

Bogan Pride.

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*Now this is the creed from the Book of the Bush -
Should be simple and plain to a dunce:
If a man's in a hole you must pass round the hat -
Were he a jail-bird or a gentleman once.*
Henry Lawson

If ever evidence was required that Australia's cultural cringe is getting worse and not better in this age of globalization, we need look no further than the ANU's on-line dictionary.¹ Presenting itself as a dictionary of idiomatic Australian English, it demonstrates a surprising lack of familiarity with our own traditional literature, an ignorance so widespread today as to have become the norm. I have for many years read self-appointed experts on Australian English pronounce in authoritative tones that no-one knows the origins of two trademark Australian colloquialisms, "bogan" (roughly, a coarse, rude and uneducated person) and "hoon" (roughly, a reckless driver keen on speed). I've always shrugged my shoulders and muttered to myself: ignorant toffs too lazy to read Henry Lawson and Johnathan Swift (an honorary if not actual Australian), and left it at that. But the toffs at the ANU have got my goat this time, so it's time to set the record straight once and for all.

"Bogan" is the surname of the roughest of the rough cast of characters in a wonderful book of stories by Henry Lawson published in London in 1905 under the title *Children of the Bush*, re-named *Pass Round The Hat* when it was published in Australia in 1907, although the stories it contains had appeared individually in the *Bulletin* during the 1890s. "Passing round the hat" is a gesture of generosity unfamiliar to the children of this greedy age. The central character is Bob Brothers, whose nickname is The Giraffe on account of his height. Bob's moral fiber is pure gold, spinning out from his solid gold heart. He is a kind of one-man salvation army for his rag-tag bunch of shearer mates, although Bob Brothers is not in fact at all religious, unless love of your fellow man can be called a religion: "I ain't a churchgoer meself. I ain't what you might call a religious cove..." he says. He's from Bendigo, but the stories of *Pass Round The Hat* are set in Bourke, amongst shearers in that remote outback town. Lawson tells us that the Giraffe

"... was almost a teetotaller, but he stood his shout in reason. He mostly drank ginger-beer. 'I ain't a feller that boozes, but I ain't got nothin' agen chaps enjoyin' themselves, so long as they don't go too far.' It was common for a man on a spree to say to him: 'Here! here's five quid. Look after it for me, Giraffe, will yer, till I get off the booze.' His real name was Bob Brothers, and his bush names Long-'un, The Giraffe, Send-round-the-hat, Chuck-in-a-bob, and Ginger-ale."

Send Round The Hat is populated by a cast of characters as poignant and perfect as Steinbeck's bums of *Cannery Row*, but have that extra edge that constant hard labour gives a man. The nicknames express not only the renowned Australian genius for linguistic creativity, but also afford the strength and integrity of an informal bond, as compared to the formal fetters tied to titles and rank. "Gentleman-once" (because he was one); "Barcoo-Rot" (known behind his back as "The Mean Man" - and credit where credit's due, the ANU dictionary will explain Barcoo Rot to you); "German Charlie"; "Jack

1 http://www.anu.edu.au/ANDC/res/aus_words/aewords/aewords_ab.php#bogan

Moonlight", "Box-o-Tricks," "Man-without-a-shirt," (alias "Shirty" or "The-dirty-man"); and of course Mitchell, the exception to the rule, demonstrating that for some, surname and nickname are one and the same.

And the roughest of this rough bunch, "the worst swearer in a rough shed", is "One-eyed" or "Wall-eyed" Bogan, variously described as "a hard case" and "a bad egg," a drunkard and a con artist and a wife-deserter on the run from overdue alimony payments. He had a broken nose and a face scarred from a life of public brawling, but with characteristic kindness, The Giraffe says of Bogan: "He ain't half a bad sort of feller when he ain't drinkin'." Eventually Bogan also ends up losing his second eye, while saving a drowning man's life - and what's more, the life of a police constable out to arrest him, who founders crossing a river in his pursuit. As if in testament to the power of The Giraffe's faith in this ruffian, Bogan's wife then returns to nurse him in his blindness, even making him a father yet again. Lawson's whole ethic is captured in this synthesis of a Leibnizian "best of all possible worlds" optimism with Voltaire's skepticism about that very faith, which is defended despite disbelief. The upshot of this dialectic is the core of the Australian ethic, encapsulated in the motto: "she'll be right."

