The Australian Stamp: Image, Design and Ideology

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On reading that Gillian Bradshaw* had taught in a school of art and design, and having to choose my own topic for this lecture, my thoughts turned to postage stamps. My predecessors in this series chose topics more related to fine art, so it seemed appropriate to redress the balance, perhaps even to suggest ways in which techniques devised for art history and theory could be useful for analysing design. While in the past I had sometimes used postage stamps as pegs upon which to hang historical information I had acquired from written sources, they started to provide primary evidence in their own right. Additional facts came from the stamps' imagery, but as I grew more alert to visual codes, the designs became part of the raw material available for interpretation.

While there is opportunity for several approaches, mine will be thematic inasmuch as the material will be grouped under six headings: Numbers, Kings and Kangaroos, Frames and Spaces, Women, Aborigines, the Class Struggle. The content will be empirical with only brief excursions into theoretical questions, although Gramsci's notion of hegemony runs through the analysis.

The main source will be what appears on the stamps and no attempt has been made to check these readings against archival holdings,[1] a lack that is only partly the result of pressure of time. One of my objectives is to encourage historians to treat visual evidence with the same enthusiasm they do newspapers and Hansards. If all literary sources about European Australia were to vaporize at midnight, we would be hugely impoverished, but no more so than we are at present when so many historians behave as if visual sources had never existed, or are useful only as illustrations to prettify a text.

Numbers

Before turning our attention to the individual images, the variety of images deserves some comment. No matter which theoretical approaches one adopts, there remains a duty to count.

Equally important as any cross-categorization of images by theme and time period is the increasing rate at which new issues are appearing. From 1901 to 1913, the Commonwealth produced no designs of its own. Between 1913 and 1927, the definitives of kangaroos, king's head and kookaburra were the sole images on sale. Variations were confined to price, watermarks, perforations, printing techniques and paper qualities. The first commemorative appeared in 1927, the next in 1929.

Those figures demonstrate the late and slow start in contrast with 1986 when the Commonwealth issued fifty-three different images on its postage stamps in the one year. It had taken thirty-four years, from 1913 to 1947, for an equivalent number of images to go on sale. If we begin with the first commemorative, that is, with 1927, it was not until 1949 that fifty-three different images had appeared. To indicate something of the pace of this change, compare the number of new images issued each decennial year since 1927, when there was only one; 1937, again one; 1947, four; 1957, three; 1967, eight; 1977, seventeen; and in 1987, more than three times as many different images as became available a decade before. In fact, half of the total number of 950 images have been released during the past eleven years.

How are we to explain this accelerating turnover of images? Since we can rule out that Australia Post has been responding to demands from the bulk of its customers, what other forces have been at work?

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* Humphrey McQueen delivered the following as the Gillian Bradshaw Memorial Lecture, entitled 'Image, Design and Ideology in Australian Postage Stamps', at Curtin University of Technology, 29 October 1987.

1. For an excellent case study based on archival materials see Jim Davidson, '"A new kind of Stamp": the New South Wales Centennial Issue of 1888', *Australia 1888*, Bulletin 14, September 1986, pp. 3-15.

First, there is every government's perception of how to promote itself and its priorities. For example, the first commemorative publicized the new federal parliament house in Canberra. The 1950 series on Produce Food, like the 1960 Export example, was a propaganda exercise whose message remains obvious.[2] A less blatant but no less forthright statement was clear in the 1970 stamp for the Expo in Japan. The Japanese characters translate as 'from the country of the south with warm feeling', though Australians did not have to be fluent in Japanese to pick up that meaning. Similarly, the designs used to present the Australian flag have varied according to the government's preoccupations. Compare the issues for Australia Day in 1978, when the flag appeared as a breeze-blown form, with the one brought out in 1987 and identified as a high-tech flag in conformity with the Government's economic strategy. For that occasion, Prime Minister Hawke had intervened to ensure that the 'Australia Made' logo appeared; Australia Post complied by adding a second thirty-seven cent stamp.

The corporate needs of Australia Post since it became a statutory corporation in 1975 are another reason why there have been so many images created during the past eleven years. The turnover of philatelic materials is a profitable line as well as a piece of prestige promotion. Each new issue is an instance of corporate advertising to the buying public, a reminder that Australia Post is part of the dynamics of Australian development. More specifically, Australia Post has produced a plethora of images highlighting postal activities and heritage.

