

○ REVIEW OF FRANK BONGIORNO AND DAVID ANDREW ROBERTS'S *RUSSEL WARD: REFLECTIONS ON THE LEGEND*

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Geoffrey Bolton of Murdoch University reviews *Russel Ward: Reflections on the Legend*, edited by Frank Bongiorno and David Andrew Roberts (special edition of *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2008, AU\$33pb), University Press, 2008, 372pp, AU\$62.95hb)

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Russel Ward was not the first nor the only historian to explore the ways in which Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 hypothesis about the influence of the frontier on North American history could be adapted to Australian circumstances. W. K. Hancock touched on the subject in *Australia* (1930) and Fred Alexander in his ANZAAS presidential address *Moving Frontiers* (1948) cast himself in the role of a John the Baptist foreshadowing the academic Messiah who would produce a major study of Australia's engagement with the frontier. It is a safe bet that neither would have foreseen how Ward's pioneering methodology, based on a mastery of colonial popular culture and literature, enabled him to write *The Australian Legend* (1958) which after half a century retains its status as the definitive starting point in the debate about the influence of the environment on national character and ethos. Probably the majority of Australians still cherish a national self-concept based on Ward's portrait of the resourceful, laconic, insubordinate travelling bush worker, the product of a tough environment shaping ex-convict and working-class human material. Many of us have disagreed with some of the arguments put forward in the *Legend*, but its staying power is demonstrated by this anthology, in which thirteen historians of widely varying backgrounds and approaches find stimulus in discussing Russel Ward's achievement.

One or two of the articles, reflecting recent trends in Australian historiography, might have given Ward mild astonishment: Lisa Featherstone, for example, on 'Sex and *The Australian Legend*: Masculinity and the White Man's Body' or Joy Damousi on 'A History of Australian Voice and Speech in *The Australian Legend* and Beyond'. Both make some useful and original contributions to our understanding of Australian culture. Ward might have been less surprised to find a couple of his old sparring partners allowing second thoughts. Humphrey McQueen a young tiger of the New Left who, as Frank Bongiorno reminds us, savaged Ward trenchantly back in 1972 now sees Ward's proclamation of an Australian 'socialism-as-being-mates' as part of a valiant, but eventually doomed bid by radical nationalists to counter the conformism fostered by globalizing capitalism. John Merritt stands by his insight that the nomadic shearers who created the Australian Workers' Union were often identical with the selectors who battled to become 'little capitalists', but he shows how the mountain stockmen of the snow country of the Monaro developed regional nuances that fed into modern stereotypes of The Man from Snowy River.

Testing Ward's national self-concept against the insights of regional history we find some interesting refinements. The pastoral outback of Queensland and New South Wales would seem

the heartland of Ward's 'nomad tribe', but Lyndon Megarrity shows that during the 1890s Queensland quickly distanced itself from the aggressive nationalist self-assertion that had momentarily come to the fore with spokesmen as different as Thomas McIlwraith and the republican miners of Charters Towers. Anne Coote reminds us that for several decades before Federation national feeling in New South Wales meant precisely and solely New South Wales, and not the Australian continent. Alan Atkinson opens up fascinating new vistas in the debate when he suggests that 'The most profound intellectual achievement among nineteenth-century Australians – I mean the mass of the population – was the ability to measure time and space on a large scale, beyond immediate familiarity and yet with useful precision.' Here two of the most seminal historical works of the mid-twentieth century, *The Australian Legend* and *The Tyranny of Distance* provide a foundation for Atkinson's masterly insights.

A good deal of debate still centres around *The Australian Legend's* standing as a conscious riposte to the anti-communist conformism said to characterize the 1950s. Both Cottle and McQueen link the *Legend* with the staging of *Reedy River* and the founding of *Overland* as validating 'an authentic tradition of collectivism and anti-authoritarianism in the popular culture of the common people; an alternative to the individualism, consumerism and conformity' of 'Australia's sprawling suburbs'. As a suburban product of Menzies' 'forgotten people' during those years I question this dichotomy. It was taken for granted that the bush and its inhabitants were the starting point for any definition of Australianness, with a literature stretching past Tom Ronan's *Vision Splendid* and Xavier Herbert's maverick *Capricornia* to Lawson, Paterson and their contemporaries. We in the suburbs felt excluded from the national myth, and cheered when we read Shaw Neilson's 'The Sundowner': 'I know not when this tiresome man/With his shrewd, sable billy-can/And his unwashed Democracy/ His boomed-up Pilgrimage began.' For us Ward's achievement lay not so much in his originality as the skill and learning with which he brought together so many of the ingredients of Australian self-concept.

And in many respects the times were with him. As David Andrew Roberts shows, he was writing at a time when historians and their readers were at last willing to look realistically at Australia's convict origins. As Cottle reminds us, the 1939–45 war and the Kokoda campaign fostered the growth of an Australian nationalism independent of the British connexion. As Maddison argues, when John O'Grady wanted to define the national stereotypes into which his fictional migrant 'Nino Culotta' was expected to find assimilation, he looked to the kind of values that Ward found in the Australian past. I'm less sure that McQueen is on the money when he sees the *Legend* as endeavouring to counter the Americanisation of Australian culture. My impression is that it took the Vietnam war and the 1960s to begin the process of Coca-colonisation, and that in the years when Ward was growing to maturity American writers such as Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg and Stephen Vincent Benet were seen as models for some Australians of how a settler society might develop a literature nurtured by its own history and its own environment.

There lies the enduring legacy of Russel Ward. In an era when, as Merritt reminds us, historians were given space to take on large topics and produce bold interpretations, he took his opportunity. Fifty years later his ideas are still worth vigorous debate. This volume is a welcome contribution to the debate.