Buy Australiana: Diggers, Drovers and Vegemite

Susie Khamis

2003 marks the eightieth anniversary of Kraft’s Vegemite. For most supermarket products, this would constitute a commendable achievement, a show of impressive endurance in an otherwise unpredictable consumer climate. Octogenarian feats aside, it is fair to suggest that longevity alone does not fully explain the place of Vegemite on Australia’s cultural map. Over the last few years the national value of brands like Vegemite has surfaced with remarkable symbolic potency, with ‘value’ understood here is an index of sentimental patriotism. From Louie the Fly to the Flying Kangaroo, icons of advertising have become beneficiaries of patriotic attachment. In fact, in some quarters, the ‘loss’ of famous Australian brands to outside interests has been declared an abhorrent affront to national pride. A good example is a 1998 Quadrant article titled ‘Saving Australia’. An anonymous economist, bemoaning the extent of foreign investment in Australia, warns:

Already many famous Australian icons, including Vegemite, Arnotts Biscuits, Minties, XXXX Beer, Mortein, Four ‘n’ Twenty Pies, Peters Ice-cream, Rosella Soup, even Driza-Bone, are owned by foreign companies. Within a few years many of our larger companies are likely to be owned by overseas companies and managed by people domiciled overseas.1

Tellingly, the author defines Australia by the brands. To ‘save Australia’ is to spare certain brands from foreign poachers, policing cultural borders as much as (if not in lieu of) terrestrial ones. Of late, and as a sort of polemical shortcut, the use of famous Australian brands to springboard such doomsday fears has become a particularly convenient strategy. Indeed, to appreciate the extent to which Australian consumers have become increasingly conscious of brand identity, especially where national interests are at stake, one need only consider the reception to Dick Smith’s line of Australian-made, Australian-owned products in 1999. Within its first nine months, Dick Smith Foods generated retail sales worth $27.8 million.2 The market-tester product, Dick Smith Peanut Butter, secured a remarkable fifteen per cent share of the lucrative $72.4 million market within the first few months of its release.3

If nothing else, the Dick Smith phenomenon illustrated a brand’s capacity to stand for a nation, or to define itself as ‘more’ Australian than its competitors and thereby claim cultural legitimacy over them. However, as the anonymous economist makes clear, this connection between an otherwise generic product and its ostensibly true-blue credentials is not new to Australians. Rather, certain brands have long been popularly identified as distinctly Australian, whether by origin or by association.

Whilst the likes of Smith have sought to uncover the ‘truth’ of some brands — that is, that they are not Australian-owned and/or Australian-made — the fact remains that these brands have been popularly imbued with heritage value. Herein lies the topic at hand: the way certain brands have consistently invoked and
articulated key nationalist discourses. From Kiwi Shoe Polish and Bonds to Bushells and Fosters, even a cursory survey of such brands shows how particular images, of diggers, pastoralists, labourers and the like, speak to, about and for ‘the nation’. What this reveals, and what is at stake, is the politics of representation. In turn, questions of inclusion and exclusion collide, as these images either absorb or deny the vexed ambiguities of national identity.

These brands have, at one time or another, relied on those images and narratives popularly identified as ‘distinctly’ Australian. Their individual biographies often involve far more ambivalent tangents and trajectories, with ironic turns that betray the Australianness with which they are now associated. This is not highlighted to debunk any underlying myths or to interrogate their iconography for hidden truths. On the contrary, these images and narratives are an integral part of Australia’s consumer history — with ‘consumer history’ not demarcated as a sideline show to History proper but regarded a surprisingly under-acknowledged feature of it. After all, Australia may have been, as Donald Horne argues in *The Lucky Country*, ‘one of the first nations to find part of the meaning of life in the purchase of consumer goods’. In turn, to play down the cultural significance of some of the more ‘iconic’ examples of these consumer goods would be, at the very least, academically remiss. What needs to be seen, then, are the paths by which these particular brands came to signify Australiana. As Richard White writes in *Inventing Australia*, ‘When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve’.

