

Ten Pound Poms: Australia's Invisible Migrants

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The Australian launch of Hammerton's and Thomson's history of postwar British migrants to Australia took place at the end of a one-day symposium held at the Migration Museum in Melbourne. The speakers' programme for this event boasted the names of most of the significant researchers in this emerging field: Sara Wills, James Jupp and Mark Peel, to name half of them. Since the 1970s the experiences of those who came to Australia from Europe in the postwar migration boom have been studied at length. By contrast, published research focused on British immigrants to Australia – the largest cohort of arrivals in this period – has only recently begun to appear. Although not the first of these publications, the breadth and quality of research in *Ten Pound Poms* will ensure that it becomes an essential point of reference both for scholars of postwar British migration to Australia and for those pursuing oral history.

James Jupp, the pre-eminent scholar of the history of Australian immigration, published *The English in Australia* in 2004. His chapter 'Bringing out the Britons' comes closest to *Ten Pound Poms* in terms of offering an overview of the postwar migration scheme, and provides important analysis of the machinations of politicised Britons and the Australian politicians instrumental in shaping the services and opportunities they received. However, an account of the aspirations, satisfactions and disappointments of the individuals for whom the effects of these machinations became most meaningful are necessary for fleshing out Jupp's historical framework. In *Ten Pound Poms* their life stories, complex both in their own fashioning and retelling and in the authors' piecing together of biographical evidence, people this history in a way that defies conventional assumptions about the ease with which Britons adapted to life in Australia. This reveals much about twentieth-century phases in the British-Australian alliance, which is so often taken for granted. Jupp's work places post-war British migration in two contexts: that of migration from other countries and a longer history of British free-settlers in Australia. He argues that a form of post-war exhaustion drove those who escaped Britain for Australia soonest after the war and that members of this relatively recent cohort were more skilled than many of those who had gone before them.⁽¹⁾ Thomson and Hammerton add detail and nuance to this analysis, giving Jupp's conclusions weight in the form of a collection of complex narratives,

which also point to the mix of motivations for coming to Britain and to the varying value placed on the skills that British migrants brought with them.

Sara Wills and Kate Darian-Smith have published a number of articles, which share Hammerton and Thomson's interest in ethnic and national identity.⁽²⁾ Wills and Darian-Smith use the British community in Frankston, outer Melbourne, as a case study. Their work offers sophisticated theorisation of the ongoing processes of identity formation and relies less on interview material than *Ten Pound Poms*. The anchoring of its discussions in one community, and in particular the event of Britfest, organised primarily by and for this community, is one of its strengths. This enables the kind of sustained and contained analysis that, in its best incarnation, develops a very critical and detailed engagement with individual and community practices as it comes to terms with the inconsistencies, impositions and divisions entailed in the performance of British identities. Hammerton and Thomson are slightly less critical, perhaps one small cost of them casting their net so widely. They are alert to inconsistencies and defensiveness, as Wills and Darian-Smith are, but are more concerned with the emotional journeys of a broad cross-section of this migrant population. Sustained sensitivity to differences of age and sex are a feature of their broad sweep.

This is not the first time Hammerton and Thomson have shown us their abilities to use oral history in sensitive and revealing ways. Thomson's *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend* (1994) is one of the most moving examples of Australian war history and relies heavily on interviews for its considerable insights. In joining forces with Hammerton, Thomson further extends the argument for the importance of oral history, both its content as transcribed and interpreted, and analyses of its performance. While reading *Ten Pound Poms* I frequently felt transported to the lounge rooms and porches of those interviewed, an observer of their embodied story-telling techniques and their non-verbal responses to the interviewers' investigations. In addition to oral histories, interviewees revived some fascinating material for public consumption, including letters, postcards, diaries and scrapbooks. One of the most memorable examples is a collection of thirteen reel-to-reel audiotapes containing messages from each member of the Good family. Made in 1963 and 1964, these tapes were sent to England to the children's maternal grandparents along with slides and letters. Gwen Good's 1964 ABC radio broadcasts describing her migration to Australia shed additional light on her experience and the ways in which she chose to construct it for particular audiences.

One of the many contributions that this text makes to the history of British migration to Australia is its interest in the images, language and embodied experiences of mid to late twentieth-century homesickness. While confrontation with the Australian bush, and other factors in the alienation of nineteenth-century free settlers, have been examined in some detail, the particular psychology of later versions of British homesickness has not, to my knowledge, been explored in the detail that it is here. The authors' subjects often use the term 'homesickness' in a way that 'simplifies or conceals a complex experience'. It is considered by many to be a condition afflicting women much more than men, and is indeed most often reported by women. Yet Hammerton and Thomson detect a 'hidden form of male homesickness'. They find abundant clues for this in the testimonies of wives and children who have observed the 'emotional and physical breakdown of their menfolk' (p. 289). These testimonies contribute to a general undermining of any simplistic model of homesickness, which explains it as something that passes or is grown out of. Instead, *Ten Pound Poms* contends that it is a condition that often returns and is deeply connected to the way that life is experienced in the present.