Kings and Kangas

Although the Commonwealth of Australia had been proclaimed on 1 January 1901, the first Commonwealth postage stamps did not go on sale until 2 January 1913. In the interval, stamps that had been issued by the colonies continued in use, though New South Wales offered its own hybrid. The reasons for this twelve-year delay were administrative and political. Because the Commonwealth bureaucracy was in its infancy, the manufacture of postage stamps did not have precedence over the establishment of the High Court, the introduction of compulsory military training or the imposition of a 'language test' on non-Anglo-Saxon migrants. How different from the celebrations associated with the post-war decolonization in Africa when the issuing of postage stamps became another mark of nationhood. The delay in producing Australian stamps is a further indication that Federation was more a way of binding Australia to Britain than declaring our independence within the Empire.

Eighty years later, we still have 'God Save the Queen' as one of our national anthems, the Queen of England as Queen of Australia and Queensland, and the Union Jack in our national flag. At least we have not incorporated the monarch's head on every stamp as is done in Great Britain. One of the very few instances of that happening on an Australian stamp was in 1954 when Her Majesty unveiled the US War Memorial that towers over the Defence Offices in Canberra, a multiple statement that the United States had displaced Britain as our greatest and most powerful friend.

Here it is worth noting that there is no reason why postage stamps should carry any imagery or decoration whatsoever. Ideological elements in the image and design are available for analysis because the authorities chose not to issue postal rate stickers of the kind now coming out of calculating machines on post office counters. Unlike those adhesive receipts, postage stamps were not merely utilitarian. The inclusion of images has meant that the postage stamp was supposed to do more than prove that the charges for delivery have been met.

Conflict between imperial loyalties and Australian patriotism was a second source of delay. The 1905 Labor Party Objective had called for the cultivation of a national sentiment. Labor won a clear majority in both houses at the 1910 elections. The Postal Rates Act of 1910 cleared the way for the issuing of a uniform series on behalf of the Commonwealth.

The 1910 Labor Government favoured a kangaroo design while the Opposition preferred the king's head. The first kangaroo issues went on sale a few months before Labor lost the 1913 elections. The new Liberal Government accelerated production of a George V image, the first and engraved example of which appeared in December 1913. Release of a complete George V series started on 17 July 1914, shortly before Labor won the double dissolution elections. War broke out early in August, making resources so scarce that the Labor Government kept both kings and kangaroos in production. Imperial sentiment during the war and the self-destruction of the Labor Government late in 1916 meant that the king's head series became the more readily available image.[3]

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2. **Readers not familiar with the imagery of Australian postal stamps are referred to the latest edition of *The Australasian Stamp Catalogue*, Dubbo, Seven Seas Stamps Pty Ltd.**

The 1913 image of the kangaroo on the map of Australia continued to be issued until 1945, especially for higher and less usual denominations, making them among the most expensive examples for Australian philately. The two pound black-and-red is listed at $2,500 in the most recent edition of the postage stamp pocket catalogue. On that scale of values, it can be said that the kangaroo won out in the end.

Watermarks deserve mention since nine of the eleven designs showed a crown resting on the triangular letter A. Depending on one's outlook, this arrangement could be read as the Commonwealth either upholding or being suppressed by imperial links.

The kangaroo did not have to hold the bush by its own efforts. In 1914, a 6d. kookaburra appeared, followed by another kookaburra as well as a lyrebird in 1932, the latter being a product of the 1931-32 Scullin Labor Government which had appointed an Australian-born Governor-General against the wishes of King George V. A zoological series commenced in 1937 when the platypus made its first appearance, followed in the sesquicentenary year of 1938 by the first koala. The emu had to wait another ten years before making its debut at 5½d.

The inclusion of a sheep in the 1938 zoological set highlighted the equation of the outback with pastoralism, a social force stressed by the commemoration of the death of John Macarthur with a portrait of a merino ram and not of the old rebel himself, still less of his wife, Elizabeth, who had managed the estates while John was either 'at home' or insane. A hereford bull was added to the zoological series in 1948, in a further confusion of the natural with the agricultural. Though it is not surprising that the rabbit has never appeared, the original design of the 1913 kangaroo was altered to remove a tuft of grass that looked like rabbit ears.

In more recent years, so great a variety of native flora and fauna has been depicted that it is no longer informative to examine all the individual examples. Suffice it to say that a country whose stamps have included one showing a stonefish can be judged to be fairly relaxed about its environment. The days of acclimatizing sparrows, foxes and hares are well and truly behind us.

Nonetheless, recently settled people like Australians are always going to have some difficulty in deciding what is exotic and what is indigenous. Interplay between British origins and Australian adaptation reappeared in the 1980 series on dogs that included the Australian terrier, and the 1982 set on locally bred roses.

