

The idea of national humour and Americanisation in Australia and Britain

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Abstract

The widespread notion of a unique national humour involves an impulse to apply the commonplace assumptions of national identity that demand uniqueness of identity, history, language and culture for a political society. What is deemed true and distinctive of the nation must be also be true and distinctive of its national humour, goes the thinking.

However, such cultural exclusivity has not been reconciled with cultural exchanges between nations. Paradoxically, conceptions of national humour have been formulated in dynamic tension with such exchanges during the various phases of globalization that have taken place since the 19th century. The Americanisation of humour, in particular, has been an important component of such transmissions and resulted from the commercial popular culture dominated by America since the nineteenth century. Australia is a prime example examined here along with examples from Britain. To complicate matters of transmission, Americanisation sometimes arrived in Australia via Britain as well as directly from America itself.

Australians and Britons periodically reacted against American culture, including humour, as a threat to national identity. But this was part of a dynamic tension played out between modern and traditional, imported and local in their selections and adaptations of humour imports from America.

There is a huge and historic complexity of cultural anxiety and cultural transfer lying behind the apparent cultural comforts of belonging to a nation-state. Moreover, humour has played its part in the continual discursive recreation of the nation in the form of constant searches for the unique national humour of a people.

Keywords: newspapers, film, modernity, national identity, relational identity.

1. Introduction

The Danish ambassador, Claus Grube, was relatively new to his post in London in 2014 when he arranged an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper. He clearly intended to compliment his hosts and demonstrate how much they had in common with his compatriots back in Denmark. Of course, smoothing relations between countries is a prime task of diplomats. Still, he took an unusual tack by venturing into the realm of humour.

As much as the Vikings were unwelcome visitors a thousand years ago, he volunteered with a view to dispelling a stereotype of history, they were “not all about raping and pillaging”. They were also traders who brought with them sarcasm, irony and understatement:

It has always struck me that in the UK we have the same sense of humour as in Denmark. We use sarcasm and irony, and we also like understatement. I think this forms part of our common heritage, stemming from the Vikings and some of the legacy they have left.

(Carter 2014)

The interview was a chance for Grube to assert this common heritage while also setting the English and Danish peoples apart from the French and Germans who take sarcasm and irony “literally, and the humour [gets] lost”.

Flattery of an audience rather than complex historical analysis is to be expected of diplomats. For that reason, the accuracy of Grube’s statement is less important than the commonplace argument he posed and the concepts he used. These relate one sense of belonging to the notion of a national sense of humour, which takes the form of a configuration of attitudes shared by a people and contributing to their sense of an enduring national identity.

Governments and their agencies have taken up this idea, which is hardly surprising since the state has become a keen promoter of national identity and culture. As the Australian government has explained in one official online story of the nation, the “national sense of humour” is “known (...) the world over as being distinctly Australian. Our humour is dry, full of extremes, anti-authoritarian, self-mocking and ironic” (Australian Government 2017). Screen Australia is a federal government agency in charge of Australian screen development, production and promotion, especially overseas. Therefore, in a submission to a parliamentary review of soft power, it celebrated the screen talent internationally promoting Australian values, including the national sense of humour. “Unofficial ambassadors” included Paul Hogan of *Crocodile Dundee* fame and his “laconic” statement “That’s not a knife” (Screen Australia 2018). The National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, another federal agency, applauded *Bondi Rescue*, a television reality show seen around the world, for exhibiting professional lifeguards who “personify the stereotypical image of the bronzed Australians with their laconic sense of humour and their athletic prowess” (Australian Screen undated).

Far from exhibiting Australian uniqueness, however, these declarations are the same as those made by the New Zealand Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage. The Ministry believes Kiwis have “a broad, self-mocking, anti-authoritarian strain of humour” that tends to be “laconic, dry and self-effacing”. Their iconic hero is Fred Dagg, the “classic self-deprecating Kiwi comic hero” (Harker 2013).

The idea of exclusive national attitudes in humour becomes even harder to uphold when we consider the opinion of the Kiwi-born creator of Dagg. John Clarke (1948-2017) spent most of his adult life in Australia rather than New Zealand and thought the well-worn Kiwi claim to the laconic is “not very helpful, as the same claim is not unreasonably made for the humour” of Scots, Irish, English, Australians, Russians, Canadians, ancient Greeks and others (Clarke 2017).

In their study of Australian humour, Kirkpatrick and De Groen were similarly critical of unique national “configurations of attitude” and therefore countered Australian claims to irony with “British pride” in the ironic understatement. Australian and British belief that Americans lack irony is belied by “Washington Irving, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Dorothy Parker, *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld* and *South Park*”. (2009: xxiv, xix). For such reasons and more, the authors backed the claim of earlier scholars Dorothy Jones and Barry Andrews that “to define a national humour is impossible” (2009: xviii).

Trying to find a “distinctly Australian” humour is “like chasing a will-o-the-wisp” (Milner Davis 2009: 31). Like Kirkpatrick and De Groen, Jessica Milner Davis argued that different surveys of Australian humour have had difficulties finding “authentically unequivocally Australian” jokes because they were often imports that had been Australianised with local names and character-types; that local topics were vastly outnumbered by universal topics; and that the structures of jokes were also universal (2009: 31, 33).

Like Ambassador Grube, the Australian and New Zealand governments had innocently extended to humour the commonplace assumptions of “banal nationalism” (Billig 1995: 14, 71). Since the nineteenth century, these have driven us unwittingly to demand the enduring uniqueness of identity, history, language, and culture of a people over time, in order to establish their difference from other peoples and legitimate the separation of nations in a world drawn with boundaries of sovereignty. What is deemed true and distinctive of the nation must be also be true and distinctive of its sense of humour, goes the thinking.

Such national exclusivity, however, takes no account of international cultural transmissions in the age of globalisation, which is often demarcated by scholars as the period since the late 18th century (Hirst et al 2009: chapter 2). That is the whole time since the British invaded Australia in 1788. Australia and New Zealand have always been since then complexities of home-grown phenomena interacting with political, economic and cultural transmissions from the outside world. In other words, the search for a distinctive national humour is challenged by the numerous exchanges between nations.

Paradoxically, the sense of national belonging regularly accommodates and eventually takes for granted these international cultural transmissions and associated changes. There is a huge and historic complexity of tensions and transfers behind the seeming certainties and cultural comforts of belonging to a nation-state. I examine this dynamic tension through humour and the framework of Americanisation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an important mode of modernization along with its attendant cultural fears.

