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Crimson thread, 1880–1914

The battle for standardised railway gauges and the harrowing tales of rabbit plagues have provided many an insight on the period reviewed in the following chapters, and although my discussions favour other contentious themes, they are not intended to diminish the significance of such familiar fare. A few conscientious studies have allowed glimpses of the ubiquitous influence of these frustrating questions, but the irritating recycling habit of recent popular history has probably exhausted our palates while passing up too many opportunities for useful political, spatial and economic analyses.[1] Rodents and Railways need not make for mundane history, but a third *R* – the present 'Reflexive' approach – needs to be emphasised for the neglected 'literacy of place', or understanding of territory, it promises to impart.

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1

Prodigal children: an introduction

Land of rare climate, stalwart men,
And pretty girls, and queer mammalia,
All England cries, through *Punch*'s pen,
'Advance, Australia!'[1]

The three decades leading up to the centennial year of 1888 brought momentous transformations in Australia. The response to those transformations was far from uniform, however, and so the centennial was seen as a test, an interrogation, an irrelevance, perhaps as an assertion, rather than a simple celebration. Since the 1850s, severe contrasts between British and colonial impressions of land and life in Australia, and the unstable interplay between the two appraisals, had complicated the primary tasks of interpretation, adjustment and development for governments and immigrant settlers alike. Whatever they did to persuade themselves and their contemporaries to the contrary, leading colonials knew that Australia's fate was comprehensively linked to such global transactions.

Family feuding

British social and economic pronouncements, though seldom uniform or clear, expressed the more strident opinions. During the mining boom the colonists were lectured on the growth of private materialism and extragavance, the emergence of radical democracy, over-expenditure on public works programmes, and 'misguided' policies which made it difficult for landless people to secure small homesteads. Australian society, it was explained, still exhibited the 'convict stain'; the gold rushes had fostered the gambling instinct; the climate produced indolence or the physical and mental degeneration of the race; oversupplies of lower-class immigrants, coupled with the development of democratic, egalitarian structures, meant that there were no effective leaders. Gradually, alternative assessments gained prominence, but few of the critiques were altruistic or devoid of

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prejudice. Emigration to Australia offered Britain an outlet for redundant capital in a proven staple-producing system which was comparatively free of 'native problems', decent homes for the poor and disaffected, a safety valve for the unrest and misery in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands, and overall an acceptable substitute destination after the outbreak of civil war in North America. Simplistic Malthusian explanations of unemployment in Britain led directly to descriptions of 'overcrowding' there, and thence to predictions about Australia's 'empty spaces'. The centre of the continent contained no deserts, but a land flowing with milk and honey. Whereas long-settled countries desperately wanted land, and were unable to get it, new territories obviously required people just as badly:

> For years and years to come their resources can never be adequately developed, because of the comparative smallness of their population; and if every unemployed man, woman, and child, now living in the United Kingdom were sent thither it would be like pouring a drop of water into the ocean.[2]

To ignore the appeal of idle hands and idle lands was abnormal, morally indefensible. Britain's xenophobic economists, always loath to see any good in foreign institutions – and therefore scandalised by the independent actions of their own Australian brethren – fulminated against the rise of protectionist policies, especially those of Victoria. They pressed for the creation of a single federated nation to guarantee economies of scale and unhindered trade, to keep down the costs of defence and administration, and to curb the interest in parochial politics. Interestingly, Marx and Engels were rather happier with the colonists' efforts.

As Goodwin and White[3] explain very well, all of this belonged to a brand of thinking which was readily extended to most interpretations of the functions of empire, sometimes with mixed results. For example, when applied to imperial 'relationships', the overused parent–child metaphor resulted in a good deal of chastisement for Australia, yet the colonists found ways to profit from the same biological analogy. So, the universal need of youth for generous care and protection was often cited, and it provided a convenient ploy when soliciting loans or dodging defence expenditure. Goodwin demonstrates how the use of this analogy encouraged the idea of Australia-watching for self-interest – the free-ranging child might take a few suspect traits of the parent further, and more quickly, so that lessons might be learnt from Australia's mistakes. In the 1860s and 1870s the patronising airs and unpleasant class-consciousness which coloured the writings of Dilke, Martineau, Trollope and George Baden-Powell sold Australia short where rapid urbanisation and the land question were concerned. Their complaints included no effort to analyse the mix of forces creating the young cities, and neglected the special significance of land revenue for infant treasuries; above all, they failed to understand that potent environmental,

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economic and technological factors militated against the establishment of small-scale settlement, homestead style. Sadly, Britain's geographers – including the eminent Roderick Murchison of the Royal Geographical Society – were delivered of crackpot notions about population carrying capacities and the foundation of a plantation system in the tropical north based on the mass import of cheap coloured labour.

