Who are the Australians?

An Australian historian looks at his country's development in the 200 years since European settlement

BY GEOFFREY BOLTON

AUSTRALIA has always seemed a bit of a paradox in the eyes of the rest of the world. Medieval navigators talked of a Great South Land of gold and monsters. Jonathan Swift situated his imaginary land of Lilliput off Australia's southwest coast. After European settlement began in 1788, reports still spoke of a land where the trees shed their bark but not their leaves, and where Christmas was celebrated in a heatwave. It was the home of the pouched kangaroo, and the furry platypus which laid eggs, and the swagman with corks around the brim of his hat to discourage the ever-present flies. A rich country to be sure, productive of minerals and wool, brave soldiers and impressive sporting personalities, but in the last resort, perhaps, not a nation to be taken quite seriously. Overseas critics, particularly English critics, too often look for traces of colonial immaturity. Australians, they say, are nice enough people but they lack culture and sophistication. They are, in a word, provincial.

Australians are also more aware than most peoples of the shaping influence of the environment. The Aborigines, who inhabited Australia for at least 40,000 years before the coming of white domination, adapted skilfully to their surroundings. They lacked cereals, and remained a hunting and gathering society which did not disrupt the ecological balance. By 1788 there were perhaps 750,000 of them, one for every ten square kilometres of the continent. Captain James Cook, navigating the east coast before claiming the land for Britain, thought them "far more happier than we Europeans ... The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life". But the white newcomers were not prepared to learn from Aboriginal culture, and the Aborigines succumbed to disease and dispossession.

Various strategic and commercial motives have been suggested for the British settlement of Australia. It was a unique experiment. Australia must be the only significant nation in the world to have been founded as a prison. Between 1788 and 1868 about 160,000 convicts, largely male, were sentenced by British courts to transportation to Australia. English writers commented on the "thief colony" with amused fascination. "They don't thieve all day long, do they?" the essayist Charles Lamb asked a friend who was visiting Sydney in 1817. "It is impossible that vice should not become more intense in such society," shuddered the Reverend Sydney Smith.

The first generation of Australians saw it differently. Some compared New South Wales with ancient Rome, which according to the standard histories of the day was founded by a band of outlaws under Romulus and Remus. Others proclaimed the superiority of the Australian colonies over the United States of America. The first Presbyterian minister, John Dunmore Lang, wrote: "as a penal settlement the history of New South Wales is unquestionably much more interesting to the general reader than that of any other colonies of the Empire. That colony has been the scene of an experiment in the capabilities of man." Australia was a test of the capacity of human material to respond to improved environment and economic opportunity.
By the 1830s, Australia was becoming one of the world’s major wool producers. In 1851 the discovery of gold in New South Wales and Victoria brought half a million immigrants within a few years, so that ex-convicts became an ageing minority among the newcomers and the native-born. There were important regional differences in the pattern of settlement. New South Wales was always regarded as retaining the rough-and-ready politics of its Georgian origins. Victoria, where the gold rushes had the greatest impact, was seen as dominated by Scots investors and respectable but radical Chartists. Both had a substantial Irish-Catholic element, perhaps 25 per cent of the population, whose Catholicism and strong sense of national identity ensured that Australia could never grow into a second England.

The largely working-class Irish-Australians would always push for a separate Australian identity. Western Australia, on the other hand, always stressed its links with London because its inhabitants thought themselves ignored and disregarded by Melbourne and Sydney. South Australia, never a convict colony, was by far the most Protestant region. Though often a pioneer in social reform (it was the first colony to give the vote to all adults), it was sometimes given

*Chartists*. Supporters of a British working-class movement for parliamentary reform which took its name from the People's Charter, a bill drafted and published in 1838. *Editor*
to bouts of restrictive morality. Queensland was the frontier where Australian characteristics might be seen at their most exaggerated. Tasmania, left behind in the race for economic growth, consoled itself with rural clannishness.

In each of these colonies the capital city soon grew to contain between one-third and one-half of the whole population. But there was no Australian metropolis. The rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne was too intense. This meant that when the colonies eventually federated in 1901 none of the existing cities could be given priority as capital. After much argument it was necessary to create an artificial seat of government between Sydney and Melbourne, at Canberra. Meanwhile, no single Australian city came to dominate Australian culture as London or Paris dominated theirs. In the circumstances it is remarkable that a unified Australian culture came into being as early as the 1880s, the decade in which for the first time a majority of the adult inhabitants were Australian-born.

