

THE BUSH MYTH: CONVENTIONS AND COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

The Australian bush has several meanings. Conspicuously, the bush is an environment of both nostalgic loss and regeneration, and is a contradictory place capable of signifying homeliness and otherness. This article examines the durability of the myth of the Australian bush as a locale for the universalization of capital, employment and environmental management and as a resource for traditional concepts of Australian identity.

Keywords: *myth, bush, nostalgic, regeneration*

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The bush is the source of one of Australia's most enduring myths – that of the bush worker, representing traditional 'Australian' values of mateship, egalitarianism and irreverence towards authority – the robust pioneer in a harsh, unforgiving land. From the latter decades of the nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth century, many white, especially male, Australians could identify with its representation in popular literature and films. Yet although this myth has considerable historical substance – resonating through such nation-defining events as the Eureka Stockade and the Gallipoli landings – its practical relevance has been declining for decades, as people and wealth have become increasingly concentrated in the nation's major cities.

In this context, we evaluate the traditional mythology of the Australian bush and consider its potential for creating a sense of place alongside the growing internationalization of the Australian workforce. Through this article we go on to explore the resilience of Australia's rural communities and the continuing role of the bush myth. This myth, we argue, retains considerable power for both rural and urban Australians, particularly as a source for popular critique of contemporary finance capital, although it may discourage deeper analysis.

The meaning of the bush for urban dwellers, tourists, and new immigrants to Australia is usually as a place evoking images of both homeliness and estrangement. Its vastness and isolation have the capacity to inspire in people mixed emotions of domesticity, wonderment and confrontation with the unknown. The bush is harsh and unyielding, yet has the constant potential to burst into life; and its evident proximity to the urban landscape imposes a challenging contrast between the 'natural' and the 'built' environments.

This strangeness and otherness of the bush was portrayed well, for example, in the film *Lantana* (2001), which addressed, amongst other themes, issues of trust in human relationships. These relationships were filmed on locations within urban and suburban Australian society. The inhabitants' lives were portrayed as meshing uneasily with the bush landscape, which was characterized by extreme weather, noisy insects and dense vegetation. It represented the bush as being a place where individuals can progressively retreat until they become hidden from their social environs. *Lantana* is a plant that was introduced to Australia and which has since become classified as a noxious weed. It has the capacity to entangle, choke and destroy areas of native bush. Visually it is deceptive with its brightly coloured flowers but, as many Australian inhabitants know, its sweet, rather sickly smell can be less than enchanting. It is an olfactory cue to its exclusivity and destructiveness: the micro-environment of *lantana* is home to only a few animals and plants. The image of social relationships in the film *Lantana* is markedly different from the persona of the bush pioneer who is commonly portrayed as rural and down-to-earth. The traditional, pioneer Aussie 'battler' occupies the natural and social contexts of large tracts of bushland and small, tight-knit 'built' communities, typically where people are said to pull together, offering support and friendship to newcomers.

Indeed, it is worth remembering that Australia has for well over a hundred years been a mainly urban country, with the majority of its population living fewer than 200 kilometers from the sea. Today the political, economic and social imbalance between coastal fringe and rural areas is greater than ever. With the diminished employment in agriculture and mining, much of rural Australia has suffered population drift to major cities and regional centers, and basic services such as rail and bank offices have been withdrawn. Many formerly prosperous rural areas now see tourism as their main source of economic salvation: hence 2002 was the 'Year of the Outback.' Alongside this urban migration, the image of the pioneer taming the land has inevitably become less relevant.

The bush is neither indestructible nor endlessly capable of regeneration in the face of many of the ills of (post-) industrial society. Clearly, there is a tremendous amount still to be achieved if the Australian urban landscape and the bush are to coexist more effectively than

they have done over the previous two centuries. The population of Australia continues to grow and put further pressure on the bush vegetation especially on the coastal fringes.

If we rewrite the bush myth within the paradigm of sustainable development, the sustainable future of the bush then became more of a problem during colonial settlement. Trends towards globalization herald yet a further phase of interdependency and complication of the issues. The internationalization of capital and employment holds vital significance for the bush as the surrounding context for Australians' residence, livelihood and recreation.

Australia in today's terms remains a distant land, rendering it harder to feel spatially and temporally close to other places in Asia, Africa, Europe or the Americas. Does the myth of the Australian bush, therefore, stand for increasing isolation and irrelevance against the forces of globalization? Assuming that influential Australians continue to aspire to be international in outlook, will the traditional myth of the bush continue to be reinterpreted and play a central role within mainstream Australian culture or will it primarily come to be both a place and a myth signifying difference, resistance and protest?

Plainly, the bush is not just a relic of the past and retains the natural capacity to make its presence felt – as in the fires that raged in Sydney's outer suburbs, albeit unfortunately with the aid of the occasional delinquent 'firebug.' For many urban Australians today, the real outback presents an uncomfortable vision as portrayed in different works of bush writers and poets.

The traditional bush myth may be refashioned as a narrative of rapprochement with indigenous people. Once set in the context of current political and cultural moves towards reconciliation between non-indigenous and indigenous Australians, the official myth we interpret remains however problematic through steadfastly asserting Anglo-Celtic privilege over the bush.

