

The Larrikin Legacy

The Australian stereotype is intertwined with notions of larrikinism. It is a stereotype of a fundamentally good person that tests the boundaries of dubious rules. As defined by historian *Manning Clark*,

“Soaring over them all is the larrikin; almost archly self conscious- to smart for his own good, witty rather than humorous, exceeding limits, bending rules and sailing close to the wind, avoiding rather than evading responsibility, playing to an audience, mocking pomposity and smugness, taking the piss out of people, cutting down tall poppies, born of a Wednesday, looking both ways for a Sunday, larger than life, sceptical, iconoclastic, egalitarian yet suffering fools badly, and, above all, defiant.”

Although not all Australians are larrikins (most could probably be defined as quite conservative), when it comes to finding icons, no other character stereotype has proved to be as popular with Australians as a whole. In real life, these icons include bushranger [Ned Kelly](#), swimmer Dawn Fraser, digger [John Simpson](#), French resistance leader Nancy Wake, cricketer Shane Warne, actor Errol Flynn and singer Bon Scott. In movies, the larrikin characters of Mick Dundee (Crocodile Dundee) and Daryl Kerrigan (The Castle) have also proved popular with the public.

At the opposite end of the personality spectrum is the wowser. As defined in 1960 by Eugene Gorman QC,

"Wowser is a simple, satisfying, succinct, single word which aptly distinguishes the whole race of windy, watery, cantankerous, snuffling Chadbands, Stiggines, Holy Joes and Scripture-sprouting sneaks, hypocritical humbugs, and unctuous, dirty-minded rotters, who spend their time interfering with the healthy instincts and recreations of healthy-minded, honest humanity."

The Australian affection for the larrikin and scorn for the wowser can probably be traced to the 80 years of Convict transportation that characterised the founding third of Australia's urban existence. Many of the Convicts showed that they were more likeable, and more respectable, than those who had put them there, or made them into outlaws.

The word itself seems to have been coined by an Irish policeman in a Melbourne court who claimed the prisoner was "larkin about". Overtime, larrikin became a word for people of the streets that were seen as potential criminals. For reasons that probably had something to do with the oppressive nature of Australian society, it also developed a positive connotation.

Defiance

Sir Henry Browne Hayes

Sir Henry was both a knight and transported felon and this unusual combination made him quite a novelty in Sydney. A native of Cork, Ireland, he had been made Sheriff of the city in 1790 and

knighted in the same year. Ironically, he was the Crown Agent for the transportation of 150 Irish Convicts in 1791, only to involuntarily follow them nine years later.

With his wealth, title and his incongruous criminal record, he clearly presented a problem for the colonial authorities. The conflict between his Convict status and his social class set a poor example to the other Convicts as well as the garrison officers, many of whom were on smaller annuities than Hayes. The Governor, Philip Gidley King, was also an enemy.

During his ten years in the colony, Hayes was arrested and convicted five times, earning sentences to Parramatta, Van Diemen's Land, Norfolk Island and twice to the Coal River (Newcastle). Most of his sentences resulted from disrespectful behaviour toward the colony's military leaders. A page from the letterbook of Judge-Advocate Ellis Bent gives some insight into Hayes's personality:

"The first Person I tried was Sir H Brown Hayes, (before a Bench) for speaking insolently of Colonel Foveaux, and endeavouring to raise a riot. I reprimanded and discharged him. Since which he has sent me two Water Melons every week, of uncommon size and goodness. He is a gentlemanly man, in his manners, tho' odd in his dress and appearance. He has made a vow never to Cut the Hair on his Upper lip, which, is very long and gives him a very formidable and grotesque appearance."



Henry Brown Hayes' trial gained a great deal of attention in its day.

John 'Black' Caesare - The first bushranger

Born in the West Indies, [John Caesar](#) fled to Britain to escape plantation slavery. Ironically, he soon found himself being transported to Sydney on the First Fleet where his slavery continued.

A huge black man, John had been described as the 'hardest working man in the colony'; however, when the colony began to starve, he escaped to the wilderness to kill game and steal food. Time and again he was captured only to escape once more. Eventually he became the leader of a gang of like minded escapees and had a reward of rum placed on his head. Soon he was tracked down and killed. In assessment of his life, Governor Collins wrote:

'He has given more trouble than any other convict in the colony'.

Pemulwuy - A brave character

Pemulwuy was an Aborigine who made trouble for colonial authorities from 1790 to 1802. He may have been a justice man or guerrilla leader. Branded an outlaw, he was once captured, chained and left comatose in Parramatta prison where he was expected to die. Inexplicably however, he shed his chains and escaped. According to the Eora people, this was achieved by turning himself into a bird.

