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Encountering Asia: an historical overview

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Australian responses to Asia, both as a generic entity and as specific countries and cultures, are more richly layered and extend further into our past than is generally appreciated. From the late 19th century, Asia has loomed large in Australian consciousness, giving rise to the view that Australia's future – for good or ill – would be increasingly influenced by events in the region. It is a history that deserves to be better known.¹

It is fair to generalise that speculations about Australia's future have often been highly coloured and dramatic. At one extreme the nation is in dire peril. Invasion narratives typically picture a sprinkling of white Australians huddled in their coastal cities facing huge and restive Asian populations to their north. According to this narrative, an awakening Asia threatened Australia's very existence as a white nation. Invasive Asia was considered capable of obliterating white Australia altogether, turning the European attempt to colonise the Australian continent from a rousing story of Anglo Saxon achievement into a melancholy tale of failed settlement. This Asia was an irreconcilably alien force capable of ending Australia's prospects as a white nation.

The first fully developed invasion narrative – *White or Yellow? A Story of the Race-War of AD 1908* – was serialised in the Queensland labour paper, the *Boomerang*, in 1888. The author, William Lane, was a powerful figure in the labour movement who would later lead a band of followers to establish a utopian community in Paraguay. In Lane's story, as in subsequent invasion narratives, the threat from the north was used as an opportunity to assess the strengths and limitations of the emerging Australian nation. There is no question that Lane feared the Chinese. He was convinced that their tottering empire might release a destructive tidal wave of population that would soon turn Europeans into an embattled minority in Australia. But it is also clear that by positing an Asian threat, Lane created an opportunity to weigh up the forces that might guarantee national strength. Lane was convinced that Britain and its imperialist supporters in Australia would be quite happy to cut a deal allowing greater access to Asian markets for British products in exchange for freer Asian access to Australia's invitingly empty spaces. Lane's serial was a story of betrayal and resistance in which Queensland's ruling elite colluded with wealthy Chinese to turn Australia into a miscegenated nation. This dastardly plan is eventually defeated, after considerable bloodshed and mayhem, by the largely republican labour movement.

This may not appear to fit the description of an encounter with Asia, but it is clear that an idea of Asia, or in this instance China, was central to Lane's attempt to conceptualise Australia's future. Lane's Australia was a moral and physical space that would cease to be Australian if there were any attempt to accommodate Asia's territorial ambitions. In Lane's story, Asia became the 'indispensable enemy' that helped bring Australia's scattered communities together as a nation.² Lane wanted Australians to unite as custodians of the last continent available for the development of the European race. In this way, the future of the Australian nation was linked directly to the global fortunes of the white races.

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It might be instructive to see speculative writings about Asian invasion from the late 19th century as both a literal commentary on the vulnerability of 'empty' Australia and as the expression of a deeper unease at the growing significance attaching to Asian affairs. From an Australian perspective it was hard to accept orientalist constructions of Asia as a series of inert civilisations that had no choice but to submit to European powers. Many Australian commentators saw dynamic energies and destructive forces at work in Asia. Instead of submissive populations and downcast eyes, they saw a stirring of territorial ambitions and a new watchfulness. Some, Lane among them, blamed European powers, and particularly Britain, for stirring Asia into action.

One of the most powerful commentaries on Asia's likely role in world affairs was C.H. Pearson's *National Life and Character: A Forecast*, published in 1893.³ Pearson was an Oxford-educated historian who went on to become a minister for education in Victoria and a prominent educationist. His forecast covered a range of topics, prominent among them the growing influence of Asia. Pearson saw China becoming a major power. Moreover, he maintained that Asia's influence would inevitably continue to expand through the 20th century, just as Europe's influence would recede. The world's future would become increasingly Asian. One of the consequences of the changing power relationship between Europe and Asia, as Pearson saw it, was a dramatic increase in Australia's strategic importance: it was the last continent which gave the white races an unimpeded opportunity to expand their numbers and renew their energies.

