REVIVING THE RADICAL 1890S: CONTEMPORARY RETURNS TO WILLIAM LANE’S AUSTRALIAN UTOPIAN SETTLEMENTS IN PARAGUAY

In 1893, between five hundred and six hundred migrants from the as-yet-unfederated British colonies in Australia travelled to Paraguay to establish a Utopian socialist community (Souter 282). At ‘New Australia,’ the settlement they founded in South America, all land and property was collectively owned. The constitution enshrined teetotalism and ‘the colour line,’ an attempt at race-based social planning that pre-dated the White Australia Policy by eight years. The community was Utopian in the sense that it envisaged and tried to implement a model of a perfect society intended to set an example for others to follow (Metcalf 7; Morris and Kross xxi). This society was to be free of class and racial conflict – it would exclude non-Anglo Saxons all together – and would treat the sexes as equals (New Australia 1.1:4).

The leader of the New Australia movement was William Lane, a charismatic, British labour journalist. He believed the institution of private property was fundamentally corrupting, and led inevitably to poverty, economic exploitation, and crime: ‘This is where the sin begins, this is the sin which underlies it – that a few own what all must have before they can work’ (New Australia 1.1:2). By reversing this single principle and successfully establishing socialism in Paraguay, Lane believed the New Australian workers would teach an object lesson, not just to ‘Old Australia,’ the country they had abandoned, but to all the world (New Australia 1.6: 4). His vision was a grand one. Hoping others would emulate New Australia’s model of small, collectivist village settlements, he corresponded with the leaders of similar organisations in Mexico and
South Africa. Eventually – and this was Utopian indeed – he believed such communities would replace industrial capitalism across the globe (*New Australia* 1.1: 1).

New Australia emerged toward the end of the great international era of Utopian experiments. From the mid-eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, hundreds of similar communities were founded in the Americas and around the world. Often, these small-scale reformist societies were anti-modern, a reaction against industrialisation and urbanisation. Like the New Australians, who sometimes referred to their ship The Royal Tar as ‘Our Mayflower’ (*New Australia* 1.2:3), many of them were inspired by the example of the United States.

Utopianism flourished later in Australia than elsewhere, peaking in the depression of the 1890s. The fate of the Queensland settlements was typical of those in other colonies. Following the passage of the 1893 Co-Operative Settlement Act, twelve communes were established involving some two thousand people (Metcalf 26). All struggled due to lack of agricultural expertise, harsh conditions, and infighting. When the inspirational example New Australia collapsed in Paraguay, the press and colonial governments at home crowed: ‘socialism in New Australia and Old Australia, has practically failed, as everyone who has read history, or his bible, ought to have known it would fail’ (*The Queenslander* qtd. in Metcalf 28). By 1896, all the Queensland settlements had disbanded, and those in the other colonies soon followed. The collectivist dream faded from the Australian political landscape, not to be revived, with a few exceptions, until the communes of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture. New Australia, it seemed, had succeeded in teaching an ‘object lesson to the world’ (*New Australia* 1.1:1), but it was not the lesson intended.
What went wrong in Paraguay? The trouble stemmed, principally, from a split between wowsers and carousers. Many bachelors from the bush disliked Lane’s severe, ascetic brand of socialism: they demanded the right to drink alcohol and have relationships with local women. Wives dragged into the venture by their husbands complained of the hardship of pioneer life (Whitehead *Paradise Lost* Episode 3). Within a few months, the community split into factions. The ‘Royalists’ continued to support Lane as leader; the ‘Rebels’ objected to his authoritarianism, and demanded his replacement with a board of management (Souter 85-86). In May 1894, Lane led sixty-three of his closest comrades away to found a rival settlement about seventy kilometres to the south. Without his leadership, New Australia quickly disintegrated. In 1897, the public land was divided into private lots. The second settlement, Cosme, lasted as a commune until 1909, when it met the same fate (Whitehead *Paradise Mislaid* 247). Many of the settlers drifted back to Australia; others migrated to England, South Africa, and Argentina. Those who remained in Paraguay gradually set about learning Spanish and the local indigenous language, Guaraní. Like first-generation migrants everywhere, they often clung to their mother tongue and the customs of home. But while the older generation yearned to ‘scent the wattle blooms once more,’ (Rose Cadogan in Souter 231), their children grew up knowing no home but Paraguay.

