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Bill Cope

University of Wollongong

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Abstract
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RACISM, POPULAR CULTURE AND AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY IN TRANSITION: A CASE STUDY OF CHANGE IN SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS SINCE 1945

Bill Cope

CENTRE FOR MULTICULTURAL STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

P.O. Box 1144 Wollongong, NSW 2500 Australia
Phone: (042) 270 780
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Since the second world war, significant changes have come about in senses of Australian identity and historical self-consciousness. The nature and extent of these changes can be seen in an analysis of racism and conceptions of culture, particularly in the definition of 'us' and the 'them' of history: how 'we' define ourselves through a delineation of 'others' who are different.

The main interest of this paper is Australian popular culture. Its empirical focus is six hundred and thirty texts widely used in Australian schools in the 1945-85 period. The argument presented here is a summary of research findings elaborated in detail elsewhere (Cope 1987). The texts on which this research is based are very significant elements in making Australian culture for a number of reasons. They are both indicative of broader shifts and very significant elements in the making of popular culture in their own right. Most of these texts achieved mass circulation, much greater than the more noteworthy contributions in high social science and historiography. They were used on the compulsory site of enculturation that is institutionalised education. School curriculum, moreover, is highly responsive to the changing cultural policies of the state, given its institutional role. Changes in historical interpretation are cruder and more clearer in school textbooks; even the big-name historians such as Russel Ward and A.G.L. Shaw, when they write for school students, use large generalisations, simplifications, condensations and interpretative homilies, which are revealing caricatures of their more guarded academic works.

This paper traces a striking change in the cultural contents of school textbooks since 1945, from the paradigm of assimilation to that of multiculturalism. This change, however, needs to be situated in the context of a much broader ideological shift. To summarise this shift in a few sentences, we see a move away from an old story of Australia in which history is a narrative of progress and development, with cultural differences conceived as a matter of superiority/inferiority; dominance and suppression of other cultures is depicted as a historical necessity, as, for example, in the assimilation of Aborigines and immigrants to the structural and technical movement
of an ever-modernising industrialism. This old story was the all-but unanimous view of the texts of the 1945-1965 period. From the late 1960s, however, a new story of Australia began to emerge. Its reading of history was based on principles of cultural pluralism. This, in part, is linked to a re-evaluation of the historical 'us', as the supposed benefits of progress and development are thrown into question. In the new story of Australia, cultures are relative and senses of superiority have negative connotations of ignorance and insensitivity. Cultural differences are to be celebrated. This new reading of Australian history is of much broader significance than simply giving new recognition and value to different cultures. It involves ascribing quite new meanings to history, establishing a new epistemology for reading history, and, ultimately, giving history a radically new meaning. It emerges as the culturally dominant content in social studies and history in school curricula by the early 1980s, judging by official departmental guidelines and the content of the majority of the most-used textbooks.

The Old Story of Australia

Russel Ward writes, in a textbook published one year after *The Australian Legend* and which achieved a circulation of well over 200,000 copies,

> There are still living today in Arnhem Land people who know almost no history. They are Aboriginal tribesmen who live in practically the same way as their forefathers and ours did, tens of thousands of years ago. Like them they have not only no accurate knowledge of past events, but no aeroplanes, motor-cars or picture shows; not even any books, houses or clothes. Apart from the fact that they use weapons of stone and wood to hunt for their food, their lives are almost as hard and dangerous as those of the animals, who also hunt to live ... [W]e are civilized today and they are not. History helps us to understand why this is so (Ward 1952, p. 9).

This framework of historical interpretation is one of historical progress towards the development of civilisation. 'Early Man', of which Aborigines were an anachronistic example, was only one stage removed from the animals. This is reinforced by a condemnatory language of primitivism: 'tribesmen', 'savages', 'primitives', 'natives'. 'His' life was characterised not by cultural content but by an absence of the cultural products of industrialism. Figure 1 exemplifies this well. Historical inferiority, moreover, is conceived in terms of types of interaction with nature. Thus, in Figure 2, from Ward's *Man Makes History*, the superiority of the 'Modern World' is characterised in its power to dominate and re-work nature. Progress is teleological, in which the industrialised 'Modern World' sits at the pinnacle of history.