Australians romanticise icons of the bush such as the metal windmill, the stagecoach, and damper (a form of bread) without thinking of their origins in North America. To this list can be added, for instance, Californian bungalows, shopping centres, supermarkets, skyscrapers, motorways and the internet. Our history is replete with examples of cultural transmission involving the adoption and adaptation of American products that were later taken for granted as part of the national cultural scenery (Bell and Bell 1993; Rolfe 1998, 2003).

Therefore, we should apply to Australian humour the same interpretive framework tracking the Americanisation of our nation. I demonstrate that this Americanisation indirectly connects to transatlantic exchanges between America and Britain as well as to cultural transmissions across the Pacific in a complex three-way exchange, which is a most important focus of this article. I am dealing here with humour and the meta-narratives of humour that reinforce identity (see also Zekavat 2017) rather than with analyses of humour that focus on psychological theories (see Billig 2005 for an overview) or on its subversive potential to attack the powerful (for instance, Jordan 2008).

2. Anglo-American conceptual developments and nationalism

Ambassador Grube’s resort to the notion of a unique national sense of humour powerfully demonstrated its persuasive and evaluative potential for distributing praise or blame according to national identity, extending to the British the attitudes he found in common with Danes but not with the Germans and the French!

However, the ostensibly stable meanings of humour and national sense of humour are

easily undermined by the complex histories of contingent concepts that have subtly but noticeably shifted over generations. That is, contextual conceptual history undermines notions of humour as “an unproblematic universal category” (Derrin 2020: 11). This is plainly obvious in the shifts in Britain during the 16th to 18th centuries from medieval physiological notions of humour as the balance of four liquids in the body that determined temperament (Wickberg 2015). Meanwhile during this period, the assessment of character in humour was expanded to encompass individuality in the form of permanent but odd dispositions, or with temporary but spurious affectations that were considered valid targets for criticism and personal reform.

With these changes, humour became connected for the first time to the comic form and to laughter and was set on the path to an eventual concern with the mind and with psychology, leading to the physiological notions falling by the conceptual wayside. This expansion of meaning happened within a larger social framework in which humour and laughter, along with new terms such as banter, raillery and ridicule that arose in the late 17th century, evolved to a conceptual network focused on “the give-and-take of social life” (Wickberg 2015: 82), on repartee and conversation and on the social order. By the 18th century, though, humour had to compete with ridicule, which had then become an umbrella term and which “made laughter a consequence of action rather than something” that was considered in the nature of a thing (Wickberg 2015: 81). This particular aspect passed to humour.

In its conceptual development, therefore, humour went from being viewed as located as an object in the body to a way of seeing in the subject, from a passive attribute to an active trait of agency. As a consequence, laughter could now be seen as issuing from an agent using humour rather than simply being seen since the ancient Greeks as a “natural response to a risible object” (Wickberg 2015: 76), that is, to the ugliness and deformity that resided in the thing itself.

Three centuries of conceptual development in Britain and America have led to the current position of humour in English as an umbrella term for a variety of conceptual distinctions and phenomena (2015: 90; Derrin 2020: 12; Burrows 2020: 64; Attardo 1994: 7). It rests now in a semantic field of terms such as wit, lampoon, joke, tease, fun, ridicule, satire, irony, nonsense, sarcasm and more and, in a way, that would be unrecognisable to our early modern forebears. One consequence, says Condren (2012, 2020), is the need for historical, contextual and rhetorically informed understandings of humour. By extension, we should see humour as a discursive construct (Condren 2020: 21; Wickberg 2015: 66) nestling in social deliberations. The cognate senses of humour and national humour, which emerged in the nineteenth century from British and American developments, are similarly positioned (Wickberg 2015).

Overall, humour has become a discursive construct of society and this has presented potential for various rhetorical purposes. This is most obvious in judgments made of individuals as having or lacking a sense of humour. That evaluative possibility has only been available since the 1870s when humour was first imagined by Americans “as a valuable personality attribute” and as part of the rise of middle-class sensibilities (Wickberg 2015: 189). It was in the eighteenth century that humour became attached in discussions to the peculiarity of the English and their love of liberty, an exceptionalism that was carried over to the Americans (Wickberg 2015: 67). In the following century, this trope was elaborated to the putative correspondence of humour, or lack thereof, with stereotypes of national characters, thereby gaining widespread and popular adherence.

But what is considered unique to each national humour, and often thereby mistaken for essences, is actually achieved through a reliance on contrasts between nations, as with Grube’s use of the Germans and the French in contrast to the British and Danes, as part of the continuous discursive recreation of the nation-state. Basically, the ambassador reflected

Billig's argument that the identities of nation-states do not exist in isolation but in relation to "a complex of other nation-states" (Billig 1995: 14, 71). This relational identity involving an 'us' versus a 'them' has been discussed in relation to humour (Zekavat 2017) as well as to the Americanisation of France (Kuisel 1993) and of Australia (White 1981).

Since 1788, Australian identity has been construed with both America and Britain serving in varying degrees as points of reference to triangulate affinities and differences (White 1981: 47). Until the 1960s, Australians incorporated a dual identity as both Australians and Britons that extended to belief in superior membership of the white British race and empire. This was a "distinctive British-Australian composite nationalism" (McGregor 2006: 493) that connected Australian identity to a pan-British nationalism through blood, heritage, symbols, and culture and through a British passport until 1948 when the Australian passport was first promulgated, some 47 years after the nation was formed. Before 1945, Australians proudly boasted their nation was 98% British and 'more British than the British' (Forest 2010: 4). This identity made cultural transmissions from America a cause for concern, as we shall see, but it also had the effect of rendering minority ethnic identities and the indigenous population as either irrelevant or condemned to the general public.

We can see notions of relative identity playing out just two years after the Australian colonies federated into a nation in 1901. The existence of an Australian sense of humour that is thought to be so obvious now was not so obvious then. Livingston Hopkins (1846-1927), an American who had become a famous Australian cartoonist, thought humour existed in the land but that a national humour was "open to question" because "we are yet far from being a nation. We are still fearfully and wonderfully English" (1903: 359). Alfred George Stephens (1865-1933) agreed. This writer, literary critic, editor and publisher thought that much humour could be found in Australia but that "at present there is no specific Australian race, and there is no specific Australian humour. Australian natives are still typically British, conforming to one or other of the British racial classes" (1903: 445). A fledgling nation that was not a distinct race could not possibly have a distinct national sense of humour, according to diktats of nationalism at that time that connected to race patriotism and the racist White Australia Policy.