A further change has come with the rise of the ecological movement. Instead of concentrating on typically native animals, the iconography of stamps has expanded to show entire environments, such as Mt Field in Tasmania. That kind of subject had not been used since the 1899 pictorial series whose object had been to promote Tasmanian scenery to potential tourists. In addition, the built environment has been included as worthy of notice if not of preservation. Buchanan's hotel in Townsville lives on as a stamp image because the building itself spontaneously combusted after a conservation order had been applied. That Australia is no longer equated with the non-human is clear from the appearance of works of art and literature on our stamps.

The extent of native images suggests that if declining economic fortunes ever oblige the Commonwealth to reduce its issue of stamps to a single image, the choice would be for an indigenous subject. A few voices would still support the monarch's head, but the chorus would call for a kangaroo.

Frames and Spaces

Following the open conflict between King-Emperor and Big Red in 1913 and 1914, the contest between the imperial and the indigenous was reproduced along the margins of postage stamps. The impulse toward native imagery included a border war over framing or other design elements.

Comparing the design of the 1913 with that of the 1914 George V, the most striking difference is that the Australian image was open and free-standing while the British monarch was supported by an enclosing oval frame. If the kangaroo has any frame, it is the map of the Australian continent, while a broad band separates the king from his Australian supports of kangaroo, emu and wattle.

No one-for-one correlation has existed between local imagery and open-spaced presentation. For instance, the kookaburra was unframed while the same year's lyrebird came in a scalloped border. Two years before, the bust of Charles Sturt had been framed by a lyrebird tail and Aboriginal weapons. As an explorer, Sturt had helped to prove the vastness of this land, and had had his share of battles against the Aborigines. As a national hero fit

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3. For a more detailed account see Australian Postage Stamps, *The Early Federal Period, 1901 – 1912-13* and *The 1913-14 Recess Printed Series and the King George V Sideface and Pictorial Definitive Stamps*, published by the Australian Post Office without bibliographical details.

for a stamp, he was depicted as being confined within a frame constructed from museum relics of his expeditions.

The 1937 mythological and monarch's head series were both largely unframed. The free-standing emu found itself fenced by two side panels of native orchids in 1947. At that time, the King and Queen went back into frames which were supported by varieties of local flora, or a pair of blue wrens.

Australianness was not just a matter of the central image. Its presence was as often to be found in the stuffage or in the openness of the design, especially in the absence of any form of framing. Nowhere were these tensions between image and design more apparent than in the 1929 issue for Western Australia's centenary. Inevitably, there was a swan, whose blackness had once been evidence for European observers of the grotesqueness of this continent. Yet by 1929, the black swan was the insignia of Western Australia, and had appeared on eighteen of the colony's stamps between 1854 and 1912. The other five were all high demoninations and showed Queen Victoria. No other colony had issued anything like that percentage of non-royal stamps. New South Wales came next with half royals, and half others; Victoria was at the bottom with all but four of its sixty-three issues showing its eponymous sovereign. Hence the selection of the black swan as the typical image for Western Australia's postage stamps had been a remarkable display of local sentiment for the nineteenth century.

Western Australia's centenary in 1929 provided an opportunity for the Commonwealth to indicate publicly that Canberra had not forgotten about its secession-prone constituent. The 1929 black swan issue can be read as a pendant to the 1927 Canberra issue, that is, as a way of reassuring this farming state that the high-tariff, high-taxing t'othersiders were aware of the West's difficulties.

If such political and constitutional concerns help to account for the choice of subject and image of the 1929 issue, they do not explain why the stamp acquired its particular design. The oval frame was taken from the colonial issues, but was supported here by kangaroo paws and eucalypt flowers, which were as much a part of Western Australia's iconography as the black swan. The difference was that on the colonial stamps the swans had been shown floating on water. In 1929, that natural element was displaced by an heraldic device, a bar that might have been used to attach the bird to the helmet of a mediaeval knight. The natural world of Western Australia was thus transformed into a cultural statement about its settlers' link to the old world of British chivalry, recalling that one aim of secession was to draw closer to Britain. The tensions in the design between indigenous nature and distant culture reproduced the conflicts within Western Australia and between that state and the Commonwealth, disputes that led in 1934 to a two-thirds vote in favour of secession.

The black swan appeared twice more on Australian stamps. In 1954, it was depicted as it had been on the first Western Australian stamp a hundred years before, that is, floating on water. By 1979 and its sesquicentenary, an entirely different image of the swan was used: a coloured, stylized version, suspended in mid-air, and expressive of the 'State of Excitement'.

