The Utopian Diaspora: Australians in Paraguay

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Abstract
This chapter argues that the experiment of the Australians’ diaspora in Paraguay forms an important but neglected chapter in Australian history. Only two books, an occasional play, and no significant films have represented the ‘New Australia’ experiment, a paucity of coverage which is the result of both a deliberate forgetting and an underinvestment in national cultural institutions. The contrast with the Welsh government’s continuing support of Welsh settlements in Patagonia is striking, and the chapter examines the reasons behind these contrasting approaches and the cultural significance of Paraguayan collective amnesia.

Key Words: Nationalism, identity, Australia, Paraguay, utopia, diaspora.

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Class war was manifest in Australia in the 1890s. The shearsers’ strikes had divided the nation: pastoralists wanted the ability to hire labour at will on free contracts, while the shearsers and associated workers wanted guaranteed employment, wages and hours. Governments were close to the pastoralist interests, while the shearsers ‘were armed and mobile’. One of the loudest advocates for the shearsers’ interests was William Lane, a fiery wellread journalist with a knowledge of Das Kapital and a vision for the future. The shearsers lost most of the battles, and Lane decided to exit the war stage left - far left. As the strikes were broken and workers suffered through drought and rising unemployment, the Australian Labour Party was born. Lane, though, wanted a more radical solution to the struggle than mere political franchise. Inspired by Edward Bellamy’s utopian vision outlined in his popular novel of the time, Looking Backwards, Lane led an expedition of two hundred ambitious souls to the shores of Paraguay in the Royal Tar in 1893.

The Australian settlement in Paraguay represents the many paradoxes of individual and collective identity. The Bulletin famously labelled the expedition ‘one of the most feather-headed expeditions ever conceived since Ponce de Leon started out to find the Fountain of Eternal Youth, or Sir Galahad pursued the Holy Grail’. This cynicism served to bond the initial group of settlers together, but the nature of the bond was not always clear.
Paraguay seemed an appropriate place to establish a socialist utopia. The historical experience of the Jesuit community in Paraguay was world renowned and provided some precedent for Lane and his followers. From the late sixteenth century the Jesuits lived relatively harmoniously with the local Guarani Indians in large settlements around the Missiones province, learning the Guarani language and teaching their religion and social customs to the Indians. Despite their religious overtones, the settlements were in some ways early socialist experiments, with goods held in common and principles of mutual respect adopted. The legend of these harmonious settlements had spread, and William Lane had doubtless read accounts such as Voltaire’s description of Paraguay in Candide:

I’ve been there all right! said Cacambo. It’s a wonderful way of governing they have… Los Padres own everything in it, and the people nothing - a masterpiece of reason and justice.³

The putatively harmonious heritage of Paraguay had certainly shattered quickly after the Jesuits were expelled. Indeed, by the time the Australian settlers set sail in the Royal Tar, the country had been decimated by the Triple Alliance War. The War was a belligerent venture by Paraguayan dictator Francisco Lopez to subdue Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay simultaneously. Despite valiant fighting by Paraguayan troops, over 90% of the nation’s men were killed. The country was soon known as the Land of Women; more importantly for William Lane, it was now a Land of land. The Paraguayan government’s eagerness to repopulate its territory contributed to a number of strange expeditions, with settlers arriving from Japan, Sweden, Germany and beyond. Some of these legacies remain, for example the strongly Japanese town of La Abeja (the beehive). Others, like the attempt to establish an Aryan settlement at Nueva Germania (New Germany) were not so successful. In the 1890s though, it was a sympathetic Paraguayan government which welcomed and supported the Australians.

New Australia was to be a socialist utopia, but one whose leader and several others were devoted Christians. It was a workingman’s paradise, but one in which women were equal. Embedded in the nomenclature was also evidence of a nationalist project. The settlers gave up the prospect of establishing a utopian society in their homeland, yet many became more nationalistic than most Australians at home. Others neglected their Australian legacy completely and simply became naturalized Paraguayans. Sometimes these apparent paradoxes of identity were found within families. Rose Cadogan wrote longingly of her dream to ‘scent the wattle blooms once more’⁴, while her son, Leon, became one of the most celebrated Paraguayans of all time and never set foot in Australia. Leon’s son Roger, who now runs
the Leon Cadogan Foundation, is even more emphatic: ‘I am the worst person
to talk about New Australia and my father had no interest in it - William Lane
was mad but my father was a free thinker’.  

