‘The Legend’ Fifty Years on…

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In 2008 Russel Ward’s The Australian Legend turned fifty. At the University of New England, where Ward worked for many years, an Australian Historical Association conference in September 2007 included a major focus on Ward and his work. All but two of the full-length articles published here, the editors tell us, are based on papers presented at that conference.

Clearly, Ward’s text has been enormously popular—especially for a work of history—and influential intellectually as well, even if, in more recent years, as a point of departure rather than a still accepted authority. But does this work still have anything vital to say? ‘We offer this volume’, state Bongiorno and Roberts, ‘as a reassessment of Russel Ward’s The Australian Legend [and] a provocation to the closer study of Australian historiography and intellectual history’. But more reasons for reading and thinking about Ward and his work emerge.

Russel’s son Charlie, Robin Gollan, David Kent, Jeremy Beckett, John Ryan and Alan Grocott draw on their personal recollections of Ward to evoke the generosity, passion, energy, humour and commitment to justice that they found characteristic of him. ‘Dad’, Charlie tells us, ‘saw Australia as the greatest, youngest, most precious and precarious stage on which decency and compassion might assert themselves, and all the twists and turns of our political and social history as tracks made on the long road to the full blossoming of a self-aware and self-authored nationhood’ (3). Kent observes: ‘The Australian Legend was “history from below” before anyone made the term or the approach fashionable’ (9).

Angela Woollacott sets out to ‘discuss two specific issues: one concerns Ward’s time of writing, and the other is that of locating Ward as the founder of what we might call the “Armidale school” of Australian historiography’. She argues ‘Perhaps the gender dynamics of the 1950s need to be added to those of the
1890s to explain the singular tenacity of mateship within Australian national mythology’, and traces Ward’s influence on historians Miriam Dixson, John Ferry and Alan Atkinson (28–29).

Roberts places Ward’s work on convicts in its historical context, noting ‘what distinguishes Ward from other writers up to that point is that he turned away from the customary discussion of convict character and morality … in order to understand how they reacted to the Australian environment and how that reaction shaped an outlook that permeated Australian social traditions and, much later, its literary traditions’ (54–55).

John Merritt recounts using Ward’s ‘legendary’ Australian as a yardstick by which to measure the culture of shearers and other members of the AWU, and later that of high-country graziers, the last of Paterson’s ‘men from Snowy River’. In each case, he found significant divergence from, but also overlap with, the legendary archetype Ward set out. He finds this conclusion ‘reassuring’: ‘I have always thought that Ward was onto something’ and, ‘so far as I am concerned, there has never been anything wrong with Ward’s assumption’ that ‘a fair percentage of white Australians … did want to signify to themselves, and to those among them who wished to create an antipodean Britannia, that life in Australia was going to be different’. Merritt argues, in addition: ‘I do not think there is much wrong with (Ward’s) account of how the sectional self-image subsequently won a wider currency in Australian society’ (69–70).

Lisa Featherstone ‘explores the conjunctions between bush mythologies and masculinity in late-nineteenth-century Australia, through a focus on sexuality’. Drawing on medical literature, in particular, she suggests that Australian masculinity in the period Ward wrote about ‘was not necessarily dominated by bush ideals’ (90).

Alan Atkinson concludes that Ward ‘still has a great deal to teach’, though, it seems, indirectly: ‘For all its dated idealism … the late nineteenth-century as it appeared to Ward, and also to [Vance] Palmer, still has its uses as a pivotal moment for the broad integrity of the Australian story’ (94).

Anne Coote, examining ‘the growth of national consciousness in NSW’ (106), criticises aspects of Ward’s historical account of cultural development in the colonial period and argues, interestingly, for the existence of distinctive, state-based nationalisms. Relatedly, though less rigorously, Lyndon Megarrity explores ‘the notion … which Ward briefly mentioned but did not investigate … that Queensland was the most “Australian” colony’ (123).

Ben Maddison, like Woollacott, sets out to consider the influence on Ward’s work of this historian’s own culture and society. He suggests that ‘the contemporary assimilationist context exerted a more powerful structural influence on Ward’s
Joy Damousi, in perhaps the most insightful and creative essay of the collection, notes that ‘the use of speech and language as the basis for historical argument was uncharacteristic for historians (in 1958), and some fifty years later it remains an under-explored aspect of historical research’ (155). Consciously building on Ward’s thesis she argues ‘that there was a gradual evolution of Australian language—much like that of the English language as a whole. And, like its English counterparts throughout the world, Australian English did not evolve uniformly, but changed and metamorphosed to reflect the various layers of society, the roles of men and women, and the demarcation of races (169–170)’.

