In 1901 Australia saw the passage of the Immigration Restriction Act. In 1962 the Immigration Reform Group published Immigration: Control or Colour Bar? Between these dates only two books were published which offered some domestic criticism of the White Australia policy. One was E. W. Cole’s White Australia Impossible, a brief, racy and somewhat eccentric tract which maintained that whites would eventually become coloured under the influence of Australia’s climate. The other, Colorphobia: An Exposure of the White Australia Fallacy, was published in 1903 under the intriguing pseudonym, Gizen-No-Teki, otherwise E. W. Foxall.¹ It is clear that the policy of immigration restriction attracted overwhelming support through to the 1960s, not least from the writers, intellectuals and opinion makers of the new Commonwealth.

Cole was famous for his Book Arcade and Cole’s Funny Picture Book. He pushed his argument about the unsuitability of the Australian climate further than others were prepared to go so his opposition to White Australia could readily be put down to his wonderful eccentricity. Nevertheless his book speaks of a general concern about White Australia before the Second World War namely, the ability of whites to create permanent settlements in tropical climates. If a hostile climate could prevent white Australians from taking full and effective
possession of the continent then the White Australia policy was a mistaken experiment. If the climatic objection could be overcome, the major obstacle to White Australia disappeared. The question was not so much whether racial homogeneity was desirable—that was taken for granted by modern, educated Australians in 1901—but whether white Australians could make a convincing case for their exclusive possession of an entire continent. Were they able to make the continent their place?

While Foxall conducted a more searching critique of White Australia than Cole, he was also persuaded that Australia was climatically unsuited for white settlement. He believed that skin colour 'predicated the possession of powers and abilities that can be put to their best use in certain localities'. In short, the racial divisions of humanity were climatically produced. Australia had produced coloured people and Foxall therefore believed that a black skin expressed the truth of Australia's climatic condition. Black skins suited Australia better than white and, that being so, Europeans would not be able to make full use of the continent. It was not their place and could never become so.

Foxall was also interested in how the case for White Australia had been presented. He noted that numerous speakers during the immigration restriction debate in federal parliament invoked the 'flood from the north'. While Foxall dismissed this as a 'silly scare' he also acknowledged that the fear of being 'swamped' by northern 'hordes' was repeated with such frequency that no resort to immigration statistics could allay the concern. It was generally accepted that Australia was vulnerable to Asian invasion.

In the only sustained critique of the White Australia policy brought before the federal parliament, Bruce Smith tried to demolish the great flood thesis by looking into the figures. He found that the Japanese had been leaving the colonies rather than entering them, whereas the rate of increase for other non-Europeans was minuscule, under one thousand for the six years from 1896 to 1901. But mere figures, as Smith recognised, left the potency of the scare unscathed. He believed the only explanation for the persistence of this fear was its
usefulness: 'a desire to make political capital by appealing to some of the worst instincts in some of the more credulous of the people'.

There is no doubt a lot to be said in favour of Smith's assessment of the 1901 debate. He followed the language and logic of the debate very closely and understood the appeal to racial exclusivity. However, he did not appear to understand that the argument for free trade and more lenient immigration laws did not have the same ringing appeal as the ideal of a white Australia. Smith's critics warned that the mighty fifth continent was not to be set aside for mere commercial gain alone. It was to be made into the legitimate home of a new branch of the white race.

Twenty years previously, in the centenary year, 1888, a serial appeared in the Queensland labour movement paper, *The Boomerang*, under the pseudonym, 'Sketcher'. Titled 'White or Yellow? A Story of the Race-War of AD 1908', it was written by the labour intellectual and organiser, William Lane. Set twenty years into the future, it was the story of defiant farmers and workers defending their embattled colony from the Chinese. Lane's story emphasised the need for ordinary Australians to make a stand for a white Australia before it was too late. Failure to do so would ensure that Queensland and, in due course, the nation at large would become a miscegenated, mixed race community, dominated by wealthy Chinese and the British imperialists who supported them. The call to arms came just in time. White Australia won a narrow victory over the Chinese.

