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Through the 1980s and into the 90s the contention that Australia was part of Asia attracted increasing comment and high-level political support. A good deal of talk centred on Australia’s growing enmeshment with Asia, the importance of continued engagement and the need for Australians to acquire “Asia literacy.” These positions rested on the argument that Australia was then undergoing a transition from a period when knowledge of Asia was negligible to a new era of cultural receptivity and developing Asia awareness. Unfortunately, this imagined quantum leap from a past state of ignorance to a present state of enlightenment has reinforced ideas that commentary upon Asia in earlier periods was too flawed and inadequate, too intellectually impoverished to merit serious examination. In this view, when it came to Australian representations of Asia, there was no history worth examining.

One of my purposes in Anxious Nation (1999) — an examination of Australian responses to Asia in the period from 1850 to 1939 — was to demonstrate that from the late nineteenth century (and perhaps earlier) the idea of “Asia” in its many different forms was an essential, though not fully explored or understood element in the “invention” of an Australian nation (Walker 1999; White 1981). Accordingly, recent debates about Asia literacy and “engagement,” rather than representing an absolute break with the past, fall within a century-old discourse on Australia’s possible Asian futures.

A persistent question informed Asia-related speculations from the late nineteenth century: could Australians continue to justify their exclusive possession of the vast continent at their disposal and, in the process,
defend their extended coastline from nearby Asia? Related questions followed. Could Australia's performance on the key indices of population growth, productivity and adaptation to new environments match that of the Chinese? Were Australians capable of the same levels of discipline and patriotic commitment as the Japanese? The defence of Australia's exposed borders from outside incursion required an affirmation of the legitimacy of white Australia's colonizing mission. White Australia claimed the right to be left alone to complete the task of building a new and distinctive democracy, a new people. In this schema, "Asia" helped define our difference, sharpening the sense of what was rare and valuable in the Australian experience, while also threatening the ultimate destruction of a fully realized democratic Australia. Proximity to Asia could be represented as a threat to "our" future and "our" right to exist.

**Marginality and the Figure of the Asianist**

It can hardly be denied that ignorance and prejudice towards Asian nations, cultures and peoples has figured prominently in our history. Australia has often been depicted as a nation that has consistently failed to understand Asia, despite the contention that it is uniquely placed among European nations to do so (For Australians being "uniquely placed" to study Asia see Broinowski 1992, Preface). One response to this view has been to cast "the Asianist" as a prophetic figure, with knowledge critical to the nation's future. Yet in being sharply at odds with mainstream Australian values it was the fate of the Asianist to be largely ignored or dismissed. The Asianist, in this view, is the prescient outsider, ignored in his own time, but awaiting vindication. These prophetic figures appear in novels of Asian invasion like Charles Kirmess's *The Commonwealth Crisis* (1909) or Ambrose Pratt's *The Big Five* (1910). Theirs were for the most part warning voices, pointing to the dangers ahead from a resurgent Asia.

Use of the term "Asianist" normally applies to the specialist student of Asia, working for the most part in a University. Using this definition, Australia had virtually no Asianists until the development in the 1940s of Asian Studies programs at Canberra University College and the Universities of Tasmania and Western Australia (Legge 1990). However, there is something to be said for broadening the scope of the term to include those who argued, in fact and in fiction, for the closer study of Asia on the grounds that Asian developments would transform power relations in the modern world. Defined in this way, figures like William Lane, the anti-Chinese zealot, labour movement
organiser and late nineteenth century radical intellectual or the Oxford-educated historian and Victorian cabinet minister, Charles Pearson, author of *National Life and Character: A Forecast*, published in 1893, can be considered Asianists. Both saw knowledge of China and the Chinese as keys to the future. China's huge population and unstable central government made them concerned for Australia's future and all the more so as the Chinese had proven themselves to be such adaptable colonists, not least in Australia.

