

The University of New England
9 September 1997

The Russel Ward Lecture

'Finding a New Legend'

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It is a great honour to be giving this lecture, and it is a great pleasure, as well, for it brings me back to the place where I became an adult, where I learned what I was for and what I was good at, and where, of course, I met Russel Ward.

Much has been written about Russel, and I have written a little of it. I do not mind repeating myself in this place and at this time. He was my supervisor when I began as a postgraduate student in 1959, and I was his first such student. He was a good supervisor, interested in what I did, anxious that I do well and that I do it out of my own wits, not out of his, careful in his assessment of my drafts, and clear about the limits to his own knowledge. He became a good friend, and from that time until his death very many years later, we corresponded, not regularly but often. We wrote about our reactions to each other's work, and we wrote, too, about our own personal lives and the trials we encountered. Part of his life story pushed me into writing a novel, though he did not wholly approve of the uses to which I put it in that fiction. He tried to get me to come back here on a couple of occasions, and accepted in good part that I had left for good reason and that my course lay elsewhere.

But I had of course met him before 1959. He arrived at UNE two years earlier along with another recent ANU PhD, Eric Fry, who also became my friend, to teach in the History Department. Both of them had a hand in our third year subject, on British Imperial and Colonial History. Eric would agree that Russel was the more memorable, if only because of his booming voice and exuberant manner. His style, oddly for one who was famous for writing about 'Australianness' and whose affiliation was to the Left, was that of a former Colonel, probably in the British Army. As students we did not know what to make of him. But we did know that he knew his stuff. For part of the year he carried it with him into lectures and tutorials, a ragged copy of his ANU doctoral thesis, with bits of paper stuffed into it and trailing from it. He would open it and declaim. Indeed, he liked declaiming, and would do so without any thesis or any props at all.

That tattered thesis we discovered next year, our final Honours year, had become the widely acclaimed book, *The Australian Legend*. He was to write many other books, but this is the one which made him famous and the one I will refer to tonight. When it appeared in print none of us thought it necessary to buy a copy, not only because we were poor, but because we thought we knew it all pretty well. As with some of the other important books of my life (like

Hancock's *Australia*) I discovered on re-reading it for tonight's purposes that a number of ideas I thought I had independently formed came straightforwardly from this book. But there was real pleasure in the re-reading. It is a book which stands up very well to a forty-year passage of time. Its greatest weakness is its insistent use of the masculine and concentration on the lives and experience of men. I do not think that was a fatal flaw, because early white Australia, especially that in the bush, was a society in which women were often scarce in number and reduced in influence. His developmental thesis about the way and the why Australians thought about themselves in the early part of the 20th century sounds as plausible today as it did then.

It is important to be clear about what that thesis was. Russel was interested in 'the development of the Australian self-image' (page v — all references are from the OUP paperback of the second edition, published in 1966) or 'the Australian legend or national mystique' (vi). This was not what the average Australian thought, but 'what the *typical* ... / Australian likes (or in some cases dislikes) to believe he is like' (vi/vii). He stressed the word *typical* because it pointed to what was different about peoples rather what was similar. And he went past simple thought structures:

a people's idea of itself ... though often absurdly romanticized and exaggerated, is always connected with reality in two ways. It springs largely from a people's past experiences, and it often modifies current events by colouring men's ideas of how they ought 'typically' to behave. (1)

As I probably don't have to tell you, the Australian people's idea of itself, according to Ward, was developed and spread by pastoral workers who drew on the ideas, songs and values of convict shepherds and those born in the colony, who were disproportionately to be found in the bush. They had an opportunity quickly to develop a widespread independent tradition, for a number of reasons — the absence of an aristocratic class, the great distance of Britain from Australia (which made going 'home' difficult), the better material conditions for ordinary people in Australia, the prevailing labour shortage, the aggressiveness of the Irish, the nomadic nature of pastoral work, the shortage of women in the bush, and so on.

That independent tradition — the legend itself — Russel summarised in one paragraph, which is terse enough to repeat as he wrote it.

