

Introduction

Sad peace, ridiculous interlude between two massacres of peoples.
 Romain Rolland 1919 (cited in Ducasse, Meyer and Perreux,
Vie et mort des Français 1914-1918, p. 461)

*[In] Australia isolationism, whether in defence, education, art,
 literature, or science, is the road to disaster.*
 C. E. W. Bean (*War Aims of a Plain Australian*, 1943, p. 133)

Visions of a new world

By 1913 Australia had experienced, along with other developing and developed nations, more than a quarter of a century of unparalleled change. The first multi-storied buildings of steel and concrete—in large part made possible by the recent development of the electric, cable-winchd elevator—had appeared in cities where electric lighting was becoming the principle source of illumination, where lorries, motor cars and motor omnibuses were no longer novelties, and where electric-powered tramways had almost completely displaced horse-drawn and cable-driven systems. Evidence of ‘new society’ modernity was not restricted to cities. Aided by the wonders of science and with the help of improved transportation means, modern farming techniques would, it was almost universally believed, allow the fringes of viable settlement to be pressed outwards to absorb a manifoldly increased population, for whom even the deserts would finally bloom.

But it was in the cities where evidence of the process of ‘becoming modern’ was most readily perceivable. The major Australian cities were casting off the lingering vestiges of a provincial backwater past and turning into medium-sized, modern metropolises by world standards, and impressively large ones by the yardsticks prevailing (London alone excepted) in the white British Empire. As well as bearing witness to most of the technological innovations of the modern age, the citizens of these cities might, if they cared to, begin to come to terms with many of the ideas of the modern age as well. In newspapers carrying an impressive

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quota of world news, they could, for example, read articles extolling modernity, make contact with the ideas of Nietzsche, see examples of futurist and cubist art reproduced (though not in colour), and learn how these movements, futurism particularly, were now about to take over in the realm of high art.

In 1913 the art and writing of the 'golden' 1890s were often looked back on as summing up the previous century; its works offered Australians a solid cultural achievement to build on rather than being the rigid exemplars of a national school. Indeed, the local cultural scene was fluid, and the idea that an art which was not expressive of the nation's soul was of intrinsic inferiority, or even somehow unpatriotic, was far from universally accepted. There was no great consensus so far as to whether there was a national soul, or even a national 'type'; the debate was still being waged about what being an Australian meant, and even whether white Australians were as yet other than transplanted Britons. And where the bush had previously seemed to symbolise Australian cultural values, its continued iconographic relevance to the most urbanised society on earth was under scrutiny. Now, voices could be heard calling for a national theatre hosting plays that dealt with the 'real' Australia of the cities rather than melodramas treating the clichés of imaginary bush life; and calling for painting that went beyond the depiction of gum trees and pastorales, for an art which encouraged painters to examine the 'ordinary', or the commonplace experience of Australians in a critical manner.

In an environment that was becoming supportive of innovation and showed few signs of being afraid of it, it is not surprising that some Australian artists had begun to examine, and work with, some of the recent ideas that had revolutionised the world of art, first in Europe and now, in 1913, in the United States. This experimentation continued, in isolated pockets, throughout the Great War—appearing most notably perhaps in the work of Grace Cossington Smith—and in a sense climaxed in the first full postwar year, 1919, with Roland Wakelin and Roi de Mestre's joint exhibition in Sydney. Although nothing as radical as this show would be seen in Australia again for two decades, it was received by critics, for the most part with bewilderment, but also with a degree of tolerance that would soon be hard to find. But at this moment the eyes of the art-world Establishment were hardly turned towards the music-inspired, abstract paintings of those two young men.

Harbingers of reaction

The main focus of the art world's attention in 1919 was on the extensive monograph on Arthur Streeton, published as a special number of *Art in*

Australia. By that time, at least one English critic had long believed that Streeton had ‘become in his art an Englishman’, while as far back as 1913 an Australian critic was already carping that Streeton seemed ‘to specialise in castles with wide, stretching domains. Is it to prove to Australians he is still abroad?’. But if Streeton, too, felt of his years of exile that he had fallen into a rut, his time spent painting with the Australian Corps in the rolling downs of Picardy had been to his benefit; or at least he thought so, later describing *Amiens, the key of the west*, ‘for its fine art qualities,’ as ‘one of the most important pictures I have painted’. But it was not this work or similar recent examples that drew the critical attention of Lionel Lindsay and Julian Ashton in Sydney in 1919, rather it was Streeton’s Australian paintings of the 1880s and 1890s. Ashton saw these as unresolved. Streeton’s quarter-century of exile had done him no good: ‘On that foreign soil [England] so saturated with formulae, Streeton’s true purpose could not be fulfilled’. But Lionel Lindsay positively gushed. In these ‘pictures of the Hawkesbury, sleeping in the sun amidst its fat pastures, the essential genius of our birthplace is revealed’. Ashton and Lindsay did seem to hold opposing views on Streeton, but on what was important they were in accord: what really mattered was how well these outer-urban landscapes of the Victorian *fin de siècle* appeared to capture an expression of the national soul.¹

