

**TELLING THE NATION:
CURRENT AUSTRALIAN CONFIGURATIONS**

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So natural is the habit of Australian self-analysis that its very quantity can easily become an occasion for further self-analysis. (Are Australians narcissistic?) There is no sign of a falling off. If anything, the number of books and articles seeking out, identifying or pondering the distinguishing features of Australian culture or the Australian people seems to be increasing. This essay discusses some recent examples, focusing on their underlying assumptions and motivations, and trying to put them into some kind of historical perspective.

Who are we? What are we doing here?

National character may be puzzling and contentious, an overworked domain of wild generalisation, prejudice and stereotyping. All the same, it is real enough. An Australian can pick a fellow national in a room full of people by the timbre of a vowel. And of course national features are not restricted to phonetics, they are all over that obscure object of desire called 'culture'. Years ago in Crete I came across a group of young men and women frolicking in the water off a crowded beach. Even from the other side of the beach it was evident that they belonged to a different world from the German tourists on their beach chairs, who seemed grimly bemused by their antics. They were performing absurd charades of characters from Greek mythology, flapping around and laughing hilariously. Maybe they were

students of archaeology or classical literature. At any rate, they were of course Australian. Their vowels gave them away, but so did their attitude.

On that occasion I felt relaxed and comfortable enough with my nationality. Nevertheless, the traits in play – ironic good humour, gauche insolence – are also ingredients of a prevalent negative stereotype. ‘We think’, a businessman from South East Asia once confided to me, ‘that Australians are loud, lazy and stupid’. He expressed surprised that my thirst for beer was measurably less than his own. Perhaps he would not have said these things to me, had I the look of someone whose ancestors came from somewhere in Asia.

In the flood of words about what it means to be Australian, it is rare to find any quite as blunt as ‘loud, lazy and stupid’. However, much agonised self-appraisal goes on. Moralism dominates the genre. Perhaps that is why the portrait is so messy. Apparently Australians are conformist and independent, easy-going and selfish, egalitarian and prejudiced, arrogant and insecure. They combine nostalgia for the ideological and institutional relics of Britain with nationalist insularity.

Isolation, landscape and colonialism are repeatedly invoked as explanations of Australian character and identity. Australians live far from the rest of the world. Back of their dwelling places, which are nearly all close to the sea, lurks a vast, sparsely populated country. The land, ‘our’ land, is a rich and contradictory symbol of past achievement, future potential, indigenous dispossession, and precious, endangered nature. It seems harsh to most people who have experienced the environments where most human beings

live. Harsh – and dangerous. Contorted by heat and drought, flattened by wind and flood, its soils leached of nutrients, it is ‘old’ not merely geologically, but in the spiritual impression it makes. Out there are hunger and thirst, poisonous creatures, maddening loneliness. The bush resists domestication. Children disappear into it. At the same time, wherever they live, white as well as indigenous Australians have strong attachments to Australian places, as Peter Reade’s evocative work *Belonging* insists.ⁱ Their relationship with their dwelling places partakes of what Martin Heidegger in his high-flown language described as the fourfold oneness of dwelling: it is here that Australians save the earth, receive the sky, await the divinities, and initiate their being.ⁱⁱ

British colonists, thrust from a Europe replete with art and strife, indifferently shoved aside the indigenous people and proceeded to investigate, settle, and make money. Their descendants, together with the non-British, mostly white immigrants who joined them, have never really worked out what it means to be congregating on the edges of a forbidding land far from their ancestral homes, but they know it has to mean *something*. For the key to the secret they look towards the continent’s ‘dead heart’, away from the sea that brought them here. As Laurie Duggan observes, the bush is constructed or imagined as an ‘authentic’ space, an image of the true nation, ‘populated by “authentic” national types’.ⁱⁱⁱ

All of which is an old mantra:

... She is the last of lands, the emptiest,

A woman beyond her change of life, a breast
Still tender but within the womb is dry...
The river of her immense stupidity

Floods her monotonous tribes from Cairns to Perth...
And her five cities, like five teeming sores
Each drains her, a vast parasite robber-state
Where second-hand Europeans pullulate
Timidly on the edge of alien shores.

Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the deserts prophets come,

Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilisation over there.^{iv}

Not long before A. D. Hope published this poem in 1939, P. R. Stephensen published the first major work about 'Australian culture'—though significantly he did not use this phrase, preferring the formulation 'culture in Australia'.^v Stephensen took it for granted that nations are by and large a product of their geography and the genetic make-up of their people. Australia is the way it is because of where it is and who its people are. Both indicators looked good to him: vigorous white stock with a vitalising tincture

of Aboriginal, and a vast, wild continent to admire and tame. While believing in race as a determinant of national character, Stephensen judged place to be more important. Had not the landscape painting of Gruner, Hilder, Heysen, and Streeton discovered a 'Spirit of Place' that was 'an Australian contribution to the art of the world'?^{vi} Once they outgrew their British heritage, the national character of Australians would come to match the matchless character of the Australian landscape.

The British Connection

Today, the brutal fact of colonisation commands more attention than the where and who. Nevertheless, the where and the who are crucial. For example, the tie with Britain remains stubbornly robust. It is sixty years since Brian Penton, then editor of the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, wrote a polemic (*Think, Or Be Damned!*) in which he complained that Australian Conservatives had failed to move beyond conceiving of Australia as a British colony, and the Left had failed to provide an acceptable alternative.^{vii} He blamed these failures on the lack of tough-minded pragmatism observed by the historian W. K. Hancock. Hancock (who in 1930 saw no problem using the word 'invasion' to describe the arrival of the Europeans) judged that 'as individuals, Australians are generally matter-of-fact people who distrust fine phrases and understand hard realities. But in politics they are incurably romantic'.^{viii}

Not much has changed. In 1999, Inga Clendinnen, whose reputation rests chiefly on expertise in the history of pre-Columbian Central America and a widely acclaimed reflection on the Nazi's Jewish extermination program,^{ix}

was asked to give the Boyer Lectures, a prestigious ABC annual radio series modelled on the BBC's Reith Lectures. Clendinnen's lectures were broadcast shortly before a referendum in which the majority of Australians voted to retain the British monarch as the nominal head of their national state. She pitched into the arguments that accompanied the rise of Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party in the late 1990s. A splendid teller of stories, she told moving and evocative ones about Aboriginal dispossession. Yet when Clendinnen was moved to offer her listeners a list of things that she liked about Australia, it turned out that many of them—Common Law, popularly elected parliaments, the celebration of Armistice or Anzac Day – were directly inherited from the dispossessors, and furthermore mostly continue to be understood that way, as a colonial legacy. (Even Anzac day celebrates the part played by Australians in a British war.)

