

# Introduction

*... a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation.*

**Edmund 'Toby Tossopot' Barton, 1897**

**A** USTRALIA. How could one word mean so much, yet so little? It might one day be a nation, but who would be its people? Would its bounds encompass the lands of the penniless sand-dwellers to the west, or the atlas-makers' afterthought on the wrong side of Bass Strait? Could the sturdy yeomen of the south, who'd never felt the leg iron's chafe, reconcile themselves with the northern slavers? And how might the citizens of its two great cities join as one when they couldn't even agree on a football code? These disparate peoples shared a continent, but could they share a future?

There were green and gold shoots of possibility. Yes, there were Tasmanians, South Australians, Victorians, Queenslanders, Western Australians and New South Welshmen – and they all considered themselves British – but they also called themselves and each other Australian.<sup>1</sup> There were differences, but also shared values. They believed in democracy (for men), a fair go (for white men) and housework (for women of all colours). They were committed to a free press, trial by jury and, for the most part, freedom of religion. They trusted in commerce, progress and the queen. And most of all, they shared

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<sup>1</sup> Consideration was also given to calling New Zealanders Australian, but thankfully common sense prevailed.

the bond of losing money betting on ridiculously dressed shortarses engaging in S&M with defenceless animals.

The Melbourne Cup was not so much the race that stopped the nation, as the race that started it. Visiting American writer Mark Twain called Melbourne Cup Day ‘the Australasian National Day’, with no single event in the world, even the Fourth of July in the United States, able to match its fervour:

[The] race ground is the Mecca of Australasia. On the great annual day of sacrifice ... business is suspended over a stretch of land and sea as wide as from New York to San Francisco, and deeper than from the northern lakes to the Gulf of Mexico; and every man and woman, of high degree or low, who can afford the expense, put away their other duties and come. They begin to swarm in by ship and rail a fortnight before the day, and they swarm thicker and thicker day after day ... They come a hundred thousand strong ...<sup>2</sup>

Horse racing gave Australians a common sport. More surprisingly, it gave them art, birthing ‘a national school of Australian poetry’. Why write about an old Greek pot or some dead Asian guy’s pleasure palace when you could dash off a few lines about a jockey being trampled to death in the sixth at Caulfield? It didn’t matter whether the poem rhymed or scanned – readers would love it as long as it had a horse in it. The cannier Australian poets didn’t just write about horses, they built their identities around them. ‘The Breaker’ wrote as a horse handler, while ‘The Banjo’ went one better and wrote as a horse.

Horses weren’t just found at the track, but on farms and pastoral runs, and in the untamed expanses of the Australian bush. There were so many wild and remote horsey settings for a poet to choose from – and so poems about racehorses evolved into poems about bush horses and the men who tamed and rode them.

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<sup>2</sup> Victoria remains the only place on earth to hold a public holiday for a horse race.

Australian artists, realising the poets were onto a sure thing, turned their easels bushwards. They abandoned portraits of consumptive girls fondling spaniels for paintings of muscular men fondling sheep, bristling with vitality and facial hair.<sup>3</sup> Landscapes featuring haystacks and flowering meadows were out – slab-huts and gum trees were in. The *Bulletin*, a cynical Sydney paper, remade itself as ‘The Bushman’s Bible’, somehow managing to be both racy and country, like the *Picture* and *People*, but with more bush.

Australia was the most urbanised place on earth in the 1880s.<sup>4</sup> More than half the continent’s colonisers lived in cities and large towns, yet when an Australian man looked in the mirror – whether he was short or tall, old or young, from country or from town – a tough, honest, hard-working son of the land stared back at him.

This was the power of the bush legend – the power to make a mild-mannered Sydney accountant who owned an Akubra think he was the Man from Snowy River. Nationalists and Labor, the new workers’ party, latched onto the bush legend like blowflies to a jumbuck’s jacksy, hoping that a little of its blokey matiness would rub off.<sup>5</sup> Labor, through some weird political alchemy, transformed the mateship of bushmen into the solidarity of workers. The nationalists helped make the bush identity an Australian one.

Australia now had Australians, but something was missing. The answer was un-Australians. To build a nation, you need to know not only who you are, but who you are not. Who would these un-Australians be?

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3 Both the men and the sheep.

4 If you didn’t count First Nations people – which was surprisingly easy in a land whose Constitution would soon provide, ‘In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.’

