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AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING COMMISSION

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"GOING, GOING, GONE"

Introduction by Robin Boyd

The theme of this short series of talks, which it is my duty to introduce, is: Preservation. Preservation in Australia, of Australia, preservation of Australian things, Australian qualities, preservation of Australian character. The series will voice a belief which is held by a number of people that it is a sort of axiom of modern life that Australian qualities are faint and fragile, and need action to preserve them before they disappear altogether.

In the series we will hear from some Australians, prominent in various fields, whose work demands a certain amount of active preservation in order, ultimately, to keep the field itself alive. For instance, we will hear something about the state of our wildlife. In some countries it might be possible for an expert on native animals to discuss them in an entirely dispassionate and scientific way without mentioning the subject of preservation, because there would be general confidence that the animals were safe from extinction. I don't think there's any such confidence in Australia.

And we will hear about the continuous loss of all kinds of historic records of our earlier history: documents, buildings and artefacts of all kinds which might be giving us a better understanding of our background. They are going all the time, into the waste-paper baskets and dustbins of an active nation which is so intent on tomorrow that it is inclined to deny that yesterday ever happened. And we will hear of the destruction of other solid things, such as gumtrees in the suburbs, that contributed to the character of the Australian environment, and perhaps to the character of the Australian man and woman as they are today.

But at the outset I must admit that there are some difficulties in defining the idea we have for the series, because there are considerable difficulties in defining what is meant by Australian character. You might argue that the indigenous character

of this country is to be contemptuous of indigenous character. Australia is changing under our eyes (you may say) - and it is what it is at any moment quite involuntarily. Maybe destruction is one of our strongest qualities. The real Australian character may incorporate a vast indifference to this land we live in, and the best manifestation of genuine Australianism may be found in the mass shooting of kangaroos, the demolition of colonial buildings, the bulldozing of gumtrees, the exiling of

creative artists, and the general adoption of Hollywood's language and values.

Who is the "typical Australian", anyway?

Is he the shaggy, silent bushman of the old outback legend, in his cabbage tree hat, reeking of chewing tobacco and mateship?

Or is he the lean, high-tensile Digger, with lantern jaw and noble forehead and a mouth full of false teeth and bad language?

Or is he neither of those mythological types, but is he more likely to be found nowadays in one of the younger professions: Management Consulting or Public Relations, or even Used Car Sales, a city man, hard talking, in a fashionably tight suit, a crewcut and a hurry?

Australia is changing quickly. What it is now, as always, is largely determined by the dominating mood of the dominating type of man, and the dominating type here for some time to come may be the international-style rather ruthless go-getter.

It may be that the fate of this country is to make the cultural jump from England's apron strings to American-led international western anonymity without any intervening period of national originality.

If you can accept that idea complacently, this series is not for you. You'd perhaps be better off tuning in next door to the Top 40 presented by one of those Australian announcers with a smart Austerian pronunciation, spinning in the hit rec'ords from A to Zee.

But some of us can't accept with easy resignation the idea of Australian character being entirely submerged in the amorphous flood of international admass or 'pop' culture.

I suppose, to be realistic, one must admit that the ultimate fate of this country - even when viewed most optimistically and on the assumption that the world stays out of nuclear conflict - is likely to be **lacking in striking individuality**. The entire coastal fringe, ^{the} at/least, will inexorably be stained evenly with the anonymous suburban sprawl, until it is eventually without gumtrees, without any trees except an occasional specimen liquid-amber; without animals except those bred to be eaten; without buildings except the plastic-coated prefabs of the previous decade; without history stretching back any further than the latest murder.

There is, admittedly, a danger in talk of this kind. It can be narrowly nationalistic, even maly chauvenistic, to plead for the preservation of national character. The associated emotions have been stirred up to the point of war often enough to make the whole subject suspect. Precise words are important here to define what we are talking about. The word 'regional' might be safer than 'national'. What we are up against is the tendency under the mounting pressure of modern life towards a levelling out of all the differences between different areas on the globe - differences that make travel enlightening, differences that emphasise realities and heighten experience. It is not nationalistic in the political sense to object to this dulling tendency, levelling everything to a flat tinselly mediocrity where all the similar desperate attempts to add colour, interest and glamour cancel each other out. The tendency operates within national boundaries. We can feel regret at the gradual passing of the little habits of living and the tricks of speech which once made it possible - only a few years ago - to tell a Queenslander from a Victorian.