The discussion of hope, loneliness and disappointment that this analysis of homesickness entails runs throughout the book. It begins with a detailed treatment of emigration: the official, popular and personally delivered messages that fed the imaginations of those who saw Australia as a place to make a new life. Poverty, the effects of war and the breakdown of family relationships in England were all reasons to escape. Sunshine, better wages and the possibility of adventure were inspirations to take the long journey to Australia. The experience of leaving loved ones is explored, as are the complex ways in which emigration decisions were arrived at and the difficulty of communicating these decisions to those who would be left behind. The physical wrench or the energised and excited anticipation, which characterise the feelings associated with travel out of villages and cities on trains and then boats, is described. A fascinating analysis of transitional identities follows as the authors' interview material and written sources reveal long boat

journeys made sense of through the images and stories of Empire, particularly as liners docked in the ports of Egypt, Aden in the Suez and Ceylon.

In addition, the class structure that would be reconfigured in Australia is emphasised by many in their memories of this passage between two worlds. Some struggled to find 'their sort of people' aboard the ships, while others made close friendships but worried that these would not last in the face of forced dispersal by the Australian authorities once they had reached their destination. Others still enjoyed the fact that the assisted passage meant that conventional British class segregation was disrupted by the fact that agreeing to the scheme meant agreeing to eschew social distinctions expressed through graded accommodation aboard the ships.

During the 1960s, passenger jets made flying a real alternative to a sea voyage to Australia and an increasing number of emigrating Britons took the plane. This was incorporated into the government scheme at no extra cost. From the early 1970s the jumbo jet began to spell the end of migration by boat and in 1977 the last shipload of British immigrants docked in an Australian port. For those who flew to Australia, particularly those who took this option soon after it became available, the sense of a rite of passage that came with the lengthy voyage was often replaced by a feeling that theirs was a pioneering experience, that it entailed novelty and adventure. One interviewee, John Hardie, decided that the event of his first flight warranted a collar and tie. By the time the Hardies arrived in Melbourne they were 'elated, exhausted and filthy' (pp. 118–9) Many, given the choice, chose the four-week sea voyage over a flight and Hammerton and Thomson make the point that the variety of experiences enjoyed by many voyagers are remembered vividly as an experience of a lifetime, whereas flights rarely feature. They also suggest that the loss of the time a sea passage gave people to reflect on the decision they had made and to imagine their life in Australia was a negative effect of travel time being cut dramatically short for those who took the plane.

In part two, 'Britons in postwar Australia', the authors offer fascinating descriptions of people's early encounters with the Australian landscape, social and commercial practices, and housing. Of the alien natural environment of Hobart, Margaret Scott wrote:

I didn't find it beautiful. I found it threatening. The mountain rose menacingly above the Hill's hoist. The land had no history that I could read from it. Everything looked untended, shabby, peeling, dry and horribly powerful as though the bush or the sea might suddenly rise up and casually flatten all the little wooden houses. And here too was the misery of the loss of the known, not of network and ritual but of familiar places and the sense of possession that familiarity bestows. Later I felt unhappy that I couldn't, without resorting to books, open the landscape for my children as my mother had opened Gloucestershire for me. (pp. 133–4)

Later in this section of the book Scott is quoted again:

I had no idea where to buy cheese or where to get shoes mended ... When, in January 1960, I got back to our New Town flat and found that a tin I'd bought in a strange supermarket held unground beans, I tried to grind them in the washing machine. (pp. 141–2)

Other testimonies speak of the strange ways in which Australians communicated: not only the way they had re-organised and re-invented the English language but also the segregation of social events along gender lines. While Hammerton and Thomson remind us regularly that every migrant's experience was different, the text is consistently attentive to the variables shaped by gender and age. While many migration narratives featured friendship and support from Australians, the experiences of prejudice are just as apparent. The authors note that

Adjustment to a new school system, was hampered by racist taunts and bullying; indeed the ferocity of the Pommy bashing suffered by many British children in postwar Australian schools is shocking (p. 148).

