Selling the Snowy: The Snowy Mountains Scheme and National Mythmaking

Grahame Griffin

During the 1950s and ’60s, the Snowy Mountains Scheme played a key role in national mythmaking as an icon of technological, economic and agricultural progress, and as a place of assimilation for non-British immigrants. Following its completion in 1974, it went through a relatively dormant period in the popular imagination until the 1990s, when it re-emerged alongside the immigration debate. At this time the scheme began to receive media coverage as a model of the successful integration of economic and national development with an expanded migrant intake. This re-emergence of interest culminated in the scheme’s fiftieth anniversary celebrations in 1999.

As a major instigator of the scheme (along with Nelson Lemmon, federal minister for works and housing), Prime Minister Ben Chifley described the venture as ‘one of the greatest milestones on the march of Australia to full national development’. The scheme, which operates over an area of 3,200 square kilometres in the Snowy Mountains of southeast New South Wales, took 25 years to build. When complete, it consisted of 16 large dams, 7 power stations (two underground), 80 kilometres of aqueducts and 140 kilometres of tunnels. The scheme had two aims: to divert water from the Snowy River inland for irrigation and drought relief west of the Great Dividing Range; and to supply hydro-electricity to the southeast Australian power grid. Originally, the power grid was linked with defence; inland and underground power stations could withstand aerial or atomic attack. It was also strongly linked with that other national icon of the fifties, the city of Canberra, which would receive a large portion of the scheme’s output. These days, the hydroelectric contribution to the grid is lauded in terms of its flexible loading capacity and its environmental friendliness, despite being relatively small. However, the technical and utilitarian aspects of the scheme have faded from immediate public consciousness. The Snowy Mountains today receive greater renown as a snow-sports playground and a conservation-inspired national park than for their dams and power stations. Nevertheless, the engineering milestones the scheme represents still receive attention in public and professional arenas — for example, the scheme was recently recognised as an international historical engineering landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers, joining the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Eiffel Tower and the Statue of Liberty on the Society’s roll of honour. The scheme is often promoted as a ‘big ticket’ engineering feat that inspired and galvanised the nation into thinking and working on a grand scale. Politicians and editorial writers encouraged this view in the scheme’s anniversary year, holding it up as an example of a planned major project (such as the Alice Springs to Darwin railway) designed to inject a revitalised spirit of enterprise and a new vision into the national economy and psyche.

This article can be located at the confluence of several streams of thought and activity surrounding the Snowy Mountains Scheme. The first of these is a small
but solid raft of books devoted to popular reminiscences. The second is a monograph by geologist and environmentalist George Seddon that delivers an environmental history and a personal account of the Snowy River. The third is a growing number of commentaries on Australian immigration history and policy in the light of the so-called immigration debate. The final impetus for this article is the fiftieth anniversary of the scheme, which was celebrated in October of 1999, mainly on site and in the media, particularly the Murdoch press.

**Scheme literature**

Predictably and overwhelmingly, media commentaries on the scheme’s anniversary were positive and approving. In this, they echoed popular texts that have appeared on the scheme. Most of these are heavily illustrated books focusing on workers’ reminiscences. The results are colourful and entertaining, at times powerful and poignant. For the most part, however, they are confined to anecdotal recollections and rarely verge on the analytical or critical. Commentary on negative or questionable aspects of the scheme is largely restricted to sonorous enunciations of the death toll of 121, and the privations and loneliness suffered by single men and men separated from their wives and families.

One negative aspect of the Snowy Mountains Scheme came to a head in its anniversary year. This concerned the future of the Snowy River and the amount of water that the Snowy Mountains Authority needed to release if the river was to survive. This issue was central to George Seddon’s criticism of the scheme and its Authority published five years earlier. Seddon’s much-loved Snowy River has been reduced to a trickle, and the blame rests with the scheme for diverting its water into the westward-running Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers. The scheme was promoted on utilitarian grounds and it is on this level that Seddon shows it to be deeply flawed. His attack brings together several strands of criticism that have emerged from time to time, namely that the legality of the scheme’s enabling Act was dubious; the death rate was high, as were the social costs in the form of loneliness and suicides; and, most significantly, the scheme’s economic and environmental costs have far outweighed its benefits. Seddon quotes (and indirectly endorses) academic commentaries that question the ‘dubious’ benefit of the scheme’s hydropower input. He argues, further, that its irrigation legacy has contributed to ‘major ecological problems’ in the Murrumbidgee and Murray River valleys.

