NATIONAL IDENTITY AND EDUCATION IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AUSTRALIA

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BY

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For Christine Hall, mentor and friend; my daughter Katie; and Robin my 'history man'.

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Preface

In recent times, the populist reaction to globalisation has led to a resurgence of nationalism, often of a very negative kind. The question must, therefore, arise of whether national identity, as distinct from nationalism, can be a force for good and can in some circumstances be inclusive, rather than exclusive and concerned with overcoming 'the Other'. It may be useful to focus on the evolution of national identity as part of the process of nation building in settler countries outside Europe, where the majority of the population are recent or distant migrants from elsewhere.

The case examined here is that of Australia. In this instance, it was necessary to bring together people who had arrived not just from Britain but, in significant numbers, from other parts of the world as well, and to create a sense of belonging and loyalty to this new land. This need was increased by Australia's remoteness from Europe.

This study leads to conclusions about the emerging identity of new Australians which are contrary to much of what has been written on this subject in the past. The approach taken shows the role played by the school curriculum in moulding loyalty to a new identity among young white Australians. Perhaps most important of all, it suggests that national identity can indeed be a positive phenomenon, where it harnesses the common experiences and achievements of people, and the unique and uplifting characteristics of their new home. It does not have to take the form of a wholesale rejection of 'the Other' and is, therefore, quite different from the European experience of nationalism.

However, this study also reveals that in the case of Australia, there was a counter-narrative running in parallel with respect to Indigenous people. Australia's original inhabitants were 'encountered' but never 'embraced' or 'exalted', to use the terminology of Chapter 3. They were largely left out of historical accounts of early Australia, and never considered to be among the 'heroes' of the early projects of settlement. The mythology that built up about them was, for the most part, consistently negative, portraying them as marauding savages. Indigenous people were that part of the 'Other' with whom white settlers, during the period examined here and for long afterwards, never came to terms. Throughout this study the treatment of Indigenous people will be referred to as a counterpoint to the broadly positive white 'Australian' focus of the curriculum publication *The School Paper* in its efforts to unite young Australians and develop in them a sense of national identity.

National identities matter because they have the potential to help people make sense of the world in which they are born and live, help them make sense of their past, and provide them with the identification that supports the political structure and enables visualisation of a common future.

The concept of national identity has been subject to a variety of interpretations over the years. It has been pointed out that it is incessantly negotiated through discourse (Lane Bruner, 2005). It may be based on mythical rather than factual history, able to integrate apparently contradictory facts – as one observer put it, it is 'the stuff that dreams are made of' (Walker Connor, 1994, p. 210). The nation may exist primarily in the hearts and minds of its members or be built upon perceived past common glories (Renan, 1882); it may be found too in ordinary day-to-day social habits (Billig, 1995). United by 'common historical memories, myths, symbols and traditions' (Smith, 1991, p. 11), this imagined community is promoted especially through mass education. For this reason, we need to look not only at the way adults participate in cultural traditions but also ways in which national culture is conveyed to children from one generation to the next (Barrett, 2007). Above all, national identity is always defined in terms of difference from the 'Other' (Bhabha, 1990; Said, 2003).

It is clear, therefore, that identity is central to much socio-political debate in our own time. For both the individual and the collective, the question 'Who are we?' cannot truly be answered without engaging with the social context in which the question is asked. In addition, it will be apparent that historical and literary narratives are likely to be important to the formation of national identity. For all observers, narrative, or 'discourse', is an essential medium through which national identity is constructed and reinforced.

Narrative is a powerful vehicle for spreading values and conveying them to subsequent generations. Children's literature has been described as 'a struggle for young people's minds' (Stephens, 1992, p. ix) in that it is frequently didactic, offers moral codes, and defines for children the nature of their childhood at a particular time and in a particular place. This equally holds for school materials. The purpose of this book is to show how an emerging (white) national identity is both reflected in and constructed through educational texts read by children in Australia.

The period 1900 to 1918 starts and finishes with events of enduring significance to Australia. These years were a crucial time of nation building when, arguably, Australians embraced a stronger sense of independence from Britain, and developments occurred which crystallised characteristics of the emerging white Australian identity. Many of these traits remain central to the way Australians perceive themselves today. Federation was finally achieved on 1 January 1901. The end of the period was no less significant. By the close of 1918, the Great War was over, and with it came the consolidation of the Gallipoli legend: Australian troops had proven themselves on the battlefield.

The State of Victoria was the home of the first Federal Parliament, and, at the time, one of the most populous and dynamic regions of Australia. The focus here on Victoria is supported also by the fact that the Education Department's own publication, *The School Paper*, was the mandatory reading syllabus for all Victorian state schools and for many denominational schools as well. Moreover, it incorporated reading material from that prepared by the Education Departments of other states, notably from *The Commonwealth School Paper*, *The School Magazine* of the *Education Department New South Wales*, the *South Australian Children's Hour*, and the *Queensland School Paper*. The *Victorian School Paper*, in its turn, was used in other states; the messages the texts conveyed about national identity, therefore, had a broader currency among predominately white school children within Australia well beyond Victoria.

A criticism commonly made of *The School Paper* is that it included almost no Australian content, and was primarily an instrument through which British attitudes were reinforced among school children, thus perpetuating an Imperial mystique. Yet to date, there has been no really thorough analysis of the publication.[1] The present study sets out to remedy this. Through a comprehensive deconstruction of the publication, it finds that *The School Paper* made a very substantial contribution to the formation of the white Australian identity.

Finally, and critically as implied above, it should be noted that material with *any* mention of Indigenous people has been given particular attention, for these early representations of first inhabitants are vital to the prevailing attitudes held by society and passed down to the young. Indigenous people saw their land progressively invaded by Europeans who denied them any entitlement to it because they had no system of land rights in the European sense. This was not, therefore, simply colonisation of territory by the whites, but expropriation. The denial of recognition to Indigenous people would lead ultimately to decimation of their way of life, and in some extreme cases, to genocide. Thus, messages by white writers included in educational reading materials compiled by white educators for consumption by, in the main, white school children, speak volumes about the colonisers' attitudes towards the Indigenous 'Other'. In the view of Edward Said, it is important to 'defend peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated because they are considered inferior' (1998, p. 7). The framework employed here allows for a thorough exposition of these attitudes.

[1]The two main sources hitherto for content analysis of *The School Paper* have been Desmond Gibbs (1987) and Peter Musgrave (1996). However, neither of these works is based on a comprehensive review of this publication for the whole of the period 1900 to 1918. Moreover, national identity was not their primary focus.