'White or Yellow' was the first sustained account of an Asian invasion of Australia and it served as a precursor to a number of invasion narratives in which Asia, in one form or another, threatens Australia’s future as a homogenous white nation. There is, inevitably perhaps, a conspiratorial element in this writing, a belief that there are plots afoot to bring down White Australia. In Lane's case the plotters gather around Government House in Brisbane where the governing classes, the loyal servants of British imperial interests, plot with Chinese businessmen to control Queensland. The trade-off for the British is better access to lucrative markets in China, while the Chinese are guaranteed a determining say in the development of Australia's tropical north. In the great game of Empire, Lane warns his readers, remote Australia is
no more than a pawn to be traded to the highest bidder. In these titanic struggles for power and influence the lives and aspirations of ordinary Australians count for very little. While the anti-Chinese forces win a famous victory, White Australia is nevertheless shown to be very insecure and not least because Lane is convinced that Australia's importance to the future of the white races is not well understood. The reader learns that the defence of White Australia has to be that much more determined and passionate because people in high places are hatching alternative plans for Australia's future.

The invasion narrative seeks to outline both the power and influence of conspirators and to weigh the forces of national resistance. In Lane's story, the small farmers of Queensland, whose lives and circumstances are not far removed from the working people, see the threat posed by the Chinese and begin to organise an army of resistance. The story is grounded in the often-stated conviction of The Boomerang that there could be no compromise between the races. Where Europeans and non-Europeans occupied the same territory, one would inevitably come to dominate the other. Of all the non-European races, the Chinese were considered among the most tenacious and formidable. Once allowed to gain a foothold in Australia it seemed logical to suppose that they would emerge as the dominant race. Lane's title was to be taken literally: this was a life and death struggle between white and yellow. In a yellow Australia surviving whites would soon become a degraded and enslaved people. For Lane, China had come to mean Ghengis Khan and rampaging hordes.

The defenders of White Australia were typically focused on the prospect of Australia's Asian future. Action had to be taken in the present to ensure that the nation remain white. For that to happen, there had to be a realisation that Australia's future was in jeopardy and especially so when the immediate evidence might not have seemed altogether compelling. However small the numbers of Chinese and however humble their circumstances, they apparently provided clear evidence of a gathering flood that would sweep all before it. Either that, or they were syping out the territory in advance of a larger, more determined campaign. In any event, Australia's population was tiny, while
China's was immense and increasing with frightening speed. Lane based his estimate of the danger Australia was in on the huge number of Chinese and what he termed their 'swarming' populations: the millions who would need to seek their livelihood outside of China. The swarm of Chinese proved to be another powerful metaphor. Lane considered Australia the logical destination for swarming Chinese unless urgent steps were taken to prevent their coming. In the invasion story, those who sought to warn their fellow Australians of this menace were often ignored or derided.

Most of the derision was attributed to the cities where urban comforts and pleasures had supposedly made people soft and complacent. The city was seen as a solvent of patriotism, a place where people were lured away from love of country and the disciplines of racial purity. The city encouraged mixing, mingling and experiment. The city, it was often claimed, lived parasitically on the country. It consumed rather than produced. The city dweller inhabited a false and cosmopolitan world where men were subjected to feminising influences and women were rendered more masculine. The more urban Australia became, and by the 1890s it was recognised as one of the most urbanised countries in the world, the weaker its power to resist Asia; or so it seemed to many commentators, William Lane among them. A people in danger of losing all connection with the emptiness and silence that pervaded inland Australia were considered unlikely to understand as clearly as they should the dangers surrounding the continent. Australians were represented as at one and the same time among the most comfortable Europeans on earth and among the most endangered.

While the invasion narrative is a commentary on the growing power of Asia in world affairs, it is also a commentary on the capabilities Australians would need to develop in order to both defend and define themselves. While the plot varied among invasion stories, there was a common anxiety that the nation would weaken to the point where resistance became impossible. The invasion story invited readers to consider their fate as a weak and defeated people dominated by one or other Asian nation. In the language of the day, there was a good deal of concern that the 'prestige of the white man', a subject that attracted
considerable comment, would collapse. Australians could see themselves as both the victims of declining white prestige, evidenced in Lane’s story by opportunistic imperialists assiduously cultivating the Chinese, or as heroic defenders of the white man’s cause in distant Australia. Would Australia affirm white prestige and at the same time strengthen the white cause throughout the world or would it too succumb to the growing asianising pressures that seemed to be part and parcel of the modern world?

By the 1880s, as Lane’s story went to press, the business of defending White Australia had taken on the appearance of a masculinist stand against the forces of modernity.7 For Lane, the city, parliamentary democracy and the consumerist world of the modern woman were all signs of a corrosive modernity, weakening the fibre of the nation and, with it, the capacity to resist Asia. It also appeared to weaken the right to resist Asia if the best that Australia could do was create second-rate and second-hand city dwellers.