After his slaying in 1802, Governor King described him as 'Brave and independent character'. Today, he is an icon of many some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. A suburb of Sydney has been named in his honour.

Taking the piss out of the pompous

Billy Blue - A colourful character

Billy Blue was of African decent. He had such a colourful personality that his frequent law infringements were looked upon with a 'benevolent ' air by police. He could be referred to as Australia's first celebrity.

Billy was quite a character due to his respectable attire of top hat and discarded military uniform. To see a black convict strutting about Sydney in such a dignified manner encouraged Sydney's cultural elite to laugh at their own pompous behaviour.

In tribute to his legacy, many streets, landmarks, hotels and businesses in Nth Sydney have been named in his honour. These include Blues Point, William Street, Blues Point Road, The Commodore Hotel, and the Billy Blue Design School.



Arguably, Billy Blue was the first person in the colony who could be defined as a celebrity.

Arabanoo - A master of returning insults with interest

Arthur Phillip kidnapped Arabanoo as part of a ploy to improve communication between the colonists and the natives. It is likely that Arabanoo imparted some of his characteristics upon his captors as it was noted that:

"If the slightest insult was offered to him, he would return it with interest and frequently turned a laugh against his antagonist. "

Bennelong -master of the devastating wit

Bennelong was an Aborigine kidnapped for the purpose of opening lines of communication between colonists and natives. It was noted that Bennelong loved wearing European cloths and mimicked the speech and habits of his white cotemporaries with a 'devastating wit'. He was also known to mimic Arthur Phillip's French cook with 'great hilarity'.

The site of the Opera House, Bennelong Point, was named in his honour.

Technically Bennelong wasn't a Convict because he was never convicted of anything; however, like many Irish Convicts who weren't convicted of anything either, he found himself in chains.

Egalitarian ethic

It would be fair to say that Australia is one of the most egalitarian nations in the world. While many countries celebrate the ideal of human equality, arguably none has it so culturally engrained as Australia.

The ideological bias towards equality is most clearly seen in the language that Australians use to communicate with each other. In comparison to other English speakers, Australians tend to be far more informal; readily using the same language when dealing with a boss, an elderly person, friend or rascal. In a famous example, when cricketer *Dennis Lillee* met the British Queen, he greeted her with a handshake and a friendly:

“g'day, how ya go'in”

To outsiders, the egalitarian nature of Australian speech has been seen as a sign of rudeness because it means treating someone of high status in the same manner as a shoe salesman or garbage collector. For example, in 1980, a Japanese prefecture sponsored a weekend seminar to discuss problems that Japanese people might experience in Australia. According to an account recorded in *The Australian Slang*, one speaker, *Hiro Mukai*, stated:

"Australians appear very naive to the newly-arrived Japanese. They speak the same way with everyone."

Admittedly, the origins of the ethic are perhaps rude in that the ethic might be a legacy of the Convicts' desire to cut down anyone who elevated themselves above others. An example of this trait can be found in the memoirs of the Convict *J.F Mortlock* who wrote,

"He declared, confidently, that an immense number of women were dying for his diminutive highness, but became terribly angry, when an ugly, red-nosed publican with a hump-back, pretended to recognize him as an organ grinder strolling about with a monkey."

Unknown ex-con - Dine with me or not at all!

Freed Convicts did not tolerate notions of 'class superiority' and made of point of offending those who exhibited it. A folk tale tells of a dinner held by a 'superior' group. A ex-con got through the door, sat down at the end of the table and rolled the corner of the table cloth so tightly around one hand that no one could throw him out without dragging the cloth and all the food off the table as well. He then used one hand to enjoy a hearty meal!

James Squire - All are equal in the beer hall

Whilst some freed Convicts broke notions of class superiority by insulting the 'Exclusives', other ex-cons like James Squire led by example. Already highly valued for being the colony's first brewer, James became a wealthy philanthropist and banker to his poor neighbours. After his death, the Convict artist Joseph Lycelt wrote:

"Had he been less liberal, he might have died more wealthy; but his assistance always accompanied his advice to the poor and unfortunate"

Squire's memory has been immortalised with a beer label of the same name.



To create a beer label in tribute to a criminal was the action of a larrikin mindset.

James Grant - Walking a mile in the shoes of a different class

James Grant was a distinguished member of British society when found guilty of a trumped up charge and sentenced to transportation. However he reserved scorn for the common Convict and so used his many connections to travel in relative luxury and away from the common rogues and desperadoes. Upon arrival in Australia, he was a welcome addition to the socialite set and was not required to work.