Yet Clendinnen's list of Good Australian Things juxtaposed these accolades for British institutions with praise for behaviour that is not obviously British, and might even be thought obviously *not* British. She liked being called 'mate', thought Australian teachers and nurses 'humane and inventive', and was impressed that at Melbourne's Austin Liver Transplant Unit, 'no one can jump the queue'.^x

Australian egalitarianism has a curious, dynamic relationship with the tenacious attachment to Britain. The nation's origins were profoundly ambivalent. It was eighteenth century Britain's 'Pacific solution', a dumping ground for criminals and dissidents expelled from their homeland, a collection of remote detention centre where violations of human rights were common. But transportation was also born of a rationalist, reforming

impulse, as a humane and socially beneficial alternative to appalling prison rates and conditions in Britain. From the first, the Australian continent was both a prison and a land of promise, where people came because they rejected their homeland and wanted somewhere better, or because they hoped, Magwitch-like, to take back a fortune. The relative dilapidation of British social status markers—accent, dress, schools, aristocratic titles—simultaneously signified Australian inferiority, and the enlargement of egalitarian and entrepreneurial elements in British society. So being Australian could imply *both* aspiring but failing to be properly British, and correcting and superseding Britain by *not* aspiring to be British. This is what psychologists call a double bind. A cybernetic encyclopaedia remarks that ‘the effect of a double bind is that the addressee cannot decide what is real and may develop pathologies’.^{xi}

The complement of Australia’s complicated relationship with Britain is its equally curious relationship with the other English-speaking great power, the United States. This is the subject of Don Watson’s mordant essay *Rabbit Syndrome*, the rabbit referring to Harry Angstrom, the gormless subject of John Updike’s Rabbit novels. A. D. Hope accused Australians of being second-hand Europeans. To Don Watson’s jaded eyes, we have become second-hand Americans.^{xii} But the British tie remains more salient in institutional terms.

Marching to Tolerance and Back

David Walker’s *Anxious Nation* is a review of Australians’ attitudes to Asia from the mid nineteenth century until the eve of World War II.^{xiii} It is a fine

example of contemporary historiography, examining a great diversity of source materials from academic literature to novels, memoirs, journalism and government reports. From them emerges a kaleidoscopic pattern illustrative of typical Australian ‘ways of seeing Asia’. The pattern is a picture of pictures, a ‘meta-picture’, patchy, inconsistent and blurred, because that is the nature of national ways of seeing. (In similar vein, Laurie Duggan’s study of the visual arts in the first decades of the twentieth century refers to a ‘ghost nation... in a visual sense of images which ghost each other; not as layers or levels but as a kind of parallax view which must exist in any slice of time, whose images shift about (against) each other within time...’^{xiv}) Walker’s method relies on premises that are difficult to evaluate—the representativeness of its evidence, the validity of its interpretations – but this is true of all history. He uncovers a rich brew of attitudes to Asia during this formative period of the Australian nation, all shared with other ‘white’ nations. Denigration, fear and ignorance dominate but do not obliterate simple curiosity, commercial opportunism, sincere admiration, and fanciful orientalism.

Walker observes that ‘the modern city, with its urban complexity, crowds, noise and chaos mirrored the conflicted genetic condition of the “half-caste”... City-dwellers were routinely denigrated as voluble, devious, unreliable, degenerate. Cities were thought to encourage far too much mixing and mingling; too much talk, invention and experiment... The city was seen as the site of racial betrayal. In contrast, rural folk were solid, dependably stable, patriotic. Only they were true nation-building material.’^{xv} Do cities foster tolerance? The inhabitants of large cities like Sydney and Melbourne do encounter on a daily basis, albeit superficially, more people

behaving in less predictable ways than their country cousins, whether the latter are imagined (falsely, always falsely) as living in Rousseauan moral purity or in Marxian rural idiocy. Urbanites may not be more tolerant, but they are more exposed to difference, and probably likely to be more blasé about it. However, there is very little in contemporary Australia that is either truly urban or truly rural, in the traditional meanings of those words. The typical built environment is the suburb, a compromise between city and country about which Robert Graves once remarked that ‘hell is the suburbs of itself’. Quite a few Australian intellectuals have agreed with him, but in this they have been out of step with the majority of their compatriots.

Anxious Nation could be read as a parable of the futility of power. It surveys decades when there was all but total domination of the world by white men. Yet many were obsessed with the prospect of the imminent decline and ruin of their ‘race’, and what the Harvard historian Lothrop Stoddard called in 1921 ‘the rising tide of colour’. In terms of their own value system, subsequent events justified their anxiety. European Empires really were nearing the end of their centuries-long supremacy, or at least a profound change in its character, and people of colour were indeed on the way up.

Tony Burke's passionate and detailed history of Australia's political and military relationships with Asian countries complements and confirms Walker's study.^{xvi} More heavily theorised, Burke's analysis is based on a Foucauldian understanding of security as a ‘political technology’.^{xvii} In spite of the abandonment of the White Australia policy and the rhetoric of a new sensitivity to Asia, ‘the basic discursive structure of security endures, with

its repressive relation to the Other', and continues to dominate Australia's relationships with the region to the present day.^{xviii}

Burke and Walker illustrate forcefully how, within living memory, opinions and assumptions that today would be perceived as obnoxious were not only expressed publicly, but were taken for granted by most people. According to one view, the national story, at least after World War II, is a journey leading steadily from a past of prejudice and intolerance towards a happy future of live and let live. For three decades or more – from perhaps the early nineteen sixties until at least the mid nineties – this inspirational narrative prevailed among those whose business it is to ponder such things (politicians, journalists, teachers, 'the educated public'). It was closely associated with and conditioned by government policies. In the 1960s, the political discrimination against Aborigines mandated by the Constitution was removed, and a bipartisan consensus in the Federal Parliament led to dismantling of barriers to non-white immigration. (Subsequently considerable numbers came from the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and people with some kind of Asian descent now comprise about 5% of the population.) The goal of 'assimilating' Aborigines was officially ditched in favour of a friendlier, if not necessarily more feasible, goal of 'integration', and an internationally acclaimed policy of 'multiculturalism' extended a similar courtesy to immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds. Many developments, some perhaps quite separate, added support to the 'journey to tolerance' narrative. They included equal pay for women, the introduction of no-fault divorce legislation and a weakening of the legal and social significance of legal marriage and legitimacy, legalisation of homosexual behaviour, more safeguards of the rights of stigmatised groups

generally, the relaxation of a once repressive censorship regime, easing of restrictions on gambling and alcohol consumption, more casual etiquette and dress codes, and more.

