yet Australia has not sought a creation myth.

Nor has Australia followed another American tactic in what sociologist Robert Bellah has termed 'civil religion'. That is to cast itself as God's chosen people, selected for its virtue, and set a divine mission. In an age in which political authority could no longer be derived from church religion, this enabled Americans to shift the focus of worship to the nation itself. By contrast, Australian symbolism has never represented this country as a new Promised Land. None of our stories cast the people as singled out for favour by a guiding divinity. There is no Old Testament *mythos* that we draw upon in order to halo our doings.

Nor have we had the explicitly religious vision of some of America's earliest settlers, whose ambition was, having left the corruption of the Old World, to build Boston as Augustine's 'City of God', a divine city on earth, one in which goodness would prevail. There are no signs that Australia ever felt the need for such sanctifying ideals.

America, furthermore, has been far more persuaded by the Enlightenment belief in progress. Much of its energy has been directed by some hope that confident free individuals, through intelligent planning and hard work, may build a material civilisation that will sustain human virtue and happiness. Australians have been far more sceptical. Whatever their deeper view of the human condition, it is not this.

Nor has Australia followed the classical Roman path in search of its legitimacy. The Romans centred their cultural world on the sacred hearth—the private home was the locus of stable being. Even gods were brought indoors, figurines to the patron deity placed respectfully in the hope of attracting divine protection for the household. While Australians have been deeply attached to their castles, usually with a carefully-tended garden out the back, they have changed them too casually and frequently for their tie to be that of the sacred hearth.

From where then has security of being come? I can claim no more than tentative moves, in proposing a minor and a major dynamic. This country further contrasts with America—in its resistance to interpretation. The best loved of our art, the landscape painting, provides a lesson, and a warning. How tame it looks next to the reality!

Let me open with the minor dynamic. Every culture, to follow the German philosopher, Nietzsche, depends on a 'fixed and sacred primordial site'. The Australian Aborigines amplify a similar view in their notion of the Dreaming. The implication is that all cultures are—like their own—centred on a body of myths or archetypal stories. For culture to retain its vitality these eternal stories, dating from a long time ago, must be retold by each

new generation.

So what then is the Australian Dreaming? It must derive largely from the Western *mythos*, with its major roots in classical Greece and the Jesus narratives. If this were the case then we could expect charged stories of our own, mythically compelling ones tapping into the original sources, reworking them while drawing on their force.

There is one of the formative Western stories that has resonated in Australia through the last century, and in various modes. It is that of the hero. Homer filled out the archetype in the beginning, in the figure of the great warrior, Achilles—his story told in *The Iliad*, the book that became the Bible for fifth-century Athens. The Homeric hero is not just the greatest of all warriors, godlike in his form in battle, but one who gains dignity through suffering—tragic dignity in the face of death.

In reading Australia culturally there is orthodoxy: that a single story carries the public imagination, and continues to do so—Anzac. The Anzac legend is rooted in the archetype of the hero. Australia Day, commemorative of first settlement, has never gained a scintilla of gravity. Nor has the history of Federation, which for all its display of vision and political skill lacks the attributes of mythic narrative.

Anzac as legend was to a significant degree the creation of one man, C. E. W. Bean, whose greatest legacy is his own first six volumes of the Official History of Australia in the World War. His two volumes on Gallipoli are written with evocative timeless force, celebrating the mettle of the soldiers, and by a man who saw most of the campaign at first hand. They have claims as the Australian *Iliad*.

There are notable amplifications. Only two works of public art in the country I know arrest the viewer with pathos. One is the Rayner Hoff sculpture in the Sydney Anzac Memorial of a young soldier crucified on his shield and sword. The other is the memorial to Weary Dunlop in his home town of Benalla in Victoria.

The Australian War Memorial in Canberra—another Bean initiative—has become a sacred place. It is the soul of the national capital, with visitors in their daily thousands passing through and gazing with hushed awe at the stories of gallantry and sacrifice, especially as retold through three-dimensional models of key battlefields.