White shows that, in that great age of graphic commentary, the future of British Australia was vividly essayed in two favoured styles. In the metropolis and at the periphery, Australia was shown as young, innocent, vulnerable, very feminine; the cliché made her a shepherdess, and 'another Britannia' for John Bull and the original Britannia. Uniquely antipodean contributions to this iconography favoured similar 'healthy and wholesome' characteristics, the most successful being the young boy in sailor suit or scout uniform – the 'little boy from Manly', adapted from a touching story of (misguided) patriotism from that Sydney suburb – but declarations of a close relationship with Britain were maintained. The flexibility of this second version guaranteed its popularity: for the imperially minded pastoralists it might be employed to hint at the need for a continuing dependence on the mother country; for ambitious colonial manufacturers the boy might be better shown cutting the apron strings, or growing inevitably to maturity in an industrialised economy. But the restiveness of the urbanising fringe was not entirely coloured by these offerings. As White also cautions, local class issues were usually ignored, prompting the radical press to supply stark alternatives – including the idealised Working Man versus the Fat Man, who was naturally the capitalist, domestic or foreign.[4]

There is not the space to discuss the relationship between these efforts and the persistent debates on the 'national type', which favoured the taxonomic approaches still in vogue in the growing sciences. The frequent nomination of the interesting title the 'Coming Man' reveals their kinship: the colonies and the Home Country shared the Social Darwinist notions supporting British expansionism in Asia and Africa and their own attitudes to the Aborigines (a 'dying race'). In the matter of 'racial purity', many considered themselves even more British than the British – an 'improved type' might be evolving under Australian skies. There was as much doubt as assertion, yet again, but it was widely agreed that logic demanded that the type be 'tested'. What better test than an imperial war? We can find Australian colonists helping to dispossess New Zealand's Maoris, avenging Gordon in the Sudan, quelling the Boxer rebellion in China – and (in a force of about 16,000) fighting the Boers. The last trial run seemed flawed, and it brought more confusion. The Boers were clearly the very 'bush' types the Australians admired: from the 1880s the bush – best defined as the whole area beyond the towns and cities – had been admired by artists,

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balladists, poets and writers as the abode of distinctively Australian landscapes and social traits, the true home of the Coming Man.

From the commencement of the upsurge in imperial interests in the antipodes, Australia could call on its own champions to combat the 'pernicious influence' of the mother country. Normally, the counter-attack depended heavily on returning colonists, agents-general and visiting politicians doing the London rounds, but the outcry in the colonies was loud and sustained when British presumptions overstepped the mark. Perhaps the most spirited early defence came in the 1860s, suitably provided by the distinguished Irish immigrant and Victorian politician, Charles Gavan Duffy. The eloquent Duffy castigated British critics for their lack of interest in his adopted country's great 'social expedition' and attacked their palpable ignorance of its varied geographical and political contexts. Duffy's riposte was apparently unrewarded in the metropolitan hearth, but in any event his rebel background must have alerted him to the insular proclivities of the English towards the cultivation of comforting stereotypes of other places – which obscured the need to put their own house in order. With good reason, he shared the fears of his senior colleagues that the unfair and ill-informed assessments issuing from the heart of the empire might influence the very pace and direction of development in Australia. Others joined the debate over the next two decades, mainly replying to British abstractions and coarse generalisations with hard-earned personal experience and batteries of statistical data.[5]

Like other parts of the British empire, Australia had been subjected to innumerable environmental appraisals of varying reliability in the formative years of white settlement. Their promotional content, with an occasional *caveat emptor*, influenced early domestic and foreign images of the country – including early geography texts – and continued to provide intrinsically interesting elements in the Australian experience. Then, as now, British images of Australia were at best patronising and condescending; at worst they were arrogant or simply stupid. As Goodwin points out, in either case they were usually conditioned by the self-interest of a large and old-established nation in which there was a strong suspicion that its own destiny was somehow indissolubly linked with that of a young and very small community. British parameters – social and political, and all too often unreservedly economic – were employed, and Australia was found wanting. But it must be noted that they remained part of an external model in which insufficient allowance was made for Australia's home-grown aspirations. And so the pioneering achievements in welfare legislation, high rates of home ownership, universal suffrage, and the eight-hour day, were grossly and impertinently undervalued; they were even condemned for 'too much democracy'.

