The Decorative Fringe: An interview with David Walker

Agnieszka Sobocinska

Professor David Walker holds the Chair in Australian Studies at Deakin University. He has been working on the history of Australian perceptions of Asia for over thirty years. His Anxious nation: Australia and the rise of Asia, 1850-1939 (1999) explored the wealth of early Australian responses to Asia, which ranged from enchantment with an antique Orient to a deep-seated and abiding fear of Asian invasion. Anxious nation revealed that anxieties about Asia underpinned the establishment of the Australian nation at Federation and were central to the formation of an Australian identity. It remains the seminal text in the field and has been published in China (in translation) and India. Walker is currently working on a second volume of Anxious nation, which will continue the analysis of Australian perceptions of Asia into the 1970s.

David Walker has also been active in bringing Australian Studies to the world. He was involved in the establishment of Australian Studies programs in Indonesia, China and India. In 2010, he held the Distinguished Chair in Australian Studies at Copenhagen University. He is also Visiting Professor in the School of Foreign Studies at Renmin University of China in Beijing. His most recent book, Not dark yet: a personal history, (2011) is a reflection on history that includes discussion of Australia in its Asian contexts.

Agnieszka Sobocinska is a Lecturer in the National Centre for Australian Studies, Monash University. Her PhD thesis, ‘People’s diplomacy: Australian travel, tourism and relations with Asia, 1941-2009’ (completed at the University of Sydney) examined how travel and tourism facilitated a range of Australian-Asian contacts from the Pacific War to the present day. It argued that this archive of contacts had a profound impact on Australian perceptions of and attitudes to Asia, and therefore underpinned moves towards political and economic engagement.

In recent months, Walker and Sobocinska have been working on an edited collection entitled Australia’s Asia: from Yellow Peril to Asian Century, to be published by UWA Press in 2012. This collection brings together a variety of voices and perspectives from Asia, Europe, North America, as well as Australia, to highlight the extent and complexity of Australian links with Asia. Its temporal scope ranges from pre-colonial contacts to present-day concerns about Australia’s future in a world increasingly dominated by Asia. It addresses Australian-Asian relations from a variety of disciplines including history, politics, international relations and literary studies.

This collection was inspired by a recognition that Asia has played an important role in Australian history. Ideas about Asia were fundamental in shaping Australians’ conceptions of themselves, their nation, and the world. Yet Asia is typically relegated to a liminal place in Australian history. When it comes to ‘Australian’ history, Asia is usually dealt with outside of the main narrative, in a separate chapter or section – if it appears at all. Keeping Asia out of the Australian experience is extremely problematic in that it elides a vast archive of transnational and intercultural contacts that informed and constituted the Australian experience.

The following conversation took place in Melbourne in May 2011.

**AS:** David, you’ve been working on Australian perceptions of Asia for around thirty years now. How important a role has Asia played in Australian history?

**DW:** I think that Asia has played a really central role in Australia’s past. The range of contacts between Australians and Asians – even early contacts with Chinese migrants, or Indians within the broader links fostered by the British Empire, or the Japanese as both friends and enemies, or any number of other contexts – is astonishing. And it crosses so many fields of Australian experience and life. Just to give one example, Greg Watters has recently examined the extent to which the Australian medical profession was affected by Chinese medical practice and herbal remedies, and by the tensions between Chinese practitioners and European practitioners. So there’s hardly a point in Australian history where you don’t find an Asian presence or an Asian dimension.

