SEMAPHORE

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AUSTRALIA'S ABSENT MARITIME NATIONAL IDENTITY

The Australian national identity is immature when compared to most other nations. We are still a very young nation and struggle in all kinds of ways not only to understand our collective identity, but also what it is that we want that identity to be. This is exemplified in the changing concepts, ideas and values that Australian's have accepted as defining features of their culture over the years. These include the colonisation of Australia and the 'man versus nature' ethos, the notion of Australia as the 'child of Mother Britain', the bush myth, and the ANZAC legend, to mention only a few. A national identity is an important intertwining of past, present and future and comprises a myriad of images, feelings, collective and individual actions and responses, values, institutions, misconceptions and interactions with other nations. The confusion and ambivalence that is present in Australian society



The First Fleet 1788

today can possibly be attributed not only to our youth and relatively short history, but also to our incomplete understanding of the significance of our origins.

To adopt a truly meaningful and mature national identity for Australia, we must learn more from our unique heritage. Heritage is more than simply the preservation of the past (our 'official' history); it is 'profoundly symbolic: how and what we value in the past says something about how we see ourselves as a community today and how we project ourselves into the future:¹. That is, we are able to choose which aspects and lessons of our past we want to bring with us into the future. It is particularly important to note that while the notion of heritage is much more than a simple historical account, history provides a strong basis upon which our heritage is built. The collection of historical information itself, and the way it is conveyed (ie. the degree to which we suffer from 'historical amnesia'²), can

unintentionally blur and distort the meaning and symbolisms of a nation's heritage, and thus its culture and definable identity.

Given that 'we', as in those who came in 1788 to colonise Australia, came by ship, and the greatest influence of our early beginnings came from the Royal Navy, one may be forgiven for assuming that Australia's national identity is largely supported by a significant attachment to, and affinity with, the sea. Moreover, all immigration came by sea until the late 1960s, and the focus of illegal immigration since the early 1970s has been on the arrival of 'boat people' from Vietnam and the Middle East. Since Federation almost seven million people have arrived in Australia, the majority by sea. The sea is a great deal more than a coastline and a beach for recreation, but a necessary part of life that supports trade, provides a variety of important resources and, for Australia, defines a unique strategic environment.

Take, for example, the mythology surrounding British penal colonisation, which has largely displaced a primary maritime strategic driver for the colony's creation. While the closing down of America as a penal destination as a result of the Revolutionary War (1776-1783) required a new focus for transportation, there were closer areas in the Empire to which convicts could be sent at far less cost. However, by the early 1780s Britain was also at war with France, Spain and Holland, all of which had a growing presence in the South Seas. 'Australia sat astride three great ocean basins - the Indian, Pacific and Southern - Australia was too large a land mass to ignore and would inevitably become of some strategic importance.'3 A port in Australia would provide a strategic location to replenish and refit Royal Navy ships operating against Britain's enemies in the south. Botany Bay presented a site protected by distance, and therefore relatively easily defended by a small naval and military presence. Convicts would provide a source of cheap labour to build the colony. Ancillary benefits of the new settlement would be the reduction of the overcrowded jails and hulks in Britain, and the opening of new sources of materials, such as timber and flax, on the southern continent.

The early colonies had much to do with the sea, in particular for resources and trade. Stories of our early history are filled with evidence that the maritime and naval focus persisted, at least, within the more privileged members of the colony. Indeed, John Hunter, the second Governor of the Colony, began very early to build a 'Naval Department' and supplied the colony with many of its first vessels. However Phillip had left instructions that Hunter should under no circumstances allow any type of sea craft to be built for the use of individuals⁵. This might provide at least part of the puzzle as to why the majority of Australians even today understand very little about our maritime heritage and dependence, while the Government has focused to one degree or another since colonisation, on





the development of naval power, merchant shipping and the necessary expansion of seaborne trade.

