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"'Looking in All the Wrong Places'; Or, Harlequin False Testimony and the *Bulletin* Magazine's Mythical Construction of National Identity, Theatrical Enterprise and the Social World of Little Australia, circa 1880-1920."

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""Looking in All the Wrong Places'; Or, Harlequin False Testimony and the *Bulletin* Magazine's Mythical Construction of National Identity, Theatrical Enterprise and the Social World of Little Australia, circa 1880-1920"

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Any historical quest for the Australian nation or national character should be extremely wary of contemporary definition and prejudice and should examine contrary, as well as supporting evidence for the existence of certain characteristics in the past (Glynn 229).

The Australian legend of the late-nineteenth century has deeply influenced our attitudes. . . . But every legend has to be re-examined, and the more so if it has been given lasting vitality by the imagination and genius of some of our greatest writers (Blainey 375).

Published between January 1880 and January 2008, the *Bulletin's* crowning years are considered to have been the 1890s, a period also generally regarded as Australia's literary renaissance. During this decade the magazine encouraged a new generation of writers, illustrators, critics and journalists to voice their protest at the dominant literary forms and social attitudes while at the same time promoting strident nationalist sentiments. Encouraged to present the "real" Australia in verse, short stories, cartoons and illustrations, this radical literary collective turned largely to regional (Bush) themes for their inspiration, and in doing so essentially created the "Australian Legend," an ideal which incorporates the Bush mythology in its depiction of rugged masculinity, mateship, egalitarianism, larrikinism, devil-may-care attitudes and ingenuity in the harsh Australian landscape. Many of Australia's best-known writers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were first published in the *Bulletin*. Through regular contributions they went on to develop skills that allowed them to later branch out into wider fields of creative endeavour. Arguably the best known from this period are: A. B. "Banjo" Paterson (1864-1941), Henry Lawson (1867-1922), Breaker Morant (1864-1902), Barbara Baynton (1857-1929), Steele Rudd (1868-1935), Randolph Bedford (1868-1941), A.G. Stephens (1865-1933), Joseph Furphy (1843-1912), James Brunton Stephens (1835-1902) and Henry C. Cargill (aka "Dipsomaniac").

The considerable literary reputations established by the *Bulletin* writers has resulted in the magazine becoming arguably the most commonly cited magazine in the literature pertaining to Australian drama, sociology, politics, journalism and literature between 1880 and the 1920s. However, recent research into pre-1930s Australian popular culture entertainment is beginning to cast much doubt on the methodological approaches taken by historians and social/urban biographers, particularly their reliance on literature as a means of gauging or explaining socio-cultural attitudes. Indeed, a good deal of primary source evidence not only contradicts previous findings but indicates that much of our current knowledge is based on a combination of myth, erroneous historical research, faulty memoir, and perhaps most damning, that it reflects a history constructed in response to contemporary academic interests and institutional practice. This paper's objective, then, is to use the *Bulletin* as a sample case in order to demonstrate the flaws in a methodology which all too often fails to question the veracity and appropriateness of particular sources in relation to the wider Australian community. And furthermore, it questions the erroneous belief that literature and other high art forms of creative expression accurately reflect or speak for the broader popular culture demographic. In agreement with Peter Burke, I too argue that the historian's understanding of any social or cultural formations is dependent not only on collecting and processing information, but that it also requires the capacity to distinguish "between the culture which comes from ordinary people [. . .] and the culture which is provided for ordinary people by someone else" (218).

¹ See End Note for details regarding this 2017 revised version. All [hyperlinks](#) are directed to entries in the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive*.

That the *Bulletin* has been used for so long as a primary historical source for the study of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Australia is understandable given that its founders, editors and contributors encouraged a type of intellectual and creative discourse that is similarly favoured by tertiary-educated historians and critics. On the other hand it is also perplexing because some very fundamental issues relating to demographics, cultural relevance and cultural formations (notably class, socio-economic relationships and political consciousness) appear to have been overlooked. This paper is certainly not alone in suggesting that the historian's traditional methodological approach has its flaws. Rob Pascoe's detailed analysis of the manufacturing of Australian history posits, for example, the problem of our past having been fashioned by selective interpretation and the continued repetition of myth. In their late-1970s investigation into Australia's urban culture McCarty and Schedvin also put historians on notice, arguing that their work was being hampered by a minimal toolkit of methodological techniques. The pair found that research into any particular aspect of history contained large gaps and that by necessity these had been filled in with assumption and most-likely scenarios. Thus while the ultimate aim is to write up a "fully-rounded history of the city over a long period or the entirety of its history [. . .] Australian historians simply have not yet undertaken the basic research needed to write even the most conventional sort of urban biography" (2-3). Their warning appears to have gone largely unheeded.

