

THE ROUND TABLE : ON BEING AUSTRALIAN IN 1959.

In two world wars during the first half of the twentieth century the "Digger" tradition (fearless soldiers of fearful indiscipline until the last minute) was added to Australian mythology; but otherwise it was a quiet and comparatively flat period when the rate of population growth gradually decreased and nothing grew so well as the spirit of suburbia. By the middle of the century half the population lived in the low-density suburbs of five principal State capitals and another quarter lived in smaller towns. It was a comparatively comfortable existence even during the depression, and it was often described by visitors as smug and spiritless: a whole nation isolated in its intellectual life like a provincial town in Europe. The pioneering qualities which had marked <sup>the</sup> nineteenth-century ~~development~~ hung in suspension, while there developed a cult of the average, of the glorified common man, and of mediocrity. During this time numerous creative talents, grown in the healthy circumstances of sunshine and a meaty diet, left for recognition abroad, and a stodgy air of conservatism in scientific, technological and artistic enterprise settled over the community.

The second world war did not dispel it. But after the worst rigours of economic and social readjustment to peace were over, about 1954, a change began to appear. With a ten-per-cent injection of European migrants, and a new boom in industry, a realisation of the potentialities of the country returned. Many



Australians began again to look ahead and swell with vicarious pride at the thought of what Australia could be one day -- probably by the end of the century a guardian of Western ideals in S-E Asia, perhaps the leader of the British Commonwealth - as is sometimes wishfully forecast, even an almost-equal partner of the U.S.A. On National days, editorials and speeches began to revive all the attractive chauvanistic visions which were last enjoyed in the eighteen-eighties, when Australia first sensed the full power of her unrealised resources. The era of slouch seemed to be over. The new mood built up its own momentum and today the feeling of being an Australian is radically more exciting and disturbing than the flat resignation to that circumstance to which most of us a few years ago had become accustomed.

Once the Australian working man, from labourer to professional, was more or less conscientious in regard to what he considered his normal day's work, but his measure of self-improvement was the time he could gain for doing nothing. Once the manufacturer was content to produce a shoddy version of a British or American model, with or without permission. Once the service in shops, hotels and restaurants was offensively casual, and the economy was wracked at frequent intervals by strikes; walking to work during a tram or train stoppage was a familiar, recurrent burden to the city worker. Once the economy rested almost entirely on the sheep's back.



Now there are proportionately more factory workers in Australia than in America, and the ever-increasing load of refrigerators, power lawn-mowers, television sets, room-conditioners, and labour-saving devices which burden the working man is almost entirely made in Australia. Exports of industrial goods, including iron and steel products, aircraft, vehicles and electrical equipment, are rising continuously. Manufactured goods now amount to more than one-fourth of the export trade. Competition raises the standards of manufacture and urgent advertising presses up the standards of living. A greater stake in stability and the sobering influence of monthly time-payment demands have finally subdued most of the latent rebelliousness in the wild colonial boy.

Once, five or six years ago, the housing problem was considered to be of such magnitude and urgency that heavy restrictions were placed on almost all kinds of building other than houses, and a Government permit was required even for houses that exceeded an area of 1,250 square feet. This was the size arbitrarily fixed to represent a fair average and sufficient area for a healthy typical family. Only twenty percent of the building industry's recourses were spent on other works.

Now industrial and commercial construction has revived spectacularly. About 1956 there came a boom which threw the building industry into the greatest activity since it made the



grotesque stucco palaces of the late nineteenth-century. Expenditure on new construction for the year 1956-57 amounted to £361,000,000 -- more than a quarter of the total investments for that year. In 1957-58 buildings costing more than £100,000,000 were completed in Sydney alone. At present, each of the four corners of one intersection in the business district of Melbourne - Bourke and Queen Streets - has deep holes excavated behind builders' hoardings. To the west along Bourke Street a racket of rubble and wreckers' dust, steel skeletons and rising curtain walls suggests a city bravely recovering after some major disaster. But the only disaster was the sloth which is now behind Australia.

The new confidence has concrete foundations in big public works, the most impressive of which is the twentyfive-year project in the Snowy Mountains where coastal rivers are being diverted back through the range to add water and electric power to the dry interior. It is balanced by projects described as "luxury" works, like municipal swimming pools and civic fountains, and with "cultural" buildings, like Sydney's opera house and a music bowl and art gallery in Melbourne, all of which would have been politically impossible a few years ago. In short, Australia has become ambitious.