There remain a number of questions about both the shifting terminology applied to Asia and the attributes that were said to characterise the East. Where the great imperialist Lord Curzon, for example, saw the stationery Orient, Charles Pearson saw geo-political ferment and dramatic change. Was Australia developing some distinctive perspectives on Asia? The *Athenaeum*, reviewing Pearson's *National Life and Character* certainly thought so. Pearson's was not a book written from a European vantage point, but from Melbourne and when viewed from Melbourne, Asia and Europe looked distinctly different. The *Athenaeum* (4 March 1893) commented: “Europe loses altogether the precedence it has always enjoyed. It appears here as not only the smallest, but as the least important continent [...]” (*Athenaeum* 273-74). By contrast, China loomed very large indeed. Some of the wisdom of the prophetic Asianist lay in the realisation that Australia appeared to stand in a different relationship to looming Asia than was the case for any other European nation (*Athenaeum* 273-74).

**Narrative Strategies**

In urging Australians to keep a close eye on Asia, Lane and Pearson joined those who feared that the rise of Asia might spell the end of European civilisation. They were far from being alone in arguing that East and West had been involved in a centuries old struggle for dominance in which each sought to eliminate the other. The eliminationist paradigm allowed no room for compromise or co-existence. Francis Adams, one of the leading lights of the labour movement press in the 1880s and 1890s put the case clearly enough: “The Asiatic [...] must either conquer or be conquered by, must either wipe out or be wiped out by the Aryan and the European” (Adams 1888). This was presented as a law of history and it was considered dangerously naive to argue against it. From the inauguration of the Commonwealth in 1901, White Australia was based upon an eliminationist logic which assumed that all Asians were potential enemies of the state; spies in waiting.
In a world of shrinking distances Australia appeared to be heading towards an increasingly Asian future. Putting the truth or otherwise of this proposition to one side, the prospect of an encounter between a newly formed and sparsely settled "white" nation and populous Asia was full of exciting narrative possibilities. This had all the hallmarks of a big story. Imperiled Australia, alone in Asia, was a theme worth writing about and all the more so as it connected Australia to the centuries-old struggle between East and West.

The dramatic possibilities of racial conflict and world domination could not to be lightly dismissed. Life and death struggle was the meat and drink of popular fiction. Race conflict was perfectly suited to this cloak and dagger world as the popular British novelist Sax Rohmer was to demonstrate in a series of best-selling novels based on the figure of Dr. Fu Manchu. The Fu Manchu stories, running from 1913 to the 1950s, did not theorise race conflict, they personalised and dramatised it through the figure of the evil doctor and his British adversary, Sir Denis Nayland Smith. There was no question that Fu Manchu wanted to overthrow the white world, but interpreting how these stories of race psychology and the struggle for power and supremacy were read at the time is another matter and a matter for another time.

The invasion story formed a sub-genre in the narratives of racial conflict and has a significant place in Australian literature. William Lane was the first to develop a fictional account of an Asian invasion of Australia, serialised in the Boomerang in 1888 as *White or Yellow? A Story of the Race-war of A.D. 1908*. The story was located in Queensland, with the Chinese as the invaders (Sketcher 18 Feb. 1888-5May 1888). Lane developed and reworked a genre that had already achieved considerable popularity in Britain where various continental invaders, particularly the Germans, plotted the conquest of England (For a comprehensive survey of war literature, including invasion novels see Clarke 1992). It is clear that Australian narratives of Asian invasion belong to a broader literature in which the enemy outside the nation's borders provided an opportunity to examine both the strengths and weaknesses of the nation and the meaning of sovereignty. Daniel Pick's *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in the Modern Age* (1993) helps contextualise this literature by providing a revealing analysis of the invasion story and its associated concern with war, degeneracy, violation and national betrayal in late nineteenth century England. For his part, William Lane identified British imperialism and its Australian supporters as a source of weakness on the grounds that imperial interests were only too happy to deal with the East for...
trade benefits. For Lane, the defence of Australia would come from bush-bred republicans who put nation before Empire. In telling the story, Lane nonetheless draws heavily on the richly coded language of degeneration and renewal, effeminacy and virility that pervades late nineteenth century discourses on sovereignty and border protection.

Invasion stories enabled authors to explore the conditions of independent nationhood in Australia, but threatening Asia certainly created an air of urgency and narrative pressure, it intensified the drama. There could hardly be a bigger question than the disappearance of a new nation. Would Australia become the first victim of awakened Asia’s march to world supremacy? Furthermore, if this was the fate awaiting the Australian people, how might they publicise their plight internationally and prepare themselves to meet the danger at home? Seen in this light, proximity to Asia enhanced Australia’s significance, turning the fifth continent from a distant and forgotten landmass into a strategically vital possession in the war between the races. Threatening Asia lent Australia a strategic importance it did not otherwise possess. Asia configured as a threat effectively created a new topic for the speculative writer and the expanding fiction industries that served the needs of a growing reading public, itself the product of urbanization, higher levels of literacy and more discretionary spending (For the growth of popular literature and new reading cultures see Nile and Walker 2001).