Evidence that our national identity around the turn of the century had been constructed from "a single tradition of social comment and criticism" can also be seen in R.W. O'Connell's observations from the late-1960s (30). A few years earlier A.L. McLeod similarly proposed that Australia's recreational forms of the late nineteenth century became "a part of the whole social and cultural program" and in tandem with the artists, writers and intellectuals of the era worked towards "the establishment of a truly national identity." McLeod further notes that by the time of Federation, an Australian ethos could be "found in language, literature, art and all the other facets of cultural achievement" (8). Presumably, McLeod is not referring here to the achievements of our variety industry (including minstrel, vaudeville, burlesque, pantomime and revusical performers and writers) which operated around the country year in and year out for more than sixty years to an audience which not only far exceeded the number of people who read the *Bulletin*, but which was also largely uninterested in literature or other related intellectual discourses. While improvements in the country's education meant that the magazine's readership began increasing from the 1890s, this did not mean that all Australians read more often or that they read exclusively Australian material. Indeed, the belief that there was a huge market for Australian stories is questioned by Suzanne Mellor who notes that Lawson and Paterson were continually competing with foreign writers and poets like Kipling, Twain and Tennyson (69). As this paper will shortly demonstrate, terms like "success," "popular," "a hit" and "widely read" have been too readily used by theatre and literary historians in order to give their subjects historical and cultural significance. However, by looking at fundamental realities - maximum possible audience (per theatrical season) in relation to population (i.e. an individual city or the entire country), or total circulation numbers of a newspaper or magazine (local or national distribution), we find that in simple percentage terms the sums in most cases suggest that further contrary investigation is invariably required.

Only in the last decade or so have new fields of inquiry such as media and cultural studies begun to give popular culture production and reception academic legitimacy. In relation to theatrical enterprise, for example, the latter half of the twentieth century can now be seen as a period in which the research focus largely reflected contemporary tertiary practice, and conclusions about past cultural formations were therefore formed mostly from a literary, text-driven perspective. The problem with this approach, however, is that it inadvertently skews the historical reconstruction of theatre activity towards one particular field of theatre production, legitimate narrative drama, at the expense of more popular forms of entertainment. Indeed, research conducted for the "Australian Popular Theatre" subset of the online database *AustLit*,² has highlighted numerous historical discrepancies and high culture bias in the literature currently available. At the heart of this issue is the unquestionable fact that the current historical record rarely engages with pre-1930s variety theatre (and its popular culture audience) at any level other than superficially. In this respect the two most common problems are the repetition of myth and a reliance on often erroneous memoir (Djubal, 2005: 1-3, 17-19, 39-56). Admittedly this area of theatrical enterprise has long been difficult to

² *AustLit: The Resource for Australian Literature* is currently still a subscription database. Free online access is available to staff and students of most Australian Universities and to members of each of Australia's state libraries. Many council libraries also provide free access to members.

research due to the ephemeral nature of its texts, practices and products, and the subsequent lack of available sources. However, it is also clear that such texts even when available have been considered aesthetically or critically disreputable in comparison to the work of the *Bulletin* writers, and have largely been ignored as historical evidence.

If we again briefly consider the paucity of research into early variety theatre history it is clear that the leading historians who emerged between the 1950s and 1990s invariably completed one or more post-graduate degrees, and in the process of publishing their findings established reputations within university schools or departments as specialists in drama, English, history, art history etc. Some tertiary educated theatre historians have also emerged from other disciplines such as music, journalism and architecture. Even though coming from disparate fields of academic endeavour, their similar cultural capital and critical training (often steeped in formal theory) has resulted in an essentially like-minded community. The stimuli to have driven this community's research and analysis over the last years of the twentieth century must therefore also be considered as largely intellectual. That most have been uninterested in conducting sustained research into a non-text-based popular culture entertainment form like variety theatre is therefore not surprising given such factors as the genre's ephemerality, unfamiliar structures and low aesthetic content. It is nevertheless difficult to justify the sparseness of information that serves as our knowledge of Australian variety theatre when that form of entertainment clearly dominated our theatre industry from at least the early 1870s up until as late as the mid-1920s. As such it attracted a market vastly greater than drama and all other forms of serious theatrical enterprise combined. Even melodrama, which has traditionally been viewed by theatre historians as "popular" theatre, was attended in much smaller numbers than variety. We know this because each metropolitan centre in Australia throughout that sixty-year period had at least two or three specialist inner-city variety venues operating constantly—with most catering to at least 1,000 people, often more. In Sydney during the 1890s, for example, the three leading venues were [Harry Rickards' Tivoli Theatre](#), which catered to 1,200 people (Thorne 41-43) and the [Alhambra Music Hall](#) and [Lawler's Music Hall](#), which seated 900 and 1,000 respectively (Irvine 206-207). In 1911 two variety theatres were built in Brisbane to accommodate that city's steadily increasing variety market. The [Cremorne Theatre](#) had a seating capacity of 1,800 (Queensland Performing 43), while [Holland and St. John's Empire Theatre](#) is believed to have been designed for somewhere between 1,200 to 1,500 patrons.