The presiding image at the Memorial is Will Longstaff's painting of the *Menin Gate at Midnight*. Spot-lit like a sacred relic in a blackened crypt, it shows a classical ruin, here mausoleum, set in the fields of Flanders near Ypres, all ground to devastated rubble and mulch by cataclysmic shelling. Across this gloomy night wasteland, like thousands of stalks of silver wheat in a lunar breath, move the ghosts of the soldiers. The painting echoes the cry of bereaved mothers after the war, when a memorial was erected in

their local town or suburb. At last they could find some peace. For while the bodies of their sons lost in action were buried in some foreign soil, known only to God, their souls had finally been brought home—to rest.

Once a memorial is clothed in such gravity we know that Dreaming is awake. This place is no longer the Never Never. The tragic *mythos* of the West consecrates the ground, a voice awakened out of its Dreaming slumber every Anzac dawn as the bugle sounds the Last Post. The mournful cry joins those who rise to the new day with the shades of the long departed outside the Menin Gate.

The mood of Longstaff's elegy is reminiscent of the final two chapters of *The Iliad*, both centred on funerals. Indeed the whole Anzac tradition has eerie classical Greek affinities. Arendt links American foundation back to the ancient Roman blueprint. Australia's sources, by contrast, are Greek.

Why Gallipoli? The place is arbitrary in relation to Australia, even geographically absurd. The Dardanelles lie on the other side of the world, with no British traces, and the military campaign was a complete failure. And yet! From the heights of the Anzac objective on landing can be seen, on a clear day with the help of binoculars, the ruins of the ancient city of Troy. Troy was the site of *The Iliad*. It is as if Australia had deliberately chosen its own sacred origins within breathing proximity to the birthplace of the West.

The tens of thousands of First World War memorials, built throughout Australia in a tidal wave of unparalleled public tribute, are in their design and their inscriptions rigorously classical. Statuary in towns and suburbs, as Ken Inglis' definitive study makes clear, is mainly of diggers or obelisks. By far the grandest monument, the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, derives from two ancient Greek temples. An unconscious drive to keep out Christian motifs seems to have been at work. The sacrificed youth in the Sydney memorial is the exception, yet not, for Anzac Day marches avoid it, gathering at dawn at the Cenotaph in Martin Place, before moving to the Domain.

In all of this there is one major *midrash*, or adaptation of the classical Greek hero. It is not Achilles himself, the great individual, who is celebrated in Australia—nor, to switch to the most powerful modern American reworking, the John Wayne film persona. Australia has remembered the men, and above all their character, not individuals. It has remembered the people. There was no statue to any individual soldier before 1936, when Simpson was unveiled in Melbourne. Even then the work is titled: 'The Man with the Donkey', and what is honoured is selfless service—not warrior prowess.

The same is true of the one subsequent war hero to be revered by the nation—

Weary Dunlop. A surgeon, his story combines superhuman courage with compassion. The Christian image of the suffering servant seems to have entered the national consciousness by the back door, avoiding the churches, journeying via classical Greece. Simpson and Weary are the only two individuals honoured in sculpture at the Canberra War Memorial.

Bean ends his first volume with the question of what carried each man on, when realising that he had been cast into some god-forsaken Turkish wilderness without food or sleep, the dead and wounded all around, the cause seemingly hopeless. Bean's answer was character.

One national hero stands above the rest. Don Bradman's status depended originally on his class as a batsman—everyone else who has ever played the game of cricket ordinary by comparison. But 'The Don', as cricketers from both teams during the Calypso Summer referred to him, a title in itself rich with associations of chivalry, but also informal, intimate; the Don came even more to embody an Australian character ideal. The voice is indicative. A touch nasal with Australian vowels, its undertone slow with reticence and modesty, it yet resonates with a buoyant high-pitched impishness, the words carefully chosen yet almost always combining a touch of humour with serious intent. C. D. Kemp put it: 'He was one of us but distinguished.'