One of the persistent claims in the invasion literature was that Asian interests were given a far too sympathetic hearing within Australia. Lane imagined the political elite of Queensland working hand in glove with Chinese business interests to create a Eurasian state run by the Chinese. More generally, he considered women vulnerable to the suave manners and beguiling exoticism attributed to the East. He was not alone in doing so. While not actively conspiring against the nation’s interests women, in Lane’s view, were nonetheless prone to a dangerous fascination with things Asian; they were inclined to accommodate and appease (For an extensive discussion of the gendering of Asia see Walker 1999: 127-140). Withstanding Asia was represented as a male undertaking.

In a further twist to this argument, it was suggested that the decline of the West would lead directly to the collapse of chivalrous attitudes towards women. Chivalry was considered absent among Eastern cultures, where the brutal suppression and exploitation of women was said to be the norm. The rape of a farmer’s daughter by a politically powerful Chinese businessman was central to William Lane’s White or Yellow? and proved to be a turning
point in the battle to expel the Chinese from Queensland. It followed that those who wanted to bridge the gap to Asia could be accused of delivering Australian women into rape and servitude. The Bulletin, although persistently anti-feminist in the 1890s and early 1900s, could nonetheless represent its masculinist campaign against Asian influences, mediated through the rough hewn figure of the bushman, as an act of chivalry (For a searching analysis of Bulletin representations of women see Peers 1999).

Lane, writing in the 1880s, was one of the first to allege that there was a conspiracy to asianise Australia from within. It was hardly possible to make such a claim without also alleging that Asian nations had developed a suspiciously close interest in Australia’s progress and that, within Australia, there were those who, either knowingly or naively, worked with the Asian enemy. Behind Lane’s active conspirators was a larger group of suspect citizens who were considered much too sympathetic to Asian interests. Exactly a century later Geoffrey Blainey alleged that Australia had an immigration policy that was largely the work of a band of pro-Asian conspirators working behind closed doors in Canberra (102-3). In 1996, Denis McCormack advanced a sweeping interpretation of the asianisation debate. He had discovered a nationwide refusal among power elites to discuss “the grand plan for the long-term Asianisation of Australia.” McCormack’s “grand plan” is a direct descendant of the high level conspiracies against the ordinary people outlined in Lane’s White or Yellow?

Australia’s Asian future was a subject that attracted rumour and innuendo. It provided a happy hunting ground for conspiracy theories. The literature of invasion, the spy novel and the works of popular novelists, both home-grown and overseas, like Sax Rohmer, can help the historian interpret the language of intrigue, betrayal and suspicion that is integral to the discourse on the “awakening East.” To eliminate the irrational from this debate or suppose that it can be neatly categorised as prejudice is to miss both the power and the continuing appeal of demonic Asia and the rich elaborated discourses on race, loyalty and national betrayal. Yet it must also be noted that rumour, intrigue and conspiracist doctrines notwithstanding, some of the worst excesses of a strident and fully racialised nationalism were largely contained. There was no organised attempt to promote Australia as an Aryan nation (The case for Australia as an Aryan nation was outlined in American publications see Grant 1916; Stoddard 1920). It may be that assertiveness of this kind appeared excessively provocative and therefore best avoided, though the measured assessment of risk is not generally considered one of the strengths of conspiracist thinking.
The appeal of disappearing Australia as a narrative device, which is inherent in the asianisation debate, has an enduring history. Donald Horne used it to considerable effect in *The Lucky Country*, first published in 1964 and re-issued many times thereafter. Horne tells us that after a trip through Asia in 1963 he returned home believing that Australia was “worth a book.” He explained his position in these terms: “In the future it might be of interest to know what the huge continent was like in those early days in the nineteen sixties before it was peopled from all over Asia.” According to Horne, proximity to Asia gave Australia a significance it might not otherwise have had and the interest was rendered that much greater by the prospect of Australia’s transformation into an increasingly Asian nation (Walker 1997).