In these terms, ‘tolerance’ undoubtedly made ground during the thirty years of integration and multiculturalism. However, there was always resistance to it. The Mining Industry conducted a heavy-handed campaign in 1984 against Aboriginal Land Rights legislation proposed by the Labor Party, which succeeded in putting off the issue until the Mabo Judgement compelled action nine years later. This was also the period of a bitter debate about Asian immigration, triggered by Geoffrey Blainey’s public doubts about the wisdom of multiculturalism.^{xix} During the nineteen eighties there was a constant grumble of anti-Asian racism—graffiti, street attacks, community groups protesting the building of mosques and Buddhist temples, and so forth. However, the depth of feeling about race and migration issues did not become not fully clear until the election of the Howard government in 1996, when it received a degree of official license. Interestingly, these days it is not so often directed against immigrants from East and Southeast Asia, who have melded with the dominant culture with relative ease and speed, as against Muslim immigrants from the Middle East. Today nearly all the institutional and cultural elements of multiculturalism remain in place, but they are on the defensive, and multicultural rhetoric has been erased from political bandwagons as thoroughly as the name of a dumped candidate. For the first time in decades, coding policies and messages to appeal to the racially prejudiced voters – playing the so-called ‘race card’ –is a recurrent, if not very respectable, feature of elections.

The same trends—restrictive immigration policies, less inclusive attitudes to cultural difference, along with a partial return to a closer government regulation of lifestyle choices—can be observed throughout the West in recent years. One common explanation ascribes them to the renewed vigour of global capital and economic liberalism, resulting in rapid structural change, market turbulence, high levels of unemployment, widening inequalities, and a weakening of the welfare state.^{xx} Other factors may include massive population growth in poor countries, fostering resentment, religious fundamentalism, and sheer desperation, and aging populations in rich ones, nudging them towards conservatism.

Yet regardless of the global context, intolerance in Australia is also Australian intolerance. The 1998 Boyer lecturer, eminent novelist David Malouf, addressed the issue of national civility. His lectures, ‘The Making of Australian Consciousness’ (published as *A Spirit of Play*), contrasted two factors at work in Australia’s cultural history: isolation, conformity and repression, which Malouf abhorred, and diversity, creativity and imagination, which he applauded.^{xxi} Malouf’s schema of an ongoing tension between the (possibly dangerous) delights of play, and the (sometimes cruel) demands of loyalty, touches the reality of debates about ethnic crime and imprisonment rates, land rights, substance abuse, family violence, refugees, detention centres, and so on.

Malouf implies that Australians would be happier if they cultivated the spirit of childhood within them, but Peter Pierce’s lugubrious inquiry suggests that Australian childhood is an anxious state, menaced by mythical as well as prosaic hazards. *The Country of Lost Children* dwells on the recurrent figure

of the lost child in Australian culture. Surveying news reports, novels, paintings and films, Pierce concludes that Australians are morbidly preoccupied with the dangers that threaten childhood. In an argument blending academic erudition, literary grace and moral zeal, he finds that nineteenth century stories of children manifest a fear of the land, whereas stories from the second half of the twentieth century represent the threat no longer as coming from the land itself, but from people in it: kidnappers, molesters, Welfare Officers.

In the early months of 2002, Australia seemed to be awash with stories about endangered children, starting at the top. The federal government was embroiled in two rather bizarre commotions connected with children. There was accumulating evidence that the government had consciously promoted misinformation during the 2001 election campaign by claiming that would-be immigrants threw their children overboard from a vessel in the Timor Sea in order to blackmail an Australian rescue ship into picking them up. At the same time the Governor-General was facing down calls for his resignation after it emerged that he had failed to act on cases of child abuse within his diocese when Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane. Meanwhile, cinema goers could see Rachel Perkin's short musical film *One Night The Moon*: an early twentieth century farmer's daughter dies in the bush because he refuses to employ an Aboriginal tracker.^{xxii} Then there was *Rabbit Proof Fence*, based on Doris Pilkington's biography of her mother.^{xxiii} Three girls taken from their mothers under Western Australian Aboriginal Welfare legislation escape from the convent school where they have been incarcerated, evade recapture, and find

their way home by following the white man's useless rabbit proof fence through hundreds of kilometres of sublime outback. The result is an engaging work that manages to confront the issue of the stolen generations with a degree of honesty, without straying too far into polemic and out of commercial viability. Thanks in large part to their depiction of landscape, both films make a vivid impression. The children in them bear symbols in beautifully contrasting structural symmetry. In one, a white child, drawn from 'civilisation' (by the full moon), dies in the outback for lack of a black rescuer to bring her home; in the other, black children, fleeing from 'civilisation', survive in the outback despite efforts by white rescuers to prevent them going home. Although in *Rabbit Proof Fence* the implication is complicated by the metaphor of the fence, which is the work of the conquerors but guides the lost indigenous children home, nevertheless at some deep level both films encode a message that is unconvincingly simple: whites are lost in the outback, Aborigines are not. That is only half true. If it were wholly true, whitefellas could not make so much trouble there.

