

The Empire Dies Back: Britishness in Contemporary Australian Culture

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I

Empires, as we know, do not collapse overnight. They linger within institutions, cultures and *mentalités* long after the formal end of imperial administration, whether as trauma, nostalgia or aspiration. In the Australian case, this lingering imperial aftermath can be seen in the priority accorded to the British connection even after the Second World War by Australian governments, with the overwhelming support of the Australian population. Despite the lessons that might have been drawn from Britain's failure in the Pacific war, its resistance to Australia's war-time demands, and the military-industrial successes of the United States, reactivating the imperial connection was a primary aim of both major parties. More broadly, British sentiment appears to have suffered little damage during the war; if anything, it was strengthened. The continuing—or renewed—significance of Britain and Britishness to Australia at this time can be seen even in the launch of Australia's mass immigration program in 1946–47. This policy would eventually change Australia into a multi-ethnic society, but that was not the aim; quite the reverse. The purpose of encouraging immigration was to preserve and build a stronger white British Australia, a goal based in turn on the assumption of an Empire-wide family of British peoples (more precisely it was *narrower* than the Empire, extending initially not much further than the white settler societies). Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell assured Australians that all migrants would be “Caucasian” and nine out of every ten would be British.¹⁾

The norms of White Australia—and assimilation into a “British” society for the increasing numbers of non-British migrants—would remain largely intact for the next thirty years. Australians in 1960 could still with fair accuracy be described, in the phrase historian W. K. Hancock had used in 1930, as “independent Australian Britons” (the phrase itself goes back to the turn of the century).²⁾ In one sense this is not surprising as the concept of an Empire-wide British community was not so much ancient history as a relatively recent product of late-Victorian imperial ideology. The “new imperialism” of the late-nineteenth century was at its peak during the very decades in which Australian federation was being debated and the future nation's constitutional status decided.³⁾ And it remained strong,

¹⁾ A. W. Martin, “The People,” in *Australians from 1939*, in *Australians: A Historical Library*, ed. Ann Curthoys, A. W. Martin and Tim Rowse (Sydney: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, 1987), 62.

²⁾ W. K. Hancock, *Australia* (Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1966), 50. First published London 1930.

³⁾ See Stuart Ward, “Transcending the Nation: A Global Imperial History?” in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and Through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), 45.

certainly still in the 1950s. During the Royal Tour of Australia by Queen Elizabeth II in 1954, the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented that “Australia is still and always will be a British nation whose greatest strength lies in the tradition she has inherited from England.”⁴⁾ This was not an argument likely to arouse controversy except among minorities on the radical or liberal left. In 1959, historian J. A. LaNauze described Australia as “at least until recently, a notably derivative and dependent society in its culture and institutions. Until the present generation, nearly everything came from Britain.”⁵⁾ There’s just a hint in La Nauze’s qualifying terms—“at least until recently,” “until the present generation”—that Britain was beginning to lose its symbolic power as an originary and all-embracing source of culture.

It is not surprising, then, that historians, postcolonial theorists and cultural studies scholars continue to trace what Tara Brabazon has called the “phantoms of Englishness,” or the “British phantoms,” still haunting Australian culture (Australians are typically careless about distinguishing between Britain and England).⁶⁾ In Chris Healy’s phrase, Australia continues to live in the “ruins of colonialism” or, Brabazon once more, “in a patchworked moment of British debris.”⁷⁾ The field of postcolonialism is concerned precisely with such after-effects, with both summoning and exorcising colonialism’s phantoms.

Nonetheless, without pretending that Australia has left the ghosts of imperialism behind I nonetheless want to push the argument in another direction and claim—somewhat polemically—that what is most remarkable is how suddenly and completely Britain (or England) became *irrelevant* to contemporary Australian culture; even more so, Britishness or Englishness as a distinctive site of symbolic value. Of course these concepts still circulate as possible sites of meaning and identification—and most importantly, now, as commodities—but in a globalised “mediascape” so do Frenchness, Chineseness, Japaneseness and Americanness (if I can be permitted to invent some necessary words). At the same time, the Britishness of any contemporary English cultural influences, if I can put it that way, is of little significance to Australian producers or consumers, either at the high or popular end of the scale. Indeed, to put it at its most polemical, Britain is about the *last* place that matters in many areas of contemporary Australian culture.

