

Brendan
Lee
AUSTRALIA
DAYS



BOGUE NATION: WALKING WITH BOGANS

Australian national identity was built upon hard masculine foundations, using the harsh nature of the bush to exemplify these character traits. For many, the ANZAC troops were the crystallization of this new identity, celebrated by Russel Ward in *The Australian Legend*, a text examining the predominantly masculine development of 'Australian character'.¹ Even by the 1950s Ward still regarded Australian identity as anti-intellectual and antiauthoritarian, mirroring the 1890s conception of the 'coming man'.² At this point in Australian history it was assumed that Australian identity was set in stone and carved from the traditional values of the shrewd and rangy Australian 'bloke' or, as they were known, 'larrikins'.

In 2011 Australian identity is a many splintered thing with University courses exploring national identity, searching for answers to the elusive question, 'who are we?' However, to the rest of the world, Australia is still viewed through a Steve Irwin/Crocodile Dundee lens because the international media held them up as Australian cultural icons and a symbol of all things Australian. This is so far from the truth of the matter. With cultural diversity, and levels of education and literacy at an all time high, Australia has become a cosmopolitan and highly literate society with Melbourne now named the second city of literature after Edinburgh. However, that said, national identity has been transformed from a recognised and acknowledged social paradigm into an intangible web of possibilities and 'maybes'.

The traditional Aussie of the 70s and 80s has much in common with the conception of 'the coming man';³ an ordinary person, with simple pleasures but a hard working 'battler'⁴, who'll take each blow on the chin and roll with the stubbie holders. Basically, unpretentious and a good 'bloke' or 'Sheila'. However, nobody called them bogans until the mid 80s when the term first gained currency in the surfing magazine *Tracks*. Up until then they'd been Aussie battlers or larrikins,⁵ just regular Joes 'giving it a go', people you wouldn't think twice about. In the late eighties Kylie Mole, a character from The Comedy Company, picked up the term and began using it as a pejorative term. From there it became a way of defining outer suburban culture, in a nut shell, traditional Anglo working-class culture.

Fast forward to present day via Area 7's nineties track *Nobody likes a Bogan*⁶ and you find that the word bogan is used to define/isolate any form of antisocial behaviour and anything deemed to be unsophisticated. Bogan has changed from 'loveable Aussie' to a pejorative term used to oppress and ridicule the lifestyle choices of a lower socio-economic demographic, who live, for the most part in outer suburbs of Melbourne. They have become the object of vilification and ridicule and any representations we see in the media regard them as either simpletons or thugs. Tabloid current affairs programs like, A Current Affair and Today Tonight, air article after article on working class people rorting the system, depicting them as lawless thugs making Melbourne streets unsafe and less, 'liveable',⁷ while on a perpetual quest to defraud social welfare departments like Centrelink.

However, boganality has also made that bold leap onto the catwalk over the last decade, with Bogan Chic gracing our pavements with retro-UGG boots, skinny jeans and the now erstwhile trendy mullet, sported, predominately by private school boys playing out their bogan fantasies. These people are now known as Fauxgans (wealthy middle class people posing as bogans). But with cultural diversity and non-working class people jumping on the bogan band wagon, the term no longer belongs to Bazza and Shazza. The bogan world has expanded, transmogrified into something bigger than Ben Hur downing a slab of tinnies on Australia Day; more culturally diverse than an overdone steak and certainly more complicated than a booze cruise down the main street of Frankston on a balmy Saturday night. Moreover, the average Australian abroad singing so-called bogan anthems like Cold Chisel's *Khe Sahn*⁸ and celebrating with the chant 'Aussie Aussie Aussie Oi Oi Oi', the same chant used during the Cronulla riots. While the media vilify so-called bogans, mainstream culture has embraced it with a sense of ironic pride and perhaps as a guilty pleasure.

