



## On being Australian in 1959

### Correspondent

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# ON BEING AUSTRALIAN IN 1959

## THE DIGGERS COME TO TOWN

*(From a Correspondent)*

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 private houses in the low-density suburbs of a few principal cities, and another quarter lived in smaller townships. It was a comparatively comfortable existence, 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 the nineteenth century 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 enterprises settled over the community.

There were, of course, isolated exceptions when the pioneering spirit was translated into the terms of the twentieth century: notably, the foundations of the steel, paper and brown coal industries, and the Commonwealth scientific research organization which is now known as C.S.I.R.O. Technical knowledge grew through the nineteen-thirties, laying the foundation of later change, but nothing greatly disturbed the surface indolence before the disruption of the Second World War. The change did not begin to appear until the worst rigours of economic and social readjustment to peace were over, about 1954.

Then, with a 10 per cent injection of European migrants and a new boom in industry, a realization 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 the guardian of Western ideals in South East 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 grandiose visions which were last enjoyed in the eighteen-eighties, when Australia first sensed the full power of her unrealized 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 economy rested almost entirely on the sheep's back. Once the manufacturer was content to produce a shoddy version of a British or American model. 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 watching sport or doing nothing. Once the service in shops, hotels and restaurants was offensively casual. In the years immediately following the last war the economy was racked at frequent intervals by strikes; and walking to work during a tram or train stoppage was a familiar, recurrent burden to the city worker.

Now, it is often claimed, there are proportionately more factory workers in Australia than in America, and the ever-increasing load of refrigerators, power lawnmowers, television sets, washing-machines 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 light electrical equipment, are rising continuously. 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.

From 1940 until 1954 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 20 per cent of the building industry's resources were spent on other works, while separate private houses were built in proportion to population at almost double the rate of the U.S.A. or the United Kingdom.

Now industrial and commercial construction has revived in spectacular measure. 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 and the caution which are now behind Australia.

The new confidence has concrete foundations in big public works, the most impressive of which is the twenty-five-year project in the Snowy Mountains, where coastal rivers are being diverted back through the range to add water to the dry interior and electricity to neighbouring States. It is balanced by school and university buildings and 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 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 self-assured. 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.

### Old and New Australians

WHAT does it feel like to be an Australian in 1959? First you try to decide what sort of Australian you are. Are you native born or New Australian? Are you content with the trend of the national social and cultural development, or do you watch self-consciously every Australian creation, as you would watch your child reciting in public, proud and fearful, glowing inwardly at every small success and yet more painfully conscious of the faults than anyone else? Do you take Australia for granted, accepting the charm of the old myths, of mateship, independence and rugged individualism, along with the bad coffee, bad teeth and bad manners; the uninhibited *flair* of some individuals along with the deplorable standard of taste of the uneducated public?

There are many kinds of Australian, even inside each of us Australians, and it is of course difficult if not impossible to generalize on their feelings. Yet being an Australian clearly is a different feeling from being an American or an Englishman or even a neighbouring New Zealander. It is a combination of secure and supreme confidence on the physical level, and just doubts on the intellectual and artistic levels. It is a feeling of advanced national adolescence, with towering self-assurance and yet brief spasms of corrosive self-doubt. If the present writer can find no better words to describe it, perhaps this is because it is not a feeling that can be described in so many matter-of-fact words. It is a mood for artists to capture, in print and drama, on film and stage, in all the media of popular entertainment. And a depressing aspect of Australia today is that artists rarely make attempts to capture it.

The pace of the central stream of physical development has been too fast to allow many delicate seeds of expression to take root and multiply. While

