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Beefeaters, Bobbies, and a New Varangian Guard? Negotiating Forms of “Britishness” in Suburban Australia

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Abstract

The recent emergence of “Britfests” provides a point of departure for investigating the complex transitional narratives of migrancy, ethnicity, and “belonging” among British migrants in modern Australia. We argue that the recreational representation of “Britishness” at these events reflects broader trends in the re-imagination of “Britishness” in Australia now a source of popular and scholarly debate. Such events are seen as representative of a newly-emergent sense of identity among British migrants — an organic reawakening of “community” pride, nationhood, and sense of privilege in a society that publicly proclaims a multiculturally-hued nationalism. We explore the ramifications for identity formation among British migrants, particularly as located in the Melbourne suburb of Frankston, as a situated example of how ethnic and national identities may be expressed. Local contexts can shed new light not only on the ways in which conceptions of “Britishness” are formed and negotiated by migrants in an Australian context, but also on the broader British diaspora in nations shaped by the historical processes and legacies of British imperialism, colonization, and migration.¹

Britfest, February 2001

It is the third annual “Britfest” in Frankston — a city in name, but known by most in Melbourne simply as the outermost suburb at the south-eastern end of the metropolitan train line. The location is the Frankston Football Oval, just outside the “civic centre.” The temperature is approaching its projected late February maximum of 38 degrees Celsius. There’s not much shade on the expanse of the oval, so many have sought relief in the raised wooden grandstand. Here, festival-goers can catch the breeze blowing across Port Phillip Bay and look out over Olivers’ Hill towards the beach, reminding themselves that, despite the best efforts of town planners to conceal its existence, people initially moved to Frankston to be “beside the seaside.”

The view from the stand looks down on a small stage in the middle of the football field. Rose Romeo has just finished her “Recitations,” her place taken by branch members of the United Kingdom Settlers Association (UKSA), who perform English country dances in Regency costume; their average age is perhaps 60. Just to the side of the stage, another group awaits the upcoming “Knobbly Knees Contest.” According to the program, a dance by the Britannia Morris Men, the playing of Scottish bagpipes, and “a Varangian Guard battle” will follow.

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From the grandstand one can also see, ranged around the edge of the playing field, some twenty stalls selling a range of goods, especially food, identified as British, and promoting clubs, societies, and interests similarly identified. There are cups of tea, and ploughman's lunches, fish and chips, "fudge with flair," scones, and "Rob's British and Irish Butchery," specialising in "British Gammon, Haggis, Irish Boiling Bacon, Pork Pies, Walsh Faggots, Black Pudding, and much, much more." A Scottish clan and tartan stall urges all to "look for your clan here." Shetland pony rides are offered near the Varangian Guard's "medieval" tent complete with soldiers and their smock-clad families. The Victorian Re-enactment Society has provided a wizened Queen Victoria as well as a Cockney Pearly King and Queen. There's a Punch and Judy show, Beefeaters, British bobbies, a Welsh witch, the "Front Parlour: specializing in country-ware gifts and English china," a cake stall run by the "Blitz Brits," and an assortment of second-hand oddments arranged under the banner "Steptoe."

Other features include the Frankston Returned Servicemen's League Pipes and Drums and a late afternoon "singalong." "Twelve different British beers" are advertised as on-tap in the football clubrooms. Every so often, a cannon is wheeled out and space is cleared for a firing (though this is never entirely successful). As the day wears on, it becomes evident that some of the highlights of previous Britfest gatherings — the Merseyside Association of Victoria, with their t-shirts and banner proclaiming "A swelling river, a rising tide, my heart, my pride, my Merseyside," and a "Beauty Contest for British Bulldogs" ("no humans eligible") — have not braved the heat to appear.

* * *

An Australian Rules football oval might seem an unlikely location for the identification of new forms of what is, within Australia, a uniquely paradoxical category of "Britishness," yet Britfest, with its recreational representation of "Britishness," provides an entry point for investigating the complex transitional narratives of migrancy, ethnicity, and "belonging" among British migrants in modern Australia. The identification and promotion of "Britishness" at this event reflects the broader ways in which "Britishness" in Australia is currently being re-imagined, a source of popular and scholarly debate.² Events such as Britfest are seen as representative of a newly emergent sense of identity among British migrants — an organic reawakening of "community" pride, nationhood, and sense of privilege in a society that publicly proclaims the ideologies and policies of multiculturalism.

Many of the public and nostalgic recreations of "Britishness" that have sprouted over the past decade remain problematic for many British migrants. The Frankston Britfest, and other activities of its organizing body — the United Kingdom Settlers Society (UKSA) — can be seen as an example not so much of a new form of British "self-ethnicizing" in an attempt to establish "a new visibility and new power" (Stratton, 2000, 23), but as the construction and policing by a certain minority of the ways that a particular conception of British history, culture, and nationhood is represented in the public sphere. The origins and contours of an event like Britfest emerge from the concerns of those wishing to delineate and/or curtail British cultural identity through performative and symbolic display. The majority of British migrants, who are

for a number of reasons much more ambivalent about the need for such forms of ethnic self-display, must respond in a form of negotiation (or non-negotiation) of that public presence. We will examine this new expressive tendency to perform British identity in the context of wider debates about “Britishness” in Australia, and explore the ramifications for identity formation among British migrants. We locate these tensions in the particular Melbourne suburb of Frankston as a situated example of how ethnic and national identities may be expressed. Finally, we will suggest that such local contexts shed new light not only on the ways in which conceptions of “Britishness” are formed and negotiated by Australians, but also on the broader British diaspora in nations shaped by the historical processes and legacies of British imperialism, colonization, and migration.

