

present value for stock » and so on. He was unequivocal in recommending that domestic and foreign investment be stringently confined, for the foreseeable future, to the comparatively well-endowed fringes – which offered an enormous expanse of territory by European and most international standards, anyway.

The Australia Unlimited rallying-cry was closely allied to a resurgent form of postwar nationalism-imperialism which argued that the country's « vast empty spaces » (like those of Canada) would provide *lebensraum* for the white inhabitants of the British Empire, thereby reviving its great international mission and maintaining the global balance of power. Astute politicians and bureaucrats were well aware that favoured nations within the imperial fold could expect increases in capital investment. It is nonetheless difficult to comprehend the apparent success of the bizarre corruptions of spatial reasoning which flavoured the campaign. Briefly, the most significant of these reckonings drummed home the argument that, since Australia's national territory was roughly as extensive as that of the United States, and far exceeded that of Western Europe, the scope for further development must therefore be virtually endless.

Taylor's indignant response was to cite the presence of geographically analogous regions of some notoriety in the wider world – North Africa, for example. Nationalist-imperialist boosters accused him of treachery and black pessimism ; he was savagely lampooned in the populist press ; and his deployment of « arid » and « desert » across the western Centre earned indignant rebukes from patriotic and influential Western Australians, who ensured that his textbook on the geography of Australia was formally banned in that isolated and insecure state. At a high point in the debate, his protagonists hired a noted « possibilist » from North America to tour the purportedly maligned Centre and to wage battle in the daily

press with the archetypal « environmental determinist » – thus, one of academic geography's more seminal global controversies, captured and to some extent actually anticipated in the provincial antipodean media.

2. Soldiers and war correspondents returning from fronts in the Middle East were keen to discover more about their own desert heritage. They swelled the ranks of contemporaries who had found special reasons for disputing Taylor's stark pronouncements. A kind of candid patriotism is implied once again, but it was inseparable from the common need of reflective immigrants to seek spiritual sustenance in the adopted home, rather than surviving from one generation to the next in a state of emotional exile. In short, there were intensifications of the intellectual and aesthetic trends of the late colonial era ; that became very noticeable during the Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s. Privileged by a new-found respect and affection arising from these developments, the Centre was given a more positive image. Its new title was the *Red Heart*. As indicated in a flurry of immensely popular and (partly responsive) scientific publications, the reference was generally to the region's trademark sands and soils, and most pointedly to the throbbing luminescence of the enigmatic, powerfully symbolic Ayers Rock. In these conceptions, the territory signified in *Red Heart* was truly *living* space: Taylor's attempts at rationalistic interment came to naught.

It is vital to deflect metropolitan presumptions of a merely elitist preoccupation. There were many highly successful popularisations: some of the books, for example, ran into several editions, with sales in the scores of thousands – this, in a comparatively well-educated, generally prosperous and largely urbanised nation which numbered less than six million in the mid-1920s. For a steady succession of writers, artists and scientists, the Centre became much

more than a rite of passage: it took on the status of a *hadj*. Pilgrims alternately tested themselves and their equipment against the elements, made notes on the customs and rituals of the indigenous inhabitants, collected specimens, drew or painted and shared those skills with native artists. Directly and vicariously, the same alarmists who had excluded non-whites from the immigration programmes could now rejoice at the undeniably *Australian* character of the Centre, acknowledge the qualities of uncontaminated indigenous ways, and occasionally even admit to a yearning to experience an equivalent companionship with aridity's distinctive landscapes – confessing, that is, to a passion for a kind of Aboriginality by osmosis.

3. New ideas for dramatic change in the interior served to burnish the image. The most robust of these was the aptly entitled *Boomerang Plan* of « Jack » (Ion) Idriess, one of Australia's most popular contemporary writers (Idriess, 1943). Essentially, Idriess reinflated old hopes for the « turning back » of selected eastern rivers into Lake Eyre, thus definitively redeeming the Centre. This scheme was refined in the proposal of renowned engineer J.J.C. Bradfield, of Sydney Harbor Bridge fame. As a special brand of wishful thinking it extended back to Gregory's day – and much further. Cargo-cultish, it refused to go away, despite repeated contemptuous dismissals from national and international environmental experts, and the issue added to the Centre's mystique.