Seddon praises the scheme’s high engineering standards, and its becoming ‘a role model for multicultural Australia’. He also adds to the list the scheme’s psychic and mythical values for post-war Australians, taking it “beyond social, political and economic history into the domain of cultural history”. The myth may have been of a mundane or utilitarian bent, centred on technological and economic national progress, but it has generated notions of national self-sacrifice and great achievement. Thus it has, as Seddon puts it, ‘more psychological than utilitarian value’.

According to Seddon, much of this myth-making can be attributed to the success of the Authority in promoting itself to the public, to the extent that it has ‘dominated the sources of information about its activities’. To illustrate this point, Seddon surveys a cross-section of books written about the scheme, typical
of which is Margaret Unger’s oral history. Unger, the daughter of the scheme’s commissioner, Sir William Hudson, and a public relations officer for the Authority, is taken to task for her book’s celebratory mode — although a perusal of the book reveals that it is not entirely blinkered. Seddon deals more kindly with Siobhan McHugh’s contribution, which reveals some of the ‘unsavoury aspects of the project: loneliness, suicides, exploitation, inadequacy of safety procedures and official cover-up after some of the accidents’. Ultimately, Seddon argues that these books do not ask the ‘hard questions’ about the scheme and generally take for granted its success and value. What is needed is a ‘dispassionate analytic work’ to redress the balance. This paper will not proceed in that direction, not the least reason being that Seddon’s definition of a dispassionate analysis seems to be one that would simply describe in greater detail the gap between the ‘reality’ of the scheme’s environmental and safety flaws and failings and the myths it generated about itself. Instead, I hope to take up Seddon’s broader notion of a cultural history to investigate a particular aspect of the scheme and its aftermath: the way the scheme dealt with its immigrant labour force and the way that labour force was portrayed. In short, I aim to draw comparisons and contrasts between the scheme and immigration as represented, first, during the construction period of the 1950s and ’60s, and second, during the scheme’s fiftieth anniversary year.

**Scheme workers**

The Snowy Mountain Scheme faded from popular view following its completion, overshadowed by the popularity of the Snowy region as a place of winter ski resorts. However, the debates on immigration and multiculturalism that beset the 1980s and ’90s ensured that when the scheme was mentioned in the media it was usually as an allusion to its ethnically diverse workforce. It became a symbol of success in assimilating foreign workers and was seen as sowing the seeds of a future government-endorsed multiculturalism, such allusions having little regard for distinctions between assimilation and multiculturalism.

During the 25 years of its construction, the scheme employed more than 100,000 men and women (the great majority were men) from 30 countries. At its peak the workforce was approximately 10,000, with the Australian-born constituting only one-third of that workforce. In a period of labour shortage in Australia, the Authority was forced to recruit much of its workforce from overseas, including those categorised as Displaced Persons, most of whom were of eastern and southern European extraction. Other workers were recruited from New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland and western and northern Europe, including France, Germany, and Norway. The scheme therefore became a focal point within the broader vision of Australia’s post-war immigration policy — a vision encouraged by the slogan of ‘populate or perish’ and, as Cope and Kalantzis phrased it, ‘aimed at filling gaps in the age profile of the existing population, meeting labour shortages and strengthening national security through economic development and rapid population increase’.

In the lead-up to the anniversary celebrations, media reports (like the popular oral histories) focused on the multicultural aspect of the scheme. In January 1999 the Australian editorialised:
This year Australia consciously and actively celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electricity Scheme which brought upwards of 100,000 migrants into the country. Most of these stayed and contributed most positively to the expansion of the economy in the 1950s and 1960s.24

As it is celebrated in these accounts, the scheme gave workers from widely varying lands and backgrounds the opportunity to reconcile their differences and work together. After overcoming some initial hostility from the established Australian population, the immigrant workers became a welcomed part of the community.25 The scheme is portrayed as a kind of micro-melting pot that transformed immigrants into ‘men of the Snowy’, and thence into genuine Australians. As Commissioner Hudson’s homily to prospective eastern European workers has it: ‘You’ll be neither Slavs nor Balts but men of the Snowy’.26 ‘You’re Australians now!’ cried a peace-making overseer to former second world war enemies brawling in a pub. As the story has it, his words instantly subdued the German and Polish belligerents.27

As told today, the story of the scheme’s success mainly depends on accounts of how it managed to attract foreigners from diverse nations and mould them into an effective workforce. Underlining this is the idea that the scheme provided a powerful and unifying sense of place and identity, allowing cultural differences to be overcome and strong individual characters to emerge, ready to accept the challenges of a new land in which they could settle and prosper. Many of these accounts have come from the ex-workers themselves as they reminisce to journalists and the author-editors of oral histories. This popular retelling exerts an ideological pull within the ongoing debates over immigration and multiculturalism. However, while the Snowy Mountain Scheme was in progress — during the 1950s and ’60s — the massive increase in immigration caused some consternation within Australia’s established Anglo-Celtic population.28 To put it bluntly, now the triumph of the scheme’s multicultural workforce is (almost) everything; then it was (almost) nothing.

