

Introduction

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Is there *somewhere* in Australia a man (or woman) who can project Australian history on to an Australian plane? ... unless Australians learn to be self-respecting, by devising a legend, or an illusion, of their own history, creatively, then this community is doomed and doubly damned to colonialism and inertia forever.¹

Percy Reginald Stephensen, 1938

In *The Australian Legend*, which turns fifty in 2008, Russel Ward traced the origins of a stereotype and a national mystique, a set of assumptions about what distinguished the 'typical' Australian.² He claimed that a distinctive outlook emerged first among convicts, emancipists, Irish and native-born whites. It then developed more fully among workers in the pastoral industry, especially wool-growing, of whom convicts and ex-convicts, Celts and Currency (as the native-born whites were known) formed the overwhelming majority. The 'up-country' values of these men ultimately had an influence on the attitudes of the society disproportionate to their numerical strength and economic power.

Ward's 'typical Australian' (whose characteristics are summarised in the opening pages of the book, in a passage quoted on pp. 188-9 of this Volume) will be familiar to many people who have never read *The Australian Legend*, but who might have encountered him in films such as *The Overlanders* (1946), *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), *Breaker Morant* (1980), *Gallipoli* (1981), *The Man from*

¹ P. R. Stephensen, *A Brief Survey Of Australian History: Our Story In Fifteen Decades*, [1938], <<http://home.alphalink.com.au/~radnat/stephensen/prs1.html>> np, accessed 1 October 2008.

² R. Ward. *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1958.

Snowy River (1982) or *Crocodile Dundee* (1986). Clearly, his argument still has cultural resonance, and Ward's *Legend* continues to receive attention, especially when the national conversation turns, as it still so often does, either to the mighty bush or national identity. A recent *Sydney Morning Herald* article, for instance, explored the question of whether Ward's argument helped explain 'why politicians give generous sums of money to drought-affected farmers' and 'why most Australians think it is money well spent'.³ Meanwhile, the political scientist Judith Brett has influentially argued in recent years that a part of John Howard's political success derived from the way he had appropriated Ward's Australian Legend for the conservative side of politics. 'Until Howard', she claimed, 'Australian Liberals had left the legend to Labor. Labor was the party of "mates", committed to egalitarianism, the fair go and an assertive Australian nationalism.'⁴ It is indeed hard not to be impressed by the way in which a fifty year-old history book, attacked over the years for its supposed deficiencies by a conga-line of critics, is still being recognised by academic and non-academic commentators as relevant to contemporary Australian politics and society.

The Australian Legend was based on a doctoral thesis with the title 'The Ethos and Influence of the Australian Pastoral Worker' completed at the Australian National University in 1956. It was first published by Oxford University Press late in 1958, has been regularly re-issued and re-published in new editions ever since, and it remains in print today. Few Australian history books, and very few that began life as a dissertation, can boast such a distinguished publishing record, which is itself testament to the continuing relevance of the book. Yet like many texts that later acquire the status of 'classic', its success was not entirely predictable in the book's early reception. While a fairly consistent thread running through the respectful academic reviews of the *Legend* was that Ward underestimated

³ D. Lewis, 'Why every week is Bush Week', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September 2007, <www.smh.com.au/news/drought/why-every-week-is-bush-week/2007/09/28/1190486569894.html>, accessed 18 April 2008. See also T. Stephens, 'Mate, you're a Legend', *Sydney Morning Herald, Spectrum*, 17-18 May 2003, pp. 4-5.

⁴ J. Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class, From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 203.

towns and cities in Australian history,⁵ some non-academic reviews were concerned with a more fundamental problem, from their point of view: that he had written a dull book. We were taken aback when we discovered this theme, for Ward's *Legend* is usually regarded as one of those rare gems that manages to sparkle as both academic and popular history. Given the significance he attributed to the Sydney *Bulletin's* role in the 1890s in disseminating the Legend, it must have been upsetting to read his book described in that weekly magazine as 'essentially an academic work', lacking 'the liveliness and color one would have expected from the author's interest in old bush songs'.⁶

Other non-academic reviewers were also put off by what they saw as the 'academic' qualities of the book. Marjorie Barnard, the novelist and popular historian, thought the book full of jargon, with its talk of mystique, ethos, culture heroes and frontiersmen – the latter, she complained, carrying a 'wild-west connotation'. The only excuse she could find was that '[t]he uninformed burblings of many of his predecessors' might have driven Ward 'to take refuge in a starched collar'.⁷ John Rorke, writing in *Australian Highway*, believed the whole text retained many of the faults of books adapted from 'theses in that they usually impress mainly by the wealth of scholarship and reference, rather than by any flowering of novel ideas'.⁸ These were the last words of the review; certainly sufficient to leave a bitter taste in the mouth of any junior academic who believed they might have something to say to a wider audience than his peers, as Ward clearly did. And if Ward read *Melbourne University Magazine* he might not have enjoyed the observation that his book bore 'several traits of the text-book writer. His approach is academic', said the reviewer, and this was not intended as a compliment. There were too many phrases such as 'We shall see' and 'We shall find', and 'the whole book is indigestibly over-referenced'.