**THE NATIONING PROCESS**

The idea that Australia could be expected to have an Asian future made regular appearances from the 1880s, while the act of invoking Asia was closely implicated in the nationing process. Australian possibilities, not least the colonising mission itself (including fundamental questions of population and settlement) were profoundly influenced by speculations about what might become of Australia and, not least, Australian women, if the continent came under Asian management.

The historian Peter Cochrane used the happy phrase “survivalist anxieties” to characterise Australia’s endangered future in Asia (Cochrane 1999). It is customary to attribute a confident sense of superiority to the Anglo-Australians of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australia, but in doing so we can lose sight of the intricate workings of survivalism. There is a persistent note of unease in the commentaries upon the rise of Asia about the quality and strength of Australia’s colonising performance. A population of 4 million in 1900 was interpreted as a quite inadequate response to Australia’s colonising opportunities. The problem was compounded by a declining birthrate and increasing urbanisation. The stern disciplines and colonising energies that had built the empire were giving way to bread and circuses and the frothy pastimes of the city. Fibreless pleasure had overtaken patriotism, or so it could seem.

To the insecurities associated with a small, highly urbanised population a long way from “home,” there were the added burdens and uncertainties of the Australian climate. As late as 1939, one of the leading authorities on white settlement in the tropics, the Australian geographer A. Grenfell Price doubted,
on the basis of a comprehensive analysis of settlement data from around the world, that white Australians could succeed in the tropical north (For an illuminating discussion of settlement in the tropics see Anderson 1997). If the tropics were not suited to permanent white settlement, as expert opinion maintained, what were the prospects for the successful occupation of tropical Australia? The problem of settling the “empty north” was a constant reminder of the vulnerability of white Australia. Anglo-Australian colonists seemed incapable of settling territories that many considered ideally suited to the tropical races to Australia’s north. If “they” could prosper where “we” failed how could it be legitimate to exclude them? (For the debate over populating northern Australia see Walker 1999: 113-126; Langfield 2001).

Alongside Australia’s problematic status as a geographical entity there were the persistent questions about the physiological status of the Australian. The racial character of Anglo-saxons was routinely attributed to the cold climates which had (so the argument ran) shaped, toughened and disciplined them into formidable colonisers. What might become of them in Australia’s warmer climates? Would they begin to degenerate? The first intimations of these changes could appear harmless enough. What was there to fear in the signs of a warmer, more pleasure-loving people? Nothing at all unless these signs were interpreted, as they sometimes were, as the ominous beginnings of a physiological change, a subtly asianising force reconfiguring blood, nerves and character. It was not too far-fetched to imagine that climate and geography were now conspiring to asianise the continent and its white inhabitants (See Australasian Medical Congress 1921).

**Dynamic Asia**

Where indolence and decline were commonly attributed to the Australian population, generic Asia was often represented as a dynamic and newly energised world. Nineteenth century intellectuals, Alfred Deakin (Temple and Tomb in India, 1893) among them, traced the great religions to India along with the origins of Aryan civilisation. For those who imagined that Eastern wisdom belonged to the past, the example of post-Meiji Japan was a reminder that new leaders and a modernising spirit were also to be found in “awakening” Asia. In the space of a generation Japan had mastered many of the technologies of the West and had laid the foundations of a modern, industrialising state. A regular flow of travellers to Japan wrote admiringly of this achievement (Hingston 1885; Want 3 Aug. 1889-27 Sept. 1889). In the popular culture of the West, Asian leaders of frightening ability were
common, though few were endowed with the immense intellectual force and scientific brilliance attributed to Dr. Fu Manchu.

While Australia’s Asian future was often rendered as an impending tragedy it remains the case that the benefits of “engagement” were also canvassed much earlier than is commonly recognised. This was hardly the dominant discourse, but by the 1930s there were highly-placed converts to the view that Australia was an Asia-Pacific nation whose future would be determined by events in the region. Among the earliest exponents of the view that Australia stood to gain from its proximity to Asia were the commercial agents and trade commissioners who sought to publicise the growing importance of Asian markets. From the 1830s, British India had shown itself to be a lucrative market for the sale of horses, while the rise of post-Meiji Japan encouraged the view that modernising Asian economies would generate new demands for products that Australia was well-placed to supply from food products to wool (For an historical overview of trade with Asia see Tweedie 1994; For nineteenth century trade with Japan see Johnson 1986).