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Centennial

There was no coming of age in 1888. The Colonial Institute marked the centenary of white settlement by installing George Halse's statuary, 'Advance Australia', in which virginal Australia 'steps out of her native wilds into the light of civilisation', still secure in the matronly warmth of Britain.[6] J. Henniker Heaton heaped praises on the colonists' valiant efforts – 'Here, then, the ugly duckling out of which the swan of the Southern Seas was to grow' – but the Australians continued to face a numbing paternalism.[7] White Australia was still administered as a series of separate and highly parochial units, probably maintaining as much cultural, economic and political contact with Britain as they did with each other. Significantly, while centennial day was noisily celebrated in Sydney and other parts of New South Wales, most Australian colonists could make very little sense of it except as another welcome public holiday. Its 'national' designation was quite premature. Taking the year as a whole, however, there were a few contrived or self-conscious statements indicating an acceleration into a new phase of endeavour: for example, Melbourne's lavish International Exhibition was opened in August and lasted until the following February, Sydney hosted the inaugural Congress of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) at the beginning of August, and colonial politicians redoubled their efforts in a growing campaign for a federated Australian Commonwealth. Certainly there was a quickening of nationalistic enthusiasms in better-educated circles – albeit accompanied by a little apprehension – and, although the collective colonial pulse registered no great change, the event did not elude obsessive metropolitan scribes:

> The use of Australia to the rest of the world, her history in its truest sense, dates from her occupation by the English, and that began on January 26th, 1788, when Captain Phillip announced to an inattentive world that thenceforward the people of a little island in the Atlantic intended to own and govern a land in the South Pacific thirty times greater, and possibly fifty times richer, than their own. They have owned and governed it ever since, have founded, in their haphazard, anarchical, and most effective way, a group of vigorous States on the fringe of the great continent, and are looking forward with reasonable confidence to the day when the statesmen of a Federation as populous as that of the United States, as large in area and possibly as rich, shall announce that, within the vast expanse of the Pacific, political initiative and the political veto belong to them alone.[8]

Thus the *Spectator*'s bold prospectus on 'The Next Centenary of Australia' began another very British analysis of broad economic and political indices. But to some extent this bit of centennial rhetoric showed a sensitivity towards colonial conditions, attitudes and aspirations which had been all too rare in the episodic British commentary on Australian affairs.

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Imperialists at home and in the colonies found its attempt at 'political prophecy' challenging, but not unfamiliar:

There is every reasonable probability that in 1988 Australia will be a Federal Republic, peopled by fifty millions of English-speaking men [*sic*], who, sprung from the same races as the American of the Union, will have developed a separate and recognisable type, resembling yet differing from that of their cousins in the Western Atlantic. The most difficult work of settlement, the provision of food, houses, instruments, and organisation sufficient to tempt and to provide for increasing multitudes, has been accomplished; and soon the stream of emigration, that wonderful outflow of annual armies from Europe, leaderless but obedient, guideless but unfaltering, will turn to Australia in increasing volume . . . within ten years the overspill of Germany and the United Kingdom should both alike be pouring to the South, where there is room for all and land for all, and the sky is clear and the air is warm, and the apple and the grape will flourish side by side. The populousness is almost certain, and so is its organisation as a Republic, and, as we should predict, a Republic with certain aggressive tendencies . . . The Australian Republic will be mistress not only of her own continent, but of the Eastern Archipelago, – that is, of the lands which in all the world are richest in minerals, forests, and the means of yielding all that the tropics can produce.[9]

The Australians would build a new empire in Asia and the South Seas, stretching from New Zealand to the Philippines and taking in Papua, Java, Borneo, Sumatra and hundreds of islands. If it was designed for export, this kind of exaggeration was usually wasted and, for the most part, all such anticipations of a clear break with England encountered chilly receptions or blank bewilderment. The *Spectator*'s brand of Social Darwinism obviously struck a better note, however, and its reflections on a coming 'national type' fed that enticing debate which had already snared earnest colonials:

. . . They will, in short, desire easier and larger lives than the Americans do, will be less persistently laborious, and will feel – we note this already in Australians almost as strongly as in Californians – a sort of worship for their climate. The note of discontent which penetrates the whole American character will be absent, and if not exactly happier, they will be more at ease. All Australian development will be affected by that difference, and as they cease to be British, Germans, and Irish, the men of the new type which will gradually be born, the distinctive and separate 'Australians', will be as distinguishable in England as the Americans, and distinguishable also from them. The typical Australian will be a sunnier man.[10]

Well, it would be foolish to deny that wider strategic and commercial considerations played a role in federationism, but geopolitics was not the average Australian's strongest suit; boosterism aside, it is difficult to detect any common and influential designs for an aggressively Australian presence in the Asian and Pacific sector. And yet there was indeed a growing preoccupation, both rational and romantic, with interrelated 'nationalisms' in matters of race, social and geopolitical conventions, art and literature,

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resource appraisal and management. The temper is not easily caught. In some quarters, the Australians appeared to be serving notice, or were interested in doing so after years of flamboyant expansion, while all but the most confident of them were seriously handicapped by the relentless stereotyping of colonies on Britain's part and an absence, on their own, of any overarching vision. And although similar uncertainties are carefully hidden in the 1980s from casual observers, many Australians have developed a very high degree of sensitivity to outside opinion. It is an important paradox in this land of paradoxes – one of the youngest of Western societies, and so heavily burdened by the past. Because the punishing legacies of earlier generations are pervasive ingredients in the restiveness of today the historical researcher, infused with that same restive spirit, can do no more than to seek an understanding and hope to communicate it: admittedly that does not promise exorcism, but it contains the small beginnings of one form of liberation.

Fringe, bush, outback

British commentators concentrated so often on Australia's investment potentials – 'The use of Australia to the rest of the world', as the *Spectator* put it – and in many respects colonial evaluations favoured similarly utilitarian and exploitative perspectives. To the more parsimonious and superficial of nineteenth-century observers, the settlement process had been rude indeed, and, when measured against the available continental scale, the colonists' tangible achievements seemed rather sketchy. Australia was almost 25 times larger than the British Isles and more than 30 times larger than Britain itself, but the contemplation of that was not to be permitted to deceive investors or prospective immigrants: where mere space was concerned, 'considerable deductions' should be entered in the imperial ledgers.

> For in the interior there are vast tracts of desolate country, rocky, covered with stones, covered with sand which is driven in clouds by the wind; vast tracts where the soil is impregnated with salt, and fresh water is found only at points separated from each other by great intervals of dry, barren, cheerless wastes . . . If, as is generally believed, these great tracts of desolation are rich beneath the surface with mineral wealth, it may be assumed that, sooner or later, means will be found for making them habitable, but it is difficult to believe that they will ever be covered with a very large population. Men may work there, but when their work is done they will fly to the more genial parts of the country.[11]

And in general the prospects of tropical Australia – a third of the continent – were less than sunny for European man:

> If tropical Australia is ever to be thickly populated it will not be by men belonging to the great race which has created Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide, for they cannot

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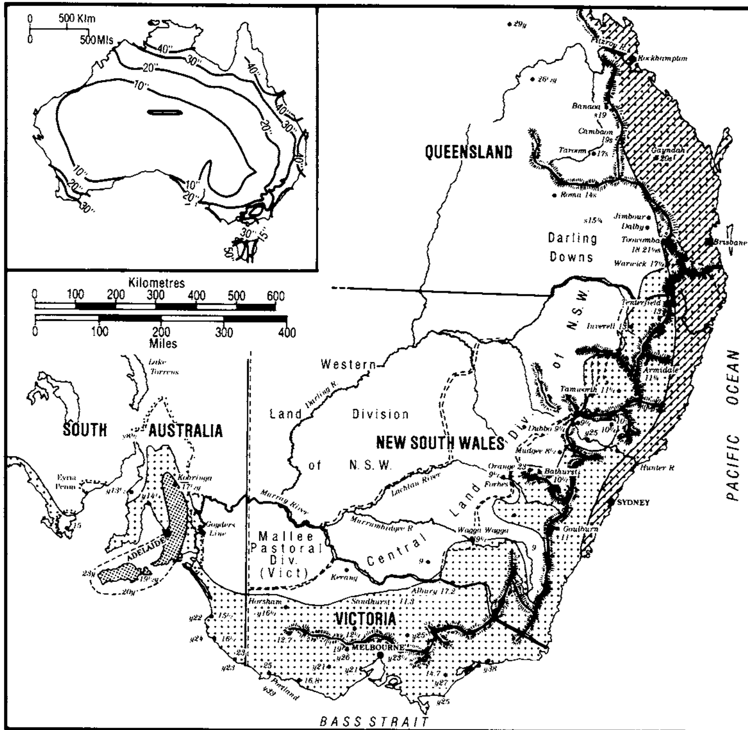