Their little dispute about artistic blood-and-soil worthiness was then, and now seems, mild enough, but it was actually a harbinger for the more general mood of reaction that came to prevail in the interwar years. Australia, of course, would not be alone in having a patriotically inspired version of an ageing landscape-tradition pressed into service—in the way that Streeton’s work was—as part of a bulwark against an allegedly ‘cosmopolitan’ threat. Nor, as elsewhere, were reactions against modernity confined to art. Indeed, in all national societies where such responses occurred, the prevailing attitudes in respect of the need to ‘protect’ high art were invariably indicative of an underlying mood of disaffection with the modern age, of which hostility to modern art was merely a manifestation. Art was easily shown up for its alleged decadence and all-too-readily brought into the orbit of special-interest groups acting as custodians of a national and supposedly racially inspired culture.

It was one thing to ‘expose’ the decadent atrocities of modernist art, but in doing so it was necessary to have a ready-made institutionalised counter-product to serve as an alternative: usually this was genre and landscape art from the previous century. In Australia the art of Streeton, the nation’s most famous living painter, served admirably, not least because he had once been thought of as a radical. In addition, he had been confirmed as a presence, albeit minor, in the capital of the British race—at that time the only race which seemed to count. Nor did the fact that his best work was probably behind him count against his

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re-invention as a cultural precursor. What mattered was that his work was celebrated, and that it depicted what was now presented as an ideal Australian civilisation basking in an exemplary golden age. This work became, thus, a kind of propaganda fodder to be exploited in the name of the spirit of the times; for, in the 1920s and 1930s the trick for cultural reactionaries, and not only in Australia, was to encourage artists to spurn modernity and recapture, in paint as in essence, the spirit of an imagined lost Arcadia. Streeton's old art was to provide the nostalgic model for future generations of Australian painters.

Nevertheless, the interwar years seemed to begin promisingly enough. In 1919 and 1920 much of Australia, despite a drought and some unpalatable, economic home truths to face, was in a mood of celebratory optimism. The nation was now sorting out how it should respond to peace; in that interregnum, while Streeton's art was discussed and Wakelin and de Mestre enjoyed what would be their last relatively pleasant reviews for almost two decades, there was also a flurry of local films. Of these, *On Our Selection* was praised in the press for its 'general Australianness', but already had Vance and Nettie Palmer bemoaning this 'nostalgia for an Australia that has ceased to be'. An association between 'Australianness' and nostalgia had already been made. It was an alliance that would dominate 1920s high culture. Thus, in the first full year of peace there were already hints that Australia was about to head down an isolationist path—a cultural isolationism which could only be made viable with some kind of quarantine in place.²

Quarantined culture

Nostalgia is a sign of longing that expresses a sense of being out-of-tune with one's present time and place. The idea that the past is always better—based upon what Marshall Berman calls 'nostalgic myths of a pre-modern'—is centred upon the beliefs that in the past issues had been plainer and simpler, the air had been purer, people kinder, and life more decent. In these largely imaginary times—before industrialisation had ruined the landscape and turned workers into machines, and before mass education had made people discontented with their lot—life's race had been run at a more sedate pace. So leisurely was this pace, in fact, that one had time to take in the trees and the landscape, which was just as well, considering that the pre-modern environment to which anti-modern quarantiners wished to return was invariably agrarian. Such nostalgic overviews did not take into account the dreadful poverty that abounded in pre-industrial rural societies, nor the minimal educational opportunities village and country life presented for the poor, nor the

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chronic in-breeding rampant in what were later idealised as ‘close-knit’ societies.

