



**HISTORY** The search for a post-colonial identity was forced upon Australia and, as this account shows, it has been a confusing and not totally successful endeavour, writes **Jim Davidson**.

# A difficult rebirth

## The Unknown Nation: Australia after Empire

By James Curran and Stuart Ward  
 Melbourne University Press,  
 \$39.99

**T**HIS is an important book. It does not discuss Australian identity so much as show how we have sought to build up one and formalise it, not very successfully. Thoroughly versed in what simultaneously happened in comparable countries, James Curran and Stuart Ward examine how Australia sought new bearings from the 1960s. In particular they subject the various strivings to update the civic culture — anthem, flag and the republic — to telling scrutiny.

They begin by pointing out that a fully separate identity from Britain was not asserted so much as forced upon Australia in the sixties. By then Britain could no longer sustain imperial pretensions. All of a sudden, so it seemed from Canberra, Britain wanted to enter the European Economic Community, impose immigration restrictions and plan to withdraw its troops from east of Suez. Britain did not participate in the Vietnam War. Australia did, and was told by Whitehall to design its own naval flag rather than continue to use the (British) white ensign.

The “new nationalism”, already up and running before Whitlam came to power, was in part a response to this changed context. Building on the growing trade with Japan, there were hopes that Asia might represent a challenge rather

than a threat — once the last vestiges of the White Australia policy were swept away. The European migration showed that Australia could change successfully, and although the concept of multiculturalism was not fully articulated until the mid-’70s, there was a realisation in some quarters that this seemed the best way forward.

Had India or Kenya been cast off as we were, it would have been seen as simple decolonisation. But because Australia at the time was still profoundly shaped by British settlement, culture and institutions, the problem of disentanglement was more difficult — particularly as we already had all the trappings of a separate state. To cease to be a self-governing dominion was always going to be harder than to cease to be a colony.

The United Kingdom had a pre-imperial past to call upon; contemporary Australia has nothing comparable. Attempts to conscript Aboriginal culture for this purpose become another rip-off, like bark painting designs on tea-towels. Moreover, little of our history provides a usable past, so tied up is it with the British colonial experience.

Even Anzac Day fitted this mould, which is one reason why commentators in the 1960s instinctively felt, as they saw the marching soldiers dwindle year by year, that it would fade away.

Attempts to find resonant symbols have often invited mockery — none more so than when Sir Robert Menzies decided to call the new decimal currency unit the Royal. The vernacular impulse is now much stronger, and may yet deliver

a flag with boxing kangaroos.

Curran and Ward trace these various controversies, skilfully pointing out the assumptions evident in them. They show the compromises and contortions that eventually brought us *Advance Australia Fair* as the national anthem — suitably shorn of its imperial patriotism. While generally accepted now, it remains less effective as a national identifier at sporting contests than *Waltzing Matilda*. But that, believe it or not, is a British tune; at least the national anthem is a home-grown one.

*The Unknown Nation* demonstrates that the desire to crystallise nationhood in Australia occurred at a time when a sense of the nation everywhere had been increasingly undercut by globalisation. Choosing appropriate national forms and symbols inevitably became protracted as well as difficult. The quest is not yet over, despite the apparent stasis in the matter of the republic.

We still lack confidence in these matters. At the Black Saturday commemoration last year, Governor-General Quentin Bryce gave a much better speech than Princess Anne; yet the princess drew the greater applause. Similarly, many countries would love to have a flag thrown up by their history as distinctive as Eureka. But somehow we’ve been conned into thinking of it only as a banner for the radical left. Among other things, the rebirth of Anzac Day as a kind of national popular festival indicates the vacuum still evident at our civic core.

Jim Davidson is the author of *A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian W. K. Hancock* published by UNSW Press.



Julie Anthony  
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PICTURE: ANTHONY  
ZAKELI