Richie Benaud recounts how at the end of the tied First Test in Brisbane he was distraught at having let the game slip away. Bradman, as Chairman of Selectors, came up to him in the rooms with a huge smile on his face and told him not to worry: 'You will find that this is the greatest thing that's ever happened to the game of cricket.' West Indians recall with delight, and some awe, how the Don would sit with them during matches and openly discuss tactics. They attribute an extraordinary, completely out of character Wes Hall performance with the bat, to one of the great man's ribbings. Three decades later Conrad Hunte would refer to Australia as his spiritual home.

It was the Don's initiative to name the trophy that will forever mark Australia–West Indies cricket after the visiting captain, Frank Worrell. Indeed, Bradman's constant presence throughout the series sets an image of benevolent, far-sighted, and vigilant yet understated authority evocative of the national ideal.

The need for the hero is sustained in modern sport. The nation's attachment to that segment of its life, above any other apart from family, is more than to an exciting communal pastime. Most of its serious conversations about the character of men and women under pressure are sporting ones. There is likewise a ready lineage back from Steve Waugh through the Don to the Anzacs, paralleled by each Country Fire Authority volunteer, who will usually double up as a member of the local footy team. And the nation's esteem for the

twin role of hero and volunteer is patent in the freest of its social spaces, the beach, in the figure of the surf lifesaver.

But, to return to the argument, there is a problem. In Australian Dreaming *mythos* the hero figure stands virtually alone. Its pervasiveness signals how one-dimensional a legacy it represents. Where are the other stories of tragic suffering, of Passion, of the metamorphosis out of fallen worldliness, of love, of the gaining of poise of spirit? Where are the mother, where are other trajectories of vocation, of fate, even stories of evil? Women have largely been absent. There is not nearly enough authoritative *mythos* here to explain security of being.

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Now to the major dynamic. Most of the people who have journeyed to Australia have found it the place to be because, I venture to propose, of a strange something in the air—both elusive and welcoming. Is there any better way of putting it than that this is a *blessed country*?

When the first generations of convicts, once freed, were given a choice of returning home to Britain only a fraction accepted—in 1826, for which there are figures, it was a mere seven percent. The rest decided that this country was not, to use Robert Hughes term, a ‘fatal shore’. Hughes himself had set out to establish a foundation myth—postulating convict settlement and its cruelty as a beginning in ‘original sin’. However, he quickly responded to facts that overwhelmingly pointed in the opposite direction, to this as a benevolent ‘new world’.

Correspondingly, it has become a truism of post-war immigration sociology that when the pioneering father and mother, their children having grown up, decide to return ‘home’ to live out their retirement in Italy, Greece or wherever—the majority are back in Australia before a year is out.

It will be countered that material factors provide sufficient explanation. Australia has been more prosperous, more comfortable, its suburban nuclear family way of life freer than traditional European models. Donald Horne took this line when he coined the phrase—‘the lucky country’.

Horne’s phrase stuck, partly because of lack of alternatives. But it is essentially false. Geoffrey Blainey, in his histories of Australian mining, has shown how much success has depended on inspiration, initiative, and resourcefulness, followed by gruelling and unremitting work usually in harsh environments. Gold nuggets did not fall out

of the sky; nor did iron ore, nickel, diamonds and alumina. Equally, we know the response from those who farm if we were to quote Horne at them. We would be instructed that droughts, bushfires, floods, frosts, rabbits, dingoes, locusts, mouse plagues, not to mention fickle world commodity prices, are truly, one and all, signs of luck.

Nor were the Sydney Olympics merely the product of fortune—given what they represent in terms of a society's capacity for organisation, starting with well-designed and efficient infrastructure. Nor was the Bradman phenomenon. Indeed, the parameters for the right way of going about human business in this country were put in one of the Don's innings, as described by Neville Cardus: 'It was never uninteresting; he simply abstained from vanity and rhetoric.' Bean might have written the same, in graver tones, of the Diggers. *Never uninteresting—abstaining from vanity and rhetoric* could serve as the nation's motto. That Bradman performance was based on a boyhood spent in relentless practice, and three gifts—lightening reflexes, formidable intelligence, and superhuman powers of concentration.