Drew Cottle provides the most detailed account of the biographical, social and institutional bases of Ward’s thought and politics and tries also to explain the ‘extraordinary impact and enduring significance’ of *The Australian Legend*, through reference to it as ‘an attempt to capture a version of the Australian national character for the Left … at a time of anti-communist hysteria’ (184–185). He also suggests, however, for me a little confusingly, that this was not a populist project.

Carl Bridge’s piece on ‘Anglo-Australian Attitudes’, perhaps written for an English audience, is part memoir, part biography, part performance (‘Let us raise an imaginary glass of red to that wild colonial boy, our old mate Russel Ward—gentleman, scholar, atheist, communist—and above all, wise old bastard’ (200)), and part argument: ‘Ward’s *Australian Legend* was quintessentially an expression and product of profound Anglo-Australian attitudes’ (199). Bridge suggests, seemingly contradictorily, that while the ‘historical moment’ of these attitudes ‘has now passed … the legendary Australian (Ward) described is still indelibly at the core of our cultural DNA’ (199).

Bongiorno addresses the famous attack on Ward and his work by Humphrey McQueen, and Ward’s, and others’, responses, in a piece which draws on very interesting original research but ultimately side-steps the question of whether or not this attack was justified: ‘the growing rancour between McQueen and Ward was more about how to behave as a left-wing historian than the content of either *The Australian Legend* or *A New Britannia*’ (216). In similarly diplomatic vein, Bongiorno suggests that *The Australian Legend* should be recognised as an important work because so many subsequent scholars have felt the need to attack it.

The last word is given to McQueen, though if the editors and conference organisers were hoping for further insight into, or reflection on, his argument
with Ward, they would have been disappointed. Instead, McQueen considers building and construction workers, mainly in the nineteenth century, as Wardian ‘improvising nomads’. In a characteristically wide-ranging piece utilising obscure historical records and explicitly Marxist political economy, McQueen advances the formulation that ‘The crux of the Legend is not a divide between the city and the bush, but rather their interactions within the conflicts between wage-labour and capital’ (250).

‘Culture’, as Raymond Williams explained in his classic accounts of this idea, can refer to the ideals of a people or to the actual lived experience of them. In practice, the connections and distinctions between these ideals and activities can be difficult to determine. Ward, it seems to me, valuably identifies the ideals of a people: broadly, the common or working-class Australians of his time. As Richard White wrote in 1981, this was ‘the last great re-statement of the character of the Australian type’ (154). Ward’s explanation of the actual social and historical bases of these ideals, on the other hand, as numerous historians have noted, was, at best, limited. In particular, he failed to acknowledge the extent to which the ideals of the typical bushmen were shaped by people other than the bushmen themselves—people in the city, for instance—and by conscious and unconscious silences (about racial violence, especially) and exclusions (most obviously of women, non-whites, and homosexuals).

Arguably, however, Ward’s text remains important, and not just as a work of 1950s cultural studies, because the Australian cultural ideals he identified were in the past and remain now real potential bases for individual and social behaviour. As right-wing populists like John Howard and Les Murray have recognised, the ‘legendary’ cultural ideals and codes tend to connect with the self-understanding of many Australians and especially the predominantly white working class or ‘mainstream’.

It is instructive to remember here that Ward wrote during a time of vehement anti-communism and that, unlike many radical intellectuals of his own generation and of McQueen’s ‘new’ left, he never thought a revolution in Australia was likely. In that sense he may have been more realistic than some of his critics.

To an extent the question of whether or not there is anything of value in Ward’s text is the question of whether there is and has been anything of value in ‘mainstream’, white Australian working-class culture. And reconciling ‘old’ and ‘new’ left approaches to this question is a vital task (as Cottle notes, Ward’s detractors ‘have come from both right and left, although the former predominated before 1970, the latter afterwards’ (182)). After all, the vilification of progressive politics as ‘elitist’, so characteristic of the Howard era and the two decades of right-wing cultural politics that preceded it, was partially enabled by this distance between left and liberal academia and the cultural ‘mainstream’.
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Work Cited