It’s there in all sorts of ways. But apart from the tangible contacts, the other thing that’s really quite interesting is the extent to which Australia’s sense of self – its identity – was constructed in opposition to Asia as Australia’s ‘Other’. It is my firm contention that some of the enthusiasm for the bush, and the place of the bushman as a symbol of national identity, can be explained by the ‘rise of Asia’ phenomenon. The thinking being that if Australia is going to defend itself, where is that defence to come from? Most of the writing around that theme dismisses the cities, and the urban folks and parliaments; they’re cosmopolitan and they’re compromised, and they are totally incapable of understanding the gravity of Australia’s geopolitical situation, and of taking action to defend the nation. Meanwhile, out in the bush are the visionaries who do see the problem. Not only that, but they are also the people who have the kind of guerrilla skills, if you like, to defend the nation. So the bushman becomes the race patriot. And part of the importance of the bush is that it produces the bushman, and he is a resource that the nation will need if push comes to shove. By the 1880s and the 1890s, all the invasion stories portray the bush as the great racial resource for the defence of the nation. Of course, later on the racial dimension of that argument – as it becomes awkward and embarrassing – is elided or pushed to one side. But if you
look at it historically, you find that many of Australia’s core mythologies are built around an awareness that if the nation is threatened, we’re going to have to draw upon particular skills and capacities, talents and abilities. And these are increasingly defined as Australian because they’re going to be the things we need in order to survive. So an awareness of Asia is constitutive of national identity, in that Australians came to value those things that seemed crucial to national survival.

**AS:** So Asia underpins the national ideal of a rugged masculinity – a bush masculinity – that can defend the nation, as opposed to the cosmopolitan weaklings chattering away in parliament.

**DW:** Yes, and of course there were other elements feeding into the privileging of this masculinity – the rise of the new woman, for one – but those running the masculinist line found a strong argument in the rise of Asia. So the national anxiety about Asia has a culturally regressive dimension to it, and you can use it against the modern and the urban. The argument is that, with the rise of Asia, we can’t afford to be sitting around and going to the movies and being cosmopolitan and female, because there’s serious geopolitical business going on, and we have to focus our attention on that.

**AS:** And do you think this anxiety was about China or a more generic Asia? In most of the 1890s invasion narratives it seems that China is the major threat, but then as Japan became more dominant it seems to take on the mantle of ‘Asian Threat’, certainly by the Pacific War. And more recently, Indonesia has come to resonate in this way. John Marsden’s *Tomorrow when the war began* (1993) – the most popular recent iteration of the invasion narrative – portrays a very Indonesian kind of Asian threat. So do you think Australians react to a transferrable, pan-Asian threat, or are these fears separate and coded in specific ways?

**DW:** I think it starts as China, because China’s got the numbers. But I think the anxiety shifts to Japan quite early on, because although Japan doesn’t have the numbers it has cohesion, patriotism, Bushido, and military capacity, so it’s got the kind of discipline that Australia will have to somehow match and answer. I think a lot of the nation building that took place at the end of the nineteenth century and during the early Federation period is framed particularly around Japan. Indonesia doesn’t really come into the picture as the Netherlands East Indies – apart from its exoticism, there’s not much of that. So it’s a bit uncomfortable with the Dutch in some ways, but at least they’re up there, doing what they’re supposed to be doing. We worry about them because they don’t hold the racial line quite as firmly as the British do, because there’s a certain amount of miscegenation up there, so they’re less trustworthy racially, but nonetheless they’re pretty well sorting that out. And up to a point the same story is told about India.

**AS:** This brings us to the question of what ‘Asia’ is in the first place. The category of ‘Asia’ is a contentious one, a sort of generic term that occludes just as much as it reveals. How has the concept of ‘Asia’ changed for Australians over time? Which places have Australians meant when they spoke of Asia at different points in time?

**DW:** The way that Asia – the Other, the Orient, etc – is understood is necessarily comparative, I think, and so different Asians move in and out of the national imaginary at different times and in different ways. The mental map of Asia has changed, and will change, across time.

If I were to try and trace it, I think that in the Imperial heyday India was the dominant presence: when Australians with an imperial cast of mind thought about the world, then India was a significant part of that world. That’s reflected pretty strongly in James Hingston’s *The Australian abroad* (1885). Although he goes just about everywhere, it’s India that’s front and centre for him, and it’s the same for Alfred Deakin. When Deakin thinks about the Orient, it’s primarily India, and it’s India in the imperial framework. So Deakin looks at both the British imperial project in India (in *Irrigated India* [1893]), and also at India as being the spiritual source of Western religion, or religion in general (in *Temple and tomb in India* [1893]). Educated Australians of the time would have felt they needed to know something about India in order to have earned their place in sophisticated society. To be educated was to know something about India, and Hingston and Deakin exemplify that.

