

Contemporary Rites of Passage

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National and personal 'rites of passage' take place in all societies, associated with, amongst others, birth, coming of age, marriage and death.¹ These celebrations may only be focused on a select group,² and yet others can be observed over a large number of participants in society, as members move from a lesser to a more significant role in their group or society. Some gain notoriety and yet are not fully representative of the whole society, but the success of their celebration or its controversial nature may give it more credence than it actually deserves. In Australia the strength of the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture leads to an over-emphasis on what it means to be Australian. Other rites of passage, such as Bar Mitzvah in the Jewish community, have very little acceptance in mainstream Australian life, although the Jewish contribution to Australian life has been substantial, not to mention the fifty-thousand years of Indigenous Australian settlement and its own ancient ceremonies which mark rites of passage. For this reason I have chosen three 'mainstream' rites of passage based on my Anglo-Australian perspective; 'schoolies week', the 'grey nomads' and the continually unravelling interpretation of the ANZAC legend with its increasing focus on the Dawn Service at Gallipoli. These three areas, two of them personal rites of passage, re-inforce the Anglo-Celtic background of Australian society since European settlement, and deny the exposure of other, quite dominant sections of Australian society, e.g., Arab, (especially in my neighbourhood), yet they are denied legitimacy in the face of the dominant society's mores and perceptions of what it means to be 'Australian'.

Although 'Schoolies' week was purported to have begun in the late 1970's on the Gold Coast of Queensland by graduates of private single-sex schools, there is an earlier report of students from wealthy families going to Rottnest Island in Western Australia in the nineteen-sixties and 'drinking themselves stupid for a week'.³ From this it has extended itself to many parts of Australia, particularly along the East Coast, and more

¹ Seal, G, *The Hidden Culture*, 2nd edn (Perth, WA: Black Swan Press, 1998), p. 79.

² *Ibid.*

³ Howat, P., Jancey, J., and Binns, C., 'Are There More Positive Alternative Celebration Opportunities to Schoolies Week', *Health Promotions Journal of Australia*, 24.3 (2013), 161-162 (p. 161).

recently to offshore locations such as Bali, which are cheaper and free from the alcohol restrictions in force in Australia.⁴ The concept of ‘fun’ is integrally tied to excessive drinking, sex and some drug use.⁵ For the participants there are reported to be high expectations about what ‘schoolies’ is about, but quite often these expectations are not fulfilled.⁶ There are varying reports about the numbers of students attending ‘schoolies’, varying from 15,000 in 1995⁷ to a supposed 50,000 in 2005.⁸

‘Schoolies’ are also targets for other groups, Specifically ‘toolies’ who attend the sites frequented by the young people in an attempt to pick up sexual partners and attach themselves as a legitimate part of the celebrations on the beach, partying, socializing and meeting people.⁹ In an attempt to prevent the excesses of ‘schoolies week’ programs have taken place to provide safer entertainment and leadership in other places rather than the Gold Coast.¹⁰

Thirty-plus years older than those who attend ‘schoolies week’ is a group known as the ‘grey nomads’. This term is used to denote those people aged fifty years and older who travel independently in Australia for an extended period of time.¹¹ Most are couples, and travel by caravan, motorhome, campervan or converted bus: they are retired and wish to travel at their own pace.¹² For many this has been a long-held dream to which they feel entitled after their life-long work and family commitments¹³ although family pressures still form a basis for the timing and organization of their journey¹⁴ and constant contact is made with family who make the trip possible because they take care of family details such as pet care and property maintenance.¹⁵ ‘Grey nomads’ often have considerable work- and life-skills which can be of benefit to rural communities, while at the same time gaining considerable satisfaction for themselves. Accurate figures are not available but based on Bureau of Tourism Research figures it may be that there are several hundred thousand potential ‘grey nomads’.¹⁶ They wish to pursue personal new

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁶ Guest, A., AM, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, November 21, 2009.

⁷ Smith, A. and Rosenthal, D.A., ‘Sex, Alcohol and Drugs: Young People’s Experience of Schoolies Week [online] *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 21.2, (April, 1997), 175-180 (p. 175).