Stephens then favourably cited Mark Twain, amongst others, for having observed that, "Australians did not seem to me to differ noticeably from Americans". If this seems at odds with pride in Britishness, Stephens was in fact replicating the inclination among Australian writers and politicians before World War I to think that America and Australia were treading similar paths as nations. Australia was often cast as a younger sibling treading somewhere behind its elder Brother Jonathan, as America was known, or as "a new America", "another America", "the Future America", or a "second America in its infancy" (McLachlan 1977: 380). Consequently, America functioned "as a kind of storehouse of ideas to be raided, a powerfully justifying precedent to be invoked ... or a dreadful example with which to shame the thoughtless" (cited in Churchward 1979: xxv). Such borrowings were always done in accordance with Australian contexts and needs and not necessarily imposed in any imperious way by Americans. America was never laid out as a blueprint for changing Australia into its image.

3. Americanisation

Certainly, globalization has been a fiercely debated and contentious term since the 1990s. Nevertheless, it seeks to capture the multitudinous processes and connections of politics, economics, and cultures across the world (Robertson and White 2007: 54). This complexity

has compounded with discussions of modernization and Americanisation (Robinson 2007: 138) that have frequently muddled conceptions of political, economic and cultural imperialism and resulted in wholesale condemnations of America. This recent analytic practice is a continuation of critiques first aired in the 1970s and 80s, especially in Australia where the brief history of the nation-state and the legacies of Britain bred fears that a compromised national identity and culture was succumbing to American imperialism (see Rolfe 1997).

American cultural influence has been easily confused with the role of America as demon or angel (Rolfe 1997). The problem with tracking Americanisation is that it is easy to see its deposits in our own lands of McDonalds, television shows, hip-hop music, and shops of digital giants like Apple and Microsoft. However, to proclaim surrender to American cultural imperialism begs the question of how cultural transmission occurs. The adoption and adaption of Americana is more multi-layered and intricate than simple characterisations of Americanisation as a linear one-way process involving an aggressor that imposes its culture on victims. This tendency has been encouraged by the habit of treating countries as simplistic reified entities rather than as complex, diverse communities undergoing similar bewildering changes. There are multiple Americas and Australias, in a conceptual sense, yet we speak of each nation in holistic terms.

Rather than the wholesale import of Americana being forced by America on an unsuspecting Australia, we should see the transfer as a never simple or uniform process of selection and adaption by various Australians convinced of the value of Americana as species of modernization. Indeed, American imports have often been seen as species of modernization representing the overall United States in Britain (Abravanel 2012), in France (Kuisel 1993), in Europe generally (De Grazia, 2005), as well as in Australia (see Bell and Bell 1993, 1998; Rolfe 1999, 2003).

This has happened at the same time as the aforementioned calibrations of Australian identity that are relative to other nations and are often mired in controversy over culture, identity and anti-Americanism. In other words, behind the sense of belonging lie endless dynamic and dialectical tensions between cultural transfers and discussions of national identity and national humour.

As for the modernization that is identified with a reified United States, David Ellwood argues that Americans have enjoyed both the capacity to define and redefine modernity as well as the reputation to constantly impress on others that they have invented the future and the progress that accompanies whatever is new:

The key cultural power is the one that most successfully defines the content, direction, and pace of change for the rest, and so presents itself as the leading model of modernity in any given era. This was the challenge of America. As we shall see, in many ways it still is... In each of the eras, American innovations (...) redefined the dominant definitions of progress in the West.

(Ellwood 2012: 3)

American culture industries have been key battlegrounds in the challenge of modernity against tradition because Americans have had a “supreme role in their development” (Ellwood 2012: 4). Therefore, popular culture, including the humour industries, has been a strong suite of American appeal for generations. Or as Joseph Nye put it with his notion of soft power, America has had the capacity to “inspire the dreams and desires of others” with “the universality” of its culture (Nye 2004: 9, 10).

Victoria de Grazia gave more analytical depth to this question. In the decades before World War I, America had become a “democracy of things” (Rosenberg 1982: 23), which

allowed for an expansion of the meaning of democracy to encompass the market, mass consumption, popular culture and the dismantling of “barriers of taste” that hemmed in the masses (De Grazia 2005: 1-3). Therefore, she sees in the concept of soft power five traditional ideas of the American Market Empire going back to that time: (1) other nations have limited sovereignty over their public spaces; (2) American civil society is disseminated with its economic exports; (3) there is particular power in American norms-making, its “winning arm”; (4) there is a democratic spirit; (5) and it is inherently peaceable (De Grazia, 2005: 6-9, 555-556). These traits also apply to the export of American humour.

4. American humour and cultural panic in Australia and Britain

American political, economic and cultural power disturbed many but not all Britons as early as the 1880s. William T. Stead was a famously influential newspaper editor and a booster of all things American in Britain, particularly the changes that he led and called New Journalism. These dismayed traditionalists like prominent cultural critic Matthew Arnold. To counter the considerable shock at the American challenge and the “needless [...] resentment in Great Britain”, Stead wrote *The Americanization of the World* to publicize the many benefits brought by this stage of Anglo-Saxon success that enveloped Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other parts of the empire. Among them, Stead listed a range of products that helped “the average man” (1902: 138), thus alluding to the democratic and consumer advances wrought by America. These included humour from the comic characters Sam Slick and Artemus Ward in the early nineteenth century down to Mark Twain, who Stead claimed had been “disdained” years earlier by “supercilious British culture” (1902: 104).

This was one of his many rejoinders to those like Arnold who feared cultural decline instigated by lower class mobs in Britain if the American example of democracy were followed (Goodwin 2018: 410). Stead wrote instead of American humour as giving “gaiety to the world” and to “many millions of homes” (1902: 110). He also conveyed a sense of American superiority to the English in this regard:

One of the most distinctive contributions which America has made to the literature of the world, is that of humour, a department in which the Americans have left their English kinsmen far behind. He who contributes to the mirth of the world makes humanity his debtor, and the American humorists have put the English speaking world under heavy obligation. Their export is balanced by no corresponding import (...).

(Stead 1902: 109)

British ambivalences about both America and modernization were loaded onto the new term Americanisation and were expressed in a language of panic over the corruption of civilized values, moral order and national identity caused by commercialization, degeneracy and cosmopolitanism. This fear echoed for decades. One columnist considered “the most powerful film critic in Britain” in 1927 expressed the alarm in terms of loss of national identity. Most Britons were,

(...) Americanized to an extent that makes them regard the British film as a foreign film, and an interesting but more frequently irritating interlude in their favourite entertainment. They go to see American stars. They have been brought up on American publicity. They talk America, think America, and dream America.

