

AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

Hunt continues for elusive dinkum Aussie - or is the notion just a crock?

Steve Waldon The Age 9 September 2006.

Steve Irwin's death had revived debate on being quintessentially Australian, writes Steve Waldon.

NOT for the first time, the essence of the dinkum Aussie - even its existence - is being examined.

With this week's death of buoyant adventurer Steve Irwin, the nation is again reviewing its character.

The question we are asking is: when we looked at Irwin, what did we think we were seeing?

Did his version of knockabout blonde Aussie sit easily with most, or did we sometimes wince and hope that the rest of the world did not think Irwin represented us?

Some of the people interviewed for this article said that 10 years ago, they were vaguely uncomfortable with Irwin's self-promotion, but they felt energised by his irrepressibility.

They also noted that, even if he was overtly "ocker", he spoke lovingly of his wife and children, and always maintained that his showmanship was designed to attract attention to wildlife conservation issues.

Now, with overwhelming anecdotal evidence that Irwin was the same "bloke" off-screen as on, some who were sceptical about his public persona are relieved, because they didn't want to find out he was not authentic.

There is a loose consensus about Irwin: he was not typical of us at all. In some cases, he was the antithesis, perpetuating a mythology built around the resolute outdoor type.

But he did seem to personify much of the spirit that is usually thought to have its antecedents in the travails of the early explorers, the men and women on the goldfields, the testing of mettle at Gallipoli, the Country Women's Association - perhaps even Bodyline.

Historian Geoffrey Blainey says modern Australia has not entirely dismissed its outback heritage as no longer relevant, even though a character like Steve Irwin seems increasingly remote from the cosmopolitan nature of city life.

"When we talk about the quintessential Australian, we still largely think outside the cities, to our history on the land - we retain that memory of adventure," he says.

"I think we like to believe that as a nation we have certain characteristics that other nations do not."

Singer John Williamson agrees. He says the reason koalas, kangaroos and emus are popular motifs in our creative culture is because no one else has them.

To Williamson, Irwin was a living celebration of who we are.

"Off-camera, I found him a humble person, with a disarming innocence," he says.

Williamson says Irwin understood that indigenous Australians had a special relationship with the land long before settlement.

Barry Humphries, who, in his creations Barry McKenzie, Sir Les Patterson and Dame Edna Everage, has arguably spent more time than anyone exposing the kernel of the Australia character, told The Age he was "devastated by this tragic loss".

Federal Opposition Finance spokesman Lindsay Tanner, who grew up in the bush but lives in Melbourne, says Irwin was a kind of "modern Clancy of the Overflow".

That sort of figure, he says, exemplifies the difficulty of pinning down the nature of the Aussie character.

We like to identify with the robust bushman, the same way we find the Anzac spirit commendable.

"But there is also something mysterious and inaccessible about characters like Steve Irwin," Tanner says.

"That's why his death is so confronting," Tanner says.

"It's because the ultimate negative thing happened to a highly positive person."

Writer and broadcaster John Doyle says Irwin represented something of an Aussie continuum.

"It's a lineage you can trace back to Chips Rafferty, and he also inherited it from previous generations," Doyle says.

Doyle lives in Sydney but has long enjoyed immersing himself in the bush, where he can leave alter-ego Roy Slaven at home.

A five-part documentary series he made with the author and scientist Tim Flannery begins on the ABC on September 19.

In it, Doyle and Flannery travel along the Darling-Murray river system in the archetypal Australian tinnie.

Doyle says Irwin projected qualities that appealed to Australians.

"What people look for in characters like (Paul Hogan's Crocodile) Dundee and Steve Irwin is honesty," he says.

"They find it refreshing when all the bullshit is cut through."

Doyle thinks we want to retain whatever sense remains that Australians are capable and no-nonsense.

"We're not as innocent as a nation as we once were, so we look back to the qualities that we understand to be representative of the Australian spirit.

"We like to think that, put on the spot, we could be as straight as an arrow.

"That we could hold up an end and take a few bouncers to the body and the helmet so that the bloke at the other end could get his maiden Test century."

AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

Growing pains: how are we changing?

Duncan Markham.

The late 'noughties' are looking good. Australians are confident. Our athletes shine. Our international profile is strong. Our sense of self has evolved - but how?

Where once the "Australian way of life" was just a weak scaffold of toil, opportunity, hardship and some egalitarianism, we seem to be approaching an edifice of self-confidence and overt patriotism. The politicians' favourite demographic - the newly coined "Middle Australia" - lounges in McMansion suburbs, has zero household savings, and seems happy as long as the shops are full of shiny things. We're calm about Australia's love of property, despite warnings about unprecedented levels of debt. She'll be right!

Optimism is one of the central tenets of the Australian cliché. "No worries" - we don't fear a touch of adversity. It's part of the "laid back" attitude we're famous for. Middle Australia might have noticed the skyrocketing prices of mandarins, and the family trip to Bali might have been deferred for more immediate reasons than terrorism, but things will be right as rain sometime soon.

Farmers might not agree. Being Australian is more than being a well-off suburban with a plasma TV and a 4WD. The drought continues and prospects remain bleak for many on the land. And for those people who must surely be labeled "Bottom Australia", diluted welfare and flexible employment conditions aren't necessarily the stuff of hope and happiness for more vulnerable members of society. (Best not to reflect on what being 'Australian' means for the indigenous population!)