By the middle of the twentieth century, memory of Lane’s Utopians had nearly faded in Australia. While Vance Palmer and a small number of radical nationalists were interested in the movement in the 1950s, it was not until 1963 that broader interest was revived. That year, a pair of wandering journalists, Theodore James and Anthony Paul,
rediscovered New Australia and published a brief, excited account of the lost ‘Australian
Lane’s Australian Utopians in Paraguay*, followed in 1968. Since its publication,
Australian writers, artists, and scholars have become obsessed with New Australia and
Cosme. Several bodies of literature about the settlements have come into being: an
academic discourse in historical and literary periodicals; a corpus of poetry, fiction,
drama, and folk songs; and a body of non-fiction for a lay audience consisting of popular
history, travel writing, and documentaries for both radio and television. Since the 1970s,
small groups of Australians have taken to visiting the former colony in Paraguay, inspired
by what they have read or come across in the media. Visitor numbers are relatively small,
nothing compared to the crowds who descend on other places of Australian pilgrimage
overseas such as Gallipoli or the Kokoda trail. But while Paraguay is a minority interest,
it is an intense and long-lasting one. Australians have been making the journey for the
best part of forty years now, undeterred by the passing of the oldest-surviving settlers
throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

If the story of New Australia still cycles periodically through the culture more than a
hundred years after the venture failed, it must have some continuing utility. But what use
is a failed Utopia? And what is the nature of the connection some contemporary
Australians evidently still feel with the Paraguayan experiment? The recurrence of New
Australia is just one expression of a larger Anglo-Australian need for mythopoeic stories.
Like Ned Kelly or the Eureka Stockade, Lane’s movement has become a folk legend –
often expressed in poetry and song and, in this instance, through a tradition of popular
pilgrimage. I will argue here that the story of the failed Australian communes recurs
because it offers the culture a way to sustain and renegotiate its relationship with the 1890s. The collapse of the Utopian projects of that era has haunted Australian radicals ever since; meanwhile the mainstream culture retains a nostalgic connection to the rural mythology associated with the same period.

The turn of the nineteenth century has long been central to Australian nationalism and to interrogations of it. As Kevin Foster has noted, Lane’s Utopians hover at the dawn of national memory alongside some of Australia’s most important mythopoeic narratives (22). The period evokes federation and the beginning of the White Australia Policy; the great strikes and the development of the Labor Party; not to mention the nation-defining bush literature of Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson still imposed upon reluctant school children today. Like these other cultural reference points, the Paraguayan experiment has come to be associated with a certain idea of ‘Australianness’: the cult of ‘mateship’ so central to Australian nationalism, the idea of the bushman as the ‘national type,’ and the privileged position of the bush as the national landscape. New Australia reappears, this essay argues, because the culture is still working through values inherited from the 1890s, values appropriated in the name of various nationalisms to this day.

For figures of the Old Left like Lloyd Ross (1934), Vance Palmer (1947), and Gavin Souter (1968), New Australia embodied a ‘lost tradition’ of idealism with which the Australian public needed to reconnect (366; 167; 278-279). The work of later scholars of the movement such as Burgmann (1985), Lake (1986), and Foster (2007) can to be seen in the context of a broader questioning of the 1890s Legend and its central importance to Australia’s sense of nationhood. Here, I examine the three representations of Lane’s Utopians with the widest reach: Souter’s popular history *A Peculiar People* (1968),
Michael Wilding’s novel *The Paraguayan Experiment* (1984), and Anne Whitehead’s radio documentary *Paradise Lost* (1990). Considered together and tracked across the decades, the Paraguayan experiment’s many retellings come to resemble an evolving dialogue with turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Australia.

Gavin Souter’s *A Peculiar People*, published in 1968, was the first substantial account of the movement since Old and New Australia fell out of contact in the late 1920s. When Souter began his research in 1963, almost nothing was known of the settlers who had remained in Paraguay. Souter posted newspaper advertisements in Australia, New Zealand, England, Paraguay, and Argentina, asking anyone connected to the movement to contact him. He received more than sixty replies. Over the next two years, he continued building contacts in South America and studied Spanish by night. In 1965, he finally made the journey across the Pacific. Bill Wood, a Cosmeite born in Sydney in 1894, was waiting to greet him at Asunción airport.