Assimilation of the Aborigines is 'our' duty as the bearers of the benefits of the 'Modern World'. The Aborigines, after all, are not irretrievably primitive because they live the same way that 'our' ancestors did tens of thousands of years ago. After all, 'we' managed to transform ourselves. The difference today

is not because the Arnhem-landers are more stupid than we are. Scientists have proved that there is very little difference, on the average, between the natural, inborn cleverness or intelligence of different peoples;

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*See below, p.10.*
but there are very great differences in their knowledge — in what they
know, or have learnt from other races. . . . Because of your knowledge of
changes in the past you will also be better able than the Arnhem-landers
to judge which of the changes taking place today are improvements and
which are not and so you can work intelligently to help and not hinder
them (Ward 1952, p. 9).

This analysis and situation of traditional Aboriginal culture in history is not racist
in any of the classical senses of that term. It does not, in short, ground perceived
historical superiority/inferiority in irretrievable biological difference; it does not ascribe
cause and significance to biological or phenotypical peculiarities. The prescription
of assimilation grants equal potential to those who are only conceived to be histori­
cally inadequate. But, in another sense, this does constitute a racism, even if
historically rather than biologically grounded in concepts of 'progress', 'civilisation',
'history'/pre-history' and the 'Modern World'. It is a clear delimitation of 'us'
from 'them' along lines of superiority/inferiority and a rationalisation of historical
processes of colonialism which in their structural effects were racist.

History proper, the rise of 'civilisation', according to this old story of Australia,
is a peculiarly European phenomenon. The 'Discovery of the World' (Figure 3)
begins with a small area around the Mediterranean, and gradually extends across
a whitening globe, until 'man' spins of the planet into ever extending realms for
discovery in 'space'. In fact, these lines of discovery are arbitrary relative to other
'discoveries' and historical movements of population in human history. Extending
the Eurocentric imagery further, the Oxford School Atlas, re-published annually for
more than thirty years, included a series of maps in which the black silhouette of the
Australian continent gradually whitens, gaining geographical features and names.
The author of the atlas called this 'rolling back the curtain of darkness'. Even the
concept of 'history' itself is implicated. Australian 'history' begins at the moment
of European sighting (Figure 4).

Exploration then follows 'discovery'. Primarily, this consists of 'opening up' a
land which is conceived to be a 'wilderness' (Figure 5). One or two incidents of
European-Aboriginal conflict do crop up, such as Sturt's encounter with Aborig­
ines on the Murray River. '[T]hey were making rapid headway downstream when
they saw about 600 blacks on its right bank working themselves up into a frenzy'.
Although Sturt had to respond to these 'native warriors' with guns if necessary,
he really did not want to hurt a hair on their black heads' (Hart 1960, p. 40). Rather revealingly, the student views the scene from behind European lines, with
the Aborigines portrayed as faceless silhouettes in the distance (Figure 6).
The explorers' 'legacy', it seems, is settlement and development.

Let us pause for a moment and take a glimpse of what has been ac­
complished since the British flag first fluttered from a flagpole on the
shores of Port Jackson. Thousands of miles of railways and roads now
cross our continent, great bridges span our harbours and rivers, huge
dams shore up millions of gallons of water for use in the dry interior,
all sorts of industries have been established, and large cities have grown
up and continue to grow, in all our States. Furthermore, we have won
a reputation for enterprise and courage among the nations of the world
Success has not come easily. Ways of combating diseases, which have carried off many of our sheep and threatened our wheat crops with destruction, have had to be found. The problem of water shortage and soil erosion has had to be solved .... The fight is a continuous one and is being fought with skill and determination (Spaull 1960, p. 146).

The project of the 'Modern World', necessarily superseding the Aborigines, is technical mastery of nature and the overcoming of wilderness. It is in this context that Australian identity is conceived.

In the more conservative of the textbooks of the 1945-1965 period, a triumphant modernism of development is directly associated with the 'British race'. Other texts, however, lean towards a populist conception of independent Australian-ness. A supposed egalitarianism and fewer distinctions of social class than were to be found in England are immediately obvious aspects of this Australian-ness. This self-characterisation is central in the definition of suitable others to settle Australia. It is this populist view of the good standard of living of ordinary Australians, almost utopian in its lyricism for the Australian present, and certainly for the Australian future, that silently and often not so silently warned against the consequences of importing people who would constitute an inferior class. Figure 7, characterising the issue of immigration as a central concern at the time of Federation, makes no bones about this.

Australian identity, as defined against potential immigrant 'others', is not conceived at the level of mere symbols and feelings, but as a vindication of more elementary everyday life-forms. Australian-ness is conceived in terms of those forms of production and consumption characteristic of 'developed' industrialism. Immigration in the post-war period, as a corollary, is a process of bringing new people in to extend the singular project of progress and development.