The symbolic and emotional weight of Australian tales of endangered children tends to support Pierce's thesis, but without comparative investigation, whether or not Australians are more anxious about the young than other nationalities remains an open question. People everywhere tell all sorts of tales about children, but not everyone considers it to be a national issue. Pierce claims that the figure of the lost child registers a deep flaw in Australian identity, directly related to 'essential if never fully resolved anxieties of the white settler communities of this country'. 'Children lost in

places they might not belong bruised anxieties not only over legitimacy of land tenure, but of European Australians' spiritual and psychological lodgement'. Australians are 'a people persistently fearful of where we are lodged in space and time'.^{xxiv} This interpretation is plausible for the period from the late nineteenth century to the present. David Walker makes a closely related point when he remarks that popular narratives of Asian invasion from the early decades of the last century manifest 'a fear that Australia's historically shallow and remote colonies might not be given long enough to establish coherent identities'.^{xxv} However, it is doubtful that many earlier colonists had such qualms, even the dissidents celebrated by Henry Reynolds.^{xxvi} They were taught that to possess rights over land by virtue of having fought for it was not only legitimate, but praiseworthy above all other means. That was how God urged the Chosen People to inherit the Promised Land, how the Romans built their Empire, and how the Normans founded the state that became Great Britain. In colonising Australia, the British were doing no more than following in the glorious footsteps of their exemplars and ancestors.

While Walker, Burke and Pierce agree that anxiety and fear haunt Australian identity, Rosamund Dalziell finds it tainted by shame. Although her book begins with the story of a young shoplifter being paraded around a Canberra store wearing a t-shirt that reads 'I am a thief', for Dalziell the core of shame is not *doing* a bad thing but *being* a bad thing, having what the sociologist Erving Goffman in a classic study calls a 'spoiled identity'.^{xxvii} She discusses Australian autobiographies under four headings, according to the shames they register. There is the shame, once potent but today barely pertinent, of being Australian as opposed to British: of bearing the stain of convict history

and colonial provincialism – the kind of shame familiar to students of Australian literature as the ‘cultural cringe’ denounced half a century ago by A. A. Phillips.^{xxviii} There are the shames of being Aboriginal, or descended from non-English speaking immigrants. Perhaps the most symptomatic of the Australian shames examined by Dalziell is having unmarried, absent or dead parents.^{xxix} Endorsing what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra term Australia’s ‘bastard complex’, according to which Australians are engaged on a ‘doomed quest for symbolic forms of legitimacy’, she notes a literal correlate of bastardry in the extremely high illegitimacy rates of the early decades of convict settlement.^{xxx} ‘Bastard’ remains a common term of both abuse and solidarity in Australia, a linguistic move typical of stigmatised groups, as the self-application of ‘nigger’, ‘chick’ ‘blackfella’ and so on attests.

Jennifer Rutherford’s *The Gauche Intruder* psychoanalyses Australian culture. It is a stimulating work of philosophical and literary panache. Like Pierce and Don Watson (and Patrick White), Rutherford detects an underlying nihilism in Australian white culture, ‘an encounter with the void’.^{xxxi} Influenced by Lacan and Zizek, she argues that racism is founded on a fantasy of goodness and enjoyment, a fantasy that must be protected and so entails reactive aggression. She calls the fantasy ‘the Australian Good.’ It is cognate to Burke’s ‘security’, but the strength of Rutherford’s analysis stems from how she puts her finger on the impervious righteousness of the intolerant, worn like armour against the possibility of doubt. Her case is framed by Lacan’s formulation of the fraught nature of ‘moral’ goodness as opposed to ‘ethical’ reflection. The trouble is, this takes the form of a proposition about goodness that is meant to apply to all people (and all

nations). Rutherford does not clarify its relationship to the specifics of white Australian identity. Does every nation have a 'Good'? What distinguishes the 'Australian Good' from Others' Goods? If the road to hell is paved with good intentions everywhere, what is special about Australia's good intentions and Australia's hell? I wanted *The Gauche Intruder* to move outward, towards history and the world of nations, but it moves inward, and then not even into minds of real people, but into figures of literary fiction – the fictions of Henry Handel Richardson, David Malouf and Tim Winton. It is uncertain whether most Australians have even heard of these writers, and it is for sure that only a small proportion has read them. To be fair, there is more to Rutherford than this, as *Ordinary People*, her recently released documentary on One Nation members, shows.^{xxxii} However, *The Gauche Intruder* is burdened with the same problems that encumber the more traditional and eclectic studies of Pierce and Dalziell. Its interpretations of Australian identity and culture may be plausible, even compelling, but it lacks means to confirm them, and fails to make the comparisons with other nationalities that would bring them down to earth.

Reflecting on the rise of the Australian film and television industries in the 1970s, Don Watson sums up the tenor of these more recent discussions: 'lurking behind our self-confidence was anxiety and shame'.^{xxxiii} Mungo MacCallum is one of the few present-day commentators to resist pessimism about the Australian character. His essay on the Tampa crisis and the cruel system of detention by which the Australian government has sought to discourage unauthorised immigration, maintains that Australians 'remain tolerant and easy-going about race – if their politicians give them half a chance'.^{xxxiv} Sadly, *Girt by Sea* tends to show the contrary; or else, that if

Australians are indeed tolerant about race, then they are also so easy-going about it (not to say stupid) as to be misled with implausible ease by the politicians they elect. Sociologists have long been aware of the currents of racism and white supremacism in Australia, trenchantly demonstrated by Ghasan Hage.^{xxxv}

Saying sorry and making it better

Recent self-portraits, then, represent Australians as uncomfortably stuck with elements of British colonialism, prey to intolerance and racism, harbouring fear, shame and insecurity, and deeply nihilistic. They fear many things, including shame, and they are ashamed of many things, including fear. They need help. True all of this may be, but it amounts to an indictment, not a description or an analysis, and omits some of the national type's most recognisable (and endearing) features. These authors say little or nothing about the open friendliness for which Australians are renowned, nor its corollary, brashness. They do not dwell on the laconic wit noticed by many, whether interpreted as grounded wisdom or crass stupidity. Where, in other words, is Crocodile Dundee?