Grant's elitist attitudes soon began to change. He gained an appreciation that many Convicts were falsely accused or political prisoners that were suffering illegal and abusive treatment in Australia. He began to speak out against the barbarity of penal life, calling it 'slavery' and became convinced that his Christian duty was to act as an advocate for those who could neither read nor write.

Australia's establishment was bemused as to why Grant, as a member of high society, would champion the cause of the lowly Convicts. For his outspoken ways, he was convicted of sedition and transported to Norfolk Island where he was starved, flogged and spent four months in solitary confinement. The judge at his trial declaring:

"Mr Grant, you are acting so much against your self interest that I guess the cause only in supposing you mad-for, although your sentiments may be most righteous, why do you espouse in this way the cause of the prisoners? We have never treated you as a prisoner."

Arabadoo - Horror at barbarity

Although a British captive, Governor Phillip was keen to impress Arabadoo with notions of English justice. On one occasion, Phillip organised for Arabadoo to view the flogging of two Convicts caught stealing. However to the Governor's surprise, Arabadoo was horrified by the barbarity.

As well as being unimpressed with the British justice system, Arabadoo would not tolerate the British notions that the Aborigines were in any way inferior.

John Wilson - A diplomat

Convicted of stealing nine yards of 'velvet' cloth, John Wilson was transported to Sydney on the First Fleet. After gaining his freedom in 1792, he went bush. Judge Collins recorded that:

".....he preferred living among the natives in the vicinity of the [Hawkesbury] River, to earning the wages of honest industry for settlers. He had formed an intermediate language between his own and theirs, with which he made shift to comprehend something of what they wished him to communicate."

John Wilson was an excellent bushman and observer of nature. In addition, he was a linguist and a diplomat who could relate to government, Convict and Aboriginal persons, and a leader capable of great kindness and compassion.

Bending rules

The son of a West Indian slave, *William Cuffay* believed that just because something was law didn't mean it had to be respected. In 1848, he was charged with “sedition” and “levying war” after organising a Chartist rally. He was subsequently sentenced to 21 years transportation. He arrived in Hobart in 1849, but was immediately granted a ticket-of-leave, which allowed him to work. He was pardoned three years later. Upon receiving his pardon, he started campaigning against the Master and Servant Act, which aimed to restrict trade unions. He died in 1870 and was honoured with obituaries in numerous Australian newspapers.



Through his slave ancestry and own life, William Cuffay learnt that the law is not always on the side of justice.

Daniel Gordon - A novel way to escape death

Daniel Gordon was a Convict of African decent. In 1789, he was caught stealing and was subsequently committed for trial where a death sentence was expected; however, on his day in court he appeared 'wild and incoherent' forcing the judge to deem him unfit for trial. Appreciating Daniel's acting qualities, Governor Collins wrote:

"His fellow convicts gave him credit for the ability he had acted his part and perhaps he deserved their applause."

He died 29 years later, Aged 81.

Strength of conviction

Mary Bryant - Rowing home

There are few tales of perseverance that rival that of Mary Bryant. Unhappy with her life as a Convict, Mary escaped in the Governor's six oar cutter with her husband, baby son, three year old daughter and five other Convicts. They then rowed to Timor, (5000 Kilometres from Sydney) navigating the uncharted Great Barrier Reef and the Torres Strait.

Upon arrival in Timor, they claimed to be ship wreck victims but were soon identified as Convicts and sent back to England for trial. On the return journey, her husband and son died of fever.

Sadly for Australia, the English press found her tale of perseverance quite stirring and so rather than transport her once more, she was freed into the community where she strengthened the weakened gene pool.



English actor Romola Garai as Mary Bryant in the tv mini-series The Incredible Journey of Mary Bryant.

J.F Mortlock

J.F Mortlock was convinced his uncle had cheated him out of his rightful inheritance and he was transported to Australia as a result of a ensuing family squabble.

After attaining his ticket of leave, he returned to England to pursue the matter of inheritance but was soon arrested for returning before the expiration of his original sentence. Once more, he was transported to Australia and after serving his sentence in full, he returned to England to continue his struggle.

The Hobart Herald once said of him:

'He appears to have had but one set object in life. That was, while he passed it as congenially and pleasantly as his humble circumstances would allow, to still keep in view his deep wrongs, with a determination that nothing could shake a restitution of his natural rights.'

He died a pauper after failing in his quest.