The Snowy Mountain Scheme Authority possessed a well-endowed publicity machine, which presented its workforce to the world. The scheme’s construction-stage promotional material did contain representations of, and reference to, its non-English speaking workers, usually alluded to as ‘workers from many lands’. Lists of nationalities are intoned in some of the many promotional films produced by the Authority,29 and photographic captions occasionally refer to such topics as ‘the New Australian camp’30 or an ‘Italian carpenter’.31 However, in the impression given by the bulk of images, workers are dominated — if not crushed, figuratively — by the sheer mass of concrete and machinery. For example, in the Authority’s vast photographic output, workers are commonly overshadowed by, and rendered subordinate to, the scale of machinery and construction work. When workers predominate in the photographs, there is little attempt to humanise them as subjects: ‘workmen appear in action, anonymous, only referential to the activity of work’.32 The utilitarian camera angles and captions highlight the technical nature of the work being performed. There are no heroic, low-angled poses and displays of flesh and muscle of the kind identified in photographs of men contributing to the Australian war effort,33 just workers performing tasks or acting as models of scale against which the size of machines can be measured. Although
visual images of workers taking second place to machinery have been found in the promotional output of other modernist industrial and technical enterprises, in the case of the Authority’s photographs the lack of recognition of a unique workforce borders on a disavowal of the very difference and uniqueness of that workforce. It is a disavowal reflected in the way the Authority omitted to collect information on the national origins of its workforce and again in the Authority’s promotional literature. In the scheme’s self-documentation there are no grand gestures or rhetoric attempting to link the constitution of the workforce with demographic and social change within the nation as a whole; no attempt to champion the workers as representing any kind of positive social or cultural trend or development. The workers might become New Australians, but they in no way inspire a vision of a new Australia. Seddon claims that the Authority vigorously promoted the scheme as a cultural ‘melting pot’. The Authority gave lip service to recognising the existence of foreign workers but this was never high on its promotional agenda, particularly in the early days of the scheme. The worker-centred, assimilationist and/or multicultural theme was given priority by the popular histories of the 1980s and ’90s, but this was one area in which the cue was not taken from the scheme’s promotional output of the 1950s and ’60s.

There are several plausible reasons for the Authority’s apparent lack of interest in drawing attention to the Snowy Mountain Scheme’s workforce. The scheme was a major civil project dominated by engineers, being undertaken under extremes of weather and topography. It involved capital outlays — and the organisation and deployment of machinery, housing and labour — at a level exceeded only by the demands of two world wars. In a scale of priorities, concrete results were placed far ahead of fostering human relations and ethnic identities. The workforce was seen largely as a means to an end. The work was tough, demanding and dangerous. Workers were well paid, and those who could not adapt to the harsh conditions were soon replaced. As long as workers did what was required of them, they were left alone while the Authority’s well-oiled publicity section churned out images of mountains, snow and dams.

**Scheme publicity**

The Snowy Mountain Scheme’s overlord, Sir William Hudson, exemplifies both the literal and the metaphoric ‘down-to-earth’ nature of the scheme. At the same time, he towers over the project as the one person commissioned by government and Act of Parliament (the *Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Power Act, 1949*) to be ultimately responsible for its implementation, progress and success. All assessments of the scheme point to the pragmatic engineer Hudson as the driving force behind its completion on time and within budget. Hudson is often described as a forceful but fair workaholic with a meticulous and methodical cast of mind, who kept a tight rein on every aspect of the enterprise. Although Seddon gives him credit for being ‘ahead of his time in his awareness of highly professional public relations’, those public relations were strongly influenced and guided by Hudson’s insistence on highlighting the practical nature of the scheme. Hudson’s preoccupation was with letting the scheme speak for itself: ‘We shall in the long run be judged by our progress and not by talks over the wireless and published articles’. Consequently, he emphasised the tangible technological and
construction facets of the scheme, and their advancement through the years, with all the appropriate statistics to hand. ‘Vision’ statements were restricted to rather prosaic pronouncements on economic and technological progress, while many of his dealings with the Authority’s professional communicators revolved around points of accuracy concerning photographic captions: ‘Nearly every time I receive photographs for articles or other purposes I have to devote time to amending the descriptions’.42 (In one of his more imaginative moments, Hudson called for more ‘snow photographs’, as these would draw attention to the unique environment of the ‘high country’.)43

Hudson instituted a policy of encouraging the public to visit the scheme, either through pre-arranged bus tours or through guided ‘convoys’ of independent tourists.