According to myth the 'typical Australian' is a practical / man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing 'to have a go' at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is 'near enough'. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause. He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. Though he is 'the world's best confidence man', he is usually taciturn rather than talkative, one who endures

stoically rather than one who acts busily. He is a 'hard case'. sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. He believes that Jack is not only as good as his master but, at least in principle, probably a good deal better, and so he is a great 'knocker' of eminent people unless, as in the case of his sporting heroes, they are distinguished by physical prowess. He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when these qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen. Yet he is very hospitable and, above all, will stick to his mates through thick and thin, even if he thinks they may be in the wrong. No epithet in his vocabulary is more completely damning than scab', unless it be 'pimp' used in its peculiarly Australasian meaning of 'informer'. He tends to be a rolling stone, highly suspect if he should gather much moss.

(1-2)

What made the book provocative was Ward's insistence that by the time of the second world war a legend with such characteristics had permeated all strata of Australian society, even that of the pastoralists themselves. There had been, after all, another kind of Australian legend, one of Britons who carried the flag of civilisation to the farthest-flung corner of the globe, and preserved there a great sense of the importance of Empire and of 'home'. But there is little doubt that this second version became subdued as a sense of Australian nationalism developed. Not only that, Ward's version of the legend had a much stronger sense of nation-building in it. He argued that if Australia were to be a true nation it would need a universal, unifying sense of itself, for 'without a distinctive national tradition a people lacks cohesion, balance and confidence'. (258) It was clear, though he didn't actually say so, that he thought Australia had come of age, and possessed that cohesion.

The ideas for the book came to him throughout the 1940s and the writing of it took up much of the early 1950s. It was during this process that another great social movement occurred in his country and ours — the immigration of thousands and thousands of people from countries other than the British Isles, a process which has gone on ever since, and continues today. Russel recognised that the legend would have to change, that it was not a static phenomenon:

nothing could be more thoroughly within the tradition than to 'give it a go' — to venture / boldly on new courses of action, and so modify, and even create, traditions as the anonymous bushmen and, later, the men of the 'nineties did. Today's task might well be to develop those features of the Australian legend which still seem valid in modern conditions. (258/9)

It is that task which I want to speak about further tonight. For I believe that Australia does badly need a new sense of itself, a new legend, and the 'cohesion, balance and confidence' which Russel saw as possessed by a people who inhabited a distinctive national tradition. It is plain to me that we presently do not have it, and that in the years which have passed since his book was first published we have somehow or other lost it.

There are many indicators. Hugh Mackay, a thoughtful observer of the Australian psyche, points to a loss of confidence in the country's future possessed by ordinary people everywhere. Youth suicide rates are four times what they were thirty years ago. Politicians are much less respected than they were (indeed, that is probably the case with most of the institutions of society — the judiciary, the churches, universities — about which I will have more to say in a little while — and business). People feel that they have to work even harder simply to stand still. Single-income families, unless the income is very large, are finding it difficult to make ends meet. We seem to be stuck with unemployment rates in which one person in ten (perhaps more accurately one in eight) cannot find work; as the quip has it, there are two kinds of people, the out of work and the overworked. Our rural industries are in trouble, and have been in trouble for a generation. Our manufacturing industries are declining. Our environmental problems seem endless and insoluble. We sometimes seem to be little other than a tourist resort for the world's wealthy.

What brought about this state of affairs? It is not just that we are enduring relatively hard times. That has often been the case, and many other countries are enduring them too. What is missing is the old confident sense of ourselves and our future, the silver lining to the dark economic clouds — the feeling that Australia stood for something important, and that in the uncertain passages of the future it would survive and prosper. It is that feeling of confidence about a society's inner core, its store of values and experiences, that makes a people hang together in the bad times. That is what Russel Ward thought the Australian legend was for: it told us how to behave as Australians. What has happened in our own time to make the old legend less useful? Let us go back a hundred years, to the time when the old legend was achieving its final polish.

In the late 1890s there was a widespread expectation in Europe and the New World that the new century would bring about huge changes, to the betterment of the condition of human beings. Some of the expectations were based on inventions that were already known, like electricity and the telephone, while others were being talked about as possibilities, like flight. The notion that goods could be produced cheaply and thus made available to ordinary people, who for the first time in human history might be well housed, well fed and well fed, was again widespread. When everyone had the vote and everyone had education — and these possibilities also seemed close in the late 1890s — then societies would be fairer and better run. The 20th century did bring these changes, and many more, such as those in medical science, which improved the lot of ordinary people. But, as you know, it also brought world wars, economic depressions and ethnic and religious hostilities of huge proportions. Most Western countries have had universal suffrage and universal education for some generations, but it is arguable that they are much fairer or much better run. The twentieth century — certainly its first half — has been a mixed blessing.