Nonetheless, the 'October 2005 Australian Unity Index of Wellbeing' indicated broad, robust levels of personal satisfaction with life here, even in households earning less than \$15,000. International events haven't

dampened satisfaction, despite constant reminders. In fact, Australians appear to be happier with life at home since the terrorist atrocities on foreign soil.

Australians like their lot, especially within a broader context. We know that foreigners quite like this place, and Australia has been punching above its weight on international issues - whether terrorism, trade, asylum seeker policy, entertainment or sport.

The Olympics and Commonwealth Games were glowing successes and Australia has long been buoyed by sporting achievement. The national catch-cry of the 'noughties', "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie. Oy! Oy! Oy!", embodies the confidence of a nation once better known for a subservient attitude both to its colonial mother and to "culture" anywhere but home.

Our confidence makes it possible, in a melting pot of peoples and cultures, to start talking about "un-Australian" behaviour or attitudes, and the balance of respect and lively debate seems bereft of our once famous sense of humour. We've found we can justify not giving a "fair go" to everyone who comes here and we've discovered unimagined racial tensions in our largest city. Not quite the old cliché, but perhaps Australianism has become something else. Has a young nation grown up?

Australians love the outdoors and sport. We're obsessed with lifestyle but also work hard (putting in more hours than in almost any other OECD country). Wealth and material well-being are important elements of the national discourse, and we're largely indifferent to political and social issues. A sense of fairness is intact, but moderated by an emphasis on individual fulfillment and guarding our turf. It seems we're not so young and not so free anymore.

AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

With loyalty tests, we're on the way to dull conformity

Natasha Cica The Age Opinion 12 September 2006

A chunk of my early career occurred in Britain. The weather was terrible, London's tube was packed with begging homeless, and we lived in a basement shoebox. Plus my Australian passport meant queuing for visas with desperate asylum seekers at a grim if nicely named processing centre called Lunar House, although I didn't have to sign or salute any Pommie Values Manifesto.

"Why on earth are you here?" asked a Scottish friend who worked for the BBC. "It's the 1990s not the 1960s. And Australia has such wonderful beaches!"

Good points. Tempted to say "proximate to Paris", I picked three more apt words. "Reading Julie Burchill," I answered. "Great point," he conceded.

British Burchill, now in her late 40s, started paid and published writing in the punk era. Lots of drugs and husbands (three to date, including one toy boy), two sons, one lesbian love affair, and a host of books, columns and TV shows later, Burchill's made her mark as a kind of perceptive-pen provocateur. She's taken aim at established correctness wherever she's selectively spotted it, from her broadsheet perches at The Guardian, then The Times.

Her roller-coaster ride of favoured polemical positions has made Germaine Greer look staid and stable. In the 1980s, Burchill miraculously blended support for Thatcher and the Soviet Union, and she's subsequently whacked Islam, Europe, wowsers, wet liberals, Camille Paglia and Prince Charlie's consort. Tony Blair declared Britain's class war over in 1999, but Burchill's kept fighting it tooth and lacquered nail - most colourfully in her championing of 'chavs', the British equivalent of our cashed-up bogans, at the expense of their so-called betters who, opined Burchill, "should be more shame-faced in their weird, status-needy spending, be it on five types of extortionately priced organic lettuce in a

poxy salad, (or) a king's ransom on a fortnight's living death in a mausoleum in Tuscany".

I have rarely shared Burchill's point of political view. That's almost beside this point. I love a sunburnt beach, but what the Brits do better is allow mainstream space for perspectives, and styles of expression, that directly challenge familiar frames of wisdom and dissidence. Edgy energy does exist in Australia - in spades, but where does it end up? Consider Ryan Heath, whose recent book *Please Just F**k Off: It's Our Turn Now* is a full-frontal attack on what Heath terms the boomer-heavy Australian mediocracy.

Local critics reacted harshly but, with too few exceptions, paid little attention to the core argument. (Melbourne academic Mark Davis' important book *Gangland*, criticising the clubbish, negative attitude of Australia's entrenched culture brokers, met a similar fate in 1997.)

London-based Heath's counterblast: "There's a noticeable schoolyard mentality among reasonably powerful people in Australia. You get treated with suspicion or contempt if you are different in some way. Where I find that problematic, apart from lack of exploitation of talent or innovation, is that in England difference is something that generally marks you out as an asset rather than a liability."

As playwright Stephen Sewell wrote in *The Age* last weekend, "we are entering the world of the whispered conversation, where the only people who can speak loudly - shrilly - are the ones endorsing the official line". What this spells, says Sewell, is dull conformity.

Instead of iconoclasts who prick our thought balloons, we're gorging on Aussie icons. There's nothing inherently wrong with celebrating Peter Brock, Steve Irwin, Germaine Greer or Shane Warne (OK, there are big problems with Warne), but there should be limits and balance.

There's so much more to 21st century Australia than the tired comfy-zone of sporting heroes, larrikins and the Oz gang of '69. Where were the feature spreads marking last week's death of children's author and teacher Colin Thiele, illuminating his special contribution to our national identity?

Where was coast-to-coast outrage at the recent ousting of Scott Meek as newish head of drama at ABC-TV, a talented Scotsman who reputedly doesn't

suffer fools, believes that writers and directors are hired to be creators not bureaucrats, and that the national broadcaster should be spending its paltry budget on high-quality products that pack some meaning punch? What does all this say about the Australian values that visitors, migrants and citizens are increasingly expected to sign on to? And who's crafting that party-line jingle, and accompanying lunatic loyalty tests built on misty-eyed jingoism? Bert Newton?