

Letter From Australia

by R.J. Stove

Geoffrey Blainey and the Multicultural Nirvana



One's kindest possible response to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's typical attempt at a sitcom is Mark Twain's quip about *The Vicar of Wakefield*: "Nothing could be funnier than its pathos, and nothing could be sadder than its humour." Hence the astonished pleasure inspired by the Corporation's dazzling new comedy *Frontline*. A merciless skewering of current-affairs talking heads' moral pretensions, *Frontline* initially leaves viewers laughing hard enough to incur hernias, and afterward leaves them awestruck at its parodistic brilliance. Its second series contained the show's most horribly acute episode yet: a chilling tale about a harmless and mild-mannered professor who has had the impudence to publish a statistical survey of ethnic groups in Australia. His volume is of the driest, least controversial and—one would have hoped—most innocuous sort; but just because it touches, however soporifically, upon race, the *Frontline* motormouths are convinced that its author is a racist. (As Sam, the show's executive producer put it: "Can you find out whether he's got any right-wing affiliations—political, social. . . . Does he like Wagner. . . . Are his parents German?") The climax comes with *Frontline*'s anchorman Mike Moore perfecting his Vyshinsky imitation, at the hapless academic's expense, on prime-time TV:

MIKE: Welcome back. Our nation has been rocked over recent days by the release of a book that some are calling a Third Reich-type document. Entitled *Above Average*, it threatens to tear this country's social fabric apart. It was written by controversial professor Desmond

Lowe, and he joins me now. Thanks for coming on.

PROF: Thank you. I certainly didn't set out to be controversial. . . . My point was to identify prevalence and frequency on a wide range of criteria. It's not a static commentary of predetermination or causal relationships.

MIKE (not grasping this): Sure. I mean, that's obvious. But you mention race.

PROF: Yes . . .

MIKE: You attribute characteristics on the basis of race.

PROF: Statistical characteristics.

MIKE (interrupting): That's racism.

PROF: No.

MIKE: You said it.

PROF: But I . . . It was . . .

MIKE (aggressively): You said it, professor. That's racism. [Cut back to control room.]

SAM (impressed): Wow, Mike. [Cut back to studio.]

PROF: I was pointing to elements that can be altered.

MIKE: Social engineering—isn't that what Hitler did?

PROF: No, no. That's not social engineering.

MIKE: You're an apologist for Hitler.

PROF: I'm referring to my book.

MIKE: So I guess you would deny the holocaust, yes?

Every *Frontline* addict with an IQ of more than single figures knew at once whom the scriptwriters had in mind when creating the professor: Geoffrey Blainey, Australia's finest and most maligned historian. Blainey's publications

(unlike those of Moore's victim) could never be called dry, much less soporific. There, however, the list of differences between him and his fictional counterpart ends.

Five years back, any ABC program which suggested even by implication that Blainey's existence might be defensible in the cosmic scheme of things, let alone that his cogent and dignified criticisms of unrestricted immigration might deserve study, would never have gone to air. These days—though, of course, almost no one in Australian public life has been so hubristic as to suggest that there was anything actually wrong with howling down Blainey in the 1980's—his former attackers tend to be strangely mute. Insofar as Australia's We Hate Blainey Movement continues to function, most of its members come from the mass media's more overtly putrescent elements: from the Mike Moore intellectual stratum, in short. A decade ago the movement attracted, shall we say, a better class of thug: any Sydney or Melbourne lecturer who couldn't attract an ululating rent-a-mob to hear his curses of Blainey The Racist (curses no less sincere for being ritualistic) wasn't even trying. That heady era has long since ended. Where once total certitude as to Blainey's unfitness for human society reigned amid the chattering classes, there is gradually appearing an intimation of sheepish acknowledgment that in certain areas of unambiguous fact he was right and his critics wrong. His last and best book, *A Shorter History of Australia*, has earned reviews so respectful that for all their accuracy they make one's head swim. Can this man, praised on all sides as a genius of his exacting craft, be the Geoffrey Blainey whom these selfsame journals once spoke of in terms that would prematurely whiten Ice-T's hair?