Of arguably greater importance to the industry, though, was the increasing number of suburban variety venues which emerged as the population expanded markedly from the 1890s onwards. While the industry's second peak period³ was only some ten years (ca. 1916-1925) this nevertheless occurred after at least a decade of steady growth (Djupal, 2005: 101-4). In some instances the demand for vaudeville and revusicals⁴ was so great that these suburban venues actually catered for larger audiences than the city theatres. [Harry Clay's Bridge Theatre](#) in Newtown seated 1,500 people for example ("Lookout," 14), while across the road the [Fuller's Majestic Theatre](#) catered for 2,000 (see 'Majestic Theatre' n. pag.). There were also numerous regional and interstate circuits in operation, allowing the local industry to support many thousands of performers at a time.⁵ A highly mobile and supportive industry it was not uncommon for practitioners (and their immediate family members) to carve out careers of thirty or forty years by constantly touring their way around the country, and sometimes overseas (particularly New Zealand and the East). Many of these local performers and entrepreneurs were considered stars (Djupal, 2005: chapters 2-5). However, one needs only to point to the minimal attention paid to the four most influential Australian comedians of the 1910s and 1920s, [Nat Phillips](#) and [Roy Rene \(Stiffy and Mo\)](#), [George Wallace](#) and [Jim Gerald](#), and the almost complete unawareness of what was once a thriving and widespread industry, to demonstrate that this area of Australian theatre history has been sadly neglected (Djupal, 2005: 1-2, 39-42).

³ The variety industry underwent its first significant period of growth during the mid-late 1880s (see Djupal, 2005: chapters 2 and 3). In both instances growth was curtailed by outside events. The first was the 1880/90s depression; while the 1918/1919 Spanish Flu and the increased growth in film exhibition were largely responsible for slowing down variety's momentum following its World War I boom years.

⁴ Often referred to as "revue" the Australian-written revusical, essentially a one-act musical comedy, was the dominant variety genre in the country between 1916 and the mid-1920s. For further details see Clay Djupal, *What Oh Tonight*, Chapters 5 and 6.

⁵ An exploratory project investigating the building of new theatres and the re-use of existing buildings for the purposes of popular culture entertainment (variety only and/or film and variety) has to date identified more than 80 venues around Australia between 1900 and 1925. Early indications are that this research is still very incomplete. See "[Timeline: 1900-1999](#)" in the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive* for the latest results.

With little sustained research having been undertaken into variety, the historical record has therefore become one dominated by theatrical works which were attended by a minority audience within the broader Australian demographic (Djubal, 2005: 42-6). Over the years this has led to researchers basing their text-based methodology on an assumed socio-industrial infrastructure that now requires rigorous re-examination. The myth that Australian melodrama was "the" popular theatre has become so entrenched that successive historians simply continue to apply their theoretical approaches to particular plays and dramatists believing that these works/individuals spoke for or reflected the thoughts and ideals of the entire Australian community. In the first chapter of *Performance and Cosmopolitics*, for example, Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo draw on a number of theatre works to argue their position, using terms such as "impact on representations of cultural difference" (26) and "smash hit" (28) in reference to Albert Edmunds's⁶ *The Squatter's Daughter* (1907);⁷ and "a telling portrait of colonial anxieties" (34) when discussing Randolph Bedford's *White Australia* (1909).⁸ At issue here, however, is the fact that most of the productions referred to in that chapter attracted a significantly small audience in comparison to both the population of the cities they were staged in and the overall Australian population (Williamson and Musgrove's 1895 pantomime spectacular *Djin Djin*⁹ is the notable exception). Any "success," as claimed by Gilbert and Lo, should in fact be considered relative only to other dramatic works, and not the wider entertainment industry. Any political impact should also be seen only in relation to the audience attracted to "legitimate" drama. I am not arguing that concerns about Asian invasions (or infiltration) did not exist. There is certainly evidence to indicate that these were issues raised within the public arena.¹⁰ But to assume that all Australians (or even the majority) were preoccupied with xenophobic attitudes, without supporting evidence from other areas of cultural and social engagement, necessarily raises several questions. Did the subject matter and political issues introduced into these plays have widespread currency given that they attracted such small audiences; and, were these works chosen because they support the authors' hypothetical position, while evidence to the contrary has been ignored. There is certainly no indication that similar concerns were being engaged with by the variety industry, largely because such issues had little everyday relevance to the popular culture. Indeed, positive aspects of foreign culture, and particularly those of the East and Far East, dominated the musical scena, a variety genre made popular during the 1910s by high class variety troupes such as Edward Branscombe's *Dandies*, John N. McCallum's *Courtiers*, the *Smart Set Entertainers* and Huxham's *Serenaders*. These shows included: *In Sunny Japan* (1914), *In Fair Japan* (1914), and *A Dream of the East* (1919).¹¹

It should be noted here that the high culture bias of contemporary historians and academics is not the only reason for literature having such played such a dominant part in shaping our knowledge of Australia's theatrical past. In many respects variety entertainment was also its own worst enemy. Being such a familiar aspect of everyday life few people considered its scripts, scores, posters, stage properties and other paraphernalia as having little if any cultural significance, and hence almost everything has since been lost. In rare instances archival sources become available, notably the *Nat Phillips Collection* (Fryer Library, University of Queensland), allowing us an opportunity to examine texts, but otherwise the researcher is reliant almost exclusively on second-hand reportage through the newspapers and magazines of the era. Interestingly, while theatre industry magazines like the *Theatre Magazine* (1905-1926),¹² *Australian Variety* (1913-1921), *Green Room* (1913-1925), *Everyone's* (1920-1937) and *Just It* (1926-1927) provide invaluable information for research into theatre activity they are rarely cited in other forms of historical research. If we consider the critical discourse focusing on national identity and the Australian Legend during World War I,

⁶ The writing name (and a contraction of the first names) of Bert Bailey and Edmund Duggan.