Since 1947 more than one million people have emigrated to Australia, nearly half from Britain and the rest from Europe. They have settled here as New Australians to help the old ones develop the country. They have provided man-power for new industries in the industrial cities; some have settled in the country to develop farming; others again have helped to finish great public works, like the Snowy River Scheme near Mt. Kosciusko; others have gone to work in the great new iron and steel furnaces at Port Kembla and Newcastle ...(Shaw and Nicholson 1961, pp. 291-2).

Cultural assimilation is an element of this process. In the middle of the largest immigration program in the world during the post-war period (excepting the case of Israel) one text could assume that 'our street' would be made up of people all with Anglo-sounding names (Figure 8), and another could assure us that immigrants would not be distinguishable from other Australians once they had assimilated (Figure 9).
The New Story of Australia

The new story of Australia emerging in school history and social studies curriculum materials from the late 1960s defined itself in part as a critical revision of earlier histories. It became the most common perspective in textbook and curriculum material by the early 1980s. Unlike the previous story of Australia which was almost unanimous, the new story of Australia did not become universal. Older texts such as the 1959 *Effective Social Studies* series, for example, are still selling well today.

From the perspective of the dominant view of the 1980s, we live in a continuum of tens of thousands of years of cultural difference. No judgments of progress can be made. Any such judgments would involve implicit condemnation of people's lives which were equally human and no better or worse than ours. Aborigines, for example, had different, but no less successful and no less human relations within nature. Their communities were as complex, value-laden, sophisticated and profound as ours. Instead of 'progress' through the hierarchy of 'ages' in the development of 'civilisation', we now have conceptually neutral 'race relations' and 'culture contact'. But although this is an apparently neutral framework for interpreting cultural difference, it is one which also condemns actual histories of cultural non-neutrality in which people displayed 'prejudices', lack of 'awareness' of others and 'insensitivity' to their 'traditions' and 'lifestyles'. As an ex post facto alternative to the actual history of Aboriginal-European relations in Australia, we are presented with detailed empirical expositions of Aboriginal culture in which artefacts and symbolism prevail as evidence of differences, almost as if we could wishfully re-make the history through sensitivity and understanding. It is supposed that we can simulate an awareness of 'contact' now from the other's point of view (see Figure 10, for example), even though the European historical actors had little of such awareness.

It can be concluded from the historical evidence, according to this new story of Australia, that there has been a continuous history of cultural difference in Australia, that there were significant changes over time in the Aboriginal habitation of the place (that is, an Aboriginal history) and that there are both Aboriginal and European 'perspectives' on that history. Indeed, the only thing that is the same about our history is the differences. Aborigines are simply part of a multicultural continuum whose history is worthy of celebration for its differences rather than for its singular progress.

Throughout its history, Australian society has always been culturally diverse. Prior to culture contact with Europeans, Aboriginal belief systems, social patterns, exchange systems and local group identity varied considerably from one environment to another. Likewise, English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish immigrants of the early colonial period varied considerably in terms of geographic origins, social class, religion, folk traditions, education and political outlook.

Since 1788, the cultural diversity of Australia has been expanded. Immigration and the interaction of a wide range of Australian ethnic groups have been instrumental in the development of an Australian multicultural society.

However, societal attitudes and government policies have reflected the values, attitudes and sectional interests of dominant racial, social
and ethnic groups. This resulted in the near destruction of Aboriginal society and the evolution of discriminatory immigration and national cultural policies (NSW Department of Education 1983, p. 53).

Very frequently, Aboriginal culture is defined as the symbolic, the sacred and the subjective. These are things which the happy theory of multicultural continuum can plausibly celebrate. Symptomatically, elementary aspects of everyday material life (land and modes of subsistence for example) are neglected. The story of preserving cultural differences is less easy to sustain there.

The obverse of this new cultural relativism is a new view of the historical ‘us’. Indeed, ‘we’ are reconstructed by seeing ‘ourselves’ from ‘their’ perspective (Figure 11). In contrast to the texts of the immediate post-war decades, the ‘Modern World’ and ‘Progress’ are rarely used interpretative categories in the new story of Australia which emerges in the 1970s and 1980s. And when they are used, they frequently have strong negative associations. No longer is there a singular linearity to history culminating in modernity. No longer is it the case that progress necessarily means improvement. Modernity brings with it a series of crises: of ecology, population, war, poverty and culture contact. Pollution, in particular, becomes a repeated motif of the dilemmas of modernity. Replacing the enthusiasm for transport as a futuristic emblem of the times in the old history is an anxious concern about the ‘mass media’ and the ‘information society’; instead of a populism of material improvement for the citizens of industrialism there is increasing existential angst and moral uncertainty.