In Arthur Streeton's painting of *The Land of the Golden Fleece* (1926), blending into a parched landscape are a flock of sheep, a few cattle, a stockman on horseback and a man chopping wood—no more distinctive than dry grass and eucalypt. There is a spare beauty here, the Grampians in the background, resonant with the bluish transcendent glow of some beyond. Diminishing the humans and their enterprises, a grander stillness pervades the land.

If the gods are present, though, their domain does not permit explicit human tracery. This mountain is not Mt Sinai—no God will appear to present the stone tablets of the Law to the people. And as the nation's stories suggest, led by Burke and Wills and Patrick White's *Voss*, the country will rebuff those who rise above themselves. Would-be prophets and leaders who try to usurp the primacy of the place will fail in it.

The instruction and the warning are not just against excess and superfluity. The men in the Streeton scene are, like the great majority who populate the land—they in their cities—fringe dwellers. Patrick White, in his masterpiece, *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), embraces this reality as nothing but well and fair. The sanest of his chosen ones, Mrs Godbold, lives in a dilapidated shed with her many children. It is there, as, once upon a time in a Bethlehem cattle shed, that the fundamental event takes place. Mrs Godbold, too, represents White's projection of women as being more likely to find themselves at home, in uncomplaining acceptance of the hardships of life.

At issue are *proper-ties*. Property is the profane starting point. Just what do we possess? Are we merely occupying space? European Australians are becoming more self-

conscious about the possibility that there could be a spirit to the land. It may project its own aura. It may even preside. They are intrigued by the Aboriginal mode of engagement. As different, even alien, as the way of the original inhabitants may be, perhaps it does hold some secret. Above all, there is the stress that proper ties oblige those who pitch camp to become faithful servants of place—they belong to it, rather than any bit of it belonging to them.

The furthest we fringe dwellers usually go in practice are Romantic, tamed encounters with the Bush—our Pearl Bays, surfing between the flags, native gardens, and caravan tours round the coastal rim. The suburban home stands partly as fenced-in defence against infinitude of landscape, the boundlessness reverberating through laconic sprawling cities. Occupation remains a troubled category, and will continue so until the newcomers take in the Aboriginal lesson about how to dwell in order to belong. That lesson is about being. It is notable that the nation's greatest poet and its greatest artist—Les Murray and Michael Leunig—both choose to live in the bush.

Patrick White reads the country as receptive to wayward vision. It is there in the biggest film hit of the 1990s—*The Castle*. Set in another shed, in another fringe suburb, this time on lead-contaminated soil, under power pylons next to an airport, the scene is Melbourne wasteland—at least as judged by prevailing standards of charm, taste and comfort. Yet, to the father's eye it is his little corner of paradise. The love and energy with which he puts his vision of home into practice nurtures a very happy family. The film flirts with the quixotic ludicrousness of this man, as did Roy and HGs *Dream* with sport stars, and can do so because of that intangible Australian security of being which is not prickly about prestige and dignity. Such security is antipode to the 'cultural cringe' felt by sections of the intelligentsia—for whom uprootedness seems to be a life condition. There are traces in *The Castle* of many a suburban backyard—a blessed little corner. Just ask the children who grew up in them!

Special warmth has grown for kangaroo, koala, platypus and echidna. It is more than of the cuddly-toy sort. The marsupials set a tone, in their way of being. In part it is their lack of aggression—except when cornered. There is the quiet way they go about negotiating their habitat—the solitary wallaby in the bush stopping to cock an ear and look, before gracefully loping away. It shares an affinity with the way the people respond to bureaucratic controls. Calm resistance, except when cornered, has met the Australia Card, Byzantine new tax systems and grand attempts to tidy up the Constitution. The spirit of this country quite fancies a bit of complacent mess, a slice of anachronism.