The agrarian nostalgia that manifested itself in ‘back-to-the-land’ movements was not something new to emerge from the Great War, for it had been present in the folkloric revival of north-western Europe in the late-nineteenth century, and it had waxed and waned in ‘new society’ cultures for generations. But in the disenchantment that followed the war these movements received vital shots in the arm, as the power élites in many societies claimed to seek—albeit often half-heartedly and mostly as a propaganda fantasy—a return to the racial and simple values of that imaginary past. The intensity, duration and synchrony of these reactions varied from society to society: in some—like France, where there were then fewer illusions about peasant existence—they were hardly manifest at all. But wherever Arcadian nostalgia was turned into cultural ideology, this presented a need to deny and decry all that was seen as confronting and potentially contagious, whether within or outside the frontiers of the nation state. Where possible, this meant the exclusion of the offending idea or object lest it contaminate or even seduce elements in the local population; but where exclusion was not possible, it meant marginalising, ridiculing or otherwise demeaning those who had the effrontery to entertain unsound ideas or produce decadent works. In fascist Italy, Nazi Germany or Franco’s Spain—where rosy nostalgia for a never-never past underpinned much that passed for ideology—exclusion and complete repression could be achieved by the command or nod of a Duce, Führer or Caudillo. In democratic societies, fortunately, it was never so simple.³

By about 1921, nonetheless, an improvised, unstated but de facto cultural quarantine existed in Australia. It was propagated by an inchoate grouping of racial supremacists, anti-Semites, anti-bolshevists, protectionists, anti-industrialisers and the leaders of an élitist and conservative art-world Establishment—men, mostly, who as individuals often manifested many or all of the foregoing traits. The quarantine they endorsed was fortuitously, but not surprisingly, augmented by a range of political actions or inactions, from the draconian Anti-Alien Laws of 1920 to the failure to repeal the much-criticised duty on imported works of art. On the proposition that isolation was better than contagion, Australian high culture was being ‘protected’: from decadence, from modernism, from almost anything that was unfamiliar—implying, given the imperial spirit of nationalism prevailing, almost all that was not British, and some things that were British as well. Keeping out the ‘other’ meant ensuring that Australian racial purity, and the purity of the ideas and characteristics that were supposedly borne by the race, could be safeguarded—and safeguarded they were, with a devotion, according to Stuart Macintyre, that ‘verged on the pathological’ during the interwar years.⁴

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Compared with the full-blooded and institutionalised versions that became features in some European societies, the Australian cultural quarantine was ad hoc; a sometimes inadvertent by-product of the widespread self-congratulation, complacency and apathy then current. This quarantine could hardly have been other than improvised, for Australia's cultural custodians did not have the means either to physically prohibit or to legislate for a future physical prohibition. But because they held influential positions and represented, for the 1920s at least, the cultural mainstream, their task was made easy for them. They needed do little else but attack modernism at every opportunity, or ridicule—sometimes in vile and scatological terms—those they saw as infected with the modernist virus and, where possible, brand them with what were for cultural custodians the undesirable contagions of bolshevism and Judaism, or whatever else came to mind. Even among less apathetic Australians who actually cared about culture, there were those who saw little wrong in this; for the nation was in fact passing through what can now be seen as a disturbingly isolationist phase.

Directly abetting the cause of these cultural protectors and quarantiners, who by age and inclination were almost invariably Edwardians, was the disquieting fact that young Australian men appeared to lose interest in the making of music, art and literature during the war; it was as though these activities had become effete and feminised, ill-befitting the rugged image of the hard-faced digger that had now become the Australian beau ideal. Clearly, something happened during the war years that made painting, writing or composing unattractive or unrewarding activities to young males; this strange near-absence is sometimes blamed on a 'lost generation', but it seems more directly related to the near-total disappearance of young men, after 1913, from institutions like art schools. For their young, female contemporaries, who were bound to stand outside the conforming influence of the Anzac legend, the same apparent strictures did not apply. Young women, accordingly, made a disproportionate contribution to progressive interwar art; however, while they had the talent and ideas, the men of an older generation had control. And with little pressure from a rising generation of radical young males, this dominant Edwardian clique—conservative, imperial-minded and almost to a man anti-modern—for almost two decades was able to control the levers of power on a machine only they had keys for.