Let me take the opportunity of stressing to all concerned how important I regard visits in promoting knowledge of the Scheme among the public. Visits provide our most effective means of giving publicity of the right sort for the job. It is the policy of the Authority to encourage people to come to see what we are doing and form their own opinions, so removing the doubts and suspicions where they exist.44

According to Hardman, in 1959 78,000 people received a conducted tours of the scheme. By 1964 this figure had risen to 135,000 but did not include visitors who travelled independently.45 One could conservatively estimate that at least half a million people visited the scheme during its construction at a time when the population of the Australian southeast was less than 10 million. The Authority was in no doubt of the success of the visitor program, and according to sub-commissioner E L Merigan in 1960, ‘Since the works have been thrown open in this manner there has been a marked change in the attitude of the public towards the Scheme’.46 Not all reactions were positive, however. Unger quotes local politician and grazier, Tom Mitchell, on ‘the superb manner in which the Australian public was mesmerised by the genius of the late Sir William Hudson who … is said to have spent some 80,000 pounds a year on publicity, and the public fell for it’.47 Interestingly, this significant historical and social phenomenon received no attention in the media coverage of the celebrations. Workers’ memories were keenly unlocked but rather disappointingly (for my research, at least) there were no recollections of how visitors perceived and reacted to the sights and experiences they were offered.

In my own memory, as well as the memories of others I have spoken to, the most common recollections of childhood visits to the scheme encompass the ‘rugged grandeur’ of the Southern Alps, the excitement of seeing snow for the first time, and the various stop-off points where one took in the panoramic views of the massive construction sites and the distant, ant-like workers. This may well have been as close as many visitors came to the people who built the Snowy Mountain scheme. As a young visitor I knew that many of these workers were New Australians or, more commonly, foreigners (as my parents described them) and therefore different — a difference underlined by the strict segregation of workers from visitors. ‘Staff’ and waged labourers also had separate messing and accommodation.48 Visitors were banned from visiting workers’ canteens and wetbars, and I can recall that all visitors, young and old, were warned by the tour guide not to venture forth from the hostel after dark (one person I interviewed...
remembers the term curfew being applied). The reason for this, we were told, was that the foreign workers were on the whole a good bunch of blokes, but they were excitable and unpredictable and they drank a lot, and well, who knows what they might be tempted into. I don’t recall any sense of fear or foreboding about this; after all I was snug and secure and protected and the workers remained distant objects, doing what was expected of them — working hard. If anything, the hint of unexpected and mysterious transgressions by a bunch of hard-drinking, hard-working blokes from exotic places gave them a certain glamorous appeal, especially when contemplated from a safe distance.

Conceivably, then, the visitor policy posed something of a risk for Hudson. On the one hand, it was a tremendous boost to have the public directly relating to the scheme through personal visual contact. On the other hand, contact with a volatile workforce could lead to incidents that might create bad publicity. Hudson, though, had it within his power to strictly regulate the movements of visitors and contain the workforce at a distance. His concerns and policy-making in this regard were confined to minimising risk and avoiding ‘incidents’, as well as their reportage by unauthorised journalists: ‘Information is not to be given to representatives of the press without my authority … Press representatives visiting the area must be accompanied by a PRO’. Regardless of Hudson’s propensity to downplay the ‘foreign worker factor’ to focus on the tangible achievements of construction and engineering, the outcome of his visitor policy was that it provided in microcosm and in heightened form the kinds of practices, conditions and restraints that allowed Anglo-Celtic Australians to view (albeit remotely), affirm and ultimately approve non-English speaking migrants who were seen to be conforming successfully to these practices, conditions and restraints. Nevertheless, this first-hand seeing was subject to limitation and ambivalence. The workers could be both seen and not seen — seen only from a distance where the evidence of their cooperation and compliance was embodied in the construction work itself. Tourists were expected to be content with the same kind of disavowal of difference displayed in the Authority’s visual publicity. At the same time, however, this disavowal was in danger of being undermined by the unavoidable proximity of the workers in the living areas and the consequent restrictions placed on close contact. This amounted to an unspoken admission of difference — a difference that had to be contained, which also made it by inference a difference that could both fascinate and threaten.