The kookaburra reminds humans, prone to taking themselves seriously, that

they are easy to laugh at. Don't we recognise its cadences in the raucous vulgar zest of Barry Humphries' most brilliant satiric creation—the Falstaffian cultural ambassador, Sir Les Patterson? Then there was the wombat star of the Sydney Games. And how many Australians who travel overseas feel reassured when they first spot the kangaroo, indicating that a Qantas plane has arrived—something familiar and trusted? The totemism of Aboriginal tribal culture seems to be colonising the colonisers.

But what about shark, crocodile, poison spider, and snake? During the Olympics it was as if the land put on its own show, with two fatal shark attacks, letting visitors who cared to notice know where they were. Here is a fruitful ambiguity. There is a dark strain in high Australian art, from Barbara Baynton to *Mad Max*, warning what happens when the blessing's off. Their 'heart of darkness'—its source in human evil—rises as counterweight to the Romantic idylls of the Heidelberg School painters. Patrick White negotiates a middle way, one that is, I think, more instructive.

*Riders in the Chariot* is set in a fringe suburb. There are the unchosen, those for whom the blessing was never on—Australia has had its own cruel practices and bad institutions. One of them is a Mrs Jolley—who clings to her decent morality, with grown-up daughters who don't want much to do with her. Mean not jolly, she represents the city *Never Never*. While working as housekeeper for an eccentric spinster, Mary Hare, she comes across a snake in the backyard and kills it with a spade. Miss Hare, who is one of the chosen, mourns: 'You killed it! I used to put out milk and it would drink and sometimes allow me to stand by, but I never quite succeeded in winning its confidence.' Mrs Jolley defends herself: 'That is not killing. That is ridding the world of something bad.'

*Never quite winning its confidence!* Our country is resistant to liberties. Take care with the snake! Today, we have crossed the threshold of a century in which the land may repulse much of the first two hundred years of occupation. Already there are doubts about that triumph of 1950s nation building, of Enlightenment progress—the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme. A great feat of engineering, its legacy is darkening. In the Hebrew Bible it is Lot's wife who, on disobeying God's law, turns to salt. Here it is the land. The gods in Homer, angry with the Greeks at their impudence in constructing a huge ditch and earth mound to protect their ships, send a nine-day flood to wash it away. Who do these petty humans think they are, they signal, to think they can amend nature to suit themselves?

The country in refusing the great leader archetype—from Moses to Abraham Lincoln—invited the people themselves to preside. This was its own anti-Roman equation: power to the Senate, authority to the people. The choice was not for lack of candidates of

senatorial stature, starting with Alfred Deakin, the political visionary in whose honour these lectures are named.

The death of Bradman in 2001 was followed by a sustained, comprehensive outpouring of homage such as modern Australia has never experienced. The only point of comparison in living memory was public reaction to the death of Princess Diana. Was this not a means for the people to refocus on their character ideals? Here is Australia's civil religion—celebrated in a man whose advice to one of his grandchildren was: 'Try hard, with lots of integrity, and have some fun!' The year 2001 may be better remembered for the death of the Don than as the centenary of Federation.

Patrick White strips superfluity and pretence back to a fringe shed, the kookaburra and galah overhead. He writes of formalised religion—and he means not simply church, but all particulars of faith and doctrine: 'There is no point in putting on a pair of boots to walk to town, if you can do it better in your bare feet.' The nation's secular saint, Weary Dunlop, concluded from his experiences in prisoner-of-war death-camps building the Burma-Thai railroad: 'There is a bit of God in every man.' A common thread unites these wayward visions.

The Don reflected in his memoirs fifty years ago that the future of cricket would depend on the spirit in which it is played. What he had learnt, and what he passes on, is to forget about vanity and rhetoric—the spirit is everything. It depends on character, and a blessing. The people taught Richie Benaud the same lesson, as they do their politicians, as they do us all.

*Terra Australis* resists mapping. Yet in its own way it indicates to its new inhabitants that they will be favoured once they find their right relationship to it. In this slow process it has so far allowed them a pretty loose rein. At work, play, or in everyday reverie those who dwell here might then come to find themselves supported, as by a benign presence. The country provides humans with a place simply to *be*. It offers its blessing.

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