(cited in Glancy 2006: 461)

For the most part, this cultural panic did not settle upon Australians until the 1920s (Waterhouse 1998: 45). Australian ambivalence over Americanisation and modernization is captured in repeated interwar newspaper columns discussing “Americanised Sydney”. On the one hand, this Americanisation of Australia’s oldest city could be applauded and Australian modernity savoured, as when an American baseball team visited and they reportedly had “a home from home” much like New York or Chicago (‘Americanised Sydney’ 1929a). In addition to a plethora of taller American-style buildings in the city centre, Sydney had undergone in that decade another major wave of expansion in the suburbs where blossomed American Art Deco cinemas presenting Hollywood’s latest and Californian bungalows equipped with American appliances and supported by newfound electrification.

On the other hand, “Americanised Sydney” was a totem of modernization, cosmopolitanism and cultural threat to the rest of the nation. Some visitors were like a Kiwi visitor who was “shocked” from a “standpoint of commercial morality” (‘Americanised Sydney’ 1929b). To its detriment, reported another newspaper, Sydney had “imbibed more of American ideas” than the rest of Australia, (‘Americanised Sydney’ 1930). A professor of English at Melbourne University sniffed that in Sydney, the weather, outdoor attractions and the Americanisation of speech all “militated against serious reading” and thus the rise of an Australian literature (‘Australian literature’ 1928).

Besides anti-Americanism, this cultural panic descended into racism, including anti-Semitism. In 1935, the Cultural Defence Committee founded by the Fellowship of Australian Writers condemned “Americanization” and “American propaganda” as “degenerate and dangerous” and linked “mental decline” to “dumped” magazines, radio dramas, and music (‘Mental Rubbish’ 1935: 11). Radio channels broadcast “middlebrow” programming but also jazz, which roused racial and patriarchal fears in both countries that ‘whiteness’ and the sexual morality of women would be undermined. Some feared this black American music had too quickly conquered the hearts and dancing feet of too many Australians (White 1983) and Britons (Abravanel 2012: chapter 2).

Part of this moral panic was also a linguistic dread focused on the supposed assault of coarse, low culture American speech upon the refined high culture English sound, considered by elites the correct guide to speech for Australians and broadcast through media modelled on their British equivalents (Damousi 2007). In the Victorian parliament, a Melbourne politician complained about the “filthy American twang” in the new “talking pictures” that contaminated the language (‘American Twang’ 1929).

Humour was swept up in this linguistic alarm. The Cultural Defence Committee despised Hollywood for portraying “Chicago machine-gunning crime” and “pop-eyed and goitred comedians” along with “wise-cracking Jews” (‘Mental Rubbish’ 1935). Sydney was being Americanized, according to one report of 1924, because “good old Australian vernacular” was overwhelmed by “Americanisms” that were “pouring in” with visiting Americans, including “variety artists” (which encompassed comedians) as well as with fashion, films, magazines and novels (‘Americanised Sydney’ 1924). The chief government film censor protested the “ugly and raucous” American films with their “endless reiteration” of “small-town vaudeville comedians” filing through to eventual success on Broadway. The films contained, he said, “sordid stuff, full of Bowery accent, and of that peculiarly aggressive kind of repartee which the Americans call “wise-cracks”” (‘The Talkies’ 1930).

It is most likely anti-Semitic reactions to cosmopolitan New York were behind these complaints about Jews and wisecracks. Australians knew this city as a polyglot of peoples that included Jews from Eastern Europe and Italians who were not considered white like Nordic Europeans. Even a well-regarded journalist of his time, Arthur Porritt, who wanted to ameliorate suspicions about America in Britain and Australia (where his article was repeated),

explained the success of what was labelled “Jew York” by a sub-heading: “it was settled by the Dutch, conquered by the British, is owned by the Jews, and governed by the Irish. There are more Germans in New York than in Hamburg, more Irish than in Dublin, and more Jews than in Palestine”. As a result, “American humour is vastly different from ours”, which was the theme of his article. American humour “has a tang of its own. We may not like it – but it is humour”, he concluded (Porritt 1925).

The surprising thing about the complaints of American speech is that for decades American entertainers had toured Australia. Nevertheless, such familiarity had not dulled the shock of hearing Americans on the silver screen. Despite decades of cross-Atlantic cultural exchange of British music hall ensembles with American vaudeville troupes, there were still “national and cultural variations in language and styles of comedy” (Springhall 2008: 151) between Britain and America. And Britons had similar reactions to Australians. In 1922 the Marx Brothers flopped on their very first tour of Britain. Audiences booed, whistled and threw pennies on stage. The English did not understand their humour, according to a local comedian. But also, they and other touring vaudeville failures such as Eddie Cantor “spoke urban American with the rapidity of a Gatling gun [which] bewildered the ticket holders”. It seems this was another way of saying that they came from New York. The act and the accents of the brothers were “a little too trans-Atlantic for English audiences”, condescended *The Times* of London (Springhall 2008: 158, 159, 165). The Marx Brothers had failed to adjust their act to England.

Such pragmatism came readily to Carl Lemmle, the founder and owner of Universal Pictures, who must have sensed foreign reactions and the associated effect on his bottom-line. He reportedly thought “[t]he screen ... had become too American for its own good” and “catered too much to American slang, wisecracks, and local subjects”, according to *The Times* (‘American Film Production’ 1932). This repugnance for the American wisecrack is again evident in 1933 in a review of a romantic comedy on stage in Perth, Scotland, which complimented the script as “an excellent antidote to American-type wisecracks” (‘Bright Comedy at Perth Theatre’ 1933). Apparently, British jokes were better than American ones.

Like Australian elites, British elites were affronted by sound films and “the harsh American accent” which “comes out on the ‘talkies’ with a stridency which amazes you”, as one newspaper put it (cited in Burns 2014: 203). As in Australia, there were calls in Britain for quotas on American films and more support for British films in addition to similar fears of cultural decline. In Britain during the 1920s, as one scholar explained:

‘Hollywood’ became synonymous with a form of facile, homogenised, amoral mass-culture that was widely seen to be undermining the values of British people at home and subjects abroad. In public and private discourse across the empire, Hollywood became a subject of scorn and derision by colonial elites who warned of its corrosive influence.