The Snowy Mountains Scheme was a great national enterprise and, as such, it symbolised the kind of ventures that Australia as a nation had the potential to grasp — new power grids, factories, mines, irrigation systems, housing developments, electrical goods and motor cars, and, to top it off, a fast-growing national capital. But such enterprises needed a readily available workforce — of necessity, in Australia at that time, a migrant workforce. The scheme provided distinctive and eminently viewable evidence of what could be accomplished materially. But as part of the ideal — and the deal — of national progress, it quietly and unobtrusively gave established Australians the opportunity to see first-hand for themselves how, in an isolated setting, foreign workers could be seen to be working and building together. After learning how to become ‘New Australians’, the workers quietly slipped into the wider community. There, having
paid their dues and undergone their rites of passage, they could find acceptance and assimilation within the larger population.

The scheme was a location isolated and set aside as a marginal place, organised and ordered in such a way as to encourage and facilitate — but also to control and regulate — visual scrutiny. In this sense, it can be seen that the scheme had something in common with Foucault’s much-analysed notion of heterotopia; marginal sites of modernity where difference and ‘otherness’ meet with forces of surveillance, order and control, places such as psychiatric hospitals, prisons and boarding schools. In his study of Foucauldian heterotopia, Kevin Hetherington describes them as paradoxical places where resistant practices vie with forces of panopticon control.\(^{50}\) Hetherington sees linkages between heterotopia and the academically fashionable notion of the liminal — transitional places on the margin, physically separated from the main body of society, where initiation ceremonies and rites of passage are practised and new states attained before ‘reintegration into society as a new person’.\(^{51}\) If the scheme can be counted as a liminal place, then ‘reintegration into society as a new person’ becomes ‘assimilation into society as a New Australian’.\(^{52}\)

There are limits to this kind of analogy-construction, and indeed the limit may have been reached by Ghassan Hage, a scholar critical of officially promoted Australian multiculturalism. Hage fashions what he calls the ‘real caging’ of refugees and asylum seekers into a ‘metaphorical caging’ of migrants (especially recent, non-white migrants), who are likened to ‘tamed and domesticated animals’.\(^{53}\) Whether the isolation and separation of scheme workers could be classified as real or even metaphorical ethnic caging is a moot point; there was an element of taming and domestication as well as outbreaks of transgressiveness within the heterotopic confines and margins of the scheme’s real and metaphorical space. The clash of these elements of freedom and control can be observed in a minor but telling incident involving the arch-controller Hudson and a worker ‘break-out’ in the marginal setting of Cooma, where traditional Australian country-town society crossed paths with the foreigners.

The incident, a kind of in-house moral panic, was sparked by hearsay evidence provided by the Authority’s London representative, R G Smith, concerning the television documentary *Strangers in a Strange Land* (produced by Associated Rediffusion with Dan Farson as presenter and shown on ITV in September 1961). Although the film was mainly well-received by English reviewers, Smith described it as an entirely objectionable depiction of Cooma as a rollicking, lawless boomtown overrun by boozing, gambling, sex-starved ‘continentals’ who all received ‘fantastic’ wages for their work. Smith reported that in the film ‘everybody interviewed said that the Australians were not friendly to them and under no circumstances would they become naturalised’. He suggested that for the film to be screened in Australia by the ABC it should be edited with inserts showing workers being assimilated and participating in naturalisation ceremonies.\(^{54}\)

There followed a spate of correspondence circulating among Hudson, Smith, the Authority’s public relations office, the Australian News and Information Bureau and the Australian High Commission, including a letter from Hudson to
the Deputy High Commissioner detailing Hudson’s concerns about the film. Hudson’s concerns were, as ever, practical:

The bad impression the film has apparently created is irretrievable. However, we still have the problems (a) to resist further screening of the film either in Australia or overseas (b) to collect payment for tv rights estimated at 175 pounds.55

Although Hudson could not stop the documentary from being broadcast in the UK, he began to exert pressure on Sir Charles Moses of the ABC to withhold the program from Australian viewers.56 Moses appeared to hold his ground, but eventually told Hudson that the ABC would not be screening the program because *Strangers in a Strange Land* was largely a development of a quarter-hour film on Cooma already shown on the ABC as part of the series ‘Farson in Australia’.57 This incident was the culmination of a volatile relationship between Hudson and the media in which Hudson was incensed by ‘unauthorised’ and (in his eyes) incorrect accounts of the scheme: ‘The film is quite an inaccurate and misleading impression of life in Cooma and the way in which migrants generally have settled into the local community’.58 Such accounts particularly annoyed and frustrated Hudson because they were entirely beyond his control. I would suggest that this could be a reason for his implementing the visitors’ program, which could be regulated entirely in accordance with his own demands.

