

Introduction

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Born in New York in the turbulent eighteenth century, African-American Billy Blue fought with the British against France and America, led a press gang in Deptford, lusted cargo on the Thames, was transported to Australia for pilfering and became a ferryman on Sydney Harbour. In Sydney, he flourished for some years as a man of property, on terms of friendship with Governor Macquarie. Cassandra Pybus speculates that this friendship, which helped secure Blue's stature in Sydney society, might have owed something to an earlier acquaintance when both men served in the same campaigns in America.

Guna Kinne was at high school in Latvia when she began making her national dress in 1939. She took the unfinished dress with her when she fled the country ahead of the Soviet invasion of 1945. She finished the jacket in Germany while living in the Russian Zone, unable to find her family and in continual fear of deportation. When she tried to escape across the border, Russian soldiers threw her from the train. The dress, carefully packed in her suitcase, rolled with her down the railway embankment; she had it still as she clawed her way back on to the last freight wagon, which rattled and lurched to the comparative safety of the English Zone. The outfit came with her to Australia, holding within its folds as many memories of movement and displacement as of the Latvia of her childhood.

Minh Tam Nguyen invented his *dàn tre* on a tea plantation in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, where he was doing hard labour in a Vietcong 're-education' camp. The stringed bamboo instrument, inspired by the traditional musical instruments of the region, symbolised the culture and tradition of a Vietnam he had lost. He made a second *dàn tre* in a refugee camp in the Philippines, where he lived with his son for more than a year before being transferred to Australia in 1982. He brought the second instrument with him. Like Mrs Kinne, he had crafted the object with love while building a life out of displacement. Like her, he later donated this treasured and culturally resonant object to the National Museum of Australia.

Cassandra Pybus and the National Museum's gallery development team tell the stories of Billy Blue, Guna Kinne and Minh Tam Nguyen in the two chapters that begin and end this volume. Chronologically, they neatly bookend the span of 'white' Australian history. Geographically, they offer just a taste of the far-flung lives—of adventure or displacement—that have been lived by many 'Australians' before they ever reached Australia. In so doing, they remind us that white Australia has never existed in isolation from conflicts and crises

elsewhere around the globe. Australian lives are intricately enmeshed with the world, bound by ties of allegiance and affinity, intellect and imagination.

Australian historians—and still more Australian politicians—have been perhaps too inclined to forget this obvious fact. Although certain international relationships demand acknowledgment, it has been tempting to seek ‘Australian’ identity in what is at once unifying and distinctive: the fabric, as Ann Curthoys suggests, of national histories.¹ The nation is a comfortable frame for historical inquiry: one, as Curthoys further observes, that ensures historians a ‘large, interested audience and enables our historical work to count in current debate’.² The more we speak in terms that are generally applicable across the nation, the wider will be the audience we reach—and historians, like politicians, depend on an audience for professional validation. The quest for Australian identity therefore contains an inherently homogenising impulse: it is a quest for sameness, not diversity. Seeking what is held in common, it is tempting to smooth over the chequered world of difference, held by fragile bonds, that inevitably defines a society built primarily on migration.

Increasingly, however, scholars are attempting to escape the straitjacket of such nation-based inquiries. The borders of modern nationhood are culturally contingent, Homi Bhabha points out: away from ‘the psychosis of patriotic fervour’, we find ‘a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities’.³ Transnational history, then, encompasses diaspora, imperialism, exile and conflict. It allows analytical space not only to nations defined by political and geographical boundaries, but to the oceans and the wild spaces and borders that divide them. It is a dynamic history, a history of journeys as well as moments of departure and arrival, crossings and exchanges, ‘movements, flows, and circulation’.⁴ Transnational history, writes Sven Beckert, takes as its starting point ‘the interconnectedness of human history as a whole, and while it acknowledges the extraordinary importance of states, empires, and the like, it pays attention to networks, processes, beliefs, and institutions that transcend these politically defined spaces’.⁵ Or, we might add, those that flow around, beneath and through them.