Locating British Identity in Australia

Recent scholarship has “tracked,” “traced,” and positioned expressions of British identity in Australia to a variety of specific cultural, social, and geographical spaces and locations (Brabazon, 2000; Moore, 1994; Peel, 1995; Stratton, 2000). The Melbourne suburb of Frankston has not attracted attention thus far, but it is no accident that Britfest has been held there since its inception in 1999. With a population of around 100,000, Frankston now functions as a major regional retail, service, and commercial centre (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996; Frankston City Council, 1999). Until it was transformed by extensive residential development in the 1950s, Frankston existed largely as a seaside resort for Melbourne (Jones, 1989). In its period of rapid postwar population growth, Frankston proved especially attractive to British migrants. The expansion of industry both at Frankston and within commuting distance (for example, the opening of the General Motors Holden plant at nearby Dandenong and the construction of the BP refinery at Crib Point) provided ample employment opportunities for skilled, semi-skilled, and manual workers alike. Cheaper housing, including government-funded ex-servicemen’s homes and a series of new residential estates (in some cases actively promoted by property developers to recently arrived migrants),³ and scenic beaches made Frankston a place where British migrants could realize dreams of seaside suburbia and “comfort and security in a warm climate” (Jupp, 1998, 97).

Census statistics indicate that from the second half of the twentieth century, the percentage of British-born residents in Frankston has been much higher than elsewhere in Melbourne, and indeed than much of Australia.⁴ By the mid-1960s, almost 20 percent of those living in the municipality were British-born.⁵ While this percentage is slowly diminishing due to an ageing population, in 1996, 12,298 people, or roughly 12 percent of the Frankston population, were born in Britain or Ireland (compared to an average of approximately 6 percent British-born elsewhere in Melbourne). These migrants to Frankston were part of the huge postwar population drive via organized, large-scale immigration schemes, initially for displaced persons and then for European economic migrants. Australian immigration policies blatantly favoured migrants from Britain; the infamous “White Australia Policy” was officially abandoned only in 1972. British migrants inspired little of the curiosity and alarm sparked by, in the 1950s and 1960s, significant numbers of migrants from northern, central, and southern Europe, and, by the 1970s, from the Middle East and South-East Asia. Between 1947 and 1991, more than one-and-a-half

million migrants from Britain arrived in Australia, many making the journey as government-assisted “ten pound tourists” or under the “Bring Out a Briton” sponsorship scheme (Appleyard, 1964 and 1988; Zamoyska, 1988). They constituted a high proportion of all settler arrivals: 30 percent between 1947 and 1961, 44 percent between 1961 and 1976, and 22 percent between 1976 and 1991. Between 1986 and 1991, the proportion fell to 15 percent of the total, and to 12 percent by 2001. Even this latter percentage still represents the second largest group of settler arrivals in Australia from any one nation.⁶

Despite the extent of this migration, much British migrant experience from the 1950s onwards has been inadequately characterized, and discussed in largely unproblematic terms. It is too simplistic to suggest that “British migrants had been immediately accepted into Australian society” (Stratton, 2000, 40), but the official and unofficial reception of migrants from Britain in Australia was certainly different from that of those who migrated from other countries. Australian historiography has generally assumed Britons were willing migrants, welcomed by and easily assimilated into a society that held so-called British values at its core. Recent scholarly work has begun to address these issues more critically.⁷

The migration experience profoundly transforms any person’s sense of place. Many postwar British migrants described a “sense of marginalisation” when reflecting on their lives in Australia (Hammerton and Coleborne, 2001, 86). For Britons, migration resulted in complex changes in relationships with the “homeland,” and thus in the migrants’ transformed sense of self and community in Australia. In this regard, British migrants are among “the poorest served of all groups in the history of Australian migration, with accounts ranging from anecdotal whimsy to an almost hostile dismissal of migrant Britons as the pampered beneficiaries of Australia’s cultural cringe” (Peel, 1995, 114). Understanding their sense of place, and making the British visible *as migrants*, provides insights into the construction of British/Australian identities which challenge conventional notions of identity formation and assimilation.

By developing new, non-totalising conceptions of the British in Australia, for example, one understands better what kind of “Britishness” constituted a “dominant cultural myth in Australia” that was “more pervasive in Australia than in Britain itself” (Meaney, 2001, 79). Locating British identity more particularly reveals that as a concept that had much currency in Australia during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century — the idea of a “British people,” combining those of English, Scots, Welsh, and Irish origin, and, more broadly, diasporic British peoples across the Empire — presents us with a complex and highly unstable category. Moreover, study of the British as an “ethnic” group in Australia, and especially the English within this group, complicates and destabilizes settler-migrant historical narratives of belonging.