⁷ Premiered 9 February 1907 at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne.

⁸ *White Australia; Or, The Empty North* premiered on 6 June 1909 at King's Theatre, Melbourne. See End Note 2 for details relating to this play and its legacy as a supposed "portrait of Colonial anxieties."

⁹ Premiered 26 December 1895 at the Princess Theatre, Melbourne.

¹⁰ See for example Albert Newcomb's *The Yellow Peril* (1907) which was likely seen by many more people than Bedford's *White Australia* courtesy of seasons by the Macmahon Brothers Dramatic Company (New Zealand) and Charles W. Taylor Dramatic Company (Australia). It can be argued that the reason Bedford's play has received more historical attention is the fact that there are surviving scripts - a factor seemingly not applicable to Newcomb's play. "Historical and cultural currency" is further accorded *White Australia* courtesy of the 2013 Playlab/New Vintage publication (edited by Prof. Richard Fotheringham, with background notes by Dr Stephen Carlton).

¹¹ See "Scena" in the *Australian Variety Theatre Archive's* "Genre" section for links to selected works from 1914 to 1919.

¹² In 1913 the *Theatre Magazine* strengthened its association with variety entertainment by publishing a feature section called "The Month in Vaudeville."

for example, it's clear that neither *Australian Variety* nor the *Theatre Magazine* have been thought of as suitable sources. And yet both magazines yield much insight into the variety industry and the attitudes and desires of the Australian popular culture audience supporting it. Similarly ignored is *Aussie*, which although written, published and distributed by Australian soldiers serving overseas, contains an enormous body of evidence relating to the egalitarian, mateship, larrikin ethos during that period. Comprising "Aussiosities" in the form of stories, anecdotes, cartoons, poetry and glossaries explaining the diggers' idiosyncratic speech (a type of "slanguage"), *Aussie* is clearly not a work of literature, but nevertheless serves as the kind of "contrary" evidence called for by Geoffrey Blainey and Sean Glynn. These magazines are not the only popular culture texts to have remained outside the historio-literary perimeter, however. As Glynn notes, even an iconic writer like C.J. Dennis, possibly Australia's most popular poet of the World War I era, has all but been ignored at tertiary level. And yet, writes Glynn, "it could be argued that, as a social commentary, the work of a writer who has successfully catered for popular taste should, other things being equal, be more useful than a literary work which represents only the inner thoughts of a gifted individual" (231).

As a source of information concerning turn of the century Australian culture the *Bulletin* is problematic for two very clear and pragmatic reasons. The first concerns the magazine's small circulation in comparison to the country's total population, an issue which suggests that its impact on the broader Australian demographic was much less than we have been led to believe. The second concern relates to its content. As this paper will shortly demonstrate, even a casual glance through the issues published between 1880 and 1930 indicates that magazine's target audience was a specific and narrowly-defined market. This raises further doubt as to the validity of any conclusions formulated using the *Bulletin* because it is possible that the wider community may well have been unwilling or uninterested in engaging with the magazine's radical/intellectual/literary and/or political agenda. As popular culture theorist John Fiske (1989) notes:

Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture (*Understanding* 24).

This essay serves, then, as not just an opportunity to investigate the *Bulletin's* credentials as a reliable source of historical and critical information, but also as a reminder that ignoring the texts and products made popular by the wider social demographic is ultimately a perilous and fruitless exercise for anyone attempting to understand socio-cultural formations and national identity.

The argument that our understanding of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century nationalism is reflective of the works and the ideologies articulated by Australia's leading artists and writers of the era can be seen in Gordon Greenwood's observation concerning the *Bulletin*:

The most important avenue of publication, the [magazine], attracted the best creative writers. For the first time the Australian land and people were seen through the eyes of writers who were consciously Australians, sensitive to its virtues, critical of its shortcomings, but confident in its future" (148).

David Walker, Jack Lindsay, Kay Iseman, John Carroll, Graeme Davison, and others have demonstrated, however, that most of the magazine's leading writers were far removed from the great popular culture mass. They were well-educated and typically influenced by contemporary European socialist thought, and as such were the "products of both the middle-class and parent culture they decried" (Iseman 276). Most had also travelled widely. As a consequence they saw themselves as effectively separated from their contemporary culture - both dominant and popular. The "Bush" ideal, as articulated in the *Bulletin*-inspired Australian legend, should be therefore be largely regarded as the literary imagination of a group of "lone, impressionable, ambitious young men" (Mellor 69) who projected their own revered values onto the outback even though they had in most instances little empirical understanding of the people or what that life actually entailed.

