

Introduction

Listening to the past

Joy Damousi and Desley Deacon

The ubiquitous sound of gun-fire on the Australian gold-fields; the silence of men in the Citroën factory outside Paris as the giant drop-hammers boomed, the milling machines screamed, the boring machines squealed and the pulleys sighed; Australian schoolchildren reciting in one nation-wide accent; Alfred Deakin's virile oratory; William Tilly's dream of a 'World English'; ideas of what was a 'legitimate' or 'pure' Australian accent; powerful speech, intimate speech and 'bad English' in American talkies—the experience and meaning of these sounds and silences have seemed, until recently, too ineffable to be captured by historians.

Historians of modernity have, until recently, focused almost exclusively on sight—when they have considered the senses at all. A major new interest, however, in the history and anthropology of the senses has begun to pay attention to the ways in which modern life has been shaped by the auditory as much as by the visual. Following the example of Alain Corbin—whose pioneering *Village Bells: Sounds and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside* (1994) argued that historians 'can no longer afford to neglect materials pertaining to auditory perception'—this new scholarship aims to capture the auditory environment of the past in order to provide new insights into historical places, events and processes. One of the most suggestive of these new scholars, Steven Connor (1997), argues, in particular, for 'the compelling importance of the auditory in the cultural, clinical and technological constitution of the modern self'.¹

This collection of essays on talking and listening in the age of modernity takes up the challenge thrown out by this new scholarship by bringing together some of the major scholars of the history of the auditory in Australia. In taking as its focus talking and listening, it follows the dicta of two of Australia's pioneering historians in this new field. Alan Atkinson, in his 2002 book *The Commonwealth of Speech*, argues that talk needs to be understood better as a hidden foundation of human history. 'Speech,' he points out, 'continues, resilient, unpredictable, always strangely powerful, the medium at the heart of human affairs.' Historians, therefore, 'need to make an effort to think of the past as abuzz with voices'—like those on board the *Bounty*, evoked by Greg Denning in *Mr Bligh's Bad Language*—'fill[ing] their territory with chatter.' Joy Damousi, in her 2005 book, *Freud in the Antipodes: A Cultural History of Psychoanalysis in Australia*, makes a similar argument for listening. 'There was a move,' she observes, 'from learning

about the world by looking...to interpreting one's surroundings by listening to the radio, conversing on the telephone and going to the cinema, from the 1920s onwards.' She notes, 'While historians and other social theorists have focused primarily on the visual and its influence in the construction of identity, little attention has been given to the auditory in understanding the "modern" notion of the self.'²

The essays gathered together in this volume consider the influence of the auditory in the formation of individual and collective subjectivities; the importance of speech to understandings of individual and collective endeavours; the centrality of voice in marking and eliding difference and in struggles for power; and the significance of radio and film in the formation of modern cultural identities.

In Part I of this collection, Diane Collins and James Donald examine two periods whose intensity of change is linked to aural experience as much as to visual: the 'Roaring Twenties' and what Collins calls 'the roaring decade' of the 1850s Australian gold-fields. Both explore 'aural time': the conceptualisation and periodising of history according, not merely to visual and material changes reflected in documents and artefacts, but to the experience of sound. Collins' chapter argues that there are multiple modernities and that the roar of the gold-fields in 1850s Australia was linked to new material environments and new behaviours in a rupture as significant as that of 1920s Paris and London. Donald examines those 1920s sound-scapes—along with those of Berlin and Vienna—identifying the new sounds associated with electricity, the combustion engine and media and communication technologies such as the telephone, the gramophone, the radio and the cinema. He shows how sound began to be thought about in new ways—as something to be measured, managed and abated through new methods of building, new regulatory measures and new techniques of mechanical reproduction—and how a new aesthetic of sound emerged in the novels, poetry and operas of the period.

In Part II, Alan Atkinson demonstrates the importance of uniform speech training in schools in the Australian colonies in the 1870s and 1880s in moulding 'a nation of ready public speakers' who could form a community of truly democratic people. The continental nationalism that resulted in federation of the colonies in 1901 was, he argued, considered to be manifest in the speech of the people. Marilyn Lake, in turn, examines the brilliant oratory of one of those 'ready public speakers', Alfred Deakin—arguing that, in the world of public men, oratory was the measure of manhood, it was a key weapon in Deakin's political battle for the new nation's independence and central to his demand for British recognition of the rights and equality of Australian manhood.

Peter Kirkpatrick examines the rise and fall of recitation in Australia, not as a folkloric remnant, but as the product of modern technologies of speech and performance. He revisits the broader cultural context in which recitation

flourished, outlining three factors which led to its popularity: the growth and spread of elocution, the institutionalisation of recitation in schools, and its professionalisation as a performance art. The chapter offers a glimpse into one of the lost arts of everyday life, but also sheds new light on some of the ways in which poetry was mobilised by modern popular culture.

The essays in Part III by Desley Deacon and Bruce Moore examine new chapters in the history of the Australian accent. Bruce Moore argues that the nineteenth-century Australian accent developed from a process of the levelling and excision of obvious dialectal features, resulting in what commentators called a 'pure' accent—that is, one not marked by provincialisms. Yet, he notes, from the late 1880s, a prescriptive attitude towards Australian vowels and diphthongs developed in which they were being judged against an 'ideal' or 'standard' pronunciation. By the first half of the twentieth century, the Australian accent was regarded as impure, ugly and substandard. Moore attributes this change in attitude to the increasing popularity of elocution and phonics, the exponents of which saw 'purity' as an ideal pronunciation rather than a non-regional one. He argues that 'cultivated' Australian and 'broad' Australian developed in the first half of the twentieth century as extremes on either side of the general Australian of the nineteenth century. Since the 1970s, he points out, the former has lost its power, and broad Australian is rarely heard. Most Australians now speak general Australian—something very similar, Moore argues, to the foundation accent of the 1820s.