⁸ Tresidder, J., ‘Queensland Schoolies Week and Interventions’, [online] *Of Substance, The National Magazine of Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs*, 3.1 (2005), 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Listser, J., Patterson, I, *et al.*, CAUTE 2008: ‘Where the Bloody Hell Are We? *Hospitality Research, Training and Practice*, Gold Coast, Queensland, (2008), p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Leonard, R., and Onyx, J., ‘Volunteer Tourism: The Interests and the Motivations of the ‘Grey Nomads’, *Annals of Leisure Research*, Sydney, Australia, 12.3-4, p. 315.

experiences, meet other people and explore new places. Many build strong social networks, which aid them as they travel on their journeys and many maintain contacts long after their travel. Interestingly this group was documented as being approximately seventy-seven per cent Australian born, sixteen percent were from overseas with an English speaking background, leaving only seven per cent from a non-English speaking background. Thirty-six percent came from rural areas or country towns, and only twenty-four percent from metropolitan areas.¹⁷ Thus this can be seen as another mainly Anglo-Australian rite of passage, and many of them were prepared to face considerable challenges and risk in order to learn new things,¹⁸ especially as many of them did not have a large amount of disposable income.¹⁹ Like the 'schoolies' the 'grey nomads' like to socialize with their own age cohort, and do so with expectations about their own journeys which may not eventuate, yet their trip can be seen as a rite of passage.

In 1915, in spite of the catastrophic losses at Gallipoli, C.E.W. Bean, the then official war historian, wrote of his perceptions of the character of the Australian soldier, and thus began the ANZAC 'myth'. Ordinary soldiers from very ordinary backgrounds became heroes, with specific qualities which differentiated them from other armies, particularly the British. From this grew a tradition which continued until World War Two and beyond. However, with the impact of the Vietnam War on the Australian psyche came a rejection of the men who fought there because they lost, and because they did not fit into the national ethos of heroes, partly because a lot of them were conscripts and not volunteers. Later conflicts were treated with even less attention, and this possibly reflects a time of greater affluence and assurance as a nation. But in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century a resurgence of national pride and reverence for the past this has reversed, giving a focus for particularly, young Australians, to identify with 'a kind of reference point for national identity'.²⁰ It is as if the events of 1915 have become an authority for an 'an original national story'.²¹ Yet it is still Anglo-Celtic in its bias and *mores*. At first it appears that youth, particularly the current generation, have latched onto a pivotal point in post-settlement Australian history, and appropriated it for their own emotional and patriotic needs, in the absence of any other great national tradition. It is also pertinent to mention that this, yet again, is an Anglo-Australian expression of nationality, which gives no *entre* to those from different ethnic or Indigenous backgrounds.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

¹⁹ Smails, S., PM, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Nov, 2010.

²⁰ Scates, B., *et al.*, *Anzac Day at Home and Abroad: Towards a History of Australia Day* (Melbourne, Vic: n.d.), p 530.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 530.

Each society has its own ‘rites of passage’, both personal and national. In Australia the dominant Anglo-Celtic background has allowed a legend of what it means to be Australian to develop. Both ‘schoolies’ and ‘grey nomads’ derive their persona from this background, which is then expressed in not only economic terms but also as a means of integrating with other like-minded individuals. The wish of young people to participate in the much older tradition of ANZAC is outside this economic sphere; it is more likely to be based on national and family traditions which the participants see as a means of expressing a much deeper connection with what it means to be Australian. Participants in the celebration of ANZAC are not only reinforcing this perception yet have also been drawing on this tradition for decades as their world changes and their needs differ.

‘Schoolies’ and ‘grey nomads’ may come and go as groups, yet ANZAC celebrations as a domination legacy still informs a majority participation in Australian society. All three groups still contribute to a divide in Australian society, separating those from an Anglo-Celtic background from those who have come from other cultures.

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The National Schoolies Week site is a non-profit, non-government peer-education program for schoolies, by schoolies. It is funded by Rebeccas Community, whose Director is a Social Worker. It is the Official Website of Schoolies around Australia.

History / Essay Research: You can read up about the [history of schoolies](#), dating back some twenty to thirty years.

Survival Guides

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