For the purposes of this analysis, there are nevertheless a few methodological hurdles that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, Australia’s mediasphere is not readily compartmentalised; the lines between content and promotion are notoriously imprecise. As it will become clear, one is just as likely to find the likes of Vegemite mentioned in pop songs and plays as in the brands’ actual promotions. Such is the way images and ideas circulate and multiply, they cannot be easily contained or controlled. Moreover, as it will be argued, this spillage is central to the mythology in question. Ultimately, the ways these brands have been so seamlessly woven into the nation’s mediated memory bank reveal an erratic dynamic that cannot be explained by strategy alone.

In other words, there is a point at which promotional hype intersects with the everyday practices of ordinary consumers, and this exchange is as much cultural as commercial, if there is in fact a difference. What this means is that the cultural significance of these brands cannot be determined by the textual content of their advertisements alone. While such an approach is both useful and interesting, it does not go far enough in explaining how such brands have been popularly mediated over time, outside the advertisements, and the degree to which these external elaborations have strengthened and sustained their appeal. On that point, it should also be conceded that of all the elements mobilised in the selling of any given product, what industry insiders term the ‘marketing mix’, it is notoriously difficult identifying which one(s) cinched the deal — indeed, this task has long bedevilled advertising executives. So, no such ambitious claims will be made for isolating any one image or idea as a ‘sure bet’ for Australian consumers. As a topic of discussion, market efficacy will be included but not privileged.
This article will consider both the content and context of several famous brands, and will advance an intertextual analysis, identifying those instances where promotional discourses have either complemented or coincided with nationalist ones. By way of introduction and illustration, two brands will be discussed: Kiwi Shoe Polish and Bushells. These examples show how products as disparate as shoe polish and tea can in fact harness similar verbal and visual props to bolster and buttress their purported Australianness. The ways such brands come to encode and enact this Australianness, from the vantage point of 2003, are neither linear nor logical. To really appreciate just how tenuous the link between product properties and product connotations really is — thereby rendering it easily amenable to nationalist expressions — the discussion will narrow to just one, Vegemite. As it will be shown, the fact that a sandwich spread could help carry the country’s cultural identity says much about both culture and identity.

Whatever obscurity it suffers today, boot polish once figured far more prominently in the everyday lives of most Australians. Moreover, now sold in over 170 countries, Kiwi Boot Polish\(^6\) has enjoyed a major market presence for almost one hundred years. According to Mimo Cozzolino, author of *Symbols of Australia*, this has given the product a particularly enviable edge. He writes, ‘Internationally, Kiwi Boot Polish is possibly Australia’s most successful product’.\(^7\)

In *Advertising in Australia*, Tim Hewat considers the story of William Ramsay, the son of Scottish immigrants and the innovator of Kiwi Boot Polish, ‘the story, in microcosm, of the development of Australian advertising’.\(^8\) Whereas Hewat’s observation was more a tribute to Ramsay’s entrepreneurial spirit, the story is repeated here, but for a different reason. On the one hand, Kiwi Boot Polish was cleverly advertised. In early 1901, William Ramsay, with his partner Hamilton McKellan, set up a small factory in Carlton, Melbourne. Initially, they manufactured products like stove polish, fire-kindlers, antiseptic sawdust and boot polish. Of these, they chose to concentrate on boot polish, and marketed ‘Mirror Polish’ in 1905. After only a lukewarm reception, Ramsay renamed the product ‘Kiwi’, an affectionate nod to his wife’s homeland. By the end of 1906, sales had grown to over 12,000 units.

While the product clearly benefited from the graphic and phonetic simplicity of the new name, it was not until 1908 that the brand really stamped its primacy, when Ramsay launched Kiwi Dark Tan. Unlike its predecessor, Mirror Polish, or the fourteen other boot polishes on the market in Australia, Kiwi Dark Tan revolutionised boot polish: it not only added shine but also restored the colour of boots. Only Kiwi could soften, nourish, and restore colour to leather through its water-resistant, all-seasons stain.\(^9\) Indeed, such was the market impact of this new formula that Ramsay kept its ingredients secret, even from his partner McKellan. Whilst this partnership lapsed soon after, Ramsay — and his Kiwi brand — was on the threshold of a remarkable ascent, domestically and abroad. By 1910, Australia-wide sales had topped 100,000 cans, and by 1911, almost 350,000. Then, in 1912, William’s father John took the product to England and pitched it directly to the British Army, with spectacular results — by 1917, it was using Kiwi wholesale.

