

## **Richard White's Inventing Australia: revisiting the invention forty years later**

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## Richard White's *Inventing Australia*: revisiting the invention forty years later

On the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of Richard White's germinal text, *Inventing Australia*, this article presents a cultural history of the book, with particular attention to its influence on the fields of cultural history and Australian studies. Influenced by poststructuralist theory, White's book has prompted generations of scholars and students to critically examine the ways in which the Australian nation is 'invented' and the particular role of cultural power brokers in this process. Although White identifies historians as playing a particular role in the process of inventing the nation, it is striking to the contemporary reader how little he ultimately engaged with this observation in the text. The article compares White's approach to understanding the idea of the Australian nation and Russel Ward's exploration of Australian character in *The Australian Legend*, and considers the important work performed by Catriona Elder's extension of White's ideas in *Being Australian*. Ultimately, White's book remains an important touchstone not just in terms of understanding the invention of Australia, but for analysing the role we play as scholars in this.

Keywords: nation; Australian studies; cultural history

I found my copy of Richard White's *Inventing Australia* on the Australian history table at a Lifeline Bookfest in Brisbane in 2014.<sup>1</sup> I launched upon it – it was a bargain an Australian studies scholar could not overlook. *Inventing Australia* traced the history of the idea of Australia from initial imaginings of 'terra australis incognita' to a modern Australia of Holden cars on the eve of its Bicentenary of European invasion and occupation. The previous owner of my copy of *Inventing Australia* was presumably a student of Australian history or Australian studies somewhere, once upon a time, who

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<sup>1</sup> For international readers, this is a large second-hand book sale held by a charity organisation, Lifeline.

had been assigned the book, just as I had assigned excerpts to students. They took care of the book but left their mark on it in the form of passages underlined in pencil, although no tantalising marginalia beyond ‘Infl on ideas’ written in cursive under the title of the first chapter, ‘Terra Australis Incognita’. ‘[T]hey are all intellectual constructs’ is the first phrase my mysterious predecessor underlines, ‘artificially imposed upon a diverse landscape and population, and a variety of untidy social relationships, attitudes and emotions.’<sup>2</sup> ‘They’ are national identities. White’s proclamation that these are invented goes without underlining. This may be because, as Graeme Turner observed in a 1983 review, the book’s ‘main benefit lies in its title’.<sup>3</sup>

Published in 1981, White’s *Inventing Australia* is amongst the germinal texts of the new field of Australian studies that emerged as the bastard child of history, literature, and cultural studies in the 1970s. According to Stephen Alomes, Australian studies emerged as a result of a ‘new nationalist response to a colonial and provincial history’ and ‘legitimate self-awareness’ in an era of increasing internationalisation.<sup>4</sup> Although located within the field of history, and cultural history more specifically, White’s book is an exemplar of this nascent moment of Australian studies as it sought to

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<sup>2</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980*, (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), viii.

<sup>3</sup> Graeme Turner, “‘Australian Inventions’”: Review of *Inventing Australia* and two other publications’, *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* 1, no. 1 (May 1983), 120. Available online at: <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/readingroom/serial/ajcs/1.1/Turner2.html>

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Alomes, ‘The Beginnings, Characteristics and Futures of Australian Studies’, in *Thinking Australian Studies: Teaching Across Cultures*, edited by David Carter, Kate Darian-Smith and Gus Worby (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2004), 8-9.

provide ‘the history of a national obsession,’<sup>5</sup> which is perhaps the most apt description Australian studies – the critical evaluation of the obsession with what ‘Australia’ is and what it means by scholars who also participate in the obsession through this very act of evaluation.

Drawing upon a rich array of primary sources, *Inventing Australia* also exemplifies the method of cultural history that utilises culture as an *approach to* history, rather than as a *subject for* history, as later delineated by White in collaboration with Hsu-Ming Teo.<sup>6</sup> We can see this approach to history played out in White’s other works, such as his examination of Australian travellers’ cooees as a nationalist performance.<sup>7</sup> Like *Inventing Australia*, it exemplifies what Teo and White describe as the late twentieth century culturalist approach in which culture is seen as ‘the production and exchange of meanings’.<sup>8</sup> However, this exchange of meanings in *Inventing Australia* is arguably limited. Although White occasionally draws upon views of Australia from the United Kingdom and the United States, it risks being too inward looking. As Ann Curthoys observes in her advocacy of increased transnationalist rather than nationalist or imperialist approach to cultural history, ‘For modern Australians, the desire to look outward, to connect, cannot be confined to the British world and its former

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<sup>5</sup> White, *Inventing Australia*, viii.