If explicit references to Britain and Britishness are now rare in Australia, certainly the ghosts of *whiteness* live on; with the difference perhaps that they are now our own ghosts, not ghosts imported from elsewhere. The ghosts stayed on, but we took away their British passports. The situation is an interesting one, shared no doubt, in different ways, by the other

⁴⁾ Quoted in Stuart Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 24.

⁵⁾ Quoted in Ann Curthoys, “We’ve Just Started Making National Histories, and You Want Us to Stop Already?” in *After the Imperial Turn*, 74.

⁶⁾ Tara Brabazon, *Tracking the Jack: A Retracing of the Antipodes* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000).

⁷⁾ Chris Healy, *From the Ruins of Colonialism: History as Social Memory* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

white settler societies, but it has not to my knowledge been remarked upon: Australia remains fundamentally a “post-colony” but the symbolic power of Britain and Britishness, I want to argue, has almost entirely evaporated. The aftermath of colonialism remains powerful but without any significant reference to the original, founding imperial power.

The point is not triumphalist. While there were indeed significant political and cultural developments in Australia in the late-1960s and throughout the 1970s, if my argument can be sustained it has as much to do with Britain’s withdrawal from its former imperial zone of influence as with any new self-awareness or sudden assertion of independence in Australia. I find persuasive Stuart Ward’s argument that what finally led to the collapse of the paradigm of the “British peoples” in Australia was not any internal political development, nor Australia’s turn to the USA during the Pacific War or the Cold War, nor its new trade focus on Asia, but rather Britain’s decision to join the European Economic Community in 1961.⁸⁾ While there had certainly been a “steadily widening gap between British and Australian priorities” since the war, up to that point “no single issue was of sufficient magnitude to call into question the basic belief in a wider British community of nations.”⁹⁾

This helps explain the *sudden* disappearance of British race patriotism from Australia’s political culture in the 1960s. Indeed as far as imperial collapses go, in the long historical perspective, this one was as near to “overnight” as possible. As Ward argues:

The remarkably sudden realisation that Britain was determined to pursue a new relationship with Western Europe, which could no longer be reconciled with the idea of a worldwide community of British peoples, served to render the imperial imagination obsolete in Australian political discourse, and ushered in new ways of thinking about an exclusively national Australian future.¹⁰⁾

Rather than struggling to free itself from the imperial embrace, Australia was cast aside with only the Commonwealth as comfort. The point for my argument is that with Britain’s reorientation towards Europe, the *symbolic* power of Britishness was also rendered obsolete, not merely economic or strategic rationales.

II

The situation of Australia’s culture can best be understood through the simple but telling definition that Tom O’Regan used in his studies of Australian cinema and television. Here we should understand the term “Australian culture” to mean a complex of institutional, industry and commercial relationships rather than as an embodiment of national character. O’Regan

⁸⁾ Britain applied to join the EEC in August 1961 (having previously held discussions with members of the Commonwealth including Australia). Its membership was blocked by French President de Gaulle in 1963 and again in 1967 before being accepted in 1973. Original documents can be viewed at <http://www.ena.lu/>

⁹⁾ Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace*, 20, 29.

¹⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 4.

defines Australia in straightforward terms as a “middle-sized English-language culture.”¹¹⁾ Both adjectives are crucial.

As a *middle-sized* culture, Australia’s domestic market is large enough to support its own cultural industries in publishing, music, television, cinema, new media and so on; but it is not large enough for these to be self-sufficient as is the case for the USA, Japan or even Britain. Nor are these industries large enough to supply the needs of Australia’s own domestic consumers, hence we import. Indeed the market is large enough to be an attractive export destination for the larger English-language cultural producers (and here’s where the second adjective, *English-language*, becomes important).