The rural male in the form of the bushman was represented as the key to the defence of White Australia. He represented the hard, unyielding surface of resistance to invading Asia. He held the future of the nation in his hands. The editor of the Lone Hand, Frank Fox, made the point very clearly in 1906 by declaring that the bushman would form ‘the backbone of the resistance which the White Man will make to any flow of Asia along the Pacific littoral’.8 The bushman had been transformed from a figure of local interest into an exemplar of the defiant White Man confronting mobile Asia. The entire white world had been given a reason to support and sustain the Australian bushman, the herald of a new race.

Women had a problematic status in the stern game of resisting Asia. In Lane’s ‘White or Yellow’ they were slow to realise the danger that the Chinese represented. Upper-class women were easily flattered by the suave manners and elaborate courtesies of the wealthy Chinese. Even among ordinary women, anti-Chinese sentiment was not as highly developed as it was among the men. The message was clear: Asia would make inroads into Australia through its gullible and politically naïve women. It was only when Queensland’s leading Chinese
businessman and politician raped and murdered the daughter of a rebel leader that the women in Lane’s story realised the danger they were in and rallied to the anti-Chinese cause. The rape and violation of a white female presaged the violation of the continent at the hands of the Chinese. It also positioned the bushman as the chivalrous defender of white womanhood against lascivious oriental males.

Lane’s story, timed to mark the centenary of white settlement in Australia, underlined the apparent vulnerability of the Australian colonies and their uncertain future on the edge of Asia. These were represented as worryingly small and increasingly feminised communities in which, according to Lane, the national spirit was weak and knowledge of Asia, particularly China, undeveloped. In these circumstances it seemed quite possible that Australia would become Asian. But the threat of Asia could be invoked for other purposes. The act of voicing the possibility of Australia’s Asian future demanded the creation of better alternatives. Lane wanted to see a manly, independent, republican Australia and it served his purpose to believe that Britain might well trade Australia’s independence as a white nation for better access to eastern markets. The prospect of losing Australia acted as a spur to development and population growth, particularly in the tropical north where white settlement had proved so difficult and controversial. One of the warnings in ‘White or Yellow’ was that no part of Australia could be sacrificed without jeopardising the whole.

Taking our lead from Lane, we can say that from the 1880s there developed a speculative literature around the idea that Asia—expansive Asia—would develop a growing interest in the settlement possibilities of empty Australia. Moreover, it seemed that there were shadowy, highly placed agents of Empire who would be only too willing to betray White Australia if the price were right. Invasion was the most obvious and dramatic expression of this fear, but the process of becoming increasingly Asian could take other forms and express different apprehensions. The impact of Australia’s climate on Anglo-Saxon settlers is a case in point. It was widely believed that Anglo-Saxon energies were the product of a cold climate and that Australia’s heat might weaken and diminish the race. There is a certain pathos in this story of a young and
largely untried community on the threshold of nationhood discovering predatory Asia and a huddle of unscrupulous imperialists at its door. Would the young nation rise up in defence of its right to exist or would it succumb to a force more powerful to become no more than a faint historical memory, a failed experiment in colonisation? Would Australia be remembered as a lost homeland?

The aspiration to create a secure and respected nation in Australia is closely linked to the rise of Asia and the threat it appeared to pose to the survival of White Australia. In considering what Asia might have meant to Australians at the end of the nineteenth century we need to consider the contexts in which Asia was invoked. That it was often invoked as a disciplining force, a means of urging Australians to perform their nation building duties more urgently and with more determination seems clear. Australians had to be convinced that holding their continent was no foregone conclusion. They would certainly have to argue for it and perhaps fight for it as well. Threatening Asia could serve a useful purpose in quickening the tempo of nation building. As an outpost of Empire, Australia had, at best, a modest role to play in the history of the British people. Against the gaudy backdrop of Empire, Australia's stories lacked colour and excitement and significance. Awareness of Asia's swarming populations helped confer a new and immensely important quality on Australia: uninhabited space on the edge of Asia. That, and something more: an emptiness that suggested renewal and a new beginning for the European race. It seemed all too believable that covetous Asian eyes were sizing up 'empty' Australia as a place to settle their overflowing populations. If 'they' recognised its value, it was high time that Australians also learnt to do so. It was a patriotic duty and a mark of racial responsibility.