the general prosperity rises, the opportunities for artists in the commercialized media are declining. Australia has accepted certain levels of artistic proficiency and sophistication in filmed, printed, recorded form, yet has not the population to support local production at similar standards. Most of the material of popular culture is imported at comparatively low cost, and Australian artists find such difficulty in competing with it that they often give up trying. The more talented still frequently leave the country to find fortune abroad and the less talented find other work for bread and butter. Composers write background music for radio serials. Painters decorate pots. Writers fill corners of magazines between the syndicated novelettes. Yet there are of course isolated examples of creativity. Two of the most popular books of the last two years, while having no pretensions or claim to the rank of literature, indicate that the Australian still does enjoy, better than any importation, seeing himself in the mirror of the lively arts. These books were attempts to capture the present Australian mood in broad satire. *They're a Weird Mob* by "Nino Culotta" (Patrick O'Grady) purported to see the Australian working man through the eyes of a New Australian—an Italian migrant. It pictured Australians with the traditional traits of easy-going toughness and robust cynicism thinly veiling hearts of gold. It represented the self-assured side of Australian adolescence, and it was remarkably successful. The second book, *So You Want to be an Australian*, was commissioned by publishers to catch the wave of shallow introspection. It was a trifle tossed off by the prolific writer Cyril Pearl, and it pricked masochistically into the more obvious sore points of the more sensitive Australians: the lazy acceptance of discomforts and mediocrity, the vandalism, worship of sport, coyness in the relations between the sexes, prim censorship and so on. It was a wicked book tearing wildly at Australia's features, yet strangely, between the lines of satire and sarcasm, a basic pride of country was easily read. This little book represented the adolescent doubts of Australia at their most distressing, and it was moderately successful.

The Australian who has not travelled abroad finds great difficulty in relating his standards to those of world capitals. He is inclined to excesses of pride or shame when assessing his urban environment. In another recent best-seller, *On the Beach*, the expatriate English author Nevil Shute recorded the insecure pride of Australia as extending even to the attitude to the unique landscape. The heroine, an Australian girl, is described showing her American hero the gentle valleys of Berwick, near Melbourne. "Is it beautiful?" she asks him. "I mean, is it as beautiful as places in America or England? . . . One sort of thinks that everything in England or America must be much better. That this is alright for Australia, but that's not saying much." When a Hollywood company arrived to film *On the Beach* in Melbourne, the same sort of question was asked again in countless different ways by reporters and interviewers of the visiting celebrities.

No country can be so anxious to hear well of itself. Distinguished visitors like Professor Brogan have interpreted the Australians' questions as a desire to be told they are like Americans. John Ely Burchard has noted more perceptively that the key recurrent question is ". . . is it of world standard?"

The Australian questioners have in fact little interest in what the visitor thinks; they are seeking for their own benefit a datum on the world cultural scale. When Australia establishes this datum and can measure her own works from this point, feeling secure in her own judgments and able to drop the "it's alright for Australia" attitude, then she will have reached a major plateau in her cultural development.

### Imported Ideas

THERE are, at last, signs that she has at least one foot on such a plateau. For the first time Australian creative work is finding acceptance abroad. The success of the artist Sidney Nolan in Europe and the U.S.A. plainly injected confidence into his colleagues and contemporaries at home. Each Australian novel that succeeds abroad, like Patrick White's *Voss*, encourages the underpaid serious writers of Australia. So the standards rise. The fate 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 mesmerized trance. At other levels Australia regards the U.S.A. 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. 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 habitually appointed for the decorative positions of Governors, where prestige and aura are required, by the same sort of thought process which puts Central Europeans into the resident conductors' stands of most symphony orchestras.

The term "Aust." in parenthesis, as in John Bull and Co. (Aust.) Pty. Ltd., is familiar in Australian business, a constant reminder of the continuing power of imported ideas and initiative. Australia has provided most of her

own capital for the industrial boom, but not always her own inventiveness. The oversea influence on finished products remains high. The bulk of Australian-made consumer goods, from cars to kitchen equipment, has been designed abroad. Mostly it is produced under licence to imported patterns. Australians, knowing they need outside ideas and money, continue to invite and welcome them. Just the same, they are impatient to be independent of them. While recognizing unashamedly her dependence on others, Australia is at last reaching the point where she demands a little respect. Her pride is enormous, but it is easily satisfied. 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 cars, for instance, are not the ponderous 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 that achieves 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-publicized 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 as the U.S.A. must have felt around 1900: about to break into a run. It is disturbing because the run might easily be an uninquiring, unthinking, undirected sprint across the surface of things. In 1959 Dr. Billy Graham drew the record crowds of his career in Australia.