

MEANJIN QUARTERLY

A Review of Arts and Letters in Australia



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The University of Melbourne

Winter Issue

RUSSEL WARD	149	<i>Home Thoughts from Abroad: Australia's Racist Image</i>
ROLAND ROBINSON	156	<i>The Deer/verse</i>
HUMPHREY MCQUEEN	157	<i>The Sustenance of Silence: Racism in 20th Century Australia</i>
ROLF HOCHHUTH	165	<i>'Guerillas', Act II/drama</i>
GRAHAM ROWLANDS	175	<i>Mirrors/verse</i>
CRAIG MCGREGOR	176	<i>'The Revolution will not be Televised'</i>
HORST BIENEK	180	<i>Our Ashes/verse</i>
HOWARD A. DEAKIN	181	<i>The Lie/verse</i>
ESME GOLLSCHESKY	182	<i>The Liberator/fiction</i>
STEPHEN FITZGERALD	191	<i>Australia's China Problem: 'Self-Imposed Isolation'</i>
PETER ANNAND	204	<i>From the Journal of a Recent Expedition/verse</i>
ANNE ELDER	205	<i>To a Friend: On the Occasion of Her Death/verse</i>
MAUREEN FREER	206	<i>Apology for Unborn Children/verse</i>
JOHN B. BESTON	208	<i>Alienation and Humanization, Damnation and Salvation in 'Voss'</i>
SAM BRADLEY	217	<i>Vista Past Zero/verse</i>
GEOFFREY LEEPER	219	<i>Mammonism v. Luddism: Overpopulation, Ecology, and Australia</i>
C. B. CHRISTESEN	226	<i>Come Home, Soldier/verse</i>
JOHN MORRISON	227	<i>Pommy in Wonderland</i>
FRANCOIS TRUFFAUT	234	<i>How I Filmed 'L'Enfant Sauvage'</i>
NIAL SHERRIDAN	239	<i>Brian O'Nolan: A Postscript</i>
BEVERLY GROSS	241	<i>The House of Fiction and the House on Eleventh Street</i>
L. J. CLANCY	246	<i>Revolution Without Guns: Thoughts on the Counter-culture</i>
DOROTHY GREEN	251	<i>Christina Stead's Fiction</i>
MICHAEL WILDING	255	<i>Short Story Chronicle</i>
CARL HARRISON-FORD	269	<i>Trailer: 'There is a goal, but no way'</i>
LOUIS KAHAN		Sketches of Russel Ward, Geoffrey Leeper
J. S. OSTOJA-KOTKOWSKI		Cover design

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Humphrey McQueen

THE SUSTENANCE OF SILENCE: Racism in 20th Century Australia

BY THE LATE 1950s RACISM¹ was a dirty word and Australian radicals were comforted by a 1960 opinion poll which told them that fifty-nine per cent. of their countrymen favoured a slight relaxation of the White Australia policy. Russel Ward ended *The Australian Legend* by pointing to the improvement in our racial attitudes demonstrated by the integration of non-British migrants since 1945 without social disturbance. Certainly, liberals and radicals of all shades wanted to believe this and, while they recognized that there had been some very unpleasant incidents in our past, they were hopeful that the old views were rapidly fading away. There were other straws in these winds of change, most particularly the student demonstrations against Apartheid in Sydney in March 1960, against White Australia at the 1961 elections, and the 1965 'Freedom Ride' into northern New South Wales: the torpor which had settled on students for most of the 1950s was broken by anti-racist protests. As further proof of the improvement there was more than an eighty per cent. vote in 1967 to alter the Constitution 'to omit certain words relating to the People of the Aboriginal Race in any State'. Some pro-Apartheid MHRs remained but the trend was clearly against them. No matter how bad things had been at Myall Creek in 1838, or Lambing Flat in 1861, or in the Federal Parliament in 1901, Australia had broken with racism.

However, 1971 has delivered this cosy conclusion some severe blows. The year began with the Victorian Minister for Immigration (Mr Dickie) opposing migrants with 'dark blood'. Not genes, mind you, but blood! Right-wing Laborites including the shadow minister for Immigration (Mr Fred Daly), chorused their approval. Mr Arthur Calwell talked about black councils in London by 1980 and later called for an end to the Colombo Plan. In March an opinion poll showed that more than eighty per cent. of Australians interviewed favoured visits from South African sporting teams.