It is not a failure of Australian culture so much as its defining reality that it is in a structurally subordinate relationship to contemporary US and, in certain areas, British cultures; that is, in relation to the two largest producers and exporters of English-language cultural products. Nor does this structural subordination necessarily translate into *cultural* subordination. The question of cultural influence, of course, is an extremely complex one, whether the case is the lingering effects of the British connection or “increasing Americanisation” (it always seems to be “increasing,” at least to its critics). The fact that Australia shares the English language with these two major culture producing nations means that Australians have relatively direct access and a kind of “insidership” to these cultures that will not be possible for those in other-language cultures. That’s to put the point positively. To put it negatively, Australia will not be protected by a language barrier. It will always be *vulnerable* (in negative terms) or *open* (in positive terms) to their products and influence, although we know that influence cannot be read directly off consumption patterns. O’Regan argues that there are good reasons—historical, economic and cultural—why Australian culture will share certain “family resemblances” with American and British cultures but that this does not mean Australia lacks a distinctive culture. We might, though, need to adjust our sense of exactly what having a “distinctive culture” means: in a globalised world, a world at once post-modern and full of lingering imperial phantoms, distinctiveness will always be a relative rather than an absolute difference. It is in this framework that I want to consider the place of Britishness in contemporary Australian culture.

For the remainder of this paper I want to examine a range of cultural fields in their contemporary Australian manifestations, looking for the presence or absence of Britishness as a cultural influence, a source of meaning, or a desired value. Behind this task is an argument for the disaggregation of the category of culture, and for what I call a principle of “*under-generalisation*” in cultural analysis. Almost certainly, Britishness will be unevenly distributed across different cultural domains and for different audiences. There is no “British culture” as a single, whole thing to be contrasted to “Australian culture,” although this is often the form that arguments have taken.

¹¹⁾ Tom O’Regan, *Australian Television Culture* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993) and *Australian National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

III

Let me begin with the elite or minority arts, specifically the visual and the performing arts (dance, opera, theatre), and then, moving further into marketplace, contemporary literature. In the visual arts, at least, I think the *strong* case can be argued: that Britain is about the last place that matters as a source of cultural significance, as a “centre” from which meaning emanates, or as an intellectual or stylistic reference point. Obviously, individual influences remain and the occasional scandal makes the British art scene newsworthy. Otherwise Britain scarcely figures on the horizon of influence, inspiration or even irritation for contemporary Australian artists. If it figures at all, it is as a multi-ethnic, diasporic and European Britain (often a black or Asian Britain), not the traditional Britain that cemented earlier cultural bonds. Even so, on the evidence of contemporary exhibitions, publications and criticism, it rates a long way behind East Asia, Latin America, USA, France, Italy or, for that matter, Ireland.

The internationalisation of the art scene—with its post-modern dynamic of simultaneity and decentralisation—is one reason for the decline of Britishness as either an overt or unconscious cultural reference point. The visual arts have been the most cosmopolitan and trans-national of the arts in terms of the diversity of influences and cultural flows that now constitute their field. Metaphors of cultural influence or importation are scarcely adequate to describe the way in which the art of East Asia and the Pacific, some American and European art, and, not least, Aboriginal art circulate today *within* the field of contemporary Australian art. Of course such changes in the field of art have not happened to Australia alone; they are symptomatic of a general internationalisation and hybridisation of art networks, concepts and markets. But they have happened in Australia in a peculiarly intense form for two reasons: first, the relatively sudden “discovery” of Asia and, belatedly, the Pacific as sources of contemporary art (as David Walker has written, Australia has a history of discovering to its own surprise Asia’s proximity to its own shores); and second, crucially, the unprecedented emergence of Australian Indigenous art (again, as *contemporary* art), as those who saw the Emily Kngwarreye exhibition in Tokyo or Osaka will readily understand.

English art is at best one node in an international network, but one relatively remote from what seems most exciting here and now. From an Australian perspective, in the midst of trans-cultural, trans-Pacific flows, England can seem, strangely, a bit like a colonial outpost, more remote than Sydney or Brisbane from where the really exciting stuff is happening. Here as elsewhere we see a reversal of cultural force. Symptomatic is the regional significance of Brisbane’s most important artistic event, the Asia-Pacific Triennial.

In the performing arts, London theatre, ballet and opera still carry prestige, and careers can still be made there (although this is no longer a common pattern). Australia’s established theatre companies still perform English classics and contemporary works, as we might expect given the shared language and the portability of international issues such as the Iraq war (the subject of one contemporary English play performed in Sydney this year). But Australian

theatre and dance takes its bearings from its *local* context first of all. This might seem obvious but in fact it is a relatively recent phenomenon in Australia, for this kind of local orientation or feedback loop requires a number of quite specific conditions: an identifiable local theatrical tradition, continuity in institutions and personnel, professionalisation, and the ongoing sense of an autonomous local audience. These conditions did exist in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before cinema, but were then lost until the 1970s or 1980s; even then state patronage was necessary for their re-establishment.

