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ESSAY

Australia, Asia, and Cultural Anxiety


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It is a great pleasure to be here in Mildura and especially so at the Grand Hotel overlooking the River Murray. I spent my Freudian years a little further down the river in the bustling metropolis of Cadell. I am sure that knowing the Murray and its landscapes contributed something to my appreciation of Stefano’s witty, informative and endearingly Australian food program ‘Gondola on the Murray.’ It was a wonderful program and I wonder why there hasn’t been a new series. And that reminds me that I have a melancholy confession: I stand before you as a person who has not been approached to create my own food program for television and I am sadly aware that this places me in an increasingly small community.

My theme tonight is the recurrent idea that Australia could be expected to have an Asian future. From the 1880s there developed a speculative literature around the notion that Asia (‘generic Asia’ as I prefer to call it) would exert an increasing influence, possibly a determining influence, on the development and settlement of the Australian continent. There is a certain pathos about this story of a young, newly formed community on the threshold of nationhood finding Asia blocking its path. Would the ensuing contest be the making of white Australia; would the young nation define its national purpose and assert its right to exist or would it succumb to a force more powerful? Would white Australia become nothing more than a faint historical memory, a failed experiment in the complex and uncertain business of nation building? In short, would white Australia fail?

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These questions lead directly to a consideration of survivalist anxiety. The survivalist theme is a very broad one and is certainly not confined to Australia. Let me mention the survivalist writings of the American popular author, the Shakespeare of the genre, William Johnstone to help make this point. Johnstone has written on the theme of a post-nuclear holocaust America in what he calls ‘the Ashes’ series. The series begins with Out of the Ashes (1983) and six titles later had rushed to Wind in the Ashes (1986). A close student of texts may sense a faltering note of self-parody in this title and recognition that the series may have been nearing its end. Not so. There followed in breathtaking succession: Smoke in the Ashes, Danger in the Ashes, Valor in the Ashes, Trapped in the Ashes and, in 1990, Death in the Ashes. That would seem a logical enough spot to end the series. But by this point Johnstone was well aware that he had tapped a rich vein. He was off to the diggings. The series went on (and on) through Survival, Fury, Courage, Terror, Battle, Flames, D-Day, Betrayal, Chaos, Slaughter, Judgement, Ambush, Triumph, Hatred, Standoff, Crisis, Tyranny, Warriors, Destiny and Enemy all, it goes without saying, in the Ashes. In an exciting departure From the Ashes: America Reborn appeared in 1998 and there is talk of an Australian series beginning with ‘Winning the Ashes’ and ‘Battle for the Ashes’. The series continues.

The fight for survival is a powerful theme and one that allows for considerable speculation about race and nation, patriotism and character, them and us. Australia does not have a William Johnstone (a subject that invites further consideration), but we do have a survivalist literature. The idea of the Australian nation itself, I would suggest, is closely linked to the threat of racial oblivion or, more precisely perhaps, to the idea of disappearance. For late nineteenth century readers the decline and fall of once powerful civilizations and the disappearance of races was a familiar theme. Powerful races and mighty civilizations were known to have been swept aside in the ruthless march of history. William Lane, editor of the Boomerang, warned his readers that unprepared races faced a fate similar to that of the Cymric who had succumbed to the Saxons. Nearer to home, the imposing ruins of Borobodur in Java again reminded Lane that greatness was impermanent. The Asian world in general was often considered a decayed remnant of greater civilisations.

Behind these questions lurked some urgent considerations for colonial Australians. They were proud members of a mighty Empire, but even the mightiest of empires failed. No empire was so strong that it could expect to escape the inevitable law of historical decay. Imperial decline might well pose a threat to Australia’s future, but it could also be seen as an opportunity to renew the British race on the periphery of empire. Vigorous young Australia might come to the rescue. Then again, the theme of disappearance created an opportunity to consider Australia’s likely historical impacts. It was reasonable to wonder how a small and insecurely established colonial society might guarantee a place in history. Paradoxically
Perhaps, the threat of national disappearance lent a new urgency to the task of nation building and the creation of enduring historical legacies.

In considering the theme of permanence and disappearance, of strong and weak nations, it is worth examining the contexts in which ‘Asia’ is discussed. I would suggest that generic Asia is often invoked as a disciplining force, a means of urging Australia to perform its nationing tasks more urgently. It is both a call to arms and a call to thought. Avoiding an Asian future is represented as a national imperative, a condition of survival. But it was also the case that Australia’s value rose when it appeared that the continent was an object of envy to rival nations. As bad as it was for Australia to be wanted by other nations, it was worse for it not to be wanted at all. From the 1880s the strongest rival claim to the Australian continent appeared to come from Asia, hence the speculation about Australia’s Asian futures.