In this context, a quite new Australian-ness is constructed, moving away from standards of living and towards the creation of specific and peculiar symbols of Australia. These symbols have none of the confident fixity and substance of the old, populist version of Australian-ness. The process of creating the symbols is simultaneously one of questioning their validity or universality through the concept of stereotype. Thus the symbolism itself is constructed as a myth, as a stereotype (Figure 12) or as indicative of the untenability of any single symbol (Figure 13).

Moving away from the old meta-histories, in which ‘we’ are confidently situated in a singular and teleological meaning to history, the new histories ground specific meaning locally, in the particular and in the commonplace of everyday life. The old narrative of the development of the ‘Modern World’ is fragmented into particular and necessarily various histories.

Multiculturalism as a result of mass immigration constitutes one, particularly important example of the diversity of Australian history. Australia is like a cultural jig-saw puzzle (Figure 14). ‘Ethnicity’ becomes the key category defining this diversity. The term, however, is rarely defined and when it is, it is done poorly. Eliminating the ‘answer’ to the ‘crossword’ in Figure 15, for example, one could hardly guess that it would accurately and clearly sum up all the ‘clues’. The shopping basket metaphor in Figure 16 does little to clear up its meaning.

Through the materials of the last decade newly interested in multiculturalism, however, there is a meaning ascribed to ethnicity, if not explicitly, then in a hidden curriculum of cultural contents. If a rough count of space taken up is an indication of a working definition of ethnicity, at least forty per cent of it must be food. Thus, multiculturalism consists in a significant part in enjoying different people’s foods, as in Figure 17. Ethnicity also consists of celebrations (Figure 18), dancing, national costume (Figure 19) and indeed, folklife generally (Figure 20). Frequently, also,
it is aligned with nationality, a strikingly inept move given the fact that much immigration is at least in part the result of political resistance by groups that define themselves ethnically against the nation-states in which they live.

Problems of Pluralism

No-one would want to deny the important revisionary role of the new story of Australia that comes through in the majority of textbooks by the 1980s. There was undoubtedly a cogent and justified critical impetus in the re-writing of the Australian historical story-line. But this has been refracted into a debilitating form of pluralism, frequently akin, in some ways and despite its own intentions, to racism.

In the commonsense uses of ethnicity the problem of immigrants is conceived culturally, using a very narrow understanding of culture as innocuous folk-life. In the same way that assimilation in part viewed the problem of immigration culturally, as a matter of visibility, so multiculturalism also conceives the issue culturally, except this time celebrating the same differences that assimilation wanted to erase. Visible difference, however, is a poor way of explaining social process, equally poor whether one wants to erase or to celebrate it. Indeed, whilst conceiving culture as innocuous, colourful folk-life, this sort of multicultural education can inadvertently provide grist for the racist mill, immersing children in colourful differences during ‘national days’, for example, but really exaggerating and constructing stereotypes of cultural difference in order to celebrate them. In one sense, the old story of migration and assimilation, of work and life in the structures of industrial development, of standards of living measured by commodity consumption, is a more accurate reflection of the main part of the everyday lives and cultural aspirations of immigrants.

Moreover, culture-as-difference harks back to a mythical primordial folk and cultural traditionalism. This contains strongly conservative elements, as traditions frequently involve relations of sexism, for example. At the same time, this conception of ethnicity as traditionalism separates the ethnics who have it from the rest who do not. Are the Eurythmics and MacDonalds ethnicity? Are they culture for this purpose of the colourful differences of multiculturalism? And when the culture of the dominant group is characterised, it is trivialised away from the problem of cultural dominance to haggis and Irish ditties. It is reconstructed as ‘Anglo-Celtic’ culture, a strange historical hybrid indeed if one is to take the claims of ethnicity to primordial kin-links as seriously as many multiculturalists would have us.