Of course there are significant problems with the ideas of “Britishness,” “Englishness,” “Anglo-Celticness,” or even “Anglo-Saxonness,” within Britain itself. The concept of an Anglo-Saxon racial lineage lies at the base or “tap root” of an “Englishness” often collapsed into “Britishness”: an idea of “Anglo-Saxonness” reinvented and romanticized in the nineteenth-century as a myth of commonality, and subsequently transported to Australia (Cochrane, 1994, 6). Like Australians, Britons have never been as Henry Parkes, the great advocate of Australian Federation in 1901, wished it: “all one family, all one blood, all one faith” (cited Cochrane, 1994,

2). Sociologists and historians have been unpacking British and English identities in Britain (Chambers, 1993; Colls, 2002; Robbins, 1998; Samuel, 1989), and in various imperial, colonial and diasporic contexts and manifestations (Baucom, 1999; Brabazon, 2000; Cohen, 1994; Gikandi, 1996; Hall, 1992 and 2002; O'Reilly, 2000; Zuberi, 2001); an equivalent need is to explore and unpack these identities in Australia. This is not to say these identities have no validity or meaning, but we must try harder to understand the contexts and choices of those who identify in such a way.

At first glance, seemingly, "Britishness" has made more sense in Australia than in Britain. Australian immigration analyst James Jupp has argued that when the British first arrived in Australia at the end of the eighteenth century to establish the penal colony at Botany Bay, "a majority in Ireland, the Scottish Highlands and Wales did not normally speak English and most could not speak English at all." There were significant cultural and economic differences between these groups and the English and, we might add, between the quite distinctive regions of England itself. The Irish were further distinguished from the English, Scots and Welsh along ethnic, class and religious lines, the majority of Irish migrants being Catholics entering the predominantly Protestant society of the Australian colonies. The distinctiveness of the Irish, and particularly Irish-Catholic, experience in Australia is certainly evident up until the mid-twentieth century, and to some extent ever since.

And yet, Jupp argues, the colonial environment was highly assimilatory because of the scattered nature of settlement, the decline of non-English speaking migrants, the use of English in the education system, and Anglicization in Britain itself (1988, 1). In Australia, the argument goes, peoples from England, Scotland, Wales, and even Ireland had much more in common than they did in Britain. "Britishness" in Australia was not the same as "Britishness" in Britain — it was a unique form of "Britishness" that underscored an emergent Australian nationalism of the 1880s and 1890s.⁸ The introduction of Australian self-government, following the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901, was achieved without rupturing economic, institutional, or cultural ties with Britain. Australia differed from its "sister" British settler colonies of Canada or South Africa in that its population was overwhelmingly British; societal conflict was reserved for class and sectarian differences between the sizeable Irish minority and other British settlers. Indeed, up until the late 1940s, 98 percent of Australians were classified as being Anglo-Celtic in origin, indicating the relative homogeneity of an Australian society closely tied to Britain.

The context of Australian nationalism and the quest for the identification and consolidation of a unique Australian national identity is crucial to understanding "Britishness" in Australia. The sentimental attachments to "home" and "kith and kin" by postwar leaders and immigration planners meant that the "Australian way of life" was grafted onto notions of British heritage, community and "standards," and a sense of the "indissoluble unity of the British people everywhere" (Brett, 1992, 146). From 1948 to 1987, the *Nationality and Citizenship Act* protected and reinforced the British character of Australian society, and deemed "alien" those who did not have the status of a British subject, an Irish citizen or a "protected person" (see Jordens, 1995). Yet, the emphasis in radical nationalist historiography in Australia on the inevitable separation between Britain and Australia (more obviously, Alomes, 1988; Birrell, 1995; Mandle,

1978), as well as lack of enthusiasm about the monolithic if not culturally homogenous Australia implied in the 2001 Centenary of Federation celebrations, indicates ambivalence and anxiety about recognizing that, at specific moments and circumstances, “Britishness” was the dominant cultural myth.”

The sense of British identity in Australia has been further complicated by the emergence of the official policy of multiculturalism since the 1970s, and a subsequent public and intellectual “discourse of Anglo-decline” (Hage, 1994, p. 41). This “discourse of Anglo-decline” counterpoises the ideas of “homely belonging” and “governmental belonging” as ways of belonging in the Australian nation. We would argue that contrary to popular conceptions that the British have constituted a “natural aristocracy,” most British migrants have not experienced governmental forms of belonging, and many have not even “homely” forms of it. As cultural critic Ghassan Hage has argued, “one needed to accumulate something more specific within ‘Britishness’ to acquire . . . ‘governmental power,’ and that something was ‘class’” (Hage, 1994, 52). The question of class is crucial to understanding the experiences of post-war British migrants, and their collective and individual sense of belonging. As Paul Turnbull (1996) has noted, “British working-class migrants occupy a curious and still largely unexamined place in Australia’s post-war history. . . [I]t has seemed an identity somehow apart from multicultural Australia, as bland as the flat and mildly bitter beer Poms are generally supposed to favour” (10). While not the central focus, our examination of Britfest takes into account the class dimensions of British identity in recognition of the limitations (and social anxieties) created by the identification and celebration of a national history divorced from lived memories and experiences, from the possibilities of multiple, transnational, and even contradictory expressions of self-identity.