Proponents of closer trading ties with Asia faced vociferous and often vituperative opposition from Australian nationalists who were always on the lookout for yet another plot to asianise Australia for the Empire’s benefit. The commercial spirit was blamed for stirring sleeping Asia, according to one Commonwealth parliamentarian, Patrick Glynn (1910), into a new state of “moral restlessness and military activity,” developments that were thought highly detrimental to Australia’s future (4444). Commerce was considered cosmopolitan and tainted. Yet there are fascinating, though often historically obscure figures among those who promoted trade with the East.

Hidden away in the twelve elegantly bound monthly issues of *The Institute of Bankers of New South Wales* for 1906 is a learned essay irresistibly titled, “British Traditions and Australian Decadence” by one such figure, J. Currie Elles, Esq. Elles’s essay ranged boldly over the glories of India and the achievements of the Chinese, Burmese and Siamese Empires. Elles was appalled at the narrowness of white Australia doctrines and dismissed “yellow peril” talk as ignorant nonsense. As more of his essays and public addresses came to light, including a well-argued proposal for the integration of Asian language teaching with commercial education in Australian Universities, it became clear that this utterly forgotten figure may be more interesting to us now than many of his much more celebrated contemporaries. Elles saw an opportunity to create a new generation of Australian business leaders equipped with the
cultural and linguistic skills that would put them in the forefront of trade with Asia. That was 1910 (Walker 1999).

**Cultural Amnesia**

Elles proved to one of a number of proponents of closer economic ties with Asia in the period from the late nineteenth century to the Second World War. This proved to be a surprisingly diverse community. It is fair to generalise that an interest in Asia has tended to place such figures beyond the boundaries of mainstream Australian history. Consider the Hungarian-born Alexander Marks who traded as a merchant in Yokohama from 1859 and served in consular roles for colonial governments for over twenty years from 1879. Marks was fluent in Japanese and an early exponent of trade with the East. There is an intriguing figure here, but his career remains on the antiquarian margins of our history (Sissons 1980). A similar fate has befallen J. B. Suttor, a major figure in Australia-Japan relations, but a minor one in national histories.4

A striking feature of the debate over trade with the East is the lack of historical memory among its proponents and those charged with the need to frame policy. From the 1880s, report after report commented upon the limitations of Australian marketing and the failure to understand the requirements of consumers in Asia. In the twenty years from 1903, when he was appointed New South Wales trade commissioner to Asia, based in Japan, Suttor developed a sophisticated critique of the skills and cultural sensitivities that successful trade in the region would require. In regular trade Bulletins to the New South Wales government, Suttor was particularly critical of the packaging and labelling of Australian goods and the apparent failure to realise that these were becoming increasingly competitive markets (Suttor 35). Similar comments were made through the 1920s. Herbert Gepp and A.C.V. Melbourne repeated them in separate reports in 1932 (Report on Trade between Australia and the Far East; Report on Australian Intercourse with Japan and China) and Sir John Latham raised them again on his Goodwill Mission of 1934. Similar complaints continued well after the Second World War. Each new report or commentary appeared to begin with the assumption that there was either no prior body of knowledge on the question or nothing capable of illuminating current issues. The relationship with Asia appeared to operate outside of history with each generation believing that it was the first to stumble upon the East. This was another dimension of the visionary paradigm governing Asianist thought: Asia belonged to
Australia's future. It was a subject without a history.

**Future Directions**

One of the challenges in writing about "Australia" and "Asia" is the need to achieve some conceptual clarity about what these categories might mean, without essentialising both or failing to allow for change over time. The ninety years or so covered in *Anxious Nation* encompasses immense changes especially in Asia, but Australia also moved from a group of dependent colonies to a Commonwealth developing, at the end of the period, something resembling a foreign policy. "Australia" was a fluid and contested entity through this period. Debates on climate and northern Australia, for example, open up the question of what "Australia" might have meant around the turn of the century. There were continental aspirations behind the Commonwealth takeover of the Northern Territory in 1910, but whether northern Australia was destined to move from an Aboriginal to an Asian possession seemed an open question. "Australia" was a fluid category and its possible futures seemed much more problematically "Asian" than we might imagine to have been the case. It was Australia's conceptual instability and its apparent evanescence, that could make "Asia" seem so patiently watchful, enduring and threatening. White Australia, it was argued, would need to find its own counter-mythologies of permanence, patriotism and enduring national character.