Convict culture

The music, poetry, sayings, writings and paintings of Convicts show some of their ideologies and moral values. Although it may sound counter intuitive, honesty is a recurring theme. The honesty doesn't just refer to refraining from theft, it also refers to refraining from being two-faced.

As well as learning about Convict values through art, some can be inferred by looking at cultural traits that have been repeatedly expressed across the generations.

Mateship

The word 'mate' covers all relationships that are important, after the family ones. A 'mate' is more than a friend, suggesting a mutual closeness. Contrary to misconception, it is a gender neutral term that used by, and in reference to, both men and women.

The importance Convicts placed on mateship can be seen in the words of a J.F Convict Mortlock who once wrote:

"Men betraying their companions or accepting authority over them, are often called "dogs", and sometimes have their noses bitten off- the morsel being termed "a mouthfull of a dog's nose."

A Convict by the name of Galvin demonstrated the extent that some Convicts would suffer for their mates. Galvin might have known the names of Irish Convicts who were planning an uprising and he was determined not to reveal who they were to the authorities. This resulted him being flogged until the bones on his back stood out, he was then striped naked and flogged on his buttocks until they were a bloody pulp, then flogged on his back again. At the end of the torture, the Magistrate concluded that Galvin would sooner die than become an informer. One Convict described the flogging in quite horrific terms:

"Next was tyed up paddy galvin, a young boy about twenty years. He was ordered to get 300 lashes. He got one hundred on the back and you cud see his back bone between his shoulder blades, then the doctor order him to get another hundred on his bottom. He got it, then the doctor order him to be flog on the calves of his legs. He never gave so much as whimper. They asked him where the pikes were hid, he said he did not know, and if he did he would not tell. "You may as well hang me now," he says for you will never get any musick from me". So they put him in the cart and sent him to the hospital."

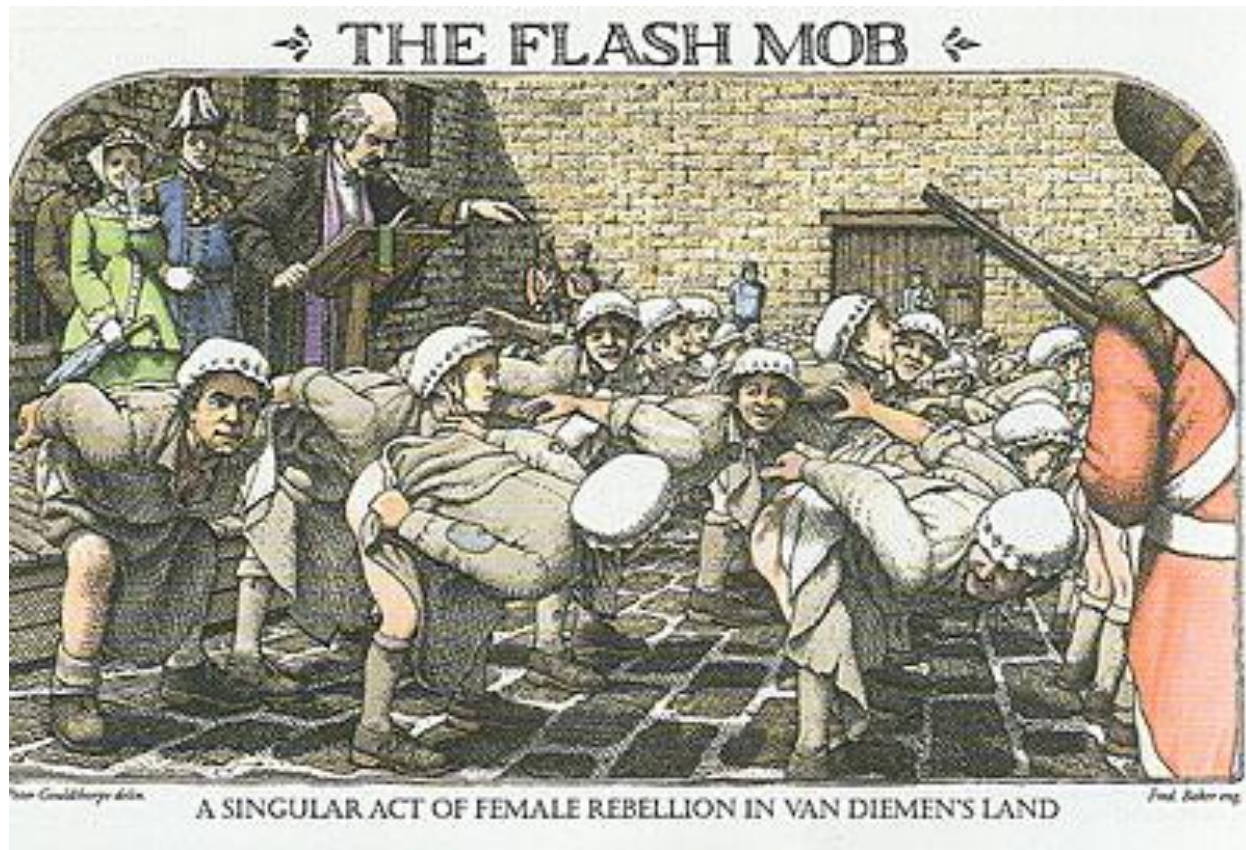
It has long been known in psychological circles that social bonding coincides with extreme hardship. (For this reason, defence force training inflicts hardship upon new recruits so as to foster such bonding.) Consequently, the hardships endured by Convicts caused them to feel a great sense of reliance upon each other.



