

slice of social history of the period.

Unfortunately, the corollary of the author's approach is that he sheds no new light on any of the many issues that arose during Menzies' time in power. Lyons does not judge Menzies' record. He leaves that to others. There is little if anything in these letters that is controversial. That includes one I like to think is still among those letters – the one I wrote in 1958 (when I was 14) to Mr Menzies, seeking his autograph. I still have the favourable reply!

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**Melissa Harper and Richard White (eds), *Symbols of Australia: imagining a nation*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2021, xi + 448 pages; ISBN 9781742237121.**

A symbol is something that stands for, or represents, something else. Typically, a symbol is a physical object, or a picture of a physical object. A national symbol is meant to evoke a wide recognition beyond the symbol itself, which may be the power of the state, the feelings of a nation about itself, a reminder of and pride in objects common to the life of the people, and a desire to buy a certain product, among others. National symbols are 'national' because they are presumed in some sense to unite rather than divide, and perhaps to give some sort of deeper meaning to national life, even though they may take a matter-of-fact form.

A symbol may have different meanings and purposes for different groups and may be there to be used rather than to be respected, or both. All of these aspects receive discussion in various parts of this work. 'National symbols are complicated beasts,' write the editors in their introductory chapter, and the contents of this book bear this out.

The book has an introductory chapter 'Land of Symbols' by the editors, and 28 further chapters each devoted to an Australian national symbol, by various authors. The writing is scholarly, but readable and engaging. The reader is not simply provided with facts and dates about the symbols, but is led to place them in a wider and changing social context. There are extensive notes containing sources and references, a comprehensive index and 69 figures.

The book reads rather like a social history, travelling along the highways and byways of the history and the society that created Australia's national symbols. There are many insights into changing attitudes, social mores and lesser-known aspects of Australian history. The figures provide a fascinating series of snapshots on Australia's past.

The book is a history of national symbols, rather than considering only those prominent today. So there are the discussions of the imagining of Australia as a young woman, common in the 19th century, and Australia House, which are hardly national symbols today.

There are chapters on natural symbols such as the Southern Cross, the wattle and the kangaroo, the (inevitable) built symbols of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Opera House, and Indigenous symbols that have become national – the boomerang, the Rainbow Serpent and Uluru. As well, there are the abstract symbols of the state – the flag, the coat of arms and the crown. The important influence of the bush and its hard life feature with the billy can, the gum tree and the digger, the latter a ‘bushman gone to war’ and taken to epitomise the independence and anti-authoritarianism seen in the Australian character. The notion of ‘mateship’, emerging also from bush life and, although changed, lives on in particular in the most recent symbol in the book, ‘the democratic sausage’, with its low-key celebration of Australia at election time.

The crown is one of the more problematic symbols. It is the foundation of legal and political authority, but it has also had a moral and even spiritual aspect. On the one hand, it legitimises state power but, as we read, ‘it has also acted as a source of appeal against arbitrary exercise of state power’. The quasi-religious ‘spiritual and emotional conception’ that Sir Robert Menzies perceived in the crown was also perceived more generally until the early 1950s, but can no longer command that type or breadth of intangible and elevated attachment.

Secular materialism is the dominant ‘world view’ in Australia, as it has

become in most of the west. This process of secularisation has been occurring more widely, for example in the transition of universities into places of training, not truth, and in the expanding religious groups that often contain, American-style, an underlying materialism only partially hidden by a religious veneer.

Nevertheless, the need for symbols suggests that an overly prosaic notion of the nation cannot sustain itself. In the chapter on the symbol of the Rainbow Serpent we read: ‘Aboriginal culture was increasingly being called upon to provide a symbol of nation ... by groups of non-Indigenous Australians who believed it offered a depth and richness of symbolic meaning that more conventional symbols had lost.’ One might say a similar thing about the relatively recent recognition of Uluru as a national symbol. Serious engagement with Indigenous culture and a wider appreciation of it could have a further effect on the development of Australia’s national symbols.

The editors comment ‘the book can be neither comprehensive nor definitive’, and in this spirit one can note that words also can be symbolic. In pondering the various shades of possible meaning, the declaration of Australia as a Commonwealth in 1901 might be taken to symbolically express a national spirit to which Australia wished to aspire.

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