What is more, the second half of the century, while it did not see the next world war that was widely prophesied in the late 1940s, has produced a basket of paradoxes that are at least unsettling, if not actually dismaying, to people like

ourselves. Germany and Japan, defeated and destroyed in 1945, are today the wealthiest countries in the developed world; the victors in 1945 are much less prosperous. Another set of countries, among them the Asian 'tiger cubs', have become economically important, and they have diminished our own role in the world and in our region. Although Australia enjoyed a quarter century of steady economic growth after 1945 there followed another quarter century of 'stagflation', 'stop-start' and a steadily widening gap between the rich and the poor. No-one seems to know what to do about it. Economics, or at least economists, have been in control, but their discipline is not believed and is losing students at a fast rate. We have learned that what we thought was a virtuous endeavour on our part in the 19th century to 'develop' Australia was from a more knowledgeable perspective a disastrous attack on a fragile environment whose damage may not be repairable. Similarly, our old assumptions about the indigenous people of Australia being a 'dying' race and thus able to be ignored have been stood on their head: the Aboriginal people are alive and well, and they are using the legal system and the values we imposed on them to demand a fair go for themselves. The old certainties have gone. Not only have no new ones taken their place, but people are sceptical that there is a solution for any of these problems — perhaps even in the notion of 'solutions' to human problems.

Above all, we have a much diminished shared sense of who we are. That is in part a consequence of all those changes I have been mentioning, but it follows from two other very powerful processes. One is the change in the 'ethnic' composition of Australia, from a land whose population in 1945 was about 95 per cent 'British' in the broadest sense, and overwhelmingly native-born, to a land whose population is in large part the children of recent arrivals and recent arrivals themselves, and their origins are as diverse as the world. There has been a good deal of inter-marriage between the new arrivals and the old, but it would be stretching the use of language to say that those of older immigrant stock have been prepared to embrace all the newcomers in the lovely word 'we'. As Pauline Hanson's dazzling rise to prominence has shown only too well, our country harbours a lot of resentment about the changes which have occurred, and many people in their frustration and incomprehension are prepared to lay the blame either on the newcomers or on the oldest arrivals, the Aboriginal people themselves.

The second great change is connected to the first: it is the shift in our values over the past half-century from the first person plural to the first person singular: from 'we' to 'me'. The second world war was the last great time of community solidarity in Australia. Ever since its end our country, like other Western countries, has seen a decline in the prominence of the community and a rise in the prominence of the individual. We no longer talk much about 'Australian society'. The real focus of attention is 'the economy' and in the economy it is the individual, the rational maximiser of his or her own utilities, who is the actor. I would argue strongly that society should come first, and that 'the economy' is a set of arrangements that we have set up for taking in our washing, not the be-all and end-all of our existence. But that hardly matters here. All received wisdom is about the economy, and the role of the individual. Our language today is full of talk about individual 'rights', but much less about the individual's

'responsibilities'. There is a widespread assumption that the public side of our life hardly matters: if something in the public sector is useful, privatise it; if it's not useful, terminate it. Usefulness is always defined in terms of money. Our present national government exhibits some of this perspective, and from time to time I am tempted to show it off to the world as the first Australian government which is somewhat ashamed to be a government, as though government were somehow intrinsically evil.

The rise of late 20th century individualism has been accompanied also by a loss of the spiritual, a lack of feeling that anything is sacred. Part of the cause has been the sheer material abundance that is now characteristic of Western society and the enormously enhanced capacity for very large numbers of people to do what they like. Much of Christianity's appeal for two thousand years has been to make our mundane existence tolerable, by providing the promise of a better life to come, in a domain flowing with the heavenly equivalents of milk and honey. But if milk and honey are already available in large quantities in the supermarket and the video stores, who needs a life hereafter? Not only that, the church has been an institution of authority with a notable fondness for laying down the law on what is to pass for good behaviour. In a society where the individual is king, and an assertive king at that, religion has increasingly been seen as a negative rather than as a positive force in society.

I can do little more in a lecture like this than to sketch the forces of change. Their interrelationships are rich, and that richness increases the impact of change. But my purpose is, given the changes that have occurred, to point to the need for a new legend, a new account of our historical experience as a society which gives us some confidence that we can navigate the seas of the future, because we have already done well on the seas of the past. To do that will involve us for the moment in abandoning these gloomy examples and looking with some pride at what we have been able to achieve in the last half-century.