In a crowded world there could be no greater prize than an empty landmass. For hungry Asia to want unused territories for its surplus populations seemed entirely believable. It was common sense. When reconfigured as an inviting space, Australia's value in the global scheme of things rose dramatically. It created an opportunity to move Australia from the margins of world interest to somewhere near the centre of an intensifying battle for space and racial advancement. In the coming
battle between East and West, control of the Australian landmass could be represented as vital to the future of the white race. Preserving Australia as a white homeland, particularly for its most valued and endangered Aryan strand, seemed a critical strategy. In Lane’s story, there was a sharp contrast between the nobility of struggling farmers and workers who were prepared to lay down their lives for a white Australia and the sordid, commercial motives of British imperialists who saw Australia as nothing more than an opportunity to pile up more cash. Lane had helped reinvent the taciturn bushman as a visionary and race hero, the foundation upon which an enduring white Australia would be built.

Proximity to Asia at once appeared to threaten Australia’s future as a white nation while at the same time making the survival of White Australia an issue of global significance. Lane’s highly coloured and melodramatic serial was a warning to Australians that Asia presented a more formidable threat to their future than they might have imagined. The ‘Chinaman’ was far from being the harmless and obsequious figure he was often represented as being. While Lane attributed every known vice to the Chinese, he also saw them as a clever and calculating adversary. Though it may be hard to recognise it as such, Lane’s story was a call for ‘Asia literacy’, a reminder that Asia—generic Asia—was no longer a somnolent giant, but a rising power.

Several years after Lane’s Queensland story, one of Victoria’s most respected intellectuals and political figures, Charles H. Pearson, brought out his great book of prophecy, *National Life and Character: A Forecast*. For all their many differences of background, education and class position, Lane and Pearson shared a similar preoccupation: the decline of the European world and the rise of Asia. World population trends and population movements fascinated them both and each agreed that the European and non-European races were fundamentally incompatible. Where Lane looked to popular fiction as the most effective vehicle for his message of race peril, Charles Pearson, historian and scholar, drew deeply upon the lessons of history, as he saw them, for his account of the future. Pearson’s carefully documented book was immediately recognised by intellectuals throughout Britain and North
America as a profound and disturbing study, an intellectual tour de force. Kaiser Wilhelm was engrossed in National Life and Character when he invented the phrase, 'the yellow peril'. In 1901 speakers in federal parliament invoked Pearson in their arguments in favour of immigration restriction.

Pearson pictured a world in which the ‘higher races’, a term he reserved for Europeans in general, had almost reached the outer limits of their expansion. There was little room for expansion in Europe, America had all but filled up and, so Pearson believed, whites could not expect to form permanent settlements in tropical and semi-tropical zones. He subscribed to the view that Europeans degenerated in the tropics. Europe was rapidly approaching a stationary condition and Australia appeared to be the one place left on earth that allowed for further expansion. Australians, Pearson declared, ‘are guarding the last part of the world, in which the higher races can live and increase freely, for the higher civilisation’. Playing a typically Victorian role, Pearson gave intellectual coherence and respectability to some of the more crudely expressed ideas, including William Lane’s, about the Asian threat to white hegemony. Pearson helped create the spatial vocabulary of White Australia. He made the case to set Australia aside for the renewal and advancement of the ‘higher civilisation’.

Pearson’s powerful and remorselessly documented formulation of Australia’s place in the world created an imposing responsibility. Australians were assigned a role critical to the future of their race both as guardians of precious territories and as forerunners of a coming race of newly energised Europeans. From this point forward, the racial character of the Australian, a subject that had already attracted a good deal of comment, became a matter of the highest moment. Only those deemed racially fit could be entrusted with the task of guarding a landmass so vital to Europe’s future. Enhancing the future of the white races conferred an importance upon Australia, a serious national, even global purpose, it did not otherwise possess. If ever there was a fatally attractive big idea dangled before a new nation, White Australia as guardian of the race was it. It soon became an ideal subject for sonorous speeches, many of them delivered in federal parliament. Moreover,
the business of keeping Australia white could be represented not as a narrow, parochial policy, but as an expansive gesture of racial solidarity in a world in which Europe’s future seemed increasingly imperilled. The creation of a white Australia became a daring mission, a visionary enterprise well suited to a community that liked to be considered the most adventurous and risk-taking branch of the Anglo-Saxon family. The idea of a white Australia invited soaring rhetoric about that most important of all topics: the Future.

