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In 1894, Charles H. Pearson, a leading intellectual and former Victorian Cabinet Minister looked into the future. He saw Western civilisation ageing and growing more timid. The future might bring a fairer and more comfortable world, but at the expense of heroism. He predicted the 'decay of character' and with it a decline of literary epics capable of stirring the imagination and setting the blood racing. The limits placed on European expansion disturbed Pearson more. He feared a world in which Asia, particularly China, exerted a growing geo-political influence. At this point, Pearson allowed himself a curiously personal confession. It worried him that familiar and domestic locations, drawing rooms, theatres or race courses, might be infiltrated by Chinese people assuming a right to equality. It seemed a terrible affront to have a known and familiar place intruded upon in this way. By the 1890s, Pearson had defined any Asian presence in Australia as a significant cultural loss; something that weakened and diminished the nation. While the intruder was wholly unacceptable, so too were those who spoke on their behalf. That was an act of cultural betrayal. Professor Griffith Taylor made this discovery in the 1920s when he speculated that a case could be made for a modest intake of Asian immigrants. The outspokenly
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Australian newspaper, Smith's Weekly, led the charge by denouncing Taylor as 'the counsel for the yellow streak'.

Enter Hou Leong, painter and accomplished satirist. A century after Pearson's troubled speculation he took an absolutely familiar theme, Crocodile Dundee tenderly embracing his blond lady love, and replaced the leathery figure of the crocodile hunter with his own image. A calmly smiling Chinese face looks out from the canvas. Hou Leong's repertoire includes a number of cultural 'intrusions' of this kind where entirely familiar Australian scenes and landscapes are dramatically disrupted by a Chinese figure or cultural monument like the Great Wall. However unsurprising it might be to have people of different backgrounds in Australia, it is nonetheless a shock to have Hou Leong appear as Crocodile Dundee as if he had as much right to assume such a role as anyone else. Even the most receptive Anglo observer is forced to acknowledge that much of the power of the image lies in a recognition that this Chinese fellow has gate crashed 'our' party. He might be acceptable, even welcome, in all sorts of roles and locations but surely not as the iconic crocodile hunter. He could be many things, but not a real Australian.

Hou Leong's work asks the question, when is one accepted as Australian? It has been a question asked by those designated as the 'other' for a long time. In the 1880s the Italian socialist Francis Sceusa sought refuge in Australia and attempted to make it his home. His 1888 pamphlet Hail Australia! was an appeal to Australians to set aside "race distinctions, prejudices and hatreds". Sceusa felt that there was a lack of historical appreciation and understanding in Australia. He defended Italy and Italians from charges of inferiority, arguing that Australian culture had yet to distinguish itself in any significant form, whereas Italy was the product of thousands of years of cultural evolution. He despised being called a "foreigner" and wondered how long it would
Hou Leong's satire on Australian national character.
take for him, and those from non-English speaking nations, to be accepted as Australians. It is a question that is still being asked.

From the late nineteenth century to the 1960s the ideal of a White Australia—a homogenous nation of British-Australians—dominated Australian political and cultural life. By imposing ever increasing immigration restrictions the Australian colonies, and then Commonwealth had, by 1901, determined that the flow of non-European arrivals would be as limited as possible. There was to be no ‘Other’ to disturb Australia’s future. Many Australians hoped that complicated cross-cultural negotiations and exchanges would be unnecessary. They believed that nationalism was a more robust and energising sentiment than cosmopolitanism. It was felt that unity could only be guaranteed by racial homogeneity. Belief in a White Australia was more than a value; it became emblematic of the nation, defining the aspirations of the generations after Federation and, for those who noticed, how Australia was recognised abroad. But it should also be conceded that the attempt to create a people was a precarious undertaking that required common goals, interests and values. It required an awful lot of glue to make a nation.

