

## ○ KNOWING THE NATION

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*The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire*, by James Curran and Stuart Ward (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010, 326pp, \$39.99pb).

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As I was reading *The Unknown Nation*, I noticed an advertisement on a bus shelter in Aldwych. It featured a photo of a young man on a beach – white, but tanned and muscular. He was wearing a skimpy swimming costume that served mainly to emphasise the ample size of his genitals. 'IF YOU DOUBT YOURSELF WEAR SOMETHING ELSE', the ad proclaimed. The man might have been a Californian, but there was never really any doubt – in my mind, at least – about his homeland. The company concerned is called aussieBum. Its mission, apparently, is to flog undies and swimwear.

The image belongs to global popular culture and works on the 'sex sells' principle. But it is also more or less instantly recognisable as Australian. It conforms to a popular image of how the Londoners at whom it was targeted imagine Australia, and of how Australians have commonly projected their own national identity. It is a reference to twentieth-century beach culture, but reaches back to such nineteenth-century masculine figures as the noble bushman and the coming man as the embodiment of national character.

James Curran and Stuart Ward do not find much room for the aussieBum man or any of his close relatives in their discussion of Australia's quest for a renovated post-imperial national identity. Indeed, they suggest that when Australia's professional worriers debated national identity in the immediate aftermath of empire, they were insistent that the bush legend and its associates were of little use. It seemed as out of date as the British Australia that lay in ruins around them. The worriers were yearning for a more sophisticated national image.

Curran and Ward's thesis is that British race patriotism had formed a fairly stable and consensual basis of Australian civic culture until the early 1960s. But Britain's initial, failed attempt to enter the European Economic Community provoked a crisis in British Australia, one magnified by the 'Winds of Change' decolonisation. Curran and Ward suggest that the circumstances of this parting of ways – the absence of any definite break, the sense of being abandoned by Britain, the lack of a strong impulse towards independence in Australia itself, that it all came to pass in an era when nationalism had been so tarnished by twentieth-century history – had significant implications for Australia's subsequent debate about civic culture and national identity. Post-imperial Australia lacked symbols and myths that could replace those that had once been provided by Britishness. They debated the national anthem, what to call their new currency, what kind of face they would show the world at Expo '67, how they should commemorate the Cook Bicentenary of 1970. The authors show that the debates were marked by a confusion and hesitancy that reflected the absence of any consensus about the 'new nationalism' being advocated by governments and the intelligentsia as a replacement for imperial Australia.

*The Unknown Nation* makes an original contribution to the historical literature on the Australian nationalism. It is well-written, with a thoughtful argument driven by colourful and revealing detail, and some wonderfully ironic observation – such as that Australia found itself devising national symbols for its colony, Papua New Guinea, at the same time as it faced the problem of creating its own. It is more difficult to decide the extent to which the debates that form the core of the narrative and argument reflected the insecurities of a freshly-minted postwar intelligentsia more than any larger national angst. Did these controversies engage a broader public? Ward and Curran suggest that the National Anthem debate gained considerable public attention, but elsewhere they note that post-imperial civic culture ‘failed to capture the popular imagination’ (222). Perhaps part of the difficulty here is that there was sufficient continuity between the imperial and post-imperial order not to cause widespread concern outside the ranks of those whose job it was to evince concern. Examples of continuity included the flag, the (British) Commonwealth, parliamentary government, the legal system and – perhaps more importantly than is recognised these days – the monarchy.

But a more significant source of continuity than any of these was whiteness. The likes of aussieBum man, who retained a place in post-imperial culture, surely formed a bridge between the old and the new. As Curran and Ward’s evidence shows plainly, the debates over Australia’s civic culture and national identity seem largely to have taken for granted that Australia would remain *white*. They did so even when imagining an Asian, multicultural or Aboriginal Australian future.

Curran and Ward cannot be accused of ignoring race. Nevertheless, a greater stress on the resilience of what Ghassan Hage calls the ‘white nation fantasy’ possibly helps us understand why there was apparently limited popular ‘worrying’ over national identity in the 1970s – and of why the debate seems like a hall of mirrors occupied by Donald Horne, Manning Clark and an assortment of Australia Day leader-writers. It might also help explain why from the mid-1980s, by which time white Australians were actually encountering large numbers of ‘Third-World-looking peoples’ (again I borrow from Hage), the worrying truly began.

By the mid-1990s, there was genuine popular engagement with the dilemma of Australian national identity. But it often took forms – the panics over Mabo and Wik, Hansonism, *Tampa*, Islamophobia, Cronulla, Australia Day beatings – that emphasised just how significant whiteness remained to many Australians’ national identity, even when no longer an explicitly articulated ideal like ‘White Australia’. It might help explain why, as Curran and Ward remark, Australians have been able ‘studiously’ to ignore ‘their British heritage for more than a generation’ without ‘signs of national disintegration’ (262).

This excellent study is full of such astute judgements, and presents what is likely to be an influential interpretation of an important aspect of the recent past. It is a significant book, and certainly a landmark in what John Howard derided as the ‘perpetual seminar’ on national identity.