For example, in 1964 when Ann Hawkins' children came home from their first day at school in Radcliffe, near Brisbane, one had a cut-lip and black eye. The other asked her, "What's a Pommie bastard mum?" (p. 148)

The complex and often difficult process for Britons of making a new life in Australia seems incongruous considering the Australian government's commitment to coaxing as many of them to its shores as possible. It adds a fascinating dimension to understandings of Australian national identity at the time. The visit of Elizabeth II in 1954 brought hundreds of thousands of Australians flocking for a glimpse of their queen. And Australia's longest-serving Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, who was openly enamoured with the royal family and Britain, dominated this period of mass migration. It must be remembered though that many Australians had misgivings about what could be interpreted as Britain's abandonment of Australia in the Pacific during WWII. Less than two decades later, when Britain joined the common market, Australia was left to find its own trading partners and, by the late 1960s, started to rethink its White-Australia policy. All of this suggests some shifting of alliances but it could easily be argued that at this ground level, many Anglo-Celtic Australians recognised and identified strongly with a British inheritance. Yet it was also at this ground level that prejudices brewed and translated into taunts and exclusions metered out to late arrivals from 'the Motherland'.

For some immigrant Britons, these taunts compounded homesickness, financial stress and a sense of responsibility to those left behind. Hammerton and Thomson tell us that estimated numbers of those who returned to Britain average just over 25 per cent. As early as 1954, the Australian government was anxious enough about this phenomenon to commission an official enquiry into the problem of returning immigrants. The last part of the middle section of this book looks at the experiences of those who eventually said goodbye to Australia's shores. *Ten Pound Poms* argues that the decision to return must be understood in the full context of life histories and that family dynamics are almost always a central component of the decision-making process. It also shows that at different ages the question of where to call 'home' raises different considerations. The young and single could often return to Britain after a few years and frame their Australian story as episode and adventure. For some who invested a substantial period of time in Australia, retirement meant a new freedom to return to Britain. For others, by this late stage, children and grandchildren had transformed Australia into home.

The final third of this text, 'Migration, memory and identity', begins by examining the narratives of those who returned to Britain. In the more positive of these Australia is framed as providing a period of adventure and character building; an episode that left an indelible mark on people; broadened their horizons. In others there is a sense of regret; of missed opportunity. This is particularly so for those whose lives in Britain did not provide the improved circumstances that they hoped for as they left Australia. For some, Australia had caused the breakdown of family relationships. One particularly tragic account is of a woman who accompanied her family to Brisbane and after two years of aching homesickness returned to Britain. She took her two sons with her and hoped her husband would follow. He never did. One of her sons subsequently moved to Australia (p. 316). For others Australia had meant the beginning of a new family that had made the return journey with them. Memories of Australia are at times filled with the difficulties that made return the most sensible option at the time of departure. The relief felt on return was often tinged with the anger and disappointment borne of feeling harshly treated by Australian authorities and others who were supposed to have supported British migration. To some degree these memories continue to make sense of the present.

In the final section, of 'Migration, memory and identity', the authors pull back from extended first-hand accounts and offer an overview of the meaning of this migration narrative for those who belong to it, and for

history. This section looks at the ways postwar British migrants to Australia have managed an 'evolving sense of belonging'. Recognising that the issue of national identity is never fixed or resolved, or shaped by one thing, Hammerton and Thomson capture some of the complexity of migrant subjectivity through their analysis of their subjects' self-representations in relation to their sense of themselves as British-Australian. Here the ways in which British and Australian loyalties are juggled and manifest in attitudes to an Australian Republic, sporting teams or a concept of multiculturalism are explored. The crucial role of family relationships in shaping migrant loyalties and identities is given close examination, as is the importance of return visits for providing crucial phases of reassessment. The strong impression of a variety and instability of migrant identities is hardly surprising given the range of reasons for leaving Britain and for staying in Australia. This chapter places the experiences of 'Ten Pound Poms' in the contemporary social and political landscape. It helps us to see the importance of migration history for an understanding of what it means to be Australian today.

In *Ten Pound Poms* Hammerton and Thomson pull together a vast and ranging collection of sources, handled deftly to give ample voice to British migrants in the post-war period, while offering a sustained analysis of these migrants' self representations and the broader history to which they belong. This text will make a lasting impression on individual readers and the scholarly field.

Notes

1. James Jupp, *The English in Australia* (Cambridge, Port Melbourne, 2004), p. 131. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sara Wills and Kate Darian-Smith 'Beauty contests for British bulldogs? Negotiating (trans)national identities in suburban Melbourne', *Cultural Studies Review*, 9 (2003), 65–83; and Sara Wills, 'Passengers of memory: constructions of British immigrants in post-Imperial Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 51 (2005), 94–107. [Back to \(2\)](#)

The authors are very appreciative of this extremely thoughtful review, which highlights many key themes that they wanted the book to explore.

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