But I think by the early twentieth century – not long after Hingston and Deakin have said their piece on India – that importance begins to fade. While there is some ongoing interest, particularly in theosophy, India tends to be seen as interesting in the spiritual sense, but not necessarily in the geopolitical sense.

**AS:** So when do you place this turn from India towards a more East Asian conception of Asia?

**DW:** I think that’s beginning to happen from the late 1890s, and I think Charles Pearson’s *National life and character: a forecast* (1893) is one signifier of that. While Pearson is also an educated, respectable Australian – part of the same milieu as Hingston and Deakin – for him it’s China that matters. When he’s doing his forecasting in *National life and character*, it’s China that he sees as the future. At that stage in his writing, India is already being relegated to the past, in the sense that it’s not going to determine or frame Australia’s future. So I would argue that China starts rising in the national consciousness from the 1890s.

But that sort of chronology is contested and contentious. When Lord Curzon reviewed *National life and character*, he was quite critical of the notion that China was going to be dynamic in the way that Pearson predicted, because his view was that China was static and decaying and going nowhere.

**AS:** And of course, by the early twentieth century, Japan was on the rise, and began to loom as a potential great power.

**DW:** Indeed, so the East Asian turn comes around then, I think. It’s beginning to dawn then that this is something that matters to Australia in a particular way; and that will also in a sense be the making of Australia.

**AS:** You’ve traced a rich genealogy for the idea that Australia will have an Asian future. How important do you think that trope is?

**DW:** I think the Asian futures idea is very important. It is a story that we tell about ourselves increasingly from the 1890s. It’s the story about what makes us important in the scheme of things. The idea that our people might disappear and that a continent might turn from a European one to an Asian one becomes a huge story. And nations need huge stories to keep them going. It isn’t the only one – there are a lot of huge stories: Australia as a workingman’s paradise, a progressive nation, and all the rest of it – but sitting alongside them is the Asian futures story. It is important in that it allows Australians to pause and think
about their place in the world. In the invasion narrative we worry about a world without us – which is peculiar, given that we didn’t worry quite so much about Aboriginal dispossession – but our disappearance is something that is seen to be quite serious. So it is a story which has us playing a determining role in shaping the geopolitical future. It becomes a key narrative in the construction of Australianness, and it crops up again and again throughout the twentieth century.

AS: You’ve noted before that there is an ambiguity at the heart of Australia’s response to this trope: that the idea that Australia will have an Asian future functions as both a threat and a promise.

DW: The notion that Asia is looming just over the horizon – as much as it’s framed by anxieties and concerns – is also informed by the idea that this is a great opportunity for us, that this is the thing that might transform us as a nation, or be the making of us as a nation.

And it’s important to note that Australia has needed Asia – needed its Other – in order to create the necessary sense of urgency. It’s there in a lot of what Pearson is saying – that we in Australia will understand developments in Asia better than anyone else, because we’re being exposed to the importance of Asia, or to the rise of Asia, more directly and more immediately than any other European community. The rise of Asia will happen to us before it happens to everyone else. So Australia is played into the story as the place that will be the eyes and ears of Europe in Asia. And there’s a certain amount of cultural hubris involved in that; but there’s also maybe the anticipation of the later story, that we do have a place in discussing developments in the region, because we are of the region.

So there is another side of the story. I’d argue that, increasingly, and intuitively, the countries that worry us most also generated various kinds of fascination and interest, which is the unpredictable outcome of an initiating anxiety. Because you don’t know where anxiety can lead. You may be told to be terribly worried about China, Japan, or Indonesia, and people might obediently worry about these countries and their people for a while; but you can never control anxiety, and it’ll always move in unpredictable directions and in unpredictable ways, and for a number of people will end up as fascination.

AS: We’re currently in the midst of another period when all eyes are on the rise of Asia, and of China in particular. Do you see this as just another iteration of the Australia’s Asian Futures trope, or do you think this is somehow different – the real deal, perhaps?