<sup>6</sup> Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White, ‘Introduction’, in *Cultural History in Australia*, edited by Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Richard White, ‘Cooees Across the Strand: Australian Travellers in London and the Performance of National Identity’, *Australian Historical Studies* 32, no. 116 (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Teo and White, ‘Introduction’, 3.

manifestations as Empire and Commonwealth.’<sup>9</sup> While this might be an apt criticism to consider for more recent and current historical practice, White’s book did come at a time where Australian historical scholarship was arguably necessarily inward looking as it sought to understand itself in an era of cultural, political, and economic change, and increasing internationalism.

As Lyndall Ryan observes in her survey of germinal texts in Australian studies, ‘It is almost impossible to imagine today the impact this book made when it first appeared in 1981.’<sup>10</sup> It appeared on the scholarly scene when ideas of Australia were being reconsidered, reimagined, reinvented, and sometimes reinforced. It came after important national events of the 1970s, such as the Whitlam dismissal, the elevation of the High Court of Australia, and the Vietnam war, and social changes, such as multiculturalism and the women’s movement. It also came before the events of the 1980s that enabled a clear celebration of the nation, such as the 1983 America’s Cup victory and the Bicentenary in 1988. For Frank Bongiorno, ‘The 1980s began and ended in national pessimism.’<sup>11</sup> This is an interesting frame through which to view White’s *Inventing Australia* as the Australia of 1980 described in his final paragraph is one where ‘[m]ining companies and multi-national corporations will be central to the

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<sup>9</sup> Ann Curthoys, ‘Cultural History and the Nation’, in *Cultural History in Australia*, edited by Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>10</sup> Lyndall Ryan, ‘Australian Studies – The Germinal Texts: 1978-1982’, in *Thinking Australian Studies: Teaching Across Cultures*, edited by David Carter, Kate Darian-Smith and Gus Worby (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2004), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Bongiorno, *The Eighties: The Decade That Transformed Australia* (Melbourne: Schwartz Publishing, 2015), 3.

formation of national identity’, and the centre of Australian politics – the new Parliament House – has ‘the rather sad look about it of a disused quarry.’<sup>12</sup>

Forty years after the publication of White’s work, and almost as many years after the work of Benedict Anderson, the idea that nations like Australia are invented, imagined, constructed is perhaps a given rather than a radical notion. Indeed, as White pointed out in his 1997 essay revisiting his book and its critics, it already an old idea when he was writing.<sup>13</sup> In 1882, Ernest Renan spoke of the nation as a ‘soul or spiritual principle’ that is constituted by a shared past, present consent to solidarity or community, and the belief in a shared future. Importantly, Renan emphasises the nation, both as a concept and as an entity, as an idea and ‘not something eternal’, not only changeable according to the human will but reliant on this will for its very existence. In short, we will – or invent – the nation into being. One hundred years later, historians such as White and Anderson would repeat similar arguments in terms of ‘invention’ and ‘imagination’ – acknowledging, of course, that even these pivotal works derived from political philosophy and anthropology in the 1960s, such as Ernest Gellner’s assertion in *Thought and Change* (1964) that nationalism ‘invents nations where they do not exist.’<sup>14</sup>

The idea of the nation as invented was being taken up quite widely at the time of

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<sup>12</sup> White, *Inventing Australia*, 171.

<sup>13</sup> Richard White, ‘*Inventing Australia Revisited*’, in *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*, edited by Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 13.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 168.

White's book, as was the idea of invention in the field of cultural history more broadly. As Peter Burke observes, 'A list of all the historical studies since 1980 with the words "invention", "construction" or "imagination" in their titles would certainly be long and various.'<sup>15</sup> Most notably, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* – published in 1983, two years after *Inventing Australia* – argued that that nation is 'an imagined community – and imagined as inherently limited and sovereign.'<sup>16</sup> Importantly, Anderson identified the rise of print-capitalism as one factor that facilitated this process of imagining as it assists in the construction, circulation and eventual popularisation of certain ideas about the nation and its people. This can be seen in White's sources, such as newspaper, the *Bulletin*, poetry, art, and cartoons.