The ANU entry says: "Some lexicographers have suspected that the term may derive from the Bogan River and district in western New South Wales, but this is far from certain, and it seems more likely to be an unrelated coinage. The term became widespread after it was used in the late 1980s by the fictitious schoolgirl 'Kylie Mole' in the television series *The Comedy Company*." Here's what really happened. Lawson no doubt chose the name because the Bogan River marked the outest-outback; as we say today, "the back of beyond." Tom Collins (i.e. Joseph Furphy) speaks of swagmen "having a choice of two evils - the long, uninviting track southward to the Murrumbidgee, and the badly watered route eastward to the Bogan" in *Such Is Life* in 1902 (p. 4), and describes vividly the experience of a dust storm, in which "the air was thick with skipping crumbs of hard dirt" (pp.331ff). Banjo Patterson speaks of a "Bogan shower" his 1902 poem "City of Dreadful Thirst" as "three raindrops and some dust"; and again in "An Emu Hunt" in *The Animals Noah Forgot* (1933) he mentions "the Bogan shower, that is mostly dust" (p. 38). But - and here the ANU dictionary is right - these two proper nouns (the actual place name and the fictional character) only became a common noun indicating rural backwardness in the wake of its popularization by the comedian Mary-Anne Fahey, with her "Kylie Mole" character on the *Comedy Company* TV show in the early 1980s. In interviews, Fahey has reported that she got the term from her own children, who brought it home from their schoolyard, and that she had no idea of its origin beyond that.

But where did Fahey's children's schoolmates pick up the word? The answer lies in Cliff Green's adaptation and dramatization of Lawson's stories under the title "Lawson's Mates: Six Television Plays" recorded and broadcast in 1979, and published in book form in 1980 (by Hyland House Publishing with the assistance of the Literature Board of the Australia Council; ISBN 0 908090 20 x). How can I be so sure that this is the proximate source of the revival of this word? Because I have stood in second-hand bookshops in Melbourne over many years and checked every single one of the dozens upon dozens of anthologies of Lawson's works published since his death in 1922, and until Cliff Green's television adaptation not a single one included any of the One-Eyed Bogan stories. And here's where the cultural cringe is so significant: perhaps more than any other writer, Lawson represents "Australianness" to the world, and we Australians have been very reluctant indeed to include "Boganness" in our image as we represent it to ourselves and on the world stage. Thus Bogan was ignored and repressed - only to come back with a vengeance in the current generation.

The Giraffe sees the good in all people, nonjudgmental of their shortcomings, and sympathetic across all class, gender and race boundaries. For one of the great merits of *Pass Round The Hat* is that

it clearly documents just how multi-cultural pioneer days in Australia were, before the insidious influence of the "white Australia" policy. Lawson's stories are populated by Afghan camel drivers (The Giraffe almost gets beaten up by a pub full of unemployed Bullock drivers who had been undercut by the more efficient Afghans with their camels when he bowls in to pass round the hat for "a poor, sick Afghan in the camp down there..." - his plea cut off forcibly and the hat remaining in this instance empty - "but about dusk, he was seen slipping down towards the Afghan camp with a billy of soup."); German laborers (when German Charlie's leg is crushed by a log, "The Giraffe caught up the hint and the hat with alacrity; the hat went all round town, so to speak, and as soon as his leg was firm enough not to come loose on the road, German Charlie went home."); ostracized prostitutes (The Giraffe says "I s'pose they're bad, but I don't suppose they're worse than men has made them" - could Lawson have read Nietzsche's *Gay Science* and noticed §68 in particular?). As Lawson says in the poem "Mostly Slavonic" : "let [Kosciusko](#) slumber - we've [immortalized his name](#)."

Lawson's own father was Norwegian, and in the Australia of the nineteenth century, the Scandinavians, the Dutch, the Swiss and the Italians, the Greeks and the Poles and the Hungarians and the Albanians and the Chinese and the Scots and the Irish and Welsh and many others all mixed and mingled and fought and talked and sang and recited with and to and at one another, and between them they hammered out the distinct mix of accents and attitudes we now call Australian. This was especially so of Melbourne, a free settlement rather than penal colony from the word go, as representatives of almost every nation were drawn by the gold-rushes which began in the 1860s. Hugh McCrae in his book of 1935, *My Father and My Father's Friends* records in his piece on "Melbourne in the Sixties" that

"Bourke Street, packed with foreign cafés, represented a cosmopolis by night. Fashionable women accompanied by bucks of the period emerged from the Scandinavian Music Hall, among barrowmen selling oysters across gutters that frequently stank. There were brawls: doors flying open, drunkards crashing on to footpaths, figures silhouetted against squares of light, sailors with their doxies, constables in belltopper hats, diggers, soldiers, ticket-of-leave-men, and aboriginals." (p.31)

The list above of the Giraffe's charitable deeds could be extended tenfold, but Bob Brother's main merit lies in an innocence concerning his own benevolence which verges upon sheer unselfconsciousness. "We all loved the Giraffe. He was very innocent and very humorous, especially when he meant to be most serious and philosophical." Other's thanks embarrassed him; for example, when his collection pays the train fares of the homeless sex-workers, their tears of gratitude make The Giraffe uncomfortable - he dodges their kisses and flees: "besides, they was cryin', and I can't stand women cryin'," he says, adding unselfconsciously that "some of the chaps" who stepped up in his wake to help the women onto the train and gladly accepted the gratitude which was by rights due to him were "terribly good-hearted fellows".