Desley Deacon places the search for an ideal English pronunciation in a transnational context when she investigates the strange history of 'World English' or 'Good American Speech' through the story of William Tilly, the Australian schoolteacher who taught speech and phonetics to a generation of New York actors and teachers from his base at Columbia University, from 1918 to 1935. Drawing on the weekly column of Tilly's student Windsor Daggett in *Billboard* from 1922 to 1925, Daggett's articles in the influential *Theatre Arts Monthly* during the 1920s, and the activities of other evangelising students throughout the United States, Deacon notes the similarity of 'World English' to what Bruce Moore calls 'Cultivated Australian' and places the success of Tilly's work in the context of ideals of internationalism of the period.

Examining discussions about Australian speech from the 1920s to the early 1940s, Joy Damousi notes the perceived relationship between speech and the formation of the nation. She demonstrates the ways in which a preoccupation with the Australian accent became a means of exploring Australianness, how popular discussion was at first embedded firmly in the notion of Australia as part of the British Empire, which was replaced gradually with pride in the development of a distinctive Australian sound. Speech was also perceived as an indicator of

moral worth at the collective and the individual level, and discussions about accents led invariably to considerations of the Australian national character.

Bruce Johnson reminds us of the role of the voice in defining territory and identity—of the connection between voice and power. He offers a deep historical perspective on the way that the relationship between voice and power has changed, arguing that the voice's challenge to print as a major site of power is one of the keys to understanding modernity. Until the late nineteenth century, he argues, the radius of vocalised space was limited by the presence of the human body. From the 1870s, however, this limitation was transcended by the invention of sound recording and related technologies. These permitted a spatial expansion that ultimately became global and, through sound-storage systems, also produced a temporal enlargement. Johnson points out that the small voice—the local and the domestic voice—now clamours for transnational public space; yet it can be turned against its source through various sound-mixing technologies. Illustrating this modern ambiguity with the local example of the politician Pauline Hanson, he shows how sound technology enabled her rise to power, but also helped undermine that power through the spoof *Pauline Pantsdown*, which remixed her own voice to subvert everything she stood for.

The final part of the collection examines the technologies of radio and film and the history of sound and technology. Bridget Griffen-Foley explores the complexities of commercial radio's response to modernity during the interwar years. The quintessence of modernity, radio had the capacity to deny its own status as a mass medium. Griffen-Foley demonstrates how early Australian radio blended the rhetoric of modernity with compensatory varieties of 'personal' contact, with 'uncles', 'aunts' and 'friends'—people 'just like you and me'—carefully ministering to their audiences. Reaching out to their listeners by considering their problems, leading them in community singing concerts, establishing social and charitable clubs and appearing at special events, radio stations transformed themselves self-consciously from a modern technological mass medium into a unifying, intimate and highly personalised family companion.

Brian Yecies completes the volume by analysing local Australian responses to the coming of sound to the cinema in the late 1920s and early 1930s. He shows how the global transition to sound was more local than previously thought, challenging conventional assumptions about global and local business interests in the cinema industry. Tracing how the introduction of sound was influenced and shaped by a diverse group of Australians, he demonstrates how they were caught between the promise of global modernity, collusion and the threat to national identity. Yecies shows how local firms did innovate, adopt, thrive and survive—not by defeating the Americans but by assimilating them, by making them Australian rather than shaping Australian cinema in a solely American way. Whether or not they realised it, Yecies argues, they were agents of

modernity, mediating complex social, cultural and technological changes in Australia.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Corbin, Alain 1998, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-Century French Countryside*, trans. by Martin Thom, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. xi–xii; Connor, Steven 1997, 'The Modern Auditory I', in R. Porter (ed.), *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 203–23, esp. p. 219. For the primacy of sight see Jay, Martin 1993, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley; Levin, Michael (ed.) 1993, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, University of California Press, Berkeley; and Ong, Walter J. 1991, 'The Shifting Sensorium', in D. Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, pp. 47–60. For the new anthropology and history of the senses, see Feld, Steve 1982, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia and Feld, Steve with Keith H. Basso (eds) 1996, *Senses of Place*, School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, NM; Classen, Constance 1993, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*, Routledge, London; Kahn, Douglas 1999, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, MIT Press, Cambridge and Kahn, Douglas 2000, 'Sound awake', *Australian Review of Books*, July, pp. 21–2; Douglas, Susan 1999, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*, Times Books, New York; Smith, Mark M. 2001, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, Chapel Hill and Smith, Mark M. 2003, 'Making sense of social history', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 37 no. 1, pp. 165–86; Thompson, Emily 2002, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933*, MIT Press Cambridge. Australian historians Shane White and Graham White recently made a distinguished contribution to this literature with *The Sounds of Slavery*, The Beacon Press, Boston (2005).
- ² Atkinson, Alan 2002, *The Commonwealth of Speech: An Argument about Australia's Past, Present and Future*, Australian Scholarly Press, Melbourne, pp. xii, xvii; Damousi, Joy 2005, *Freud in the Antipodes: A Cultural History of Psychoanalysis in Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, p. 4.