

# Australian Histories of Asian Engagement

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In deep time the Australian landmass broke away from ancient Gondwanaland, forming a continent on the edge of Asia that would become home to Indigenous Australians for over 50,000 years. Isolated from the nearest developing Asian cultures, they found their own unique ways of living. There are few traces of any contact with Asia. It was only from the 1700s that traders from Sulawesi (now in Indonesia) visited northern Australia, exchanging metal implements, food, and clothing for dried trepang (sea cucumber), pearls and tortoiseshell.<sup>1</sup>

In 1788 British colonisation began. How did the new settlers interact with their Asian neighbours? Some historians have assumed that relations between Australia and Asia are recent developments, dating from World War II when Asia was rapidly decolonising. Others look to the 1980s, when Prime Ministers Hawke and Keating spoke of 'enmeshment' and 'engagement' with Asia.<sup>2</sup> But in *Anxious Nation*, I argue that it is not the 1980s or even the 1940s we should be looking to for the starting point, but the 1880s. Moreover, the longevity and intriguing complexity of Australian responses to Asia have contributed to the emergence of the nation we are today.<sup>3</sup> I examine these themes further under two headings: trade and security.

## Trade with the East

Historians have debated the motives for Britain's colonisation of Australia. After the loss of the American colonies, there was an urgent need to find an isolated penal settlement for Britain's growing convict population. However, as a great mercantile nation, Britain also saw advantages in establishing a naval base and trading port from which her ships could enter the Indian and Pacific oceans to reach lucrative Asian markets. Links to the Indian subcontinent were critical for the survival of the nascent colonies and commerce soon began with British India, Hong Kong, Canton and Batavia (now Jakarta).

Through the nineteenth century, the colonies imported food, spices, textiles and tea from Asia, while a reciprocal export trade in horses, coal, sandalwood and whale oil developed.

By 1900, all six colonies were looking to improve trading relationships with Asia, although this trade was widely seen as much less important than trade with Britain.<sup>4</sup> Even so, in 1906 a leading Sydney businessman, Colonel George W. Bell, predicted that Japan would certainly become 'Australia's largest and most profitable customer'. Thought fanciful at the time, by the early 1970s, Japan had indeed overtaken Britain as Australia's major trading partner.<sup>5</sup>

By the 1970s and 1980s, trade with Asia was an economic imperative. This was a critical turning point. When Britain entered the European Common market (EEC) in January 1973, Australia was forced to look for new markets, and found them in Asia. By 1957 a spirit of pragmatism had overcome wartime animosity, allowing the Menzies government to sign a trade agreement with Japan. A similar willingness to overlook ideological differences opened a trading relationship with the Peoples' Republic of China. By 2009, China had overtaken Japan to become Australia's largest export market and trading partner.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the great prosperity Australia gained from its Asian trade, the nation has found it difficult to become closer to Asia, learning its languages and appreciating its many peoples and cultures, rather than seeing them merely as 'customers'.<sup>7</sup> Why is this? Australia is a nation of port cities, well-known for their cosmopolitan acceptance of difference. Yet, as I argue in *Anxious Nation*, a deep-seated fear of rising Asia has been apparent in Australia since the 1880s and cast a shadow over the emergence of the Commonwealth of Australia on 1 January 1901. These fears were both geopolitical and cultural and they persist into the present.

## Securing the nation

At the centenary of British settlement in 1888, there were two competing narratives about the part Asia might play in Australia's unfolding future. Down to the present, these remain part of the discourse about external threats and regional opportunities. The first narrative, dominant into the 1950s, warned of a military threat to 'White Australia' from Asian invasion and a cultural threat to Anglo-Celtic

dominance from Asian immigrants (Figure 1). The second persistent strand, which had much less influence until the 1980s, imagined a diverse multi-racial future for the country.



Figure 1. 'A sad sight,' 1903, artist unknown, *Truth* (Sydney) 30 August 1903, 7, National Library of Australia.

Fears were often spelled out in stories of imagined Asian invasions. The first fully fledged example appeared through 1888 as a serial in *The Boomerang*. In 'White or Yellow: a story of the race war of AD 1908', the author, William Lane, imagined what Queensland might be like twenty years into the future if complacent colonists allowed crafty Chinese into positions of power and influence. He argued for the expulsion of all Chinese, elimination of any racial mixing, and the preservation of a pure white community. At the time, such ideas were widespread and were the basis in 1901 for the first legislative act of the new Commonwealth of Australia – the Immigration Restriction Act, better known as the 'White Australia Policy'.<sup>8</sup>