Secondly, Australian theatre is markedly *international* in orientation. A quick survey of the current seasons of three of Australia's mainstream capital city theatre companies reveals that of thirty-four plays, eighteen, more than half, are Australian; seven are American; six English; and there's one each from Scotland, Ireland and Germany. I have to confess I'm cheating slightly, as the Sydney Theatre Company is using the occasion of Cate Blanchett's presence to stage Shakespeare's History Cycle, which, as a one-off, I've not counted. But to compensate I might note that one of the plays I have counted as English is in fact an adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, relocated to convict New South Wales; and it will show *first* in Sydney before moving to London. There's more than one kind of reversal of cultural interest happening here. Even the presence in Sydney of global super-star Cate Blanchett and her residency with the Sydney Theatre Company suggest a global pattern of cultural flows rather than the older pattern of expatriatism.

Indeed the sudden disappearance of the phenomenon of cultural expatriatism sometime in the 1970s was symptomatic of the changed relationship to Britain (and to Australia itself) that I'm suggesting. The point is not that people stopped travelling to bigger cultural centres outside Australia, but they stopped travelling *as* expatriates, that is, as exiles or escapees from Australian culture, from colonial outpost to metropolitan centre. A similar pattern pertains in the field of literature. A generation that included figures such as Germaine Greer, Clive James, Robert Hughes and Peter Porter left Australia not just to further their careers but in more or less conscious acts of expatriatism. None has ever returned to live in Australia, but interestingly, over the last decade or so, all have returned to Australia in their work—Greer most spectacularly in a recent controversial contribution to the debate about domestic violence in Aboriginal communities.

Literature is one of the most interesting areas because it is where the British inheritance has been felt most powerfully: first because its very medium is language; second because of the central role that literature played in definitions of national character. Literature was seen, above all the other arts, as where the spirit of the race or nation would be expressed—hence the nineteenth century invention of Shakespeare as the embodiment of folksy Englishness.¹²⁾ Literature was the field where cultural nationalism in Australia found its most articulate

¹²⁾ David Carter, "Critics, Writers, Intellectuals: Australian Literature and its Criticism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 261.

spokespersons, at least until the 1970s when some of that power shifted to cinema. Australian publishing, too, was defined almost wholly by its subordinate relationship to London, a situation that mostly suited Australian booksellers and consumers but not (most) writers or critics. Of course, both the embrace of the British connection and nationalist resistance to it testified to Britain's continuing economic and symbolic power, and the relationship of the local national culture to the British inheritance remained the central issue for writers and critics until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Then it disappeared, once again quite suddenly, as the question simply stopped being interesting to contemporary writers and readers.

For the new generation of writers emerging in the 1970s, Britain shrivelled as either a positive or negative model. As suggested earlier, the collapse of British power and its realignment in Europe was a key factor. It meant that the post-war baby boomers who were then reaching adulthood were the first in Australia to have grown up wholly in a post-imperial world of declining British influence. This helps explain the strong *generational* attachment to the 1970s among this post-war demographic. At the same time, there were significant changes within Australia itself at the level of cultural institutions and audiences with the establishment of a national body to support the arts and another supporting cinema, growth in the commercial production industries, and, especially among younger people, an increase in levels of affluence and amounts of leisure time, and expanded higher education (meaning there were not only more young people but they were better educated and with more disposable income). In publishing, for example, both local and locally-based British publishers developed substantial new lists of Australian books. (The 1970s acts as a similar tipping point for local cultures in Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, a subject needing further exploration).

Historians have sometimes spoken of the 1970s as a period of "new nationalism" in Australia. While this is one way of describing the phenomenon it falls short of an explanation. Rather than reaching for vague generalisations about an emerging national identity, what we can point to in this period is the quite rapid emergence, over the space of a decade or so, of sustainable cultural industries in publishing, film, television, music, and the visual and performing arts. These had gained a certain density and predictability by the mid-1980s, characterised in each field by an established production industry, a diverse local market, a regime of regulation and intervention, and a professional infrastructure of agents, outlets, critics and administrators. These all remained, and still remain, within the framework of "structural subordination" I outlined earlier, and so they remain at best "middle-sized" and often vulnerable to larger players. None translates automatically into wealth, fame or long-term careers; indeed in many areas long-term survival has been the exception. Nonetheless, by the end of the 1980s we could say that a substantial "ecology" and institutional depth had been established for these different domains of culture, resulting in a system that takes its bearings primarily from its own market and traditions, even in a globalised world.

