

# Reflections on Australia Day

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National anniversaries are supposed to be defining historical and symbolic moments that encourage, amongst others, collective reflection and self-awareness. If there is such a "universally" accepted moment in our national narrative and consciousness Down Under it is not Australia Day, but Anzac Day. Australia Day marks the beginning of the white colonisation of the continent, while Anzac Day is considered to be the beginning of building the Australian national identity through conflict. Regardless of how Australia Day is perceived by most of us, the occasion can still be an opportunity to learn and understand more about the country that shelters the lives, dreams and expectations of millions of people from all walks of life and from different cultures around the world.

An important book that can significantly enhance our understanding of Australia is the 2012 published collection *The Words that Made Australia*. This book, co-edited

by Robert Manne and Chris Feik, and publisher at Black Inc. Books, is an anthology of 30 original intellectual works since Federation that have, one way or another, defined key aspects of the Australian condition.

Author Miles Franklin, the Australian daughter of the Southern Cross and child of the mighty bush; journalist Keith Murdoch, Rupert's father, with his Gallipoli letter to the then Australian Prime Minister Andrew Fisher that laid the foundation for the rise of the Anzac legend; English novelist D.H. Lawrence and his impressions from Australia in the 1920s, are only some of the important thinkers whose influential works are included in this volume.

Landmark works of others such as historian W.H. Hancock's on the mediocrity in Australia; A.A. Phillips' on the 'cultural cringe'; R.W. Menzies' on the forgotten people, namely the middle class of Australia; Donald Horne who coined the term 'lucky country'; social scientist Hugh Stretton's, who talked about Australia as a suburb, and anthropologist W.E. Stanner's who introduced a new way of seeing Aboriginal Australia, are also included.

This collection of works that attempts to define the diachronically fundamental themes of the Australian identity has not been received favourably by the readers or the Australian public.

A Google search will find that only one lengthy review by James Button at *The Monthly* was ever published, and a few months after the publication of the book major bookstores were selling it at almost a third of its original recommended retail price.

However, to know where we are going as a people, we have to know where we have been - *The Words that made Australia is*, in my opinion, one of the most useful tools available to Australians if they wish to comprehend the Australian condition in depth and straight from the 'horse's mouth'. It is a worthy publication that allows you to think long and hard about the past, present and future of this country.

It is also a book that allows you, even with a 'by the way' concluding contribution of a Lebanese Christian immigrant, anthropologist Ghassan Hage, to connect with Australian culture from a non-Anglo point of view by infusing part of the NSW

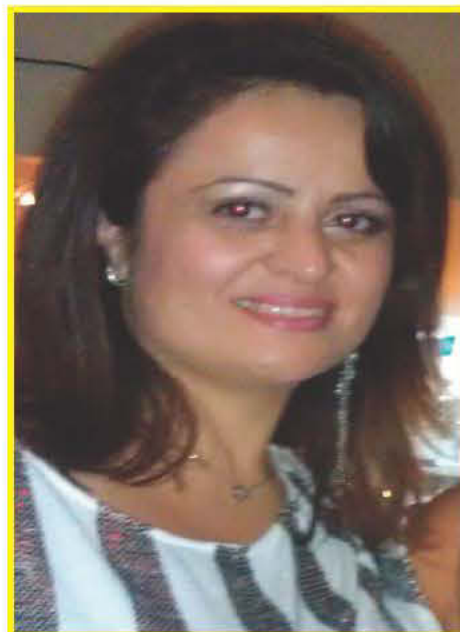
landscape with the fig, olive and pomegranate trees - a legacy of the Mediterranean experience.

In times where long term thinking is not part of the dominant public discourse in the country, this book remains as a useful reminder about the big issues of the past and the importance of moving forward by knowing and by taking into consideration the historical experience.

If Australia is to continue to be an inclusive country and a positive role model, with wealth, liberties and a social welfare net that might cater, even partially, for the needs of the underprivileged, then self-awareness is of the utmost importance.

Self-awareness and self-reflection on a national scale may be the best course of action if we are to salvage whatever we can from the positive aspects of the lucky country...

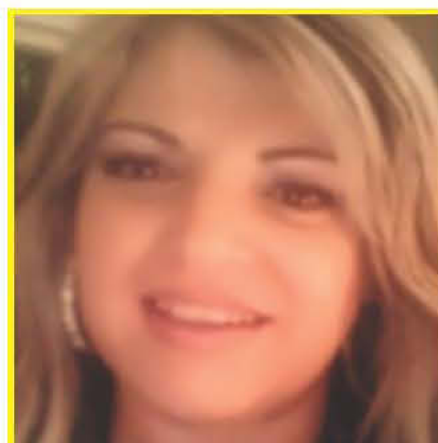
P.S. A slightly different version of this article was first published in *Neos Kosmos English Edition* in January 2014. The photo depicts migrants on board *CASTEL VERDE* departing Trieste, Italy for Australia, back in 1953-1954.



## C-SIDE restaurant

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του παραθαλάσσιου πάρκου  
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