Provincial culture in 'a rotted world'

In the interwar years Australian high culture—which by default seems to have become almost synonymous with visual art—existed on a plane of

its own. Rarely could the gulf between mass and élite culture have seemed wider: while it was not difficult to discourage people from taking modern art and 'alien' thought seriously, it was impossible to convince them to 'Buy British' and nothing but, or to turn their backs on comic books, Coca Cola, Model T Fords and Hollywood movies. A British exhibition made up of modernistic-looking art actually made it to Australian shores in 1923, but even its organiser was apologetic, admitting that it 'included examples that showed the depths of degradation and disillusion to which art had been brought in certain quarters in the old world'. The culture born of the hardy, irreverent and iconoclastic nationalism of the 1880s was beginning to bear only superficial resemblance to that spawned by the imperial-centred, ambiguous nationalism of the 1920s. Indeed, the nation was becoming a cultural desert, as was amply demonstrated in the 1923 exhibition of Australian paintings held in London. Their old-fashioned provincialism was praised as a virtue by Lionel Lindsay—proof for him that Australians had preserved themselves 'from all the revolutionary manias of a rotted world'. But the English hosts were unimpressed with familiar paintings in the Salon styles of the *fin de siècle*, and even less with the work of the exhibition's star turn, Norman Lindsay—though in Australia he was compared favourably with Goya or Rembrandt, he was criticised in London for vulgarity and poor drawing.⁵

The isolationist thinking that underwrote that exhibition came naturally enough to a nation remote from world centres; one whose most potent visual and verbal images often centred upon notions of the virtue of isolation, and where country life was often eulogised for its remoteness from the vice that city-based civilisation seemed to represent. Protectionism, the flip-side of the isolationist coin, was also rampant, Australians being obsessed, Richard White argues, with the 'idea that Australia was young, white, happy and wholesome, and in constant need of protection'. But protection was not only needed from alien influences. Australians who lived in cities seemed to need protection from themselves; no longer could proletarians be trusted in public with alcohol after dusk, or at any time in groups of more than a handful. And while the measures that enforced such attitudes may have helped keep crime out of city centres, they did so at the cost of emptying streets of the life that may have helped stimulate a vital and living culture. In the spirit of the time and place, it seemed only natural that an agrarian political party, based on an organisation which saw the votes of country people being worth more than those of their city cousins, should achieve government in coalition. To the men of the Country Party, the city was no centre of cultural vitality from which the life of the nation might take a lead; rather, it was a place which, according to Manning Clark, they saw as filled with 'bludgers, street loungers and gas pipe loafers', sponging on 'the "hard

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yakka” of the farmers’. Lionel Lindsay and the influential gallery director and critic, J. S. MacDonald, would have hardly disagreed.⁶

Imperialism, war and national identity

The idea that there could be such a thing as a unique and, at the same time, vulnerable national culture—in which all that was good came from the racial heritage of the national folk, and their agrarian values acquired over generations, centuries, or even millennia—accorded neatly with then-prevailing, imperial-conservative political assumptions, whose strongest and most vocal upholders were to be found in the British dominions. Joseph Chamberlain’s dream of a federated, and isolated, white empire—self-sufficient, self-protecting and literally able to ignore the rest of the world—while anathema to the anti-imperial wing of the British Labour Party, enjoyed a considerable postwar vogue, especially among what was still called the ‘new school’ of imperialists. Australia’s place in this schema was to remain fundamentally agrarian; for it was not in the imperial interest for dominions to elaborate or intensify the rudimentary industrialisation that already existed. What was the point of giving primary exports from the dominions preferential entry into the Motherland if those dominions began to manufacture for themselves the products that could be, and were made at ‘Home’?

Although S. M. Bruce seems at times to have recognised the folly of too narrow an export base, his government did little to encourage diversification; the agrarian-conservative governments that ruled Australia during the 1920s largely accepted the idea that Australia’s future lay as a dependent mining and farming satellite of the United Kingdom. Prodded by his Country Party coalitionists, Bruce presided over a situation which saw public indebtedness raised to dizzy heights for infrastructure and other government spending, much of it being frittered away in trying to aid and even prop up over-optimistic soldier and closer settlement schemes. Measures were neglected that might have aided diversification—such as were taken in hand by Canada at that time—and which might have helped wean Australia from a risk-laden dependence on primary production. Narrow imperial and farming interests dictated Australia’s future, as though C. E. W. Bean’s agrarian and under-industrialised nation of *In Your Hands, Australians* was no longer the sketchy vision of a city bushman tutored in a Patersonian version of the Australian legend, but a real blueprint for the nation reborn at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915.