In the literary field, to return to my example, Australia now has a diverse book culture at

the high, middle and mass ends of the market. The point is not that local writers and critics are no longer interested in the international, quite the reverse. Rather, Australian literature—and culture in all these fields—is more integrated than ever before within international cultures and markets (integrated into rather than dominated by). Australia is no longer a dominion or “client” state within a closed literary and publishing market but a medium-sized player, both importer and exporter, within a globalised industry and transnational literary market (for fiction at least).

Australian literature, then, for both writers and critics, can take its bearings primarily from its own “here and now,” its own local occasions, without any sense of lack or belatedness. The international cultural traffic is such that contemporary British literature no longer feels like “our” literature, as it once did to many Australians. Some writers, of course, travel well and become internationally recognised—Ian McEwan for example—but they come to us as part of the global English-language fiction market in the same way as writers from many other cultures (even those in translation). Otherwise Britain is only a small speck on the Australian literary radar for contemporary writers and readers. Even in publishing, while Britain is still significant, it is no longer dominant. Most British houses, like most Australian houses, are now owned by one of the big five or six media conglomerates, German, French, Dutch, Canadian and American in origin (with Pearson the dominant British firm).¹³⁾

IV

Probably the most influential development since the 1970s, and the best known internationally, is the revival of Australian cinema. Without revisiting that fascinating story, we can note some relevant aspects for the present argument. In the early years of the revival, in the seventies and early eighties, there was in fact a great deal of energy put into the task of defining a distinctive Australian identity against a particular version of the British character and/or the colonial past (Britishness was shown as one or other combination of artificial, effete, officious, snobbish, and definitely “old world”). This return to Britishness was a curious, if telling anachronism given the state of the British film industry and the dominance of Hollywood at the time. Whether they were more or less contemporary in setting, like the Barry McKenzie comedies about an Australian in London, or historical dramas set in colonial times such as *The Man from Snowy River* (1982), the central point seemed to be to tell Australians that they *had* an identity and that they had emerged from their colonial past into full nationhood.

My point for the present, though, is to note again the disappearance of this theme from Australian cinema. Even in a film like *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), which took the Australian–British relationship as its premise, much of the comedy depended upon

¹³⁾ See *Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing*, ed. David Carter and Anne Galligan (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2007).

the sheer anachronism of the British connection (in *Snowy River*, in fact, the bad guy is American, not British). The theme of identity in relation to a colonial past or a British present had played itself out completely by the mid-1980s. What emerged instead, in the eighties and nineties, were the contemporary, urban and youth-centred romantic comedies and the “quirky” films like *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Muriel’s Wedding* (1994) and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994). These were very local films that nevertheless broke Australia into the international festival circuit and often had significant international box office success. In their own way, they were “post-colonial” films in the specific context of cinema history. The first *Mad Max* (1979) was another decisive moment, prefiguring the present-day integration of Australian cinema into international cinema. It led to the internationally successful *Mad Max* sequels and opened a space for other international Australian films such as *Babe* (1995) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001).

Today British and Australian cinema are in a similar relationship to Hollywood; that is, as small (or medium-sized) “national cinemas” in relation to Hollywood’s global cinema. They can achieve occasional mainstream box office success, but otherwise they inhabit the fringe circuit of art house and festival cinema. It’s interesting that apart from a few big hits like *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, British films in Australia follow the same circuits as foreign-language films. I thought that was a smart point for my argument until I realised that the very same thing applies to the bulk of Australian cinema (which suggests once more that *cultural* explanations for nationally-organised differences are seldom sufficient). Australian films represent less than five per cent of the national box office most years, sometimes more like one per cent.

V

If the cultural fields mentioned so far do indicate that British culture is largely irrelevant to contemporary Australian culture, popular music and television would seem to be two areas where the evidence points in the other direction.