How, in a more specific sense, have British migrants responded to these wider threats to dominant Anglo-Australian culture, and their place as a migrant group within it? A key issue for this discussion, says historian Peter Cochrane, is that “real people have made choices about ancestry and associated traditions, as have ethnic groupings and the ideologues who speak for nations.” The idea of Anglo-Saxon kinship, of ethnic commonality, has frequently been put and prevailed, and recently spurious notions of racial identity seem to have crept back into public discourse under the guise of recovered ethnicity. “The crimson thread of kinship” is as, or indeed more, important to some than any relational multicultural field (Cochrane 1994, 1–11). More specifically, Jon Stratton has argued that “rather than being imposed on them [as in the case of other migrant groups in Australia],⁹ British migrants and their descendants are engaged in a process of self-ethnicisation” as a consequence of the efforts by Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s to remove privileges enjoyed by British migrants,¹⁰ and a subsequent feeling among these people that “they have lost a status, and an entitlement, to what was naturally theirs” (Stratton 2000, 23–4, 36–8).

Such assertions are too broad. We would argue that a majority of British migrants are no more interested in self-ethnicization than they are in increasing their visibility or in producing “an increasing sense of ethnic self-consciousness” among themselves as a community. The reasons are twofold. On the one hand, many are happy to maintain the comfort of being “invisible migrants”: the privileges of settler status and the perceived lack of necessity to recall

the consequences of “settlement,” including the troubling history of the conquest of Indigenous Australians and a long “tradition” of racism (Schech and Haggis, 2000, 231–4). On the other hand, while culture and identity may have been invisible to certain cultural arbiters, less visible forms and signs of identification do exist and, to some extent, prevail. Some have argued that “lurking behind” the insistence of British migrants “that their side of the story should be told, [and] that the history of British migrants had been forgotten” is a “palpable” sense of a need “to express their version of a distinct ‘British’. . . ethnic identity, apparently overwhelmed by the multicultural emphasis on non-British ethnicities” (Hammerton and Coleborne, 2001, 87–8). Interviews with British migrants in the Frankston area, research on the UKSA, and observations of Britfest suggest that the self-construction of individual and collective identities is as multiple as it is contradictory. British migrant identity in Australia needs to be seen as more fluid, responding to temporal, spatial, socio-economic, cultural, and political circumstances.

Organizing British Identity

One sign of the political agency for which Stratton argues was perhaps evident at what appears to have been the last Britfest to be held in Frankston. Visitors witnessed the first appearance at the event of the Varangian Guard — a recreation of the Roman Imperial fighting unit which absorbed increasing numbers of displaced Anglo-Saxons to the extent that it eventually became known as the English Guard, representing freedoms lost and still denied, but the preservation of ancestry through the tradition of practice. Yet this re-enactment, and possible assertion of continuing heritage, was the contribution of a particular group, and more a reflection of the interests of the organising body of Britfest, the UKSA, than of British migrants as a whole in Australia.

The UKSA was founded in 1967 by British migrants living in the Frankston area. Its ties with Frankston remain important, but the UKSA has become more widely representative of British migrants and their descendants based across the suburban sprawl of greater Melbourne. Originally established to provide support for new arrivals, and a travel service offering cheap airfares, the UKSA now makes broader claims to being a representative organization acting in the interests of British migrants and their descendants. Members receive a copy of the bi-monthly journal *Endeavour*, discounts on various goods, access to a library of folk music from Britain, and invitations to social events such as dances and darts evenings.

While these social functions remain central to the UKSA’s present operations, over the past decade the organization has assumed a more active role in the public promotion of a sense of British ethnicity and heritage. The major vehicle for this has been the *Endeavour*’s reports on the Association’s events, letters from readers on items of “British interest,” articles on British history and culture, recipes for British food, and advertisements for such venues as the Charles Dickens Tavern or the Pint and Pickle, and for services to readers including cheap phone cards, ballroom dancing lessons, and immigration consultants. In the context of the journal, as in all other UKSA functions and events, British interests are defined broadly as inclusive of Scottish, Welsh, English and — to some extent — Irish interests. As those responsible for the journal admit, however, the publication’s tone is highly defensive; recent issues have included articles titled “British Australians now officially second-class citizens,” “Anglophobia costs Australia

\$millions,” and “Threats to Brits” (*Endeavour*, 1998, 1999, 2001). Some of these articles are reproduced on the UKSA’s website (www.geocities.com/endeavour_uksa), and members may purchase stickers and t-shirts reading “Proud to be Anglo-Saxon” and “Proud to be Celtic.”

The UKSA makes broad claims to represent British migrants and their descendants, to make representations to Parliament and government departments in the interest of British migrants, and to represent the interests of British community against media prejudice and discrimination. But it is necessary to treat with caution conclusions that the UKSA has rebuilt itself along “ethnic” lines, or that advocacy has become the primary function of the Association (Stratton, 2000, 40). One segment of the UKSA certainly sees its role as a defender of “Britishness” and British heritage,¹¹ and the Association has received small grants from both the Federal and state governments for specific projects aligned to their constituency.¹² In this sense, the UKSA operates within a government framework whereby ethnic definitions are not only internally but externally demarcated under the public policy of multiculturalism.

