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## **In Search of a History: Australians, Indians and the Empire**

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### **Panel Description:**

Attempts to strengthen bilateral relations between India and Australia in the present have led to a renewed interest in Australia-India connections in the past. This panel will explore some of the latest research in Australia-India connections in the early twentieth century, at a time when the White Australia Policy is thought to have dramatically precluded relationships and alliances between the two colonies of the Empire. To what degree did official policy influence interactions between Australians and Indians? How did individuals seek to subvert prohibitions and paradigms aimed at limiting contact between the two countries? What lessons might be drawn from the past as Australia searches for its place in the Asian Century? This panel draws together historical research on fresh aspects of the relationship.

## **Louise Lightfoot in Search of India: An Australian Dancer's Experiences**

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### **Abstract:**

Louise Lightfoot, an ardent balletomane, is best known for moving away from pure Western classical Ballet to a fusion of classical technique and romantic emotion in Australia. During late 1920s, she was impressed by the performances of Anna Pavlova and Uday Shankar and to bring more appropriateness and authenticity to her own Indian classical dance style that she was trying to experiment with, virtually unknown and unseen in Australia till then in its original form, Lightfoot took a few weeks stopover in India. This short holiday eventually stretched to months and then eight years as she travelled to Tamil Nadu and Kerala's Kalamandalam, where she began her study of the complex traditions of Kathakali and Bharata Natyam dance. Here she also became a Stage Manager cum Artistic and Publicity director for local troupes and artistes in residence. She was so thrilled by the whole experience of learning Kathakali – involving poetry, song, acting and dance – that soon she started appealing to the British in India to not only appreciate the Indian dance but also to Indian parents to allow their sons and daughters to dance. Lightfoot, as Dance Director of Shivaram, Janaki Devi, Priyagopal Singh and Lakshman Singh, supported by an ensemble of Australian dancers including Ruth Bergner, Moya Beaver, Leona Welch, Pat Martin and Betty Russell, successfully toured and promoted a range of Indian classical dance forms throughout Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji. As an early image-maker, she also paved the way for many other noted Indian dancers and troupes. In spite of decades of hard work and dedication to Indian dancing and creating awareness about India in Australia her work and life is little known! Her journey is fascinating because of the workings of race relations not just in Australia but also India – existing prejudices against 'Whites'. In this paper I try to chart out through Australian and Indian newspaper reports her search for India.