In a settler nation such as Australia, a history of connectedness is not altogether new. The continuing relationship with Britain, the place of the vulnerable colonies and fledgling nation in the Asia-Pacific world and the growing cultural diversity of an immigrant population have produced recurrent preoccupations with issues of defence, derivation and distinctiveness. For Australians, the concept of ‘transnational history’ represents a shift of emphasis, not of substance. There is, however, more to transnationalism than the history of an immigrant culture. The essays in this volume trace not only the movement of people across the globe, but also the imaginative reach of individuals, including those who physically stay in one place. The flow of people helped shape Australia’s

distinctive character; the flow of ideas connected Australians to a global community of thought.

Biography, and the study of life stories, can contribute greatly to our understanding of such patterns of connection; but to explore the possibilities of transnationalism tests the limits of biography as an intellectual, professional and commercial practice. When delegates came together in July 2006 at a conference on 'Transnational Lives', held at the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University, they were prepared to transgress, rework and critique disciplinary as well as national boundaries. Representing an eclectic mix of disciplines and professions—history, literary criticism, museology, art and writing—they explored and challenged hierarchies of authority, definitions of race and constraints of gender. In the closing session of the conference, the National Museum of Australia gallery team even offered a provocative challenge to the assumed distinction between personal subjects and material objects, arguing that biography could be written of things as well as people. What united the papers was their exploration of a central question: what it means to research and represent a 'transnational life'. This collection of essays takes that exploration further.

The premise of the conference was that biography, in the words of Jill Matthews, 'allows the transnational historian to prise their subject out of the death grip of the national'.⁶ Indeed, only sometimes—perhaps only when the identification is drawn from them by exceptional circumstances—do individuals understand themselves first and foremost as citizens of a particular nation. Sporting contests can do it, so can war, so can revolution, so can travel or exile. Other subjective identities, however, draw strength from categories or communities either much narrower, or much wider, than the nation. Individuals identify themselves by family and kinship networks, religious faith, political affiliation, intellectual community or friendship. The communities to which they belong might be those of neighbourhood, town, or city; they might be organisations or churches with an international reach; they might be untidy networks that sprawl across the globe, held together only by fragile ties of communication or affection. Pursuing a life story, it is almost unnecessary to look, in Robert Gregg's words, for 'the global buried within the local'.⁷ It lies exposed; one cannot help but stumble over it.

When we bend our frame of inquiry away from the nation, different stories emerge. When the focus is on an individual life, the differences multiply; and the assumed boundaries of the nation are transgressed so many times—and so unthinkingly—that the boundaries themselves begin to seem almost meaningless. We can follow a life across and between nations and continents. We can contain within a single narrative the trauma of disruption and the fragile pleasures of reattachment that mark the transition from one home to another. We can trace

the attractions, but also the dislocations, of a wandering life, whether that is the life of a migrant, a traveller, an explorer, an artist, a convicted criminal or a committed activist. We can observe the shifts in allegiance and attachment that flow from the varied cultural exchanges of a life, even when lived within a single country; and we can understand, in Lambert and Lester's terms, the circulation and global evolution of ideas and practices.⁸ Of indefinite provenance and infinite outcomes, ideas have flowed around the globe, contained in books and print media, in people's minds, in the very structure of cultural and political institutions. The history of that movement could never be fully narrated, but the focus on an individual life might allow us to follow some stages of the journey.

When tracing an individual life, transnationalism often, therefore, appears less an analytical category than a commonsense descriptor of human experience—and yet the shadow of the nation clings to biography. Personal archives can be preserved and made accessible on the basis of an individual's perceived contribution to the political, social or cultural life of a nation, creating practical difficulties about tracing and assembling material that is distributed in fragmented collections across the globe. The subjects most often chosen for biographical study are—still—towering national figures. The largest compendia of life stories are dictionaries of national biography, which define even the most peripatetic life by reference to its contribution to one nation in particular. Publishers, with their acute commercial antennae, are often wary of publishing the biography of a subject who made equal impact in, say, three different countries. To the aspiring author's optimistic expectation of thus attracting three different markets, they counter the cautious concern that they might fail to capture any. The issue of classification and shelving in bookshops and libraries underlines the problem, with the same volume finding a different home in different countries, according to the perceived national significance of the individual whose life is told therein. What qualifies a book for inclusion in that popular category 'Australian biography', for example? In part, the dilemmas of marketing simply reflect the symbiotic relationship between commerce and nation: arguably it was modern marketing as much as modern politics that necessitated the nation-states of the nineteenth century, and even in a globalised world the national market is still the simplest to define and therefore to reach.⁹