DW: I think it does partake of the old story. It is certainly like the old story in the sense that it’s malleable – you can read anything you like into it. For some people, it is a story of a threatening growth of Chinese power; but for others there’s a sense that China’s going to save us. It reminds me of an old cartoon. In the first frame, you have Cabinet sitting around with looks of horror on their face, and they’re lamenting the fact that the Chinese are coming. The next frame is almost identical, with Cabinet still sitting around looking horrified, but the caption now says that the Chinese are NOT coming. I think that captures the key point in the Asian Futures narrative – that it’s malleable enough to include both sides of the story, with Asia both a threat and a hope.

AS: So with the recognition that Asia has played a key constitutive role in the development of Australian identity, and so a key role in Australian history, why do you think it’s still treated as a niche in Australian history? Why are Australian interactions with Asia – both real and imagined – not taken seriously as a core element of Australian history, but taken up only in specialist studies of Asian migration to Australia, or of Australia’s diplomatic relations with Asia?

DW: I think it’s all part of a concerted effort to secure a distinctive Australian history and Australian identity. Establishing academic specialisations in Australian history and Australian literature were important markers on the path towards a distinctly Australian culture that didn’t send everyone into paroxysms of cultural cringe, but was intellectually respectable. From the Second World War there were determined efforts to establish Australian history and Australian literature as stand-alone fields – to show that they were sufficiently intellectually demanding and rigorous for people to build careers around. Where it was once seen as a miserable little branch of the great river of English writing, a Chair of Australian Literature reformed the national literature as a magnificent tributary of its own, one that you can study on its own terms and in its own right. Admittedly, it did come about rather late in the day, but the Chair that Leonie Kramer occupied represented a professionalisation of Australian literature and a recognition of its separateness as an entity. And I think Australian history took a similar path. So in order to build a distinct Australian history, you tend to sever the connections to the wider world – particularly to Asia, but at times also the imperial connections – and you write Australian history as sufficient unto itself. If you look at Russell Ward’s Australian legend (1958) – which of course everyone does – basically what it does is write a history of Australia that is largely understood in Australian terms.

AS: And that was really Ward’s aim, wasn’t it, to present Australian history on its own terms; to recast Australia not as an offshoot of Britain (and a lesser offshoot, at that) but as an independent entity.

DW: Yes, as a discrete story. It kind of professionalises parochialism, in a way, in order to give an independent disciplinary status to the nation’s history. So product differentiation plays a part in the creation of the disciplines of Australian literature and Australian history. But product differentiation can go too far in arguing for a distinctiveness which has no connection to other societies or other cultures. An example that springs to mind is that of writer Douglas Sladen. He was a modestly successful poet, and he published several modestly successful anthologies of Australian literature in the late 1880s. But then in 1882 he heads off to Japan and publishes the wonderfully titled The Japs at home (1892), which sells around 150,000 copies. So Japan is the thing that sends Sladen into orbit as a writer. But if you read the Oxford companion to Australian literature, or the Australian dictionary of biography, there is no Japan in either of them. His most important and popular contribution to the literature is simply missing. And I see this as a result of the need to define the Australianness of Sladen. And while this allows for British connections to some extent, we don’t seem to know how to handle Asian connections.

AS: So to be counted as Australian, it either has to be about Australia and nothing else, or possibly about Australia’s relationship with Britain – anything other than that is not actually Australian literature or Australian history…

DW: It becomes rather hard to frame. Similarly, if you look at La Nauze’s biography of Deakin, he has enormous trouble trying
to work out what to do with Deakin and India. And ultimately it
boils down to not a lot – there’s really not a lot there. But by
Deakin’s own admission, India was pretty important. It comes
back to that earlier point, that to be an educated Australian in
the late nineteenth century, you had to understand India, or to
know something about India. But by the time La Nauze comes
around to writing a biography of Deakin in 1963, that need had
disappeared. Consequently, Deakin’s Indian fascination pretty
much disappeared from the biography, and much of that, I
think, comes from the problem of how to frame it.