HUMPHREY MCQUEEN, of A.N.U.'s History department, author of *A New Britannia*, has begun work on a history of Australian society between 1939-45.

It would be wrong to conclude that Australians had become more racist during the 1960s; the truth is that we were never as free from racism as we wished to believe. It is necessary to revise our facile optimism and look seriously at the well-springs of our racist attitudes. No longer can racism be treated as an unfortunate blemish, as something marginal to the solid and healthy core of Australian culture. Those of us who are concerned by the position of the Aborigines, by the war against Vietnam, by the White Australia policy and by our links with South Africa will need to pursue the patterns of racism in our historical development. This will not be easy. Some of the reviews of *A New Britannia*² indicate that a thorough-going investigation of Australian racism remains disquieting to many anti-racists since it has been criticized by Noel McLachlan, Rohan Rivett and Judah Waten for singling out Australia when everyone everywhere was guilty. By-passing the overtones of a Nuremberg defence that their response involves, they have ignored the fateful meridian which Australia occupies: geographic proximity to Asia intensifies the 'Yellow Peril' which has almost always been chimerical for Europe. In our self-perceptions Australia was an outpost rather than a colony of Britain's, so that our geography encouraged us to be more racist than Englishmen in England, though often a trifle less so than Englishmen in Australia.

There is an essential paradox concerning Australians' awareness of their racism: if it was as strong as I have suggested why did it largely pass unexamined? For example, on the world historical stage the extermination of our native people is unexceptional. What is fantastically remarkable is that having disposed of the Aborigines we proceeded to forget about the problem, unlike the Americans who made the destruction of Indian society the centrepiece of their commercial culture. C. D. Rowley's *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*³ is a superbly sustained indictment and a perfect model for future studies; yet despite Rowley's blazing dispassion there was some resistance to the publication of his work. Nineteenth-century anti-Asian feeling has not escaped attention and one of the earliest post-graduate studies in Australian history was Myra Willard's *History of the White Australia Policy* (1922), which came out in support of continuing the policy of exclusion. So it is largely the racism of the twentieth century that has slipped by unremarked. The belated acceptance by left-liberal historians of the importance of Australian racism is designed to justify their belief in the futility of demanding revolutionary change. Their lamentations are not intended to end racism so much as they are meant to gather support for the ALP's piecemeal social engineering and thus maintain Australian capitalism.

Three factors explain this silence. One, by the outbreak of the 1914-18 war Australia had largely deported or exterminated its racial problem to become whiter than white. Two, the argument that White Australia was simply economic gained currency. Three, the most violent efforts to maintain White Australia have been subsumed within nobler ideals and worthier causes during three wars. The remainder of this article is an elaboration of these three points.

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IMPLICIT WITHIN ARGUMENTS for maintaining the White Australia policy is the belief that Australians are racist since restrictive immigration is designed to keep out the problems and strife which would occur if Australians had to live next door to non-Europeans; there is some substance to this argument. / Australia did not / *Federated* defeat domestic racism so much as it avoided the occasions of sin; the kanakas were repatriated; in 1918 the Federal Minister for Home Affairs summed up post-federation policy towards the Chinese community when he declared, 'The policy of the country is that the Chinese population shall gradually become extinct'; the extinction of the Aborigines no longer needed European assistance as their numbers were rapidly declining although the establishment of Reserves reinforced the attitude 'out of sight, out of mind'. As a domestic issue racism disappeared along with the coloured races. The hollowness of this victory was revealed in the Kalgoorlie anti-Italian riots of 1934. Moreover, the vote against extending Commonwealth power to cover Aborigines was highest in country areas where there were more of them; it is never too difficult for middle suburbanites to feel holier than the citizens of Walgett.⁴ In general Australian racism has never been challenged in practice and we still lack the experience of living with non-Europeans.

On the occasions when White Australia had to be defended in argument (which were more frequent immediately after the Russian revolution) the explanation offered by socialists like Robert Ross was that it was purely economic. As anti-colonial movements gained strength after 1945, making explicit racism internationally disadvantageous, this view spread to right-wing laborites. It would be misleading to label this a rationalization, as that term has overtones of conscious manipulation, when what happened was much closer to the process Lévi-Strauss describes as myth-making: an unpalatable notion is rendered socially less objectionable through a presentation which retains all its elements but discloses them in different form. By concentrating on their genuine fear of economic competition, and by expanding it to account for Asiatic filth and disease, most of the supporters of White Australia have avoided entirely the racist component of their thinking. Arthur Calwell's opposition to miscegenation because of its alleged social consequences—rioting and bloodshed—is another instance of this procedure.