While White Australia was ostensibly about the future, much of its impetus came from a profound unease at the collapse of distance in the modern world and the growing and unwelcome interaction between peoples of different races and cultures. Lane had gone to considerable lengths to describe the terrible impact of the Chinese on Brisbane’s moral character, cuisine and architecture. Moreover, he saw the Chinese quarter as a magnet for degraded whites whose conduct further lowered the standing of the ‘white man’. Although more philosophically inclined, Pearson was no less concerned at the thought of a world in which previously inviolable spaces and places like England’s cherished Ascot, the home of racing, or the salons of Paris, were increasingly patronised by Asians. The mere thought of such a racially contaminated world helped reconcile him to his impending death. To Pearson, mobile, plying Asia seemed destined to overrun the world, closing, in the process, the distances that had once kept the races apart. Lane and Pearson both beat a determined retreat from the cosmopolitanism and racial co-mingling that they predicted would become one of the distinguishing features of the new century.

Part of the appeal of White Australia to intellectuals lay in the belief that modern Australia might serve as a powerful reminder of what the race—Anglo-Saxon or Aryan, according to context and preference—had once been. Modern civilisation, particularly industrial civilisation, was routinely disparaged as anaemic and enfeebling. The business of race-building required that the finest expressions of racial prowess in the past would be celebrated and sustained in Australia. The old race, grown cramped and weary in Europe, or so the story ran, was to be revitalised in the antipodes. One of Pearson’s predictions was
that the modern world, while making better provision for the welfare of its citizens, would weaken the spirit of adventure, work against genius and limit the highest expressions of the literary imagination. Pearson dedicated the final chapter of *National Life and Character* to 'the decay of character' and its corollary 'the decay of vital power in the race'. Vital power suggested masculine energy and a zeal for nation building. Set against the background of an increasingly grey, prosaic and ageing European world, youthful and exuberant White Australia seemed poised to relive Europe's vibrant past in a new setting. Pearson had invented Australia as the last best hope of the European race.

The reform of the European body was central to this project. It was widely understood that modern civilisation was degenerative. Racial renewal required the renewal of bodily energies, a theme evident in the physical culture movement. Take Eugen Sandow's great Edwardian text, *Strength and How to Obtain It*, which developed a critique of modern civilisation and the evils of city living. Sandow's book contains a number of testimonials of personal transformation and bodily renewal. For Sandow, physical integrity required a rejection of the modern world and a rediscovery of the Greek past. Laurels, Grecian pillars and fig leaves abound. The race had to draw inspiration from beyond the cities and from times gone by.

The Greek motif, a commonplace of the physical culture movement in Australia and abroad, was a version of the much more widely distributed conviction that modern lifestyles harmed the race and reduced vital power. For those who wanted Australians to impress the world as an improvement on the racial stock from which they had been drawn, it followed that their closest affinities would be with the great epochs of the past. A. G. Stephens, the famous *Bulletin* literary critic and committed student of the interaction between race, climate and physiology, believed that Australians would breed a 'high-spirited race' that might 'have to look far back for its analogue until it meets Athens'. Then again there was the English observer who, after noting 'the fine strong grace' of Australian soldiers in London during the Great War, felt that they 'had bred back to the old strain'. Yet another
commentator found a ‘likeness between the Australian soldier and the English archer and yeomen of a bygone age’. Allusions to ‘the old strain’ and a ‘bygone age’ suggested that Australia might well discover an heroic future in the distant past.

Among its other meanings, youthfulness in its Australian context implied a return to the vigorous adolescence of the race. But this was a youthfulness repositioned in the world, juxtaposed against a hostile, debilitating modernity, and therefore youthfulness turned into a racial spectacle: youthfulness as national display and national affirmation. If Australians were throwbacks to a time when the race displayed its energies to better effect, it followed that they would come to resemble Homeric heroes or spirited Elizabethans or whoever else might have served to exemplify a more racially vital past. White Australia was to encourage the dormant adventuring instincts, the red-blooded love of life that had once distinguished the European race.