Melbourne gave the new culture its art, Sydney its literature. In Melbourne a group of young painters known as the "Heidelberg School" used the techniques of the French Impressionists to paint Australian landscapes in colours and tones which could be accepted as capturing the authentic look of the country for the first time. For half a century their vision of the comparatively lush vegetation outside Melbourne and Sydney would become the stereotyped image of the Australian bush.

In Sydney the catalyst was a weekly journal founded in 1880, the Bulletin. Nationalist and radical in its early years, the Bulletin encouraged writers to find their subject-matter in the Australian bush. The cities might be imitations of Manchester or Chicago, but the outback was distinctively Australian. Most of the writers in fact lived within a few kilometres of Sydney Harbour, but they soon won an enthusiastic readership across the length and breadth of Australia. They wrote of the vast sheep stations, of the drovers taking cattle on the hoof hundreds of miles to market, of shearers and miners and the travelling workers who were forming Australia's most significant trade unions.

In their writings the outlines developed of the "typical" Australian man. He was practical, resourceful, good at improvisation but no perfectionist; humorous in adversity, mistrustful of authority, disrespectful towards wealth and property, uncomfortable with women, and staunchly loyal to his mates, though apt to conceal his feelings under a cynical and laconic wit. To the young Bulletin journalist Charles Bean, "in the pastoral industry and at the diggings, the ideal of the Australian is still made; or rather the standards of pluck, hardiness, unaffectedness, loyalty, truthfulness, hospitality on which the rest of Australia consciously founds its ideal".

Here too was a paradox. Even in the early years of the twentieth century, the majority of Australians were already city-dwellers in an increasingly mechanized environment. The Bulletin's authors wrote of a way of life which was receding into nostalgia even as they wrote. But, as the historian Russel Ward argues, the typical Australian was never the same as the average Australian. If Australians saw themselves as a nation of bushmen they were entitled to their national myth, just as modern urban Americans may identify with the frontier virtues of the Old West. But the Australian national myth received powerful reinforcement during the 1914-1918 war. Australia sent a high proportion of its younger men to fight in the British Empire's cause. Of these, one in six was killed and about two-thirds became casualties. But it was the landing at Gallipoli (Turkey) on 25 April 1915 which crystal-
lized many of the concepts of Australian nationalism.

The Gallipoli campaign was part of an ill-starred plan to knock Turkey out of the war. Allied troops, including a large proportion of Australians and New Zealanders (the Anzac corps) managed to establish themselves on the beach at Gallipoli but failed to dislodge the Turks from the heights behind. There the two armies slogged it out for eight months until in December 1915 the invaders withdrew. Gallipoli established the reputation of the Anzacs as heroic fighters. The defeat could be blamed on the incompetence of British planning, whereas the heroism was proof that the recently federated Commonwealth of Australia was capable of taking its place among the nations of the world by the usual rituals of bloodshed.

The Bulletin writer Bean covered the campaign and later became Australia’s official war historian. He argued persuasively that the special qualities of the Australian soldier were those of the bushman: the same resourcefulness, stoicism, wry humour and loyalty to his mates. So the image of the typical Australian won acceptance at home and overseas. Despite the continuing sprawl of Sydney, Melbourne and the lesser cities, the Australian virtues were those of the wide outback.

Australians on the whole were happy with this self-image, but English visitors sometimes worried about whether it concealed a lack of depth. D.H. Lawrence spent three months in Australia in 1922, complaining at one moment that Australians were “healthy, and to my thinking almost imbecile”, but also noting that “nobody felt better than anybody else, or higher; only better-off”.

In 1935 the expatriate professor of English
at the University of Melbourne, G.H. Cowling, stirred up controversy by claiming that Australia could never hope to produce an adequate literature. "There are no ancient churches, castles, ruins—the memorials of generations departed ... From a literary point of view Australia lacks the richness of age and tradition." He was indignantly refuted by Australian patriots, but the fact remained that for most of the first half of the twentieth century a steady procession of Australian writers—Henry Handel Richardson, Martin Boyd, for a while Patrick White—went to live in Europe. They were willing to pay the price of exile for intellectual stimulus.