The socialist, Christian, temperance, feminist, reactionary,
nationalist principles of the settlement were never easy to reconcile. In the
settlers, these complex and at times contradictory principles led to confusions
of identity and internal conflict. Unsurprisingly, within a year a schism had
developed and a group left New Australia to establish a new settlement at
Colonia Cosme, on the confluence of two rivers some distance from the
original camp. The settlement’s failure as a socialist utopia was soon manifest,
yet its legacy remains and over two thousand Para-Australians now live in
Paraguay. Many settlers and descendants have made impressive contributions
to both countries, yet while their stories are reasonably wellknown in
Paraguay, the very existence of the historic settlement remains something of
an Australian secret.

This chapter examines the Para-Australian episode by focusing on
the Cadogan family, whose example raises many of the central questions of
politics and identity of this chapter in history. Initially, a comparison of Leon
Cadogan and Mary Gilmore, the most famous Para-Australian in Australian
history, is also instructive. Their experiences in New Australia were both
pivotal to their contribution to Australian and Paraguayan societies, but their
cases are very different. Mary Gilmore was feted in Australia, knighted by the
Queen, and her words remain etched on the Australian currency. Her link to
Paraguay, however, remains largely unknown. Leon Cadogan, meanwhile,
remains anonymous in Australia despite his peerless contribution to
anthropology. His absence in the Australian pantheon reflects a broad and
ongoing collective amnesia about the Australian experiment.

The case of Mary Gilmore provides a useful introduction into the
politics of identity in the Para-Australian context. As Mary Cameron, she
became the first female member of the Australian Workers’ Union and joined
the radical Australian socialists in Paraguay. As Mary Gilmore, she became a
mother, famous poet and social activist. Finally, as Dame Mary Gilmore she
became a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire and a staunch
wartime nationalist. Having once departed her country to join a communist
utopia in Paraguay, she returned to Australia and became one of its most
ardent defenders, an advocate for King and Country.

The patriotic words of Dame Mary Gilmore remain etched on every
Australian $10 note: ‘No foe shall gather our harvest, Or sit on our stockyard
rail.’ Mary is remembered as a poet, teacher, historian, activist for Aboriginal
and social causes, and nationalist. Her poems of the Second World War in
particular (eg No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest and Singapore) are fondly
recalled as a stirring, Churchillian riposte to the axis forces. Mary’s time in
Paraguay, however, remains a chapter erased from the national consciousness.
Nevertheless, it is highly likely that Mary’s time in Paraguay informed her later views. She did not consider the experiment a failure, and her experience of communal living in Paraguay strengthened the beliefs in social justice which she maintained throughout her life. Her subsequent nationalism reinforces that many of the Paraguayan settlers considered themselves, even at the time, to be more Australian than mainland Australians. In this there is likely some parallel with the experiences of Northern Ireland, where British identity is most fiercely asserted.

A similar paradox is evident in the life of Leon Cadogan, perhaps the most famous descendant of the Australian settlers in Paraguay. Leon’s parents joined the expedition’s founder, William Lane, on the Royal Tar’s voyage to Paraguay in 1893. His mother, Rose Cadogan (nee Summerfield), was a first wave feminist, a social agitator, and a woman for whom race was an important descriptor of identity. Before her departure for Paraguay, Rose had been an eminent political figure, involved with the union movement and the Australian Socialist League. Echoing the words of Dan O’Connell, Rose Cadogan had famously told one socialist gathering, ‘I will not preach calmness to you…No! No! Agitate! Agitate! I hope I’ll die with that word on my lips’.

Her journey to Paraguay was influenced by the leader of the New Australia movement, William Lane, but also by a desire to escape the racial politics of Australia. Like many Australians at the time, Rose believed the nation was being threatened by a wave of immigrants used as cheap labourers, and that the squalor in which these labourers lived was threatening local jobs and lowering the prestige of the nation. In 1898 under her maiden name of Summerfield, Rose claimed in Sydney’s Worker magazine that ‘as a race surely we are demoralised enough without mixing with an inferior one’. Ten years later, she left for Paraguay with her second husband, Jack. They arrived in Paraguay in 1908, just as William Lane was giving up on his utopian dream.