The only character expressing racism is the cynical shearer Jack Mitchell, who doesn't think it matters if a Chinaman gets beaten up. But then Jack Mitchell is cynical about Bob Brothers too:

Well, I don't think there's so much to his credit after all. You see, the Giraffe is ambitious; he like public life, and that accounts for him shoving himself forward with his collections. As for bothering about people in trouble, that's only common curiosity; he's one of those chaps that are always shoving their noses into other people's troubles. And as for looking after sick men - why! there's nothing the Giraffe likes better than pottering around a sick man, and watching him and studying him. He's awfully interested in sick men, and they're pretty scarce out here. I tell you there's nothing he likes better - except maybe its pottering round a corpse. I believe he'd ride forty miles to help and sympathize and potter round a funeral. The fact of the matter is that the Giraffe is only enjoying himself with other people's troubles - that's all it is. It's only vulgar curiosity and selfishness. I set down to his ignorance; its the way he was brought up.

Lawson lets this diatribe hang in mid-air, and moves immediately to yet another yarn concerning Bob Brother's generosity, thus demonstrating that although Lawson is not such an uncritical idealist as to ignore the fact that racist, cynical people do exist, his strategy of critical idealism is to ignore what Jack Mitchell says about Bob Brothers, while at the same time acknowledging his right to say it - the Voltaire half of Lawson's Leibniz-Voltaire synthesis. But Lawson does not allow Jack Mitchell the right of a racist diatribe - there is no racist diatribe in any character's mouth anywhere in Lawson, thereby demonstrating Henry Lawson's comprehension of the fact that, like everything else, free speech has its limits too.

Mitchell is also, not surprisingly, a self-appointed expert on women, and in the story "Mitchell on Matrimony" from the collection *On The Track*, we learn what made made Mitchell the cynic he is. His cynical outlook is the result of his wife having left him for another man, despite having been a loving husband. It takes a strong man to rise above betrayal without lasting bitterness; but Mitchell is not all that strong, so he vents his spleen instead of sublimating it, thus demonstrating that Lawson is critical of the naive idealization of women, a stance sometimes mistaken for misogyny by the unthinking.

Bob Brother's selfless and unselfconscious humanity to his fellow man and woman is a defining moment in Australian identity, the underdog clearly emerging as the real but unsung hero of actual reality as it actually unfolds, as opposed to the distorted ideology peddled by those in power. But this ethic of Lawson's, so basic to who we Australians are, is really the culminating moment of a century of sadistic brutality at the hands of the jailers, wardens, magistrates, and ministers of the fledgling colony. If we go back yet another century, we find the root of our second term, 'hoon,' (also listed by the ANU dictionary as "of unknown origin"²), and we can see that it was largely the upshot of the need for the oppressed and exploited to let off steam and to cathect their impotent rage at a system which would otherwise crush their very spirit.

The origin of this second colloquialism is Book IV of Johnathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (published 1727), that being a phonetic rendering of the pronunciation of the name of the fictional race of human-like horses, the "Houyhnhn," or "Hhuun" for short. It is also the source of the closely paired colloquialism "Yahoo," that being the name of the Houyhnhn's animalistic slave-humans. This means the correct spelling of "hoon" is actually "hhuun," an onomatopoeic word Swift coined to try to capture the sound a talking horse might make. Swift was an Irish writer, and a satirist of incisive wit. Had he been born fifty years later, he may well have been transported to Australia himself, along with so many of his Irish country-men and -women.

Gulliver's Travels is a merciless and unrelenting parody of the hypocrisy and vanity of the English ruling classes, and so it was an immediate smash hit with the dispossessed and oppressed of eighteenth century Britain - including especially the convicts who were as of 1787 being piled onto sailing ships and transported to Australia. The voyage was long and tedious, especially if you were a convict in chains. Anyone on board who was literate must have been in high demand as a reader, to while away the endless hours (see Chapter Five "The Voyage" of Robert Hughes brilliant *The Fatal Shore*). No doubt *Gulliver's Travels* would have been very popular entertainment among those in chains, who would have had little appreciation that the word they heard as "hoon" was actually spelt "hhuun," but a ready understanding of the hypocrisy parodied so scathingly by Swift's genius for satire.