For all that Renan disassembled the idea of the nation for his audience, he nevertheless perpetuated a romantic idea of it. White, by contrast, does not, presenting a poststructuralist-influenced argument of how Australian national identity has been constructed by those with political, economic, and cultural power. Russel Ward's classic, *The Australian Legend*, is perhaps more aligned with Renan's ideas of nation. National character, Ward argued, 'springs largely from a people's past experiences, and it often modifies current events by colouring men's ideas of how they ought to "typically" behave.'<sup>17</sup> Although arguably written in a similar mode to Ward's book, it is White's poststructuralist assessment of power relations that delineates these two generations of historians. White belonged to the new generation of New Left academics that he describes in the final pages of *Inventing Australia* who came to critique and

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity), 79.

<sup>16</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 1.

dislodge the egalitarian mythos perpetuated by the Old Left, such as Ward. As Frank Bongiorno summarises in his analysis of the particular tensions between Ward and Humphrey McQueen, the New Left ‘criticised the Old Left for its insufficiently critical approach to nationalism and failure to take adequate account of Australian racism, capitalism and imperialism.’<sup>18</sup> White condenses his account of these intergenerational tensions into a single paragraph, but they are not only crucial to the intellectual environment in which he was writing but also signal a shift in Australian historiography more broadly, the impacts of which still affect critical practice today. Lorenzo Veracini identifies this period as the ‘pre-history’ of the history wars that dominated the 1990s and early 2000s,<sup>19</sup> while Bongiorno more candidly calls McQueen’s *A New Britannia* ‘the “daddy” of...the “black armband” school of history.’<sup>20</sup>

Despite his critical invocation of ideas of ‘mystique’ and romanticism, Ward did not seek to destabilise pre-existing notions of Australian national character and identity but rather to establish what he thought to be the more accurate historical origins of it amongst nomadic bush workers. Ward’s work was doubtless ground breaking for its time and remains a classic in Australian history, but has now become an historical

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Bongiorno, ‘Two Radical Legends: Russel Ward, Humphrey McQueen and the New Left Challenge in Australian Historiography’, *Journal of Colonial History* 10, no. 2 (2008), 202.

<sup>19</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, ‘A Prehistory of Australia’s History Wars: The Evolution of Aboriginal History during the 1970s and 1980s’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 52, no. 3 (2006).

<sup>20</sup> Bongiorno, ‘Two Radical Legends’, 203.



artefact in itself<sup>21</sup> that is subject to criticisms regarding its racism and misogyny.<sup>22</sup>

White's own contribution to this kind of history does not subvert these stereotypes of Australian national character and identity either, but it does de-stabilise the romanticism more effectively than Ward's *Legend*. When Ward states, 'Nearly all legends have some basis in historical fact. We shall find that the Australian legend has, perhaps, a more solid substratum of fact than most',<sup>23</sup> he presupposes some sort of historical truth beneath it all. Where Ward assumed a substratum of truth, White was sceptical of these foundations from the outset:

There is no "real" Australia waiting to be uncovered. A national identity is an invention. There is no point in asking whether one version of this essential Australia is truer than another because they are all intellectual constructs, neat, tidy, comprehensible – and necessarily false.<sup>24</sup>

Even if there is an essential 'truth' of a nation, its identity, and its character to be found – which White refuted – this is less important than understanding the forms and functions of the constructs that obscure it.

*Inventing Australia* was published in as part of the 'Australian Experience'

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<sup>21</sup> I believe my copy of Ward's *The Australian Legend* was also taken from the same Lifeline Bookfest as *Inventing Australia*. It is a first edition of the paperback in pristine condition, unmarked by any student's pencil but scrawled on the flyleaf with 'KSW Campbell'.