The third means by which racism passed unobserved has been its coincidence with issues which have given it the protection of their righteousness. The three instances of this are: the conscription disputes of 1916-17; the war against fascism (the First Pacific War); the war against communism since 1950 (the Second Pacific War).

In 1916 and again in 1917 Australia split wide open, ostensibly over conscription; inextricably interwoven in this conflict was the demand to keep Australia White. This has long been recognized about the 'Vote No' campaign which employed propaganda such as 'William Maltese Hughes' and played upon proposals to import Chinese coolies to do labouring work, as had happened in France. Only

in the past year or so has race been perceived as an important element in Hughes' reasoning when he introduced conscription. To quote his biographer, L. F. Fitzhardinge:

By the time he returned to Australia his latent fear of Japan had become an urgent apprehension of her post-war intentions; the more powerful because it could not be openly expressed. There is good reason to suppose that this was one reason for his pressing for conscription, and he was furious when the arguments he could not publicly employ were turned against him by opponents.⁵

A fuller discussion of this can be found in chapter five of *A New Britannia* so I will not traverse the same ground here. What is worthy of further comment is the past inability of scholars to recognize that W. M. Hughes was concerned about Japan in a way that led him to advocate conscription. It would be wrong to suggest that the maintenance of White Australia was the only issue at stake in the plebiscites of 1916-17, yet it is surely noteworthy that it should take more than fifty years for one of the primary factors in this continuously discussed episode to penetrate the consciousness of professional historians; the shortage of researchers and the censorship of the War Precautions Act cannot explain their lack of insight. The race theme was obliterated from the popular tradition by being submerged in a palimpsest of patriotism and civil liberties.

A. J. P. Taylor, in the first chapter of *The Origins of the Second World War*, commented on the differing responses of historians to the origins of the two world wars; the first has provoked continuous debate while the second has had to suffice with assertions of the malignancy of Nazism and the psychoses of Hitler. E. H. Carr underlined the implications of this in his 1961 Trevelyan Lectures: '... one can ... be content to say that the Second World War occurred because Hitler wanted war, which is true enough but explains nothing. But one should not then commit the solecism of calling oneself a student of history or a historian'.⁶ If Carr's maxim were to be applied to the attitudes which Australian historians have towards the origins of the war against Japan from 1941-45 there would be an avalanche of ontological insecurity. And since the origins of the war are a foregone conclusion there is not the slightest appreciation of the need for the corollary questions: should Australia have fought at all? And if so, on whose side? Another way of putting it might be: how many of those who could have acquiesced with a German overlordship of Australia would have joined the resistance against a Japanese conquest?

and
British

American historians have been active in this field and some of them have shown awareness of the complexities of the issues, Richard Storry being among those who have stressed that Japanese foreign policy up to 7 December 1941 was not a simple catalogue of duplicity which reached its acme with the unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbour:

The Americans had broken the code in use between Tokyo and the Japanese Embassy in Washington; and therefore they knew that the Ambassador, Nomura, was instructed to

obtain some agreement by the end of November. In the middle of that month Nomura was joined by a special envoy, Kurusu, who had been Ambassador in Germany. After Pearl Harbour the world believed that Kurusu's mission was merely a device by Japan to gain time and to lull the Americans into a sense of false security. There is in fact no truth in this supposition. Admiral Nomura was a sailor, not a trained diplomatist. In the critical autumn of 1941 he felt overwhelmed by the difficulties facing him and he asked for an experienced diplomatist of ambassadorial rank to be sent to help him.⁷

More recently American historians of less orthodox political intentions have set about questioning the rôle of US diplomacy towards Japan in the inter-war years. There is an illuminating summary of this material in Noam Chomsky's essay 'The Revolutionary Pacificism of A. J. Muste' in *American Power and the New Mandarins*.^{*} The 'revisionists' are not interested in defending Japan or any section of the Japanese ruling classes; their purpose is to show that America, like Japan, was an imperialist power in the Pacific, but that, unlike Japan, it held the upper-hand. In order to redress the balance Japan had to act aggressively: Hans Morgenthau once defined aggression as upsetting a *status quo*, which is as neat a justification for previously successful aggression as could be imagined.