From Paraguay, Rose became nostalgic about her homeland and perceived that New Australia faced many of the same problems as Old Australia. In particular, Rose struggled to relate to the native Guarani Indians. Shortly after settling in Paraguay, she claimed:

> It is a fine country, but, owing to the ignorance, indolence, and superstition of the natives, it is a poor place to live in, and anyone may do better in any part of Australia. One regrets that such good workers in the reform cause should be buried among strangers and retrogrades.

Remarkably, her son would devote most of his adult life to protecting these ‘strangers and retrogrades’. Rose herself, indeed, was not as racist in her
actions as her rhetoric sometimes suggested. As Whitehead outlines, Rose Cadogan was successful for example in prescribing medication for many native Paraguayans in her daily life. Race, however, was evident whenever nationalism was articulated. This was part of a further complication in the history of the settlement. New Australia was to be socialist, but it was also by definition a project of nationalism, and in practice a project of religion, as Lane and other founders were devoted Christians. Identity in the settlement was a complicated beast. Rose Cadogan defined her identity by gender, class, race, and also by nation. It was race, in fact, which informed her national identity, and the move to Paraguay only solidified her belief in the pre-eminence of the Australian race.

By 1915 she wrote wistfully:

Tho’ noble streams and lovely sights
Enchained my senses for a while,
Not all the thousand fond delights
My love from thee could e’er beguile, Australia.

Rose held a strong sense of identity, and it was clearly defined by notions of the Other. Rose described herself as a freethinker, a moniker also proudly adopted by her grandson. The Other, however, was omnipresent in Rose’s thinking, whether in the guise of religion (Rose was a vociferous member of the Australasian Secular Association), alcohol (she wanted dipsomaniacs secluded from society), capitalism (‘Let the harlot Competition fashion out some other plan’), or race (she spoke of the ‘almond-eyed slaves’ of China). Nationalism provided an umbrella under which these identity politics could be accommodated.

The case of Rose Cadogan can in some ways be explained through the theories of Zygmunt Bauman, who has written extensively on the impacts of nationalism on identity. Bauman’s analysis explains the strong nationalist tendencies inherent in societies such as late-nineteenth century Australia: ‘Drawing the boundary between the natives and the aliens, between the prospective nations and its enemies [is] an inseparable part of the selfassertion of the national elite.’ The strength of the nation lies in its homogeneity and in the unity of its cause. Paradoxically guaranteed yet always needing to be defended, the nation reprojects the other to deal with its inner incongruities, and focuses its self-defence on locating strangers within. Thus, ‘Nation-building, that quest for a uniform world without difference or contingency, turns out ambivalence as its productive waste’. Yet if the politics of Rose Cadogan were at times less than subtle, it was her socialism rather than nationalism which was passed on to her most famous son.

Leon Cadogan inherited none of his mother’s nationalism. He heard her Irish songs and stories, attended a German school, read English novels,
studied French and Spanish, and most importantly, learnt the Guarani language from an Indian called Aguero who would look after him while Leon’s father and stepbrother were away working on yerba mate plantations. By the age of twenty Leon had command of five languages. He had been born into a world of diversity, and it was likely that this background helped him to acknowledge the validity of the local Indians, and to reject some of the grand narratives preached by the New Australia settlers.

Leon’s fame stems from his work with the Indians, and his ceaseless mission to ensure the preservation of their dignity and identity. Like Australia, the Paraguay in which Leon grew up was a racist society, and the local Indians were not considered human let alone equal. Leon grew up in Paraguay because his parents had shared Lane’s view that the new settlement should be British, and that any miscegenation would dilute the purity of the group. The colony was explicitly racist, and presaged the White Australia Policy which would subsequently be enshrined in legislation back in their homeland following federation in 1901. Leon, however, grew up to be one of the most famous anthropologists in the world, and devoted most of his life to convincing Paraguayans that their native Ache and Guarani Indians were worthy of respect. On reflection, Cadogan would note that ‘My first task was to convince as many people as possible that the Indian is a human being.’

As mentioned, Leon first encountered the Indians through his father, who used to work in the forest on the yerba mate plantations, and through a workman named Aguero who introduced him to some of the Guarani myths and legends.

As an adult, Leon married a Paraguayan woman and, after a brief sojourn to Buenos Aires, began to develop his interest in anthropology while living in Villarrica, a town between New Australia and Colonia Cosme. As Souter outlines:

He made a close study of the Guayaki [or Ache], a primitive Guarani tribe in the hills behind Villarrica; he published a book of mythical Guarani texts in Brazil, and many ethnographical papers in Paraguay, Uruguay, Mexico and Brazil; and in 1950 he was appointed Curator of Indians for the Department of Guaira.