Thus, the old myth of the bush may hinder the domestic integration of a diverse workforce by presenting an outmoded colonial history of place. Any new myth reinterpreted out of the old one will have to portray somehow greater compatibility of the natural environment with, on the one hand, the forces of internationalisation, and on the other hand, the contested

claims of local ownership, particularly those of indigenous people. If the 'natural' home of any new official myth of the bush is to be supportive of a collective consciousness favouring global territorialization of place and transnational business, the limits to the plasticity of the traditional myth of the bush need to be understood.

The traditional myth of the Australian bush, we propose, often serves to hide more than to raise questions on the nature of national identity, social conformity and social rebellion in Australia.

Consideration of national celebrations like Anzac Day and their comparison to the myth of the bush reveal similar political and symbolic dynamics. Anzac Day is the anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli on 25th April 1915 and continues to mobilise several hundred thousand people attending memorial services and marches. He argued that individual recollection is a battlefield where we fight within ourselves to establish a particular memory of our experiences and do so by repressing alternative memories, accounts and personal histories. The Anzac Legend portrays the Australian national character as being primarily male, egalitarian in nature, enterprising and independent-minded although loyal to the group. These qualities were said to be fostered in the Australian bush and tried and tested in war when the nation 'came of age.' The legend was deliberately developed and constructed by nation builders.

This paper also discusses the bush romanticism and the legendary bushman myth by playing with gender roles and stereotypes with a strong focus on the real hard bush life of women. After a theoretical introduction to the whole topic, the realistic depiction of the bush myth in Australian context, the interaction between bushmen and bushwomen is significant in portraying bush life in outback. Thereafter, paper focuses on social factors of bush life, on how the relationship between men and women in the bush and how all this influences the female bush inhabitants. The analysis is based on the Bush Studies from 1997. The Australian bush - a mythical and fascinating space that has been the setting of many films and all kinds of literature, and which is an interesting field for literary scholars, especially from the late 19th century, the time of national writing, onwards. During this time, the outback used to be

described as a hostile, but also romantic environment, loved and feared by the people who lived there, people who were perfectly assimilated and happy with their lives in the bush. The legendary bushman myth was born; a myth that described the outward appearance and character of the typical Australian bushman, explaining why he adapted so properly to the hard environment. All these stories, including the origin of the bushman myth itself, were however made up and written down by male authors, who did not intend to include important female characters to their stories. The typical bushman was simply a man. Women and their lives in the bush did not play a big role in the literature of that time. One of the few Australian authors like Barbara Baynton who had her first short story published under the title "The Tramp" in 1896 in the Christmas edition of the Bulletin. Founded in Sydney in 1880, the Bulletin was instrumental in developing the idea of Australian nationalism. It was originally a popular commercial weekly rather than a literary magazine but in the 1890s, with the literary critic A.G. Stephens as its editor, it was to become "something like a national literary club for a new generation of writers". Stephens published work by many young Australian writers, including the short story writer Henry Lawson and the poet "Banjo" Paterson and in 1901 he celebrated Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* as the first Australian novel.

Women are conspicuously absent in this description of Australian life as they are in the work of Henry Lawson whose stories have come to be seen as the 'perfect' example of nationalistic writing. In the titles of his stories women, if they exist at all, are seen as appendages of men: "The Drover's Wife," "The Selector's Daughter." They are defined at best by their physical characteristics: "That Pretty Girl in the Army," but more often than not are specifically excluded: "No Place for a Woman" or reduced to silence: "She Wouldn't Speak." In the texts themselves the narrators are either anonymous or male and male mateship is valued above marriage. In Lawson's most well-known stories the bush is a destructive force against which man must wage a constant battle. The landscape, perhaps predictably, is depicted in feminine terms either as a cruel mother who threatens to destroy her son or as a dangerous virgin who leads man into deadly temptation. Men survive by rallying together and are always ready to help a "mate" in distress. Women are left at home and are shown to be contented

with their role as homemaker: “All days are much the same to her ... But this bushwoman is used to the loneliness of it ... She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children”. Baynton's stories challenge this vision of life in the bush in a number of ways: the majority of her protagonists are female; the real danger comes not from the bush but from the men who inhabit it.

The Australian traditions and societal customs within which bush habitants managed to outsmart the might of cultural and traditional bush myth of early 19th and 20th century Empirical studies of what it is to be Australian suggest that traditionalist conceptions of the bush and mateship remain robust sources of meaning for both Australian citizens and immigrants. We propose that the myth of the bush will continue to return in the popular mind and in the media even when it appears to be pushed to the point of irrelevance through the internationalization of finance, employment and environmental management. Much of the resilience and flexibility of the bush myth arises from its common mythical facility for multiple interpretations and its tendency to persuade by emotional appeal. It is difficult to predict how exactly the bush myth will continue to evolve and yet remain compatible with increased universalization. Our argument has been that as a collective vehicle it will successfully endure and moreover will retain its power to dissuade people from engaging in deeper analysis of issues of conformity and non-conformity in Australia.

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