Even though the *Bulletin* attempted to establish and articulate a truly Australian national identity its actual impact on Australian culture should have been regarded as minimal because, as a simple mathematical calculation shows, the magazine's circulation in relation to the overall population between the 1880s and 1900 never rose above four percent of the population. Commonwealth census statistics indicate in this respect that the number of people living in Australia was approximately 2,323,000 in 1881 and that by 1901

this figure had jumped to 3,771,000, an overall increase of 1,448,000 (roughly 72,400 new citizens per year over the two decades). If the *Bulletin* had a circulation of 82,560, as it claims for its Christmas 1886 issue (Greenwood 144), and at which time the population would have been around 2,557,400, this equates to only 3.23 percent actually buying the magazine. By 1901, when the *Bulletin* boasted that its circulation had risen to 100,000, this percentage actually drops to 2.65. Even if each issue's circulation increased five-fold (with an average of five people having access to every one copy sold) then in 1901 this would equate to 500,000 people. Taking into consideration that possibly up to one third of the population (1,257,000) had legitimate reasons for not engaging with the magazine - children, new immigrants, illiterates and first generation British nationals, for example - then the percentage of access to each *Bulletin* issue by adult Australians in 1901 would, in this scenario, have still have been less than twenty percent (19.89 %). This means that upwards of 80 percent of the population may not have bought or read the *Bulletin* on a regular basis (if at all). Thus claims that the magazine's "circulation reached remarkable levels" (Birrell 123) is a type of contextual slippage that Graeme Turner warns can occur when cultural theorists fail to apply a comparative tradition that explicitly and routinely admits the contingency of its local analyses and arguments (4).

The general consensus that the *Bulletin* began developing features that attempted to appeal to bush and "working-class readers" within a few years of starting, and that it was the first widely circulated journal (Waters 77-78), also requires further investigation. This is because the magazine frequently debased the lower economic, less-educated population. It is also possible, then, that many Australians who actually lived in the bush saw through these writers, particularly as some (including Lawson)¹³ rarely ventured outside the city for more than brief periods. Indeed, while the radicalist ideology of its writers supported an Australian identity that we today assumed extended to regional Australia, non-professionals and "the public," their shared sense of community was in fact exclusive and elitist" (White 31). This by itself suggests that the *Bulletin* could not have attracted the support of the mass. Indeed, it is more likely that this demographic viewed the magazine as advancing intellectual and social snobbery. Typical of the attitude of the *Bulletin's* writers and its editorial direction is the following paragraph from the magazine's "Sundry Shows" (8 October 1898) column:

Percy St. John with W.J. Wilson takes over the lease of the Alhambra Theatre, down in the remote works of Brickfield Hill, Sydney (on Saturday previous) after an almost unbroken silence of years. The theory is that at the far end of George Street there is a population that wants to get to the city theatres but knows it is no use trying because it would drink its eighteen-pence [on] the way; and that this population can be profitably reached by bringing the bones and the tambourine nigger and the interlocutor to its door (8).

The *Bulletin's* position in so far as low culture entertainment was concerned appears to have changed little since the mid-1880s, when one critic wrote a lengthy article about the current offerings in "minstrel-mad Sydney" with a form of expression that can only be described as condescending:

If novelty is pleasing this notice should be popular; it is written for the public not for the profession. And it's a pleasant thing, too, mind you, to write nice things about the "pros," and to stand at the "corner," with a simper about free lunch and receive their tributes of admiration *re* your scintillating humour and dramatic acumen. We've had lots of this in our time, and it was not until a distinguished member of the variety profession gave us a dig in the ribs one morning, and called us a "sickarstic dawg," that we awakened to the fact that we were a great writer [. . .]. Look in the advertisement columns of the dailies; gaze upon the hoardings of this city; and what appalling lesson do ye learn there! Simply this: Sydney has gone mad on minstrelsy. The list on names we read over with ghastly wonder, [F.E.] Hiscocks alone at his popular and fashionable lounge does not content himself with mere variety veterans. He must have in his bill, sirs, nothing less than Monuments of Minstrelsy ("Sundry Shows," 19 Sept. 1885, 9).

The author clearly positions himself above the audience by his use of language and satire throughout the review. As the "unfortunate critic [. . .] glued conscientiously to his *fauteuil*," he describes his experience attending the various variety halls with terms like 'agony,' "ugh," "dreary," "bewilderment" and "burden."

¹³ A.G. Stephens' entry in *Art in Australia* (1922), reprinted in *Henry Lawson Criticism 1894-1971* (1972), notes that Lawson's "sole experience of the outback" occurred at the end of 1892 when he made his famous journey to Hungerford, situated on the Queensland boarder during the great 1890s drought (217).