But at the same time that some members of the UKSA want to actively uphold their British heritage through such public avenues, “the backbone of the Association,” according to its President, is really the social activities, mostly dances, held by the six suburban branches: Camberwell, Eastern Districts, Glen Waverley, Springvale, Preston, and Frankston. Interviews with branch members suggest many are more interested in the organization as a forum for social activity — for dancing, darts nights, coach trips to play poker machines, and meals at pubs — than in promoting a more general or rarefied sense of British culture and heritage. Indeed there is evident tension between those within the Association who see it needing to become a more viable vehicle for the advocacy of all things British, and those who prefer to concentrate on the weekly social activities born of the shared experience of migrancy and forms of sociability and entertainment based on a working-class lifestyle and values. Although both groups are present at Britfest, it appears to be the advocacy group who have done most to push for the event.

The UKSA took the idea for Britfest from a similarly-named event in the Sydney suburb of Blacktown, which began in 1996 and has generally attracted somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000 people. Frankston’s Britfest, first staged in 1999, has been less successful, dogged by both rain and hot weather. There have been difficulties in attracting sufficient crowds to make the festival financially viable. The 2001 Britfest attracted less than 2,000 people, numbers so low that the Frankston Football Club refused to run a bar from its clubrooms at the oval. When all costs had been accounted for, the UKSA barely made a profit from the event, dashing any hopes of Britfest being an important fundraiser for the Association.

Not only has a festival of “Britishness” failed to be a drawcard for spectators, the organizers have reported serious problems in recruiting participants willing to put their ethnicity on display. The UKSA President commented at an interview that “the Scots are very good; there’s an enormous range of Scottish things going on... But there’s Scottish things going on all over the place.”¹³ He indicated that Britfest had hoped to cater for “the Irish [who only] have St Patrick’s Day and that’s about it [and] the Welsh [who] have a church service for St David’s Day.” Most of all, it appears that a major aim of Britfest was to provide an outlet for the recreation of English ethnicity, and perhaps to compensate for the small turn-out at St George’s

Day functions. This reflects, of course, wider historical conflation of English and British identities, but also more recent (and perhaps anxious) reconstructions and re-affiliations.¹⁴

Given the relative failure of Frankston's Britfest, the UKSA has decided to promote "Britishness," and the Association itself, through stands at other events and by instigating a new range of social activities. It intends to make more use of clubrooms at the English Speaking Union closer to the centre of Melbourne, and to develop its role as an umbrella organization, with affiliated groups around the state and country. The UKSA already has some affiliates within the South Australian TEA group — The English in Australia — which set itself up rapidly but quickly dwindled to only sixty people. They have also approached the Merseyside Association of Victoria and the WISE People — the Welsh, Irish, Scottish and English — centred in the nearby suburb of Dandenong. Both these groups, however, prefer to maintain independence rather than uniting as part of a wider mobilizing force to act out a collective "Britishness."

Performing British Identity

As Australian historian Richard White recently commented, "[I]t is not usual for people to act out their nationality. Only in particular circumstances is nationality self-consciously and actively imagined, usually circumstances where the borderlines between 'us and them' can be not only marked but negotiated and brought into being" (White, 2001, 109). This begs the questions of whether the borderlines between Australian and British identity can be drawn quite so easily, and how British "being" was actively marked and negotiated. Was nationality self-consciously and actively imagined at Britfest? What varieties of British identity or "folk"-life could be encountered on the Frankston football oval?

Understanding Britfest as a folklife festival provides a useful way to think through notions of transplanted and fluid forms of British ethnic identity. Richard Bauman and Patricia Sawin have argued that folklife festivals are forms of cultural production in which "symbolically resonant cultural goods and values are placed on public display," often as a counterpoise to mass, elite, or official culture, and to preserve and promote histories seen as valuable and necessary. And yet, as Bauman and Sawin also note, folklore and folkways are largely the invention of the late eighteenth century, and have always been about the *politics* of culture. They point out that at folklife festivals in particular, certain aspects of cultural life are valued over others in the service of larger political agendas (Bauman and Sawin, 1991, 288–9). In this respect, Britfest should be understood not as a spontaneous "organic" emergence from the British community at Frankston, or within Australia as whole, but as the work of the predominantly middle-class UKSA, and the celebration of their values in the name of British migrants as a whole.

One need only consider the symbols that dominate Britfest — the Union Jack, the British royal family, the police, the military, and the early medieval — to understand what kind of "Britishness," and what vision of Britain, is being celebrated. This is not a pluralistic vision of a varied and changing group of peoples with a broad range of social, cultural, racial, and even linguistic affiliations, but one where imagined characteristics of shared origin, language, religion, and race are enlisted to constitute a notion of a singular social identity and an often

inherently conservative (a)political community. Apart from the romantic idealisation of the Morris dancer and of the Pearly King and Queen, no working-class values or symbols are evoked — no mention of British unionism, the solidarity of miners, or indeed of the Tolpuddle Martyr who arrived in the penal colony of New South Wales as a very early, albeit unwilling migrant. There is no mention of the industrial North or Midlands, of terrace living, *Coronation Street*, or city life in general. And there are certainly no references to the products of post-Second World War West Indian and Asian migration to Britain: no curry sauce to go with the fish and chips, and nobody to dress up as the 1990s hip-hop cult figure from suburban Staines, “Ali G.”¹⁵ For the organisers of the UKSA, “there ain’t no black in the Union Jack”; there isn’t even “Britpop” or “Cool Britannia.”¹⁶

Yet, as Robert Lavenda has argued in relation to North American community festivals, once a festival begins it has the potential to take on a life of its own, to develop what he calls a “dialogic potential.” Quoting Paul Ricoeur, Lavenda (1992) notes:

“In the same way that a text is detached from its author, an action is detached from its agent and develops consequences of its own . . . [O]ur deeds escape us and have effects which we did not intend.” The festival, both text and action, becomes public property, creating a public culture (101, 81–2).