‘Welcome to Paraguay,’ said Wood with an unmistakable accent.

‘His voice,’ writes Souter, ‘could have been that of an Australian farmer’ (259).

*A Peculiar People* re-examines the 1890s from the vantage point of the late 1960s. Some elements of the 1940s and 1950s radical nationalism associated with Russel Ward, Vance Palmer, and others, are retained. The New Australians’ antiquated English, the fences and huts of the old colony, and the anthologies of bush poetry kept by elderly migrants, are all portrayed as surviving traces of the ‘Australian Legend’. Nevertheless, the text also gestures forward at a more pluralistic conception of the national character.
Souter’s history concludes as a contemporary migrant story, with the author assisting Paraguayan descendants of Lane’s Utopians return to Australia.

The Legend comes first. Souter compares New Australia with some of the most mythologised episodes in Anglo-Australian history. No place for Dreamtime or immigrant stories here, for the tradition being invoked belongs to the old, white, nationalistic monoculture:

Australia does not have many legends, but those it does have are all concerned with people who took their chances against great odds and failed: Eureka, Cooper’s Creek, Glenrowan and Gallipolli. The odds against Utopia were also great, none greater, and it seemed to me that New Australia and Cosme might be added to the list’ (279).

Travelling to Cosme with Bill Wood, Souter records anything that his readers at home might identify with the Australian Legend. Wood is said to resemble Henry Lawson, ‘his father’s mate at Bourke’ (260). Cosmeite Dave McLeod is as natural a horseman as the Man from Snowy River (269). Even the buildings at Cosme are described in terms of 1890s rural mythology: ‘The house looked like an Australian country shack, the sort of rough dwelling that a cattleman might once have knocked together in the bush’ (268). Often, signs for Australianess are sketched against a backdrop of local colour so that they stand out more clearly:

The road was lined on both sides by fully grown gum-trees […]. The leaves when I crushed them, smelt like the Australian bush. There was quite a crowd at the crossroads […] several soldiers going home on leave, dark Guaraní women selling peeled oranges (263-264).

By reinforcing the significance of the 1890s for mid-twentieth century Australia, A Peculiar People continues the radical nationalist project of Ward and Palmer. But in its
final stages, the book also hints at the massive demographic changes occurring in Australia in the late 1960s and 1970s. A major shift occurs when *A Peculiar People* moves from the older generation of Paraguayan-Australians to their offspring. Bill Wood believes he is too old to return to Australia, but asks Souter to assist his two young nephews, Peter and Francisco, make the move. Wood has never fully embraced his adopted country and wants a better life for his young relatives: ‘Another few years and they’ll be like everyone else: walking around in torn straw hats, and sinking into the mud with big families’ (273). The older of the two brothers elects to marry and stay in Paraguay, but Souter, true to his word, sets about raising money for Peter Wood’s plane ticket through connections at home. He places an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* reminding readers of the story of New Australia and mentioning that an eighteen-year-old Paraguayan descendant wishes to migrate but lacks the means. As a hook, he notes that the boy’s grandfather, Billy Wood, was a character in Henry Lawson’s story, ‘Sending Round the Hat.’ This reference to Lawson’s parable for Australian generosity is a fairly obvious hint. Enough readers understand it to raise the fare, and Peter Wood is soon found work and lodgings in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area, where his grandfather once worked as a shearer. For Souter, the MIA is a particularly appropriate home for Wood because it is ‘one of the few regions in Australia with a truly cosmopolitan population’ (280-281).

It would soon no longer be possible to claim Australia lacked diversity. In the mid-1960s as Souter was writing his history, the White Australia Policy was being dismantled, and the nation was becoming increasingly open to ‘New Australians’ from all over the world. Peter Wood’s arrival in 1966 made him the first Paraguayan descendant
of Lane’s Utopians to migrate since 1927. As a non-English speaker of non-Anglo appearance, he would have been barred entry for most of the intervening years. Lane’s attempt to engineer a racially-homogenous community isolated from the surrounding population might have failed, but the Immigration Restriction Act was used to exclude non-white settlers from entering Australia for more than seventy years. Across the first half of the twentieth century, while Lane’s Utopians were gradually absorbed into Paraguayan society, ‘Old Australia’ became one of the whitest countries in the world.