AS: So La Nauze edited out Asia to make Deakin more Australian?

DW: Yes, I think so. But it must also be said that Asian history
was not part of La Nauze’s intellectual formation. It just seemed
odd and rather marginal.

AS: Do you think this determination to make Australia a
discrete category is changing within the historical discipline?

DW: Yes, I do think that that’s changing now. I think that there’s
probably a sense that historical processes don’t necessarily
differentiate on the basis of basis of race and nation, and that
modernity occurred across cultures and across social settings,
and there’s going to be commonalities and differences in the
way those things play out that don’t have much to do with race.
So I do think there is a sense in which that has disappeared.

But the distancing of Australian history from its Asian context is
not only about the nature of academic disciplines. I think it’s
also related to an older and deeply layered racial differentiation,
the sense that we cannot be like Asia because we’re racially
different from them, and have a different civilisational path. I
think there’s a bit of that throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and
possibly even later; that their ineradicable difference meant that
you couldn’t necessarily learn a lot about the historical process
from what was happening to the Japanese, Chinese, or
Indonesians – or nothing that would be particularly relevant to
us, because our experience was a rather different one. And I
think the idea that we’re on a different historical trajectory from
Asia is still there.

AS: And that, too, seems to be a transnational phenomenon, if
we take Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of civilisations* (1993) thesis
– and its popularity – as a case in point.

DW: Indeed.

AS: It’s interesting that you point to the importance of
academic culture in shaping Australian history, particularly now
that the field of Australian Studies is becoming so determinedly
focussed on transnational and international connections. There
is a growing internationalisation with the opening of Australian
Studies centres around the world and the creation of Chairs in
Australian Studies in Tokyo, Harvard, Copenhagen, and now in
Beijing. How do you think that’s going to – or how has it already
– shifted the terrains of Australian history?

DW: Well I think up to a point, some of those Chairs are in fact
an outgrowth of what I’ve been describing. If you really have a
serious literature and a serious history, then you’re going to
want to have those subjects studied in distinguished places.
So having Australian Studies being promoted and promulgated
in Harvard or Copenhagen or Tokyo or Beijing is not necessarily
about internationalisation or a transnational turn.

But I think in the case of Tokyo, and one would imagine in the
case of Beijing, the argument is that there is now such a close
interest in how those parts of the world develop, and the sense
that they’re important to Australia’s future is so strong, that
we’re not only there to tell them how important Australian
history is or how important Australian literature is, but to tell
them how important the connection is. So I think the Tokyo and
the Beijing chairs are going to be putting more effort into
establishing common interests, and a common intellectual
pursuit of questions that matter to both societies. And it is my
view that Australians have a lot of trouble attracting outside
interest in their own society, so that there’s been relatively few
outsiders who’ve come into Australia and tried to make sense
of it in a serious way. There are some exceptions, of course,
such as Hartley Grattan, who showed a sustained interest in
Australia for a long time from the 1920s. But Grattan’s unusual;
there’s not a great many other American or European – or even
British – intellectuals or historians who’ve committed
themselves over a long period to understanding Australia.

AS: And how important do you think that outsider’s view is?

DW: I think all societies need scrutiny from others in order to
understand what they do well and what they do poorly, and
also to understand how their self-perception is understood by
others. We can have all sorts of understandings of ourselves,
of our strengths and limitations and all the rest of it, but it’s
important to have other people come in and have a good look
and say, ‘well, you’re sadly mistaken if you think you’re doing
this well’; or ‘you might think you’re doing this well, but in fact
what impresses us is something entirely different’. So I think
you need people who are external to the culture. And I think in
the Australian case the people who are external to our culture
are going to increasingly come from our region. I think it’s going
to be Indonesian, Japanese, and Chinese writers and
intellectuals who are going to give us a more substantive
understanding of who we are by looking at us and taking this
place more seriously than has been the case from European or
North American.

AS: So Australian Studies needs to be a conversation, and a
two-way enterprise, rather than Australians writing about
themselves, in opposition to others?