<sup>22</sup> Fred Cahir, Dan Tout and Lucinda Horricks, 'Reconsidering the Origins of the Australian Legend', *Agora* 52, no. 3 (2017), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, *Australian Legend*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> White, *Inventing Australia*, viii.

series edited by Heather Radi for George Allen & Unwin that also included such works as Richard Broome's *Aboriginal Australians* (1982), Geoffrey Bolton's *Spoils and Spoilers* (1981) and Geoffrey Sherrington's *Australia's Immigrants* (1980).<sup>25</sup> It was, White explained some years later, originally commissioned by the publisher to align with a history unit, 'To be Australian', in the New South Wales HSC curriculum.<sup>26</sup> The inclusion of this history in the HSC curriculum is identified by White as part of the 'new nationalist' movement that grew from the 1960s, flourishing in particular with the Whitlam government's support for the arts as a particular platform for articulating Australian national identity.<sup>27</sup> White's book was therefore potentially complicit in this new nationalism even as it provided a framework for critiquing it. Indeed, Veronica Sen's review for the *Canberra Times*, which is quoted on the book's cover, declared White's work to be an 'antidote to the cultural cringe'.<sup>28</sup>

As a series intended for a wider readership, the book was a success in the eyes of the reviewers also publishing for that audience, such as Sen. She praised the flair and wit of White's writing, but did note the relative absence of women in White's account, lamenting, 'It's a pity she [the Australian woman] is given only passing attention in White's book.'<sup>29</sup> Notably, Sen was the only reviewer to mention this absence, although

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<sup>25</sup> Lyndall Ryan observes that the cover artworks in the series are each by male artists, although what stands out more to me is that the series contains two Richards (White and Broome) and two Geoffreys (Sherrington and Bolton), but no Miriams or Annes, for example.

<sup>26</sup> White, 'Inventing Australia Revisited', 19.

<sup>27</sup> White, *Inventing Australia*, 169.

<sup>28</sup> Veronica Sen, 'Antidote to cringe', *Canberra Times*, January 16, 1982, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

the lack of deeper reflection around gender and diversity is quite striking in reading the book today in light of subsequent scholarship, and is certainly a marked difference from Catriona Elder's continuation of the project in spirit (discussed below). In his review of the series for the *Bulletin*, Edmund Campion identified *Inventing Australia* as the volume 'likely to attract the most attention' because 'it is about the image Australians have had of themselves.'<sup>30</sup> He found the book to be 'illuminating', particularly praising its treatment of artists of the late nineteenth century, concluding that the book 'shows that such inventions, meaningful or not, are ways in which we come to term with our experience.'<sup>31</sup> The series as a whole was heralded by Campion as a 'landmark in Australian publishing'.<sup>32</sup> International scholars were similarly impressed. Ged Martin called it an 'enviously fluent overview of perceptions of identity', describing White as 'strolling effortlessly from viewpoint to viewpoint',<sup>33</sup> while Eric Ross similarly praised White's 'beautifully restrained' wit, calling *Inventing Australia* 'impressive in its scholarship and a delight to read'.<sup>34</sup>

Not all reviewers were convinced. Patrick Morgan, writing for conservative outlet *Quadrant*, observed that 'As a "history of ideas" narrative [*Inventing Australia*] is

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<sup>30</sup> Edmund Campion, 'Four aspects of Australian history unfold', *Bulletin*, March 16, 1982, 76.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Ged Martin, '*Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* [review]', *History*, 68 (1983), 295.

<sup>34</sup> Eric Ross, 'Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* [review]', *Journal of Historical Geography* 10, no. 1 (1984), 113.

first class,' but resists what he sees as White's 'standard Marxist class analysis'<sup>35</sup> as well as its post-structuralist influences. His conclusion is that the book perpetuates 'the current orthodoxy of many university courses, which is not related to the subject at all, and which imposes today's prejudices unsympathetically on to the past.'<sup>36</sup> By contrast, Graeme Turner, reviewing the book in the first volume of the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, says, 'The perspective offered is carefully analytic of the economic bases for social change and is a resourceful defence for the Left in its attempt to repel the continual raids by the Right on their icons, flags and myths.'<sup>37</sup> Both Morgan's and Turner's reviews illustrate the spectrum of political responses – although White has wryly observed that it seemed his argument was capable of being both too Marxist and not Marxist enough, depending on the reader.<sup>38</sup> In a particularly querulous review, literary scholar Patrick Buckridge claimed that White 'failed to theorise adequately the notion of ideology within which his discussion of "intellectual constructs" of Australia is necessarily located'.<sup>39</sup> Buckridge critiqued White's empiricism and argues that his claims about the falsity of the intellectual constructs of the nation are underpinned by 'his own presupposition of a "real" or "true" Australia'.<sup>40</sup> He appeared sceptical of White's success in writing for either an academic audience – due to the unsatisfactory

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<sup>35</sup> Patrick Morgan, 'Who are we again?' *Quadrant* 26, no. 11, (Nov 1982), 84.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Turner, "'Australian Inventions'", 120.