The 1939-1945 war brought profound changes. When Japan entered the war and Singapore fell, Australians realized that they could no longer count on British protection. In the future they must increasingly seek trade and alliance with foreign powers; first the United States then, when the war was over, the nations of East and South-east Asia, including before long Japan as a major trading partner. The war also convinced most Australians that their country was underpopulated. No longer proud of origins which were 97 per cent British, the Australians after 1945 opened their country to an unprecedented inflow of migration. In thirty years the population doubled, passing 15 million by 1980. Until 1970 nearly all the newcomers were of European origin: Italians were most numerous, but Greeks, Yugoslavs, Germans, Dutch, and eastern Europeans were also well represented.

The "White Australia" policy was quietly discarded during these years, and from the 1960s a modest amount of Asian immigration occurred, growing after 1975 because of an influx of Vietnamese refugees. Migrant demand created prosperity for many Australian industries, as did overseas demand for Australian wool and minerals. Urbanization grew; by the 1970s Sydney and Melbourne were supporting populations of nearly three million, with Adelaide, Brisbane and Perth each having nearly one million. Air travel and television swept Australia from its isolation. Times of such rapid change presented a challenge to conventional images of what it meant to be Australian.

Under Sir Robert Menzies (prime minister 1949-1966) belief in the British connection was still officially fostered, although American culture and American foreign policy were gaining in influence. Between 1965 and 1971 Australia sent troops to help the Americans in Vietnam. But in the late 1960s the forces of protest and change found a voice, and in 1972 a Labor government...
Australians first settlers were the Aborigines, hunters and food gatherers who are believed to have migrated from Asia 40,000 years ago. They lived undisturbed for many centuries, during which the only other visitors to Australia may have been Indonesian traders who sailed to the continent’s north-west coast. Australia however remained a mystery to the rest of the world until less than 400 years ago.

Although a “Terra Australis” — a Great South Land — was shown on maps as early as the second century AD, its actual existence was not confirmed until the 17th century as a result of Portuguese, Spanish and Dutch mercantile expansion into Asia.

The first Englishman to visit the continent was the buccaneer William Dampier, who landed on the north-west coast of what is now the State of Western Australia in 1688. In 1770 Captain James Cook of the British Navy sighted the east of the continent, charted it, and after travelling up the coast landed at Botany Bay.

The first European settlement of the continent occurred on 26 January 1788, when Captain Arthur Phillip landed at Sydney Cove (now Port Jackson) near Botany Bay and established a penal settlement. He took possession of the whole of the eastern part of the continent which he named New South Wales.

The first white settlers were convicts and their soldier guards and some tradesmen sent to help establish the new penal colony. Although at first struggling in a harsh, alien land and dependent on supplies from Britain, the colony began to reach inland from what is now Sydney. The hinterland was explored, farms were developed, and eventually the colony became self-sufficient in most foods.

Extensive exploration in the 19th century led to vast areas being opened for development and the establishment of new colonies which subsequently became the States of Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, and the Northern Territory.

Transportation of convicts from Britain to New South Wales ended in 1840 and to Tasmania in 1853, but the population growth was spurred by the arrival of free settlers attracted by the prospects of riches on the New South Wales and Victoria goldfields and the opportunities to take up tracts of land for farming. Agrarian development burgeoned and the mainstays of the economy became wool, meat, wheat and gold.

While the alluvial gold mining industry declined towards the turn of the century, rural industries continued to expand and are still important in Australia’s economy.

The growth of the population and of the economy led to calls by each of the colonies for self-government and for their own legislatures, which were granted by Britain. Progress towards federation was inevitable and in 1901 the six colonies joined in a federation of States to become the Commonwealth of Australia.
came to office under Gough Whitlam, standard-bearer of a new concept of Australian nationalism.