In a long and laudatory review of Pearson's book, the influential British journal *The Athenaeum* commented on how different the world looked when viewed from Melbourne rather than London or Paris. In Pearson's forecast: 'Europe loses altogether the precedence it has always enjoyed. It appears here not only as the smallest, but as the least important continent, nor is it allowed even that kind of theoretical precedence which might come from historical greatness'.⁴ When viewed from an Australian perspective, Asia loomed very large indeed, whereas Europe shrank appreciably in size and cultural power. It followed from Pearson's analysis that Australians were positioned to see the rise of Asia more clearly and be exposed to Asian influences more directly than was the case for any other European nation. In one of the most influential books of the decade, Pearson had joined the future of populous Asia with that of 'empty' Australia.

The idea that generic Asia imposed a threat to Australia's very existence as a nation has a history that runs down to the present. It is also apparent that such a threat can be readily invoked to promote favoured causes: increased defence spending, accelerated immigration, improved productivity, and increased birth-rate, northern development, conscription and so on. It is equally true that the idea of a threat from the north could be used to control elements in the population who were under suspicion as either actively sympathetic to Asian culture and causes or insufficiently antagonistic to them. A plausible Asian enemy, well maintained and regularly modernised, was a handy disciplinary device.

While the threat posed by Asia's immense populations was a powerful concern, and one that elected officials listened to very attentively, there were certainly counter arguments that put Australia's proximity to Asia in a more positive light. In the 19th century, educated Australians were well aware of the cultural and philosophical debt that the West owed to the East. Australia's first great travel book on Asia – *The Australian Abroad on Main Routes Round the World* – was published in 1880 to considerable acclaim.⁵ Its author, the well-read and witty James Hingston, though a firm British imperialist, left his readers in no doubt that Asia had made an overwhelmingly large contribution to spiritual knowledge. Hingston visited India and China, knowing them to be profound civilisations. He considered a knowledge of Asia one of the marks on an educated person.

Japan was a revelation. At every turn Hingston found evidence of order, refinement and unsurpassed craftsmanship. By 1879, the year of Hingston's visit, Japanese aesthetics had already had a profound impact on the West, summed up in the newly coined term, 'Japonisme'. In fashionable circles Japanese fabrics, furnishings and fans had become an unmistakable sign of good taste and modernity. While Hingston drew a very flattering parallel between the creative energies of modern Japan and the dazzling achievements of the Elizabethan age, he was not alone in doing so. The remarkable Japanese were commonly thought of as the new Elizabethans.

Alfred Deakin, Prime Minister on three occasions before the First World War, shared Hingston's interest in Asian cultures, particularly the religions of India. In the 1880s, Deakin had a brief dalliance with Theosophy, a modern religion which drew heavily upon Indian traditions in its search for a new spiritual order. Theosophy had a significant following in Australia, suggesting an interest in Asian cultures that extended beyond 'yellow peril' anxieties.⁶ Though Deakin soon left the movement, he leapt at the chance to visit India in 1890 to report on irrigation schemes for the *Age* newspaper. He had long been enthralled by India and subscribed to the argument that 'all the most vital elements of our knowledge ... come to us from the East'.⁷ Deakin's fascination with India's architectural heritage, along with his considerable knowledge of the subject, is apparent in his articles on India, published in 1893 as *Temple and Tomb in India*.⁸

Australia's proximity to Asia led Deakin to some surprising observations. He felt that Australians might develop a more accurate sense of their place in the world if they learned to think of Australia as 'Southern Asia'. He looked forward to a time when student exchanges would enrich cultural interaction between Australia and India, and believed that Australia was well placed to develop its own community of Indianist scholars. Such views were consistent with the idea that proximity to Asia gave Australia both an obligation and a special opportunity to study Asia's cultural heritage and, in due course, interpret Asia to the West, an idea also to be found in Pearson's *National Life and Character*. Where Deakin speculated on the possibilities for Asianist scholarship in Australia, Pearson was rather more focused on Australians developing a special interest in the geo-politics of race and race

migration. Either way, 'Asia' was beginning to emerge as an object of particular interest for Australians. Both writers anticipated that interpreting Asia would pose a considerable intellectual challenge for Australians.

