

The Evolution of the Folklore Discipline

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The belief systems of white Australia lie in its Anglo-Celtic origins and the transportation of a disinherited people to the 'fatal shores'¹ of an alien land. The lore these 'unfortunates carried in their collective memories'² was both sustained and adapted to the new, host country's conditions. As a harsh, penal settlement there came a clear distinction between those effectively enslaved and those carrying out a perceived tyranny. As outlined in a popular ballad, 'All these cursed tyrants' language we must obey/ Or else at the triangles our flesh is mangled.'³ So began the process of acculturation. Ward asserts that ballads provided a distinct set of social values' and it has been these ballads in their oral tradition, which have functioned as a 'preserver'. Ward's scholarship of the 1950's identified the class struggle and the roots of our national ethos. Some of these notions have been identified as; resentment towards and suspicion of authority, a belief in egalitarianism and admiration for unpretentiousness and 'plainness'.

These beliefs have modified and adapted but seemingly endured. Such attitudes are also discernible today as part of Australian folklore. The colloquial and commonly used term 'wanker', denotes a person placing themselves above another either socially, culturally or intellectually. The spirit of the term appears to hark back to colonial beginnings in its contemptuous rejection of pretentiousness. Power relations are seen as a potent source of folklore in Australia's history according to Seal. Accompanying these notions is the strong tradition of 'labour lore' and its underlying suspicion, if not contempt for authority. This is also reflected in the folklore of war, according to Seal, in which the military hierarchy were often perceived as representing the 'bosses'.⁴ He also asserts that these begrudging perceptions of injustice, and oppression 'can be traced directly back to the early convict ballads...' Today, in industrial disputes, 'scabs' are still treated with derision as they may be seen as siding with the 'powerful' and compromising the interests of their 'mates'. According to common, retrospective wisdom, one of the fundamental reasons for the failure of the Howard Government to be re-

¹ From a folk ballad recalling transportation in Seal G., *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society*, 2nd edn, (Perth, WA: Black Swan Press, 1998). p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³ A folk ballad, 'The Convict's Lament', in *ibid.* p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

elected was 'Work Choices'. The rejection of this policy appears to have been on the basis of a perception as favouring employers at the expense of workers.

Bolters, were the escaped convicts who took to the bush and became Australia's first bushrangers. Seen as a manifestation of egalitarian notions, bushrangers have been celebrated as part of Australian folklore and culture. Perceiving the need to right injustices and seek freedom from oppression they have been considered, as carrying out the role of the 'noble robber'.⁵ Ward has suggested that bushrangers, according to lore, were presented as representing a class struggle challenging those in authority and those perceived as powerful. In the tradition of the highwayman, bushrangers did not seek to exploit or injure the weak and underprivileged but instead, performed 'a justified revenge...against repressive forces.'⁶ As such, the ballads, which circulated in colonial society, regarded their actions as gallant and heroic.

Transportees found themselves experiencing harsh climatic conditions and a hostile environment. Surrounding them was unknown and unexplored territory. In contrast English soil had been settled for centuries and was previously explored, known and familiar. Conquering the bush and an often, hostile environment has been celebrated in the folklore as heroic resistance of adversity. The conquering of territory and the 'opening up' of the continent gave explorers 'heroic status'. The experience of the interior of the continent later becoming 'the greatest source of Australian folklore.'

The image of the bush has represented a major part of Australian lore. In the era when transportation had ceased and emancipated convicts roamed in search of work, a change of emphasis developed. Eccentric 'bush figures' came to be celebrated while the struggles of semi-migratory and landless bush-workers against the landed gentry continued to be seen as epitomising the class struggle. Migration from outside and within the country caused by the discovery of gold also laid emphasis on bush lore. Banjo Patterson later recorded these experiences in the form of ballads, which circulated particularly from the 1850s to the 1890s, in his publication *Old Bush Songs*. This contributed to the development of the mystique of the bush and the tales 'frequently display the ethos of anti-authoritarianism and bloody-minded independence that is often said to be 'typically' Australian'

Seal discusses a notion of 'invisible baggage' and persisting folk memory. He identifies folklore as closely involved with popular notions of cultural and popular identity. Ward also sought to explain the Australian character in *The Australian Legend* which explored a

⁵ This term is used by G. Seal, *ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

distinctive set of social values in an attempt 'to trace and explain the development of [the] national mystique'. As already discussed, Ward identified anti-authoritarianism and a belief in egalitarianism as central to our national image. He also noted a lack of sentiment and belief in practicality. Ward has argued that part of the national psyche, values justice and likewise possesses a willingness to clash with authorities in the belief that notions of fairness are not being met. Culturally and socially these notions appear both fundamentally stable and shifting in creating Australian lore.

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References

Seal G., *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society*, 2nd edn, (Perth, WA: Black Swan Press, 1998).

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