Although popular music originating in Britain is still an important part of the contemporary popular music scene in Australia—from boys’ bands to stadium rock—its “Britishness” is of relatively little significance to its Australian consumers. It is, for example, of much less significance than was the Britishness of sixties pop; then again, even “swinging sixties” London was partly about nostalgia for a disappearing Little England (Penny Lane and Strawberry Fields) and partly the manifestation of an emerging international youth culture (Lucy in the Sky perhaps). Today, the Britishness of British music is less defined and less significant than say the Americanness of American music or the Irishness of Irish music. If it is present, it tends to be sub-divided into genre and place of origin as with American music, as in “the Manchester sound.” UK Pop constitutes a market segment. But for fans and consumers in the music world, the cultural flows seem to work *horizontally* in terms of musical and sub-cultural styles rather than *vertically* in terms of national provenance. Individuals and subcultures develop “portfolios” according to genre, which might include

Australian, American, British, French or Japanese examples. This is especially so outside the dominance of American music at the mainstream end of the market.

This situation also means that Australian music can take its place in a transnational musical field. Although the balance of cultural power is still massively uneven, there is probably more opportunity in music than in most other domains to reverse the pattern of cultural flows, as groups such as Savage Garden and individuals like Kylie Minogue have shown. On another level, alternative bands such as the avant-pop group Regurgitator can build an international network of fans while remaining based in Brisbane: the circuits no longer pass necessarily through London or New York. Of course, Regurgitator has an official fan website in Japanese.

Finally, let me turn to television, the most difficult example of all for my argument. First some brief contextualisation. Australia has a mixed commercial/public television structure, with three free-to-air commercial networks and two public channels, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation or ABC, and SBS, the Special Broadcasting Service, established as a multilingual channel. Australian television is different from that in some other major systems in that it is still dominated by free-to-air services. Although pay-TV delivered by satellite and cable is growing slowly, it is struggling to get beyond the 30–35% mark in terms of market penetration. So for the majority of Australians, watching TV still means watching free-to-air TV.

That's where it gets interesting, because about half of Australian free-to-air TV is *imported*, the vast majority from the USA and a smaller percentage from Britain (plus other countries on SBS). British programs have traditionally been the preserve of the ABC, while American TV looms large on the commercial channels, although this has shifted around a little in recent years. Imported television dominates in certain specific genres, typically the high budget, prime time genres of drama series and situation comedies. Locally-produced television, by contrast, rather like in Japan in this one respect, dominates in the cheaper forms of television, for example those like game or talk shows shot live in the studio, live sport, or "lifestyle" programs, such as home improvement, real estate or health and well-being programs, that depend on being local and up to date (for example, advertising products that are available in one's local shopping centre). Nonetheless, Australia does have a television production industry making TV drama series, and Australian dramas regularly feature in the top ten most-watched programs. There aren't all that many, but there will almost always be three or four showing during the week in prime time, and they tend to rate highly with viewers—and so with advertisers. As with Australian films, we find what appears to be a paradox: the field is dominated by imported products, but Australians strongly support Australian material when it's available. The enjoyment of American or, for that matter, British programs is clearly not the opposite of identifying with or participating in Australian programs.

Television, then, presents a complex picture because of its different economics and audiences. But the British presence on Australian TV is certainly significant, between ten

and fifteen per cent of programs overall, with a higher percentage on the ABC. Further, despite the long history of British low comedy—a tradition extending back to the popular stage—the concept “British” *does* carry a specific cultural meaning in the television system: that of “quality” as opposed to American trash. What exactly the significance of this is for contemporary Australian culture is less clear.

Britain, after all, is the second largest producer of English-language TV after the USA, so it would be strange if Australian networks didn’t buy large amounts of it. The British production industry has been very successful in remaking itself as a TV exporter. But American and Australian programs consistently out-rate British programs. The reasons for the British presence, in fact, is partly economic: the ABC buys British to meet the tastes of its specific audience band, but also because it can’t match the commercials in the higher-priced US market where the latter have package deals with the American studios.