The creation of new markets for Australian products was one aspect of the growing interaction Deakin had wanted to see between Australia and India. Where annihilating Asia stood at one extreme in the debate over Australia's Asian future, the 'illimitable' markets of the East formed another. Exaggerated fears were often countered by equally exaggerated talk of immense markets. Trade enthusiasts turned the vast invading armies of the north into eager consumers of Australian products. Industrialising, but resource-poor Japan was a prominent focus of their interest.⁹

The mixed motives that underpinned Australia's developing interest in Asia are very apparent in the appointment of James Murdoch to the first Chair of Oriental Studies at Sydney University in 1917.¹⁰ Murdoch was a remarkable figure. After winning high academic honours and a reputation as a brilliant linguist at Aberdeen University, he made his way to a teaching position in Queensland in the 1880s. Murdoch encountered William Lane and was sufficiently tempted by the utopian experiment in Paraguay to join Lane's community. He left very quickly, making his way to Japan. He soon began a massive history of Japan, learning modern and ancient Japanese in order to gain direct access to primary sources. Murdoch's three-volume work was considered the definitive history for many years and remains in print to this day.

Murdoch was appointed to Sydney University for a mixture of commercial and strategic reasons. From the early 1900s, the New South Wales trade commissioner in Japan, J.B. Suttor (another fascinating figure), urged the creation of a Chair of Oriental Studies in order to give Australian students an opportunity to study Asian cultures. At around the same time, a prominent business figure J. Currie Elles maintained that Australia's location in Asia demanded an education system that delivered a knowledge of Asian markets, respect for Asian cultures and familiarity with the major languages of the region. These cultural and commercial arguments were strengthened by the growing unease in Australia over Japan's Pacific future. Murdoch's knowledge of Japanese history and impressive language skills ensured his appointment.¹¹

From the First World War, the case for a closer analysis of what was generally referred to as Pacific Affairs intensified. In December 1918, the Minister for Home and Territories urged the Parliamentary Library to pay 'special attention' to its 'Far Eastern Section'. The minister predicted 'a considerable increase in the volume of trade' with Japan, China and India, which he anticipated would lead to closer ties with the region. There is a recognition here that knowledge of the region required a systematic approach to the creation of research materials on Asia.¹²

In the mid-1920s, a new non-government body, the Institute of Pacific Relations, held the first of many international conferences on issues affecting the Pacific. The