In view of their tone of censure and lament rather than praise and celebration, it is striking how polite most of the recent national commentaries are. Their demeanour tends to resemble that of a teacher struggling to motivate a recalcitrant class, or a mediator intent on resolving a complex dispute. Though often motivated by strong moral or political convictions, they strain to conciliate, persuade and compromise, and make an effort to credit everyone's point of view. After chiding Head Prefect John

Howard for 'bad history',^{xxxvi} Inga Clendinnen, as if encouraging the weakest pupils in a class, praised One Nation supporters' 'egalitarianism and obstinately independent empiricism'.^{xxxvii} If any were listening, they must have been chuffed. Even Don Watson, who has written scripts for Max Gillies and Paul Keating, manages to keep his indubitably sharp tongue on a leash most of the time in *Rabbit Syndrome*. The tone modulates between irony and elegy, though anger and despair are just below the surface and occasionally spill out in brief outbursts that for me are slightly too like the climax of a Methodist sermon to take altogether seriously. Younger dissidents like Fiona Nicoll also write well-mannered books. *From Diggers to Drag Queens* is a discussion of the representation of war in Australian nationalism, based on research on the Australian War memorial and the historian C E W Bean. Rejecting the narrative of a national journey towards tolerance, she celebrates the politics of parody. Her favourite example, the drag satire of Simon Hunt alias Pauline Pantsdown, is an excellent illustration of Malouf's 'spirit of play'. At the same time Nicoll appeals earnestly across the rabbit-proof fences of the culture wars. 'Violent diatribes against digger-nationalism too easily reproduce the configuration of national identity they seek to displace', she warns. 'Hanson and Pantsdown are related elements of a single phenomenon'.^{xxxviii}

In the first half of the twentieth century, violent diatribes about the nation were par for the course. Denunciation, sarcasm and harangue were approved modes of public intervention. *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* is a strong brew by the standards to which we have become accustomed. Expatriate intellectuals are dismissed as 'shirkers, they have cleared out, funk'd their job. ... "Pioneering was all right for our grandfathers, but *we*

want something easier”^{xxxix}. The intellectuals who stayed at home fared no better. They had retreated into ‘castles of isolation... retreating from the Australian problem, leaving the petty and the smug in control of things of the mind here... How can these timorous shirkers be awakened to a sense of their national duties and responsibilities?’^{xl} Stephensen’s critics were equally rude to him. Randolph Hughes, an acolyte of Christopher Brennan’s who fled Australia as soon as he could, described *Culture in Australia* as a ‘funny elucubration... clumsily conceived and barbarously written; it is the product of a mind that is muddled and ill-furnished’.^{xli}

Penton’s polemic is in the long tradition of British literary bombast, darkened by the urgency of total war. The mood is of a pub, noisy with male shouting, as the closing hour of six o’clock approaches and arguments threaten to become punch-ups. Attacking the abstractions of political debate, Penton called for and exemplified ‘ill-mannered, cantankerous, unpatriotic, subversive and destructive thought’.^{xlii} True, his self-proclaimed faith in ‘clear thought’ was disingenuous. When it came to making constructive suggestions, Penton picked up his hat. All the same, the dulling down of Australian debate is regrettable. Mark Davis is one of the few to keep the tradition alive.^{xliii} Did Paul Keating sing the sparkling swansong of public pugnacity? It is thirty years since intellectuals excelled mightily in rhetorical truculence: the young Germaine Greer, for instance, or Mungo MacCallum in his *Nation Review* period. *Girt by Sea* shows that MacCallum has lost none of his acuteness or lucidity, but his wit has lost its sting. He used to exemplify Penton’s ‘ill-mannered, cantankerous, unpatriotic, subversive and destructive thought’. Now he secretes the disappointment of the sizeable cohort of political dissidents he speaks to and for. Malcolm Fraser is a

symbol of their political disorientation. The man they hated, the one who felled Whitlam, has turned out to be one of their own. *Eppur si muove*.

In a persuasive commentary, David Carter contends that today's public intellectuals are driven by the values of literary aestheticism.^{xliv} Their favoured genre is the intimate, didactic essay invented by Montaigne. (Ken Wark, a prolific national commentator with a professed admiration for the sixteenth century moralist, made the point by citing Lyotard: Montaigne is a 'postmodern' writer'^{xlv}) The literary essay is a genre that parades modesty but is motivated by an ample sense of self-importance. The goal of a national commentator, like Montaigne's, is therapeutic. He or she would like to make their audience better people. But while Montaigne was content to work his charm on individual readers, Australia's public intellectuals want to work theirs on the entire nation. It seems these critics must love their nation, or why be so concerned about it? But their love is not the bountiful love of those who devote their lives to uplifting of their fellow citizens, like Arthur Stace, whose chalked 'Eternity' decorated the streets of Sydney for decades and who is saluted in the title of the Australian National Museum's most popular permanent exhibit;^{xlvi} or a current denizen of the same city who wanders its streets cheerfully wishing everyone he meets a happy day, assuring them that they are beautiful and Jesus loves them. Nor is the love of today's commentators the angry love of the Hebrew prophets, denouncing and excoriating the sins of the people. Their love is low-key and domestic. It is protective of self and bound by proprieties. By turns it carps, seduces, pleads, and reasons.

The personal anecdote is a stock-in-trade of the essay genre, as the beginning of this one illustrates, so it is not surprising that by far the most favoured tool in the current kit of national psyche mending strategies is the telling of stories. Dalziell urges that writing autobiographical accounts of shame helps to resolve its pain, while reading them evokes sympathy.^{xlvii} *The Gauche Intruder* is sprinkled with anecdotes and interludes. Fiona Nicoll also makes rich use of narrative, folding an historical account of the Australian commemoration of war into other levels of stories—national myths, the current political situation, the author herself, and the writing of her book. Pierce is convinced we can ease the burden of our sense of dislodgment if we ‘illuminate’ how it happened by ‘the rehearsal of stories’. Indeed, he insists that stories ‘must be addressed as a matter of moral and cultural urgency. An inquiry into them can enrich us all’.^{xlviii}

Clendinnen cites the liberal philosopher Martha Nussbaum in favour of her belief that telling ‘true stories’ restores political health to a community (that ‘true’ apparently intended to rule out the stories of John Howard). By promoting critical self-examination and empathy with others, stories foster responsible citizenship and enhance citizens’ ability to foresee the likely consequences of different courses of action.^{xlix} It is certainly the case that communities need stories to sustain and recreate themselves. They provide frameworks that help people to know who they are, where they come from, and where they are going. However, as Clendinnen is perfectly aware, stories can also foster unquenchable grief, monstrous indifference, and murderous rage. She maintains that histories that do this are not ‘true’. But what is truth? In practice, people are persuaded not so much by truth as by what makes sense of their lives and gives them reasons for living and acting.

