

# EMIGRANT NATION

## MAT TRINCA



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photo: George Serras

The Melbourne Cup is Australia's pre-eminent annual sporting event. For a few minutes each year the nation *really* does stop and collectively hold its breath while a squad of thoroughbreds races at Flemington. This year's outpouring of public emotion when Makybe Diva rewrote history by winning a third Cup is proof of that.

And it's not just Australians glued to their TV sets at home who comprise the national community on the first Tuesday in November. When the Governor-General, Major-General Michael Jeffery, presented the Cup to the Diva's owner, Tony Santic, he took care in his address to acknowledge the 'one million Australians living overseas'.

The Victorian Racing Club estimates that about 700 million people in more than 120 countries tuned in to watch the Cup. As an international event, expatriate Australians – and those on holidays overseas – can usually find somewhere to watch the race and symbolically rejoin, if only for a few minutes, their compatriots at home. These travellers are said to constitute a diaspora, spread to all corners of the globe.

Professor Graeme Hugo, of the University of Adelaide, is an authority on the so-called 'Australian diaspora', a phrase that still provokes a start. After all, we are accustomed to seeing ourselves as a migrant community, distinguished by British and Irish immigration and the strong growth of migration from continental Europe and Asia after 1950. Yet Prof. Hugo wants us to see Australia as an 'emigrant nation' too.

The figures back his view. While the tradition of Australians travelling overseas in search of adventure and experience is well-established, the numbers of young Australians who now leave the country 'permanently' has grown. In 2003, 25,612 Australians departed for a new life overseas. Hugo argues that many of them now see London, New York or another global city as 'the ultimate destination in their career advancement'. Their motivation is increasingly 'economic and career-related'.

Add to this the 150,000 plus 'long-term' departures and four million Australians who take overseas holidays each year, and it becomes clear that the country is strongly engaged with the rest of the world. All these people become participants in the societies they visit, or live within. They play a part in people's lives and influence the course of events overseas.

In some cases, such as that of Anzac pilgrims at Gallipoli, travelling Australians create new rituals that become part of the nation's history. The National Museum now hosts a website that chronicles latter-day experiences at Anzac Cove. While the commemorations vary in character and sensitivity, there is no mistaking the emotion:

This was the dream that every Aussie and Kiwi, and quite a few Turks, had dreamt since childhood. To be at Gallipoli for Anzac Day, and particularly to experience this moment, was something that I don't think you could top really (*Glenn Morrison, 19 May 2001*).

The Australian backpackers at Gallipoli are not only marking the lives lost in the Great War, they are also claiming their place in a national lineage. In this, they have much in common with Australians who have visited Europe, particularly Britain, since the colonial period. Travel is an opportunity for experiencing the new and novel, as well as a chance to create or reconfirm a personal geography of the self.

Take the words of Sir Raymond Connelly, a past Lord Mayor of Melbourne. Connelly was in London in 1948 and exhorted his claim to a shared British heritage:

As long as members of the Empire refer to London as "coming home" the Empire is safe. . . Australia is more British than this island in which we are to-day. In the short week in which I have been here I feel I would like to put a little blood transfusion into some of the British people as far as loyalty is concerned. I have found that people here are despondent . . . Please do not be despondent, the people of Australia know that you have had six or seven years of hell and your greatest admirers are those who have not had a bomb fall on them (Connelly in *United Empire*, 1948).

Connelly's words seem archaic – even a trifle arrogant – with the benefit of fifty years' hindsight. Most startling was his claim that Australia was 'more British' than Britain. But, just like the backpackers at Anzac, Connelly was forging an understanding of his life and his culture in the course of travels overseas. Being away allowed him to see his Australian home in a new light, at least in his own terms.

Australian history has always been about what has happened elsewhere, as much as here. Tragically, events in recent years have brought this home to us with horrific consequences. The loss of lives in the World Trade Centre in 2001 and the Bali bombings are now seared into our collective memory. Any remaining sense of innocence about Australia's place in the world has been erased.

The Museum has already established collections to mark the Bali tragedies and September 11 attacks. It also recently accepted a collection related to the bombing at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, in 2004. A new gallery planned to open at the Museum in late 2007, *Australian Journeys*, will include the stories of Australians overseas alongside those of migrants to this country. All this acknowledges a simple fact – that Australian experience is not bound by the nation's borders but is tethered, whether we like it or not, to the rest of the world. 🗨️

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