This chapter will explore the resistance of several ‘white’ Australians to racial prejudice and racial exclusion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was a formative period in Australia’s history when the key institutions of national life were being created. Although the popularity of the White Australia ideal made it a hegemonic value in the early Commonwealth period, hegemony rarely goes uncontested. As the early colonial restrictions were updated and broadened by the new Commonwealth, a small but important group of Australians questioned the prevailing orthodoxy. Australia, they argued, had made a serious error in trumpeting racial homogeneity as the basis of national life. In the House of Representatives, Arthur Bruce Smith,
the Free Trade member for Parkes, subjected the White Australia ideal to a withering critique and used his position as editor of a monthly magazine, United Australia, to allege that Australia had embarked upon an isolationist course that would turn an already ignorant Australia into an international pariah. Smith preferred the ‘ideal of the cosmopolitan’ to narrow racial/nationalist loyalties and prejudices. He believed that racial homogeneity led inevitably to stagnation and inbreeding, and recognised that Australia would have to confront a future where racial boundaries were increasingly irrelevant. The movement and mixing of the world’s population was both an old story and an unavoidable one:

The whole world is quite clearly crossing and recrossing its strains of blood with the rapidity and certainty of the weaver’s shuttle; and it will quite evidently become more and more necessary to recognise the impossibility of any one race shutting itself off from contact or “contamination” with other peoples and other races ...⁴

The eccentric and celebrated E. W. Cole, humanist pamphleteer and owner of Cole’s Book Arcade in Melbourne held similar views. In his 1901 publication *White Australia Impossible*, Cole recorded his opposition to racial prejudice and racial exclusion, ideas which appeared in many of his subsequent writings. Cole declared:

Holding as I do, the Oneness of Man, I am much interested in the present burning question of a “White Australia,” and with all respect I think that it has not been sufficiently looked at in all its aspects. I know that the feeling is strong, and almost universal against the coloured man; but I also know that there is no material difference between the white man and the coloured.⁵
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Perhaps the most powerful rejection of the White Australia policy emerged from E. W. Foxall, English secretary to the Japanese Consulate in Sydney and a former single-taxer who had accompanied Henry George on his tour of Australia in 1890. Foxall’s repudiation of the White Australia policy in his 1903 book *Colorphobia*, remains one of the most considered attacks upon racial prejudice of its period. Although written with less academic nuance than Jean Finot’s contemporary study, *Race Prejudice*, Foxall’s work is nonetheless an early and largely unknown classic in the literature of racial equality. Foxall understood that racial prejudice was pervasive, but was certain he could claim that:

Throughout the whole of this book no attempt has been made to placate the colour prejudice. It is a sentiment to be apologised for, not apologised *to*. It is for the man or woman who enunciates the doctrine that a dark skin is something to be abhorred, to show cause why he or she should not be committed for contempt in the Court of Common Sense.6

Smith, Cole and Foxall held it to be important that racial prejudice, rather than economic justifications underpinned the White Australia policy, and insisted on this being recognised; not an easy thing for many exclusionists to accept. While many embraced racial exclusivity as a mode of thinking, not all were willing to abandon the moral high ground by admitting to base prejudice. In some instances, racism against non-Europeans was perceived to be a defensive measure against a more virulent hatred directed against Europeans. In 1906 *The Bulletin* argued that ‘the Asiatic, whether he be Japanese, Chinese, or Indian, holds a deep disdain for the white. The contempt we feel for them is returned one hundred fold’.7 They hated ‘us’ much more than ‘we’ could ever hate ‘them’. 