The sober assessments of the Australian High Commissioner in London and others reveal *Strangers in a Strange Land* to be a relatively benign account of a group of blokes enjoying themselves on a Saturday night.59 Whether or not Hudson approved, stories of high carousal have certainly been given much exposure in the popular accounts and oral histories of the scheme, usually as evidence of the ability of the foreigners to mix it with ‘common’ Australians and even outdo them in their traditional leisure pursuits.60 The performances of the hard working, high-living men of the Snowy, despite the language barriers, were in tune with the home-grown myths of mateship and masculinism that gave birth to the ‘Australian legend’ and persisted well into the postwar years.61 It is evident that such transgressive performances, when exposed to the outside world, were interpreted by the Authority as markers of difference that distracted attention from the real achievements of the Authority and destabilised the orderly and unobtrusive assimilation of its workforce. However, I suggest that the prominence given to these performances and the subsequent memorialising of these events in the media and in oral histories of the scheme, far from emphasising difference, have themselves been instrumental in promoting the assimilationist theme. The behaviour of the Snowy workers so described resonates with the behaviour of the ‘typical’ white Australian male, the resulting assimilationism being less concerned with national constitutional values than with ‘immigrants’ adoption of everyday cultural practices’, as Stratton and Ang termed it in their comparison of migrants in Australia and the USA.62

**Scheme memories**

The Snowy Mountains Scheme created a double-edged assimilationist paradigm for Australia in the 1950s and ’60s. Mass-mediated accounts of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations confirmed and heightened the success of the paradigm,
although it has since become more complex and multi-layered. Familiar tropes of representation are still employed, such as the immensity and scope of the scheme being an inspiration for future giant, nation-building and preserving projects, including the information technologies as well as the conventional concrete and steel. However, more contemporary renderings of the scheme place greater emphasis on the human face of the enterprise. The rhetoric used is reminiscent of soldiers’ reunions, with faintly elegiac references to death and injury, sacrifice, heroism, mateship or comradeship, and national unity and identity:

By the end of the first 10 years, hostilities among the nationalities had largely dissipated. In Cooma in 1959, the Avenue of Flags was erected to celebrate the nations working together on the scheme. That year, for the first time, German ex-soldiers were invited to participate in the annual Anzac day march.

The bond between former workers is similar to that shared by military personnel … it is not unlike the service personnel in wartime, it is lifetime bonding. People who worked on the Snowy remember it with intense pride.

They had the camaraderie, when together, of people who have done profound things as a team. They spoke like members of an army that fought a noble war together, enjoying companionship and a sense of purpose that life since has not been able to match.

A word not employed during the construction period — multiculturalism — figures prominently in the sound-bites of politicians and the commentaries of journalists, usually prefaced by allusions to forges, crucibles, cradles, seed sowing, and suchlike. Although the term used is multiculturalism, the subtext is assimilation. The media discourse surrounding the celebrations, the government and Authority press releases and extracts from the speeches of politicians, all point to the following. For government politicians, including the prime minister and minister for immigration, the anniversary celebrations were a timely exercise in the appropriation and marketing of memory. They used the occasion to promote their interpretation of multiculturalism and its underlying message to more recent immigrants from even more diverse backgrounds, as well as to those established Australians uneasy about or hostile towards non-European migration. That message was this: observe the veterans of the scheme, follow or applaud their example of assimilation into Australian society and Australian legend, and acceptance will follow. The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Snowy Mountains Scheme in 1999 provided the opportunity for a pivotal re-rendering and reaffirmation by media and politicians of what was promoted as an enduring, successful and ‘acceptable’ way of handling immigration exemplified by the scheme itself.

There was one brief ray of journalistic dissent. Amid the clichés and self-congratulation, a report written by Elizabeth Wynhausen for the Weekend Australian is notable. She observes that the term multiculturalism ‘was applied only after the project was completed in 1974’, and draws attention to the ‘retrospective’ application of ‘chic multiculturalism’ to a period when rapid assimilation was encouraged. Wynhausen views this project not as supporting multiculturalism but, rather, as the rendering down of multiculturalism into a
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multicultural-assimilationist blend. She also mentions the regulatory pressures exerted on the early post-war migrants (for example, ‘men were sent to remote areas to do the jobs Anglo-Australians didn’t want to do’) and quotes from an interview with historian Glenda Suga on the ‘ghettoisation’ of Snowy labourers.