Of course immigrant and Aboriginal testimony has been an important factor in promoting understanding and reconciliation?^l Yet there is something unsettling about the claim that these stories *cause* reconciliation. Rather, the writing of such testimony, the demand for it, the imposition of it through marketing, school curricula etc, and the ways in which it is received and interpreted, are all *aspects* of reconciliation. If it were not so, the testimony would not be written, or published, or read; or if by some chance it were written and published and read, it would not arouse sympathy and guilt, but pride, satisfaction, and at best cool pity. Stories may be necessary if we are to become better than we are, but they are not sufficient.

Is the current prioritising of narrative a symptom of a postmodern loss of faith in abstraction and rationality? Those who are moved to pass judgement on the state of the nation differ greatly in their attitudes to postmodernism as a philosophical or aesthetic movement. Nevertheless, their discursive strategies surely reflect postmodern developments: the dominance of visual and interactive mass media, proliferating cultural diversity, the growth of the knowledge industries, and a condition in which, in John Frow's words, 'high culture... is no longer "the dominant Culture" but is rather a *pocket* within commodity culture'.^{li} Today's readers receive much of their knowledge from audio-visual micro-narratives and bland textbooks. Writers can take little for granted about their beliefs, values and assumptions, and straight talk can go badly astray. Speaking in parables is a good way to go, especially if you want to reach non-specialist readers.

Dreams of modernity

Integration and multiculturalism are modern in that they imply a decoupling of national from ethnic identity. What binds Australians together is no longer British heritage or racial origin (Father of Federation Henry Parkes' 'crimson thread of kinship'), but a social contract to achieve a common *future*. In adopting these slogans, Australia acknowledged itself, as the United States did from its beginning, to be an artefact of the thoughts and desires of human beings. (The Australian Constitution, like the American, begins with an evocation of 'the people', but unlike its revolutionary predecessor refers to them as peoples of the federating states rather than the nation as a whole, and then adds Almighty God, the British Crown, and the Constitution itself, as further sources of the nation's legitimacy.)

In the speech he read for the 1988 Bicentennial, the then Prime Minister Bob Hawke asked:

What is it that links us, in our generation, with the generations which have gone before? It is not only the fact that, for the past 200 years, and to this day, we have been a nation of immigrants. It is not only the fact that we share together this vast continent as our homeland. It is not only the shared inheritance of all that has been built here, and achieved here, over the past 200 years. And it is not only the common bond of institutions, standards, language and culture. Indeed, in today's Australia, our very diversity is an ever-growing source of the richness, vitality and strength of our community. It is true that all these things I have mentioned go to shape the Australian character and define the Australian identity. Yet beyond them, there remains one vital factor in the answer to

the question: Who is an Australian? And that factor is: a commitment to Australia and its future.^{lii}

The point is reiterated, corrected and extended with typical flair by Mungo MacCallum, who declares that the first boat people arrived 40,000 years ago.^{liii} This concept of the nation is sometimes called ‘postmodern’,^{liv} but it is modern in its fervent orientation to the future and confidence in the power of conscious self-transformation. It is almost as if the Nietzschean ideal of the ‘artist-philosopher-hero’^{lv} were projected onto the whole nation, imagined as committed to creating and transcending itself in accordance with Zarathustran imperatives:

I teach you the Superman. Man is something that is to be surpassed. What have ye done to surpass man?^{lvi}

Duggan’s *Ghost Nation* is concerned with this relationship between Australian nationality and the strenuous imperatives of modernity. His topic is ‘visual culture’, broadly defined, but in practice mostly referring to art and architecture, and the focus is on the naming, imagining and organizing of space as fundamental attributes of national consciousness. The period is the four decades from Federation until the eve of the Second World War. Rather arbitrarily, Duggan confines himself to Sydney (with an excursion over the Dividing Range for a quick tour of Canberra) and avoids the impact of the 1914-1918 war. The latter he dismisses as something that ‘occurred elsewhere as a structuring myth whose importance grew as the event receded’.^{lvii} Obviously he is thinking of the visual arts, not the fierce campaigns over conscription or the more than 200,000 plus casualties, 10%

of the male population. Even so, the omission is curious. Duggan interprets his period in terms of a local registration of modernist aesthetics, while noting that at the time artistic modernism was experienced as much as an imported novelty as a local form of expression. Neither was it a unified movement. (80) At the time it seemed like a series of controversies about new artists and movements that often had little in common and sometimes disagreed with one another strongly. Along with insightful discussions of Grace Cossington-Smith, May Gibbs, Walker Burley-Griffin and Margaret Preston, there is consideration of the Lindsays, who hated modernism but are correctly acknowledged as an integral part of the scene.

Ghost Nation is not quite as good as the sum of its parts. Reading it is rather like being taken round an art gallery by an erudite enthusiast. Duggan expounds eloquently on each topic, but where he is going is a question endlessly deferred. If there is a leading theme, it is the figure of the city evoked by Walter Benjamin, the phantasmagoria of built structures and people at the heart of modernist experience, productive of 'almost hallucinatory awareness'. Town planners seek to write national agendas upon the city's confusion (its 'half-caste' condition, in Walker's terms), using spatial design to squeeze out danger and unpredictability, and instil order, productivity and collectivity. (91f) Duggan's illuminating discussion of the building of Canberra concludes that it 'has become finally an ironic capital in which the idealism of its design coexists with the practical inconvenience of its pragmatic location. It is a city that looks like a suburb'. (171) Rutherford, however, finds more eeriness than irony in the national capital. Reflecting that Canberra was designed to be looked at not lived in, she finds confirmation of the Great Australian Emptiness. 'Emptiness

becomes constitutive of the experience of living in Canberra; it becomes itself an idealised state, and identification with this ideal enters into the circuit of jouissance and its defence... There is something uncannily familiar about Canberra's empty streets'.^{lviii} In his biography of Paul Keating, Don Watson adds a nice counterpoint, describing Parliament House, at the intersection of the city's main grid lines, as follows: 'Inside it wants for nothing except reality. It smells of nothing, tastes of nothing, and is the colour of nothing. Having no past and no provenance, it evokes nothing, unless it is the end of history.'^{lix}