Kiwi’s first world war connections really confirmed its national worth. Not only was Kiwi Boot Polish a reliable and popular product with Australian, British
and American troops, the company was quick to integrate the imagery into its promotions. Indeed, in what is reportedly a world first, Kiwi Boot Polish even used the ‘digger’ in a 1916 advertising film that was screened in both Australia and Britain. As Hewat explains, the six-minute silent film dramatised the problem of a wartime hotelier faced with a staff shortage and 400 boots to clean. Luckily, ‘A kindly Digger befriends two boys who have seen the sign: “Wanted – Boots Boys”. Says he, “Can’t clean boots? I’ll show you something that will clean them for you! Come along and I’ll introduce you to KIWI”’.10

The boys got the job, and the digger became a key figure in the brand’s identity, a timely partnership that was both logical and emotive. Indeed, it was an association strengthened in more ways than one, and not all at the company’s behest. In the early stages of the second world war, Kiwi factories in Warsaw and Rouen were razed and raided, respectively, by Nazi Germans. In 1942, in a sort of accidental endorsement for the brand, *Time* correspondent Walter Graeber reported from Tobruk, ‘Old tins of British-made Kiwi polish lay side-by-side with empty bottles of Chianti’.11

The fact that the product was no longer manufactured locally, or that its success owed as much to the British Army as much as, if not more than, Australian diggers, was not deemed at all problematic. Rather, Kiwi Boot Polish used its international kudos to muster national pride in Australian achievement. For example, one advertisement boasted: ‘KIWI: THE QUALITY BOOT POLISH is now WORLD-Famous. It has earned such a wonderful reputation (both in Australia and Abroad) FOR SUPERIORITY IN EVERY WAY’.12

With market dominance, the Kiwi brand could virtually stand for the product: the *Times* correspondent refers to ‘Kiwi polish’ and trusts readers to know what this means. Then, by adding the aura of diggers to the esteem of its merchandise, Kiwi achieves a far more lucrative affiliation — the ‘good’ of the nation, diggers, becomes the ‘good’ of the brand, Kiwi. The Kiwi brand thus accrued the Australian connection through both contrivance and circumstance, all the while concealing whatever developments belied this association.

The Bushells brand, in comparison, has delivered and defined Australianness by an altogether different route, capitalising on the sort nationalist imagery from which it once distanced itself. What this shows is the haphazard ways by which brands come to communicate certain messages, as changing cultural conditions affect the interpretative frameworks through which these messages are read.

While the Kiwi brand has triumphed despite a name that betrays its Australian origins, Bushells seems to foreground it. As Mimo Cozzolino asks, ‘Is it a coincidence that the successful brand Bushells has the word *bush* in it?’13

It is. In 1883, Queenslander Alfred Thomas Bushell founded the Bushells business, selling tea and coffee. The operation expanded after his sons, Philip and Walter, moved to Sydney. By 1899 Bushell & Co (promoted then as ‘The Tea Men’) was supplying all the major states, and in 1912 it was registered as Bushells Limited. In 1979 Bushells and its stable of brands, including Inglis, Billy, Lanchoo and Gardenia, became part of the giant English tea company, Brooke Bond.14

Then, in 1988, Unilever gained full ownership of Bushells Holdings through Brooke Bond. As will be shown, such behind-the-scenes deals mean little if a brand’s airbrushed, nationalist veneer is accepted and embraced.
If a 2003 television commercial is anything to go by, the Bushells brand has lost none of its luck with puns. The advertisement features a series of brightly lit vignettes, unrelated except for the fact that they all involve spritely Caucasians, dancing, surfing, and generally having a good time, and that they all choose Bushells, which, consumers are eventually told, 'Puts the “t” in Australian'. As it happens, promotional posters made for Bushells in the 1930s have provided a scenic backdrop for an Australia of a bygone era — literally. They were part of the Reg Cribb play *Last Cab to Darwin*, an odyssean road-trip that stretches from Broken Hill to Darwin, and joint winner of the 2002 Patrick White Playwrights’ Award. Between sad snapshots of struggling towns, barely surviving economic irrelevance and cultural oblivion, a Bushells diorama, faded but still pretty, adds some colour. Its impact rests on the audience’s ready acceptance of the primacy of Bushells in pre-cappuccino Australia. Indeed, in the play, cappuccinos come to signify affluence and sophistication, as they become harder to find the further cab driver Max travels through red-dust Australia, through the ‘heart’ of the nation.