I would start with the quality of our society. Compared to the one in which I grew up, modern Australia is incomparably more tolerant, more creative, more curious and more self-confident. Australians may not have a well-defined sense of who they now are, but they no longer have the old colonial cringe. We are talking today about the establishment of an Australian republic, and it is being discussed in an even-tempered fashion and with a proper respect for the seriousness of the subject. All this is in part the positive side of the rise of individualism, and in part a consequence of the immigration of peoples other than the British. Our literature, art, music and theatre are in excellent shape, and very good indeed for a country of 18 million. So are our universities. Despite our material abundance, levels of personal aspiration and achievement are high. We may no longer lead the world in tennis, but in the huge domain of sports that the world now acknowledges — about a hundred of them — we are notable performers in very many and at the very top in several.

The disenchantment with 'multi-culturalism' exhibited by Mrs Hanson (and by senior people in the present Government) should not allow the achievements of Australia in the last fifty years in this field to pass without recognition.

Immigration into Australia has occurred peacefully and profitably, and with a great deal of goodwill. There has been a high level of concern for those who have come to our country, and assistance for them to overcome the barriers of language and custom. It may well be true that the adoption of multi-culturalism by many native-born Australians of British ancestry has not gone far beyond an adventure with other people's cuisine. But with which country should we be compared? Australian attitudes towards ethnic and race differences are substantially more tolerant than those of any of the countries to our North. Only Canada, in my opinion, would rival Australia in its record over the last fifty years, and the leavening effect of immigration has proceeded further and more usefully in our country. (Of course, it could be argued that we needed such leavening more than the Canadians did!)

The other side of immigration is our relations with our own indigenous people. I am not a black armband historian, and I want to point out that the Mabo and Wik judgments, the report of the Royal Commission into the 'stolen generation', and much earlier the 1967 referendum result, coupled with the opening of the education system to indigenous Australians and their increasing success on that escalator, demonstrate that we are coming to terms with our past. No, it is not happening as quickly as many people would wish, but it is happening, and in my judgment the push for reconciliation is unstoppable. That we have come as far as we have come, given the previous 150 years, is a distinct mark in Australia's favour, not an occasion for the beating of breasts and the tearing of hair.

I remain convinced that the lack of political will to tackle the question of unemployment as a social disaster rather than an unfortunate aspect of the labour market is a piece of national myopia (and connected, of course, to the loss of a feeling for the quality of our society, not simply of ourselves). But if I set that to the side for a moment, it cannot be denied that Australia remains a decently wealthy country. True, the gap between rich and poor is far too high, and growing, not declining. But much the same is happening in other Western countries, too. In the past fifteen years we have found the will to restructure our industrial base, have become involved with the economies of Asia, and have learned how to do new things well. We remain high on the list of desirable countries, whether measured by the 'Big Mac' index, the most livable cities index, or the social indicators index. It helps to start rich, but Australia has managed itself reasonably well over the past half-century; we are neither another Argentina nor an incipient banana republic.

So there is a credit side to the ledger. If we are to adapt the Australian legend, should we not do so around these successes? Russel would be happy enough to build in a rapprochement with indigenous Australians: he called racism 'the most discreditable and dangerous component of the legend'. (258) He would want to put into it, too, the move to construct an Australian republic. He would, I think, find in our acceptance of immigrants from everywhere direct links with the egalitarianism that was part of the legend from its very beginnings. He would see in our search for new sources of national wealth and income a long-standing pragmatism as well as our urge to experiment: 'if that doesn't work, try something else!' A lover of songs and ballads, he would want to build in our

creativity, and see that as being at the very core of our identity. He would be encouraged by the diversity of our multi-cultural Australia, not affronted by it. He would be puzzled by the loss of confidence.

And he would want to remind us that the core of the Australian legend was the desire to create a new kind of society, one in which people were equally deserving of respect, whatever their race, their sex, their religion or their age. It would be a society which celebrated creativity and excellence, and fair dealing, and compassion for one another. It would have a strong sense of 'us'. Yes, the people who first set about this task were people who had been rejected by their own society on the other side of the world. But they were soon joined by the native-born. Our society has been added to in large numbers since the end of the second world war, and the great majority of them have been people rejected by or rejecting the societies they left behind. They too have been joined by their native-born descendants. It is well to remember that the Aboriginal people have also been rejected, as well as dispossessed. A common thread connects us all.