Perhaps, though, the classifications and marketing strategies of publishers and booksellers reflect, as much as they shape, the instilled preferences of readers. We read to lose ourselves in a foreign world, or to learn more about our own. The pleasure of reading might lie in the burst of recognition of shared experience in a national life, or in the tug of curiosity about difference—but we like to know which to expect. Perhaps we are especially habituated to narratives of quest or adventure, where the venture into a foreign world is balanced and resolved by the return to a more secure identity, to 'home', at the end. A life

story that crosses nations follows a different narrative arc. It draws us into one social world only to abandon it abruptly when our subject moves on to new circumstances. There is no return: the stable base of ‘home’ no longer serves as an anchor, but itself moves with the subject. This could be as unsettling for the reader as for the subject. Even on the more pragmatic level of intellectual inquiry, such works can challenge, because they fail to meet, our habitual criteria of relevance: what teacher of Australian history has not struggled to persuade students to read more than the ‘Australian’ chapter in a transnational work? ‘There is something sacrosanct about certain aspects of culture,’ observes Jill Matthews, ‘that triggers the protective, exclusive, mutual embrace; that constitutes a settled “us” against the nomadic hordes of “them”.’¹⁰ Even the fiction of a coherent life story cannot always overcome the reflex of indifference.

There have always been some readers who have looked beyond the boundaries of nation for an alternative or transcendent sense of community—as Mark Hearn shows, for example, in his analysis of Alfred Deakin’s reading habits. There are also signs that more and more readers’ preferences are moving in the same direction, in response to a globalising world. The life stories traced in this volume help us to understand why this should be so. In particular, James Hammerton’s study of changing patterns of British migration suggests that emigrants no longer necessarily expect to uproot and resettle only once. More and more people are moving on rather than simply out and back. They find their communities of belonging not in a particular locale but in far-flung family ties, or in a sense of being ‘citizens of the world’. The technologies of modernity, too, increase our capacity to take ourselves into the world or bring the world into our homes, and strengthen the sense of belonging to a wider community.

The essays in this volume respond to both the limitations and the continuing draw of the nation, acknowledging the erratic mobility and imaginative reach of lives in the world but also considering their significance as ‘Australian’ lives. Here, however, we encounter a paradox: for on what standard do we judge them to be Australian? Not length of residence, for some came to Australia only late in their adventurous lives; some paused here only briefly amid an administrative or scientific career that spanned the empire. Not the requirement of citizenship, for that was denied to many, and never clearly defined until well into the twentieth century. Not, certainly, a resemblance to the ‘typical’ Australian, for that beer-swilling, football-loving larrikin has no presence in these pages. Not, even, a primary identification as ‘Australian’, or a commitment to building a future here: for that criterion, too, would rule out many, though not all, of the individuals whose lives we trace in this volume. Indeed, perhaps the only thing that unites these lives is that they were lived—however briefly—in Australia.

Yet there is, after all, something more. For many, perhaps all, of the individuals in this book, ‘being Australian’ was a series of questions rather than an emphatic

declaration. All of them, in different ways, encountered and asked those questions: what did it mean, for the country and for themselves, that they had lived in or visited Australia? How did that experience entangle with their sense of belonging—tangible, imaginative, nostalgic or aspirational—in a wider world? The writers in this volume pose these questions about individual lives. They are questions that historians—and politicians too—must continue to ask, if we are to better understand Australians' place in a changing world.