What this may suggest, is that for the wider population our maritime heritage hasn't been 'lost', but that it was never really acknowledged. Early colonisation and the practices of the Governors may have had a direct bearing on this, when the implications of the colony being populated largely with convicts are considered. Many convicts had spent months or years in the foetid prison hulks, all ex-Royal Navy warships, awaiting trial. This was followed by the approximately eight-month long voyage chained below decks. The sea and the Navy thus formed the convict's first experience of prison. Secondly, Phillip's mandate that no convict be allowed to build and use any type of sea craft once in Australia (obviously with the possibility of escape in mind) turned the sea into the bars of an even greater prison. While few convicts were transported for life (most sentences were six years), the sea would remain a barrier to return to the home country.

Further than that, the First Fleet arrived in Australia expecting a bountiful land that would easily support their needs, but found the land to be largely inhospitable. This at least for a time, turned the convict's perspective continental, as the new struggle was against the harsh Australian landscape and in so many ways their livelihood relied upon its being conquered. Add to this the fact that as time wore on many sailors deliberately deserted their ships in Sydney and headed inland. As a result they were unlikely to admit their method of arrival in the colony and deliberately left their maritime knowledge and background behind⁶. There is some anecdotal evidence that suggests that they too turned to continental pursuits, and worked on railway construction and the building of other infrastructure⁷. It may also be fair to say that as the colonies grew and infrastructure expanded people were gradually moved, physically and psychologically, further and further from the sea, until in their knowledge and memory supplies and other resources came by land and from the land.

The ANZAC legend is another example of how history can be interpreted. For all intents and purposes it has provided Australians since 1915 with a set of collective values, beliefs, sentiments and approaches to life. Since its 'birth'⁸ it has been one of the greatest defining elements of our nationhood and is referred to as the primary point of reference for our national pride and spirit. However, it also upholds a continentalist perspective in terms of military engagement, and a skewed perspective of Australia's full contribution to World War I. Historically, we know that the majority of our troops were deployed to the Western Front, and that the campaign at Gallipoli was the first involvement in the conflict by the Australian & New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). Gallipoli was neither the first Australian operation of the war (that occurred in German New Guinea in 1914) nor the most costly. In seven months Australia suffered some 27,000 casualties, including 8,000 killed or missing. During its seven weeks on the Somme in Jul-Sep 1916 (covering the battles for Fromelles, Pozieres, Moquet Farm and Thiepval), the 1st ANZAC Corps suffered over 28,000 casualties, including 8,600 killed or missing. The ANZAC legend exemplifies the power of history in the creation of a strong national identity. However, it also represents the kind of historical amnesia that can impact on national identity in the longer term, if other important events in our national history lose their visibility. The question for Australia is what part the ANZAC legend should play in our national identity into the future. The recent campaign to give greater visibility to the

'Battle for Australia' in WW2 alongside the ANZAC legend is an example of the move to broaden our national identity based on an expanded historical base.

Finally, very few Australians are employed directly in seagoing activities. The Royal Australian Navy has some 18,300 personnel, including reserves. The pool of Australian owned shipping is small and overall employment in the Water Transport industry is approximately 15,000, not all of whom are seagoing. The commercial fishing industry employs approximately 28,000 in the resource capture process. In all, in an island nation with a population of 20 million, less than 0.3 percent go to sea for a living. It is an indication of how Australia views the sea, which is its trading lifeline, that the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Government's official demographic collection and analysis agency, does not maintain distinct statistics on seagoing employment.

These are just a few potential keys to understanding how the maritime focus in Australia might have shifted to a continentalist one. If a continentalist perspective is not what we want to take with us into the future, then we must collectively re-examine the significance of the maritime environment within which Australia has always operated, and arrive at the conclusion that Australia's maritime heritage is a substantial and undeniably important aspect of Australia's heritage. For Australia to be a truly effective maritime nation within existing and future world orders, we must learn as a nation all of the relevant lessons of our past and draw on our significant resources, not the least of which, is our maritime experience and heritage.

Frame, T.R. (1990). *The Garden Island*. Kangaroo Press.

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Includes international sea transport, coastal water transport and inland water transport.

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Ang, I. (2001). Intertwining Histories: Heritage and Diversity. Paper presented as the Annual History Lecture for the History Council of NSW.

Ibid, p 1.

⁴ Ibid. See also Blainey, G. (1983). The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History. Pan Macmillan.

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For a theory of how the ANZAC legend was deliberately fostered by the media, see for example Williams, J. (1999). ANZACS, the Media and the Great War. UNSW Press.