

Growing up, at long last

HISTORY

THE UNKNOWN NATION: Australia after Empire.
By James Curran and Stuart Ward. Melbourne University Press. 326pp. \$39.99.

Reviewer: MICHAEL MCKERNAN

‘We are, or thought we were, the same people – simply the British overseas. Now it seems we were not.’ So wrote an editorial writer in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in April 1962. *The Canberra Times* thought that for more than two centuries Australians had been encouraged to think of themselves as “British citizens”. Then, while moving so slowly, ever so tentatively towards Europe, Britain threw us over. This is a book about the consequences of that. James Curran and Stuart Ward might have called their book *Australia Grows Up (At Last)*.

Reading this book makes me think that, after all, I am not really an historian. I was surprised by much of what I read here and had thought better of our nation and its people. Though I was an adult at the time I had thought that our prime minister’s ludicrous flirting with “Royal” as the name for our new decimal currency was the madness of a minute. Bob Menzies said we’ll call the currency the Royal; everyone screamed with laughter and it was all over. Not a bit of it: Menzies decreed and Australia debated for months. Months. “There can be no doubt,” the treasurer eventually informed the cabinet, “that we have made a very unpopular choice of name.” And it was Royal no more. What a bunch of twits. The name was impossible and any worthwhile politician should have recognised that instinctively.

Curran and Ward have written an important, serious book about Australia’s learning to stand on her own two feet. My only criticism is that they



that the fine Australian historian John La Nauze was a member of the committee. He threw out the notion that our pavilion would celebrate the idea that Australia “is the only continent inhabited by one race, one nation”. Kenneth Slessor was the mug who put up that idea, and Curran and Ward should have called him for it too.

Even so, at Montreal we ended up with sheepdogs (two) and sheep (three); a white man demonstrating the art of boomerang-throwing, gum trees and coral, and 20 kangaroos and 10 wallabies in an enclosure out the back. And there was a scale model of Canberra, to show how good we were at urban planning, and a miniature of the Parkes radio telescope to show how good we were at science. It sounds like a great deal of good old Aussie fun. Under the heading “Roos with Everything”, *The Australian* lamented the concert to celebrate Australia’s Day at Montreal; “dedicated provincialism” was its damning conclusion. Presumably someone was there to pass around the lamingtons.

Yet we had come out of a world war not that long before, where we had stood up for ourselves, and we would create an exciting nation not too long after. Were the ‘60s and ‘70s really so bad? This book would have you believe so. The excruciating debacle about a national anthem

should have been much more assertive in calling a spade a bloody shovel. Menzies was a mug for ever suggesting the Royal, and he should have been called for it. When Australia agreed to participate in the international expo at Montreal, a committee came together to try to find what it was that we would boast about. Thank God

when Malcolm Fraser, prime minister, finally gave us four national songs and *God Save the Queen* as well for regal and vice-regal occasions. Gough Whitlam, prime minister, mandated *Advance Australia Fair* as our national anthem and then found some state premiers rebelling and having crowds sing, in loyalty, *God Save the Queen*, without any backing because the military bands were forbidden to play it. And Whitlam was told in London that he would have had much more success with the change of anthems if he had asked the Queen to announce it. We still listened to her, it seemed.

Then Whitlam introduced a system of Australian honours to replace the imperial honours and found some recalcitrant premiers insisting on their constitutional right to nominate imperial awards to the Queen. So we had a dual system; when the Queen awarded an Order of the British Empire to Beryl Beaurepaire in 1975, a well-wisher wrote to Dame Beryl, “Glad to see you were on the Queen’s list and not Gough’s”. As if there was ever a “Queen’s list”. Another correspondent congratulated Dame Beryl saying how pleased he was that she had not received the “Order of the Wombat or somesuch”. Except that the Empire was most certainly extinct and the wombat was thriving. The conservatives dubbed the Australian gongs “Ocker Awards” and sought to ridicule them at every step.

These arguments now seem so petty and so wrong-headed but at the time they were fought with such vehemence. The importance of this book is that the authors show that the arguments demonstrate how nervous Australians were in thinking about the meaning of themselves and their place in the world. We eventually woke up to the idea that we are not misplaced Britons borrowing everything that could give us meaning. Curran and Ward, though, do not tell us precisely who we are. Perhaps that is a work in progress.

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