DW: The idea of Australian Studies as being, to use the favoured
old metaphor, a navel-gazing exercise, of us announcing what
we are to the world and making claims about what makes us
distinctive, is a pretty fruitless enterprise, really. I think that there
is a need for the views of outsiders. It is an interesting question
– how do certain societies come to see themselves as different
or distinctive, or develop a sense of themselves as different and
better in certain ways. An outsider won’t necessarily accept the
values that the society itself might create. But it has to be a two-
way exchange and cross-cultural conversation.

AS: Do you think that Australian historians are willing to engage
in such a conversation?

DW: I’m not sure. Many historians of my generation don’t seem
to have much interest in or experience of Asia. It seems to me
that Australian historians don’t have much experience of Asia,
and so fail to develop that personal connection which often
underpins intellectual curiosity. Your work on travel has shown
that it is important in shaping perceptions of the Other, and that
personal experiences are very important. But when it comes to
Australian historians, a great number are still focussed on
Europe. A conference in Italy or France is seen as a pleasure in
a way that a conference in Jakarta or Beijing isn’t. I think for
many of them it’s still a chore. And so, many historians will
continue to build personal and emotional connections with
Europe in a way that they won’t with Asia.
AS: And I suppose that reframing the narrative – to show that what has been considered niche is actually embedded in the mainstream – is a major challenge. I think that’s the problem that we’re confronting now in academic culture and historiography. The Chinese story makes this particularly evident. When you realise that Chinese communities have been here since the 1850s – predating the development of ‘Australianness’ in many senses – you come to see that they have to be considered as insiders and very much a part of the mainstream. So the problem becomes how to reframe the national story in a way that can contain that complexity and fragmentation.

DW: I think that accepting fragmentation is a big problem, because it’s always pleasing to have a master narrative. Getting back to Russell Ward, there’s something satisfying about the way he sets out the process by which national characteristics were formed, and a particular set of values and attitudes and beliefs and practices that you can call Australian were established. And perhaps the enduring popularity of the trope of Australianness as rendered in the Australian legend is due to its presenting a clear master narrative. Partly because it gives that kind of satisfying overview, but also – and I’m sure there will be many people who disagree with this – but I don’t think there’s a huge interest in Australian history in the community. So occasionally what you need is a book that will satisfy what minimal interest there is by telling a clear narrative that people can accept or latch onto as an account of their nation. And up to a point the Australian legend did that, it said ‘this is what you need to know, this is the core story of our nation’. And Anzac is another one of the core stories, which also connects to national characteristics, and I think that’s why it’s become so popular. So how you break away from core stories is another question.

AS: To my mind the multiplicity and the complexity of the Australian experience – the way that Australians have self-consciously attempted to cobble together an identity and a defining narrative and a sense of nation – are the most interesting things about Australian history and Australian Studies. So it’s a shame that the really interesting narrative isn’t picked up, and you get a simplified story instead.

DW: Well, the simplified story is powerful, and it also satisfies a minimal level of curiosity. The fact is, most people are not necessarily going to want to read a lot of history. And so if they do read something, they want a good return on their investment – they want to read the books that will tell them the story of their nation, as it actually happened. They don’t want the stuff at the fringes.

AS: And I suppose that many people read history for reassurance rather than for intellectual curiosity. I think this is reflected in the sales of popular history. Narratives with an almost comic book simplicity – ‘diggers overcoming hell overseas by relying on their ocker mates’ – are the ones that sell the most copies. Perhaps critical analysis is seen as an undermining of identity?

DW: Yes, and it does come back to that quite considerable outrage about postmodernity that was expressed, not least by John Howard but by many others as well. They considered histories that asked a lot of questions and had a lot of points of view but didn’t tell a story to be unsatisfactory in all sorts of ways. For them, history is meant to tell us who we are in fairly unproblematic ways. It’s meant to affirm, it’s meant to ennable, and strengthen and fortify, and give us confidence in who we are. So a history that actually questions those truths is not very serviceable. And I think the Asian dimension of our history can be more readily assigned to the fragmenting side of the debate than to the core narrative, because again it’s damned hard to fit it in.