There are so many influences leading to an international conformity of living pattern among prosperous nations. I think it would be generally agreed that the dominating cultural influences are still those of Hollywood, through film and television, and of New York, through hit tunes and glossy magazines. These dangle a carrot of almost-attainable goals in the acquisition of glamour before a great proportion of the world's people. Everywhere the visual background of ornaments, clothing, decoration, cosmetics - the "styling" (as they say) of all the trivia of modern existence - is conforming as best it can to the gilded image presented by those arbiters of pop culture. This is almost as true of Europe, and much of Asia, as it is of Australia. It may seem a pity when we in Australia ape America at the expense of some thoroughly good traditions of our own. But it is very silly as well as a pity when some English or European town destroys some ancient monument to build an American-style Diner and Do-nut bar. And it is sad as well as silly when, in Asia, the image is sometimes taken so literally that young people feel obliged to undergo personal p^l stic surgery in order to conform better to the image.

Of course it is inevitable that American influence should dominate the popular culture of the world in this 20th Century. But this need not be only the silly side of America, never the sensitive, creative side, and it need not swamp every other regional characteristic. Some countries manage to be entirely at home in the 20th Century, up-to-the-minute, sophisticated and even glamorous, without selling out their regional traditions ... Sweden for instance - indeed, all of the Scandinavian countries.

Hollywood, and American television shows, and those beautiful New York magazines, can only build up and spell out/infinite colourful detail the enviable, desirable goal. Other factors in this century make the goal attainable for more and more people in the privileged and well-developed countries. Modern building techniques of steel and concrete, composites and plastics, are international. Modern transport mixes up the natural materials of all countries. Air-conditioning levels out the climate from New York to Hobart. Again, American business and tourists now travel the world in sufficient quantities to justify the transportation of completely American-conceived and American-detailed enterprises such as hotels and bowling alleys to strategic points all over the world, including lucky Melbourne.

Thus, as we all well know, by direct commercial application and by indirect suggestion, the American way swamps the world, and engulfs entirely all the more delicate or tentative traditions of other regions. And here in Australia our regional traditions were, heaven knows, delicate and tentative enough.

But of course the Hollywood/Life-International influence is not the only one which is leading to the destruction of indigenous Australian character. It is only what might be called the positive destructive influence. In order to make room for the Hollywood image of the good life it is necessary to clear away various indigenous things that conflict with the image. And there is, as I've already remarked, a singular willingness in Australia to do this clearing away. Even if the American influence did not exist, a process of destruction would probably still be well advanced in this country. We have a vigorous record for destroying anything Australian, dating back at least to Tasmania's Black War.

For the pioneers to carve a foothold for white Australia, it was generally necessary to shoot everything that moved in the bush and to cut down everything that grew there. This habit seems to have been passed down by the pioneers through the urban Victorians and Forwardians. Today, with our superior firearms and transport and bulldozers, we are able effectively for the first time to conquer commercially the kangaroo, to master the eucalypt and rid the undergrowth of wildflower. The conventional explanation for the desire to do these things is that we are still a nation of pioneers, in a way, pioneers of a new industrial age in this part of the globe. We may have none of the antagonism to native Australia which some of the old colonials used to have; but we are in too much of a hurry to be sentimental about the native character of the land, and too busy to step around its early history if it is quicker and easier to trample over it.

I don't think that overstates the position. The dominating mood of the dominating type in Australia today is not antagonistic to, but utterly careless of, the national heritage - whether native or man-made. And I believe this is regrettable not only for sentimental reasons but because this attitude is also anti-progressive. It inhibits a build-up and consolidation of creative activity here. It encourages a laziness in creative thought and a reliance on other people's ideas and concepts, packaged and canned ready to digest. But of course no one would say that everyone in Australia is apathetic. If the process of destruction has been accelerating since the second world war, so has the reaction to it, and the fight for preservation. National Trusts, societies and associations for the preservation of animals, trees, buildings and records - dozens of active organisations have been formed in recent years and some of them even enjoy Government support. The outlook is not entirely dark and this series will not wallow in pessimism. Yet the situation is serious. Every day in almost every Australian town or city, and somewhere out in the bush, some rare, perhaps irreplaceable, facet of Australian character goes under the hammer of ruthlessly practical development: Going; Going; Gone.