Fact or fantasy?
Celebrating mountain heritage today

Marilyn C Truscott

I'm here to talk about celebrating mountain heritage, its Facts and Fantasies – its Myths and Legends – its associations and meanings, or rather one legend in particular and its expression today. In doing so I shall touch briefly on such expressions elsewhere and possible tensions or conflicts that may arise in the management of such associations and meanings.

And down by Kosciusko, where the pine-clad ridges raise
Their torn and rugged battlements on high,
Where the air is clear as crystal, and the white stars fairly blaze
At midnight in the cold and frosty sky,
And where around the Overflow the reedbeds sweep and sway
To the breezes, and the rolling plains are wide,
The man from Snowy River is a household word today,
And the stockmen tell the story of his ride.

This ballad, 'The Man from Snowy River', was written by Andrew Barton Paterson – 'Banjo' Paterson – in 1895. Part of his first book of poetry, The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses, the publication sold out within a week and the poem forms part of Australia's myth and national cultural identity (as mentioned by Jane Lennon in her paper). It is worth noting that a legend is a 'non-historical or unverifiable story handed down by tradition from earlier times and popularly accepted as historical' (OED).

I will return to the return to the poem later, for the focus of my paper is Craig's Hut, in the Alpine National Park above Mansfield in Victoria just beyond the Mt Buller ski resort. Craig's Hut sits high on a ridge in a spectacular alpine setting with fine views of Victoria's high country and of Mount Cobbler.

Craig's Hut was built in 1982 as a replica of a pioneer or mountain hut and its sitting on a mountain ridge exposed to the weather is not where any self-respecting pioneer and Mountain Cattlemans would locate any such structure. The graves around the hut are also fake.

Craig's Hut was found to have social value in the Regional Forest Agreement process that included consultation with communities about their heritage values (Context 1997). Both the Mansfield community and others, in fact the High Country community generally, clearly found it the most important of all the Mountain Huts; the statement of significance drafted for the Australian Heritage Commission Register of the National Estate outlines its heritage values:

Craig's Hut is of aesthetic significance because of its aesthetic appeal, spectacular setting and evocative association with a major Australian film. The Hut is constructed in a bush vernacular style in a dramatic mountain-top location with extensive panoramic views. It is a replica of a pioneer's hut built for the film 'Man from Snowy River' in 1982 and later rebuilt as major tourist attraction. The hut is frequently visited by the local community and others because of its values, and is depicted in tourism publications. (Criterion E1, AHC)

The legend of 'The Man from Snowy River' is an interesting example of myth-making and its role in forming cultural identity, even in nation-building. The poem itself was at a time of intense discussion at the end of the nineteenth century regarding the Australian character. Paterson and Henry Lawson, both writing about the ANZAC story took place to add to this legendary aspect of the Australian personality.

Even the horse in the poem reflects this character:

_He was hard and tough and wiry – just the sort that won't say die –_
_There was courage in his quick impatient tread;
And he bore the badge of gameness in his bright and fiery eye,
And the proud and lofty carriage of his head._

The poem 'The Man from Snowy River' very clearly expresses this aspect of the Australian character. It must be noted that even at the time of writing it was seen as a symbol, not as an account of any true event. Nonetheless its very iconic nature has meant that its meaning is repeatedly revisited and used, such as the film's in the 1960s, taking place at a time when we celebrated our Bicentennial. The 1960s was also the height of the conflict in Vietnam regarding ongoing cattle-grazing in national parks, something that had ended in New South Wales in the late 1960s.

Figure 1 Craig's Hut, built 1982. (M. Truscott)
The poem, or rather the myth, is still revisited in various recent Mountain celebrations. For example, in its adoption by Corryong, in northeast Victoria, which has an annual Man from Snowy River Bush Festival, as well as a Man from Snowy River Museum. The town also claims one of its own, Jack Riley, as the original Man from Snowy River. This claim is hotly debated, with many other individuals from elsewhere also identified as the original ‘Man’.

I do not wish to debate whether such appropriations of the Man are genuine celebrations or cynical commercial uses to tempt cultural tourism. But it is clear that the Man from Snowy River is now a cultural icon expressed not only in poem and film but in spectacular events. This was seen most clearly in opening of the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, and since at the Sydney Royal Easter Show in 2001 and 2002 as well as in a recent musical. Even the names at the venue of this conference, The Station Resort, such as the Stock whip Room, reflect the romance of the High Country Cattlemen, perhaps best epitomised in a place such as Craig’s Hut.