It should be noted that much of the language of race, along with its appeals to vital energies and powers, was shared in varying degrees in Europe and North America. This helps explain the Kaiser’s close interest in Pearson’s ‘Forecast’. Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States from 1901 to 1908 and one of Pearson’s most enthusiastic, though not uncritical reviewers, was an untiring opponent of anything that might lead to racial decline, or ‘race suicide’. His manly advocacy of the strenuous life as an antidote to modern civilisation and its discontents won over many Australians. For his part, Roosevelt made it known that he was concerned about the decline of the birth rate in Australia, believing that it made the nation vulnerable to an Asian invasion. This fear was particularly marked after Japan’s victory over Russia in 1905. Worrying as China had seemed to Lane and Pearson a decade or so earlier, Japan now appeared more worrisome still. Japan’s spectacular emergence as a Pacific power lent a new urgency to the speed and quality of settlement in Australia. White Australia had to commit to a regime of steady improvement.

The many references to vitality, stamina and deterioration in the literature proclaiming White Australia suggest a community highly sensitised to the nuances of bodily vigour. Even so, for all the assertions
about the qualities of Australians, it was impossible to know whether
the stock was improving, deteriorating or remaining much as it was.
W. A. Osborne, Professor of Physiology at Melbourne University,
repeated the old question about improvement or decline in an article
published in the Medical Journal of Australia in 1920: ‘Must the
stock be refreshed by repeated immigration or is the position
the reverse—is the stock so hardy that it can absorb and strengthen
many infusions of weaker blood?’ Osborne, writing in the aftermath
of the Great War, was cautiously optimistic about the Australian of the
future, but the answer to his impossible question is less important than
the recognition that this was a culture that took the ideas of weaker
blood and diminished energies seriously. To be of ‘weak stock’ was a
powerfully stigmatised condition. The individual who risked weaker
blood soon entered the shadowy world of degeneracy, where the decay
of character led on to perverted sexuality and physical impairment.
Assertions about the racial character of Australians were proclaimed
in the full knowledge that any loss of vitality, any suggestion of decline,
heralded a bleak national future. If Australians were to hold and
develop their continent it required a sustained commitment to racial
fitness and an unrelenting campaign against any weakening of the
blood.

Bodily prowess and stamina mattered. Both were taken as clear
signs of racial vigour, which in turn justified claims that white
Australians were the rightful inheritors of the continent. For some
commentators, bodily prowess seemed an end in itself. When J. H. L.
Cumpston maintained that Australia should strive to become a ‘para-
dise of physical perfection’ there was a sense that Australia could well
rest content with a reputation for perfected bodies. According to this
view, racial fitness might well prove to be the nation’s most enduring
asset. Meredith Atkinson, editor of Australia: Economic and Political
Studies (1920), believed Australians were well placed to achieve a dra-
matic advance in racial fitness, describing them as ‘the finest human
raw material in the world’. They were ideal breeding stock. When the
influential writer James Bryce visited Australia in the early 1920s he
claimed to have found ‘a virile and high-spirited race, energetic and
resourceful...’ Bryce went on to write that it was hard not to be affected by ‘the youthful vigour and optimistic spirit of the people...they are an asset precious to the world’. 25 It appeared to Bryce that Australia’s race-building mission was going according to plan.

When Bryce referred to ‘the world’ and the racial assets that Australians were able to contribute to its well-being he was thinking of Europe and North America, not Asia. His argument also pointed to a shift in thinking about the case to be made for an exclusionary immigration policy. While there remained a vocal community of opinion in favour of a massive population increase in Australia, there were also those who recognised that if settlement was simply a matter of numbers, Asian nations were likely to be able to generate larger population flows than European nations. Accordingly, it seemed more sensible to shift the emphasis from sheer numbers to quality and the value that ought to be placed on Australia’s capacity to improve the race by helping preserve and strengthen endangered bloodlines.

Concern about European decline had gained momentum during the Great War as Europe’s best and brightest fought each other to a standstill. Influential American race theorists like Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard and Ellsworth Huntington took up the theme of the progressive decline of the Aryan race. 26 Grant lamented the ‘passing of the great race’, anticipating the virtual extinction of the Aryans. Stoddard shared Grant’s concerns, pointing out that the ominous decline of the Aryan race was rendered more perilous by ‘the rising tide of color’. In making his case, Stoddard acknowledged the considerable debt he owed to Pearson’s National Life and Character and the role Australia could be expected to play in maintaining the fortunes of the great race. As the flame of racial excellence burned lower in Europe it was all the more important to keep it alive in Australia. While numbers and population growth were vital, it was no less important to ensure that Australia enlarged and revitalised Europe’s racial energies.