Television, unlike the cinema, can address itself intimately to a range of different publics, from a national audience to different niche audiences. For many, I suspect, British programs are just one part of the international programming available on Australian TV. For others, the British presence still carries the full burden of quality and acts as a way of making caste distinctions. This is one of the few places where Britishness still matters. More generally, through television we *consume* “Britishness” in quite specific ways. Many Australians, like many British themselves (and many Americans, French and Japanese perhaps), are suckers for the image of old Britain, the pre-1970s tourist Britain of fields and hedges, villages and eccentric old codgers, or the small houses in small suburbs, the pubs and the likeable coppers—the small, the slow, the un-cool. This version of little England is endlessly recycled by British TV (being set in the present doesn’t change the point; one trick is a remote setting where distance imitates time). This kind of programming has a faithful market in Australia, as do the high quality historical documentaries and adaptations of English novels, although that stream seems to be running dry. But there are many, especially younger Australians I suspect, who find it immensely tedious or simply fail to notice its existence; or who give cult status to a program like *Little Britain* which, as its name suggests, turns this image of Britain upside down with a mix of wit and vulgarity.

The other Britishness we consume through television is the inverse of “little England” and imagines a different relation to Hollywood. These are programs set in the modern city, a dark and decadent cityscape characterised by bizarre murders, incest, female forensic scientists and yuppie go-getters. This is a mini genre of its own, with its own niche audience and a time-slot to match (late Friday or Sunday evenings on the ABC); a new British influence but again one that has nothing much to do with the ghosts of colonialism and everything to do with international mediascapes. The same goes for the parallel fashion in fiction—for contemporary forensic crime novels—where certain kinds of Britishness have been restyled and carry significant brand power in the international literary marketplace.

As indicated by a recent major survey of Australian patterns of cultural consumption, ABC viewing is unevenly correlated with education but strongly linked to *age* and *class*

(it rises steadily with age, and is strongest amongst professionals, weakest among manual workers).¹⁴ But despite this apparent indication that British culture remains strongest among older, wealthier and professional cohorts, a connection between the “ruling class” and Anglophilia holds true, if at all, only in quite specific domains: in television, as we’ve seen, and to a slight extent in the cinema. More broadly, I would argue that the most stubbornly persistent—or, better, most actively engaged—attachment to British culture is found elsewhere: it is distinctly working class and lower-middle class. Even here, of course, it lives quite happily alongside popular Aussie nationalism and high consumption of American popular culture. But this demographic is less likely to be “cosmopolitan” in tastes or habits, and more likely to be attached to “whiteness” although this will remain largely unspoken.

To argue this more fully would require another paper, analysing a whole range of institutions from our Rugby League or Returned Servicemen’s Clubs to popular commercial theatre. But I do think this is where the influence of British culture lives on most strongly in Australia: not among artistic or intellectual elites, not (even) among the old ruling class or the new professionals, but in working-class and lower middle-class Australia. This is precisely the voting demographic that John Howard was able to move from the Labor Party to the conservative side of politics. In support of this argument we might note that one place where the British relationship lives on is in sport, at least in the media spectacle sports such cricket, rugby, and most recently at the Beijing Olympics, where a “side” competition arose between Australia and Great Britain. The respective Ministers for Sport had a bet as to which of the two countries would win the most medals; and the head of the Australian Olympic Committee made an unfortunate comment about Britain’s success in swimming (pretty good, he thought, “for a country that has very few swimming pools and not much soap”).¹⁵ At the end of the Games, Britain’s *Sun* newspaper made a big feature of the fact that Britain had in fact finished ahead of Australia in the medal count; apparently, the competition now matters as much to Britain as to Australia, not something one would have found in earlier periods. Much of this operates only at the level of deliberately provocative joking: one of the Australian stereotypes of the British is that they’re no good at sport, just as we find it hard to believe there are any good restaurants in England (and we *know* it’s impossible to get a decent cup of coffee). But perhaps this is precisely the kind of provocation and niggling you might find among siblings, suggesting that the family relationship is still pertinent in this area. Here at least, Australia’s achievements are sometimes measured against Britain’s; but significantly Britain now also seems to measuring its performance against Australia’s.

¹⁴ Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison and John Frow, *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 78–79. See also Chap. 8 on US culture in Australia.

¹⁵ “Poms in Lather over Hygiene Crack,” *Age* August 2008, www.theage.com.au/news.