For Blainey the trouble began in 1984, when he gave a Rotary speech at the town of Warrnambool, 250 kilometers southwest of Melbourne. Before that, he had been widely regarded as a figure with, if not mildly leftist sympathies, then at least a conspicuous absence of what in Australia's debauched lexical currency get called "conservative" ones. In 1973, Gough Whitlam had been eager enough to name the 43-year-old

Blainey as the first Literature Board Chairman of the Australia Council, which was and is this country's main arts-funding government department. Nothing in Blainey's public remarks then, or later, suggested that the Whitlam regime regretted its choice of chairman. Still, about Blainey the man, little was known. (For all his journalistic prominence—he has had columns in the *Weekend Australian* and in Melbourne's the *Age*—he seems to have only contempt for an A.J.P. Taylor-like vocation as performing historiographical flea.) Far from being famous for 15 minutes, he was profoundly respected for 15 years. Well before Whitlam's cut-price Camelot, the minority of Australians who read works of history, and the minority within that minority who had even the faintest inclination to appreciate admirable prose, had conceded Blainey's excellence at interpreting Australia's annals: his wielding of the microscope and the telescope with equal finesse, his refusal to let his intense interest in economic developments sink to vulgar determinism, his ability to combine an eye for astounding statistical detail with a positively poetic consciousness of wider philosophical and geopolitical trends. This last talent makes him write, at times, like an improbable—yet improbably convincing—cross between *Trivial Pursuit* and Frederick Jackson Turner.

Whether or not Blainey sees himself as an Australian counterpart to Turner (probably not, since his demeanor is so unpretentious and modest that one imagines he would disdain such comparisons), there is no mistaking the resemblances between the two men's attitudes to their respective nations. In 1988 appeared one of Blainey's least-known but most fascinating works, *The Great See-Saw*, which aimed at nothing less than tracing the history of optimism and pessimism in global economic, political, and cultural affairs from 1750. Here Blainey quotes the noble and melancholy music of Turner's 1903 *Atlantic Monthly* farewell to the pioneer age: "The Western wilds, from the Alleghenies to the Pacific, constituted the richest free gift that was ever spread out before civilized man. Never again can such an opportunity come to the sons of men." For an Australian audience, the dying fall of Turner's plaintive theme acquires, as it were, a Blaineyesque obligato not necessarily audible to American ears. The

knack of conveying what Turner conveys here, an "after the gold rush" sense of satiety, is at least as clear in Blainey's output as in Turner's. He often combines it with a tone of sober reproach for wasted national opportunities, and more generally with a persistent *tristesse* at a people that has squandered its ancestors' spiritual capital. This last quality he saves from any hint of oppressiveness by his taste for quietly sardonic phrasing.

Almost certainly Blainey cited Turner in the confident belief that the relevant passage would be totally new to most of his local readership, because what makes Blainey unique in the postwar Australian milieu (the sheer abundance of uniqueness with Blainey is one of his most notable features) is his preoccupation with the American experience. During the early 1980's, he was Harvard's Professor of Australian Studies, and it is as if he still occupies this chair in spirit if not in person. More recently, he has contributed articles to the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and Washington's quarterly the *National Interest*. In a period when most Australian academics continue nurturing myths that American intellectual life produced nothing of consequence between *Walden* and *Annie Hall*, Blainey has done more than any Crocodile Dundee to keep the trans-Pacific lines of communication open. With this eagerness on his part has gone a lack of *angst* about Australia's British heritage, which is as refreshing as it is, in his profession, rare. To all but a handful of his colleagues, Britain is a veritable King Charles' head: a metaphor which loses none of its aptness through the fact that they are almost all vociferous republicans. For Blainey, by contrast, the British influence on Australian life is neither a divine gift nor the mark of Cain, but simply a fact that no more deserves hysterical abuse than do the multiplication tables.