The new evaluations were not diminished by a seeming naiveté: indeed, that was of course part of the appeal. Even before World War II, but especially during the later 1940s and 1950s, no travel book in Australia was considered complete without a section on the Centre. It had become emblematic. At first, only the wealthier Australians could indulge in the visits urged on them by these authors, but increa-

sing numbers eventually did so, and the cinema and other forms of armchair-travelling compensated the remainder. The flood of European immigrants into the cities seemed to break some of the spell of the Centre after the 1950s, but it would be reinvigorated in the closing decades of the century.

Rationalism and Genuflection

1. Seldom well understood – then or now – in Europe, Australia's chapter of the Cold War saga commenced in earnest in 1942, with the capitulation of Britain's much-vaunted Singapore garrison to Japanese troops and the bombing of Darwin. Advocates of a shift from British to American protectors argued that the Centre's true *raison d'être* was simply as strategic *buffer*. In that representation, neglect or underdevelopment was more than acceptable: it was preferable.

Firm consensus was never reached on the military significance of the Centre and its « Top End » (far North) neighbour, and the buffer concept contended with other security-conscious visualisations from the last years of World War II until the 1960s. *Frontier* emerged as the obvious alternative image. According to its critics, this notion promoted an « EDNA » (or Economic Development of the North) complex, which became implicated in a succession of expensive projects in tropical Australia: the construction and servicing of a network of long-distance « beef roads » for the burgeoning export meat industry ; gigantic irrigation schemes ; and new investments in sugar cane and a range of plantation crops (Powell, 1991b). Most of these projects impinged on the Centre but their major impacts were dispersed across its eastern, northern and northwestern margins. A related proposal regarding the completion of the shelved section of the south-north transcontinental railway, connecting

backing and by recent sensationalised media coverage of the charge that pesticide residues in export beef had been traced to supplementary feed derived from the waste of cotton crops.

Faced with the prospect of the sudden loss of critical water supplies and revered family heritage, Channel Country ranchers organised the early protests and succeeded in recruiting public sympathy from around the nation. They were soon joined by local indigenous communities and by politically astute environmentalists and scientists, who had been preparing a detailed World Heritage Nomination for the « desert wetlands » of the Lake Eyre system. Lake Eyre itself was located within South Australia and, historically, the governments of that state were super-sensitive about the « unilateral » actions of « upstream » neighbours ; a sharp and very public rebuke was despatched. The ranchers then declared that unless cotton, the « drought-maker », was forced to retreat, they would sever all connections with their customary political champions in the state and federal parliaments. At that point (1996) the Queensland government withdrew its endorsement.

The Battle of Cooper's Creek re-focused a predominantly urban, immigrant nation on its continuously unfolding, peculiarly geographical history. The furore was swiftly dramatised in the media as a set of stark polarities: national cultural and ecological icon *versus* tasteless developmentalism, the mighty dollar ; authentically native, family-based, cattle-raising tradition and historically-accredited landscape authorship *versus* modern, American-leaning, high-technology agribusiness with a dubious record ; the admired independence of vigorous station life, vividly storied, *versus* the connotations of slavery, poor sharecroppers and despised, money-shuffling futures brokers. So the heartland survived, apparently ; but the surprising coalition of interests which deliver-

ed that victory would soon be tested again, when variants on the old Boomerang Plan were aired in Queensland and in the federal parliament...

In truth, the 1990s were as nervous as the 1890s and clearly, one of the greatest uncertainties concerned the bond between land and community. The invading or immigrant culture, now based on an acclaimed multi-cultural and even multi-racial admixture, was understandably handicapped in its adaptation by a full-bored political marketing of its hypothetical membership of a bustling Asia-Pacific bloc, and by a less than perfect appreciation of Australia's geographical history. Yet the very maturation signified and fostered by the achievement of that domestic admixture guaranteed a more generous appreciation of the rights and values of the indigenous peoples, who were increasingly described as the « first Australians ».

In 1992 the Australian High Court delivered its decision that « Native Title » was part of the Common Law of Australia – thus rejecting the *terra nullius* assumption which had held that, at the time of the initial white invasion, the country was not already occupied by people who displayed a recognisable social and political organisation. A *Native Title Act* was passed in the following year. One interesting aspect of the legal process was that it derived from a case concerning some of Queensland's offshore islands (Mercer, 1995). A good deal of media and academic commentary was similarly drawn to « Aboriginal land rights » across the continent's northern periphery, where the prospects for establishing the required proofs of long-sustained occupancy seemed greater, since vibrant traditional cultures had survived. But these critiques often overlooked the earlier gains in the Centre, where generally similar continuities had already facilitated a number of resolutions supporting indigenous claims (Powell, 1991a). Certainly, by the early 1980s,