F.M. Clark's Red Stockings show draws particular criticism. "Miss Lillie Linden settled herself down to a little bright banjo, and began to sing comic songs. We do not remember to have heard anything sadder," he writes. His response to Clark's dreary patter as "The Man of Education" ("calculated to break the stoutest heart") apparently forced him to leave "in a deeply dejected condition" ("Sundry Shows" 19 Sept. 1885, 9).

The *Bulletin's* format also invites a contestation of its historical value as a window into the Australian popular culture past. The fact that the magazine was a commercial product, designed to target a specific market as opposed to more broadly-marketed newspapers, is an issue that has also seemingly been overlooked by historians. An analysis of advertising placed in the magazine¹⁴ indicates that a high proportion of products being promoted were luxury items (vehicles, photographic equipment, music equipment, high fashion and major household appliances) or business-orientated goods and services (machinery, cash registers, property investment etc). The cost of these products were beyond above the purchasing capacity of low income earners, which suggests that the manufacturers and business saw the *Bulletin's* market as being an upper-income demographic. As media writer, Colin Stewart, notes: "Specialist magazines are able to reach a minority audience by charging a higher cover price that allows profit with a lower circulation and by attracting advertisers who wish to reach a certain group in society" (301). This is a factor that cannot be ignored because the make or break reality of cost and profit in the commercial marketplace was absolutely imperative (Djubal, 2005: 68-83).

It may be said, then, that the *Bulletin's* primary market largely comprised urban-dwelling Australian-born professionals and those with higher education (a demographic that may be loosely termed the middle to upper middle-class), along with local and immigrant artists and writers, all of whom had to compete against high status British works and reputations (Birrell 105). Because this relatively small percentage of the overall population comprised many individuals sensitive about their identity and constrained in their ability to compete on their own merits, it was a community open to alternatives that dismissed the aspersions of inferior colonial status (Birrell 128). On the other hand, few non-professional white collar and blue collar Australians, despite also being disparaged and demeaned by English middle-class attitudes, were in a position to endure public or official scrutiny of their worth as colonials. Instead the popular culture effectively discarded the negative cultural associations by identifying themselves within their own social world as proudly Australian. The question to be asked, then, is if a more clearly definable national identity was emerging in the immediate pre and post-Federation years, and it was at best only partly a response to the intellectuals and writers of the time, how else might this have occurred? While some sought nationalist brotherhood through associations like the Australian Natives Association (Birrell 105),¹⁵ most simply engaged with such ideals on an everyday basis through community or socially-based activities - including the leisure industry.

While this paper argues that the *Bulletin's* stable of writers, artists and intellectuals either ignored or often humiliated urban popular Australian culture and eventually succeeded in their attempt to create a mythical bush-based Australian Legend, this does not mean that the intellectual and cultural minority did not share or exude their own sense of Australian identity. However, it is clear from contemporary reports that it was different to the mass culture, and that neither group fully understood each others' purpose or motivation. A 1919 *Theatre Magazine* report on tertiary students attending a Princess Theatre vaudeville show as part of the Sydney University Day celebrations indicates, for example, that neither the management ([Fullers' Theatres Ltd.](#)) nor the wider variety industry instinctively understand or identified with the student audience. Indeed, two issues can be seen to have evoked different reactions in terms of ideological relevance and productive pleasure - these being anti-American sentiment, and the type of entertainment on offer. The Friday matinee performance of [Stiffy and Mo's Bullfighters](#)¹⁶ - the second last session for that week's

¹⁴ See page 10 for examples.

¹⁵ Although noting that the ANA's membership by the 1890s comprised 20 percent labourers, Birrell nevertheless admits that the organisation was really only successful in Victoria. The attempt to establish branches in Sydney, for example, was met with only "meagre success" (111). As with this paper's argument concerning the relationship between the *Bulletin's* circulation and overall population, the figures quoted (even for the ANA's Victorian stronghold) suggests that the organisation's impact was limited - there being in the late 1880s, for instance only 8326 members spread around 88 branches (Birrell 111). With the Australian population in 1889 standing at 3,076,100, the ANA possibly represented less than one percent, and as low as 0.33 percent.

¹⁶ *Bullfighters* was first staged by [Nat Phillips' Stiffy and Mo Revue Company](#) in 1918 as [Mexicians](#).

programme - was, as the magazine's variety editor X-Ray records, "fully packed due to the influx of students":

On the whole they kept themselves well within bounds. The only thing that got them going was the parading of American patriotism in the Pathe gazette, shown as the opening item in the first half of the programme. "They didn't go over," read the lettering on the screen in one instance; "but every man - and every gun - was ready!" This was the culminating point. From the whole of the cap-and-gown brigade came full-throatedly, the one-to-ten count out, repeated with increasing vigor until the somewhat long scene had run its allotted course. Nat Phillips (Stiffy) and Roy Rene (Mo) were applauded - genuinely and vociferously; and most generous were the students in their appreciation as regards pretty well every performer on the bill. For the all-round happy trend the proceedings took a great deal of credit is due to the tact and firmness shown by Manager George Audley in his handling of the situation from the moment the doors were opened (28).