Souter’s history of Lane’s 1890s Utopians appeared at a time when immigration was fundamentally altering Australian society. This necessarily involved reappraising the racial attitudes of the late nineteenth century, for it was at the end of the 1890s that White Australia was enshrined in the constitution. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s race-based restrictions on immigration were gradually removed and, five years after the 1968 publication of *A Peculiar People*, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam would abolish the last remnants of the policy. A comparison to emphasise the magnitude of the change: when *A Peculiar People* was first published, migrants from the UK and Ireland still accounted for nearly half settler arrivals in Australia; by the third edition in 1991, that figure had declined to seventeen percent (Carter 307). Souter’s book, then, embodies the contradictions of the late 1960s, a time when Anglo-Australians were becoming increasingly interested in stories of migration, diaspora, and cultural-hybrity, but remained attached to old identity formations associated with the Australian Legend. Through the unique story of Lane’s Utopians, *A Peculiar People* was able to think both at once.
Interest in New Australia increased steadily in the wake of Souter’s history. Michael Wilding’s 1984 take on the movement, *The Paraguayan Experiment: A Documentary Novel*, infused the story with the concerns of the urban counterculture of the 1970s and 1980s. Wilding was a core member of the Balmain set, a group of young writers who used to frequent the bars of inner-city Sydney: ‘the site of Bohemia since the 1890s’ (Wilding ‘Libertarianism’ 60). The group is often now remembered for the libertarian lifestyle it championed as much as its radical politics and experimental literary output. The Balmain writers’ relationship with the literary establishment was often adversarial. When Nancy Keesing, then chairman of the Literature Board attended one of the group’s readings, she is said to have remarked: ‘What they’re spending on alcohol and drugs would publish a dozen books’ (qtd. in Moorhouse 117). Jim Davidson, at that time editor of *Meanjin*, charged the Balmain writers with ‘cultural amnesia,’ arguing they had no sense of the Australian literary tradition.

Wilding, a literary scholar at the University of Sydney as well as a creative writer, was in a better position than most to defend against such claims. For Wilding, the ‘tradition’ championed by older literary journals such as *Meanjin* and *Overland*, represented both outdated politics and an outdated literary form – the realist bush yarn. The bush nationalism of Palmer and Ward was not only irrelevant to the new urban intelligentsia, it also led to an intractable dead end for artists:

> The problem for Australian writers today is that ‘Australian’ proclamations have seemed to be the preserve of the conservative – conservative both politically and aesthetically. Until now the celebration of rural Australia has seemed to be the preserve of the nationalist conservative – not of the radical or alternative consciousness (Wilding qtd. in Moorhouse 151).
Wilding’s solution was to revisit the radical literary tradition of the 1890s. *The Paraguayan Experiment* looks to reinvigorate the old bush subject matter with the formal experimentation of the ‘new writing’ of the 1980s. When the novel was published in 1984, Wilding was already engaged in a campaign to restore William Lane’s reputation through his scholarly output (Docker 139). In 1980, he had published a substantial new introduction to Lane’s novel, *The Working Man’s Paradise*, which looked to counter recent attacks by revisionist historians. Lane’s most virulent critic was historian Humphrey McQueen, who denounced the architect of New Australia as ‘a fanatical racist’ (39). Wilding concedes Lane’s racism, but counters, ‘it is important to realise it was a racism shared widely by his fellow communists and socialists […] In this context it is a mistake to see Lane as in any way exceptional in his racism (Wilding ‘Introduction’ 35-36). *The Paraguayan Experiment*, looks to reclaim Australian rural mythology from conservatives and continues Wilding’s campaign to rescue Lane from his critics.