(Burns 2014: 197)

Indeed, officials and newspapers alike were alarmed about the impact upon so-called “native races” and “half-civilised natives” within the British Empire, especially in India. Hollywood depictions of crime and use of Americanisms with the “completely unattractive ... slang of the Bowery” (as one editor put it with another allusion to New York) would somehow endanger white prestige by causing upheaval in the colonies (Burns 2014: 208).

5. Modernity and transfers of American humour

What I have described so far seems to have been part and parcel of a cultural version of cognitive dissonance during the interwar period. Despite the above reactions, the decade also favourably embraced American humour as a model of modernity and innovation, which we had witnessed with Stead. Famed Canadian humourist and political scientist Stephen Leacock spelt this out in 1922 in an article syndicated to both Australia and Britain. He cast a comparative hierarchy of national humours that seemed to dominate transatlantic thinking at the time.

A sort of legend has grown around American humor. It is presumed to be a superior article and to enjoy the same kind of pre-eminence as French cooking, the Russian ballet and Italian grinding. With this goes the converse supposition that the British people are inferior in humor, that the joke reaches them only with great difficulty, and that a British audience listens to humor in gloomy and in unintelligent silence.

(Leacock 1922)

Such discussions of the exalted standing of American humour and the lowly status of the British had been taking place for generations, at least since the readers of a Washington newspaper were informed in 1837 that “The English seem smitten with a sudden passion for what they call American humor” (*Washington Globe* 1837). Evidently, this notion seems to have been an English invention attached to their admiration but it was then new to Americans. They soon adopted the concept as their own.

Behind the supposedly exalted standing of American humour in 1922 was at least ninety years of American commercial development mixed with the making of norms in the fields of journalism, newspapers, lecture circuits, dime museums, minstrelsy, variety, and ultimately vaudeville. These and other forms “inextricably intermingled” and borrowed “heavily from one another” (Springhall 2008: 8) to form a commercial mass entertainment that became known in the twentieth century as “show business” (Springhall 2008: 8, 3). This wealth of inspirational Americana quickly found its way to eager recipients and adapters in Australia and Britain.

From early days, Australians were kept abreast of minor as well as major developments in America through their newspapers, which recycled snippets from foreign newspapers brought along trans-Pacific and trans-Indian Ocean sailing routes. Thus, the people of Sydney in 1838 enjoyed ‘American Humour – Latest Imported’ (1838), as Figure 1 demonstrates.

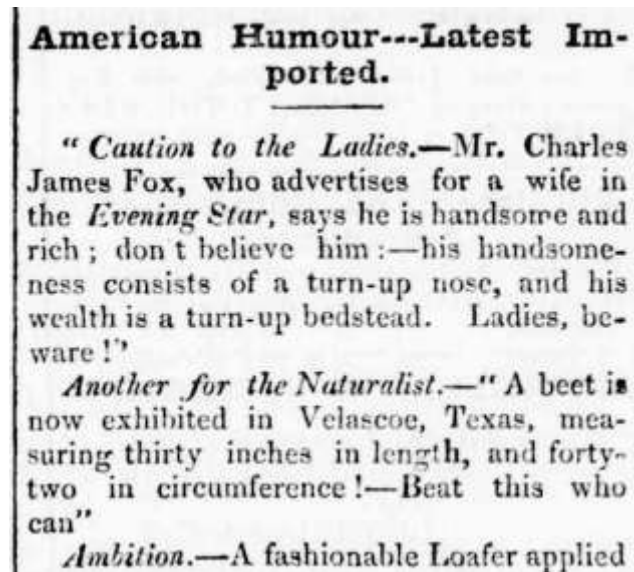


Figure 1. American Humour – Latest Imported. Source: reprinted by permission from National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Sometimes, “American Jokes” arrived in Australia via English journals, such as that in Figure 2 (‘English Extracts’ 1838):



Figure 2. English Extracts. Source: reprinted by permission from National Library of Australia, Canberra.

In Britain, there were sporadic appearances of columns of imported American jokes in newspapers during the first half of the 19th century (Nicholson 2012: 35, 36) and that was probably also the case in Australia. In both countries, American humour appeared as stories or faux news items, such as Figures 1 and 2 as well as Figure 3, which arrived via England (‘Varieties’ 1853).

AN AMERICAN JOKE.—A romantic and sentimental young gentleman, whose light-coloured moustache was somewhat ostentatiously “hung out” as a sign “of apartments to let in the upper story,” promenading Broad-st. the other afternoon, picked up a thimble. He stobd a while, meditating upon the probable beauty of the owner, when he pressed the thimble to his lips, saying “Oh, that it were the fair cheek of the wearer !” Just, as he had finished, a big negro wench looked out of the window and said, “Boss, just please to frowdad fimble of mine up in de entry—l jist now drap em.” The gallant youth immediatoly fainted, and was carried home on a shutter.—Leeds Mercury.

Figure 3. Varieties. Source: reprinted by permission from National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Australian and British readers enjoying these snippets were benefiting through their newspapers from American developments in the 1830s and 40s of the ‘penny press’ for the masses, which depended on major advances in telegraph and railway networks (Schudson 1978). These changes spawned a national market for ever-increasing numbers of newspapers, which rolled into a broader evolution after the Civil War that drove transatlantic cultural exchange between Britain and America. For the most part, “the key transformations in journalism occurred” first in America (Wiener 2011: 4), which were then called New Journalism in Britain because of William Stead and Yellow Journalism in America. This format has been the normal fare of news consumption ever since.

Newspapers turned from a political and pedagogical tone attuned to an elite readership and recalibrated towards popular tastes by covering sport, gossip, divorce cases, scandal, murder trials, and fashion. Interviews, sensational headlines, news condensation, blaring typography, and interviews became normal journalistic practices. So did serialized fiction, household tips, children’s pages, gardening advice, poetry, competitions and comic clippings (Goodwyn 2018; Wiener 2011).

This is the context in which imported American joke columns and newspaper humour in general developed as “a distinctive and pervasive journalistic genre” (Nicholson 2012: 35), facilitating the Americanisation of humour. By the 1880s and 90s, imported American jokes were “the most pervasive and commercially successful form of humour” in Britain (Nicholson 2012: 35), reaching millions of readers every week. They appeared under various labels such as “Yankee Snacks”, “Yankee Notions”, “California Humor”, “American Jokes” or just plain “Wit and Humour”. Bob Nicholson considers them as significant to the “transatlantic cultural exchange” in the nineteenth century between Britain and America because they “were steeped in ‘Americana’ and gave Victorian readers imaginative insights into American life and culture” (Nicholson 2012: 36). In addition to participating in trans-Pacific transmission directly, Australia was part of this trans-Atlantic cultural exchange of American humour via the relay of British newspapers, articles and snippets to Australian newspapers.