AS: It is interesting that complexity is immediately considered as a fracturing in this debate, and is understood as somehow taking away from the strength of the Australian story, rather than adding another layer of richness. And I wonder if a part of that isn’t a symptom of continued anxiety about the security and success of the Australian settlement, and self-consciousness about the value of Australian culture and Australian history, which forces historians to continue that process of roping off the boundaries of what makes a distinctively ‘Australian’ history.

DW: In a sense it’s a need to textually colonise the Australian continent. I’m reminded that Nettie Palmer, in about 1917 or so, charted a literary map of Australia. She planted a little flag, which said ‘Frank Dalby Davison,’ or ‘Joseph Furphy’ or whoever, onto every place that every author had written about. So in a very real sense, what the literary map did was attempt to lay claim to the land, to culturally settle the continent. The settlers had claimed the space, and now the next phase was to take an imaginative hold of the continent. And that’s the higher responsibility of literature. So even by 1917 you could have a fair bit of continent covered by the various writers, to stake a claim on the continent.

And this also went on in those early compendious studies of Australian literature, which list just about everything ever written by anyone who set foot in Australia. Why do you need something so huge? Well you need it to stake the claim, to show that Australian literature is there, and not only that but that it’s big and it’s substantial. It’s the textual extension of the settlement process. So I think the textualisation of our continent is an important part of this enterprise. And again, it’s hard to see where you fit in Asia, because allowing in outsiders complicates the claim.

AS: So this is why histories exploring just how profoundly intertwined Australia and Asia have been throughout Australia’s past don’t find a ready audience?

DW: The nationalising project is a layered enterprise, and it takes shape in many different ways, but it is about claiming the continent; intellectually, culturally, and in other kinds of ways. And there are a lot of people uncomfortable with that formulation, I think, and it is a pretty uncomfortable formulation in a sense, partly because you like to think that your history and your literature are dignified sort of enterprises and not just a project of territoriality and claiming territory.

AS: Do you think that this nationalising project is also partly responsible for the fact that Asia is always presented as part of Australia’s future, rather than its present or past? When in fact, perhaps it would be fruitful to examine and acknowledge the extent of Australia’s historical ties with Asia.

DW: There are any number of ways in which we can frame Australian connections to the region. But ‘the future’ is a seductive kind of way of looking at it because it carries an enormous sense of portent. And ‘Asia’ in inverted commas does automatically do that – there is a tendency to feel that whenever Asian comes up, you have to put on the thinking cap and become more grave than you otherwise might be. Because there’s no room for frivolity about this. It does
automatically invoke the profound and the prophetic. This was established with Pearson, but extends right up to the present day. I notice that Michael Wesley’s latest book is called *There goes the neighbourhood: Australia and the rise of Asia* (2011). Again, there’s that sense of portent. But whether the profound and the prophetic are the best ways to think about our relationship to the region, as tropes or attitudes of mind, is a different question.

Another problem with the futurist idea is that it privileges an unknown future over a known present and a knowable past. Instead of looking at the things that have real traction and significance and which have a knowable presence in our culture and our lives, we push that to the sides and speculate about the future instead. And this is a real problem with the futurist fixation: it says that it doesn’t much matter what’s happened in the past because it’s going to be pretty small beer when compared to the really big things that are happening just over the horizon. It claims that history isn’t important. It’s not going to prepare us for the dramatically different world that we’re about to enter. By claiming that there is a dramatically different world always just over the horizon, that makes the history pretty much irrelevant.

AS: So the notion that Asia is Australia’s future, and not its past, is another factor that elides the Asian connections in Australia’s history?

DW: Exactly. Looking at Australia’s past becomes a trivial pursuit, in some sense. It may have an antiquarian interest, but it’s not going to tell you a lot about what’s coming up, because what’s coming up is by definition going to be so dramatically transformative that there is no guide for it, there is no rulebook. So the very rich history of Australia’s connections with Asia is consigned to the margins, to the borders of the mainstream Australian history: to become not much more than a decorative fringe.

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