8
But those combating racial prejudice rejected the construction of such complicated hatreds and argued that the history of European colonialism told a different story. The Adelaide Methodist minister, Rev. Joseph Berry must have been the first Australian to call for anti-racism education with his plea in 1896 to ‘Let us teach our boys and girls in our public schools, and every-body to cease the shameful and petty persecution of coloured races.’ Doubts about racial boundaries and the determination of many to erect immigration restrictions based upon them characterised much of the opposition to racial prejudice in Australia. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the Adelaide newspaper, The Register, often editorialised against racial prejudice and extreme forms of racial thinking, challenging its readers with uncomfortable questions. With calls for racial restrictions growing in South Australia, The Register argued that too much importance was placed upon what were really very dubious distinctions. It mocked attempts to establish concrete racial categorisation and to apply these wobbly criteria to the selection of immigrants:

Will the ethnological test of the hair-pigment be adopted, or will the obnoxious immigrant be subjected to trial by the skin ordeal? Will Magistrates need to be erudite concerning the divisions of “straight-haired light-brown races, crisp-haired dark brown races, wavy haired plain-brown races, and curly-haired nondescripts?” And if learned in main divisions how will they apply the hirsute standard where the many exceptions complicate the rule? Where will the individual come in, and where the race?

Another component of this critique was to question the importance of ‘whiteness’. Cole attempted to do this by employing Simon Gabriel, a ‘coloured man’ with an unusual medical condition that resulted in
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him losing much of the pigmentation in his skin. Gabriel soon learned that people suddenly accepted him as ‘white’. Perversely, Gabriel’s illness had transformed him from the ‘other’ to a thoroughly accepted ‘white’ man. He had learned of Cole’s anti-racism and approached the prominent bookseller with the idea of using his circumstance to make a statement about the elasticity of racial boundaries. Cole gave him a job, and as Gabriel went about his duties, Book Arcade customers were asked to guess his ethnicity. All inaccurately labelled him as European, often an Englishman. To Cole, the case of Simon Gabriel proved how ridiculous the distinctions that determined ‘the other’ were. In a similar spirit Cole would often adorn his pamphlets with photographs and drawings of non-Europeans. He hoped that his readers would see something in these faces that would remind them of themselves or their relatives. In doing so, Cole chipped away at the idea of indissoluble racial boundaries.

Samuel Gabriel’s condition challenged racial boundaries:

A more aggressive critique of white identity was offered by Foxall, who argued that ‘prejudice against a man’s colour is about the silliest emotion which a sentient being could cherish’, and launched a scathing attack upon the desirability of whiteness, and the injustice of dusty, mottled, freckled, pimpled, nondescript-tinted beings, who call themselves “White Australians,” insulting people simply because they have skins of a pronounced, and frequently a more presentable, hue."

As Foxall’s criticism of his own skin attests, the prevalence of assumed white superiority often prompted racial egalitarians to simply reverse the flow of invective. J. Currie Elles, founder of the New South Wales Stock Exchange and critic of the White Australia policy, thought that white
racial prejudice actually exposed inferior mental capabilities. In a speech in 1910 to the Institute of Bankers of New South Wales, Elles declared:

I am not one who upholds that the white man is the superior to the coloured ... I do most unhesitatingly say from my own personal knowledge and research that the majority of the white races are very far below the Asiatics in intellect, ability and integrity. I say this fearlessly because I believe it.¹²

Questioning racial exclusion naturally attracted the criticism of *The Bulletin* and *Truth* (joined from the 1920s by *Smiths Weekly*), publications that were relentless in generating dismissive caricatures of anyone who strayed from the straight and narrow path of racial homogeneity. Elles' revelation about Asian superiority was both a rare and disturbing idea which *The Bulletin* jumped on with characteristic glee:

*Elles! Elles!! Can anyone tell us*  
*Whence comes this buzzing called "J. Currie Elles"*  
*Who sought it? Who caught it?*  
*Who trapped it and fought it?*  
*And into the Bankers' dull Institute brought it?*  
*What insect collector—What curate or rector*  
*Went out with his sensitive Gadfly Detector,*  
*And lay*  
*All the day*  
*In a Boy Scout-ish way*  
*In a large hollow log while the Devil made hay,*  
*Determined to make other big hunters jealous*  
*By snaring a genuine "J. Currie Elles"?*¹³
Because of their resistance to the White Australia ideal, Smith and Cole were also frequent targets of *Bulletin* abuse. Cole's 1905 musing that if he was 'King of Australia' he would abolish racial restrictions was a gift to the ever watchful *Bulletin*:

*If you were King of a mongrel horde—nine million piebald souls—And I were your subject, gracious Lord, I'd look for the blackened COLES. I'd look for a Black Man’s Book Arcade, and expect to find you there—Aye, driving a roaring Tamil trade, with the cow-grease in you hair! I'd look for a turbaned, trudging COLE, with his books upon his back; And I'd point with a long, derisive pole at the Man Who Made Things Black.*

Others were quick to point out that dissenters were fair game. C. H. Kirmess’ invasion novel, *The Australian Crisis* (1909), warned how dissenters would fail to be tolerated if White Australia was ever violated by foreign invasion. Kirmess imagined the wrath of Melbourne descending upon Cole’s Book Arcade, which in accordance with Cole’s faith in the ‘brotherhood of man’ had erected a window display featuring ‘a white and a yellow figure shaking hands over a conciliatory motto’. Kirmess continued:

>a more ridiculous blunder could not have been made just then. Crowds assembled in front of the shop and soon became threatening. The window was smashed and the whole concern on the point of being sacked. Only the valour of the police and the presence of mind of the proprietor saved the situation.*

As difficult as it was for white critics of racial exclusion to make their arguments, it was appreciably harder (though not unknown) for non-Europeans to raise similar objections. One such was Samuel Wong, a
Chinese born Melbourne fruit merchant and convert to Christianity who first criticised the White Australia policy in 1904. Writing in the *Australian Christian*, he called on all Christians to challenge racial prejudice and the White Australia policy, which he labeled ‘unchristian and inhuman’. Over half a century later, in *Arrogant White Australia*, Wong called for a quota of non-European migrants. He argued that ‘this white superior complex is almost now become a sort of religion for the Australian people’, and that the opportunity to develop closer ties with war-time ally China would remain problematic while the White Australia policy was still proclaimed as the guiding principle of the nation. Wong declared that he had lived in Australia for over 50 years, had raised a family here and loved his adopted country, yet lamented that over his lifetime there had not been any serious movement away from the White Australia ideal. He sensed that Australia was now entering into an age where international criticism would no longer be muted, and that with the rejection of previously accepted racial theories, Australia risked becoming even further isolated from Asian nations. He sought to remind his fellow Australians that ‘Hitler’s “pure race” policy was not a very successful venture’.

These dissenters argued that Australia would pay the price of cultural and economic stagnation for its policy of racial exclusiveness. They imagined that the alternative to White Australia, that of a dynamic and cosmopolitan society was far more attractive, and that if Australia was ever to realise a cosmopolitan future, racial prejudice had to be combated. They feared that the White Australia ideal would come to define Australia as an insular nation and would inculcate certain values of assumed superiority, creating a culturally limited and dangerously isolated nation.

Maintaining White Australia was never altogether assured or altogether straightforward. Even at its height it attracted powerful
criticism which in turn fed a persistent unease at the wisdom of any nation, not least a new one, willfully reducing the flow of ideas and cultural contacts. All nations run the risk of characterising dissent as betrayal or worse, but one of the legacies of White Australia was a culture troubled by dissent and uncomfortable with debate. It may also be the case that in a small society where the dissenters could be easily identified and where White Australia had majority support, a satirising and debunking culture found a particularly congenial home. The *Bulletin*, *Truth* and *Smith's Weekly* may well have made Australians laugh, but the laughter was often directed at those who made the mistake of looking or sounding different. This is hardly unique to Australia, but it is worth asking if a culture of derision found a more congenial home in Australia than in cultures with more robust intellectual traditions. More important still perhaps, was the persistent view that ‘outsiders’ could not add to the culture, but would inevitably diminish and weaken it.