Ironically, compared to other Australian tea brands of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bushells imagery appears positively avant-garde, atypically promoting taste and value over traditional bush settings. For example, one 1930 diorama uses only sparse, elegant imagery (a blue kettle and white cup and saucer) and crisp, simple prose. As a (tea) marketing devise, Bushells was sidestepping convention by eschewing nationalist, pastoralist scenes, scenes particularly favoured by Australian poster artists of the 1920s and 1930s. So, preceded on the Australian market by brands like Billy Tea, Coo-ee Brand Tea, Camp Tea and Swagman Blend Tea, all of which had aggressively integrated bush scenes into their packaging and promotions, Bushells was by no means the first tea brand to prioritise an affinity between its product and a ‘typical’ Australia. However, by a process of market elimination, Bushells’s sales dominance has effectively undercut whatever claims came earlier, or more traditionally. Moreover, what once represented marketing foresight and unorthodox strategies — the Bushells of history — has been retrospectively injected with authenticity and tradition — the Bushells of *Last Cab to Darwin*. This is less a revisionist ‘mistake’ than a comment on the protean nature of all mass-mediated images, subject to the push and pull of changing contexts and multiple interests.

Bushells has done little to reverse its notional slide from ‘modernist innovator’ to ‘beloved relic’. If anything, it has reconfigured this shift as a bonus rather than a demotion. After all, it puts the ‘t in Australian’, with the accompanying imagery drawing on a spectacularly narrow range of such Australians. Such specificity might otherwise be attributed to the cleverness of niche marketing, were it not for the breadth of its appeal. Against a background of multiculturalism, globalisation and the panoramic presence of multinational corporations, Bushells now endears itself to consumers by trumpeting a certain kind of Australianness, exhuming a tradition it had once disturbed.

The ways by which brands assume a nationalist identity are neither straightforward nor predictable. Rather, the Kiwi and Bushells brands both strengthened their supposed Australianness by drawing on other such images and ideas, subsuming these into their promotions. Effectively, the first world war and globalisation ‘intervened’, broadening the range of associations on which Kiwi...
and Bushells could draw. Moreover, their Australianness was further enhanced and, in a populist sense, validated by their incorporation into the language and logic of popular culture, as they emerged at sites that were essentially outside the promotional orbit of the brands themselves.

There is a parallel force at work, one which allows certain brands to be deemed privileged signifiers of a national identity across different contexts and away from their initial advertisements. To see just how powerful and pervasive this force can be, the discussion will now turn to the one brand which has perhaps benefited the most from this type of widespread, mass mediated identification: Vegemite.

A surprising number of publications, from the scholarly to the anecdotal, are punctuated with references to Vegemite. Indeed, to deem Vegemite a cultural icon has become something of a popular refrain, so much so that its ubiquity and salience owes as much to these secondary incarnations as to Kraft’s original efforts. Indeed, this tendency is striking in its breadth and frequency. Above and beyond any immediate utility as a mere condiment, Vegemite sits alongside Phar Lap, Don Bradman and the Hills Hoist as a celebrated signifier of true-blue Australiana. To appreciate the ease with which Vegemite has meshed with the national vocabulary, a quick survey of some recent works should suffice. What they reveal is a disarmingly broad consensus.

According to Peter Luck, Vegemite has joined Ginger Meggs, Ned Kelly, and Dame Edna’s spectacles as a source and symbol of deep national sentiment. In Australian Icons, Vegemite is one of the one hundred tangible objects that, Luck contends, ‘have a mystical, sometimes even spiritual significance that only an Australian can really understand’.17 Indeed, Luck goes so far as to consider Vegemite ‘the most familiar household word in Australia’.18 Similarly, Vegemite appears in David Dale’s compilation The 100 Things Everyone Needs to Know About Australia. Dale deems Vegemite ‘such a national addiction that many Australians travelling overseas slip a couple of jars into their bags for fear it will be unavailable in less civilised nations’.19 One suspects Dale exaggerates for rhetorical effect, rather than any actual doubt. Indeed, Dale’s point is underscored by a Sydney Morning Herald survey he cites from 1995. When the ‘Stay in Touch’ column invited readers to nominate the national icon they would most like to see commemorated with a stamp, Vegemite received the most votes, followed by the Akubra hat.20 In Staying Sane in Australia, Robert Treborlang repeats Dale’s observation that Vegemite holds some sort of magical pull for homesick expatriates. According to Treborlang, ‘Just as Poles in exile become all tearful at the sight of the beloved red and white flag of their nation, Australians away from their home country go all porous at the knees just at the thought of a red-and-yellow Vegemite label’.21