The Hhuun are in fact a noble race, but their highest value is speed: they "train up their youth

2 http://www.anu.edu.au/ANDC/res/aus_words/aewords/aewords_hr.php#hoon

to strength, speed, and hardiness, by exercising them in running races up and down steep hills, and over hard stony grounds; and when they are all in a sweat, they are ordered to leap over head and ears into a pond or river.” Young Aussies were “hooning” around on horses long before the V8 was even invented. This etymology is presumably so little known today because relatively few people struggle all the way through to book four of *Gulliver's Travels*, a very long book. A few extracts from Book IV Chs. 1-5 will make the source of this idiom obvious:

[...]

I could frequently distinguish the word Yahoo, which was repeated by each of them several times: and although it was impossible for me to conjecture what it meant, yet while the two horses were busy in conversation, I endeavoured to practise this word upon my tongue; and as soon as they were silent, I boldly pronounced Yahoo in a loud voice, imitating at the same time, as near as I could, the neighing of a horse; at which they were both visibly surprised; and the gray repeated the same word twice, as if he meant to teach me the right accent; wherein I spoke after him as well as I could, and found myself perceivably to improve every time, though very far from any degree of perfection. Then the bay tried me with a second word, much harder to be pronounced; but reducing it to the English orthography, may be spelt thus, Houyhnhnm. I did not succeed in this so well as in the former; but after two or three farther trials, I had better fortune; and they both appeared amazed at my capacity. After some further discourse, which I then conjectured might relate to me, the two friends took their leaves, with the same compliment of striking each other's hoof; and the gray made me signs that I should walk before him; wherein I thought it prudent to comply, till I could find a better director. When I offered to slacken my pace, he would cry hhuun hhuun: I guessed his meaning, and gave him to understand, as well as I could, "that I was weary, and not able to walk faster;" upon which he would stand awhile to let me rest.

[...]

The mare soon after my entrance rose from her mat, and coming up close, after having nicely observed my hands and face, gave me a most contemptuous look; and turning to the horse, I heard the word Yahoo often repeated betwixt them; the meaning of which word I could not then comprehend, although it was the first I had learned to pronounce. But I was soon better informed, to my everlasting mortification; for the horse, beckoning to me with his head, and repeating the hhuun, hhuun, as he did upon the road, which I understood was to attend him, led me out into a kind of court, where was another building, at some distance from the house.

[...]

The word Houyhnhnm, in their tongue, signifies a HORSE, and, in its etymology, the PERFECTION OF NATURE. I told my master, "that I was at a loss for expression, but would improve as fast as I could; and hoped, in a short time, I should be able to tell him wonders." He was pleased to direct his own mare, his colt, and foal, and the servants of the family, to take all opportunities of instructing me; and every day, for two or three hours, he was at the same pains himself. Several horses and mares of quality in the neighbourhood came often to our house, upon the report spread of "a wonderful Yahoo, that could speak like a Houyhnhnm, and seemed, in his words and actions, to discover some glimmerings of reason." These delighted to converse with me: they put many questions, and received such answers as I was able to return. By all these advantages I made so great a progress, that, in five months from my arrival I understood whatever was spoken, and could express myself tolerably well.

[...]

The Houyhnhnms train up their youth to strength, speed, and hardiness, by exercising them in running races up and down steep hills, and over hard stony grounds; and when they are all in a sweat, they are ordered to leap over head and ears into a pond or river. Four times a year the youth of a certain district meet to show their proficiency in running and leaping, and other feats of strength and agility; where the victor is rewarded with a song in his or her praise. On this festival, the servants drive a herd of Yahoos into the field, laden with hay, and oats, and milk, for a repast to the Houyhnhnms; after which, these brutes are immediately driven back again, for fear of being noisome to the assembly.

Three further important Australian colloquialisms are simply ignored by the ANU dictionary: "fair dinkum", "ripper", and "bonza," meaning roughly: "honest", "great" and "great." "Fair Dinkum" stems from gold-rush days, which saw a big influx of Chinese migrants to Australia. "Dinkum" is a Chinese word for gold, and on the gold-fields, buyer and seller attempting to communicate across the Chinese-English language barrier came up with this phrase to indicate that the gold under consideration was the real thing, and not "fools gold," a species of yellowish mineral often mistaken by novices for actual gold - hence, "fair dinkum". "Ripper" and "bonza" are both Japanese words: the latter is used often by C.J. Dennis around 1900; whereas bonza would seem to have entered the Australian vocabulary around the time of the second world war, ironically enough.

Australian cultural identity is multicultural through and through. Contrary to what racists like Pauline Hanson and Co. realize, our connection with Asia is as significant a part of our past as any, just as it remains a crucial part of our present, and an integral aspect of our future. For Bogans there are in every people, just as there is a bit of bogan in all of us at times. And if treated with respect, our inner bogan can be something we can rightly be proud of, if only we give him a chance - and keep him off the booze.