The tone and content of this report appears to suggest that X-Ray wasn't alone in being unaware that the Pathe reel would create such an antagonistic response from the students - especially seeing that the gazette would have been shown to Fuller's audiences at least twice a day from the previous Saturday without causing similar demonstrations. It's not that anti-American sentiment was a new discourse in Australia. The *Sydney Morning Herald* suggests as much in an 1899 "Music and Dramatic Notes" column when it proposes that the American invasion had been intermittently sustained since Nat Goodwin and Maxine Elliott's 1896 Australian tour. The column further notes that "the engagement [of several other companies] [. . .] points to the vigorous renewal of the campaign" (4). Michael Birch agrees that this specific issue goes back a very long way. "Australia," writes Birch has always been the most efficiently colonised country in the world. We suffer, not from the tyranny of distance but from the tyranny of proximity. Australia has always been an avid consumer of other people's cultural product, whether British or American [. . .]. [Thus] it is not difficult to understand [that] Australians [. . .] are the best cultural clones in the world" (522). The issue as it pertains to the above incident, however, is that for the majority of the Australian popular culture of that era (much as it is in contemporary Australia), the issue of anti-Americanism did not register as loudly or as vehemently as it did for those whose livelihood or specific interests (including academic) were motivated by such concerns. The events of the 1919 University Day provide an insight into the separatist ideologies within Australian population extremes, not only in that the Pathe gazette story failed to evoke outcry from popular culture audiences attending during that same week, but that there was some measure of surprise at the "cap-and-gown brigade's [. . .] genuine" appreciation of the remainder of the programme (28).

The propensity for theatre historians to ignore the Australian popular culture in favour a like-minded community appears to derive from a belief that culture can be imposed from above. Thus serious/literary theatre, even melodrama, is thought to have reflected the everyday thoughts and expectations of the lower socio-economic group (traditionally thought of as "working-class" or "blue collar") without considering the more immediate and everyday engagement that variety entertainment offered (variety comedians, for example, could respond to any topical and local issues on a day to day basis, while drama was much less immediate because it took longer for works to be written and produced). Contemporary cultural theorists like John Fiske clearly argue, on the other hand, that the living, active process of culture "cannot be imposed from without or above" (*Understanding* 2-3). Fiske's observation that cultural commodities or texts that do not contain resources out of which people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace (*Reading* 2), is also a key issue because historians focusing on drama have all too often misconstrued marketplace success. Practical considerations such as population size, the length of seasons, audience seating capacity, accessibility (i.e. travel and travel issues), and social structures (family, friends etc), for example, are seldom considered because the text invariably takes priority. Of further concern, too, is the *Bulletin's* radicalism. Suzanne Mellor's observation that the large majority of Australians would not have favoured the magazine's republicanism or many of its radical stances" (68) is a position also supported by theorists working in the area of contemporary popular culture. "Radical art forms that oppose or ignore the structures of domination can never be popular," writes Fiske, "because they cannot offer points of pertinence to the everyday life of the people" (*Understanding* 161).

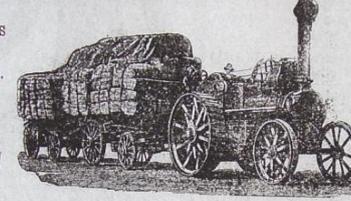
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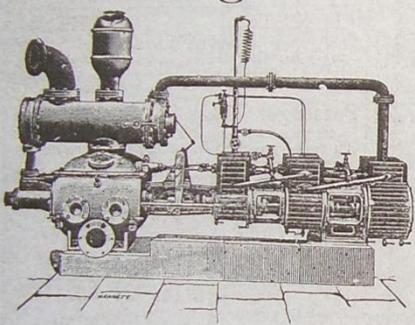


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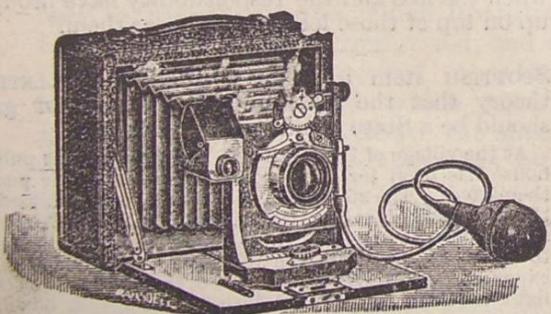


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17 Feb. (1900), 8.