This ‘documentary novel’ seamlessly blends genuine nineteenth-century documents and fictional passages together so the reader can no longer tell them apart. Such an approach raises questions of objectivity and reliability that problematise the boundaries between literary journalism, narrative history, and prose fiction. The inclusion of archival material in the novel often produces a kind of ‘reality effect,’ recreating the language and cultural concerns of the New Australians’ time. However, Wilding also subtly tests the boundaries of realism. The intrusion of twentieth-century idiomatic language sometimes threatens to destroy the illusion entirely. Contemporary-sounding dialogue like: ‘You can say that again’ and ‘I checked it out,’ might be slippage on the part of the writer, as Burns suggested in a review (15). But the frequent and frank discussion of sex – so like Balmain
in the 1970s, so little like 1890s Australia – is surely a deliberate violation of realist
codes designed to call attention to the text’s status as a work of fiction (Wilding *The
Paraguayan Experiment* 35, 95-96, 102, 111). The book’s cover art ought to alerts us to
the aesthetic at work. A photo of Lane’s Utopians garishly reworked in the style of an
Andy Warhol silk screen, suggests this is a playful appropriation of the 1890s, rather than
a realist evocation.

The novel begins with the catalyst for the New Australia exodus, the Rockhampton
conspiracy trial of the leaders of the 1891 Queensland Shearers’ Strike. This is a book
full of conspiracies. Wilding is not much interested in the trumped-up charges on which
the Queensland shearers are convicted, but he is very interested in the way history has
judged New Australia. Did the movement really collapse due to ‘the curse of socialism’
(Grahame 240)? Are all such schemes doomed? Or have journalists and historians
constructed such a consensus because it serves dominant ideology? Much of the text
mounts a defence of the movement, leading the reader through the evidence like a skilful
barrister so that we cannot help but reach the conclusion there was an organised, high-
level conspiracy against New Australia. This radical counter-conspiracy is disguised as
an objective synthesis of sources.

Wilding’s narrator begins by declaring his disinterested status: ‘And this is what
happened, as far as I can understand it […]. It’s not important who I am. Just someone
putting it all together, an anonymous collagist, an archivist of hope, a spirit of inquiry’
(prologue). The extent to which this unreliable, unnamed collagist is implicated in the
events he or she describes, however, is never made clear. Nevertheless, the narrator’s
access to William Lane suggests he or she is a close confidant and ally: someone who
travelled to Paraguay on the Royal Tar, and who went on to Cosme after the divide at the first settlement – surely a Lane Royalist.

It is true that some of the real-life New Australians suspected a Queensland colonist Fred White, who appeared mysteriously among them, was an agent provocateur. The conversations in the novel which show him deliberately undermining the movement, however, are entirely conjectured. White is portrayed as the unquestioned leader of the rebels, a man who systematically turns Lane’s followers against him through dark insinuation:

‘It’s a prison camp,’ said White. ‘Enforced isolation. With every change of plan – don’t you notice? – we get more remote…There’s a consistency about it that makes you wonder.’

‘Makes you wonder what?’ said Brit.

‘Makes you wonder what the hidden plan is.’

‘No plan at all,’ said Westwood. ‘Just bumbling, club-footed incompetence.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said White (91).

At a later public meeting, the chief conspirator confronts Lane before the other colonists, accusing him of ‘a gigantic land swindle’ (118). Again, there is no record that White was the one who made this claim. Nevertheless, these imaginary exchanges are often juxtaposed with real historical correspondence between the British Foreign office in London and the British Consul in Asunción (44, 65, 83). Banal inquires about the goings on at New Australia are hardly evidence of high-level conspiracy, but read alongside scheming like that above, we are invited to see them as such. Also, the fact Fred White keeps sneaking off to town to drink with his rebel mates when he is ‘no great drinker’ (71), strongly suggests he may be cabling information to the British. A close examination
of the list of sources for the anonymous narrator’s collage, reveals the word ‘spy,’ snuck in among the names of real documents (prologue).

Through this devious conflation of fact and fiction, *The Paraguayan Experiment* implies New Australia collapsed, not through incompetent leadership or an unworkable philosophy, but through the shadowy workings of British and Australian capitalist agents. Just as White cunningly leads the men to the conclusion Lane is swindling them, the text leads its reader to believe in a broad conspiracy against New Australia, for which there is little historical evidence. The commonplace that all Utopian ventures like New Australia are doomed, the novel suggests, is a similarly biased reading of the historical record.