In a sense, and perhaps superficially, it is tempting to underplay the legitimacy of such observations. In place of rigorous empirical research, they offer unabashedly impressionistic accounts, echoing hackneyed ideas rather than suggesting fresh ones. They act as reminders rather than revelations. Still, however much such writers rely on scrapbook nostalgia, they illustrate the degree to which Vegemite reverberates beyond its advertisements. In other words, such brand resonance can hardly be attributed to strategy alone: the way the image of Vegemite circulates as a national symbol is now so uncontroversial and so
unproblematic that it has become, in a sense, naturalised, accepted and absorbed without question or compromise.

In the wake of Australia II’s win of the America’s Cup in 1983, Vegemite enjoyed yet another boost. The single ‘Down Under’ by Men At Work became a virtual soundtrack to the euphoric hysteria that greeted Alan Bond, the winged keel and whatever else was associated with the celebrated yacht race. As the song’s narrator travels the world, recounting the things that mark him Australian, Vegemite enjoys an appearance as a novel conversation-starter in Brussels — “Do you speak-a my language?” He just smiled and gave me a Vegemite sandwich’. Here, Vegemite literally supplants language as a communication tool. The song ‘Down Under’ has since become something of an alternative national anthem, impressively eluding the market disposability of most pop music. Indeed, for the closing ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics, Men At Work was joined by a diverse selection of Australian musicians to sing it, including Yothu Yindi, Yvonne Kenny and Kylie Minogue.

What is more, the scope and scale of such endorsement has effectively breached traditional divides. That is, top-down articulations of Vegemite’s significance can also be found. In 1991, Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum staged a Vegemite Exhibition. Held in July, it coincided with the school holidays. Some of the historical artefacts used in the exhibition, such as original jars and promotional material, actually came from consumers following a national call for such memorabilia. Today, the museum’s social history wing, devoted to the ‘material culture of everyday life’, still holds a Vegemite jar from 1923. This is not to suggest that such perspectives are any more legitimate than Luck, Dale, et al., ‘proving’ a point any more convincingly. Rather, it is to show how Vegemite can straddle a range of discursive regimes.

For a product so closely identified with Australian culture, it is actually quite difficult to pinpoint Vegemite’s indigenous attributes. In 1910, the English spread Marmite was registered in Australia, and was subsequently advertised in publications like the Sydney Morning Herald and Australian Home Journal. Fred Walker, a general merchant, had been operating in Melbourne from 1908, developing foods like potted cheese and liver pastes. In 1923, Walker negotiated with Carlton & United Brewery to buy the brewery’s spent yeast, from which Walker hoped to make a local version of Marmite. With the help of a young chemist named Cyril P Callister, Walker perfected a spread comparable to the English original. As if to acknowledge its antecedent directly, Walker named his product Parwill — that is, ‘if Ma might, Pa will’. A marketing misfire, Walker launched a public competition to rename it, and eventually registered ‘Vegemite’.23

Not only did Vegemite originate abroad — in kind, if not in name — its ownership has also been, for the most part, a foreign affair. When Walker died in 1935, American Kraft acquired the local operation, including Vegemite. So, in an ironic twist, one that has become increasingly common in recent years, this iconic symbol of Australiana is in fact American-owned. In 1946 the American connection was made even more explicit as Vegemite promotional labels featured Disney characters like Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.
If the product was in fact conceived in one place, and the profits actually end up somewhere else, finding the distinctly Australian content of Vegemite must be a necessarily cultural exercise. It is the images and narratives that accompany, if not constitute, Vegemite that ultimately invite interrogation and demand understanding. It needs to be seen how the cultural life of Vegemite in Australia intersects with, and perhaps depends on, extrinsic processes. This is a logical presumption: that Vegemite is meaningful and relevant for Australians because it is inscribed with, as well as grafted onto, other messages and motifs that are also and already meaningful and relevant. Moreover, the fact that this chain of associations is forever changing — since culture itself is never static — can be seen through the various stories and symbols that have been linked to Vegemite. In this way, and for the purposes of this discussion, the biography of an otherwise unremarkable commodity (concentrated yeast extract) can in fact communicate surprisingly edifying snippets of a national conversation.