In the past fifty years we have built a nation that has no need to hang its head, for it has achieved a great transformation. In half a lifetime we have moved from being a constipated Anglo-Celtic colony to being an effervescent multi-cultural society, without having lost a common language, effective and democratic political institutions or the rule of law. We have done all of this without bloodshed, and in a marvellously accepting and positive way. We should take great pride in these achievements because, as I have said, only one country comes close to us in this respect. And we need that confidence in order to recapture some other parts of the Australian national task: the building of a model society under the Southern Cross.

What we need is a more inclusive sense of 'us', one which demonstrates our independence while it links us to the wider world, from which most of us have come. 'We the Australians' must include our indigenous people, and the people from many other countries whose languages and customs are not similar to those the first British immigrants brought with them. There is much to be done in bringing about that further transformation, especially in respect of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We need to recapture a sense of 'a fair go', and apply it to the new realities of the very late 20th century. We need to remember that the building of a society is never completed and that, with due respect to our Prime Minister, it is less important to feel comfortable now than it is to try to ensure that our children and grandchildren have a better society to live in than the one we ourselves inherited. The Australian legend has strong relevance to our situation today, because it contains within it the Australian mission. Let us continue it.

I would like to finish with an application of my argument tonight to universities. I have known well four Australian universities and two in other countries. All of them have had to come to terms with the same kinds of changes that confronted their societies, and all of them have their own legends: an account of how each came to be, the purposes it serves, the values it stands for, the triumphs and tragedies that stand out in each university's history. Although universities are

fonding of emphasising their longevity and their ancient traditions, I think it is true to say that the university of the very late 20th century is not only fundamentally different to past institutions of the same name, but entering a world in which its role and purpose are likely to change powerfully yet again. We are becoming the shapers of our species, because it is human knowledge, and the applications of human knowledge, which alone will extricate humanity from the problems of its own superabundance on this planet. The legends of each university will need to be relevant not simply to the past, but to the tumultuous future. Most will need to be re-interpreted.

In thinking about this lecture over the past few months I have been struck by the differing ways in which the need for re-interpretation applies to my own universities. The University of Canberra, which is only eight years old as a 'university', has been able to develop a sense of itself that is based on an earlier existence as a most successful college of advanced education and a situation in the national capital, which allows it to play a national and international role with perfect propriety. The past aspects of its legend are not as important as the future. Macquarie University, where I served in the 1970s, began as a university characterised, like the University of Canberra, by a dedication to high quality teaching and learning. It has been able to adapt its legend to include a strong focus on research without seeming to lose its earlier distinction.

My other two universities in this country are the Australian National University and the University of New England. Both, it seems to me, are searching for a new legend or for a way to modernise an old legend without sacrificing its virtues. For each the reasons are quite straightforward. The ANU began as a postwar response to a desperate wartime need, for highly skilled scientific and technical people who could respond quickly and effectively to the demands of war. Australia needed a world-class research institution so that the best and brightest did not have to leave their country in order to complete their education. The establishment of the University by the Commonwealth Government soon after the war was a proper response. But we have no such shortages today, and there are many other high-quality universities at which the best and brightest can complete their education. So the ANU needs a new account of itself, something that looks forward rather than backward, something that gives its staff and students a feeling of mission and of possessing a special quality or a special purpose. This is not proving easy, but it has to be persevered with.

Can I suggest that there is something similar in your present situation? The University of New England was set up as the first university outside the major cities. It is no longer distinctive in that respect. It was early entrusted with a special responsibility in developing an Australian style of distance education. It is no longer distinctive in that respect either. It was once special in having a lot of students in residence. That too is now a shared quality. It pioneered university study in important aspects of the primary industries of Australia. There too other universities have followed. Of course it is harder to be special when there are 37 universities, and not 8 or 19, and the world of higher education is now competitive in an unprecedented (and nationally unhelpful) way.

But the effort to define a new mission and to adapt the legend to that direction is a most important one. Now, as never before, a university needs a good sense of itself, one that is built around what it does best and those for whom its continued existence is most important. I know that you have begun to chart your own future, and I urge you to take seriously the task of re-defining who you are and why you are important: that will mean a re-examination of the old legend. I am sure that Russel Ward, a former Professor of History of this University as well as a former Deputy Chancellor, would agree.

2 September 1997