Since 1888, over fifty fictional stories about invasion have been published. Before 1900, China was viewed as the main adversary, then the fictional enemy became the Japanese after Japan defeated Russia in the war of 1904–5. There were no stories of Indian invasions, since India was thought to be safely controlled by the British Raj. Fictional Indonesian invaders appeared only after the Dutch left the Netherlands East Indies in the late 1940s. Today, invasion writing continues to be popular. For example, in Heather Rose's *Bruny* (2020), the Chinese once again gain commercial and political control, although the scene has shifted from Queensland to Tasmania.<sup>9</sup>

From the 1880s, views promoting openness to Asian cultures and Asian immigration continued to appear. In 1888 the

congregational minister, the Reverend James Jefferis, imagined how hard-working Chinese, artistic Japanese and spiritual Indian settlers would contribute to nation-building: 'Australia will become great by a fusion and mingling of races... East and West will join hands.' These minority views stirred deep unease among advocates for 'White Australia', who quickly suspected conspiracies seeking to undermine their ideals.<sup>10</sup>

In 1889 a much-decorated British officer, Sir James Bevan Edwards, Commander of British troops in China, was invited to visit the colonies to report on their military preparedness. Acutely aware of Australia's proximity to threatening Asia, Edwards was disturbed by what he found in the colonies: poorly trained, ill-equipped, and uncoordinated forces unable to move quickly across a continent where railways of different gauges failed to connect. In Victoria, Alfred Deakin, a key figure in the Federation movement, and later prime minister, thought Edwards' report very clearly revealed the danger of divided forces. Premier of NSW, Henry Parkes used the Edwards Report to press the case for an Australian government and an Australian parliament able to create an Australian army.

Defence of the Australian colonies was not simply a matter of boots on the ground but of finding national purpose and cohesion. What did the British colonists – mixed English, Scots, Welsh, and Irish with different migration histories and religious views – have in common? In 1890 Parkes offered an answer – their 'crimson thread of kinship', they were people of 'one blood'. Soon the poet William Gay was writing of Australians bound with the sacred ties of 'one dear blood', while Deakin argued that the 'indivisible and sacred foundation' for the new nation rested on a shared blood heritage and Australia's continental integrity.<sup>11</sup>

Continuing into the early years of the Commonwealth, fear of populous Asia looming over the 'empty' Australian continent, home to only four million people, troubled the national consciousness. Who had the character and skills to defend the infant nation? The national bard, Henry Lawson, gave his answer in 'To be amused' (1906). When 'your children's heritage/ Is claimed by China for Japan' he warns, the nation must turn to the 'Bushman from Outback' for its defence. The 'Bushman' has persisted as an ideal for Australian manhood, reinvigorated by Russel Ward in 1958. Ward fails to make the connection, but I argue that the status of the 'Bushman' as race patriot and national hero owes a great deal to colonial anxieties over the rise of Asia. In turn, the focus on the 'Bushman' helped consolidate a dominantly masculine national identity.<sup>12</sup>

My book, *Stranded Nation*, traces some major shifts in relations with Asia from 1930 to 1980. During the 1930s, political and opinion leaders gradually understood that Australia now needed to take its place as a Pacific nation, albeit one that was still very British in its loyalties. From the late 1940s, Australia faced a new era of Asian decolonisation, accelerated by Japan's military advance through South-East Asia during World War II. 'White Australia' faced an increasingly independent Asia, freeing itself of European

control. From the 1950s through to the 1970s, an increasing number of visitors from these new nations entered Australia as diplomats, students, businessmen or war brides. They arrived as the nation struggled to resolve the contradiction between seeking stronger relations in the Asian region while also retaining its exclusionary immigration policy. It was a white nation in Asia but not of Asia.

Australia signalled its new approach to Asia in 1934 by sending a Goodwill Mission to the East, quickly followed by the appointment of Trade Commissioners to Jakarta, Shanghai and Tokyo. In April 1939, in his first radio broadcast on becoming Prime Minister, Robert Menzies announced that Australia must now 'regard herself as a principle' in the Pacific and speak of Asia as the 'near North' rather than 'the Far East'. This shift was strengthened by ambassadorial appointments to Japan, Nationalist China and Washington DC.<sup>13</sup>

Of the newly decolonised nations, India was one of the most outspoken in its criticism of Australia's exclusionary immigration policies. In 1949 the newly elected Menzies government launched a series of initiatives to improve Australia's battered image. The nation signed up to the Colombo Plan to assist Asian students to study in Australia, broadcasting by Radio Australia into the Asian region was strengthened, and in due course an 'Asian Visitors' program was initiated, allowing Asian opinion-makers to tour Australia to see how little racial prejudice they would encounter. Visitors were firmly told that, unlike South Africa or the southern states of America, there was no colour bar. Yet these initiatives were largely window-dressing, designed to deflect attention from restrictive immigration policies, which the Menzies government still had little desire to change.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 2. '...have to persuade a thousand million coloured people that the best possible Australia is a White Australia...' a cartoon by Molnar showing Australia's dilemma in the 1950s-60s, *The Daily Telegraph*, 5 February 1949, 12, National Library of Australia.