To trace the cultural history of Vegemite is to see how the brand became so closely associated with the needs and interests of Australian consumers. Crucially, this analytic turn foregrounds those needs and interests deemed important enough for Vegemite to piggyback. This is, after all, the fundamental feature of brand marketing: the way it prioritises product associations over product attributes, thereby creating differences between products that are essentially identical, for example, Vegemite and Marmite. In turn, the product and its associations can become mutually reaffirming. That is, the more Vegemite is associated with ‘real’ Australianness, and the more its connotations are popularly accepted as distinctly Australian, the more other claims of ‘Australianness’ rely on these connotations for legitimation. This is not so much a vicious cycle as a logical progression, as members of a culture learn the codes and make the connections.24

Throughout the last eighty years, key images and narratives have helped deliver and define Vegemite to Australians. Perhaps the most significant of these is its strong association with the vitamin B complex (Thiamin, Riboflavin and Niacin), and the attendant emphasis on health and nutrition, particularly for young children. Indeed, marketing literature has even targeted pregnant women, in the hope that embryonic babies would imbibe Vegemite, literally, from the womb. Early advertisements drew a direct link between Vegemite and ‘that Vitamin B which babies must have to keep them growing steadily’.25 According to R S White, this spotlight on the body beautiful has been vital to the success of Vegemite. As he writes in Australian Popular Culture:

‘Ever since sporting and fit young men were made part of the propaganda war effort in 1914–18, Australians have been little short of obsessed with the subject. If a product can be marketed to the fitness-conscious it is sure to succeed. Undoubtedly this is so of Vegemite.’26

In One Continuous Picnic, Michael Symons’s history of eating in Australia, Vegemite enters the country’s consciousness at just the right time, seemingly — and, according to the author, misleadingly — embodying both convenience and nutrition. Moreover, it was a fitting emblem for the modern nuclear Australian family. According to Symons:
The nation-building 1920s entrenched the industrial family and the commercial food supply. We discovered cornflakes at breakfast — eroding our claim to ‘meat three times a day’. We discovered snacks like processed cheddar and ice cream and drank orange juice and cocoa. We sobered up, with six-o’clock closing, hotel shutdowns and attempts at prohibition. So nutritious Vegemite was entirely typical of the period.27

Here, it is clear that a brand assumes meaning because of the historical and social context within which it is consumed. The focus is not on any inherent or actual properties that it involves (in this case, brewery waste), but the associations that it calls on for cultural anchorage — those representational elements that stabilise the meanings of Vegemite for Australians.

It is at this associational level that Vegemite has shifted from a mere product to a vaunted icon, representing, in the process, modernity, wholesomeness, domesticity and patriotic duty. Such is the elasticity of a brand’s associations that Vegemite even became a symbol of home-front sacrifice. During the second world war, the Commonwealth Food Control urged citizens to place the nutritional needs of soldiers before their own. With Vegemite temporarily absent from supermarket shelves, advertisements appeared and forged the sacred link. ‘Vegemite fights for the men up north!’ read one; another implored, ‘If you are one of those who don’t need Vegemite medicinally, then thousands of invalids and babies are asking you to deny yourself of it for the time being’.28

Not surprisingly, Vegemite has seized these fortuitous allusions. It has continued to both strengthen its nostalgia value, using promotional techniques predicated on its heritage appeal, as well as positioning itself as an indispensable necessity for future generations. For example, the 1954 jingle ‘Happy Little Vegemites’ has become a staple feature of Vegemite promotions, imbuing the campaigns with a sense of comforting permanence. Indeed, according to the influential industry publication Ad News, the jingle effectively ‘secured the brand’s position in the Australian psyche’.29 In 1991, a Vegemite television commercial, shot on Super-8 to simulate a home-movie effect, was accompanied by the jingle; the message was fairly straightforward — Vegemite was as much a part of the ‘typical’ Aussie childhood as caravan holidays and backyard cricket.