One of the curious effects of emphasising Australia’s Asian futures is the instant downgrading of past relationships with and understandings of Asia. This can appear to be a subject with no history or no history worth noticing. Indeed, the discovery of Asia is often represented as the work of a prescient, but lonely individual: a discovery made in cultural isolation. It is invariably the case that the discoverer is male, just as it is understood that saving the nation is a male responsibility. Communicating the vital importance of what was going on in Asia, its dynamic energies and transformations, was a recurrent theme in the invasion narrative. The lonely visionary features prominently in Charles H Kirmess’s The Commonwealth Crisis, serialised in the Lone Hand in 1908 and, in the same year in Francis Hopkins’ play, Reaping the Whirlwind. The lone discoverer continues into the present. In the 1990s Bob Hawke declared in that self-effacing way of his that he was ‘overwhelmingly responsible for the vision of Australia as part of Asia’. He went on to claim that ‘enmeshment with Asia’ had become a stock phrase. Even Paul Keating, he continued, ‘who in his early years had no real interest in Asia and was reluctant to visit the region’, even he took up the cry.

And, of course, he did. Keating’s impatience with the history of the relationship with Asia is clear when he comes to the central theme of his book, Engagement: Australia Faces the Asia Pacific: ‘Frankly, it no longer mattered how we dealt with Asia in the past, but how we would deal with a new Asia – newer at any rate than at any time since the great decolonisation period of the late 1940s and early 1950s.’ The idea that the new Asias we face are always rendering previous Asias obsolete (along with those who study them), this idea itself has quite a history and is certainly a powerful theme in late nineteenth century accounts of the rise of Asia – to which I now turn.

By the late nineteenth century narratives of Australia’s Asian futures had developed some of their most enduring forms. The possibilities of our theme are elaborated in different registers and across different texts and genres. I have in

Hingston’s brilliant and critically acclaimed travel book developed Asia as Australia’s preferred travel destination. This was, at the same time, travel into Europe’s Aryan past and into the origins of Aryan civilization in India. For Hingston, sturdy British imperialist though he was, no Australian could claim to be educated without having a knowledge of India and its religions. Alfred Deakin, a great admirer of *The Australian Abroad*, shared Hingston’s fascination both with Aryanism and with India’s immense contribution to the world’s spiritual heritage. While Hingston and Deakin were drawn to India’s deep past - to what Deakin referred to as the ‘antique orient’- they were also convinced that Australia was favourably placed to establish productive trading, cultural and educational links with India in particular and the East more generally. In describing Australia as ‘Southern Asia’ Deakin made the case that, geographically considered, Australia was a part of Asia. Only a century later, the visionary Bob Hawke hit upon a similar idea.

For Hingston and Deakin, Australia’s position in relation to Asia, or the East, is important to an understanding of Australia’s future, although that future remains somewhat abstracted and indeterminate. With William Lane and Charles Pearson the East is reconfigured as Australia’s immediate future; their focus is not on religion but on the geo-politics of race. Their Australian future has closed in and grown more claustrophobic. In his story Lane sets the Chinese invasion of Queensland twenty years into the future, well within the lifetime of most of his readers. Pearson is less precise about dates, but anticipates a future in which the East increasingly infiltrates and controls cultural and geographical spaces that were once exclusively European. It followed from the warnings of Lane and Pearson that dynamic and restless ‘Asia’ needed to be watched, analysed and understood: both Lane and Pearson are in the business of trying to modernise Australian thinking about the East. They seek to dispel (and render obsolete) comforting notions of the East as passive, changeless, inert, servile and craven. Lane and Pearson insist that their readers discard dated notions and get with the new program.

The new Asia presses upon Australia’s future, demanding new and sharper responses, just as invasive Asia threatens the disappearance of the nation itself. But Asian invasion should also be interpreted as a versatile narrative device: it helps make Australia appear more prized and certainly more worth fighting for. This
literature obeys a cultural logic very similar to Dorothea MacKellar’s famous call in 1904 to love a sunburnt country. It is about prizing Australia more highly. The invasion narrative also moves Australia from the margins of world concern to somewhere near the centre of a coming world conflict. By placing Australia near the imagined epicentre of the coming race war the nation is rendered more historically significant than it might otherwise have been. Rather than disappearing into history, Australia emerges a central player on the world stage and in the process becomes much more important strategically than it might otherwise have been.

I would suggest that the invasion narrative performs a similar function for the nation as the famed SWOT exercises beloved of management. Most of you would be familiar with the SWOT exercise. Typically, a member of the University executive on a salary four times your own appears with a large pile of butcher’s paper. You are required to form small groups and appoint a leader who then reports on the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats facing the faculty. Beyond the spectacular abundance of butcher’s paper it is sometimes hard to see the strengths. Failure to know what to write on the butcher’s paper is an obvious weakness. There is clearly an Opportunity to trade the paper surplus to a less endowed faculty; and that leaves Threats. Again, there are always plenty of them in Australia’s higher education sector. The invasion narrative may be read as a SWOT exercise that encourages an audit of the nation’s strengths and limitations. Its purpose is to strengthen, renew and energise the nation and to that extent it is integral to the nationalist project. For writers wanting to take Australia as their subject there is a simpler point to make: proximity to Asia and the possible threats emanating from the region provide good copy for dramatic stories.