Figure 2 Neuschwanstein, built 1869. (M. Truscott)

There are other examples of building new places to express symbols and cultural icons that have influenced cultural identity and how a nation sees itself. Famous ones are the Romantic neo-medieval castles built by mad Ludwig II of Bavaria, such as Neuschwanstein built in the foothills of the European Alps. Built in 1869, Neuschwanstein is a fantasy castle decorated in images that draw on Nordic sagas that supposedly took place many hundreds of miles from Bavaria along the Romantic Rhine. Ludwig’s obsession influenced Wagner’s Nibelungenlied operas. Such symbols of the past came at the time of the unification of Germany for the first time ever in 1871 under Bismarck. Later such symbols were taken up and favoured by Nazi Germany.

Romantic notions of nation were also used elsewhere such as in Hungary and the Czech republic later in the nineteenth century to stake a claim of cultural identity separate from the domination of the Austrian Empire. Churches, palaces and public buildings were nationalistically decorated with heroes from medieval mythic sagas staking claims to the land and a past based on ethnicity and autonomy. Such reference to and use of past myths is also seen in the appropriation of an extant place for rituals and celebrations without historical fact. A well-known example of this is found at Stonehenge with the Druid festivals at the summer solstice that started in the nineteenth century. Today Stonehenge is as well known for its New Age symbolism including the ongoing Druid ceremonies as for its historic and archaeological importance.

Much of this myth has thus now become fact, even protected as heritage, telling historical stories of past social value. For example, Neuschwanstein has a huge annual visitation with most people totally unaware of or ignoring the real castle ruin dating from the Middle Ages on the nearby hillside.

Similarly in South Africa in Zululand, the ‘fake’ village of King Shaka, Shakaland, attracts more visitors than the many villages with impoverished Zulu in the surrounding landscape.

Tourists visiting Shakaland’s mixture of Disneyland and early twentieth-century ‘Golliwog’ … are treated to the usual Zulu dances … and interactions with Zulu people who supposedly explain, enact or relate various aspects of their culture. [An anthropologist] found … that it gave the tourists a fulfilment of their stereotype expectations of wartlike Zulu culture rather than the equally entralling reality … [It is] interesting that tourists selected Shakaland in preference to several reconstructions of historic Zulu settlements run by museological and conservation institutions (A. Hall, pers. comm. Nov 2002).

Does such mythologising matter? Lowenthal confirms in his article ‘Fabricating Heritage’ that

Heritage should not be confused with history. History seeks to convince by truth, and succumbs to falsehood. Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error. Time and hindsight alter history, too. … Heritage uses historical traces and tells historical tales. But these tales and traces are stitched into fables closed to critical scrutiny.

I am not sure that this is how heritage significance is viewed in Australia but Lowenthal reminds us of Renan’s statement to his fellow French (Renan 1882): ‘Getting its history wrong is crucial for the creation of a nation’ and in quoting Les Murray (1984) that

Australians are said to ‘spend more of their spiritual energy’ in quests for enshrined symbols of identity than in any other pursuit; ‘worship of the past in Australia [is] one of the great secular religions’.

Certainly this homage to the past is manifest at Craig’s Hut, which has probably a higher visitation than the approximately 200 ‘real’ mountain huts in the Australian Alps. Some of them, a few, pre-date Paterson’s poem of 1895, such as Wallace’s Hut, also in the Alpine National Park, dating from 1889. Another example, Bluff Hut, was built much later but is still a working Mountain Cattlemen’s Hut as are others in Victoria. Other genuine remnants of Mountain Cattlemen’s way of life are found at Wonnangetta Station.

Figure 3 Wallaces Hut, built 1889. (M. Truscott)
Such mythologising or fabrication of the past as found at Craig's Hut may however matter when it comes to the allocation of resources and community energy; for example, Craig's Hut has an active 4WD club that maintains it in regular working bees. Some historical huts have similar Friends Groups co-ordinated by Parks Victoria, but very few of them do and they all urgently need maintenance and active care.

This situation potentially creates conflict and tension between the real and the recreated – the fact and the fantasy – and is a problem to heritage managers in deciding how do deal with it. As such, whilst I find the associations and meanings of Craig's Hut living evidence of our cultural icons, I am also aware the Paterson's ballad is itself not history, but is part of a fabricated heritage that was created in the name of national identity. I trust therefore that Craig's Hut and its like serve a purpose as a symbol, but hopefully not at the expense of those places with authentic fabric, at a cost to the possibility of experiencing the past as it was and not as romanticised as in this instance.

Postscript

A postcard seen at Jindabyne during the conference show Craig's Hut as one of a series of photographs titled 'Kosciuszko National Park', which is of course in New South Wales some 200 km from Craig's Hut. This is a fine example of how the myth of the 'Man from Snowy River' as symbolised in Craig's Hut is now transcending even the hut's physical location in Victoria.

Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the comments and ideas for this paper from Kristal Buckley, Meg Goulding, Tracy Ireland, Juliet Ramsay and Andrew Hall (South Africa).

References

AHC Australian Heritage Commission significance criteria, see website www.ahc.gov.au