The task of multiculturalism becomes one of attitudes to differences rather than to structures of inequity or social relations generally in a context of mass immigration. ‘Culture contact’ and ‘race relations’ are neutral concepts, as if the European settlement of Australia could have involved neutral acceptance of Aboriginal cultures, and as if the incorporation of immigrants could be a culturally neutral process. This, however, is an ideological conceit. Unless there was a genuine possibility of the European settlers becoming hunters and gatherers, or of recent immigrants convincing us to join them in re-establishing Lebanese peasantry or Polish communism here in Australia, there can be no implications of cultural neutrality. As much as Captain Phillip tried to communicate with the Aborigines, there was a certain inexorable long-term inevitability to the meeting of industrialism with hunters and gatherers. Nor can any amount of positive attitude, good feeling and cultural respect by itself unwrite history or the realities or social power in the present. In a sense,
the old story of Australia, as one-eyed, brutish and as complicit with structural racism as it was, was closer to the historical truth of colonialism and the structural incorporation of immigrants. Historical relativism, seeing history as different points of view and regarding different historical and cultural perspectives as equally valid, sounds fine. But history was not relative.

In the overwhelmingly subjectivist framework of 'understanding' and 'attitudes' in the new history of Australia is the sublimation of a critical problematic of racism through the pleasant sounding prescription of 'inter-cultural understanding'. The subject matter of this latter aim, submersion in colourful differences, puts a critical reading of structural racism off the agenda. If anything racism is just a matter of intolerance, a moral lapse, a matter of individual pathology rectifiable therapeutically. Racism is thus not conceived as an ideology and social process of injustice and inequality; it is something that can be simply remedied subjectively and individually.

As a result of this, a happy vision of an ever-multicultural Australia emerges which obfuscates the massive trauma to Aboriginal life that came in the century after 1788. It is as if we are multicultural because there are lots of different art forms to be found in galleries, including various Aboriginal traditions. But this obscures the fact that hunting and gathering was remorselessly destroyed as an everyday life form for most Aboriginals, and that art-as-commodity, the gallery and even a fetish for colourful cultural difference, are manifestations of the singular culture of western industrialism.

The new story of Australia replaces the unifying rhetoric of the progress of the 'Modern World', with an epistemology of relativism and a politics of difference. This is a two-edged historical sword. The idealistic language of cultural integrity and separate-ness of apartheid is just one extreme example of the dangers. In the Australian context, the liberal pluralist constructions of 'ethnicity' and 'Aboriginality' bring with them a reduced sense of community beyond irretrievably different sub-cultures. This is felt at the level of popular culture as de-centred identity and a loss of larger communal purpose. It also involves a patronising niceness of 'live and let live', which can easily lead to a benevolent racist framework. It can, at the same time mean an implicit advocacy of the conservation of cultures which often include racist traditions of their own and the preservation of in-group/out-group distinctions which include racist assumptions about others.

What might an alternative to this disintegrating pluralism look like? Very briefly, we need culture broadly to include both the culture of everyday life in industrialism (including material aspirations and structures of inequality, for example) as well as residual traditionalisms that have been relegated to a narrow and relatively separate realm of folk-life. At the same time, we have to recognise the realities of historical and cultural dynamism, often unjust but mostly irreversible, when a dominant structure/culture meets indigenous and immigrant differences. History then, needs to be conceived as an open process, in which cultural peculiarities need not necessarily be preserved for their own sake. As culture is learnt, rather than primordial, so our futures are open to political choice, albeit shaped by, and contingent upon, powerful social and cultural forces.
References


Figure 1

I. STICKS AND STONES.

Long, long ago, so long ago that we cannot count the years, men, women and children were very strange beings. They had no clothes, no houses, no pet dogs and cats, and no sheep, cows and horses. Indeed, they had none of the useful and beautiful things we have to-day.

Figure 2
Figure 3

Figure 4
Figure 5
Whitcombe and Tombs (Publisher) (1954), *Whitcombe's Social Studies: Third Grade*, Whitcombe and Tombs, Sydney, p. 25.

![Image of a man climbing a mountain](image)

THE TRUE AUSTRALIAN GOES EXPLORING

Figure 6

![Image of explorers on a boat](image)
Figure 7

Figure 8
Figure 9

TRUE AUSTRALIANS BOTH
One was born here, one came here to live from Europe after the Second World War. Can you tell which is which?
Figure 10

Figure 11
Figure 12

Figure 13
Figure 14

Figure 15
Figure 16

![Some components of Ethnic Identity](Image)

*Ethnic identity is a selective process*

Figure 17

![Family cooking](Image)
Figure 18
Figure 19
McGregor, Mairi (1979), About Us, Inner City Education Centre, Stanmore, pp. 10-11.

George is wearing his Greek costume.

Figure 20
South Australian Department of Education (1979), Multicultural Education Materials, Education Department of South Australia, 'Polish Culture, Community Life', card 1.