

## THE SHAPING OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHARACTER

Dorothea Mackellar's epic Australian poem 'My Country', was written in 1904 when she was only nineteen. The poem remains pungent with meaning for all Australians. Her verses for instance tell us of '*...a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains, of ragged mountain ranges, of droughts and flooding rains*'. From early in the twentieth century, it became mandatory for every schoolchild to recite 'My Country' by heart.

Mackellar's iconic poem accurately reflects the plain fact that Australia is the oldest, flattest, hottest, driest and most fire-prone continent in the world. It has been so since time immemorial, and to live here, you must be able to adapt to these harsh realities. That is, to live in this land in any sort of harmony with it, you need to develop certain personality characteristics.

The fact that Australia is home to a menagerie of creatures not found anywhere else in the world is also a factor in human adaptation, because it brings additional challenges. There are for instance more things that can kill you in Australia, than anywhere else in the world. Other countries may have a few lions, tigers, wolves or bears, but Australia has deadly snakes, spiders, plants, funguses, jellyfish, sharks and crocodiles laid on. Then you can throw in things like riptides, heatstroke and skin cancer for good measure.

The point I am making is that to live here successfully, you have to be able to see humour in adversity. You need to develop a strange blend of fatalistic optimism and laconic wit. A Czech friend of mine was confronted by this when he arrived here about sixty years ago and kept hearing everyone saying '*She'll be right*'. The only problem was that he was never able to find out exactly who '*she*' was.

The peculiar personality characteristics of Australians are immediately obvious to people from other countries. We tend not to be as garrulous as some other cultures, and our sparseness with words is usually accompanied by a creative use of metaphors. People from overseas are often fascinated by our use of perverse metaphors like, cold as a mother-in-law's kiss, dry as a camel's crotch, busy as a one-armed paper hanger, and so on.

People from other countries also find that our brevity with language extends to placenames and the use of kiddie talk. Brisbane, Melbourne and Canberra are for instance Brisbn or Brizzy, Melbn, and Canbra. Country towns like Wangaratta, Shepparton and Kyabram become Wang, Shep and Ky, whilst breakfast is brekky and dinner is din-dins. Perhaps our citizenship ceremonies should be preceded by lessons in how to talk 'Strine'.

Teasing is also very much part of the Australian personality and we tend to emphasise our differences as a perverse way of bonding together as Australians. West Australians are for instance referred to as Sand Gropers, Queenslanders are Banana Benders, South Australians as Crow Eaters and Victorians as Wowers.

Rival football teams are derided, along with the intelligence, personal habits and lack of teeth amongst their supporters. This happens even between best mates and within families. People from overseas often marvel at how footy supporters here are so vociferous in their mutual disdain, but there are no wire fences here to separate rival supporters.

The point I am really trying to make is that just as this harsh land has inexorably shaped the present-day Australian character, so it had before that, inexorably shaped the character of the First Australians, in precisely the same way and for the same end result.

Wry humour, nicknames and teasing is also very much part of the Aboriginal makeup. All Aboriginal tribes had nicknames for their neighbours, referring to them derisively as Bog Dwellers, Seaweed Speakers, Salt Water Drinkers or Grub Eaters. Every person also had a nickname that usually reflected a particular physical attribute.

When the First Fleet arrived, Aboriginal people had great fun mimicking the various English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and Cornish accents, as well as the stiff body language of the English officer class. In giving colonists local placenames, some were just made up on the spot as a joke, but then given a fanciful interpretation.

The best example of a joke name and fanciful meaning was in the naming of the Melbourne Festival in the early 1950's. When Uncle Bill Onus was asked by the festival organising committee for a name meaning 'let's get together and have fun' he said 'Moomba'. However, Bill's brother Eric told me more than fifty years ago, that Moomba really means 'you're talking out of your bum'.

As I said earlier, the essential point is that as time passes, the Land and its Dreaming will continue to inexorably shape the Australian character, as it has indeed always done for perhaps 150,000 years. With each passing generation, we will therefore all inevitably become more and more Aboriginal in our attitudes and character.