Australia has always been self-sufficient if not opulent in the essential materials for subsistence, and the production



of foodstuffs, steel, beer, basic building materials and hardwood for furniture is steadily if unevenly on the rise, keeping pace with the rapidly growing population. But during a century and a half before 1950 virtually every pleasant non-essential flavouring or ornament of life was imported. Today most of the literally ornamental trimmings are made at home. Plastics of all kinds are manufactured and used with rare enthusiasm. In the higher fields of culture original Australian production is not so prolific. Australian culture is something like a sturdy little boat battling across lonely waters surging with cross-currents from Europe and America. The boat is equipped with a strong thrashing screw but as yet an ineffectual rudder. The physical isolation of Australia from her sisters of the West was never felt strongly enough to be valuable; it was not sharp enough to free creative minds to work out their own solutions. The oceans have worked as a valve permitting only a one-way passage of ideas: inwards always from the higher-pressure areas, continuously inflating a feeling of inadequacy and frustration among the local practitioners of all arts. Modern communications have of course modified the antipodean isolation, but they still cannot bring to even the best Australian a continuity of intercourse with other first-class minds in his own field. Perhaps, however, the country is now reaching the stage of maturity when local talent is approved and men of ideas can stay at home. The success abroad of the play "Summer of the



Seventeenth Doll" was watched with touching anxiety as a sort of trial balloon for Australia in the world's theatre. But still no consistent Australian character of any significance or distinction has been created in any art, and perhaps now in the modern world of scrambled cultures it never will be. Yet the development of local talent against the competition of a continuous flood of imported ideas is a matter of concern to many Australians.

At present the American influence is overwhelming in most forms of popular entertainment, the juvenile conception of the good life is a confused image of Hollywood, and vulgar taste follows American fashion as in a mesmerised trance. At other levels Australia regards the USA with awe, admiration, and, despite a feeling of being distantly related, no less than the usual jealousy. The present Government is obedient if not obsequious to America's foreign policy, on the premise that the two countries' interests are identical.

Still there remains an undercurrent of feeling that Australia is somehow better balanced and will always stop short of the extremes of Americanism. Many powerful elements in Australia still accept the idea of progress with reluctance, and on the popular plane newness has no special attraction for its own sake. Fluoridation of water supply, for instance, has been under



discussion for some years with the weight of opinion viewing the proposal as an attack on the democratic freedom to have the world's worst teeth. Inclined as she is to follow America, Australia does keep a foot on the brake. She may be no better adjusted, but she lacks the final hard drive. Thus Australia has fewer and smaller pools than America - both swimming and unemployment.

The influence of England is very different. It runs silent and deep. It is negligible in the fields of art and popular taste and entertainment, but it remains the backbone of conservative elements in Australian society. Englishmen are still favoured for important appointments, whether the job is useful like a professor's or decorative like a Governor's. ~~English money still turns most of the wheels of big business.~~ The term "Aust." in parenthesis, as in John Bull & Co. (Aust.) Pty. Ltd., is very familiar in Australian business, a constant reminder that <sup>much</sup> ~~most~~ of the industrial boom is founded on <sup>imported ideas and initiative if not actual</sup> capital ~~from~~ <sup>about twenty-five % of manufacturing investment in Australia is from</sup> abroad and much of the profits of high local consumption escapes ~~abroad, and the balance on many~~ <sup>ideas and</sup> the country. There is no real resentment of this. Australians know they need outside <sup>ideas and</sup> money. They invite ~~it~~ and welcome ~~it~~ <sup>them</sup>. Just the same, they are impatient to be independent of ~~them~~ <sup>them</sup>. While recognizing unashamedly her dependence on others, Australia is at last reaching the point where she demands a little respect.

Her pride is enormous. However, the merest morsel of recognition and flattery will satisfy it. Most success stories of the



industrial boom surround those products which have somehow subtly boosted Australia's opinion of her own progress. The outstandingly popular car, for instance, is not the ponderously chromed automatic V-eights of the Ford Motor Co. of Aust. Pty. Ltd. or Chrysler Aust. Ltd., nor the thrifty four cylinders of the British Motor Corp. (Aust.) Pty. Ltd., which somehow look apologetic on a bush road. The car which has practically cornered the market with nearly half of total car sales is the only car claiming to be "designed especially for Australian Conditions": the Holden, by General Motors-Holdens Ltd. This medium-sized six is not only as fast and tough as an Australian Rules footballer, it also has a cynical appreciation of the nuances of Australian taste in every line from its two-tone plastic upholstery to its moderate chromium tail-fins: not too big, not too small. Notwithstanding the well-publicised fact that it returns a profit of up to £15,000,000 annually to its American parents, to Australians the Holden is proudly "Australia's Own Car".

Australia is in an exciting and disturbing state. It is exciting because, as American visitors almost invariably comment, it feels like the USA must have felt around 1900: about to break into a run. It is disturbing because the run might easily be an unenquiring, unthinking, undirected sprint across the surface of things. In 1959 Dr. Billy Graham drew the record crowds of his career in Australia.

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