I find myself following a SWOT logic in Anxious Nation. This runs an argument that the perceived rise of Asia from the 1880s quickened and intensified the masculinizing imperatives of the bush ethos: rural manhood and horsemanship were considered critical resources in the defence of an imperilled nation. There were strengths and opportunities there. Granted the enemy was an obvious threat, there were also internal weaknesses and particularly, so it appeared, in social tendencies that threatened the integrity of the bushman: urbanisation and the New Woman were considered corrosive, likewise the decline of the birth rate. The invasion narrative proved a great vehicle for the strenuous manhood so dear to Theodore Roosevelt’s heart. Frank Fox, a Roosevelt enthusiast and editor of the Lone Hand made the point very clearly: “the bushman was the backbone of resistance which the White Man will make to any Flow of Asia along the Pacific littoral”. Fox associates tidal flows and obliterated boundaries with Asia and with womanhood, whereas the preservation of boundaries is a male obligation and another vital task for rural manhood.
By the 1890s this masculinist discourse had become obtrusive enough for the fearless Rosa Campbell Praed to treat it satirically in *Madam Izan*. Madam Izan is blind, beautiful and an embodiment of the New Woman. She travels to Japan with a party of fellow Australians in the belief that the voyage will help recover her sight. It soon transpires that she has acquired two intense and deeply smitten suitors. There is a wealthy Queensland squatter who embodies all the qualities associated with eugenic manhood. Frank Fox would have been impressed. Her second suitor is an odd looking and seriously shortsighted Japanese gentleman. He is a puny specimen alongside the towering squatter, but he knows a thing or two about the cultural traditions of the East and talks winningly to Madam Izan on matters spiritual. When it comes to making a choice between Queensland manhood and the Japanese gentlemen, Madam Izan chooses the Japanese. It was a terrible rebuke to Australian manhood but also another demonstration of the fact that women could not be relied upon to understand the big issues of national security.

In the invasion story asianisation is represented as an act of violation in which ‘Asia’ forces itself upon its unwilling victim. But asianisation can also suggest subtler and more elusive transformations. Such apprehensions can be found in the extensive discussion of climate and racial formation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it was commonplace to argue that Anglo-Saxon drives, energies and colonising gifts were the product of a cold climate on the grounds that such a climate required planning, foresight and the ability to manage scarce resources. These demands helped produce big and capable brains. In the tropics things were very different. The climate produced lethargy, while also supplying food in abundance all year round. It was claimed that this reduced the need for planning and dulled the spirit of enterprise. The climate made fewer intellectual demands, thereby reducing the capacities of the tropical brain. It must be admitted that Chinese and Japanese brains presented a thorny problem since both countries experienced bracing winters. The capacities of the Japanese brain were much discussed, while in late nineteenth and early twentieth century discussions of the Chinese they are commonly considered 'big-brained' people. Sax Rohmer's Dr Fu Manchu had such a large brain that it needed to be housed behind a brow as expansive as Shakespeare's.

If a cold climate race was subjected to Australia's warmer conditions and especially conditions in the tropical north, it seemed reasonable to expect degeneration, a condition sometimes referred to in the literature as 'Punjab head' or, where it applied to women, 'kitchen neurasthenia'. I suspect there was a lot of that about in Cadell where the combination of a corrugated iron roof, fierce summer heat an industrious little wood stove always on the go produced ideal conditions for degeneration, but I digress. In a climatically driven reading on Australia's future, asianisation becomes a process of progressive physiological transformation, signalled by tropical lethargy and a tendency to lean rather than
stand unsupported, hence worried allusions to Australians as 'leaners'. What future could Australians expected if the climate leached energies, eroded nerves and impaired them physiologically? It appeared to be another form of asianisation though in this instance its transformations were slow and largely invisible. It seemed possible that Australians might have been turning into a tropical, asianised race without anyone quite knowing. It was all a little unnerving.

I make the point in Anxious Nation that the possibility that British settlement in Australia might fail intensified the fascination with race narratives: disappearing races, lost races, remnant populations are common in fin-de-siecle writings. There is a naggingly persistent reminder that if Australian colonists failed to make a success of their venture, other more tenacious races would not hesitate to step in. In Ambrose Pratt's novel of invasion and northern settlement, The Big Five, a mix of Japanese, Malay and Chinese settlers are busily at work making a thriving settlement in northern Australia. They represent a possible Asian future in Australia's north. In The Coloured Conquest the narrator is represented as the last free white man, the last of his tribe. There were numerous reminders that the fate that had befallen Aboriginal Australia might also befall white Australia if its colonising performance did not improve dramatically. Australia's experiment with white settlement might fail and in an Asian Australia who would remember Australia's white history and who would care? This was the pathos of disappearance, an anxiety still obvious in current debates about the proper shape of Australian history. But perhaps I should leave that debate to the dead white males amongst us.

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