At the same time, Vegemite still reappears at key moments of (post)modern life. For example, in April 1984, a 115-gram jar of Vegemite became part of the nation’s supermarket history as the first product to be electronically scanned at an Australian checkout, at the Chullora Woolworths. What is more, as the product’s eponymous website suggests, the 66-cent jar is on display at Woolworths’ head office in NSW, ‘should anyone feel inclined to make a pilgrimage’.30 In fact, the Vegemite site is a rather savvy fusion of old-world idealism and postmodern marketing. It includes the ‘B Healthy’ page, praising the benefits of a diet rich in Vitamin B, the ‘Time Machine’, which plots the development of Vegemite alongside ‘other’ landmark events, as well as opportunities for schoolchildren to interact through competitions, puzzles, and a sing-a-long. In these ways Vegemite effectively bridges the generational divide, enjoying the rose-coloured glow of age-old memories as well as the stamp of relevance bestowed by modern technology.
Write/up

Vegemite has moved well beyond the grocery aisles to embody and articulate important elements of national identity. From nutrition and patriotism to industry and technology, Vegemite has co-opted key moments in everyday Australian life and bracketed them within its image. Moreover, as John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner argue in *Myths of Oz*, the fact that Vegemite is an American-owned copy of an English product does not at all undermine its cultural credentials. Indeed, Fiske, et al., consider Vegemite an apt metaphor for the ‘Australian cultural accent’, its ‘no-nonsense flexibility’ a characteristic feature of antipodean adaptability — durable, portable and humble. Moreover, as affection for Vegemite is a predominantly ‘popular’ affair, expressed, for the most part, in the private, domestic realms of household kitchens and school tuckshops, it shows all the tactical resilience of a grassroots political movement. Against critics’ claims that Vegemite is rendered either vulnerable or inauthentic by virtue of its foreign ownership and precedent, they write: ‘Cultures that come from below are conditioned to expect exploitation from above, and they display their own strategies of survival and resistance’.

In many ways, the three brands discussed here — Kiwi, Bushells and Vegemite — contribute to the Australian cultural accent. If an accent is identified by inflection, with subtle indicators recognised and adopted by locals, then these three brands warrant inclusion. In the branding process, as it has been argued, questions of image and narrative trump those of origin and ownership. What matters is how these brands resonate at the connotative level, since it is these associations that ultimately imbue a brand with meanings, differentiating it in the minds of consumers from other brands. In terms of evaluation this might well seem, at first, a familiar exercise, parading tired clichés and stereotypes. Still, this should not impede analytical enquiry or invite automatic rebuke. As these brands have shown, these clichés and stereotypes did not just ‘appear’ but were made and re-made, with important interests at stake. Mapping these processes takes the analyst across media and over time, as the maintenance of such apparent icons takes more effort and enterprise than is generally conceded.
Notes to pp 116–128

Buy Australiana: Diggers, Drovers and Vegemite
Susie Khamis

1 Henry Thornton (the ‘nom de plume of a prominent economist’), ‘Saving Australia’, Quadrant, December 1998, p 32.
6 The product originally appeared as ‘Kiwi Boot Polish’. While it is now generally referred to as ‘Kiwi Shoe Polish’, from the 1970s the Kiwi tin simply stated ‘Kiwi’.
9 ibid. p 24.
10 ibid. p 27.
11 ibid. p 28.
13 Cozzolino, op cit, ‘Colour Section’, p B.
17 Peter Luck, Australian Icons: Things that Make Us What We Are, William Heinemann Australia, Melbourne, 1992, p v.
18 ibid. p 11.
20 ibid. p 81.
22 ‘Down Under’, written by Colin Hay and Ron Strykert, from the album Business As Usual, 1981, CBS.
23 Cozzolino, op. cit., p 144.
24 Stuart Hall, ‘Introduction’ in Stuart Hall (ed.), Representation: Cultural Representations and
Notes to pp 128–138

27 Symons, op. cit., p 132.
28 ibid. p 165.
30 At www.vegemite.com.au, accessed 16/07/03.
32 ibid.