<sup>38</sup> White, '*Inventing Australia* revisited', 16.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Buckridge, '*Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* [Review]', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 18, no. 1 (March 1982), 97.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

level of theorisation – or for a wider readership – due to language Buckridge described as ‘patronising’.<sup>41</sup> He did, however, acknowledge the book to be ‘very readable’ and to contain ‘a good deal of shrewd and often amusing cultural analysis.’<sup>42</sup> Turner – despite his barb about the title being the most beneficial contribution of the book for scholars of cultural studies – was more forgiving on the issue of theorisation and worked to manage reader expectations with reference to disciplinary differences. While he critiqued the book for ‘not in any sense employing a theoretical approach’, Turner acknowledged that it provided a ‘theoretically determined shift in perspective [that] does reveal things normally left out of historians’ accounts of Australian colonial history’.<sup>43</sup> He also admitted, ‘Perhaps it is churlish to ask that a social historian become a semiotician, but it is in this area that White’s assumptions need greater examination.’ Turner did, however, conclude that the book’s ideas were ‘welcome and provocative’.<sup>44</sup>

Writing from the perspective of teaching texts like White’s in the first days of Australian Studies at Griffith University in the early 1980s, historian Lyndall Ryan captured the excitement and provocativeness of White’s ideas for undergraduate students in particular. She characterised the book as ‘a liberatory text’ because it ‘provided for students a set of tools for understanding how debates about Australian identity worked’, and ‘it enabled students to cross the boundary from naivety to critical thinking.’<sup>45</sup> For the teaching scholars themselves, books like *Inventing Australia*

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>43</sup> Turner, “‘Australian Inventions’”, 120.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ryan, ‘Australian Studies – The Germinal Texts’, 54.

provided an ‘opportunity ... to use Australia as a case study in considering contemporary debates within the humanities and social sciences’ and provided the ‘basis of new work on “Australia” as a political project.’<sup>46</sup>

For those of us teaching Australian Studies in the twenty-first century, *Inventing Australia* remains an important touchstone. David Carter’s excellent textbook, *Dispossession, Dreams & Diversity: Issues in Australian Studies* (2006), presents it as an important theoretical framework for understanding both the nation in general and Australian nationality specifically. Writing twenty-five years after White, Carter still characterises for his undergraduate readers White’s notion of inventing Australia as ‘surprising at first’.<sup>47</sup> Although this argument has lost its radicalism for much of academia, for many students first encountering this concept, it is still as liberatory in the 2000s and 2010s as it was for Lyndall Ryan’s students in the 1980s. Now, teaching a broad history of ideas unit as a foundational course for Arts undergraduates, I still use White’s work, alongside that of Benedict Anderson, Ernest Renan, Graeme Turner, and Homi Bhabha, among others, to work with students on a critical case study of Australia to understand the concept of nation. White’s *Inventing Australia* helps locate the general theory posited by these scholars in a localised context that is more familiar to students, but it also jars them to step outside naturalised essentialist thinking and to consider the project of Australian nationhood more critically.

Following the publication of *Inventing Australia*, the 1980s, 1990s, and early

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>47</sup> David Carter, *Dispossession, Dreams & Diversity: Issues in Australian Studies* (Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson Longman, 2006), 8.

2000s saw the proliferation of Australian cultural and social history projects that *verbed* Australia in various ways to highlight the inventive acts of nation, national culture, and identity. In *Unsettling Australia: Readings in Australian Cultural History* (2005), Lars Jensen characterised White's *Inventing Australia* as initiating the cultural turn in history and the development of the national in cultural studies – although interestingly, he does not engage with the text any further beyond this claim.<sup>48</sup> Hsu-Ming Teo and White more modestly attribute this cultural turn to rising interest in new forms of history focused on the social and cultural in the 1950s, arguing that cultural history found ready traction in Australia because of the very nature of its national history.<sup>49</sup> The first text they identify in this tradition – specifically its convergence with the strong tradition of labour history – is Russel Ward's *Australian Legend*. Teo and White observe that much of Australian cultural history that predated the perceived 'cultural turn' was often produced 'without any felt need to articulate it in poststructuralist terms'.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, White's thesis of invention is generally characterised as poststructuralist and the rise of cultural history as a specific field in Australia is attributed to the influence of cultural theory on historical practice in the 1980s. Notably, White later asserted his materialist credentials, clarifying that 'while [he] was quite happy to borrow poststructuralist notions in examining the construction of something as nebulous as conceptions of Australia, [he] did not imagine or argue that other aspects of the past –

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<sup>48</sup> Lars Jensen, *Unsettling Australia: Readings in Australian Cultural History* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2005), 1.