endnotes

- 1 This article draws upon the author's recently published book, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia, 1850-1939*, St Lucia, Queensland, 1999.
- 2 For the concept of the 'indispensable enemy' see Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*, Berkeley, 1971.
- 3 C.H. Pearson. *National Life and Character: A Forecast*, London, 1893. For Pearson's biography see John Tregenza, *Professor of Democracy: The Life of Charles Henry Pearson, 1830-1894*, Oxford Don and Australian Radical, London, 1968.
- 4 *The Athenaeum*, 4 March 1893, pp. 273-274.
- 5 James Hingston. *The Australian Abroad on Branches from Main Routes Round the World*, London, 2 vols, 1880.
- 6 Jill Roe. *Beyond Belief: Theosophy in Australia, 1879-1939*, Sydney, 1986.
- 7 Alfred Deakin. *Temple and Tomb in India*, Melbourne, 1879, p. 2.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 See *Anxious Nation*, op. cit., chapter 6, 'Trade with the East'. For a history of trade with Asia see Sandra Tweedie, *Trading Partners: Australia and Asia 1790-1993*, Sydney, 1994.
- 10 D.C.S. Sissons. 'Murdoch, James (1856-1921)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10, Melbourne, 1986.
- 11 For profiles of Suttor and Elles see *Anxious Nation*, op. cit.
- 12 Patrick McMahon Glynn to Mr Elliott Johnson, Chairman of the Library Committee, Parliament House, Melbourne, 13 December 1918, National Library of Australia. I owe this reference to Graeme Powell, Manuscript Librarian, National Library.
- 13 For the growth of Pacific consciousness in the inter-war years see *Anxious Nation*, op. cit., chapter 16, 'Pacific Citizens'. See also Neville Meaney, *Fears and Phobias: E. L. Piesse and the Problem of Japan: 1930-39*, Canberra, 1996.
- 14 I. Clunies Ross (ed.). *Australia and the Far East: Diplomatic and Trade Relations*, Sydney, 1955.
- 15 Sir Robert Garran. 'A School of Oriental Studies', *Austral-Asiatic Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 6, 1939.
- 16 George H. Johnston. *Journey Through Tomorrow*, Melbourne, 1946; Robert J. Gilmore and Denise Warner (eds), *Near North: Australia and a Thousand Million Neighbours*, Sydney, 1948.
- 17 John Legge. 'Asian Studies: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction', in David Walker (ed.), 'Australian Perceptions of Asia', *Australian Cultural History*, no. 9, 1990.
- 18 For an account of the development of Asian Collections in the National Library of Australia see David Walker, 'Studying the Neighbours: the Asian Collections', in Peter Cochrane (ed.), *Conversing with a Nation: The Treasures of the National Library*, Canberra, 2001 (forthcoming).

Institute sought to conceptualise the Pacific as a community of nations with shared interests in trade, migration, cultural exchange and the management of conflict. Australians were active in the Institute and made regular contributions through the inter-war years to its journal *Pacific Affairs*.

At the height of the Institute's influence in the 1930s, Australian interest in Asia had become appreciably stronger. Trade was again an important consideration. Japan had become a major purchaser of Australian wool, a critical development in a primary-producing nation devastated by the great depression. In 1932, two separate reports on trade with the East urged the Commonwealth government to promote closer ties with the region. Australia's first diplomatic mission to the East, led by Sir John Latham, soon followed in 1934, along with the appointment of trade commissioners to Batavia, Shanghai and Tokyo.¹³ Recognising these developments, the Australian Institute of International Affairs sponsored a study of Australia's relationship with Asia. Edited by Ian Clunies Ross, *Australia and the Far east: Diplomatic and Trade Relations*, dry though it may sound, is a fascinating landmark in the literature on Australia's interactions with Asia.¹⁴ Its publication also demonstrated that Australia could now claim a home-grown body of Asian expertise.

Among the contributors was Sir Robert Garran, constitutional lawyer, historian of federation and, for just over three decades, permanent head of the public service. Garran played a vital role in the creation of the Australian National University and argued that Asian and Pacific studies should form an indispensable part of its research program. Writing for the *Austral-Asiatic Bulletin* in 1939 (another sign of the growing interest in Asian affairs), Garran observed that the countries of Asia were 'our nearest neighbours, and we are clearly destined to have close ties with them - diplomatically, commercially, and humanly. We have the opportunity, and the duty, of making a closer study of the Orient'. Along with a National University, Garran wanted Canberra to have a National Library with major Asian collections.¹⁵

Japan's rapid advance through Southeast Asia, following the bombing of Pearl Harbour and the accelerating decolonisation of Asia in the aftermath of the Second World War, intensified calls for a closer study of Asia. The dashing young correspondent George Johnston declared in 1947 that Asia was 'the continent of tomorrow'. His book on Asia came out just ahead of an impressive collection of essays titled *Near North: Australia and a Thousand Million Neighbours*.¹⁶ And there was a new interest in Asian Studies programs in Australian universities and in building research collections to support them.¹⁷ In 1947, the newly appointed and internationally-minded National Librarian, Harold White, encouraged no doubt by his Canberra neighbour, Robert Garran, began the process of creating major Asian collections for the National Library. Those collections, now over 50 years in the making, are themselves a vital element in both our cultural heritage and in Australia's engagement with Asia.¹⁸