These three renderings of the swan convey the three design approaches which Adrian Forty identifies in his recent book on design and society between 1750 and 1980, entitled *Objects of Desire*. In his discussion of radio design in the 1930s, Forty traces the ways in which the modern and ungainly wireless was made acceptable. The first tactic was to place it in a mock antique cabinet; the second was to hide it within some other piece of furniture, for example, an armchair; the third stressed its modernity as the promise of a better world to come:

> Each design transformed the original, 'primitive' wireless out of all recognition. The three approaches evident in these radio cabinets, the archaic, the suppressive and the Utopian, have recurred so often in industrial design that they might be said to form a basic grammar or repertory of design imagery.[4]

While the most recent of the three swans fits Forty's Utopian category exactly, the 1929 and 1954 ones combined elements of the archaic and the suppressive. Such combinations are inevitable because design is not an autonomous practice, free to follow internal laws. On the contrary, Forty demonstrates the fallacy of writing about design as if its purpose were the pursuit of the beautiful. Too rarely in books and museums 'has design been shown to have something to do with profit, and even more rarely has it been seen as being concerned with the transmission of ideas'.[5] Forty is severe on historians who 'sever design from the sinews of material life, a form of butchery too often performed . . generally to fatal effect'.[6]

Rather than see design as an entirely technical question or as a

4. Adrian Forty, *Objects of Desire*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1986, p. 12.
5. *Ibid*., p. 6.
6. *Ibid*., p. 224.

kind of aesthetic, I have tried to show how social and political concerns impel and constrain the design which becomes a site for transitory resolutions of these conflicts. A materialistic reading of design, whether of radios or postage stamps, should be alert to the tensions embodied within the design of an image that might otherwise appear to be either ideologically innocent, or transparently one-sided.

One such conflict emerged in the dialogue between imperial iconography and a spatial perception of Australia in the 1935 issue commemorating the Silver Jubilee of George V whose framed head had been the subject of controversy in 1913-14. The commemorative issue showed the monarch mounted on his horse, ANZAC. Nineteen thirty-five was also the twentieth anniversary of Gallipoli, itself marked by another special issue.

George V had been the monarch for whom the cry of 'For King and Country' had rallied 300,000 Australian volunteers and in whose name 60,000 had lost their lives. Dullness preserved his reputation from the scandals associated with his father and eldest son. More than any other recent British ruler, George V was not so much a King-Emporer as a God-King. His equestrian figure was a worthy object of worship, an icon enshrined by the sufferings of war. That his Silver Jubilee fell only a week after 25 April seemed no coincidence. The Royal visage would have been as appropriate on the stamp for the ANZAC twentieth anniversary as for the monarch's own twenty-fifth.

Although these two stamps were released separately, it is pertinent to consider them as a linked pair in which ideological exchanges were represented by visual transfers. The king appeared astride a horse named for two dominions; monarch and steed are shown against an horizonless landscape, empty except for a line of low hills in the far distance. Here we see the imperial posing within an antipodean dimension. It is unlikely that George V ever experienced such an open empty space.

By contrast, Gallipoli was represented not by that figure of the Australian digger with his inverted rifle who had risen from the dead to grace memorials in suburb and country town, but by the Cenotaph in Whitehall. Australia's popular memory of the birth of its nationhood, the one day of its year, was being laid like a wreath at the feet of the Empire in London. Another thirty years were to pass before ANZAC Day was depicted by Simpson and his donkey.

By contrast, New Zealand waited until 1936 to commemorate ANZAC on a stamp and then did so by showing one of its soldiers at Gallipoli. A more complete investigation of the ideology of postage stamps would benefit from comparisons with the other white settlement colonies such as Canada and South Africa.

Women

Since 1953, Australia has had a queen rather than a king, allowing the appearance of women on our stamps to be more frequent than might be expected of a masculine culture. A gender-based reading of Australian stamps cannot rely on head counting. Instead, those female images should be interrogated for their mythological significances.

The first female figure on an Australian postage stamp occurred on our earliest commemorative, the 1927 issue for the opening of parliament house in Canberra. Here, the female was deliberately allegorical, a symbol of fertility and nurturing. In her right hand was a sheaf of grain, reminiscent of the goddess Ceres as well as of Australia's economic dependency upon rural prosperity. The shield made her appear as the defender of her children, like Britannia. For the arts of peace to be held aloft, they needed protection by the arts of war; the ploughshare depended upon the shield. This reading reproduces the realities of the 1920s when returned soldiers were settled on wheat farms. Despite the visual references to the non-Australian figures of Britannia and Ceres, the emblem on her shield was the Southern Cross.

