INTRODUCTION

In the European imagination, Australia has for a long time seemed a place of fantasy, a land full of natural curiosities, a living museum of the bizarre and miraculous where the natural order is inverted. In 1864 Jules Verne described it as a world upside down:

> where every year the trees lose their bark instead of their leaves; where leaves present their profile to the sun and not their face, and where trees give no shade; … where the kangaroo bounds along on uneven paws; where sheep have the heads of pigs; where foxes fly from tree to tree; where swans are black; where rats make nests … ; a bizarre land if ever there was one, defying logic, a country of unnatural paradoxes! … a sort of parody of universal laws, or rather a challenge to them thrust in the face of the rest of the world![1]

Seen through European eyes, Australia's originality was defined only by its departure from European norms. As the nineteenth century proceeded, the idea of Australia as a reverse utopia (sometimes a dystopia) also shaped the European vision of its social composition. In this land of opportunity the common man made a fortune and lorded it over those who were gentle by birth. In the words of one obscure novelist, 'This is the Anti-podes, you know. Everything is upside down.'[2] Such habits of speech tended to obscure the individuality of Australia's historical trajectory.

In the mid-nineteenth century, however, the six Australian colonies (New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia) had obtained a certain degree of political autonomy. As the colonies moved towards independence, a more complex relationship between the metropolis and the periphery emerged. In 1901, another landmark was reached when the colonies 'federated', to become a single Australian Commonwealth, with Canberra – eventually – as the national capital. Then Australian troops, defending the solidarity of the British Empire, introduced Australia into the international arena, first in the Boer War (South African War) and then in World War I. The disastrous Gallipoli landing in the Dardanelles in 1915, where a quarter of allied casualties were Australian, became a powerful foundation myth for the Australian nation. According to one popular version of this myth, the virile heroism of the Australian soldier was betrayed by British arrogance and incompetence. Anzac Day (the acronym for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps involved at Gallipoli), celebrated on 25 April, remains an important, if contested, national festival to the present day.

Like the armed forces of Anzac, Australian historiography was dominated by imperial influences during the first half of the twentieth century. The history of Britain, its empire and the evolution of its parliamentary constitution formed the basis of history taught in the school curriculum. Even when the historical discipline in Australia became more professionalised, it still remained profoundly influenced by the English training of its practitioners and by the context of the empire. Until 1927, no year-long university courses in Australian history were offered anywhere. Only in 1947 was the first doctorate awarded for work in the field of national history. By 1973, although Australian universities employed over 400 full-time historians, many of them had been recruited from Britain in the 1950s.[3]

In spite of this, the main questions which twentieth-century Australian historians were asking involved a search for a specific national identity. In this respect, the decade of the 1890s was once regarded as a formative period, in which a certain idea of Australianness emerged. This sense of identity was rooted in a democratic egalitarianism, associated with the sheep-shearers and small farmers of rural Australia. Pioneer values were stressed, along with the resourcefulness, determination and good humour of the bushman. These masculine virtues of the 'bush' and the outback, celebrated by novelists and balladeers, came to be defined as specifically Australian. Australian radicalism was preferred to the politics of rich Anglophile settlers, and the 'natural' qualities of the bush seemed superior to the more cosmopolitan sophistication of city life. This democratic version of Australian nationalism in the late nineteenth century inspired the first attempts to decolonise Australian history-writing. The labour movement was one beneficiary of this development. Reinforced, like the historiography of the labour movement itself, by anti-British traditions derived from the descendants of Irish Catholic immigrants, it developed an image of a radical, nationalist Australia.

In the last 40 years, this orthodox view of Australian history has more or less disintegrated. Two crucial events contributed to the radicalisation of a whole generation of Australian historians. The first was the opposition to the Vietnam War, in which 50 000 Australian troops were engaged between 1965 and 1972. The second was the political and constitutional crisis of 1975, when the Labor prime minister, Gough Whitlam, was removed from office by the governor-general (the representative of the British crown) even though his government had a majority in the lower house. Whitlam, for many an inspiring and imposing figure, led the first Labor government since 1949. He had recalled Australian troops from Vietnam, and his government represented hope for social change and for more positive relations with Asia.

