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Introduction: Nationalism and transnationalism in Australian historical writing

Abstract

One of the strongest trends in Australian historical writing over the last two decades has been a drive to emphasise the nation's connectedness with the rest of the world. Across a range of historical genres and topics, we have seen a new enthusiasm to explore entanglements between Australian history and that of other places and peoples. The history of travel has been an important contributor to this line of inquiry, but it is at the more intellectual, imaginative and emotional levels that the greatest gains are sometimes claimed for the study of what has become known as 'transnationalism'. This trend to emphasise international networks in history has been drawn on by historians in the essays that follow. It reflects and contributes to an international flourishing of histories emphasising mobility in the context of empires and globalisation. But where does this leave the idea of 'the nation' as a factor in thinking through post-white settlement Australian history? And are some of the claims made for the explanatory impact of transnationalism exaggerated? In a recent article on the 'transgressive transnationalism' of Griffith Taylor, Carolyn Strange nodded to the 'path-breaking' recent works of Australian historians who have led a 'transnational turn', but her conclusion was partly corrective: 'whether or not transnational thinking was transgressive, strategic or otherwise in the past, and whether or not our historical subjects were progressive or regressive are questions for contextual analysis, in which the nation will continue to matter'.

Keywords

historical, writing, nationalism, introduction, transnationalism, australian

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SYMPOSIUM

Introduction

Nationalism and transnationalism in Australian historical writing

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa and David Lowe

One of the strongest trends in Australian historical writing over the last two decades has been a drive to emphasise the nation's connectedness with the rest of the world. Across a range of historical genres and topics, we have seen a new enthusiasm to explore entanglements between Australian history and that of other places and peoples. The history of travel has been an important contributor to this line of inquiry, but it is at the more intellectual, imaginative and emotional levels that the greatest gains are sometimes claimed for the study of what has become known as 'transnationalism'.¹ This trend to emphasise international networks in history has been drawn on by historians in the essays that follow. It reflects and contributes to an international flourishing of histories emphasising mobility in the context of empires and globalisation.² But where does this leave the idea of 'the nation' as a factor in thinking through post-white

¹ See, for example, Desley Deacon, Penny Russell and Angela Woollacott, eds., *Transnational Ties: Australian Lies in the World* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008) and Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, eds., *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2005).

² See Tony Ballantye and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

settlement Australian history? And are some of the claims made for the explanatory impact of transnationalism exaggerated? In a recent article on the 'transgressive transnationalism' of Griffith Taylor, Carolyn Strange nodded to the 'path-breaking' recent works of Australian historians who have led a 'transnational turn', but her conclusion was partly corrective: 'whether or not transnational thinking was transgressive, strategic or otherwise in the past, and whether or not our historical subjects were progressive or regressive are questions for contextual analysis, in which the nation will continue to matter'.³

In March 2012 a number of historians gathered at a workshop in the Alfred Deakin Research Institute, Deakin University, to discuss the standing of nationalism and transnationalism in Australian historical writing. All of them had been involved in the production of transnational history in various ways and they took the opportunity to both reflect again on their own work and to critically examine current debates. This collection has been developed from papers presented at that workshop. The five articles here are deliberately short and, hopefully, punchy. Rather than offering a detailed survey of this large field, they seek to stimulate debate and to suggest future intellectual directions.

The articles

In his article on 'Nationalism, Britishness and Australian History', Christopher Waters revisits Neville Meaney's landmark article, 'Britishness and Australian Identity: The Problem of Nationalism in Australian History and Historiography', published just over a decade ago in *Australian Historical Studies*. In particular, Waters responds to Meaney's claim that many Australian historians, including Waters himself, had been guided by a teleological nationalist imperative that denied the pivotal role of Britishness in Australian discourse of the mid-twentieth century. Rejecting this characterisation of himself and others, Waters maintains that far from denying the importance of Britishness, his own work has always recognised that Australian nationalism drew on aspects of metropolitan discourse. Britishness, he claims, was a powerful 'cultural glue' in Australian society. But he also contends it would be entirely wrong to assume, as Meaney risks doing, that this was the only cultural adhesive. Waters' main point is that by leeching out nationalism as an ideology at

³ Carolyn Strange, 'Transgressive Transnationalism: Griffith Taylor and Global Thinking', *Australian Historical Studies* 41, no. 1 (2010): 26, 40.

play in Australian politics in the mid-twentieth century historians like Meaney are in danger of taking Australian history out of its other world historical context: the Age of Decolonisation. Australian history during this period, he concludes, was subject to global shifts beyond the British world and so is better understood as being part of a wider decolonising story; one where nationalism and liberal internationalism sat side by side.