Mixtures of the British and the classical with the indigenous were often employed by European Australians seeking to acclimatize their imaginations. Populating the bush with pixies or goddesses was taken up by some nationalists as a way of showing that Australian life and scenes could support so-called 'universal' concerns. On the other hand, imperial patriots imported such references in order to provide Australia with a little of the grandeur denied to it by the flatness of its landscape and history. Without castles there could be no culture, proclaimed one English-born professor at the University of Melbourne in 1935.

This latter view dominated the 1936 stamp commemorating the telephone cable link between Tasmania and the mainland. There was Amphitrite rising out of the sea so that the disquietening modernity of instant communications was rendered more acceptable by embellishment with a classical image. Just as the distance across Bass Strait was shortened by projecting the Nut into the

right foreground, so was the increasing pace of contemporary life lessened through attachment to a figure from antiquity. A parallel point can be made about the Ceres-Britannia figure on the Canberra commemorative. Spending on a 'bush capital', and for Federation in general, was legitimized by being represented through the models of civic virtue from ancient Greece, Rome and Britain. The new was made acceptable by being garbed with the robes of tradition, precedent and heritage. Similarly, in 1934 and again in 1949, the male god, Hermes, the god of speed, was used on international airmail stamps.

If we bypass the sex of the specimens in the zoological series, the next female on an Australian stamp was Elizabeth Windsor, spouse of King George VI, issued in May 1937. This example showed her head and shoulders, with tiara and jewels, framed only by a thin white line. Throughout the long reign of George V no Australian stamp had depicted his wife, Queen Mary. The change was connected to the Abdication crisis and the need to establish the new king and queen as the rightful heirs and upholders of decent family life. The Post-Master General had had to scrap a design being prepared for Edward VIII definitives. The rush to get the new monarch onto stamps perhaps accounts for the simplicity of the initial designs. Three months later, a more elaborate, oval-framed issue of George VI went on sale.

A special effort was made for the coronation when a pair of large, high-value stamps were released in April 1938 representing both the new king and queen standing before their thrones in full regalia of imperial crowns and ermine-trimmed robes. The richness of those symbols and the forceful positioning of their bodies convey a supra-human institution where the queen was no longer a mother and dutiful wife upon whom the crown had fallen. The manner of her depiction presented her as ascending to the same realm as Ceres or Amphitrite.

Each set of royal definitives included one with a bust of Queen Elizabeth, emphasizing the family aspect of that reign. The inauguration of the Duke of Gloucester as Governor-General in 1945 was marked by a stamp showing his wife as well. By comparison, there has never been a stamp showing the Duke of Edinburgh by himself; his four appearances reinforce his place as consort.

When the next female figure appeared in 1940, she was a nurse in the armed forces then being mobilized for war. The design had had its origins in a cover for the *Australian Women's Weekly*. As such, the nurse might have been the first 'ordinary mortal' woman to be depicted had it not been for her positioning within the composition, above and behind the trio of sailor, soldier and airman. By being above them, she was made into their protector, comforter and inspiration — a cross between Great War memories of Nurse Edith Cavill and the Angel of Mons. In this way, she too is removed from the realm of womanhood into a supra-human role. Yet the nurse was not only above, she was also behind the line of armed males who stand ready to lay down their lives to defend her life and virtue. That the female nurse is also the land as mother-figure is suggested by the side supports in this design which has gums to her left and city buildings to her right.

A 1945 Peace stamp returned to some of these concerns when an angel rose above a southern cross to the left of which was a woman with a babe in her arms. Once the war was over, women had to leave the factory and office and return to child-raising and housekeeping. The man on her right supported the wheel of industry.[7]

A simple image of Princess Elizabeth was issued for her wedding in 1948. Queen Victoria reappeared in a 1950 set commemorating early Australian postage stamps. The first ordinary Australian female was depicted in 1953 on a Young Farmers issue. Two years later, Florence Nightingale was remembered as the lady with a lamp, behind a young Australian nurse of 1955. The flying doctor service was honoured in 1962 with an Inland Mission nurse looking into an outback scene dominated by the grave of the Reverend Doctor Flynn. District nurses were rewarded on their centenary in 1985 with a stamp showing one of their original members pushing a bicycle, again depicting working women in an archiac situation and garb. More notable is the regularity with which women have appeared as nurses on Australian stamps, stereotyping them as servants to doctors and the community. Patriarchal ideology is as obvious in the recurrent identification of women with nursing as it is in the outmoded costume.