The Vietnam War and the dismissal of Whitlam took place within a rapidly changing society. The acceleration of European immigration after World War II, the heightened anxieties of the Cold War, and the impact of international civil rights movements shaped a generation of historians who were further radicalised by these internal political controversies. They became in consequence more alert to social issues, more aware of the subordination of Australia to Britain and later the United States, and more sensitive to the fate of ethnic minorities and other groups formerly excluded from Australian history-writing. Historiography became more open, more aware of divisions and conflicts in the national past, and more sceptical of consensual mythologies – like those which were trumpeted in 1988 during the commemoration of the bicentenary of white Australia.

Today the notion of progressive and egalitarian nationalism poses serious problems. In the late nineteenth century, it had racist and xenophobic overtones, just as expressions of European nationalisms did in the same era. As for the myth of the bush, there was always something paradoxical about the longing for a rural identity elaborated by one of the most urbanised societies on the planet. Furthermore, the nationalist myth – increasingly owned by the political right – was socially exclusive to a degree now considered by many to be inadmissible. It either obscured the Aboriginal presence, while denying the fact of black resistance to white colonisation, or else stifled it in paternalist condescension. And it was a specifically masculine myth, shaped by male values which left little space in the narrative for women. It became clear that there was a dimension missing from the history of Australian identity: the dimension of gender relations.

In building on this *prise de conscience*, Australian historiography has absorbed the intellectual currents and influences which have enriched the historical discipline worldwide. Feminist historiography, for example, has many notable representatives in the Australian scholarly community. They look to British and North American rather than to European models, but not slavishly so, since what applies in these contexts is not necessarily easily exportable to the Australian situation.[4] The 'linguistic turn' has helped to change the way Australian historiography analyses the discourses of race and gender difference.[5] The recent popularity of studies in history and memory also echoes international developments and often pays lip-service to the work of Pierre Nora.[6] These international influences provide ammunition for questioning and undermining the old certainties of progressive, nationalist historiography. They will be evident to any reader of the main journals publishing Australian history today: *Labour History*, published in Sydney, whose scope is much wider than its title suggests; and *Australian Historical Studies*, published in Melbourne. *History Australia*, the newly renovated journal of the Australian Historical Association, will further contribute to national history debates.

In connecting with international intellectual life, however, Australian history-writing does not simply mirror foreign fashions. It has some very distinctive problems and issues to confront, as the contributions to this volume are designed to demonstrate. Foremost among these is the Aboriginal question, which now comprises some highly politicised reflections on the whole process of colonisation, frontier violence and dispossession. Echoes of this debate are heard loud and clear in chapters by Anna Haebich and Alison Holland. The success of historians throughout the 1980s and 1990s in drawing attention to the destructive impact of colonisation has generated an increasingly virulent conservative backlash in the past decade. In 1993, distinguished historian Geoffrey Blainey drew up a 'balance sheet' of what had been good and bad in 'our history'. He coined the phrase 'black armband' history to designate the 'gloomy' view of the past, which he believed had come to dominate historical interpretation. He called for a more balanced judgment in which the 'lamentable' treatment of Aborigines was outweighed by the success story of colonisation. A few years later Keith Windschuttle went further, casting doubt on the story of dispossession itself and claiming that accounts of massacres of Aboriginal people had been 'fabricated' by Australian historians in the grip of an academic orthodoxy. The implications of this controversy spread far beyond the reach of academic history, and have been played out in a highly publicised, though highly simplified, media debate. The stakes are high, with the Right perceiving and seizing an opportunity to replace a politics of 'reconciliation' between black and white with a reassertion of the integrity of a proud and highly nationalist tradition.[7]