Mapping transnational lives

This book focusses on 'lives', yet few if any of the essays in this book recount a life story from birth to death, mapped across a shifting geography of place. Rather, they offer glimpses of a life in motion, or of imaginations at work to bridge physical distance and bring the 'world' and 'Australia' closer together.

Such bridges can be built in many ways. Most obviously, they are forged by the mobility of bodies into and out of Australia: acts of travel, migration or exploration. They are also built from words, structures, ideas and emotions. The essays in this volume are grouped to give emphasis to attachments forged from, and through, acts of authority, intimacy, intellect and imagination.

The section on 'Authority' considers the ways Australians are tied to the world by structures of law, policy and administration. Laws and policies secure power, and act to exclude and define as well as unite. The patterns of colonial authority could cement hierarchical structures and facilitate professional mobility for its officials and administrators, as Julie Evans shows; it could also act to restrict the movements and divide the families of subaltern subjects, unwanted in a 'White Australia'. As Margaret Allen shows in her study of such subjects as Otim Singh, masculinity as well as race was at stake. Cindy McCreery and Nicholas Brown explore the evolving patterns of external authority over and in Australia. McCreery's study of the first royal visit to Australia in 1867 shows how it provoked a shock of awareness on both sides: how strong, on the one hand, were the structures and habits of allegiance; and how strange, nevertheless, were the colonies and their prince to one another. In the twentieth century and a post-colonial age, new structures facilitated a politics of internationalism, and Brown shows how R. G. Watt transcended his Australian location and modest social status to further internationalism as an ideology.

Alongside, and threaded through, such formal ties were the intangible yet powerful bonds of love. Australians were tied to the world by kinship, nostalgia, habit and imagination. Each generation of Australians since 1788 has included many whose first attachments were formed in another place—for whom, therefore, living in Australia, let alone 'being Australian', was a matter of negotiation across rupture. The 'intimate empire', as Gillian Whitlock has argued, is one of 'pleasure, dismay, ambivalence—rarely indifference', and her insights

can be extended beyond the empire to encompass a wider diasporic world.¹¹ It is perhaps not surprising that all the stories of 'Intimacy' in this volume are also stories of migration. The legacy of their attachments was complicated, but hardly obliterated, for succeeding generations. Exploring these complexities, the essays in this section make clear that migration is not simply a story of settling into one place. Maggie Mackellar shows how early Western District settlers continually negotiated the idea of 'home', and sharply reminds us that all their creations were built on, but generally ignored, the destruction of Aboriginal homes that preceded them. Kate Bagnall explores the unhappy marriage of a woman who followed her husband to China; James Hammerton tells the stories of migrants who have followed family around the world, moving on without disrupting familial ties; Alistair Thomson shows the continuing importance of letters to and from family for a British postwar migrant; and Francesco Ricatti explores the place of nostalgia in Italian migrant stories of home and first love. Going out, returning home, moving on, staying still—all entailed cultural tensions, adjustments and divisions, within families and across generations.

Intimacy in a transnational life was often sustained by the exchange of letters and photographs. The section on 'Intellect' considers further how transnationalism was fostered by the circulation of print, and by the sharing of language and culture, within and beyond the empire. The taxonomies of Enlightenment science facilitated botanical adventuring, as Ann Lane shows with her story of the imperial entrepreneur Henry Wickham and his passion for the transplanting and acclimatisation of plants across the globe: rubber, tobacco and the fibrous arghan. Not all intellectual adventurers travelled as widely as did Wickham. The empire of literature was even more powerful. Australians could feed their intellectual curiosity about the world, and foster their cultural awareness and cultural attachments through the world of books—as Mark Hearn shows in his analysis of Alfred Deakin's eclectic and far-ranging reading habits.