Besides the sheer quantity of jokes overflowing America to Britain and Australia, there was an important qualitative change in humour from the 1880s. This connects to the problem outlined earlier of finding exclusively Australian topics and structures of humour. The joke topics and structures in Australian newspapers at this time were Americanized. While

humorous stories or faux news items still appeared, they were supplemented by the modern form of jokes that we know today, the anonymous one or two-line gags taking the form of simple dialogues with a punch line, such as this one that appeared in 1891 in Britain (cited in Nicholson 2012: 40) and in Australia ('Miscellany' 1891):

Chicago Woman: How much do you charge for a divorce?
Chicago Lawyer: One hundred dollars, ma'am, or six for 500 dollars.

These anonymous simple dialogue gags were the result of a national mass market for jokes in America that was dominated by the output of somewhere between fifteen and twenty men and women. That is, new forms and new careers in humour had blossomed with this commercial development (Wickberg 2015: 212). The writers could rely on popular stereotypes of the time and on readers filling in the context of jokes with local knowledge. So, readers in parts of America could supply specific inferences about say, Chicagoans, while British and Australian readers could supply more general suppositions about Americans. In 1895, rural readers near Sydney enjoyed a column headed 'Humor'. The simple jokes included:

What did you do with the check your father-in-law gave you for a wedding present?
Had it framed; no one would cash it. — Boston Gazette

(‘Humor’ 1895)

The same joke appeared in Wales ('Brief and Bright' 1894), Manchester ('Wit and Humour' 1894), and elsewhere in Britain.

The following presentation for *Daily Telegraph* readers in Sydney in 1898 (see Figure 4) demonstrates the differing formats and styles of humour between American sources and the British *Punch* magazine. They involve a silly upper-class Englishman and simple two person dialogues from the American press. But all the jokes deal with gender stereotypes of the stupid woman, the young cad, and the predatory woman ('Humour' 1898).

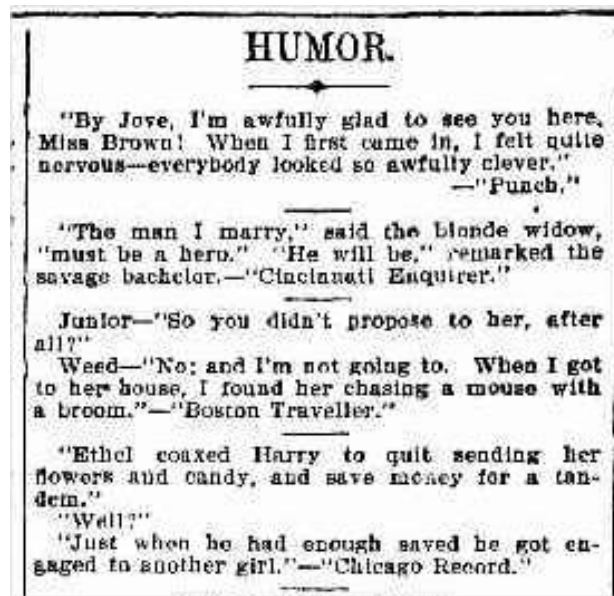


Figure 4. Humor. Source: reprinted by permission from National Library of Australia, Canberra.

According to Nicholson (2012: 34), American newspaper jokes “occupied a more pervasive presence [in Britain] than any other form of imported American culture” before the arrival of Hollywood cinema. The same situation probably dominated Australia.

For Australians who couldn’t get enough American jokes from newspapers, they could get books of them from overseas. A Sydney bookshop offered through a newspaper advertisement *New Yarns and Funny Jokes: Illustrated American Humor* as well as the following in Figure 5 (‘Books. Books. Books: Just Received’ 1893).



Figure 5. Books. Books. Books: Just Received. Source: reprinted by permission from National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Mark Twain and other American performers touring Britain could not match the popularity of newspaper jokes. Nonetheless, he was another marker of Americanisation. Twain was one of the first so-called ‘humorists’, a new American term of the mid nineteenth century that referred “to the self-conscious creator of a product called ‘humor’” (Wickberg 2015: 49). Twain had followed the journalistic path hewed by the creators of comic characters Artemus Ward, Seba Smith and Jack Downing (which were known to Australians). These authors were significant in making their humorous careers through the evolving newspapers of the first half of the century. Moreover, Charles F. Browne, the creator of Ward, became the first professional stand-up comedian in 1861 touring the lecture circuits of the United States (Robinson 2006: 20, 21, 27-31). Similarly, Twain and his witty, journalistic ilk moved on from newspaper careers in the 1860s and followed Browne’s innovation as stand-up on the lecture circuit. This led him to a tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1895. Yet these cases were only parts of larger forces underpinning American developments in the commercial mass market of humour.

In the words of two historians of Americanisation, American mass entertainment culture “was running at full throttle” in the five decades after the Civil War and before 1920 (Rydell and Kroes 1994: 174). This was made possible by the national developments before the Civil War and then after it in telephone networks, corporations, mass immigration, and the rise of

modern mass metropolises like New York, which overtook provincial rural communities as primary centres of American life. These cities augmented their attractions with cheap public transport and gas or electric lighting that facilitated entertaining nightlife. Cheap colour printing and lithography enabled advertisements, posters and song-sheets that publicized these shows (Rydell and Kroes 1994: 6-7; Springhall 2008).

All of these factors fed one another but also built upon advances in mass popular culture made in the antebellum period. Phineas T. Barnum remains legendary as “a candidate for the father of American show business”, “a significant intermediary” in the creation of mass national, commercial entertainment centred in the big cities (Springhall 2008: 173; also Rydell and Kroes 1994: 19). Despite fame with the circus, he was in his own eyes principally a proprietor of the popular ‘dime museum’, starting in 1841 with his purchase of the American Museum in New York. This place did not conform to our expectations of museums because it displayed humans who were then called freaks, exotic animals including whales, bears and giraffes, magicians, comedians, Native Americans, dioramas and a theatre. Barnum’s museum embraced the trend of the solo “blackface” comedy that first arose in the 1830s and evolved in the 1840s into groups of singing, dancing and comedic “blackface” men known as minstrels. The first accredited minstrel act was in February 1843 with the Virginia Minstrels in New York (Springhall 2008: 61-62). Barnum presented them and many other minstrel groups of which the most famous was the Christy’s Minstrels. They consolidated the style of these troupes into its standard three-part form.