It seemed possible to defend the idea of Australia having a relatively small population if it could be seen that Australia had a vital role to play in enlarging the British spirit and in helping preserve the European inheritance. Since post-war gloom and doom were taken to be
signs of Europe’s growing decadence, it fell to Australia to reject neurasthenic modernity in favour of something altogether brighter and more optimistic. Australia’s ‘youthful optimism’ became something of a mantra through the troubled inter-war years, while the sun played a mighty role in brightening the spirit and enriching the blood. A people bathed in therapeutic sunshine, every last one of them beautifully bronzed, could not fail to evoke the splendid past of the great race. Their love of adventure, their passion for the outdoor life, their sporting prowess, their close connection to the heroic age of pioneering all affirmed the energising role Australians were expected to play in a European world grown old, tired and uncertain. The semi-official quality of this rhetoric is apparent in Arthur Adams’ novel, The Australians, published in 1920. It was an argument for the view that Australia should be taken seriously as a race-building enterprise. As one character explained: ‘the sun gets into your blood and this is the first white race that has had that experience since the world began. Australia is the largest-sized and the most tremendous experiment ever tried in race building, and Australia knows it’. Adams went to considerable lengths to point out that the creation of a new race in Australia was a deeply considered experiment. This was modern science at work and therefore not to be dismissed lightly. Australia was at the forefront of racial modernity.

The defence of Australia’s great experiment in white settlement was the subject of a detailed study by H. L. Wilkinson, The World’s Population Problems and a White Australia, published in 1930. Wilkinson acknowledged the ‘very considerable nervousness amongst all classes of people in Australia in regard to Asiatic migration and the policy of restricting it’. International opinion and particularly the League of Nations had shown a growing interest in population and migration. In a crowded world, was it right for so few Australians to claim exclusive use of so large a territory? After three hundred pages of close argument, Wilkinson concluded that it was a defensible position, but strict conditions applied. Holding the continent could be defended only if Australia’s population increase could be maintained at a rate above that of world population increase. Wilkinson set the Australian
figure at two per cent per annum but admitted to a 'haunting fear' that a declining birthrate might place this rate of increase beyond reach. He was also concerned that Australians would have to recognise that they had an important and growing responsibility to help solve the world's problems of overcrowding and poverty. For Wilkinson the best defence of White Australia lay in garnering widespread support among European nations for 'the ideal of Australia as a home for the European race and civilization'. Australia's best defence was to become a European inheritance and homeland along the lines that Pearson had spelt out in *National Life and Character*.

While doing all it could to promote Australia's importance to Europe, Australians would also need to watch their language. Wilkinson advised that the 'stupid nomenclature' of White Australia would need to be changed, though not the policy itself. He believed that Australians indulged in far too much foolishly provocative talk about whiteness. Just as the overt language of race might have to be concealed by more worldly and dissembling speech, so too should an attempt be made not to 'flaunt' Australia's high standard of living. Likewise, repeated references to a 'workers' paradise' helped create an impression of Australia as an island of privilege in a sea of poverty and disease. Wilkinson was also critical of those who talked of Australia's great potentialities, for such talk merely heightened the belief that Australians had selfishly decided to put their own interests first without consideration for others. Wilkinson advised that if Australians wanted to preserve a white Australia and deflect the charge of selfishness they would need to diminish the appearance of racial exclusivity and privilege, emphasising instead the hardships of Australian settlement, the harshness and aridity of inland Australia and the severe limits to population growth in a difficult continent.

It is clear from Wilkinson's impressively researched and carefully argued book that by 1930 the task of arguing the case for White Australia in a sceptical world had become a complex mission demanding greater skills of advocacy and far more knowledge of resource distribution and world population trends than ever before. There was also a clear recognition that a substantial immigration program that
consolidated Australia’s claim to being a European homeland was a necessary strategy for a nation that remained convinced that its future depended on the total restriction of non-European immigration. As it happened, Wilkinson’s two per cent growth figure was the target set for population growth under the post-war immigration scheme initiated in the 1940s. Massive post-war immigration was the boldest and most carefully planned of all the attempts to fill ‘empty’ Australia and, in so doing, preserve a degree of racial homogeneity. Even so, the call to maintain racial exclusivity proved increasingly difficult to sustain in the post-war world.