So, it's ok to embrace the trappings of boganality but to 'behave like a bogan' has become a cultural taboo, particularly with the advent of Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Robert Doyle's bogan witch hunt. But where is his hunting ground and who are these people? You can't have a witch hunt without a witch. It is my contention that the bogan witch hunt is a backlash against so-called traditional Australian values, usually associated with working-class culture and this backlash is a

result of a sense of national embarrassment at how the rest of the world perceives Australian identity. It's as if, via the media, Australian society is attempting to purge itself of this old identity and the traditional bogan heartlands (outer suburbia) are directly in the firing line. Australia is in a fully fledged state of bogan paranoia, terrified that boganality will infiltrate and contaminate sophisticated Australia, turning lattes into instant coffee and in doing so unleash the full force of the A.A. Phillips' 'cultural cringe'.⁹ If you're to believe the media, bogans are responsible for all the ills in society, transforming Australia Day (26th of January) into an orgy of alcohol abuse, violence and flying the Australian flag as a symbol of defiant racism.

But again, what do we mean when we use the term bogan? Who or what are we talking about? If you look at bogan heartlands like Frankston and Werribee this complicates the matter even further because these demographics are incredibly culturally diverse, transforming the fixed traditional Anglo definitions of boganality forever. When Doyle made his comments about keeping bogans out of the city it wasn't just Anglo Australians who complained, it was Greeks, Lebanese and Vietnamese residents.

There are some cultural commentators who deny the existence of bogans, claiming it is merely a term, used by the media, to isolate anti-social behaviour and lay blame on a faceless demographic to make society feel better.¹⁰ It is my contention that in a culturally diverse society it is safer to blame its problems on a class. The demonization of boganality is just another example of an aged-old class war and the

most expedient method of achieving this is through stereotypical representations in the media. The media has become the arbiter of taste and anti-bogan sentiment sells.

Dr Callum Scott May 2011

Endnotes

1. Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, pg. 55
2. *ibid*, pg. 45
3. Justin Healey, *Australian National Identity*, pg. 56
4. A 'battler' is a person who resides in a predominantly low socio-economic suburb or rural area and struggles on a low income but fights financial adversity with good humour and a pioneering spirit.
5. 'Larrikin' is a moniker bestowed upon a person (usually male) who embraces anti-authoritarian principles and who prefers to deviate from the so-called norms of society. He/she also enjoys mockery and irreverence whenever a situation presents itself. The term gained currency between 1898 and 1905.
6. Area 7, *Nobody likes a Bogan*, Mushroom Records, 2002
7. Depending on which survey or periodical you read, Melbourne, has, for many years now ranked in the top ten most liveable cities in the world and this has become an important factor in constructing tourism marketing strategies and PR campaigns. If this reputation is damaged in any way it could seriously impact on how Tourism Australia targets overseas visitors and impact on annual revenues.
8. Cold Chisel, *Khe Sahn*, WEA, 1978
9. A.A. Phillips, *The Australian Tradition: Essays in Colonial Culture*, pg 23
10. Judith Ireland, *I am bogan, hear me roar*. The Age, 28 June, 2010



ccp.

centre for
contemporary
photography

**Brendan Lee
Australia Days**

17 June – 7 August 2011
Centre for Contemporary Photography
404 George Street
Fitzroy Vic 3065
T +61 3 9417 1549
E info@ccp.org.au
W www.ccp.org.au

© Brendan Lee 2011

ISBN 978-0-9806922-5-9

Brendan would like to thank the following people and organisations for their generous support, The Victorian Government through Arts Victoria, Foster's Group Ltd, DB Panels, Trocadero Artspace, Michael Brennan, Sally Browne, Craig Cole, Mark Courtney, Henry Crofts, Tony Hallam, Anton Jeandet, Nick Kocsis, Andrew McLaughlin, Alex Moscaljuk, Edwin Nicholls, Martin Rees, Tom Rees, Duraan Reid, Dr Callum Scott and Lincoln Scott.

This project is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria.

**ARTS
VICTORIA**



Centre for Contemporary Photography is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria and is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. Centre for Contemporary Photography is supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, state and territory governments. CCP is a member of CAOs Contemporary Arts Organisations of Australia.