Although they could be traced to a long history of solo blackface performers in Europe, minstrel groups evolved into the first American form of commercial entertainment (Springhall 2008: 57). While this cultural form did popularise demeaning racial stereotypes loaded with white fantasies, it was racist to varying degrees and at different times. Jews, Irish and other immigrants adopted the black face to mock class, ethnic identity and the difficulty of living up to American ideals in what was supposedly an egalitarian land. “At their best”, states William Mahar,

minstrel comedians were social satirists; at their worst – in regional amateur productions – the comics joined their neighbors in denigrating members of other ethnic groups in their own communities. Minstrel performers, even the rank amateurs, assumed, if only for an evening, that all races, classes, professionals, and genders were fit subjects for comedy.

(Mahar 1999: 6)

In Australia, the first solo blackface act appeared in Sydney in 1838 but it did not meet with the approval of the establishment newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, which expressed distaste for a song and dance routine known as Jim Crow (Waterhouse 1989: 366). From that small beginning, however, minstrel acts went on to dominate Australian stages for the rest of the century, joined by vaudeville in the 1870s. Waterhouse argues that their success and popularity in America, Britain and Australia was due to the minstrel show capturing “certain themes and values which had an international appeal” (Waterhouse 1989: 367). Australian minstrels adapted the songs and sketches to satirise local politicians, reformers and institutions, express racial anxieties about Chinese and other non-white groups, and to mitigate unease over urbanization and modernity, with nostalgia for a lost Arcadia (Waterhouse 1989: 378-82). Professional minstrels penetrated all corners of the vast Australian continent, although tours of British and American minstrels predominated. Minstrel groups also became “probably the most commonplace form of amateur stage production in Australia in the late nineteenth century”, performed by and for church, sporting and fraternal organisations (Waterhouse 1989: 366). Local versions of the famed Virginia

Minstrels performed for audiences from the 1850s, especially in the raucous gold fields of Victoria ('Bendigo' 1853) and lasted until the 1920s (Advertising 1927). Britain, on the other hand, received tours of the original troupe and by the 1860s, over one hundred minstrel groups were performing there (Waterhouse 1989: 369).

More American innovations in mass entertainment during the decades before the Great War found their way to Australia. The new variety acts from the 1860s and vaudeville acts from the 1870s built "the first syndicated or national system of American entertainment" (Springhall 2008: 9). This commercial amusement now aimed for a broad swathe of respectable middle-class and working-class families in reputable venues and therefore ruthlessly dispensed with rowdy, hard-drinking male working-class audiences and their saloons and any associated shady or bawdy appearances. Barnum led the way in this chase for respectability. Such comedic changes built on the conceptual evolutions of humour described earlier, including "the cultural invention of the joke as a unit of humor" purveyed by the "new class of professional humorists" catering to a mass entertainment market. That is, humour became "a recognized good" amongst middle-class Americans who were eager for "sources of humor consumption" and wished to display the new concept sense of humour (Wickberg 2015: 205, 206, 194).

Running at full throttle before 1920, this American entertainment culture sped by steamship across the Pacific to Australia, which became an extension of the American market. American entertainers arrived in greater numbers from the 1870s. This was due to regular shipping routes to Australasia made possible by the American conquest of their own west coast and the expansion of railways across the continent to San Francisco (Waterhouse 1998: 48, 49). Until the early 1930s and the rise of 'the talkies', the latest vaudeville developments in songs and sketches were brought to Australia by touring Americans, such as a young W. C. Fields ('W.C. Fields' 1914) and those billed as "America's premier black-faced comedians" ('Vaudeville Turns at the Shows to see' 1914: 19; 'Advertising' 1899: 1) or as "one of America's greatest comedians" ('Advertising' 1895: 3). "The Flying Jordans Vaudeville Company" was reported as combining gymnastics and trapeze with "a music hall variety of American humor [that] has come to enjoy here a popular acceptance such as it never seemed likely to attain a few years ago". The journalist added that American comedians had the advantage over English comedians of a "rapid utterance and hustling style" ('Theatre Royal' 1897).

Although the Americans provided stiff competition, "Australian variety artists ... were largely viewed as being equal to if not better than the foreign import" (Djubal 2005: 20). They adapted American themes and styles to local affairs and created a combination of old minstrelsy and new vaudeville that was not simply a replica of American vaudeville (Waterhouse 1989: 376-377). An example of this was local productions of a Broadway show by Joe Weber and Lew Fields, a very famous American vaudeville comedy duo of their time, that was adapted for tours of Australia ('Amusements: Theatre Royal' 1905: 3).

Australian promoters brought Americans and incorporated them with English vaudeville imports into large programs. Harry Clay was one, regarded as the 'King of Vaudeville', who used the visitors to improve and support local artists (Djubal 1999). From the 1890s, a few famous promoters (including Clay, Harry Rickard, the Fuller Brothers, James Brennan, Stuart Doyle amongst them) gathered chains of theatres into a centralized Australian entertainment market, modelled on the American one to which it was connected. Doyle and his Union Theatres contracted for a supply of vaudeville acts from Keith and Albee ('Sniping the shows: bullseyes and otherwise' 1929: 8), an American vaudeville corporate empire that was infamous for the control over its talent and suppression of their unionization (Rydell and Kroes 1994: 23-25). This Americanized Australian market influenced the next stage of

developments with film in a way that again resembled the US market.

Most of the big American promoters of variety and vaudeville before World War I thrived in New York and had created “a national market for humor” that was essential to modern show business. As Wickberg points out:

The humor and comedy that lay at the heart of vaudeville provided the foundation for the major forms of popular entertainment in the twentieth century. Radio, television, and much of early film—before the dominance of standard theatrical conventions and narrative structure derived from melodrama—were largely comic media.

(Wickberg 2015: 198-200)

Humour and comedy lay at the heart of the continued American dominance of commercial popular culture that has now perpetuated itself over the generations since the nineteenth century. Hollywood was another stage in this path dependency beginning around the Great War. One need only remember performers like the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Bob Hope, George Burns and W. C. Fields to realize that vaudeville was “a major source of recruitment” for Hollywood and its “style, content, and ethos helped shape the twentieth-century’s mass media culture” (Springhall 2008: 151).