Fig. Examples of the *Bulletin's* retail and commercial industry advertisements (1886, 1895, 1900)

In arguing that a methodology reliant on literary sources from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries is flawed, this paper is attempting to serve as a reminder that the academic and historical process that underpins critical thinking needs to be founded on much higher levels of fundamental historical research. This appears to have been forgotten over the past four or five decades as universities, certainly in Australia, have increasingly viewed theoretical endeavour as more important than seemingly simple historical research. The problem for theorists, however, is that it is only through a broad, unbiased and rigorous engagement with the past that we are able to interrogate its mysteries and more accurately reconstruct an idea of what occurred. Joseph Donohue argues in this respect that the critical factor underpinning the collation and documenting of historical evidence is that interpretation should not be ignored as much as put into perspective. His proposal that competing ideologies are less a danger than the "unexamined method," is the key to a methodological approach founded on a "primacy of argument" principle. That is, the historian's initial engagement with a subject or area should not be dictated by the quantity or structure of facts. "A moment's thought," he writes, "should convince us that the survival of sources is subject to all the vagaries of life and is itself no guarantee of significance" (193). The on-going quest to understand Australia's past, be it theatre activity, national identity or social attitudes, is reliant then on historians looking not just in one place, but in many places, even if these might offer contradictory evidence. This is because culture at one level is an ongoing process of producing meanings of and from our social experience. Popular culture, on the other hand, is a succession of inherently contradictory social practices that work to resist explanation. As John Fiske notes, this is why popular culture is such an elusive concept: it cannot be firmly located in its texts or in its readers (*Understanding* 45).

END NOTES

1. This revised version of the paper originally published in *Creative Nation: Australian Cinema and Cultural Studies Reader* (2009), contains very few changes. The modifications that do occur fall primarily into three categories i) reformatting; ii) expression; and iii) updated information.

- i) The biggest change to the original paper has involved reformatting it to fit within the style of the *Mixed Bag* series - notably the inclusion of hyperlinks, and a change to MLA style.
- ii) In a few instances some minor grammatical changes have been made to better express the original intention. No new information has been made, however.

Also, between submitting the paper in late-2007 and its eventual publication in 2009, the *Bulletin* magazine was closed down. This was not reflected in the original opening sentence.

- iii) Access to Trove, the National Library of Australia's digital newspaper service has provided an opportunity to fix some previously unknown or unidentified matters. In one instance, for example, a quotation in paragraph 17 made note of an Australian tour by Nat Goodwin and Maxine Elliott. Because no date was given by the author an explanatory note (the date of this tour is yet to be established) was added. The year of the tour (1896) has now been resolved.

The biggest change to the original paper occurs in paragraph 8. While no new argument has been made, a number of assumptions about the play *White Australia* and articulated in 2009, can now be readily checked due to the advent of Trove. A new search was conducted in August 2017 to see if any revivals of the play could be located. This research confirms the original speculation that the play was only ever staged once. A more comprehensive endnote (see below) now replaces the footnote included in the 2009 paper and includes some previously unknown newspaper quotations regarding the perceived failure of *White Australia*.

A new footnote has also been added to paragraph 8. This reflects on some reasons why *White Australia* has been privileged as a "voice" Australian racial fears.

The end of paragraph 8 includes some new evidence, too, that counters the long-held perception that racism and/or xenophobic attitudes in Australia during the early-twentieth century were widespread. This evidence takes the form of the eastern-influenced and focused musical scena genre which found much popularity on the variety stage during the 1910s.

2. In paragraph 8 (page 5) I argue that most of the productions referred to in the first chapter of *Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia* attracted very few people in relation to both the population of the cities they were staged in and the overall Australian population at the time. Randolph Bedford's *White Australia; Or, The Empty North*, is a case in point. Staged in Melbourne by William Anderson at his 2,200 seat King's Theatre for 17 performances between 26 June and 16 July 1909, the total audience attending, even if sold out for each performance, would have only been 37,400.¹⁷ A search for later productions of *White Australia* using the National Library of Australia's digitised newspaper service *Trove* has to date failed to locate any other productions whatsoever.

The fact that neither Anderson¹⁸ nor any other Australian manager saw potential in reviving the play suggests that it may not have been the "telling portrait of colonial anxieties," as proposed by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo. It's difficult to give *White Australia* "historical weight," too, when one considers that the total number of people who could have seen the play in Melbourne represented less than 0.9 percent of the Australian population at that time.¹⁹ There is some suggestion, too, that the season was far from well-attended. In this respect evidence contradicting both the plays "importance" and "success" comes from critics who did not buy into the publicity puffs published during the Melbourne season. *Sydney Sportsman* journalist "The Flat," wrote for example:

Since the howling failure of Randolph Bedford's *White Australia* spasm, Australian managers have been resolutely declining to read, scan, or otherwise entertain the notion of accepting locally-built drama.²⁰

A correspondent for the *Ovens and Murray Advertiser* (Beechworth, Victoria) also noted that Bedford, "undeterred by the partial failure of *White Australia*" was hoping for success with another play *The Lady of the Pluck-up*.²¹

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¹⁷ Based on Ross Throne's research into the King's Theatre (316)

¹⁸ See [Roy Redgrave's](#) agent entry in *Austlit* for further details regarding Anderson's Famous Dramatic Company between 1909 and 1913.

¹⁹ The Australian population in 1909 numbered some 4,525,100 non-Aboriginal people (Lahmeyer 2007).

²⁰ "The Flat." "[Theatrical Tit-bits](#)." *Sydney Sportsman* 2 Feb. (1910), 3.

²¹ "[Metropolitan Gossip](#)." *Ovens and Murray Advertiser* (Beechworth, Vic) 3 Oct. (1911), 2.

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