



Future Justice

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Who the Bloody Hell Are We These Days?

Laura Leighton

While most Australians would agree that our national spirit is alive and well, popular culture's preoccupation with 'Australian identity' is both tiresome and inaccurate. The portrayal of Australia and Australians by popular media leads to great misunderstandings about Australia by people overseas. The 'typical Australian' as seen at the movies is a stereotype, not a fact.

From Mick Dundee in *Crocodile Dundee* to the drover in *Australia*, one character is repeatedly reincarnated: the 'bushman'. He is almost exclusively white and male, and supposedly embodies what we see to be the best in us. But this 'typical Australian' is not a character that the vast majority of Australians are proud of, or even identify with.

He is often depicted as poorly dressed and overweight, with a propensity for violence and drunkenness. He swears constantly and uses obsolete slang. He is often of dubious intelligence and has no understanding of technology or the city. He also comes with a healthy dose of disrespect for authority (politicians, the police, the law in general ...) but without the determination, resourcefulness and wit that originally accompanied this attitude when it originated in the period between the world wars.

This representation of us is narrow, outdated and self-contradictory. The media's cherished 'typical Australian' believes

in mateship and a fair go for everybody — but he is homophobic, racist and often sexist. He believes in fair reward for hard work — but has a serious case of tall poppy syndrome. He is healthy — but scorns such comforts as skincare and regular medical attention.

This ‘ocker’ character also fails to inspire national pride. In Australia, men and women are legally equal. Yet the portrayal of Australian women in film is nothing short of offensive to many Aussie females. Admittedly, Lady Sarah Ashley in *Australia* is a good example of a strong-willed, independent and intelligent woman. However, women of this calibre are pushed aside by popular culture in favour of the ‘ockerette’ — a rude, shallow and classless misrepresentation of modern Australian women.

The young women in the mini-series *Marking Time* have very little in common with the young women who populate mainstream Australian society. Belinda and Tracy are foul-mouthed, habitually drunk, promiscuous and use recreational drugs. In one episode, Tracy asks her friend Hal to ensure that she ‘ends up’ at home if — as she expects to — she becomes so drunk or stoned she is unable to get herself home. Hal’s girlfriend, Randa, an Afghani immigrant, is disgusted by this behaviour — but she is treated with little respect because she is not a ‘true Australian’.

Racism, and the question of who has the right to call themselves truly Australian, has always been a big question. Although some Australians are notorious for their racism, they are in the minority. Racism is a societal problem, not a key part of the Australian identity! Many Australians have embraced multiculturalism, or the celebration of the diversity of nationalities and ethnicities that make up our culture. This diversity is a major point of national pride, but often only its negative aspects (such as bullying, violence and discrimination against migrants) are shown by the media.

Aboriginal culture gets a similar treatment. Some films and publications about Australia bend over backwards to include it, but do so in such a patronising and theatrical way that they

would be fairer not to include it at all. The movie *Australia* was the basis for an entire tourism campaign. These characters, their manner, their way of treating Aboriginal culture, and the setting of the film are from the 1940s. The gaps in this image are gaping. Is this really how we want to be seen overseas?

Many of the features that make up the so-called ‘typical Australian’ are not fabrications, but rather borrowed from a bygone era when racism and sexism were normal. When most Australians were white, male and rural, migrants a rarity, and Aboriginal people not considered citizens. When authority was treated with derision. But also when the bravery and sacrifice of the diggers was treated with respect rather than melodrama. When slang, satire and sarcasm were targeted, discriminating and witty rather than unsophisticated and offensive.

The identity of modern Australia is a rich mosaic of different cultures, different generations, different lifestyles — different people. What seems certain is that in the 21st century, there is no such thing as a ‘typical Australian’. Just as our diverse modern society has its positives and its downsides, so does the now outdated image of the ‘ocker’. Films about Australia have borrowed heavily from the Australia of yesteryear — but they have borrowed all the wrong parts. They have sensationalised what is left of the ‘Australian identity’ of the first half of the 20th century, and diluted it into a weak caricature of what it used to be. The Australian spirit lives on in Australians — not distorted stereotypes.

The unfortunate character who continues to grace our screens is exactly what he should be to create interesting viewing — a fictional character. The use of such a character to ‘sell’ Australia overseas is both predictable and clichéd. The ‘typical Australian’ as portrayed in popular culture is a myth. Australian patriotism and national pride does not depend on any one dominant image, but rather a feeling of belonging and friendship. Every Australian is an Australian, whether or not they conform to the stereotypical image that prevails overseas.

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We pride ourselves on what we are, and not how the media shows us.



Laura Leighton wrote this in 2009 when she was in Year 11 at Mareeba State High School in Queensland.