Duggan observes that "Official Australia" was the product of modernity, and yet its spokesmen rejected modernism'.^{lx} Hence the great interest of a moment when this broadly true generalisation broke down spectacularly. This moment is the subject of *The Prime Minister's Christmas Card*, Lindsay Barrett's incisive essay on modernism and the Whitlam government. In 1973 the National Gallery provoked a scandal by spending \$1.34 million on the abstract expressionist *Blue Poles*, painted by a foreigner, the American Jackson Pollock. In response, Whitlam defiantly reproduced the painting on his Christmas greeting card. Barrett observes that 'unlike any Australian politician before him, Whitlam had firm opinions on both art *and* sewerage, and he was equally passionate about both'.^{lxi} With his fabled eclecticism and eloquence, Whitlam embodied two utopian Australian dreams of development, one of which was waning in the 1970s, the other waxing. On the one hand there was the dream that beckoned most insistently in the first half of the twentieth century, of a nation made rich, populous and powerful through *economic* development. On the other hand, there was the dream that has most often inspired social reformers in the second half of the

century, of a nation made urbane, tolerant, egalitarian and green through *cultural* development.^{lxii} Today the first dream has faded to a shadow of its former self, and there is widespread agreement that the second is in trouble.

Creating Nation

In the last quarter of the twentieth century subtle but noteworthy changes occurred in the ways that nation, nationality and nationalism were understood and discussed. There was a worldwide tendency to conceptualise nationality less as a function of group membership, and more as the function of an authentic personal 'identity'. Over the same period, however, the concepts were theorised by academics in ways that were somewhat dissonant with the wider trend. The dominant theoretical paradigms of nationality came to understand it as a function of structures and forces that are historical and contingent.

National issues that few decades ago were assumed to be about *action*, are today more likely to be problematised as issues of *identity*. Donald Horne, for example, finds the possibility that there might be no credible definition of Australian identity 'disturbing'. He is led to propose a 'no bullshit', 'testable' one that appears to claim that an Australian is a liberal-minded global citizen who speaks English. This odd turn at least makes it clear that it is not identity he is talking about, but moral sensibility and political preference.^{lxiii} Contrast Horne's approach with Brian Penton's, who in 1941 was not interested in Australians asking themselves who they *were*, but urged them to decide what they should *do*. The 'disagreeable question' that history summons everyone to answer is: 'What have you done to deserve

continuing existence?’^{lxiv} Nor is there anxious questioning of the nature of Australian identity in Stephensen's book. The sine qua non of nationality is change and becoming, not identity and being. Australians are not inventing Australia. Australia is inventing us. Eventually it will ‘produce a new variety of the human species’, since Australia ‘is a unique country. All countries are unique, but this one particularly so’.^{lxv} The shift in emphasis from becoming to being has been accompanied by related shifts from behaviour and motives to representations and attitudes. Being Australian used to refer largely to what Australians did or were likely to do. These days it is more likely to refer to what they think, or are likely to think. Nationality is treated primarily as a function of typical imagery and narratives, and only secondarily of dispositions to behave in typical ways. It is tempting to date these changes from the 1960s, when, according to Richard White, the expression ‘the Australian Way of Life’ began to fall into disuse.^{lxvi} The phrase’s disappearance can be interpreted as a sign of the replacement of ‘assimilation’ by ‘integration’ – that is, there can be more than one Australian ‘way of life’. As well, it implies that how Australians live—what they *do*—is less significant than what they are or could *be*.

Although bitter nationalist struggles continue, during the 1990s there were growing signs of a retreat from identity politics generally, including national politics based on identity. Fiona Nicoll reflects the trend, taking her cue from Queer Theory. She claims her work to be part of ‘a broader epistemological reorientation that is taking place in Australian cultural studies away from the question of *who* we are towards the questions of *where* and *for what* it is that we stand’. For Nicoll, the enhancement of ‘self-identification’ rather than ‘self-identity’ is the key to desirable social

transformation.^{lxvii} Rutherford proposes that national identity reveals itself in ‘unexpected’ repetitions and commonalities across the field of Australian culture,^{lxviii} implying that nationality is a statistical entity, a fuzzy set of behavioural attributes. That is how a linguist might define a speech idiom.

The artificiality of nation states has always been an aspect of Marxist thought, but by 1983, with the appearance of Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* and Benedict Anderson’s *Imaginary Communities*, the idea was becoming orthodox.^{lxix} Nation states, with their diverse sentiments and institutions, were modelled as a creative response to modernity – to capitalism, literacy, industrial technology and European colonialism. Richard White’s influential book *Inventing Australia* (1981) was an early working out of this view. White argued that the quest for national self-definition is futile, and focussed instead on the image-makers who have told Australians who they were.^{lxx} Guided by them, the ‘archetypal Australian’ underwent rapid metamorphosis in the twentieth century, becoming in turn the ‘white happy and wholesome’ youth of the new federation, the beautiful crucified male bodies of Gallipoli diggers, the bearers of a ‘true Europe’ upholding values abandoned by decadent Europe and crass America, etc.

That nations are built on sand is not a new insight. The nineteenth century writers and intellectuals who played a key role in the development of nationalist thought were frequently conscious of it. They gave it a wholly different meaning to White. ‘Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation’, Ernest Renan wrote in 1882. ‘The nations are not something eternal. They had their beginnings and they will end’. However, his conclusion was not that nations

do not exist, but that nations are like ‘ancestor cults’ whose continued existence is ‘a daily plebiscite’. National unity stems from people ‘having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together’. ‘To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more – these are the essential conditions for being a people’.^{lxxi} A character in John Buchan’s popular spy thriller *The Thirty Nine Steps* (1913), published on the eve of a nationalist bloodbath, advances the idea with breezy clarity: ‘If you’re going to be killed you invent some kind of flag and country to fight for, and if you survive you get to love the thing’.^{lxxii}

Far from finding something to love at the end of his search for Australia, Richard White claimed to find nothing at all; a discovery which, inadvertently or not, echoes Patrick White’s theme of Australian nihilism. ‘From the attempts of others to get there, we can learn much about the travellers and the journey, but nothing about the destination itself. There is none’.^{lxxiii} Australia is no more than all the representations of Australia. It is an unconvincing conclusion, like deciding that an onion cannot be a proper vegetable because there is nothing at its centre. Renan and Buchan, on the other hand, accept the more commonsense view that being wrapped around nothing is what makes an onion the sort of vegetable it is. Actually, *Inventing Australia* does preserve something of Australia over and above manufactured images, in the form of a trace of Marxian superstructure. National images are interpreted as masks for the interests of the rich and powerful, mediated by a compromised intelligentsia. However, by the 1990s, with the influence of Derrida and the fading of even gestural Marxism, the trend to pure constructivism became a rout. In the ‘Introduction’ to *Nation*

and Narration (1990), Homi Bhabha, while not confronting directly the suggestion that nationalism masks 'interests', whether of a ruling class, state apparatus or popular utopianism, looked instead to its narrative aesthetics and 'the Janus-faced ambivalence of language itself in the construction of the Janus-faced discourse of the nation'.^{lxxiv} When everything has many faces, 'mask' tends to lose meaning.