It is not a matter of taking sides in a battle between two Imperialist powers, and certainly it is not being suggested that Australia should have supported Japan, although our proverbial sympathy for the underdog might have demanded it. My purposes are far more modest. They are to ask why Australians were anxious to take sides in an imperialist war, and to ask why this question has not been asked more frequently in the past.

AS ESSENTIAL PRELIMINARIES to these investigations it is necessary to abandon three widely held notions. The first has already been mentioned: America as the outraged virgin of Japanese deceitfulness. The second is seemingly terminological: the 'Second World War' will have to give way to the 'First Pacific War'. This has a substantive point to it as talk of the war against Hitler, of the war to defend the Socialist Motherland, and of the war to rescue European Jewry, has obscured the nature of the war in the Pacific, giving it a righteousness it does not deserve. The third issue concerns the birth of an independent Australian foreign policy which is usually taken to date from Curtin's December 1941 appeal to the United States. While it is intriguing to discover independence being defined as adherence to US imperialism, the point is factually inaccurate since Australia had sought American protection in 1908 when Alfred Deakin invited Roosevelt's 'Great White Fleet' here and again in 1909 when he sounded out the possibility of America extending its Monroe Doctrine to cover Australia. Four years earlier the Labor MHR for Melbourne, Dr Maloney, had, in words prophetically similar to those of John Curtin, asserted the need for an alliance with the United States.

^{*} See *Meanjin Quarterly*, 4/1969, 'Welfare Imperialism: Noam Chomsky's Critique of Liberal Immorality', by David Martin.

These early links are politically inconvenient to present-day apologists for American aggression in Asia since they cannot be separated from the racism of Roosevelt, Deakin and Maloney. This is why T. B. Millar and Sir Allan Watt insist upon 1941 as Australia's independence day. By avoiding the preceding four decades they have an easier time presenting the Australian-American Alliance as the partnership of two great democracies engaged in a battle for the liberty of Asians.

Unfortunately for our cold war warriors the actors in the First Pacific War declined to conceal their appreciation of the racial conflict involved. Addressing a joint session of the Federal Parliament in April 1942, General Douglas MacArthur maintained that there was

a link between our countries which does not depend upon the written protocol, upon treaties of alliance, or upon diplomatic doctrines. It goes deeper than that. It is that indescribable consanguinity of race which causes us to have the same aspirations, the same ideals, and the same dreams of future destiny.

Almost simultaneously a Labor weekly declared 'We've always despised them, now we must smash them'.⁸

Even if we pass over the origins of and the attitudes prevalent during the First Pacific War we cannot escape its psychological impact upon the Australian people. The treatment of our prisoners convinced us of the bestial nature of the Japanese. More importantly there remains the knowledge that an Asian power almost invaded Australia and the belief that it would have succeeded had it not been for the assistance of the United States; this, more than anything else, accounts for the continuing 'popular' support for Australian involvement in Vietnam. The trauma of near invasion froze all critical responses for a generation; the importance of racism in the First Pacific War has not been disguised or overlooked since the whole vast sequence of shocks and triumphs has stood unexaminable. The failure of historians to ask questions about the First Pacific War in part reflects the united response of the population to the war; finding no public debate, historians have lacked the 'objectivity' to devise questions of their own.

Anti-communism provides the means by which explication of the racism involved in Australia's participation in the Second Pacific War has been avoided. In the early 1950s B. A. Santamaria mounted a campaign against Asiatic Communism with as much stress on the adjective as on the noun; in August 1969 Senator McManus gave this a new twist by claiming that Russia would use Australia as a bait to gain an alliance with Japan. The presentation of Vietnam and its neighbours as 'dominoes' is but another example of racism since it involves treating Asians as blocks of wood without a past that can influence their future, and without the internal drive to fashion their own destiny; it is a natural follow-on from colonialist thinking. Some opponents of the war engage in a subtler version of race prejudice when they claim that all the ordinary Vietnamese villager wants is to be left alone because he is uninterested in anything outside his village.

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Yet it has been the experience of Vietnam which more than any other single factor has forced some Australians to face up to our racist and imperialist heritage. By forgetting this heritage, opponents of conscription for Vietnam sustained a totally unwarranted optimism about the 1966 elections since the race argument which helped to defeat conscription in 1916 assured its acceptance fifty years later. Constant repetition of the argument 'The Yanks helped us in 1942 so we have to help in Vietnam'⁹ finally makes it urgent, no matter how painful, to ask questions about the validity of 1942—and beyond.