In the second article in the section, 'Australia at Empire's End: Approaches and Arguments', James Curran presents an argument for the dominance of British race patriotism in Australia from the 1870s to the 1960s. British race patriotism, he argues, was not the only ingredient of Australian identity during this time, but it was the principal one. Going further, he contends that what has been interpreted by historians like Waters as competing strands of Australian identity expressed in traditions such as 'radical nationalism' can actually be explained as divergent aspects of Australian Britishness. In pre-1960s Australia, Curran writes, the community of culture and the community of interest – cultural nationalism and political nationalism – were sometimes at odds. They were, however, different aspects of the same ideology; a form of British race patriotism that had been adapted to suit Australian conditions. This interpretation allows for Curran to assert that it was only in the 1960s and 1970s – when the infrastructure of British imperialism, namely the material, strategic and economic props of Britishness, were rapidly swept aside in a context of decolonisation – that empire and Britishness ceased to serve Australian cultural nationalistic needs. This was a major rupture for Australia, producing a break in national trajectory that led to the 'new nationalism' of the 1970s. Curran's wider historiographical argument is that in the rush to get at what he terms the transnational 'promised land', the nation-state cannot simply be cast aside; it is too important to be 'wished away'.

Marilyn Lake's article, 'British World or New World? Anglo-Saxonism and Australian Engagement with America', argues against the thesis of historians like Meaney and Curran that British race patriotism shaped Australian relations with the world and dominated the Australian sense of identity from the 1870s until the 1970s. In fact, Lake argues that Meaney was wrong to establish an analytical framework that required Australian identity to be understood as either an expression of Britishness or of Australian nationalism. What of Asia and the Americas, she asks? Lake presents a nuanced argument which maintains that a form of 'Anglo-Saxonism' informed Australian identity in the period leading up to Australia's break with Germany as a result of World War

One. Being part of a wider global network that stressed connections with the people of regions like Britain, the USA and Germany – all branches of a Teutonic race – was much more pertinent than simply Britishness in understandings of Australia's place in the world. Britishness, and an insistence on loyalty to an imperial nation-state, she contends, only became a dominant force in the wake of the breakdown of these Anglo-Saxon relations. Anti-Americanism may have become an intrinsic aspect of a new white Australian–British identity, but it was not always present. Indeed, like Waters, Lake argues that a form of liberal internationalism was important in shaping conceptions of Australian national identity, particularly in the pre-war era. This can be illustrated by examining the strong relationship existing between the Australian liberal tradition and that of the USA as evidenced by the strong sympathies with the USA expressed by leading Australian intellectual liberals like Alfred Deakin, Charles Pearson, H B Higgins, Catherine Spence and Vida Goldstein.

The next article in the section picks up on Lake's identification of a strong connection between the Australian liberal tradition and that of other regions beyond the British world, including the USA. In 'The National and the Transnational in British Anti-Suffragists' Views of Australian Women Voters', Sharon Crozier-De Rosa looks through the lens of gender to examine how British conservatives framed their understanding of metropolitan and Australian identity in the wake of challenges to their political and ideological supremacy emanating from the 'margins' of empire, and to explore how Australians, in turn, articulated their relationship to imperial values given the increasing visibility of their often divergent interests and situations – in this case epitomised by the existence of the Australian woman voter. Drawing on discussions printed in the *British Anti-Suffrage Review*, including a reported exchange between Australian Vida Goldstein and a British male correspondent, Crozier-De Rosa argues that the *Review* alternated between drawing on nationally and globally relevant reasons for opposing the female franchise; revealing in the process a tension between British and transnational imperatives. Moreover, by citing examples of prominent liberal Australians, like Goldstein, who drew on ideas and values that were drawn from the 'new' world and that ran counter to those of the 'old', the *Review* contributed to more nuanced, complex understandings of Australian–Britishness. Crozier-De Rosa concludes that by rejecting the merits of 'old' world values in the face of those stemming from places like the USA, Goldstein and others added to an understanding of the relationship between the

‘core’ and ‘periphery’ that was much more complicated than traditional models suggest.

The last article in the section, ‘Australians Assembling’ by David Lowe, continues the exploration of Australians who used their expanding international connections to inform their understanding of Australia’s changing place on the international stage, this time in post-World War Two context. Through the example of Australian diplomat, Percy Spender, Lowe argues that far from being constrained within a British world, post-war Australia was an outward-looking nation. Australian diplomats were part of a dynamic international scene; one that was propelled by the forces of the Cold War, decolonisation and globalisation. They reacted enthusiastically to the increasing opportunities for international participation beyond those of the British imperial network, such as that presented by the new United Nations. While still performing the official duties assigned to him by the Australian government, for example, Spender enthusiastically forged new connections with the growing group of newly independent non-‘western’ nations. Drawing on Akira Iriye’s notion of ‘alternative worlds’ – transnational spheres linked by cultural, educational and social networks – Lowe posits Australia as an active participant in a much wider decolonising world. By stressing Spender’s pro-Empire but simultaneously pro-American views, Lowe moves beyond the binary of Australian nationalism and Australian Britishness and positions Australia amid a more dynamic, complex, globalised world.

The papers in this collection point to both enduring preoccupations and new modes of inquiry. Collectively, they suggest that nationalism and transnationalism can and should co-exist in the historian’s tool-kit. It is now hard to write histories without recognising that we have been part of changing empires, a globalising world, and a range of processes that transcend national boundaries. Indeed, many Australian histories have been produced that already situate the national beside the transnational. These papers suggest that much more work awaits.