It has been one of Australia's tasks in its post Second World War relationship with Asia to assert difference without arousing enmity. From the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, the pervasive language of difference across all social strata was racially-based. There was very little that race could not be called upon to explain. Moreover, race was a ranking device, inevitably preoccupied with higher and lower, superior and inferior, the strong and the weak, the swift and the slow. The attempt to engage Asia raises one of the central and most urgent issues in our history: the multiple impacts of race in the colonising project and not least on the dispossession of Aboriginal cultures. For all that, race was also a powerful sustaining myth, a way of defining and encouraging positive energies and laudable aspirations among Australian colonists who were themselves drawn from a range of backgrounds and often sharply divergent cultures.

David Carter has argued that just as over the last decade Aboriginal studies have moved close to the centre of debates about Australian identities and the formation of the nation, so too will "Asia," in the coming decade,
move from the margins of our history-making towards the centre of our examination of the nationing project (210). In the process it will be necessary to replace often-repeated notions about Australia’s ignorance of Asia with more culturally precise and contextualised readings both of what “Asia” and its derivatives might mean, but also of how “Asia” is used and invoked.

In Australia’s post-Tampa world we have seen a return of survivalist anxieties in which human rights and citizenship, categories that the West sought to universalise and institutionalise after the Second World War, are weighed against the rights of a supposedly embattled nation to secure its borders. Where the survival of the nation is said to be at risk, upholding the rights of refugees and minorities can be represented as a luxury the nation can no longer afford. The logic of this kind of survivalism is to reduce the world to a battle between them and us where “their” role is to subvert, undermine and weaken “our” will to survive as a nation. What is striking about the recent election campaign is not that immigration and outsiders became an issue, but that openness and diversity went largely undefended as Australian achievements. This was the politics of radical anxiety fed, no doubt, by globalisation but displaced onto a readily identifiable and readily blamed body of “queue jumpers” and “illegals.” The psycho-dynamics of this campaign await closer scrutiny.

Australia’s wary encounter with emergent Asia from the late nineteenth century created a history of fears of subversion at the hands of clever, duplicitous and often malevolent foreigners. In these encounters it was the responsibility of the Australian male to protect the nation’s women and children who could not be expected to understand such threats. Protecting borders is men’s work and a masculinising enterprise. Survival in these terms demands a hardening of resolve and the elimination of anything that could be construed as either soft or softening. Just as there was a powerful disciplining rhetoric at heart of the Asian invasion narrative, a mission designed to rescue the nation from the seductive lure of the good life, so too is there an appeal to discipline and obligation in John Howard’s Australia. These commitments, as Kanishka Jayasuriya has argued recently, “redefine access to benefits in terms of fulfilling certain specific obligations, rather than as rights citizens possess by virtue of membership in the political community” (62). According to this logic, citizenship and human rights, along with reconciliation, must be relegated to the realm of dangerously soft and impractical ideals. Where the logic of “engagement” was to broaden and extend our sympathies, the appeal to national security invites a return to the disciplinary regimes of patriotism,
obligation and military preparedness.

NOTES


2 There were fifteen novels featuring Dr. Fu Manchu published from 1913 and a series of films beginning in 1923 with "The Mysteries of Dr. Fu Manchu." This literature is examined in Chapter 13 — "The Evil Doctor," Walker (1999): 168-180.

3 Neatly summarised in C. H. Pearson’s arresting statement (1893): “We are guarding the last part of the world in which the higher races can live and increase freely, for the higher civilisation” (17).

4 J. B. Suttor’s earliest trade bulletins were published by the Intelligence Department, New South Wales and later, and rather incongruously, by the Immigration and Tourist Bureau, New South Wales. A thesis by Glen Walsh, "John Bligh Suttor and the New South Wales Commercial Agency in the East," B.A. (Hons), University of Sydney, 1979, has apparently disappeared.

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