<sup>49</sup> Teo and White, 'Introduction', 15.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

culture, experience – were equally nebulous.’<sup>51</sup>

The present tenses of inventing, constructing, imagining, re-imagining, unsettling, making, creating and becoming highlight the process of the idea of the nation as ongoing and one in which Australians had agency. The very idea that ‘Australia’ is something actively invented by its people was (and is) a politically potent concept. Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee’s *Constructing a Culture: A People’s History of Australia since 1788* (1988) exemplifies the political impetus for such projects through an emphasis on popular experience and culture rather than the (white, male) elite intelligentsia, bohemians, and bourgeoisie that steered the acts of invention in White’s analysis. ‘It is clear that a history which concerns itself with the actions of well-heeled, white, Anglo-Saxon males can only tell a small part of the story,’ they wrote.<sup>52</sup> By focusing on vernacular cultures and experiences, Burgmann and Lee aimed to ‘encourage people to think critically about the imagined community of the Australian nation.’<sup>53</sup> This book’s genesis was, however, contemporaneous to White’s, and despite the connections we might draw between its ideas and intent and those of White in terms of trends in scholarship, there is no explicit connection drawn by the editors themselves. Rather, it exemplifies the general trend in scholarship at the time to engage with the nation as a constructed thing and through this seek greater power and agency in the process. Burgmann and Lee’s *Constructing a Culture*, together with Patricia Grimshaw,

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<sup>51</sup> White, ‘*Inventing Australia revisited*’, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee, ‘Introduction’, in *Constructing a Culture: A People’s History of Australia since 1788*, edited by Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin, 1988), xiv.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.



Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, and Marian Quartly's *Creating a Nation* (1994), were more successful than White at interrogating the role of women and other marginalised groups in the act(s) of inventing Australia. By incorporating feminist historiography – similarly influenced by poststructuralism – into Australian history, these accounts 'sought to overtly and explicitly redefine understandings of 'nation' and its multiplicity of power, and to situation women' – and other marginalised groups, such as migrants, the working class, and Indigenous Australians – 'firmly within the process of nation-building.'<sup>54</sup>

Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton's *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History* (1997) focuses more explicitly on the civic responsibility of the historian to 'contribute to a better social life' to creating a more inclusive Australia through the histories they write.<sup>55</sup> Hudson and Bolton's book is particularly notable here as not only do they acknowledge the importance of White's *Inventing Australia* in the formulation of their collection, but the collection also includes a chapter by White himself in which he revisits his book fifteen years after its original publication. Specifically, White addresses misunderstandings of the book and seeks to clarify its principal concerns.<sup>56</sup> It is a candid engagement with the legacy of his own work and the frustrations of being misunderstood. In a review of *Creating Australia*, Stephen Garton notes that he 'took

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<sup>54</sup> Joy Damousi, 'Writing Gender into History and History in Gender: *Creating a Nation* and Australian Historiography', *Gender & History* 11, no. 3 (1999), 615.

<sup>55</sup> Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton, 'Creating Australia', in *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History*, edited by Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 10.

<sup>56</sup> An engagement I hope to not be subject to myself as a result of this essay!

particular delight in watching Richard White standing toe to toe with one of his critics and leaving him bloodied and bruised on the canvas (almost worth the price of the book itself).<sup>57</sup> Here, Garton referred to a section where White engages with Gregory Melleuish's critique in *Cultural Liberalism in Australia* (1995), which commits the common error of confusing ideas of the cultural and national in White's work. White returns:

Because Melleuish slides so conveniently between culture, national identity and ideas of nation, he ends up claiming that I see culture as "a force imposing itself on people from without and which they accept for fundamentally irrational reasons" (p. 11), that in my view "culture is merely an invention" (p. 10). Ironically he can even claim that "Blinded by notions of 'hegemony', writers like White ... make national identity the dominant and basic element of culture" (p. 9), which is precisely my complaint about him. Clearly there can be multiple readings of the same text.<sup>58</sup>