IT IS NOT NECESSARY to believe, as does J. W. Berry,¹⁰ that Australia is one of the most racist countries in the world to accept the burden of this article. What is being suggested is that Australia is primarily different because it has avoided the necessity for an articulation of its racism. There can be no meaningful response to Professor Berry until we have debated these issues among ourselves. Once this debate begins it will be possible and necessary to escape the defiant diffidence and tendentious timidity which marks this contribution. It might also be possible to fulfil Kath Walker's call for a Summer School 'geared to hear the viewpoints of Aborigines talking to an Aboriginal audience. Let the papers be written by Aborigines. Let the subject be "The Non-Aborigine—His Education in Race Relations"'.¹¹

It is with this heritage that the Papuan struggling for independence has to wrestle. As if exploitation by multi-national corporations, and the inevitable problems of new nationhood were insufficient, Papua-New Guinea will have to carry the additional burden of Australia's unexplored and inarticulated racism. One dead Mataungan and the full flood of this past will confront us with an urge to trek back over the Kokoda trail soaked as it is with the blood of Diggers whose fathers still live, whose brothers now decide, and whose sons can fight. It is no accident that Australia is the last of the colonial powers. The explanation lies within Australia, not within the backwardness of our colony; it is we who will not let go, not they who cannot govern themselves; their backwardness is the mirror image of ours. Have ever a people been so unsuited to the tasks of relinquishing even formal colonial control? The initial impact of a campaign against conscripts for Papua will be to an incalculably more hostile public than that which scorned the anti-Vietnam movement in 1965, though a protracted war will ultimately affect Australia in the way Vietnam has America. What a price to pay for a commonwealth of silence.

NOTES

¹ Racism is taken to be the association of psychological, emotional or intellectual responses with physical features; or as the Victorian labor paper *Tocsin* put it on 4 October, 1906: 'We do not object to a man because his complexion or the cast of his eyes differs from our own, but because his complexion and the cast of his eyes are inseparably connected in our experience with certain qualities of mind to which we do most emphatically object.'

- ² Humphrey McQueen, *A New Britannia* (Penguin, Melbourne, 1970). See *Meanjin Quarterly* 4/1970 and 1/1971 for commentaries by Noel McLachlan and A. A. Phillips.
- ³ C. D. Rowley, *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (A.N.U. Press, Canberra, 1970).
- ⁴ For additional information: J. S. Western, 'The Australian Aboriginal: what white Australians know and think about him—a preliminary survey', *Race*, April 1969, Vol. X, no. 4, pp. 411-434; Ian S. Mitchell, 'Epilogue to a Referendum', *Social Issues*, October 1968, Vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 9-12.
- ⁵ L. F. Fitzhardinge, 'Australia, Japan and Great Britain, 1914-1918', *Historical Studies*, April 1970, Vol. 14, no. 54, p. 258.
- ⁶ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Penguin, 1964), p. 87.
- ⁷ Richard Storry, *A History of Modern Japan* (Penguin, 1961), p. 213. A generation of school children have been brought up on R. M. Crawford's *Ourselves and the Pacific* which ten years after Storry contains: 'The Japanese seemed to give hope to negotiation by sending a special envoy, Mr Saburo Kurusu, to Washington—a means, as Pearl Harbour showed, of cloaking treacherous intentions' (p. 250).
- ⁸ *Daily Mail* (London) editorial, 29 January, 1944: 'The Japanese have proved a sub-human race. . . . Let us resolve to outlaw them. When they are beaten back to their own savage land, let them live there in complete isolation from the rest of the world, as in a leper compound, unclean. . . . We will keep and guard the cleanness of the seas between us.'
- ⁹ *Sunday Review*, 4 April, 1971, carried a report of the dismissal of Tony Reeves, ABC freelancer, for a story about Aborigines. In the course of an interview one of Reeves' superiors told him: 'I was waist deep in the swamps of New Guinea fighting the Japs. I know what Vietnam is all about'. For some indication of the images of China in the popular Australian view see Arthur Huck, 'The Idea of "China" in Australian Politics', and Jonathan King, 'A Big Gross Ogre, An Illiterate Giant', *Australian Outlook*, December 1970, Vol. 24, no. 3.
- ¹⁰ *Politics*, November 1970, Vol. V, no. 2, pp. 228-9.
- ¹¹ *Politics*, May 1970, Vol. V, no. 1, p. 93.

Shakespeare was just a baby

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