Anne Whitehead notes that there were four distinct groups of Guarani Indians who had remained largely outside the Paraguayan melting pot, including the Ache-Guayaki and the Mbya-Guarani. Leon learnt the little-known Mbya language and represented many of these Indians as head of the Villarrica criminal investigation office. As he began translating for the Indians and formally defending them, Leon began to become trusted until eventually he was taught about the aywu rapyta, the source of the Mbya-Guarani language and mythology. This was his major anthropological breakthrough. Leon
began composing a Spanish-Mbya-Guarani dictionary and writing about the Mbya, and became inducted into the Mbya tribe, where the name ‘dragonfly’ was bestowed upon him.

The Ache-Guayaki tribe were in a similar position, outside of the protection of Paraguayan law and regarded as little more than animals. Cadogan began learning their language also and compiling an Ache-Guayaki dictionary. At the same time, he began compiling his magnum opus on the Mbya-Guarani people, *Ayvu Rapyta* (The Basis of Human Language). Whitehead highlights that this was a very prolific period for Cadogan, but when the dictator Stroessner created a Department of Indian Affairs in 1958, Cadogan was overlooked for the job and, much worse, the government moved the Ache Indians to a reserve, where they quickly began contracting diseases. Cadogan had a heart attack. He died in 1973, after which the Ache were all but exterminated. The Mbya tribe is stronger, but Cadogan’s work lies in the revelation of the Mbya mythology and lives on with many of the Paraguayan mestizo. It also continues to inform the work of anthropologists worldwide.

Cadogan was confirmed as one of the hundred most important Paraguayans of the millennium. On the anniversary of his death, the *Ultima Hora* newspaper provided the following tribute: ‘Si para un Guaraní la historia de su vida es la historia de la palabra, la historia de León Cadogan será la historia de la palabra guaraní redimida’ (If for a Guaraní the history of his life is the history of the word, the history of Leon Cadogan will be the history of the Guarani word redeemed). He was frequently quoted by anthropologists such as Levi-Strauss and remains a towering figure within and beyond that discipline. Nevertheless, like the other descendants of the Australian settlement, Leon Cadogan remains relatively unknown in Australia. His is perhaps the most prominent example, but there are thousands of other stories which have been omitted from the national narrative. One of oddest diasporas in the world is also one of the most neglected.

Not far from Colonia Cosme lies the Japanese settlement at La Abeja. In La Abeja, Japanese is still taught in some schools and the Japanese government provides some support for student and teacher exchanges. Further south in the Argentinian province of Patagonia, the Welsh settlements receive £87,000 a year from the homeland to provide Welsh language teaching for communities in Gaiman, Trelew, Dolavon and Trevelin, to sponsor Welsh museums and monuments, and to support exchanges for students and teachers in Patagonia and Wales. In Colonia Cosme, there is some discussion about whether the local school might be named after Mary Gilmore. If it is, the naming will be no thanks to the Australian government, which provides no financial support to Para-Australians and no visa exemptions for descendants
of the colony whose parents and grandparents fought for Britain in the World Wars.

Why then is the memory of Leon Cadogan and the other ParaAustralians so neglected within Australia, and does it matter? There are perhaps several reasons for the amnesia. One reason is the lack of selfpromotion. Leon Cadogan’s son, Roger, was quoted as saying, ‘My father used to say he was proud of coming from those Australian socialists. But he was really a true Paraguayan.’ Roger now runs the Leon Cadogan Foundation, but has deliberately kept the charity low profile and out of the range of even google. ‘You are looking at the Foundation’, he assured the author in 2008, ‘there is me, and there is my assistant here. I am not the Rockefeller Foundation’, he laughed.

Yet the lack of recognition of the settlement within Australia has deeper roots. From the outset the expedition was derided as feather-headed, and also as anti-nationalist. The fact that the utopian socialist dream failed within a few years of its establishment is perhaps manifest in a lingering sense of embarrassment or even hostility towards the Para-Australians. Paraguay was a venture on foreign soil unrelated to war, and war remains the essential building block of early Australian identity, most notably defined by Gallipoli. The Paraguayan experience was a much more complex case of identity than the Manichean conflict of Gallipoli. Within Australia, the descendants of the Paraguayan settlement are not viewed as true Australians in any official sense, and this is partly because their identity is, and has always been, a pastiche of Australian, British and Paraguayan influences.