In the third and final section of *Stranded Nation*, I examine responses in the period 1950-80 from Asian visitors to Australia, including responses of students studying at Australian universities. For the first time, Australians saw in these Asian visitors many sophisticated, multilingual, and talented people, far removed from the uncivilised 'coloureds' they had been warned about for so long. One outstanding example was India's High Commissioner to Australia (1953-57), General Kodandera Madappa (KM) Cariappa, educated at Sandhurst Academy, a distinguished soldier, and the first Indian commander of the Indian Army. Cariappa made it very clear that the basis for excluding Indians under Australia's immigration program had little to do with economic factors (the preferred official explanation) and everything to do with race. While Australian historians have focused on how domestic pressures caused immigration reform, I argue that the cumulative impact of Asian visitors also played a significant role in changing public opinion.<sup>15</sup>

### Future directions

Since the late 1970s, a multicultural and multiracial Australia has come into being. Given Australia's monocultural settler history, Australians have adapted well to population diversity. We have not done so well in understanding and developing strong links with nearby Asian nations. We still see them largely as customers, a source of fee-paying students or as tourist destinations. China has once again emerged as an existential threat.

How do we go about developing stronger people-to-people and transnational links? *Happy Together*, my latest work, is based on a close friendship with Chinese co-author, Li Yao, the foremost translator of Australian writing into Chinese. Weaving together our parallel personal histories, family stories and early settler experience from the late nineteenth century in the mid-north of South Australia and in inner Mongolia, we found much to contrast, but surprisingly much in common.<sup>16</sup> ♦

- <sup>1</sup> L. Johnson, Tanja Lukins and David Walker, *The Story of Australia: a new history of people and place* (London: Routledge, 2022), 8-9.
- <sup>2</sup> D. Walker, 'Significant Other: anxieties about Australia's Asian future', *Australian Foreign Affairs*, no. 5 (2019): 20-24.
- <sup>3</sup> D. Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia, 1850-1939* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999).
- <sup>4</sup> Walker, *Story of Australia*, 28; Walker, *Anxious Nation*, 13, 15, 71.
- <sup>5</sup> Colonel G. Bell, *The Little Giants of the East or our New Allies* (Sydney: Bookstall Co., 1905), 57; H.W. Arndt, 'Australia's economic relations with Japan: dependence or partnership?', in *Japan and Australia in the Seventies*, ed. J.A.A. Stockwin (Sydney: Angus and Robinson and the AIA, 1972), 30-49.
- <sup>6</sup> D. Walker, *Stranded Nation: White Australia in an Asian region* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2019), 447.
- <sup>7</sup> D. Walker, 'The time has come: Histories of Asia literacy', in *Asia Literate Schooling in the Asian century*, ed. Christine Halse (London: Routledge, 2015), 29-43.
- <sup>8</sup> Walker, *Anxious Nation*, 41-44; D. Walker, 'Race building and the disciplining of White Australia' in L. Jayasuriya, D. Walker and J. Gothard, *Legacies of White Australia: Race, Culture and Nation* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2003), 33-50.
- <sup>9</sup> D. Walker, 'Facing East: Asia in Australian literature', in *The Routledge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Jessica Gildersleeve (New York: Routledge, 2021), 215-224.
- <sup>10</sup> Walker, 'Significant Other', 9.
- <sup>11</sup> Johnson, Lukins and Walker, 'A Continent for a nation', in *The Story of Australia*, 102-118.
- <sup>12</sup> H. Lawson 'To be amused' (1906), *The Poetry of Henry Lawson*, <http://www.ironbarkresources.com/henrylawson/ToBeAmused.html> (accessed 3 January 2023); R. Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958); Walker, *Anxious Nation*, 111, 127-140.
- <sup>13</sup> Walker, *Anxious Nation*, 206-207, 220-221; Walker, *Stranded Nation*, 44, 50-51, 82-83, 95-98.
- <sup>14</sup> Walker, *Stranded Nation*, 215-265.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 297-434.
- <sup>16</sup> D. Walker and L. Yao, with K. Walker, *Happy Together: Bridging the Australia China divide* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2022).

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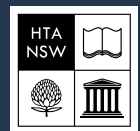
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