The “dialogic potential” of Britfest is obviously manifest in the importance that the different, and indeed competing, groups within the UKSA attribute to various events and stalls. For many branch members, the significance of the day may lie more with the possibilities it provides for social interactions (the dancing and the meeting up with friends and acquaintances) than its more official function of marketing “Britishness.”

Our observations and impromptu conversations at Britfest suggested that festival goers not affiliated with the UKSA were rather bemused by the event, responding to stalls and activities playfully and with a certain degree of ironic distance. Even invited dignitaries, such as the Mayor of Frankston and local members of parliament, made light and jocular speeches rather than nationalistic or, in the case of the British Consul, patriotic. As we indicated at the start, for many the preferred view was from a distance in the grandstand, with few venturing out into the middle of the field to get involved with proceedings. The Britfest attendees did not challenge what was presented, but nor did they in any serious way embrace it. If we think of the organisers of Britfest as ventriloquists of “Britishness” — trying to make “Britishness” speak (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1992, 398) — it does not seem to have said much to those assembled.

Perhaps the events at Britfest did not have a clear analogue with the broader community from which they purportedly derive. Even though the British-born population in Frankston, and indeed in Australia as a whole, is ageing, it is unlikely that the audience could clearly identify with the “ethnographic other” presented to them at Britfest. Beefeaters, “bobbies”, Morris dancers, Punch and Judy, Queen Victoria, and the Varangian Guard all appear rather arcane, or cartoonish, if indeed they are familiar at all (and they would not be for those second and third generation migrants accompanying parents and grandparents). Most who attended in Britfest probably understand their “Britishness” — or Welshness, Irishness, Englishness, or

Scottishness — in quite different, more immediate, more contemporary, and probably more transitional or at least transnational ways. The presentation of traditional symbols of “Britishness” for their own sake served to render them ahistorical: forms of “Britishness” were celebrated as if, in the words of Stuart Hall, they contained “within themselves, from their moment of origin, some fixed and unchanging value or meaning” (Hall, 1981, 237). Understandings of Queen Victoria and the British police force are diverse and positional. Those migrants who enjoy watching their twice-weekly instalments of British television programs like *The Bill*, re-runs of *Prime Suspect*, *Silent Witness*, and *Inspectors Morse* and *Frost*, realise that the “British bobby,” let alone British crime, isn’t all she used to be.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of Britfest is that while, as we have discussed earlier, there are valid and important reasons for thinking about the meanings of “Britishness” in Australia, there are no representations of the Australian context for which this supposedly uniquely united identity was formed, only reference to pre-migratory forms of cultural expression. It has been argued that such “polyglot programs . . . generally represent an imagined community in which diversity is harmoniously integrated, where difference is reduced to style and decoration, to spice of life” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1992, 432). One doesn’t need to dip into history, but only tune into current discussion about the development of regional governments within England itself as part of the wider process of devolution of the United Kingdom and the call to make it a group of federated states more like Australia,¹⁷ to recognise the ways in which such displays, such aestheticizations, reflect a de-politicisation of - “Britishness.” Stratton contends that in promoting the notion that Australia’s heritage lies in England, Scotland, and Wales, as well as Ireland, Britfest deconstructs what it wishes to promote, the existence of “British folkways,” and points to the “cultural recolonisation [of Ireland in particular] under the apparently benign intention of ethnic formation” (Stratton, 2000, 27).

Organizers cannot be oblivious to the effects of attempts to assert British or English ethnicity, and one wonders how conscious they are of the ways (as Stratton puts it) that particular and positive claims about the role of the British or English in Australia’s settlement are often heard as nationalist claims for the primacy of an Anglo-Celtic heritage which, in turn, easily slips into a reassertion of the racial superiority of Anglo-Saxon Australia. And how all of this, as Stratton also points out, “ultimately, works in the broadest context of Australia’s long history of the White Australia policy which promoted and privileged the ideology of a white race which for members of groups such as National Action, is by no means defunct” (Stratton, 2000, 31). This may not be part of any conscious agenda among organizers and participants at Britfest, and although function and effect cannot be ignored, it may be less prescriptive than Stratton suggests. It may even be the case that, among some, problems of self-definition in post-imperial British societies has resulted in a relative timidity when it comes to embracing rituals of ethnic performance.

For others, however, the experience may be as much a positive sense of “fluidity” (or even “hybridity”), rather than identity-disorientation. Britfest may pose the question of identity by conjuring it in the sharpened form of counter-identification: inviting visitors to question their common origin, shared characteristics and ideals, and the allegiances established on this

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foundation. Perhaps it alerts visitors to the fact that their identification is conditional, and moves them to understand, in their own way, the need to situate debates about identity, in terms outlined by Stuart Hall:

within all those historically specific developments and practices which have disturbed the relatively “settled” character of many populations and cultures. . . and [within] the processes of “free” and forced migration which have become a global phenomenon of the so-called “post-colonial” world.

