

BOWYANG

work on changing australia



A HOLIDAY QUESTION FOR SPORTSMEN.
THE DYING BEAR: "I am a good Australian. What are you?"

N.L. Howlett, Shooting Koalas in Queensland,
1927
K. Tsokhas, Soviet Commercial Interest in
Australia
D. C. ttle, The Sydney Rich in the
Depression
Editorial Comment: Bicentennial History
Project

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Bowyang : a piece of hide or string tied around the trousers beneath the knee. Used by rural labourers at work around Australia and common in the nineteenth century. An Australian symbol of work.

— Guide to Contributors —

Bowyang deals with every aspect of our past and future. It strives to express the development of Australian society in clear, factual and coherent ways. In our view, Australia has been changed through the conflict between subservience to, and independence from, the foreign powers that dominate Australia. *Bowyang* stands for independence.

Contributions to *Bowyang* are welcomed. They should be typed, preferably double-spaced. Articles should not usually exceed 6000 words. Reviews, documents, and letters are also needed. Contributions should be posted to *Bowyang* or given to a member of the Editorial Board. Contributors should include their address.

Editorial Board: P. Cochrane (Adelaide); D. Cottle (Sydney);
M. Dunn (Adelaide); H. McQueen (Canberra); K. Tsokhas (Melbourne).

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Comment

The Bicentennial History Project, to commemorate two hundred years of white occupation of Australia, encompasses a number of different activities: Bulletins, Conferences, collections of documents and statistics. Most notably, the Project intends to draw together writers from a number of "disciplines" to compile volumes on a 'slice' of Australian history. The 'slices' will be cut at fifty-year intervals. Bowyang's Editors have prepared the following comment on the project.

There is not a lot about 26 January 1788 that gives us cause to celebrate. The destruction of Aboriginal society began in earnest. Convictism signalled the start of the exploitation that passed onto the 'wage-slavery' of capitalism. Women were landed as cattle. The convict streak, with its brutalisation of prisoners, abuse of women, degradation of all sexuality and oppression of all working people, was first a cause and later an excuse for shame at being Australian. It is not an occasion for joy, and the persistence of these themes in contemporary Australia is an occasion for protest. Hence, the Bicentennial History Project is open to a variety of suspicions.

Certain events in our past merit honour and remembrance, others anger and regret. How should we express these feelings? Is love alive when only wedding anniversaries bring forth gifts? The way to honour Castle Hill, Eureka, the Kalkadoons, Barcaldine, Broken Hill, Wonthaggi and Port Kembla is to do what the Pilbara workers have just done, namely, struggle for the rights of working people, here and now.

Bowyang wants no part in celebrating the past if that means just promoting anniversaries. Our aim is in our name: *Bowyang*, an Australian symbol of work. We examine the past for the lively inspiration that wisdom brings and not for any comfort that dead worship might provide.

Thus *Bowyang* is not timetabled around 1988, or any other date. The tasks are great, though the prospect of success is promising. *Bowyang* wants to be in tune with history as it is being made, rather than history as it is written. We know no fixed points and cannot be programmed to deliver a decade hence. The slice of history we

want to cut is yet to be lived; the cutting edge still being tempered.

So far the Project's organisers have published journals and held general conferences. These activities have a certain initial importance but they can quickly become a substitute for work. There is already talk of an endless Sydney harbour cruise instead of a conference, and given the nature of scholarship, this voyage might be an intellectual advance. The opportunity exists for more concentrated efforts. Smaller working groups of people active in precise areas should be brought together. Twenty people are probably too many. Andrew Moore has taken the initiative with his 'Armies of the Night, Armies of the Right' conference in Sydney in August this year. Vast sums of money are not necessary. Lord Rutherford's explanation of Cambridge's successes in physics still applies: "We have no money, so we use our brains".

The Project is already stimulating studies of Australia and the details thus provided will be valuable in working towards a fuller appreciation of how we have got to where we might go next. For too long, too many academics in Australia have seen themselves in exile from Oxbridge; English departments being notoriously bad for this. If the Bicentennial Project directs attention towards our cultural inheritance and gets back into print the scores of novels and poets who are 'forgotten' because they cannot be read outside libraries, then it will have been worthwhile. Unexpurgated editions of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow* and a complete Furphy are long overdue as are reprints of the poetry of Lesbia Harford, 'Furnley Maurice', Zora Cross and Victor Daley.

Volumes of statistics, documents, bibliography and chronicle of events are to be part of the Project. These are so desirable that they should come out as soon as possible, perhaps even as a prelude to the other volumes. Australian studies in every field suffer from the lack of basic reference works. We need an historical atlas, a biographical register of senior public servants, a newspaper index to fill the existing gaps. Other works need to be updated regularly. And we could do with a 100 page Guide to Research in Australian History. Every student will be able to add to this want list. Such volumes will justify the Bicentennial Project even if all else fails.

Another appealing aspect of the Project is its potential for team work which has already begun around the various Bulletins. *Bowyang's* editors were working more or less as a team before we started publication and one reason for the journal's birth was to channel these efforts and to expand active membership by adding readers and contributors. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and numerous women's groups offer differing experiences of the rewards and difficulties involved. Ultimately, someone has to pen the final draft and the loss of distinctive voices would diminish delight in reading and accuracy in writing.

The project also boasts of its inter-disciplinary nature. The problems raised by this approach are beyond the scope of this statement. Suffice it to list some basic questions:

- what is a discipline if it is more than an administrative arrangement within certain universities?
- how and why did the existing disciplines come into existence? what political needs were fulfilled by the emergence of history, geography, economics and sociology?
- is it enough to bring together representatives of these fragments, or is a complete re-making needed? And if so, by whom and for what purposes?
- does the interdisciplinary approach of the History Project indicate a failure of nerve amongst establishment historians, a confession that their methods have failed even them?

Individual researchers too often use 'inter-disciplinary' studies as a way to avoid the fundamental question of 'how does all of a society work together?' Part of the renewed attractiveness which Marxism has, even for non-Marxists, lies in its prospective answers to this question. The Bicentennial Project will need more than a sharing of information if its history is to approach a successful overview of Australia's development in the period since European conquest. It no longer needs to be explained that the project's 'slice' approach of concentrating on every fiftieth year from 1788 is no guarantee of success or that it may inhibit an understanding of the premise of all history: change over time. The slice approach is certainly as good a way as any of avoiding the conflicts through which such change occurs.

And what after 1988? Will academe grow bored with Australia and return to living out its exile from what it conceives as the centres of civilisation and power? Or will the Bicentennial Project underwrite a continuing exploration? For *Bowyang* the question does not exist. Work on changing Australia will proceed.