In 1913 few Australians, only close followers of the Balkan War, had even heard of Gallipoli. And, although visiting British imperialists had a

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vested interest in saying otherwise, on the eve of the war Australia had a perceptible national identity. Even though a national 'type' had not delineated itself and while Australians still often regarded themselves as 'oversea' Britons, Australia by 1913 was already an important, world trading-nation and identified, no longer as a collection of British colonies nor even as just a British appendage, but as one of the world's up-and-coming new societies. Indeed, the nation's per capita traded income already exceeded Britain's by 50 per cent and was more than double that of Germany or France. It is true that over half this trade was with Britain, for there were still strong 'commercial and sentimental, preferences in favour of the Mother Country'; but it is also important to note that Australia, on the eve of the Great War, was fifth among nations from which Germany imported—a relative position of influence and importance which it would never again attain.⁷

The Act of Federation that brought the colonies together into the new Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901 was nothing if not the political act that designated nationhood, and for the first new nation of the twentieth century. So, the idea that the nation should need a new birth, or rebirth, on 25 April 1915 might seem perplexing, or superfluous. It might also suggest, and this is perhaps closest to the point, that at least some Australians thought there was something inadequate about a nationhood that lacked a baptism of fire. In Australia the pressure to take as gospel this bloody 'right' was propelled by perceptions of a less than adequate, sometimes unmentionable, national history which even the civilised act of federation had been unable to annul. The war, thus, suggested to Australians that they had finally proven themselves, allowing them sole occupational rights to the only island continent, and at the same time permitting them to brush a long-standing chip off a collective shoulder. The convict stain had been wiped away. Australians had now proven their blood rights to a racial military history dating from antiquity.

In the extraordinary mood of national self-congratulation that followed the Armistice, Australians were told that their reputation as the people of a fighting nation excelled all others. Indeed, Australia's five divisions, on a western front involving hundreds, had provided the British army with some of its best shock-troops. But, though the French and, occasionally, the Germans had mentioned Australians between 1914 and 1918, the world was hardly now in awe of 'the motherland of a race of incomparable fighters and athletes'. Indeed, most of the words of praise appearing about them in the foreign (British) press were written by an Australian, C. E. W. Bean, who himself had often complained—once directly to the British prime minister, Lloyd George—how the work of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was credited, in official communiqués, to the British Army. As Bean well knew, British and, hence,

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dominion press coverage of the war was dictated by imperial considerations; these determined when it was in the imperial interest to praise the work of 'oversea' Britons, and when the blanket use of the term 'British Army' was required. In fact, dominion troops, their commanders and their correspondents had been but cogs in an imperial machine and the war, rather than giving rise to a fresh, vigorous and independent Australian sense of nationality, had merely confirmed the nation's dependent status in the empire.⁸

The idea that Australians had become universally recognised as the fighting élite of the race that stood at the head of the other races—rammed home through the organs of the imperialist press during 1919—would have profound effects on Australian society and culture. There had been great changes afoot in Australia, between ca. 1890 and 1913, and again between 1913 and 1919; the idea that the war simply caused 'the prolongation of the Victorian era in Australia' surely misses the point. This is not to say that, by about 1921, what Manning Clark called 'Old Australia' had not made a comeback, for Old Australia was now becoming synonymous with future Australia—a land 'covered with farms' and offering prosperous work for fifty, one hundred, two hundred million people. The sky seemed no limit to fanciful projections. But it was a land, too, that could only be contemplated if somebody elsewhere within the imperial family did the dirty manufacturing work and, as a quid pro quo, offered a guaranteed market for the nation's primary products. With Australia's future seeming to lie in shearing, harvesting and digging, the back-to-the-land movement of 1919 came to focus on diggers who, often maimed, sick or psychologically damaged, were invested with the qualities of the pioneers of yore and promoted as ideal yeoman-farmer material. Now that many acceptable sources of immigrant rural labour had dried up, these diggers surely would provide the national lead that could make come true Bean's dream of an up-country civilisation to outweigh, in terms of its population as well as its culture, the decadent city.

The realisation that the Australian continent was mostly unsuited to intense European-style cultivation had hardly begun to dawn in 1918. The diggers did not actually conform to their bushman-type image; many of them probably knew less about rural Australia than they did about rural northern France, for most came from labouring or trade backgrounds that reflected the highly urbanised nature of Australian society. And although these citizen soldiers had been depicted as colourful bushwhackers by the wartime correspondents, it was clear to some British observers on the western front that they were anything but: what struck C. E. Montague was the fascination young Australians showed for the machinery of war, a fascination he considered to be far greater than that demonstrated by the British Tommy. The diggers of 1918 were