Much the same temperate attitude informs Blainey's study of the Australia-America relationship. As far back as February 1983, when Paul Hogan was not yet even a gleam in Pauline Kael's eye, Blainey was noting the source of Australia's appeal to certain Americans: "There, almost, is South Dakota, before the first sharp axe was heard. 'If President McKinley or Theodore Roosevelt were alive today, I sometimes think that they would be living in Melbourne, Australia.' That comment came from a

thoughtful American in his seventies." In *A Shorter History of Australia* he treats the topic less impressionistically and more deflatingly:

Most Australians gained strong satisfaction from the feeling that a protective arm was everywhere, that society was fairer. The only catch was the sleight of hand. While part of the welfare bonus came from the redistribution of wealth, especially through the new income tax that richer people paid, much of the new welfare bonus, whether higher money or shorter hours, came from an incredibly complicated series of government regulations and payments which quietly penalized one group of wage earners so that another could be publicly rewarded. The rising umbrella of social security, soothing as it was to people who had battled all their life, also reduced incentives all around.

In the years 1900 to 1925 the United States probably did more than Australia to aid the welfare of people in its control; it passed fewer protective laws but allowed incentives and unrestrained energy to increase the standard of living. . . . There is a delicate balance between shielding people and encouraging them, and the USA perhaps went too far in one direction and Australia in the other. The Soviet Union, born in 1917 and influenced a little by the exciting Australian and New Zealand experiments, would eventually show how the umbrella, if too big and cumbersome, exposed people far more than it protected them.

When Blainey was kind enough to let me interview him at his Melbourne home last November, the subject recurred:

GB: I think you probably learn more about Australian history, in one sense, if you keep American comparisons in mind, than you do from English comparisons, even though we're an English-derived society.

RJS: From the little that I know, many Americans were apparently so impressed with various Australian phenomena that, for example, they referred to the secret

ballot as “the Australian ballot,” which Australians have never done.

GB: Yes, they did in America.

RJS: You’ve mentioned in print the complete turnaround that the Australian Labor Party has made on such matters as tariffs, privatization, and—perhaps above all—immigration. How permanent or impermanent do you think these changes in the ALP mentality are?

GB: It’s astonishing, the move away from protectionism and from government intervention in every facet of Australian life: because that was one of the characteristics of Australian social attitudes. But I don’t see it as permanent. Well, nothing, of course, is! I believe that there will be a time when the forces in favor of regulation will be much stronger in Australia than they are at present.

RJS: Do you think that a neo-Chifley would emerge from the ranks of the ALP? [Ben Chifley, as Prime Minister from 1945-49, severely rationed postwar gasoline use and unsuccessfully aimed to nationalize all banks.]

GB: I don’t see that as impossible.

RJS: In America, there seems to be a rise in America First sentiment: what with Pat Buchanan, Perot getting a fifth of the presidential vote in 1992, and California’s present governor. How likely do you think a similar trend is here within the next five years or so?

GB: America, of course, has got a more acute immigration problem than Australia. I now expect that the reversal will come in America before it comes in Australia. I don’t know what we would do, though, if there were serious political breakdowns in parts of the Indonesian empire. Let’s say, for argument’s sake, that East Timorese came here in their hundreds of thousands. My instinct is that we haven’t got the will to do anything.

It was precisely because Blainey commands the global outlook of the true patriot (in contrast to his foes, who manage to combine endless denunciations of nationalism with a fixed belief in *Terra Australia* as the cynosure of all human history) that his 1984 Warmambool remarks

brewed so destructive a storm. As he dryly observed in *All For Australia*, the long pamphlet which he produced later that year:

Occupying a carefully selected patch of ground in the middle, I was in fact being more provocative than if I had sat at either end. If I had simply said, ‘Let us bring back White Australia,’ my remarks would have been merely a week-long sensation. If I had been at the other extreme, and supported even more Asian immigration, I would not have stood out amongst the variety of bureaucrats, politicians, and intellectuals who wish or say that such is the desirable policy.

