

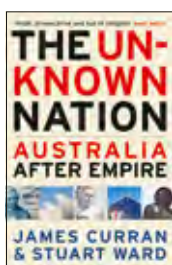
AUSTRALIAN BOOKS

Identity politics

Geoffrey Blainey

THE UNKNOWN NATION:
AUSTRALIA AFTER EMPIRE
by James Curran & Stuart Ward

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In the past half-century, a lot of ingenuity and humdrum effort has gone into redefining Australia as a nation. Politicians, intellectuals and advertisers have joined in the game of searching or 'yearning for an identity'. The phrase 'national identity', now a bit boring, arrived only in the 1950s.

In their thoughtful book, James Curran and Stuart Ward argue that this game was inspired by the global decline of Britain, the withdrawing of British forces from Asia, the coupling of Westminster with the European Union and the feeling that Australians were becoming 'abandoned Britons'. It should be added that Australia was also abandoning Britain. The dramatic swing in Australian trade from Britain to Japan was far advanced when the long Menzies era ended in 1966.

Certainly, Gough Whitlam's victory for Labor in the 1972 federal election rattled the nation's cluster of British symbols. 'God Save the Queen' was already widely challenged as the national anthem before Whitlam wittily queried 'the musical tastes of George II'. An anthem committee was convened, entries were invited, but the six best were finally dismissed as not worth singing.

Whitlam then tested four existing anthems in a plebiscite of 60,000 voters. 'Advance Australia Fair', written in 1878 and ideal for a brass band of that era, was the clear winner. Its first grand trial as the new anthem was on Anzac Day 1974, but most of the State premiers were not enthusiastic. The Anzac ceremony in Perth even designated 'Land of Hope and Glory' as the national anthem.

After Malcolm Fraser toppled Whitlam in the federal election of 1975, he set up another anthem poll. Though Fraser and Whitlam were locked in combat, they united in supporting 'Waltzing Matilda', a song

which one scoffer called 'the sheep-stealer's anthem'. Alas, it won only 28 per cent of the public's vote. Again the winner was 'Advance Australia Fair', and henceforth its music was widely played — except during those vice-regal ceremonies when 'God Save the Queen' was seen as appropriate.

This compromise ended in 1984 when Bob Hawke, dispensing with panels and plebiscites, declared that 'Advance Australia Fair', both the tune and the words, should be the only national anthem. First it had to be re-gendered, for the old version had begun with the cry, 'Australia's men, let us rejoice'.

Meanwhile, in 1975 Papua New Guinea was about to advance from colony to nation. Australia had sometimes 'reached the height of absurdity' while selecting symbols and anthems for itself, but it had no trouble in selecting them for PNG. One of Canberra's parting gifts was a new anthem and flag for Port Moresby.

Even the familiar geography of this continent was revisited as part of the new surge in Australian nationalism. In the late 1960s politicians and commentators began to affirm that Australia was part of Asia. Why not teach Japanese instead of Latin, and Indonesian instead of French? In Canberra at times the National party's leaders led the thrust towards Asia.

Of course, there had to be an official exemplar of national talents and values, an Australian of the Year. The early winners received scant publicity. Champion Aboriginal boxer Lionel Rose was chosen in 1969, an honour which yielded him less publicity than his recent opening of a dog show.



By 1975 there were three competing annual awards, one run privately from Melbourne which was the original sponsor, another from Canberra, and the third by the *Australian* newspaper.

Curran and Ward diagnose the symbolism and emotions surrounding the birth of decimal currency, the rise of the Australian Council for the Arts — a weaker part of their book — and the decline of imperial honours. We inspect the advent of multiculturalism, and the rebirth of Aboriginal Australia. We are shown the clash of ideologies behind such key episodes as the second coming of the First Fleet in 1988, the burying of the unknown soldier in Canberra in 1993, and the crushing defeat of the republican referendum in 1999. The authors call the republican debate an 'unseemly wrangle', which is rather an imperial way of describing Australian democracy at work.

Would Anzac Day, central to the old feeling of being an Australian, survive? In the 1970s it was fading. Its revival owed something to Peter Weir's film of 1981, *Gallipoli*, which turned 'the culture of imperial loyalty on its head so that the British emerged as the principal foe'. That anti-British strand seems to have been vital in rebranding the image of Australia for a younger generation. In the following half-century the public pride in Anzac Day soared, culminating in John Howard's decision in 2003 to name Gallipoli as virtually a sacred site.

Curran and Ward show skill in handling the history of ideas. First, however, they had to make their way through a mountain of print in order to discover which of those ideas were rising, falling or mutating. Buried in the paper they rejected are several themes which vividly mirror Australian nationalism. The obsession with sport and sporting victories is one reject.

And yet it is fair to suggest that the decline of subsidies for Australian factories, which were the core of 'The Old Protection', coincided in the 1970s with the rise of generous subsidies for Australian sport — an industry which is a home of the new protectionism.

One oddity came to me after finishing the book. Australia, while becoming more independent, has not obliterated all of its major British symbols. In the same period, Britain has kept its major traditional symbols but sacrificed much of its independence to the European Union.

Geoffrey Blainey is author of more than 35 books on Australian and world history, including The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australian History and, most recently, Sea of Dangers: Captain Cook and His Rivals (Penguin).