Authorities viewed Convict mateship as a threat and often tried to remove the threat by having a Convict flog his mate. In a sense, mateship was a form of defiance.

As well as mateship being born out of hardship, it also seemed to have been born out of a sense of solidarity against the authorities. This seemed to particularly define the female brand of mateship. The Convict women relied upon mateship to defy those who judged their 'loose morality'. A notable example of such an occurrence was in 1838 when the Governor of Van Diemens Land visited the Cascades Female Factory in Hobart. The Governor addressed the women from an elevated dais. Then:

"the three hundred women turned right around and at one impulse pulled up their clothes showing their naked posteriors which they simultaneously smacked with their hands making a loud and not very musical noise. This was the work of a moment, and although constables, warders etc. were there in plenty, yet 300 women could not well be all arrested and tried for such an offence and when all did the same act the ringleaders could not be picked out." This cheeky behaviour 'horrified and astounded' the Governor and the male members of the party. As for the ladies in the Governor's party, it was said, in a rare moment of collusion with the Convict women, 'could not control their laughter'.



Convict women moon the Governor

Honesty

Exclusives and Convicts were in competition to attain the high moral ground. The Convict's sense of self-righteousness can be seen in the words of the J.F Mortlock who wrote:

"what is the measure of the guilt of those transported for killing game, or goaded to robbery by famine and destitution? Then, there are innocent men in the position of criminals, who have been erroneously found guilty upon obscure or implausible evidence or misdirection, or who have been made to appear guilty by the false oaths and artful devices of wicked persons interested in effecting their ruin or destruction."

Self righteousness is also seen in Convict poem:

The law locks up the man or woman
 Who steals the goose from off the common,
 But leaves the greater villain loose
 Who steals the common from the goose.

Many of the Convict songs also contain warnings to others not to do like they have done:

Now all my young Dookies and Dutchesses
Take warning from what I've to say
Mind all is your own as you toucheses
Or you'll find us in Botany Bay

Black humour

Australians have a tendency to make jokes out of things that perhaps shouldn't be joked about. For example, when a serial killer kidnapped backpackers and buried their bodies in the Belangalo State Forest, a hardware shop in Moss Vale (near the forest) began selling souvenir shovels with the letters 'B.S.F' engraved upon them. Similarly, when seven bodies were discovered decaying in barrels of acid in the country town of Snowtown, the town's stores began selling souvenir coffee mugs with captions such as "come to snow town, you'll have a barrel of a time" accompanied by an image of a skeleton in a barrel.

Psychologists have offered two different explanations for the origins of this kind of black humour. The first is 'incongruity theory.' Incongruence is caused when someone experiences conflicting motivations after being presented with disparate ideas. For example, if someone wants to like Australians but also believes one should respect the dead, they will have conflicting motivations about the Snowtown souvenir mugs. This attitude incongruence may cause one of the attitudes to 'give'. For example, they may decide they don't like Australians anymore or decide they don't care about disrespecting the dead. If attitude change is not a desirable outcome, the person may just laugh and then move on.

The second theory is a 'catharsis release'. Freudian psychologists believe that humour allows people to release tension associated with difficult experiences. This helps them address those issues that they can not openly discuss. For example in the Convict era, Convict etiquette demanded suffering in silence whilst the law considered complaints as insolence and punished it with flogging. As both Convict etiquette and the law prevented the Convicts from discussing their emotional distress, they were forced to make jokes to deal with their emotional turmoil.

Black humour is common in iconic Australian films such as Death in Brunswick and Two Hands.