For Blainey—as, indeed, for anyone else who has approached the issue with a historian’s detachment, rather than a propagandist’s *ad hominem* spite—it is meaningless to prate about multiculturalism in Australia unless one shows equal determination to examine multiculturalism in our neighbors’ contexts. This is all the more evident if Paul Keating’s slogan “Australia is a part of Asia” has any intellectual plausibility. From how much taxpayer-funded multicultural jabbering do the Chinese benefit in Malaysia; the Vietnamese, in China; the Sikhs, in India; the Tamils, in Sri Lanka; the Karens, in Burma; or the Ainu, in Japan? Might not a genuinely self-Asianizing policy on Australian federal and state governments’ part ensure an increase, rather than a diminution, in the amount of strong-arm stuff that Joe Sixpack may legitimately mete out to the wrong kind of imported personage? These inquiries, during the aftermath of 1984’s anti-Blainey hysteria, had no sooner dawned in Australians’ minds than they were suppressed therefrom. The stentorian cant exuded by such Periclean orators as Stewart West (Bob Hawke’s first Immigration Minister) and Cliff Dolan (then head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions) within weeks of Blainey’s initial speech is best forgotten, as by happy chance West and Dolan have themselves been over the intervening years. Extended quotation from their verbiage in these pages would accord its original sources a respectability which they did nothing, at the time or at subsequent periods, to deserve. What should never be forgotten, however, is the zeal of ostensibly serious

newspapers to ginger up a story that in its original form appeared far too flavorless for comfort. Blainey himself lamented in retrospect:

Human error tended to distort the controversy. The report of my speech in the *Age* contained the strange statement that Asian immigrants should be given \$1,000 to go elsewhere. As I did not make such a statement—it contradicted one of my main arguments—I wrote letters of denial to the press. False news and rumors are never completely overtaken by the subsequent denials, which set out in pursuit. The \$1,000 statement has long since ceased to circulate, but it caused concern and pain to many Asian immigrants. Unfortunately it also gained wide circulation overseas. In Southeast Asia it was never overtaken by the refutation.

In these circumstances, and given the total failure of those responsible for the original misinformation to experience either punishment or remorse, the names of those who did defend Blainey’s warnings (or, more generally, his right to be heard in a culture that brags without surcease of its outward democratic forms) also warrant recollection. John Stone—erstwhile Secretary of the Federal Treasury, and afterward a Queensland senator—was one. Another was Blainey’s fellow Melbourne historian, Claudio Veliz, who considered some of Blainey’s predictions overpessimistic, but who spiritedly trounced Blainey’s more foolish intradisciplinary antagonists. As a Chilean, Veliz possesses a somewhat better-calibrated response mechanism to governmental browbeating than can necessarily be expected from the native tenured product. The pity remains that so few in professional and political circles manifested sufficient moxie to follow Stone’s or Veliz’s lead.

Among the original anti-Blainey fervor’s less predictable consequences was a serious division (quickly papered over, but still noticeable at even the gentlest poking around) within environmentalists’ ranks. Since there, if anywhere, the belief that every prospect pleases and only man is vile could flourish without constraint, logic indicates that the fewer men there are in Australia, the more pleasant Australia’s own prospects will strike environmentalists as being. But

with the emergence of strident opposition to Blainey, the shrewder and more self-interested environmentalists did an 180-degree turn. They had realized that those who actively wished Australia's population to decrease were, if only by default, advocating reduction in immigration levels; were thus laying themselves open to charges of racism; and were guaranteeing that Blainey's fate in civic discourse would be their own. Neither the responsibilities of upholding truth, nor the desire to warn a wide public of threats to the ecosystem that an augmented Australian population might bring, retained any force against the paralyzing terror of being subjected to the same treatment which Blainey had experienced. Beside the prospect of that destiny, mere Malthusian visions of nationwide hunger came to resemble the most evanescent bagatelles.

GB: In the 1970's, the "dark greens" were a powerful source of support for Australia's low-immigration policy. But when I started to make speeches, the "dark greens" retreated almost immediately from the immigration issue. There's a book by Katharine Betts, *Ideology and Immigration*, which mentions what happened.