With the Christmas issue of 1958 the Virgin Mary made the first of many appearances as the ideal mother in a nativity scene. The nurturing role returned in a pioneer society series of 1972 when the only woman shown was in a family — thereby ignoring the backbreaking farm labour that most country women contributed to the making of rural Australia. The Girl Guides movement was celebrated by showing one of their number alongside Lord Baden Powell as their male progenitor.

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7. Cf. Eric Hobsbawm, 'Man and Woman: Images on the Left', *Workers*, New York, Pantheon, 1984, pp. 83-102.

In pursuing ideological meanings it is always necessary to ask if there were occasions on which women should have been present but were not. An example of this absence is the stamp to honour one of the designers of Canberra, Walter Burley Griffin, no mention being made of his partner, Marion Mahony.

No named non-royal woman appeared on an Australian stamp until the 1961 centenary of the birth of Dame Nellie Melba. The first named non-royal male had been the explorer Charles Sturt in 1930. The delay had not made it easier for the authorities to accept a woman in a dignified but human pose, like that used for Henry Lawson in 1949. Melba's image was based on a marble bust by Sir Bertram MacKennal, RA. This medium gave the singer the qualities of a classical deity, while royal blueness added to the impression that this was a Queen Victoria revival rather than another of Melba's farewells. If it was too much to expect the Post Master General to reveal the all too human Melba, it is nonetheless indicative of the place of women in Australia that the first named non-royal female should have to be depicted as a cross between a goddess and a monarch. Immortalized in stone, Melba had been severed from her life as a singer, which was how the Nicaraguans presented her in their *prima donna* series.

When the next two famous women appeared — Caroline Chisholm in 1968 and Mary Gilmore in 1973 — they were not subjected to the elevated design employed for Melba. The six women on the 1975 International Women's Year series were also given as they might have appeared in life. Since then, no more named non-royal women have been presented on stamps.

By 1975, the women's movement had stimulated changes which allowed the International Women's Year to be depicted with an abstract symbol, one that looked to the future rather than to a classical past. The radical nature of this departure can be seen by comparing the IWY design with two stamps relating to the Country Women's Association, from 1962 and 1972. While both were backward-looking in their iconography, the framed miniature of the 1972 example, at least, related to a period from within Australia's European past. The 1962 example carried us right back to Amphitrite with the allegorical figure being shown in the garments of a Roman matron.

Despite various types and individuals, the image of woman on Australian stamps remains dominated by that of Queen Elizabeth II who has made a fresh appearance almost every year since 1953. The design of her look has reversed the desire to apotheosize her mother. At first, the definitives showed her with crown and jewels and in a very formal or stylized profile where immobility imitated grandeur. Since the Silver Jubilee series of 1977, and the revival of republicanism in the aftermath of the Kerr coup, both Royal image and stamp design have become less formal. Even when depicted in her crown jewels, the backdrops are casual and the monarch is amused. Facial animation was either slight or more usually non-existent before 1977 when Liberal Prime Minister Fraser intervened to make sure that there was a stamp for the Queen's birthday each year. The recent approachableness of her appearance is most advanced if she is shown in street clothes when the backdrop is likely to be more colourful than her hat and dress.

Now that the Queen's wealth has become a subject for political criticism, the outward signs of her vast fortune are less acceptable accoutrements for depicting monarchy, and the Royal household has to approve each new image used on our stamps. As her multi-billions have entered the headlines, so have the crown jewels been displaced by a string of pearls, making the world's richest woman look like the wife of a state governor — more often well turned out in floral frocks than seen bedecked with diamonds and sapphires.

Aborigines

Aboriginal artefacts appeared on Australian stamps before Aborigines were allowed there. The explorer Sturt was shown surrounded by spears, shields, boomerangs and other weapons as decorative devices. The first Aboriginal person to appear was an elderly allegorical representative of the Yarra tribe on the Melbourne centenary issue in 1934. That Aborigine was a noble savage, armed and upright in his nobility but condemned to die in his state of savagery by the river that separated him from civilization. A frequent neo-classical metaphor for the progress of Europe was 'the course of Empire'.[8] This metaphor of history flowing like a stream resurfaced in this image of the dying race. Batman's unequal treaty had had its full effect. The tribes are excluded from the future of office blocks, Anglican cathedrals and department stores. The image is poignant and inexorable. We now know that its assumption was wrong: not all the tribes departed. The funereal honours of nobility would have to be withdrawn once the Aboriginal population began to increase.

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8. Robert Dixon, *The Course of Empire*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1986; and my review article in *Meanjin* 45, 4, December 1986, pp. 561-71.