Thus Britfest may act to constitute identity through opposition, and while the festival may draw upon the past to invoke a relatively static identity, that identity formation is a dynamic process. To draw upon Hall, the “resources of history, language and culture” are active “in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as ‘what we might become, how we have been represented, and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.’” While British migrants at Britfest may relate to this invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, they may also, to quote Hall once more, find it produces in themselves “not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our ‘routes’ ” (1996, 4).

For despite the manifest identity tensions for some British migrants in Australia, many have not needed to undergo the process of “self-ethnicization”; they have carried their history with them in the patterns of life, habits, memories, continuities, and discontinuities that make identity and link it to place. As Carole Hamilton-Barwick has argued in relation to her investigation of the voice of oral memory in British women’s stories of migration to Australia, the subjectivity and purpose revealed by individual migrant narratives points to complex, sometimes epic, constructions of belonging. British migrant women “sing their songlines,” Hamilton-Barwick (2001a, 2001b) has argued, “[c]rying *What I do is me: for that I came,*” and we should not rush to universalize such experiences, such expressions of identity. We need to ask about the circumstances in which identity becomes a problem for British migrants, and for whom. Is it an “occluded nationalism” (the “conflation of the institution of the state with the embodiment of the nation”) rather than a death of “folkways” or the sense of an “identity vacuum” that leads to such experiences (Wellings, 1999/2000, 100–101)? Is it more often groups wishing to delineate and/or curtail cultural identity who feel the need to publicly narrate that cultural identity through performative and symbolic displays? As Britfest’s recreation of British space in multicultural Australia anxiously negotiates a nation of “others” (while producing its own internal, empty spaces of exclusion, thus renewing processes of displacement; see Jacobs, 1996), is it the context of an “occluded” Australian nationalism also that brings such assertions into being?

It is in this context that Britfest — precisely because of our analysis of the festival’s inconclusive and ambiguous role in promoting “Britishness” — raises questions about the visibility (or invisibility) of British migrants in today’s Australia, and the tensions inherent between a public and private sense of ethnic and cultural identity. Most British-born in Australia do not feel the need to assert or display their “Britishness”; in part it is all around

them in the continuing legacy of British political, social, and cultural colonialism, but it is also more flexible and varied than the cultural forms on display at Britfest. It is this very shifting and indeterminate ordinariness of “Britishness” in Australia — comforting for some, threatening for others — that has and will continue to undermine past and future attempts to put it on display at Britfest. In Australia, many migrants understand that they live in both “old” and “new”¹⁸ countries: they understand how history exists as a tangible sense of the past permeating everyday life, but also of the anti-historical qualities required to transform space into place and embrace new cultural forms.

It is unlikely that another Britfest will be held in Frankston. (Its Blacktown counterpart in western Sydney seems to be doing better; see Stratton, 2000). But events such as Britfest, and formulations such as those of Stratton about “self-identification,” indicate a need for further conceptual and empirical research on the nature of British migrants’ sense of place and identity in contemporary Australia. “Britishness” has always been discussed in terms of a promise, threat, or problem. It is now time, perhaps, to think of these people in different terms: to observe how they have come to settle or be unsettled in Australia, to chart their various narratives of belonging and dislocation, and to probe and perhaps question the very existence of their own unique trans-national and transitional “folkways.” How British migrants occupy and negotiate the spaces between British and Australian identity, and the nationalist or ethnically absolutist discourses that manoeuvre them to appear either coterminous or mutually exclusive, may prove to be provocative and culturally insubordinate in both British and Australian nationalist contexts. To take this one step further, and to highlight the instabilities of identity, it has been argued that

[O]ne thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know now to go on in each other’s presence. “Identity” is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty (Bauman, 1996, 19).

It may be worth asking British migrants to Australia, and elsewhere, about the ways in which their sense of self is conceived in terms other than an escape from uncertainty, and how their identities are shaped by material and imagined senses of migration, place, and nation. Indeed, it may be most necessary to do this so that (other) Australians “know now how to go on” and how to respond in the “multicultural” presence of the British.