VI

Obviously the shared language and relative cultural familiarity (for *some* Australians, certainly not all) still make a difference. In a number of fields, in dance, theatre, music and publishing, there are still good professional reasons to look towards Britain during a career — although today it might equally be New York, Paris, Tokyo or Beijing. But the most striking thing remains the *thoroughness* of Britain's disappearance as a significant cultural influence or reference point over what is a remarkably short period historically: one decade, two at most. Further, the dramatic decline of British cultural influence has not been caused simply by a dramatic increase in American cultural influence, although the American influence on youth cultures since the sixties has been decisive in reorienting cultural flows and breaking the mould of earlier cultural habits.

The idea that the importance of Britain to Australia began to decline some time in the 1960s or 1970s is widely accepted but less frequently examined. Taken as self-evident or as merely inevitable, it is prone to both over-statement and under-statement: over-statement in the idea that Australia's cultural maturity finally or suddenly arrived; under-statement in terms of the idea that cultural maturity or independence has *still not* really arrived. I think both these common views are mistaken. Indeed, to understand the changes in terms of Australia *versus* Britain is unhelpful. The fact that from the early 1970s the relationship to Britain was no longer an issue around which cultural politics would be fought out was the result of a series of demographic, technological and geo-political shifts which affected Australia and Britain alike: patterns of immigration to both countries; shifts in global political and economic power towards Asia (which have produced a shift in cultural power as well); the relative and, in many instances, actual simultaneity of modern global forms of communication; the “mass” influence of television and pop; the globalisation of high as well as popular cultures; and the fact that all these coincided with the careers of the post-war baby boom generation—and now their children. The effect of such changes has been to relativise, and in some cases invert, the cultural relations between the two countries. London can no longer stand in for the world. As the internationally successful Australian writer David Malouf wrote, in the course of arguing *for* the significance of the British heritage in Australia, in many ways the cultural relationship has been reversed: to many Britons, he remarked, Australia now looks like a version of what they might have become, “another and less disappointing history.”¹⁶⁾

It might be objected that the Australian sense of England implied in all of this is itself a decade or more out of date. I'm sure this is true. If so, I think it only helps establish the point that there has been little active, contemporary cultural exchange between Britain and Australia since, say, the 1980s. Again there are exceptions, in fine music, theatre, and in

¹⁶⁾ David Malouf, *Made in England: Australia's British Inheritance* (Quarterly Essay no. 12, 2003 Melbourne: Black Inc., 2003).

academic work in a different way, but these are local, professional, structural links, quite different from the power that the structures of imperialism once embodied.

As a footnote it's also clear by now that the 1999 vote against constitutional change to an Australian republic had virtually nothing to do with continuing cultural ties to Britain. (See my article in the latest edition of the *CPAS Newsletter*).¹⁷⁾ The “no” vote was a vote against an unpopular model of a republic. What made it possible was in fact the Queen's and Britain's *irrelevance* to contemporary Australia, because people felt there was little at stake in the change from a constitutional monarchy to a republic. There was enough truth in the claim that a republic would make no real difference (because Australia was already independent) for many to feel comfortable about voting “no” even if they felt little affection for the present system. Britain and the monarchy played no part in the debate, which was conducted instead in terms of the best constitutional arrangements for Australia. Similarly, even those who passionately defend the current Australian flag against those who'd like to change it—in particular, to get rid of the Union Jack in the corner—do so in thoroughly *nationalist* terms, and usually with only pale reference to any notion of a British heritage as a living thing in Australia.

Australia has developed a relatively distinctive set of cultural institutions, products, styles and occasions. But this Australian originality is by no means incompatible with the fact that these have shown and will continue to show some strong family resemblances to US and British cultures. Australian cultures and tastes will continue to be “both the same and different,”¹⁸⁾ in Tom O'Regan's neat phrase, in relation to those from the USA and the UK: distinctive, but only relatively so; similar in many dimensions but unique in the way that the ensemble of original, adapted, borrowed and refashioned elements work together in the Australian context. It is increasingly difficult to predict where the local authenticity of Australian culture is to be found, but my guess is that Britishness won't be much more than a novelty item—perhaps even a taste of the exotic—for most local consumers.

¹⁷⁾ David Carter, “Revisiting the Republic,” *CPAS Newsletter* 9, no. 1 (2008): 1–5.

¹⁸⁾ O'Regan, *Australian Television Culture*.