Five years later, the Aborigines had vanished — 'gone walkabout' in the parlance of the times. The foundation of Adelaide and Sydney, like Major Mitchell's expedition into Queensland, took place in an empty, unoccupied land, or so the stamps commemorating those events would have us believe. The Sturt and Victorian issues had acknowledged that Australia was not a *terra nullius*. Though the 1934 South Australian issue had repeated the metaphor of progress flowing from left to right, the starting point was no longer the Aborigines but pioneer colonists in their tents. Major Mitchell explored a domain apparently already occupied by sheep and cattle. Nor did any Aborigines find their way to the flag-raising ceremony depicted on the issue for Australia Day in 1978, though they had been an armed presence in two of the six Cook Bicentennial stamps in 1970.

The 1948 issue of an Aboriginal rock carving of a crocodile brought Aboriginal art to the fore but under the rubric of the zoological series, making its image part of the natural and primitive, rather than the culturally complex. This subsuming of the rock carving under its non-human subject matter repeated the ways in which Aborigines had been relegated to the non-human realm of 'nature', to be alternatively protected or hunted like other endangered species.

The 1950 bust of an Aborigine showed a vigorous, if wild male. For its time, it should be seen as a progressive depiction, one that recognized that the Aborigines were not going to be smothered silently into the pillow being placed beneath their head. The man's bearded chin is cast forward and his eyes look ahead, into a possible future. An equally positive image appeared in 1961 when a stamp about the Northern Territory cattle industry showed an Aboriginal stockman cutting out a steer. Of course, the image did not expose the exploitation of the cattle industry that led to the Wave Hill strike by the Gurunji, a campaign that ignited the campaign for land rights and sovereignty. Nonetheless, the image was of an active, purposeful worker, instead of the stereotyped 'drunken, lazy blackfella'.

The next two Aboriginal stamps carried portraits of the two best known — perhaps the only two widely recognizable — Aborigines: Albert Namitjira in 1968, and Truganini as one of six famous women in 1975. The failure to add to this pair of named Aborigines is really a by-product of the failure of white Australia to identify any other Aboriginal individuals. Despite Namitjira's achievements as an artist, he, like Truganini, is remembered by European Australians as a victim, not as a fighter for his people. He was a 'sad case' who posed no threat.

Since 1975, Aborigines have been depicted on our stamps but as types, not as individuals with knowable life histories made up of struggles as well as suffering. In 1982, the Australia Day stamp depicted multicultural Australia with an Aboriginal male wearing a red headband, signifying spilt blood. In appearance, the 1982 Aborigine looked rather like the 1934 and 1950 ones — with similar beard and cast of head. By positioning the Aborigine behind the Anglo-Saxon settler and Greek migrant, the stamp's design relegates Aborigines to the prehistoric past.

The only other Aborigines seen since 1968 were a pair of male torsoes whose body decorations formed one of a four part 1971 set on Aboriginal art. Of the twenty-eight stamps illustrative of Aboriginal Australia up to the end of 1987, all but eight showed art or artefacts. In the last five years all thirteen Aboriginal related stamps have depicted their art. As the Aborigines' political presence as a people has become more insistent, their claims to be heard and seen have been taken up as high art. The Australian National Gallery Opening issue in 1982 chose an Aboriginal painting to represent its collection of art from around the world. Art offers a safe image because it acknowledges creativity and hence shows appreciation of intelligence. In addition, Aboriginal art is acceptable to those European Australians who lack any aesthetic or spiritual source in their own society and hence are anxious to cannibalize the art of 'the primitive', which has the added attraction of being a good buy.

This outbreak of Aboriginal art on our stamps is an act of bad faith. While signalling recognition of Aboriginal existence, it denies Aborigines' current human needs and desire for change. Reform is lost under the 'timeless' charms of a sophisticated primitivism. In 1970, Aboriginal figures were shown defending their land against Cook and his intruders. That depiction of violent struggle was unprecedented, not only in our stamps but throughout the history of white Australian attitudes.

The five stamps announced for the bicentennial Australia Day allow the viewer to look past a group of Aborigines on the shore while the first fleet rides at anchor; in two more of the set, the place of the Aborigines is taken by native fauna. When Phillip runs up the flag, neither the Aborigines nor the kangaroos are shown.

Class Struggle

One way of uncovering the ideological context of official images

is to ask what is there in Australian life that has been left out of the authorized iconography. For example, the merino and the hereford are categorized as zoological, while the rabbit is conspicuously absent. Are there any rabbits to be pulled from a social or political hat? What are some examples of influential elements of Australian history that have been left off our stamps?