Although White's essay was shaped by the criticisms his book received, it is in many ways the introduction the original ought to have had – or the preface to a new edition. In the chapter, White outlines more clearly what the book was – and what it was not. It was, he emphasised, the history of an idea – not of Australia as a geographical space, nation-state, or society, nor a history of its nationalism. It was also, we might add, not an historiographical account. Here lies an irony in White's work. Despite explicitly identifying the role of historians as 'image-makers' who often contribute to the 'mystification' of Australian identity and later observing the historiographical disputes

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen Garton, 'Creating Australia: Changing Australian History [review]', *Australian Historical Studies* 29, no. 111 (1998), 382.

<sup>58</sup> White, 'Inventing Australia Revisited', 16.

of the 1970s between the New and Old Left – debates that were about challenging ideologically-motivated mystification – the book seems largely disengaged from any overt historiographical endeavour. It was not a history of cultural identity or even culture in Australia either. ‘It was instead’, White explains, ‘a modest history of the idealised nation.’<sup>59</sup>

In investigating the history of the idea of Australia rather than Australian nationalism, White was not limited to specifically Australian imaginings, but also how the idea of a nation is constructed by external sources, such as British media and literature. However, these particular perspectives underscore Australia’s colonial origins and the idea of the Britishness of its foundational identity, which is not challenged or complicated meaningfully by accounts of immigration and increased multiculturalism in the late twentieth century later in the book. It is also more focused on and comfortable with past inventions of the nation than it is dealing with recent history, such as the post-WWII era, or the more immediate context of its writing where some of these more interesting challenges to a normative idea of ‘Australia’ were occurring. Its treatment of post-WWII Australia is cursory in comparison to what precedes it – compare its thirteen pages to the twenty-five pages spent on ‘Bohemians and the Bush’ from the 1880s to early 1900s. As a result, *Inventing Australia* risks further perpetuating a nationalist view of Australia built on the Heidelberg School and the *Bulletin* rather than the generative acts of the modern post-war nation growing through diversified migration and manufacturing, which seem to be perceived rather pessimistically. Australian cinema, for example, is glossed over, despite White writing from the midst of the Australian

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 15.

‘new wave’, a veritable factory of ideas about the national self that was literally and metaphorically projecting images of Australia for international consumption. These kinds of gaps in White’s account are increasingly visible to a twenty-first century reader – and, indeed to White himself. He later reflects, ‘I regret that I was not able to give more attention to alternative conceptions of Australia competing with the dominant ones, nor to the processes of dissemination by which some conceptions came to dominate.’<sup>60</sup> These, however, have been the concerns of scholars who have come in White’s wake, taking up the agency of invention with greater, more conscious attention to the modalities of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability.

The idea that the nation is invented, imagined, or constructed is not a new idea, nor is it one that has been abandoned. Catriona Elder’s *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* (2007) is the most explicit in picking up White’s ideas, and is perhaps the last in the tradition of verbing Australia. Her book ‘extend[s] and rethink[s] some of the ground covered by White’<sup>61</sup> in light of the influence of race, ethnicity, class, and gender on Australian scholarship. In so doing, Elder argued that:

as White suggested, that dominant ideas of being Australian are invented, and that these inventions have been and continue to be organised around a desire for the land, a fear of others who may claim the land and, as a result of this, a deep ambivalence about belonging to this space.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> White, ‘*Inventing Australia Revisited*’, 18.

<sup>61</sup> Catriona Elder, *Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2007), 6.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

This, Ruth Balint has observed, ‘crucially extends and develops White’s original project into the twenty-first century’.<sup>63</sup> This extension by Elder is, indeed, crucial. Reading *Inventing Australia* forty years after its initial publication, I find that the book ends with a whimper rather than a bang. I crave a few new chapters – some to flesh out what is there, others to revisit and extend the book into the years after its publication. As an example of the former, I would like to see the critical self-reflection that emerges in White’s chapter for *Creating Australia* turned a little more thoroughly on his own generation’s engagement with the project of inventing Australia – a little more daring historiographical commentary about the complicity of Australian historians (including White himself) in the project of inventing Australia. As an example of the latter, I wonder what chapters covering the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s would look like from White’s perspective. Perhaps, however, that is the point: like Elder, many scholars have taken up this role of expanding upon the history of the idea of Australia, but from multiple different perspectives – and also from multiple different disciplines.