Notes

1. This article derives from a paper presented at “The British World Conference” held at the University of Calgary in July 2003. We are grateful for the comments provided by the editors and referees at *History of Intellectual Culture*.
2. Recent debates on the nature of “Britishness” or “Anglo-Celtic” identity in Australia include Dixon (1999), Stratton (2000), as well as symposia in *Australian Historical Studies* (2001), *Communal/Plural* (1994), and the *Journal of Australian Studies* (2001); see individual articles listed in references. On issues of “belonging” in Australia more generally, including indigenous, migrant and multicultural dimensions and perspectives, see Docker and Fischer (2000), Gelder (2000), Hage (1998), Read (2000), and, for a situated example, Grace et al. (1997).
3. Property developers and builders A.V. Jennings, for example, marketed their Frankston estates in Britain, and also through migrant hostels. Migrants interviewed recall that Jennings organised coach trips to view estates. See also Garden (1992, 155–9, 198–9).
4. Within the state of Victoria, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, significant concentrations of British-born are in the local government areas of Cranbourne, Melton, and Dandenong. Within Australia as a whole, New South Wales has the largest numbers of UK-born, but suburbs in Western Australia (Rockingham, 26.8%) and South Australia (Elizabeth, 25%) have the largest concentrations of British migrants (1991).
5. In 1947, the British-born represented approximately 9.6% of the total Frankston population; 13.6% in 1954; 16.1% in 1961; 18.1% in 1966; 18.3% in 1971; 17.9% in 1976; 15.9% in 1981; 14.6% in 1986; 13% in 1991; and 11.4% in 1996 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Frankston City 1996).
6. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures indicate that between 1995 and 1999, the top six source countries of permanent settler arrivals to Australia were: New Zealand (17.1%), United Kingdom and Ireland (12.3%), China (8%), Former Yugoslav Republics (6.7%), South Africa (4.6%), and Hong Kong (3.7%). In 1996, 22.6% of Australia’s population was born overseas, and 6% of these were born in Britain, still the highest source by far for all overseas born. New Zealand is second on the list, at 1.6%.
7. For one of the first and best discussions of British migrants in situ in Australia, see Peel (1995, 89-92, 108-20). Sara Wills is currently conducting research into British migrants’ “sense of place” in Frankston, and others are now engaged in extensive surveys of British immigrant experience in Australia. A. James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson, for example, are near to finishing a collaborative project that draws on over a thousand letters from British migrants who responded to a BBC appeal in 1996 for a documentary on “Ten Pound Poms,” and which have in turn provided a rich and varied source for oral history interviews.
8. In this respect, it is worth noting Meaney’s argument that Britishness was therefore not something imposed on Australia from outside — an outcome of British hegemony or manipulation — but was freely chosen (2001, 84). See also Colley (1992, 309–29).
9. On the imposition of peripheral ethnicity on migrants of a non-Anglo background within a framework of official multiculturalism, see Gunew (1994), and Hage (1998).
10. In 1984, for example, the Labor Government under Prime Minister Hawke revoked the right of British residents in Australia to vote in state and federal elections; this applied only to those who became resident after this date, and thus not to the majority of British migrants who had arrived prior to 1983. Such legislative curtailments were compounded by the Prime Ministership of Paul Keating (1992–96), during which he emphasized Australia’s geographical ties to South-East Asia rather than its historical ties to Britain. This included the speech in Parliament in which he attacked Australian conservatives for

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having “a cultural cringe to a country which decided not to defend the Malay peninsula, not to worry about Singapore, not to give us our troops back to keep ourselves free from Japanese domination.” Quoted in Partington (1994, xv).

11. As the current UKSA President indicated, a “heritage group” has been set up within the organization which “has been trying to get away from the other structures within the UKSA,” and which has “upset” many of the members. Interview with Barry Hunt, 17 June 2001.

12. The UKSA received \$3000 from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs to conduct a small survey of British-born in the City of Melbourne, and also small project-tied grants from the Victorian Multicultural Commission.

13. The Scotland-born population of Australia is the second largest group from Britain living in Australia, and in some areas the display of Scottish identity is particularly prominent, certainly in comparison with that of other British groups. There are a number of Highland dances and festivals throughout the country, and a major Highland festival was part of the Centenary of Federation activities in 2001. A “Scotfest,” “Caladonian Ball,” and “Kirking of the Tartan” are held in the Victorian town of Maffra. Other areas and towns, such as Glen Innes and Maclean in northern New South Wales, also strongly identify with Scotland in a way no town or suburb would identify with England; see McSwan (1986). Again, this probably has as much to do with the opportunities for identifiable difference of an ethnicity or culture as actual preponderance of ethnic identity.

14. National identity tends to become paramount, it seems, when opposed or under threat. Thus the Age newspaper (Melbourne) reprinted Margaret Thatcher’s comment on Tony Blair’s efforts to take Britain into Europe, “Britons can’t risk a vote for extinction” (4 June 2001). In another oppositional but more obviously “transnational” context, it has been argued that “the British in Spain can be described as a strongly ethnic group: the British in Spain are essentially British” (O’Reilly, 2000, 86).

15. “Ali G” is the creation of writer and comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, which was first launched in 1998 on UK television in the comedy program “Da Ali G Show” and quickly achieved cult status, with Ali G voted the UK’s “TV Personality of the Year” in 2000. This was followed by an American TV series starring the Asian/white rapper “journalist,” and a movie, *Ali G Indahouse*, released internationally by Working Title Films in 2003.

16. The first reference here is, of course, to Gilroy (1987). On the phenomenon of British “pop nationalism” in the late twentieth century, see Zuberi (2001, especially 64–72); Bracewell (1997); and, for a political perspective on the context and climate of “Cool Britannia,” (Cohen, 1999) as well as Brabazon (2000, 113–24).

17. In 1999 elections were held in Scotland and Wales and power was transferred to two newly elected parliaments, as well as to a new Executive in Northern Ireland, thus replacing domination by one parliament and civil service in Britain with governance by four legislatures. As part of a broad agenda to “modernize” the British state, in part through devolution of power, the Blair Labour Government also reformed local government and the (un)representative nature of the House of Lords. See Aughey (2001), Bogdanor (1999), and Chen and Wright (2000).

18. The reference here is to Wright (1985) and Carter (1992).

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