First and foremost is the Communist Party of Australia. If one believed the speeches of conservative politicians one would have to conclude that there had been no more ubiquitous or powerful organization in twentieth-century Australia. Its hand is perceived behind every strike, every plea for change, every appeal for peace. Aborigines and parsons are among its dupes. The spectre of communism has haunted the rhetoric of Australian public life. If stamps were allocated according to some measure of real or perceived influence, there should have been a commemorative issue for the Party's fiftieth and sixtieth anniversaries in 1970 and 1980. No such stamp appeared and no proposal to do so was ever made. The Communist Party itself would never have thought about asking; Australia Post would not have been able to comprehend any such request if it had been made. This absence merely indicates that influence and power are graded not quantitatively, but qualitatively.

True, the Communist Party is an extreme case, though one that highlights the accepted definition of what is taken to be natural and commonsensical in this society. If the Communist Party is an extremist minority, the same cannot be said of the Australian Council of Trade Unions which celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1977. The occasion was marked by the production of a stamp, and by protests against the awarding of such public esteem to an organization that had, according to its critics, ruined the Australian economy by its wage demands and strikes. However one explains industrial disputes, there is no doubt that the trade union movement is an integral part of Australian life, with a 1977 membership of more than half the workforce, with direct links to the main opposition party, and represented in countless governmental committees. Notwithstanding those credentials, the protests sounded when a commemorative stamp appeared.

By contrast, a 1971 stamp honouring the 100th anniversary of the Sydney Stock Exchange passed without adverse comment even though the Senate Select Committee on Securities was revealing that several prominent members of the Sydney Exchange deserved to be in gaol for their actions during the Poseidon booms of 1969-70. Economic havoc wrought by share market manipulation and corrupt trading is on an entirely different moral plane to that caused by strikers. Or to put the matter another way: the natural commonsense of a capitalist society is oblivious to stock market speculators but not to unionists, no matter how tame.

A brief comparison of the imagery for the two organizations is no less revealing. The Stock Exchange saw itself in terms of an abstract chart of multi-coloured indices arrowing upwards. The ACTU preferred to see itself in terms of its rank-and-file members who are depicted in a variety of productive jobs.

That the militancy of bosses has no place on our postal items was demonstrated in 1982 when Australia Post was preparing designs for a stamped envelope marking the 75th anniversary of the basic wage. Someone in the design section associated H. V. McKay's name with the Harvester Award and contacted an expert, Dr John Rickard, for further historical details. Once Rickard explained that the Harvester judgment had been given against McKay, who had been a bastard of an employer, the design branch was instructed to drop the idea of the envelope altogether. In the words of the Industrial Registrar to Australia Post:

> the association of the basic wage or the Harvester judgment with the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission in circumstances where a centralised wage fixing system is the subject of examination by the commission would, I feel, be inappropriate.[9]

Inevitably, there was a happy ending. McKay may not have made it onto the basic wage envelope but two years later he got one of his own for the centenary of his Harvester factory.

A parallel process excludes most union officials from being entered in *Who's Who*. The list of names approved for the streets of the Canberra suburb called after the founder of the Shearers and Miners Unions, William Guthrie Spence, was stripped of militant leaders, no matter how long dead, with the result that the crescents and drives in Spence read like a *Who's Who* of labour rats, a species of which Spence was himself a prominent example.

The context for the treatment of unionists is the way that work has been largely omitted from postage stamps. Only two other stamps show people working, one from Newcastle in 1947 and the second of an Aboriginal stockman referred to earlier. (There is another of the Duke of York opening the inaugural session of the Commonwealth Parliament which some people might regard as work, though even this was mediated through the high art image

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9. *Age*, 10 September 1982, p. 11.

created by Tom Roberts's 'big picture'.) Elsewhere work is shown as the mediated vision of artists, for example, Roberts's 'Shearing the Rams' or Gill's goldfields etching of 'Puddling'. In its self-promotion, the post office has more than once shown us images of its employees delivering letters. Yet given the importance of work in any society, what is most noticeable is its relative absence from Australian postal imagery.

Conclusion

Capitalism's commonsense is expressed in choices about official imagery and in street names which, in turn, reinforce what we accept as being natural, that is, 'only to be expected'. Such cultural artefacts are never beyond challenge and their pervasiveness is not only a measure of their power but also of the opposition that they work to contain and deflect. Social conflicts between empire and nation, black and white, the genders, workers and owners, find expression in tensions between or within the designs and the images of our stamps. The prevailing disposition of social power is one result of controlling that sequence of conflicts. The dominant definition of commonsense is similarly the product of unresolved tensions. For as long as the present system prevails, protests against stamps dealing with working people will seem more natural than outrage at honouring stock market speculators.

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