The idea that nations are somehow illusory, rhetorical, imagined, invented, made or constructed, has a powerful appeal in Australia. Just how powerful is evident from the titles of books published in the past decade or so: 'The Making of Australian Consciousness', 'Ghost Nation: Imagined Space', 'Making Australia', 'Making it National', 'Images of Australia', 'Illusions of Identity', 'Mistaken Identity', 'Reinventing Australia',^{lxxv} and so on. Australians are reminded more often than most other citizens of the fractured and provisional character of their nationality. Not only are there the still unresolved ties with Britain, but there are also strong attachments to the regions, which have legal and administrative support because Australia is a federation. Geographical diversity and distance amplify the distinctive features of the States, and high rates of demographic mobility increase awareness of them. Very few scholars indeed undertake studies of, for instance, New South Welsh or Tasmanian identity, analysing the psyches of these sub-nations, pondering the meaning of their social statistics, attributing their collective attitudes to 'fear of the Other' and so forth. Nevertheless, the histories and cultures of the federating States are unique, and there is still significant separatist sentiment in the North and West. The States are also reminders of the historical relativity of the Australian nation: Western Australia might easily have failed to join the Commonwealth, or left it later.

In an alternative universe not radically different from the one we inhabit, the people who are now New Zealanders or Fijians might have been Australians. After all, as British Pacific colonies they sent delegates to some of the Conventions that preceded federation. Lastly, and perhaps most strikingly, Anzac Day, which clearly surpasses Australia Day as the nation's most sacred civic ritual, is shared with another nation.

However, the recognition that in a profound sense nations are artificial, runs up against the equally strong concern to discover authentic Australian identity, to discover the heart of the onion and know 'who we really are'.

Logically, it is difficult to know what authentic Australian identity can be if Australia is something people make up as they go along. In response to this dilemma, an awkward compromise is frequently embarked on. The 'imagining' of the nation is reinvested with moral value. As in: Australians created Australia, and it is good, so we are good. Or: we created Australia, and it is not much good, but we can make it better, because we are good. As John Rickard puts it, 'the uncertainty of the future offers the opportunity to invent one'.^{lxxvi} That sort of rhetoric, which seems to be incumbent on politicians, is, if not, in Hancock's words, 'incurably romantic', then certainly incurably modern.

Beyond Nation

Barrett explains the failure of Whitlamism as the result of a failure to grasp adequately the nature of the world beyond Australian shores. 'It was a conceptually and practically impossible way of dealing with the effects of extreme international change within the social, economic and political life of the nation'.^{lxxvii} Thirty years on, the effects of 'extreme international change'

continue to proliferate. Who knows, APEC might develop into Pacific Common Market, and then a Pacific Community, and being Australian may become something similar to being a Tasmanian or a Sydneysider. Or if, as seems rather more likely at this ominous point in history, the world continues to coagulate into increasingly antagonistic enclaves, nationality may become even more significant and pressing. In any case, what it means to be Australian will certainly continue to change.

Saving his highest note till last, Watson suggests, in a frame of mind delicately poised between sarcasm and despondency, that it would be better for Australia to become American than to be America's deputy. 'The cultural cringe ends the day we join'.^{lxxviii} He lists the advantages – military, economic, and cultural. I was delighted with this. I have been espousing the idea for years. At dinner parties threatened with cosiness or ennui, it is a splendid way to provoke the eye rolling and lip curling responses. With the typical blindness of national sentiment, Australians obstinately fail to see the obvious. A few years ago, liking to live dangerously, I asked students in a lecture whether they would prefer Australia to be part of Indonesia or the United States. An overwhelming majority preferred Indonesia. This could be read in any number of ways, but none of them indicate any likelihood that Australia will soon become the fifty first state, or that the Australian states will become states of the American Union. Watson of course knows it is not a practical idea. Yet such is his disillusionment that he seriously wonders if the Australian republic, espoused so passionately by the former Labor Prime Minister and opposed so obstinately by the present one, is really a good idea. Might the result not be a phobic, narrow-minded 'Fortress Australia'? For a nation of rabbits, sticking with a queer second-hand monarchy could be best the way to go. 'Something as silly as the present arrangement is appropriate

to the present circumstances, even if we wake up one morning to find Charles and Camilla on our throne’.^{lxxix}

It is the way we seem to be going, but it’s pretty weird. If the options are a fairytale of European royalty or membership of the USA, the USA makes a lot more sense – assuming they would have us. If Australians were US citizens, there is no doubt that Southeast Asian businessmen would still think us loud, and probably stupid, but they would hesitate to call us lazy. Lazy is not an adjective that is meaningful with respect to Americans. It would not even fit *Australian* Americans.

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^{lxxv} John Thornhill, *Making Australia: Exploring Our National Consciousness*, Millennium Books, Newtown, 1992; Graeme Turner, *Making it National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonard's, 1994; Gillian Whitlock and David Carter (eds), *Images of Australia: An Introductory Reader in Australian Studies*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1992; Ann Marie Willis, *Illusions of Identity: The Art of a Nation*, Hale and Iremonger, Sydney, 1993; Stephen Castles, *Mary Kalantzis, Bill Cope and Michael Morissey*, *Mistaken Identity: Multiculturalism and the Demise of Nationalism in Australia*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1988; Hugh MacKay,

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^{lxxvi} John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History*, Longmans, London and New York, 1988, p. 271.

^{lxxvii} Barrett, p. 238.

^{lxxviii} Watson 2001, p 55.

^{lxxix} Watson, 2001, p. 56.