The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Snowy Mountain Scheme did partially serve the interests of a conservative government’s definition of multiculturalism. However, the expression of multiculturalism as both sign and concept is notably missing from quotations of the participating ex-workers, who are depicted as more interested in reuniting with old ‘comrades’ than in reflecting the politicians’ preoccupation with multiculturalism. For these participants, the celebrations were obviously enjoyable and sometimes quite moving at a personal level. Quotations abound with expressions of pride over the scheme’s accomplishments and the role of workers in those accomplishments. Media reports highlight the sometimes difficult recollection and recognition of names and faces, and to the rekindling of old friendships and memories over the sausage sizzle. Ethnicity and ethnic differences are accentuated to create ‘colour’ within the context of a distinctly Australian success story of concord and unity. This is an expression and an embodied performance of biography at a personal level with its emphasis on old comrades attempting to identify each other followed by embraces and the swapping of yarns. Thus a positive identification with the unifying myth of the scheme is created, though a far more intimate and engaging one than that offered in the 1950s and ’60s. Here was a memorial occasion — ‘possibly Australia’s biggest reunion and certainly its largest picnic’— where migrants came together to celebrate, remember and proudly proclaim ownership of a powerful past achievement not connected to their disparate native lands. The celebrations showed that ‘New’ Australians could adopt, adapt and perform a unifying national myth without total dependence on ‘official’ rhetoric. This is a small achievement, but one that provides some hope for a more comprehensive vision of national unity and reconciliation.
Notes to pp 31–40


12 See indexes to *Sydney Morning Herald* 1900–c1995; and ‘Plan to open historic Parramatta precinct’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 1998.


14 Personal communication. Wayne Johnson, Nadia Iacono, David Logan, Noni Boyd, Sydney Cove Authority/Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority.


16 Interview, Lesley Goodwin with Grace Karskens, 13 December 1995.


20 Interview, Kate MacMillan with Grace Karskens, 18 October 1995.

21 Personal communication. Shirley Morrall, 9 September 1997.

22 Morgan, ‘History on The Rocks’.

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3 Further details and statistics, can be found in any of the books listed in Note 6, or from information brochures and booklets obtainable from the Snowy Mountains Authority Headquarters, Cooma, NSW. For more detailed descriptions of technological, legislative and administrative aspects of the Scheme, see J Hardman, *Snowy Scheme Management and Administration*, West Publishing Corporation, Sydney, 1970.


5 Although the non-Murdoch *Canberra Times* led with the number of individual articles (14) the *Australian* followed closely with 7 individual articles and 8 stories in a special supplement on 16 October. The Melbourne *Herald Sun* had 7 articles, the *Sydney Telegraph* 5. A major story outlining the Scheme’s history and planning for the anniversary was presented on the ABC’s ‘7:30 Report’ of 4 February 1999. SBS produced two hour-long documentaries: *The Snowy Part 1 – The Vision* and *The Snowy Part 2 – The People*. Part 1 is based on archival photographic stills and footage made by or for the Authority; Part 2 mainly contains contemporary interviews. Additional public awareness of the celebrations was achieved through Telstra’s ‘Keep in touch’ advertising campaign, an online white pages search for former employees, the issuing of commemorative coins and stamps, an exhibition in the Powerhouse Museum, and a ‘second unveiling’ of the Welcome Wall at the Australian National Maritime Museum with a section devoted to the Scheme’s migrant workers.


7 Seddon, op. cit.

8 ibid., p xxiii.

10 ibid., p xxi. The environmental case against the Scheme has been taken up G Byrne in ‘Reinventing the Snowy; fifty years of mythmaking’, _Arena_, vol 44, 1999–2000, pp 34–7. Byrne also takes the Scheme to task for its ‘oversight’ of Indigenous claims and aspirations.


12 ibid., p xxvii.

13 ibid., p xxxi.

14 ibid., p 25.

15 Unger, op. cit.


17 ibid., p 26.

18 ibid., p 26.


20 Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority (SMHA), _The Men from Snowy River: A Pictorial Record of the Snowy Mountains Scheme_, Cooma, NSW, 1989, np.

21 Colliss, op. cit., p 195.

22 McHugh, op. cit., p 23.


25 See, for example, S McHugh, ‘Snowy Mountains Scheme 50th Anniversary’, the _Weekend Australian_, Snowy Mountains Scheme Supplement, 16–17 October 1999, p 1; Copes and Kalantzis, op. cit., pp 166–8; Hardman, op. cit., pp 134–5.


27 Unger, op. cit., p 145.


29 See, for example, ‘Harvest of the Snows’ (1957), ‘Years to Remember’ (1958) and ‘Conquest of the Rivers’ (1958).

30 The full caption is ‘Valley of the Snowy River showing the New Australian camp and township of Jindabyne (photograph no 18 in SMHA, _The Men from Snowy River_, op. cit., np).