Naturally, if Wilding’s 1970s Balmain bohemians are to be torch-bearers for the tradition of radical Australian writing that William Lane helped pioneer in the 1890s, the narrative cannot conclude with the settlement’s failure. Our final glimpse of the Utopians in Paraguay shows them headed for Cosme:

> And it was as if we had never been there, as if we had sailed the Pacific and come up the rivers and struggled through the bush and set up camp. And never arrived. The settlement just ahead of us, only one more day, or two, or three, always that bit further, that little bit ahead […]. A possibility. A dream (210).

Here, the pursuit of the ideal is part of an ongoing process which the text, through its spirited defence of a Utopian movement of the past, looks to continue in the present.

While the *Paraguayan Experiment* was sympathetically reviewed, the novel did not find a wide readership. It would fall to Sydney journalist, Anne Whitehead, more than twenty years on from Souter, to introduce New Australia to a large audience. Whereas Wilding focused on what Lane’s Utopians might mean to radical intellectuals and the
counterculture, Whitehead’s *Paradise Lost* (1990) was for the mainstream, a six part oral history, broadcast on ABC Radio National. Replayed several times across the 1990s, and again in 2009, it is probably now the account of New Australia with the widest reach.

Whitehead’s re-examination of this iconic story of the 1890s was produced during the build up to the Australian Bicentenary celebrations of 1988. As Magarey writes, this was a time of ‘renewed interrogation of the histories that depicted the twin births of Australian political nationalism and a distinctively Australian national culture, a century ago, in the 1890s’ (xv). *Paradise Lost* engages both the academic critique of the 1890s Legend and the popular fascination with it. Much of the program’s sentimental appeal derives from discovering 1890s Australiana in contemporary Paraguay: an old man who still remembers the words to Waltzing Matilda, a collection of Henry Lawson’s verse. However, the New Australians interviewed who best embody this tradition are all over eighty, and all but one pass away over the documentary’s eight-year recording. They are survived by their *mestizo* grandchildren, proudly bi or tri-lingual, who move as comfortably between cultures as they do between English, Spanish, and Guaraní.

*Paradise Lost*, though still fascinated with the iconography of the 1890s Legend, ultimately associates the bush, the Australian type, and the ideal of racial homogeneity with aging and death, multiculturalism with the future.

In Paraguay in 1982, Whitehead interviewed the three Wood brothers: Bill, Alec, and Norman who, in their mid-eighties, were among the last-living Cosmeites. She later reflected on this encounter in an essay for *Meanjin*: 
What especially interested me was that they [the Woods] were, in a sense, like bees caught in amber, in a time capsule of the 1890s as far as their speech patterns, attitudes and values concerning Australia. While their real lives were lived out in Paraguay with their children and grandchildren, when they thought of Australia they stepped into a mythic realm, undiluted by subsequent events, that we now enshrine as the Legend of the Nineties [...]. So the old men could provide a picture for us of what we were once like – or at least the bushman part of us we still affect to embrace (Whitehead ‘Working Through an Obsession’ 28).

What does it mean to ‘affect to embrace’ a tradition? Perhaps Whitehead suggests here – very gently – that contemporary Australians’ connection with the 1890s is not entirely genuine? Whitehead’s notion of the ‘bushman part of ourselves we still affect to embrace,’ assumes an audience that continues to identity with the 1890s Legend on an imaginary level although it no longer reflects their lived experience. This sounds like a covert expression of the constructivist position adopted by Richard White and other academic critics associated with Cultural Studies and Australian Studies. These critics have long asserted that national identity is ‘invented’ – that is to say, culturally constructed through texts.

If Australian identity is an invention for Whitehead’s listeners, it is doubly so for the Wood brothers. Bill the oldest, left Sydney when he was not yet two-years-old; Alex and Norman have never set eyes on the country. Everything the three know of Australia they learned from their father and his friends in Paraguay, and from mixing with Australian troops while fighting for England in the First World War. So, Paradise Lost is not particularly concerned, in the end, with lived memory of 1890s Australia, but it is deeply concerned with the Legend of the Nineties. The final episode invites us to see the dwindling Australian diaspora in Paraguay as a symbol for the passing of the 1890s myth.

