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The Unknown Nation
James Curran, Stuart Ward
 Melbourne University Press,
 \$39.99

WHAT does it mean to be Australian? That question is the root of the devastating identity crisis that has plagued Australians over the past century. The nerve-shredding collective anxiety that paralyzes our adolescent nation every Australia Day is the result of our ill-defined national character, our anachronistic links with the British monarchy and our painful reluctance to acknowledge the more shameful aspects of our history, not to mention . . . OK, I'll stop there.

The fact is, most of us don't spend much time wringing our hands as we frantically try to define our national psyche. Those who do, however, should gleefully devour James Curran and Stuart Ward's *The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire*. The book offers an impressively thorough account of the struggles of the various intellectuals, academics, politicians and commentators who have spent the past century agonising over Australia's sense of self.

A key focus is the new nationalism movement that was spawned in the 1960s. As the book acknowledges, many find the seemingly endless debate over our national character to be intangible, irrelevant and dull.

There can be unintended humour found in the breathlessly hyperbolic assertions of our intellectual elite as they desperately try to wrestle with

their nation's supposed identity crisis or smugly proclaim that we have, once again, finally come of age.

In the introduction, the authors castigate former prime minister John Howard for his claim that we're over all that sort of identity stuff. Howard also called for the intelligentsia to abandon the endless national navel-gazing. If you agree with Howard's sentiments, then this book is probably not for you. However, if you believe that there is still a battle to be fought, then *The Unknown Nation* will give you plenty of intellectual grist.

Terry Oberg