⁵ See, for instance, reviews by C. S. Blackton, *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 32, No. 1, March 1960, pp. 72-3; A. G. L. Shaw, *Economic History Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1959, pp. 345-6; and F. Crowley, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, November 1959, pp. 257-8.

⁶ [D. Stewart], 'Convicts and Bushmen', *Bulletin*, 7 January 1959, Red Page.

⁷ M. Barnard, 'The Australian Legend', *Southerly*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1959, p. 46.

⁸ J. Rorke, 'Australian Legends', *Australian Highway*, Vol. 40, No. 1, March 1959, p. 22.

This reviewer might have been less harsh a critic if he had realised that the original thesis ran to almost 700 pages, many of them dominated by footnotes of breathtaking detail and complexity.⁹

Perhaps Ward's problem was that he was attempting to create 'two' books in one: an academically respectable text that would provide the foundation for a career that had begun shakily as he was moving into middle age; and a book that would also contribute to a larger debate about national identity that was being carried on mainly outside the academy. The 1950s and early 1960s was a period in which there was a flourishing industry in books seeking to tell Australians what they were really like. They had titles such as *The Australian Way of Life*, *The Australian Commonwealth*, *Australian Accent*, *Postmark Australia*, *Australian Civilization* and, in the case of an immensely popular novel examined by Ben Maddison within these pages, *They're a Weird Mob*. Ward's book, however, passed into Australian academic discourse in the 1960s, a period in which the historical profession grew rapidly with the expansion and proliferation of the post-war universities. *The Australian Legend* needs to be seen as part of a new wave of professional academic history-writing epitomised also by its near-contemporary, George Nadel's *Australia's Colonial Culture* (1957).¹⁰ Nadel had given greater emphasis to urban and bourgeois civilisation, and his book represents an alternative historiographical stream that would find its most famous expression in Manning Clark's monumental *A History of Australia*. Here, Ward might figure as a kind of Wild Colonial Boy to leaven the sermonising of his oracular contemporary.

The appearance of Ward's 'national type' in so much of the popular culture of the 1970s and 1980s, especially the revived Australian film industry, underwrote its claims to a broad cultural relevance. At the same time, with the development of Australian history in schools and universities in the 1960s and especially the

⁹ R. B. C., *Melbourne University Magazine*, 1959, p. 61.

¹⁰ G. Nadel, *Australia's Colonial Culture: Ideas, Men and Institutions in Mid-Nineteenth Century Eastern Australia*, Cambridge (US), 1957. For Ward's review of this book, which makes clear some of his disagreements with Nadel, see 'Our Early Culture As Influenced By Unrepentant Bores', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 February 1958, p. 18.

1970s, and the emergence of various critiques of *The Australian Legend* from a wide range of political and intellectual stands, the book's status as a major reference point for scholars of national history and identity was assured. In the 1960s, however, the continuing predominance of economic and political themes in Australian historical writing might have contributed to an initial uncertainty about the scholarly significance of the *Legend*. For instance, when some historians criticised the 'Whig View of Australian History' that inflated the role of radicals, unions and the Labor Party, their preoccupation with political themes meant that Robin Gollan's *Radical and Working Class Politics* (1960) was a more obvious target than Ward's *Legend*.¹¹ All the same, there is something to Ward's claim regarding the early reception of the book that 'the more conservative and Anglophile the critic the more likely he or she was to damn the book – and its picture of the typical Australian'.¹² But it cannot apply to the period after 1970, when attacks increasingly came from the political left.

Indeed, in the era of the new social movements and multiculturalism, accompanied as they were by new perspectives on gender, race and sexual identity, Ward's *Legend* offered comfort to some conservative historians out of sympathy with the tendency towards social fragmentation they saw in the social movements, and intellectual fragmentation of the new histories. The defence of Ward from the 1970s now often came from historians of a more politically conservative temper, who tended, by the way, to emphasise the rural, conservative, individualistic and unifying aspects of the argument while playing down the egalitarianism and collectivism that made the *Legend* so attractive to a socialist such as Ward. They sometimes reduced his *Legend* to a form of country-mindedness.¹³

11 R. Gollan, *Radical and Working Class Politics: a study of Eastern Australia, 1850-1910*, Melbourne, 1960; A.W. Martin, 'The "Whig" View of Australian History: A Document', in *The 'Whig' View of Australian History and Other Essays*, J. R. Nethercote (ed.), Carlton (Vic), 2007, pp. 1-27.

12 R. Ward, *The Back Side of the Australian Legend*, The Inaugural Russel Ward Annual Lecture delivered at the University of New England, Armidale, on 25 August, 1986, Armidale (NSW), 1986, p. 9.