Vaudeville had a similar effect in Australia. Serious stage drama declined in the face of competition from silent films in the 1920s and Hollywood did make huge inroads into the nascent but thriving Australian film industry. Despite this, Australian variety and vaudeville acts featuring comedy blossomed across cities and regions. Numerous troupes of ex-soldiers and comedians purveyed a reinvention of the war as farce and a reverence for the ‘common man’, thereby continuing ‘the long tradition of comedy based on the everyday vicissitudes of life’ (Fotheringham 2010: 03.8).

A few promoters of theatre and vaudeville acts (such as Doyle and his Union Theatres) established subsidiaries exhibiting and/or producing films along American lines, ones that juxtaposed “Hollywood styles with allusions to British culture, and local concerns” (Speed 2015: 16, 18). They served to funnel famous Australian vaudeville acts (Roy Rene, George Wallace, Will Mahoney and Pat Hanna) into popular comedy films that optimistically embraced modernity and explored ethnicity, gender and urban life at a time when rural and British identities predominated. For example, Rene was Jewish, was one half of “arguably Australia’s most influential and significant comedy duo of the first half of the twentieth century” (Djubal 2005: xiii), and during World War I adopted the vaudeville act known as the ‘Hebrew comedian’. This caricature was a creation of New York in the 1880s and existed alongside other comic ethnic identities of Italians (think of Chico Marx), Irish, Dutch and Germans. Fields and Weber mentioned above had a German-Jewish comedy routine (Springhall 2008: 142-3). Rene’s persona reminded Australians of their Jewish compatriots who were at that time socially invisible to most. So did the ‘Hebrew comedian’ acts of Bert Le Blanc and Gus Franks, amongst other Jewish Americans. Blanc arrived in Australia in 1913 with other comedians as part of the American Burlesque Company and then stayed there, enjoying acclaim during these early years as “one of the country’s foremost comedians” (Djubal 2005: 807-8). Franks toured several times between 1911 and 1931. Franks toured Australia several times between 1911 and 1933.

6. Conclusion

This study has focussed on events of more than ninety years in age. While much has changed since then, some of the cultural landscape is familiar. The nineteenth century American anonymous dialogue gag with a punch line still seems to enjoy path dependency and dominance in the twenty-first century, among Internet jokes for example. Shifman, Levy and Thelwell (2014) employed a sample of one hundred American jokes in English that appeared 3448 times in the other nine most-used languages on the Internet. With some qualifications, they found that “user-generated globalization” spread popular jokes featuring American politics and culture. Only thirty percent incorporated cultural modification or ‘localization’. In line with my argument about Australian and British reactions of the interwar period, Shifman et al found that Americanisation occurred alongside anti-American sentiments (2014: 738). The sample of jokes covered familiar American topics of the past such as consumerism, regional stereotypes and gender differences, including women as financial predators of men, especially during divorce. In one joke, for instance, a father wants to buy his daughter a Barbie doll. He asks the shop assistant why Divorced Barbie is more expensive than all the other Barbies and is told it comes with “Ken’s car, Ken’s house, Ken’s boat, Ken’s furniture, Ken’s computer, one of Ken’s friends, and a keychain made with Ken’s balls” (Shifman et al 2014: 737).

Familiar arguments from the past about the meaning of humour transmission are still to be found. Moreno-Almeida (2021) thought that Shifman overstated the Americanisation and underestimated the opposition to “dominant state discourses”. Moreno-Almeida therefore sided with grassroots activists in Arab countries who used meme jokes as part of a counter-hegemonic challenge to authoritarian regimes. For understandable reasons, however, Moreno-Almeida little realized the cultural debt such Internet activism owes to Americanisation.

The activists of the Arab Spring in 2011 that she celebrates—in addition to the now moribund global justice movement of Zapatistas, World Social Forum and Occupy movements—repeated rhetoric of digital populist protest invented by Americans in the 1980s and 90s (Rolfe 2016). They also used the American creation known as the Internet (Abbate 1999: chapter 5), invented in the Cold War by several American universities and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and funded by the US Department of Defense. Apart from creating the nascent internet known as ARPANET in 1969 and the first email in 1972, these entities bequeathed American global norms of protocols, domain name system, technological standards, networks and governance to the infrastructure that we know today and upon which the software known as World Wide Web relies. The Internet was for David Ellwood “proof of [the] enduring reality” of America’s continuing ability “to transform the history of its successes into recipes for others” (2012: 444-445). While Richard Dawkins conceived the idea of the meme, it was American Mike Godwin, the author of the mocking Godwin’s Law and a lawyer for the American non-profit Electronic Frontier Foundation (which arose as part of the digital populist reaction), who first proposed the internet meme in 1994 in the influential American magazine *Wired* (Godwin 1994).

On this note of *plus ça change* and continuities, Britons and Australians have largely left far behind the ugly blackface minstrelsy and race patriotism that once prevailed in their humour. White Australians have thankfully discovered in recent decades the humour of their indigenous compatriots, who were ignored and excluded because of racism from the considerations of national humour covered in the period under discussion. Yet the complexities of humour and Americanisation remain. In 1986, Australian actor Paul Hogan achieved enduring fame with the film, *Crocodile Dundee* (director, Peter Faiman), earning celebration as a ‘typical Aussie’ with his “laconic” statement about a thug’s flick-knife,

“That’s not a knife – *that’s* a knife”. But the terrifying knife he used in the film was a modified American Bowie type, deliberately created for a type of Australian character in a film that was crafted with American audiences in mind.

In 2018 Hannah Gadsby captured international fame when her show *Nanette* turned a light onto the dark side of stand-up comedy. She has been rightly celebrated as part of the new wave of Australian comedy (BBC News 2019). Yet this was an Australian comedian succeeding with Americans on the American streaming service, Netflix, over the American invention of the Internet and—using insights gathered over her years as a stand-up comedian in Australia—insightfully skewering the American invention of stand-up in the manner of American Dick Gregory in the 1960s.

Behind the comforts of belonging to a nation-state and sharing in its perceived national humour, there is a huge and historic complexity of tensions and transmissions. With that, arguments have sometimes tarried and sometimes raged about national identity, national culture and national humour. While discussions of national humour have often settled on configurations of attitudes that give us a shared sense of belonging, on closer inspection such attitudes and humour prove to be disturbingly insubstantial and historically variable, the result of many influences and inheritances. Different ideas of national humour have involved national stereotypes about one’s own nation and about other nations as well. Yet this is a scholarly view. For the citizenry at large, such communal conversations about national humour are quite legitimate and are part and parcel of the perennial and indispensable discursive recreation of the nation-state and each person’s sense of belonging to it.

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