5 *Jumbuck* is an Australian word for a male sheep. It is believed to derive from *junbuc*, which Australian poet Charles Harpur claims was an Aboriginal word for a ‘shag-haired species of Kangaroo particular to mountain copses’, or from the Aboriginal pidgin for ‘jump up’, which is what a sheep does when you try to spear it.

Larrikins were un-Australian, with their song and dance routines, vegetable-themed double entendres and casual approach to violence. Actually, scratch that – although nobody liked a larrikin (including other larrikins), those things all seemed pretty Australian.<sup>6</sup>

Women looked promising. Most of them rode side-saddle and you couldn't chase a mob of brumbies down a mountain doing that.<sup>7</sup> They were also deficient in the sheep-fondling department. Women had, for the most part, been successfully corralled in the kitchen, laundry and bedroom, and were used to being looked down on. They would do.

It then dawned on Australian men that without Australian women there would be no Australian boys who would become Australian men. And women were increasingly breaking out of the domestic sphere that imprisoned them. They were popping up in all sorts of unexpected places and demanding all sorts of unexpected rights. Australians would have to find an easier target.

What about the natives? It would be tricky to argue that a native of Australia was not Australian – though, given time, some compelling arguments would surely be found. But how could Australians unite against a people who were hiding in reserves and missions? Un-Australians needed to be visible to reinforce feelings of Australianness. And the natives weren't going to be around for much longer anyway – it would be harder to feel Australian if all the un-Australians were dead. A few people even argued that it didn't seem fair to exclude the natives from Project Australia, as we'd 'taken their country from them'.

Hang on a minute ... what if some people took our country from us? Surely, that would be un-Australian. And so, Australians turned their eyes north. To China.

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6 These sacred larrikin traditions have been handed down through the generations by their custodians – hosts of *The Footy Show*.

7 *Brumby* is an Australian word for a wild horse. It is believed to derive from a lost Aboriginal word, or from Sergeant James Brumby, who left his horses to run wild when he was posted to Tasmania.

The Chinese wanted to invade Australia to take jobs from Australian men and give opium to Australian women. They wanted to infect Australians with leprosy and sell them un-Australian vegetables. And it wasn't just the Chinese (although they were the worst). It was all the other yellow races – and the black and brown ones too! If Australians wanted to keep being Australians, then they needed to be *white* Australians.

The red blood that ran through the blue veins of white Australians would bind the disparate colonies into a nation: itself bound to the red, blue and white of the Union Jack. To keep that nation pure, it would be necessary to keep coloured folk out. It was time to raise the drawbridge of Fortress Australia. Thankfully, its moat was already well stocked with sharks and crocodiles.

There were, of course, things other than racehorses, racism and rugged bearded bushmen that bound the people of Britain's six southern colonies together. There were concerns about all the French and Germans bobbing around the Pacific. There were trains, wars, international expos, droughts, floods, depressions, plagues of rabbits and plagues of Nellie Melba farewell tours. But most of all, there was the simple calculus of geography and a desire to show Mother Britain that her children had grown up, although they still wanted to return home every second weekend with a load of dirty washing.

The people of the Australian colonies achieved great things during their quest to become Australian. They transformed democracy, at home and abroad; they revolutionised women's and workers' rights; they introduced child and adult education reforms that were the envy of the world; they oversaw a second agricultural revolution; they achieved the seemingly impossible in simultaneously increasing jollity levels in both swagmen and jumbucks; they ushered in new freezing and food-preservation technologies and gave man wings; they invented the crouch start and beat the Poms at every sport; they attained the highest standard of living and GDP per capita on the globe; they ate more meat and drank more tea than anyone; and

they reduced the incidence of harmful alcohol consumption and even more harmful masturbation.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Let us return to a simpler age, to an unassuming house in Melbourne's Fitzroy. A six-year-old girl sings nursery rhymes in its tidy garden, her father anxiously pacing a narrow hall, his eyes on the door that is closed to him. If he could but open it and step across the threshold, he would see his wife on their bed, sheets spotted with blood, the midwife in attendance. He knew this child would be their last. His wife's cries quieten. A new voice is heard. A voice that will unite a people. A voice that will harness the power of a club of sexist, racist insurance salesmen to transform Australia from an aspiration into a nation. The voice of Alfred Deakin.