13 For country-mindedness, see the essay D. Aitkin, "'Country-mindedness": the Spread of an Idea', *Australian Cultural History*, No. 4, 1985, pp. 34-41.

The 'discovery' of the Australian Legend by John Howard in the 1990s was prefigured by the qualified defence of the *Legend* by conservative historians at La Trobe University in Melbourne, John Barrett and John Hirst, in the 1970s.¹⁴

The articles in this collection are an attempt at a reassessment of Ward's *The Australian Legend*. All but two of the full-length articles are based on papers presented to a stream on 'Australian Legends' at the Australian Historical Association Regional Conference, *Engaging Histories*, held at the University of New England (UNE), Armidale, from 23-26 September 2007. The setting was no accident; Ward spent virtually all of his academic career at the bush university, and several of the contributors to this volume, and both of the editors, are or have been academics at UNE. Moreover, Angela Woollacott's article explores Ward's role in helping to initiate and shape an 'Armidale school' of Australian historiography.

Two articles featured in the collection do not arise from the original conference. Carl Bridge's reflection on Ward and Britishness was originally presented as the 2001 Russel Ward Annual Lecture at the UNE, while Humphrey McQueen's study of builder's labourers as a nomad tribe was specially commissioned for this volume. Other articles explore a broad range of themes, assessing Ward's book in various contexts such as mid-twentieth-century radical nationalism (Drew Cottle), and debates about Australian language (Joy Damousi), manners, assimilation and identity (Ben Maddison), and sexuality (Lisa Featherstone). The contributions from Woollacott, John Merritt, Frank Bongiorno and David Andrew Roberts seek to contextualise the *Legend* in historiographical terms, while Alan Atkinson, Anne Coote and Lyndon Megarrity re-visit various aspects of Ward's treatment of national identity in light of recent research. We have also assembled some more personal reminiscences to help fill out our picture of the significance of Ward's achievement and

¹⁴ J. Barrett, 'A Defence of the Ward Thesis, and One Investigation of it', *Historian*, No. 25, October 1973, pp. 1-5 and 'Melbourne and the Bush: Russel Ward's Thesis and a La Trobe Survey', *Meanjin*, Vol. 31, No. 4, December 1972, pp. 462-70; J. Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 71, October 1978, pp. 316-37 and 'Russel Ward (1914-95): The Life and the Work', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 107, October 1996, pp. 356-8.

legacy. Our focus is on *The Australian Legend*, but several of the pieces examine other work by Ward in the context of his own career, and Australian historiography more generally.

In the process of putting together this volume, we've learned that much more work needs to be done on Ward's *Legend*. Aspects of the cultural and intellectual history that underpin this deeply influential book remain obscure. Ward had been involved in army psychological testing during the war, and was well read in psychoanalysis. It is not far-fetched to see his reading in the 1940s of Freud, Jung and, for that matter, J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, as stimulating – or at least helping to focus – his interests in dream, myth, legend and identity. His Masters thesis on modernist poetry has clearly been neglected in discussion of Ward and could form the basis for a lively study of the influence of T. S. Eliot in particular.¹⁵ Ward quoted Eliot near the end of *The Australian Legend* but further work is required on whether that great poet's ideas about culture and nationality, his habit of looking to ordinary folk for cultural renewal, and his incorporation of the demotic into high art, exercised much direct influence on Ward.¹⁶ What is not in doubt is Ward's close engagement with Eliot's *Essays*.

Similarly, it is clear that Ward's work became known in the field of comparative frontier history, and that there were contemporary studies appearing in Canada and the United States that grappled with similar issues to his *Legend*.¹⁷ Angela Woollacott refers to one American example; another is Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950),¹⁸ a parallel that Robin W. Winks noted in his Foreword to Ward's *Australia* (1965).¹⁹ Ward's

¹⁵ R. B. Ward, 'The Genesis and Nature of the Social, Political and Historical Content of English Poetry between the Two World Wars, With Particular Reference to the Works of Pound, Eliot and Auden', MA Thesis, University of Adelaide, [1949].

¹⁶ R. Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1988 [1958], p. 251. We are indebted to Humphrey McQueen for insights on this point.

¹⁷ See, for instance, W. T. Jackson, 'A Brief Message for the Young and/or Ambitious: Comparative Frontiers as a Field for Investigation', *Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1, January 1978, pp. 4-18, esp. pp. 9-10.

¹⁸ H. N. Smith, *Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth*, New York, 1950.

¹⁹ R. W. Winks, 'Foreword', in R. Ward, *Australia*, Englewood Cliffs (US), 1965.

significance as a comparative and perhaps proto-transnational scholar, and his relationship to both imperial and national historiographies – a theme that Bridge explores in this volume – are likely to repay further scholarly attention. Meanwhile, his contribution to the study of folklore, both in Australia and internationally, would also be worth pursuing, a point at which John Ryan hints in his reflection.

In sum, we offer this volume as a reassessment of Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend*, but also a provocation to the closer study of Australian historiography and intellectual history.