The next section on 'Imagination' explores how creative artists have, in Hannah Arendt's memorable words, 'trained their imagination to go visiting'. Reaching out to the world or attaching themselves to communities outside Australia, these artists have—with varying degrees of success—used the force of imagination to develop the 'enlarged empathy' Arendt considered necessary to become 'world citizens'. Nancy Paxton and Susan Carson examine how three noted modernist novelists—Jean Devanny, Eleanor Dark and Christina Stead—explored the relationship between 'home' and 'away'. Mary Besemeres highlights a neglected aspect of travel writing by demonstrating, with reference to works by Gillian Bouras, Sarah Turnbull and John Mateer, the complex power dynamics of 'language travel' that inhibit the traveller's ability to 'go visiting'. Finally, Sally Gray shows how artist David McDiarmid had already inhabited the transnational community of the queer diaspora in his imagination before he joined it in New

York and developed a life and an art that was both mobile and located, neither 'Australian' nor 'American'.

Other themes, not flagged by our section titles, may be traced through many of the essays in this volume. Gender shapes, and is shaped by, particular ways of connecting to the world. The worlds of intellect and authority are not inhabited exclusively by men, but perhaps men have been more inclined, historically, to understand their connection to the world through those frames. The worlds of intimacy and imagination are not inhabited exclusively by women, yet perhaps they have presented women with more opportunities to escape the demands of their local environment than have more public structures of power. Ethnicity emerges, unsurprisingly, as another key issue in the study of transnational lives. Never simple, the negotiation of new attachments and identities was particularly fraught for those coming from outside the Anglo-Saxon world, whose background was strange to the normative 'Australian' and whose right to settle, in every sense of the word, into an Australian life was more open to question and challenge.¹² The essays by Allen, Bagnall, Pybus, Ricatti and the gallery development team explore the negotiation of such cultural crossings.

Tendrils of thought, emotion and experience attached 'Australian' lives firmly to the world. Colonial and national authority have been embedded in global networks of ideas and people; a society of immigrants carries within its heart intricate and intimate attachments to loved people and places across the globe; the world of science and ideas is enmeshed in imperial and global cultures; and Australian imaginations are forged within a realm of fantasy and literature that extends far beyond national boundaries. *Transnational Ties: Australian lives in the world* offers some unexpected answers to the question of what it might mean to be 'Australian', and in so doing opens new perspectives on the nation's transnational history.

Notes

¹ Curthoys, Ann 2003, 'We've just started making national histories, and you want us to stop already?', in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the nation*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, p. 85. See also Curthoys, Ann and Lake, Marilyn (eds) 2005, *Connected Worlds: History in transnational perspective*, ANU E Press, Canberra, pp. 13–15.

² Curthoys, 'We've just started making national histories, and you want us to stop already?', p. 86.

³ Bhabha, Homi K. 1994, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 5.

⁴ Hofmeyr, Isabel 2006, 'AHR conversation: on transnational history', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 5, December, p. 1444.

⁵ Beckert, Sven 2006, 'AHR conversation: on transnational history', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 5, December, p. 1459.

⁶ Matthews, Jill Julius 2005, 'Modern nomads and national film history: the multi-continental career of J. D. Williams', in Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds) 2005, *Connected Worlds: History in transnational perspective*, ANU E Press, Canberra, p. 167.

⁷ Gregg, Robert 2003, 'Making the world safe for American history', in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the nation*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, p. 171.

⁸ Lambert, David and Lester, Alan (eds) 2006, *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial careering in the long nineteenth century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 25.

⁹ Richard White (1981, *Inventing Australia*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, p. 108) argues, for example, that just as Federation was motivated by the desire to unify and access national markets, there was a direct link between the 'nationalist credentials' and 'economic self-interest' of the professional group of writers and artists in late nineteenth-century Australia.

¹⁰ Matthews, 'Modern nomads and national film history', p. 169.

¹¹ Whitlock, Gillian 2000, *The Intimate Empire: Reading women's autobiography*, Cassell, London and New York, p. 2.

¹² See Schech, Suzanne and Haggis, Jane 2000, 'Migrancy, whiteness and the settler self in contemporary Australia', in John Docker and Gerhard Fischer, *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, University of New South Wales Press.