In a review of the new edition of John Rickard’s *Australia: A Cultural History*, White suggests that cultural history is ‘no longer flavour of the month’,<sup>64</sup> replaced by specialised area histories, such as political, economic, environmental, and queer histories, in addition to its settler colonial and transnational turns. ‘History has taken so many turns in the last few decades,’ White says, ‘that many historians are still

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<sup>63</sup> Ruth Balint, ‘*Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity* [review]’, *Journal of Australian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008), 147.

<sup>64</sup> Richard White, ‘A Sort of Farewell’, *Inside Story*, February 2, 2018.  
<https://insidestory.org.au/a-sort-of-farewell/>.

spinning.’<sup>65</sup> Australian history has indeed broken into its multiplicities. Perhaps the poststructuralist turn is now fairly engrained. Contemporary historians are less inclined to attempt a complete history of an entire nation or its identity as a single text and in a single voice. To attempt this now is not only a folly, but perhaps even unethical. Rather, we take chunks of it – a particular community, a particular decade – and through this attempt to build a more nuanced picture that cannot be contained in a single tome. However, as Teo and White observed at the height of cultural history in the early 2000s, ‘Despite the effectiveness in poststructuralism in deconstructing the nation – see Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Thongchai Winichakul – even quite consciously poststructuralist work in Australia remains committed to some form of national project.’<sup>66</sup> Scholars have embraced the importance and the responsibility of ensuring that multiple voices, identities, and ideas contribute to the multiple acts involved in the ongoing process of inventing Australia, but they are still committed to this idea of Australia.

It is, however, a far more self-conscious thing – more so than even White’s reminder of the role of historians in the inventive act of the nation in his introduction to *Inventing Australia*. In his reflection on the impact of poststructuralism and postmodernism on unsettling subjectivities in Australian colonial history specifically, Leigh Boucher reminds us:

History – the creation of shared knowledge about the past – plays a constitutive role here because it creates a connection to the past while tending to imply that this

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Teo and White, ‘Introduction’, 18.

connection works in the opposite direction (from the past to ‘us’). This, I so often tell my students, is why the pronoun ‘we’ has such purchase in Australian history. The history wars were, in part, a battle about what an imagined ‘we’ (in this case the settler nation) did in the process of colonisation. They were riven with the kinds of psychological venom that is created when individuals feel like their subjectivities are at stake.<sup>67</sup>

Boucher invokes Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* – a work I would argue is crucial to ethical poststructuralist scholarship and teaching.<sup>68</sup> In this study of human subjectivity and moral philosophy, Butler explores the importance of ‘giving an account of oneself’, which is in essence a project of self-knowledge and understanding. She explains, ‘ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique. And critique finds that it cannot go forward without a consideration of how the deliberating subject comes into being and how a deliberating subject might actually live or appropriate a set of norms’.<sup>69</sup> Or, as Greg Denning reflects in ‘Culture is talk. Living is story’, his contribution to Teo and White’s *Cultural History in Australia*, ‘My true authority, I discovered, would always be my humility.’<sup>70</sup>

Such perspectives encourage a view of Australian history – cultural or otherwise

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<sup>67</sup> Leigh Boucher, ‘New Cultural History and Australia’s Colonial Past’, in *Australian History Now*, edited by Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013), 300.

<sup>68</sup> Jessica Carniel, ‘[Insert Image Here]: A Reflection on the Ethics of Imagery in a Critical Pedagogy for the Humanities’, 26, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>69</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>70</sup> Greg Denning, ‘Culture is Talk. Living is Story’, in *Cultural History in Australia*, edited by Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003), 232.

– as an important ethical project for both individual scholars and for the nation as a whole. Most importantly, it is a project that never ends. White reminds of us this at the outset of *Inventing Australia*: ‘So we will never arrive at the “real” Australia. From the attempts of others to get there, we can learn much about the travellers and the journey itself, but nothing about the destination. There is none.’<sup>71</sup> White’s *Inventing Australia* is one such traveller we have met along the road to a destination we may never reach, but for which we will invent new ways of getting there.

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<sup>71</sup> White, *Inventing Australia*, x.