Figure 1. Investors' notes: a contemporary estimate of average rainfall distributions. Modified from Wills 1887.

endure severe and continuous labour in a tropical climate . . . Englishmen, Scotchmen, Irishmen may find the capital, and may direct the labour; but the labourers themselves, who must form the great majority of the population, will be coloured people.[12]

Even that guarded prognosis collapsed when the author flippantly hazarded a guess at a future European–Australian population of 100 millions. But, if the attempt to see Australia as a whole was another sign of the times, the essayists did not produce elaborate inventories demanded by increasingly technocratic, capitalistic communities. The kinds of synthesis required to clarify (and sometimes to service) these speculative sorties were mainly attempted by geography's pioneer teachers and scholars.

Then in its infancy in academia, the subject had become heavily impregnated with imperialistic and nationalistic sentiments: it was therefore quite strongly orientated to contemporary political, racial, strategic and commercial issues. Despite the shortcomings alluded to in the preceding section, geography in its later nineteenth-century form delivered some of the most

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'accessible' scientific information about people and places. So J. T. Wills, in the *Scottish Geographical Magazine* for 1887, cautioned British 'investors and promoters of emigration' to note that the 'limits of agricultural settlement' were undeniably set in Australia by the insufficiencies of rainfall over most of the continent; his rough analysis stands up quite well against modern cartographic synopses (Figures 1 and 2).[13] Tracing the 'pecuniary value of rain and of irrigation water', Wills combined several earlier fragments to produce a useful map of annual rainfall for the mainland and Tasmania. His lukewarm audit seemed to be timely, since major irrigation projects had just been initiated in south-eastern Australia. Covering both arable and grazing potentials, Wills's paper contained a special rebuke for those South Australian authorities who (he claimed) had recently discarded their own excellent statistical series:

> The South Australian records are the longest and most complete, but no returns later than 1882 are to be found in this country. The colony has had bad seasons since, and apparently wishes to conceal the fact by not publishing returns. Her agricultural statistics, too, have just been discontinued, because they were such melancholy reading.[14]

In partial response to these intemperate criticisms, Goodwin points out that the Australians were apparently expected to conform to a narrow model of economic performance, and that too little attention was paid to their vaguely defined social goals. This was one of the most disabling forces characterising a type of 'client' status which continues to haunt Australian nationalists. In one case, Flora Shaw (Lady Lugard) advised her fellow-critics that the appropriate image for Australia was that of the large development corporation, rather than that of the infant nation-state – so that the colonial governments might be assessed as managers or boards of directors, and the colonists as employees.[15] Yet it is equally important to note that our nineteenth-century settlers were of necessity dealing with sharper parameters than those divined by remote or visiting authors. For instance, in the decade leading up to the centennial they had shown conclusively that they were moving towards an improved consensus on some fundamental regional characteristics, and their efforts deserved better recognition overseas. At that time, notwithstanding all the contrary reports, Australia exhibited some remarkable landscape authorship: in that regard it was entirely representative of what is usually described as a promiscuously assertive century in the history of Western civilisation.

The forerunners of the 'sunnier' folk had received damaging blows from a harsh environment dominated, as Wills and others had correctly shown, by poor soils and wildly erratic rainfall regimes (cf. Figures 1 and 2). But all of that was balanced, privately and publicly, by the knowledge gained from ubiquitous and multi-levelled empirical testing procedures, including some

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