The Wood grandchildren, in their forties and fifties, are at once secure in their Paraguayan identity and proud of their Australian past. Lillian Wood embraces a
thoroughgoing cultural-hybridity: ‘I have a very Australian mind and a very Paraguayan heart,’ she tells Whitehead (Episode 6). And though Norman Wood does not use the language of contemporary multiculturalism, he too refuses to be bound by a single nationality:

ANNE WHITEHEAD: So what do you call yourself? Do you call yourself a Paraguayan, or an Australian-Paraguayan, or an Australian?

NORMAN WOOD: Well I don’t know, I seem to be half English and half Paraguayan…I’m not Australian but I like Australia (Episode 6).

‘Don Norman’ is gloomy in his final conversation with Whitehead, left behind by his brothers and preoccupied with mortality: ‘Cosme […]. The only attraction there is the cemetery where I could go and see the graves of all the people who are dead.’ Yet he must retain some sentimental attachment to the country where his parents were born, since he solicits mail from Whitehead’s listeners: ‘If you want to write to me you say on the address, “Norman Wood, Concepción, Paraguay,” and that’s enough…The post-mistress knows me’ (Episode 6). Wood received more than fifty letters from Australia before he died in 1992, and answered all of them personally.

In his final years, the ‘last New Australian,’ like the last ANZACS who survived into the 1990s, assumed a privileged position as the only remaining witness to an important myth of nationhood. Now there are no Australians left to correspond with in Paraguay, no first-hand testimony to challenge the 1890s Legend-spinners anywhere. Memory of New Australia is preserved wholly in texts: documents held in Australian library collections and the secondary accounts Souter, Wilding, and Whitehead. Remarkably, these classic narratives of Lane’s short-lived essay at Utopia, continue to spark interest in Paraguay.
The 1990s and 2000s saw, if anything, an intensification of the interest in Lane’s Utopians. In 1997, Anne Whitehead won the NSW Premier’s History Award with *Paradise Mislaid*, a hybrid of popular history and travel-writing that followed on from her earlier radio series. The older Australian literary journals have continued to publish on the topic. In 2009, Perth folk-singer Fletch released an entire album of songs based on the incident which, like Whitehead’s documentary before it, featured prominently on ABC radio national. ‘William Lane rose from the dead again,’ he sings on one track.

William Lane and his followers continue to rise from the dead because their story is seen to teach something about the relationship between the roots of the national character and late-nineteenth-century culture. Rightly or wrongly, Anglo-Australians often still rely on the bush iconography drawn from this period when asked to define the national ethos. The further the country’s demography and culture move from the 1890s bush imaginary, the more it seems to need this image of fixity among the flux.

New Australia, Paraguay: ‘the country town that hasn’t changed all that much in the last hundred years, and probably won’t for a while yet’ (Stubbs 2), has allowed several generations of writers and artists to engage with a static, imaginary version of 1890s Australia preserved on the far side of the world. Many politically progressive writers, have projected their desire for a tradition of Australian idealism onto Lane’s Utopians, a counter to the perceived lack of idealism in the mainstream culture around them. Further, as in Souter, Wilding, and Whitehead, the Paraguayan Experiment has often been used to engage perennial Australian questions, especially around the issues of migration, the divide between city and country, and the country’s cultural make up.
Since the 1960s, spurred by the work of these and other writers, pilgrims have continued to retrace the Utopians’ more than fourteen-thousand kilometre journey to the village in Paraguay that used to be New Australia. When I visited in August 2008, locals told me I was the fifth Australian visitor that year, a typical annual tally. Nostalgia seems to be a large part of what draws us to its dusty streets, a word of ancient Greek origin built from the roots nostos (return) and algos (grief) (Bellelli 209). What is it Australian pilgrims return to grieve in Paraguay? Perhaps it is the failure of the collectivist nineteenth-century dream, more likely it is the simplicity and coherence of the old symbols that survived the dream’s demise – the rough, bearded fellow lugging his swag across the sunlit plains extended. In 2010, I would argue, a stable, unified, and homogenous sense of ‘Australianess’ can only be located in a landscape of flowing rivers and rolling green hills somewhere across the ocean. Like Utopia, it exists nowhere else on earth.

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