Dr. Betts, a Melbourne sociologist, discusses in her 1988 volume the Australian Conservation Foundation's plan to hold a conference on population in August 1984. This event was cancelled, she writes, "out of fear that the organization would be associated with the Blainey phenomenon." She continues:

The response to Blainey highlighted the way in which the taboo functioned but it did not remove it. Rather, his experience stood as a salutary warning of the risks of ignoring it. In the absence of Parliamentary opposition to the goal of population increase, and the absence of sustained critical attention from the intelligentsia, the growth lobby experienced no real check.

Twelve years on, the climate of Australian opinion has in some respects melted almost unimaginably. Blainey is now Chancellor at the University of Ballarat, which gold-mining metropolis his writings so often celebrate. Last year the Keating government, with uncharacteristic freedom from fanfare, reduced Aus-

tralian's immigrant quota (which still stands at over 90,000, so we are not exactly about to endure Ethnic Cleansing Time). And yet one only has to pick up a morning tabloid for the *plus a change* syndrome to spring into renewed life.

The scandal of compulsory voting, against which Blainey has long and thus far fruitlessly inveighed, continues: coupled, what is more, with a citizenship policy that makes it literally easier to get an Australian passport than to get an Australian dog license. As of 1984, any grunting Third World monoglot who has managed to reside in Australia for two years has become eligible for citizenship. Nor need he give up citizenship in his country of birth; indeed, an entire governmental propaganda machine exists for encouraging him—even when he needs no encouragement—to keep such prior affiliations, this being a staple of the multicultural nirvana. Seen in the light of this information, the desperate desire of Labor at both the state and federal level to keep compulsory voting on the statute books can be understood. Wherever ethnic lobbies are at their weakest (Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia), there Labor is now also at its weakest.

At the March 2 election, John Howard became Prime Minister with a majority of 42 seats in the House of Representatives. Graeme Campbell easily defeated his ALP opponent (Western Australia's former Deputy Premier Ian Taylor), and obtained 62 percent of the popular vote.

Western Australian Labor parliamentarian Graeme Campbell, Blainey's firmest supporter in the House of Representatives—and one apt to condemn massive immigration in far sharper terms than Blainey has ever employed—was stripped last year of his party's endorsement. (He contested his Kalgoorlie constituency as an Independent.) On what we must apparently continue calling the opposite side of Australian politics, Liberal-National Coalition leader John Howard made it his most earnest endeavor to promise even more handouts for ethnic nomenclatures—not to mention whales, AIDS-infected gay activists, and other such great Australians—than the Labor Party disseminated. Howard has not forgotten the media abuse he received between 1985 and 1989, when in his first term leading the Coalition he actually dared to suggest that heterosexual couples warranted more support than homosexual ones, and that heterosexual

couples who got married and spoke English might be more deserving still.

Amid such spectacles, we could do much worse than ponder a weighty and yet unassertive sentence that Blainey published eight years ago: "Democracy is a freak condition in the world's history: civil liberties are not common liberties even today, and most people in the world have never possessed them." When the eueptic delusions of Fukuyama have been altogether lost to memory—or else relegated to a footnote of unsavory scholarship, rather like Kraft-Ebing—the stoic temper of a Blainey will remain to reassure and daunt: a temper simultaneously as antique as Seneca, and as modern in its unillusioned patience as Primo Levi.

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Letter From Lagado University by John N. Frary

Resourcemammal Eroticism



Readers who have been attentive to the slashing edge of the Postmodernist Project will be aware of Lagado University's vanguard role at the Modern Language Association's 1995 meeting. On that occasion a session conducted entirely by the LU English Department's faculty, "Intersections of Sex and Animal Husbandry: The Love that Dare not Low its Name," was rated the most innovative presentation in MLA history. Oscar Odsodd's "The Erotic Moos: Articulations of Bovine Buggery," Vito-Extravaganza Piustranostrano's "Sheep Thrills: Engendering the Ovine Other," and Hector Mondo-Bizarro's "Phrasing the Graze: Intimations of Man-Kine Eroticism on Alluvial Plains in Eighteenth Century Spanish Pastoral Poetry" concerted an unprecedented challenge to homospeciesnormativity's underlying assumptions. It was received with an enthusiasm befitting its importance.

It is not surprising, then, that the Lagado faculty's papers drew large audi-