32 E Esau, ‘Photography and the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme’, _History of Photography_, vol 22, no 1, 1998, p 73. In her study of Authority photographs, Esau makes the following observations: ‘men are simply appendages or activators of their [the machines] operation’ (ibid.). Further, ‘one finds no indication of any concerted effort to present a specific ideological stance concerning the multicultural workforce that enabled the project to be completed’ (ibid., p 77). My own examination, while researching this article, of the Authority’s photographic archive supports these observations.

Notes to pp 42–47


36 Seddon, op. cit., p xxiii.

37 This is reflected in articles on the Scheme appearing in such popular magazines as *Walkabout* and *Pix* during the fifties. For example: N Lambert, ‘Snowy Mountains Scheme’, *Walkabout*, 1 June 1953, pp 11–18; L H McCausland, ‘Progress on the Snowy River Scheme’, *Walkabout*, 1 April 1956, pp 9–10; ‘Taming the Snowy River’, *Pix*, 13 May 1950, pp 6–12; ‘Water means wealth’, *Pix*, 22 November 1958, pp 22–29. Collis op. cit., p 200 draws attention to the pro-English bias of the Authority’s management to the detriment of migrants — another possible reason for the lack of attention to the latter.


41 Snowy Mountains Authority archive, File CB1: Public Relations – General Policy. Hudson minute 28, December, 1949. Further, ‘This is primarily a construction organization and it is my conviction after 34 years of construction that creditable results can only be obtained by very hard work and determination’.

42 SMHA archive, File B262: Photographic Services – Policy and General. Minute from Hudson on 4 November 1954: ‘Greater attention should be paid to the description given on the Authority’s official photographs’. (Hudson provides nine examples of his corrections.)

43 SMHA archive, File B262. Correspondence between Hudson and Dr L F Loder in June 1950 on photographs for the Technical Committee’s report.

44 SMHA archive File CB1: Public Relations – General Policy. Hudson minute 27 April, 1952.

45 Hardman, op. cit., p 112.

46 Quoted in ibid., p 112 and Unger, op. cit., p 160.

47 Quoted in ibid., p 155.


49 See, for example, SMHA archive File B41: Press and Radio Policy. Commissioner’s Directive No. 25, 8 April, 1950.


51 ibid., p 33.

52 In a different context, Ross provides two meanings of containment: excluding by isolating and neutralising by incorporation and domestication. He refers to George Kennan’s definition of Cold War containment as, first, isolating and quarantining threats to the domestic body, and second, neutralising or domesticating a threat internal to the host. Such definitions might be somewhat speculatively applied to the isolating and reintegrating capacities of the Scheme as heterotopic and liminal space. (A Ross, ‘Containing culture in the Cold War’, *Cultural Studies*, vol 1, no 3, 1987, p 328–48.)


54 SMHA archive File 61/1935: Production of Film *Strangers in a Strange Land*. Letter from Smith to the SMHA’s business manager dated 13 October, 1961. Later minutes and letters written by Hudson indicate he was aware of Smith’s complaints.


58 Unger, op. cit., pp 30–3. According to V S (Did) Gadsby, the Authority’s senior photographer, Hudson instituted public tours and Authority-produced films partly because of his distrust of the press (interview with Gadsby, October 1997).

59 SMHA archive File 61/1935. See, for example, minute from Douglas Gilleson, Director of the News and Information Bureau, Australia House, to Smith.

61 For discussions of masculinism and the Australian Legend see Stratton (*Not just another multicultural story*, *Journal of Australian Studies*, September, 2000) and Turner (G Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1986). In his article, Stratton outlines some of the cultural ambiguities that existed between British migrants and Australians, with the ‘pommies’ not always living up to the latter’s expectations. It is entirely my own contention, however, that the Snowy foreign workers displayed characteristics of attitude and behaviour that were more attuned to those expectations.


63 Here it should be noted that my conclusions are based on an analysis of media discourse surrounding the events and what that implies in terms of the practices and ideologies of media selection and emphasis; they are not an attempt to distil an essential ‘reality’ of these events. Nevertheless, certain repetitions and consistent prioritising within media representations do point to significant positions and tendencies existing outside the parameters of ‘pure’ media construction.


65 Yaman, op. cit., p 8. Yaman is quoting V Good, an associate commissioner of the Authority, regarding the anniversary celebration. Illustrative quotations appear throughout the newspaper articles referred to in these notes.


68 Wynhausen, op. cit., p 7.

69 ibid.


71 Yaman, op. cit., p 8.

**Imaging a Nation: Australia’s Representation at the Venice Biennale, 1958**

Sarah Scott


3 ibid.


5 ‘Official’ events such as the Venice Biennale and the Sao Paulo Biennale used art as a means to showcase each participating nation. Nations depended upon some government sponsorship. This contrasted with unofficial, privately sponsored and funded exhibitions.