As Taylor notes, ‘Lane at one time hoped that New Australia would prove the precursor of so large a settlement of Englishmen in Paraguay as to make that country eventually... an outpost of the British Empire.’ New Australia was settled before the Australian identity was solidified by a much more famous failure at Gallipoli. For many of the settlers, as for many on the homeland, Australian and British identity were effectively the same thing, and to be Australian meant to support the Empire. Indeed, many of the settlers fought for Britain in both wars, yet their descendants are unable to gain Australian citizenship. To be Australian, Paraguayan and British is a curious thing, but this is precisely the nature of the identity felt by descendants such as Roddy Wood, whose grandfather liaised with Henry Lawson, whose father fought for the British Empire, and who is equally at home singing Slim Dusty songs or Paraguayan ballads.

Perhaps because of these rich but unclassifiable identities, no Australian government has sought to honour the work of Cadogan and others, nor bend the rules of citizenship to allow some of the Para-Australians to return ‘home.’ There is no Australian embassy in Paraguay, and there is no public money being used to support the naming of the Cosme school in Mary Gilmore’s honour, nor the construction of any other museum or monument.
either in Paraguay or Australia. In fact there is an official reticence to engage with the Para-Australians, supported by the ongoing tyranny of distance - few Australians still could place Paraguay on a map.

The reticence to acknowledge the Para-Australians may relate to a deeper question of national identity. The narrative of Australian history is entrenched. While the Keating government and the Mabo decision sought to re-assert the place of Indigenous Australians in the national narrative, the dominant theme remains that Australia is a nation of immigrants. A foreign diaspora, bordering on a colonial settlement, does not easily fit into the established story. History declares that Australia is an island nation whose identity is forged by migrants, a melting pot in which the cultures of many countries coalesce in one nation. The complexity of the exported Paraguayan model is not helpful to this narrative.

If the case of the Para-Australians seems unAustralian, or at least unconforming to a recognisable national stereotype, there is a further reason for the entropy. Lack of investment in cultural capital is a potentially powerful source of the national amnesia surrounding this curious episode. It is reasonable to imagine that if a similar episode had occurred in French history, various films, books and plays would have dealt with the subject. Australian author Don Watson has noted that Australians are not very good at telling their own history, and has traced this partly to a paucity of public resources in culture and entertainment. There is certainly an absence of will, yet there is an absence of the means to document such histories.

Whatever the sociological and historical reasons, Australian ignorance of this important chapter of history is arguably damaging to the objective of self-knowledge. The Paraguayan episode began before Australia was born, yet for the nation to remain unknowing of such episodes is to remain, as Cicero might note, forever a child. By neglecting an important element of complexity about the Australian story, in which thousands of national citizens were involved, something is forgotten and lost. Gallipoli remains the ideantary cornerstone of a nation yearning to be forged in war, and to be defined by an Other. Yet the Paraguayan episode was not only a fascinating chapter of Australian history, but one whose legacy endears and with which Australian governments could yet engage. Over two thousand descendants still live in Paraguay, and their contribution to both the Australian and Paraguayan stories is noteworthy. Recognition of this fact would enable great Australians and global citizens like Leon Cadogan to be acknowledged by the nation. Perhaps even more importantly, actively supporting and engaging with the Para-Australian diaspora would shed light on the complexity of Australian history and enable a more mature appreciation of national identity.
Notes

Notes
2 cited in Souter, op. cit., epigraph.
4 Souter, op. cit. p. 231.
5 (interview Oct 08).
7 R Summerfield, quote in *The Worker*, Sydney, 3 September, 1898.
8 R Cadogan, quoted in *The Worker*, Sydney, 23 November 1901.
11 Interview of Roger Cadogan by the author, Asunción, October 2008.
13 ibid, p. 110.
14 Whitehead op. cit.; Souter op.cit.
15 L Cadogan quoted in Whitehead, op. cit., p. 491.
17 Ibid., p. 233.
18 A Whitehead, op. cit., p. 489.
19 AWhitehead, op. cit, p. 494.
21 Whitehead, op. cit., p. 500.
22 Interview of Roger Cadogan by the author, Asunción, October 2008
24 Conversations between Roddy Wood and the author, Asuncion and Cosme, September 2008

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