Nationalism under Whitlam was multicultural. Instead of stressing the continuities with British institutions, Australia would identify itself with the cultural traditions of all its numerous migrant groups. At the same time care would be taken to preserve the architectural and cultural heritage of the pioneering past. The Australia Council was founded to steer government funding to the creative arts. Whitlam’s government lasted only three years. Trying to push through too many reforms at once, it ran into a world economic crisis and was controversially dismissed by the governor-general in November 1975. At the elections the conservative parties were swept back into power. But during the Whitlam years the agenda was set for future debate about Australian nationalism and Australian national self-concept.

Meanwhile, sport was always a means of vindicating Australian prowess. In earlier years Australian cricket teams had successfully competed with England for the legendary Ashes. During the 1950s Australia beat the United States and the rest of the world at tennis. And in 1983 Australia declared a national day of rejoicing when for the first time in over a century the Americans lost the international yachting trophy, the America’s Cup, to an Australian competitor financed by the immigrant millionaire Alan Bond. The 16 million Australians liked to see an element of David-and-Goliath when their athletes won victories over rivals from countries with much larger populations. Sport for the Australians has often been a benign and realistic way of fostering national pride without lapsing into militarism.

Outsiders observing the Australian enthusiasm for sport have sometimes concluded that Australians are a race of mindless hedonists without cultural interests. They concede that Australia has produced an impressive number of creative individuals—writers such as Christina Stead and Patrick White, artists such as Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd, interpreters of classical music such as Charles Mackerras, Joan Sutherland and Barry Tuckwell—but claim that Australia itself is still a cultural desert. Such a picture is long out of date. The major Australian cities have more to offer in the way of music and the visual arts than many European centres of the same size.

There is no dominant metropolis in which all cultural activity is concentrated. When Australia’s population was smaller this led to diffusion of effort, but in recent years strong

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*Ashes.* Symbol of victory in cricket match series between national teams of England and Australia. The term was first used after Australia defeated England in London in 1882 and an English newspaper lamented that English cricket was dead and that its body would be cremated and the ashes sent to Australia. Editor.
local traditions in the creative arts have begun to emerge. Australian theatre is perhaps less vigorous than it was fifteen or twenty years ago, but in compensation there has been an impressive record of film production. Australia has a long association with cinema and may even have produced the world's first feature-length film around the turn of the century, but the industry was largely eclipsed by Hollywood in the 1920s and it required imaginative government support during the late 1960s and early 1970s to launch a revival. The results have gained international recognition. (See article page 35).

Australians in quest of a national identity have recently developed a consuming curiosity about their background. Family history has become a hobby straining the resources of public libraries. Museums and heritage parks are big business, encouraged in almost every small town because of their tourist potential. Television series based on Australian history enjoy a wide audience. Colonial furniture and antiques are prized by those who can afford them. The colonial idiom is fashionable architecture. Australian historians stress the need to write “history from below”; the history of everyday life including the underprivileged, history with which today’s Australians can identify, including Aborigines and immigrants.

But here controversy reigns. Is there a mainstream Anglo-Australian culture with which immigrants and Aborigines should be expected to identify? Or is Australia’s cultural identity still in a state of flux? Should encouragement be given to a multicultural pluralism in which Aborigines and immigrants of Asian and European origin are encouraged to affirm their ancestral traditions? Official policy in recent years has favoured multiculturalism, but this has given rise to a backlash from critics who fear that such a trend will be socially divisive. They claim that the affirmation of ancestral traditions may mean the retention of ancestral grievances, leading to ethnic strife and even to a form of apartheid. This is an especially acute issue with Aborigines, many of whom in recent years have rejected the idea of assimilation within mainstream society and are claiming the recognition of their separate identity based on their unacknowledged land rights.

It is impossible that Australia should remain the “new Britannia” envisaged by its founders 200 years ago, or even the old Australia of outback tradition. Starting with the Aborigines, the Australian people have become a mixture of British, Irish, European, and Asian origins living in an environment different from any other. Within the last 200 years, and especially in the last fifty, they have begun to create a new culture with enormous potential for combining European background with awareness of Asian neighbours. It is impossible that a people exposed to such a range of experience could remain the rough-and-ready stereotype of popular myth. Perhaps the last word should go to David Martin, himself a Hungarian migrant turned Australian, who has written: “Foreigners easily—too easily—assume that Australia is a crude habitat. They do not understand that, on the contrary, it is a subtle one, home of a subtle people.”

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