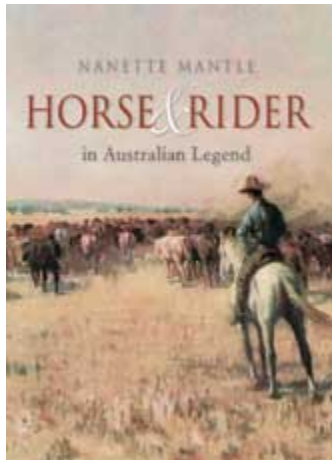


Horse and Rider in Australian Legend by Nanette Mantle. Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2004, pp. 307, \$49.95 hardback, ISBN: 0 522 85089 8.



It is now almost fifty years since Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958) was first published. Ward's account of the emergence and influence of a national type who came to be considered 'the typical Australian' — the noble, wandering bushman of the Australian pastoral industry — was destined to exercise an enormous influence on Australian historiography in the decades that followed. Whole books and journal issues were devoted to the analysis of Ward's study and in the 1970s and 1980s, and many a young historian's career was launched on the back of a critique of his principal claims. Liberals, conservatives, feminists, neo-Marxists, and historians of convicts, labour, race relations and the city, all had their turn. They produced a rich body of historical work that, even when it boldly criticised and claimed to be making a new departure, it also ironically continued to testify to the almost mesmerising influence of Ward's scholarship. The book remains a significant reference point for much historical debate today, perhaps most recently in Judith Brett's influential analysis of the novelty of John Howard's political symbolism and rhetoric.

None of these historians, so far as I am aware, ever thought to ask where all the horses were. In this respect, Nanette Mantle has performed a most useful service and filled a gap in our understanding of the business of national image-making. In fact, horses have been everywhere and nowhere in writing about the bush legend. There is, for instance, no index entry for 'horse' in *The Australian Legend* and although he discussed stockmen engaged in the cattle industry, Ward was primarily concerned with workers who made their living from shearing and other jobs associated with wool-growing. Mantle re-focusses our attention on the significance of the cattle industry, in which horses were essential.

One can't help but feel that historians of Ward's generation, and perhaps the one or two that followed, were so bound by the historical profession's 'human-centred' understanding of the past that they tended habitually to look to human 'types' — convicts, bushrangers, shearers, pioneers, Anzacs, surf lifesavers and so on — when they sought evidence of national image-making. More recently, there has been a greater focus on place and landscape, while Mantle has extended the purview to the animal kingdom — or at least to an alliance of horse and humanity. This neglect of the horse would, I suspect, have been mystifying to colonial Australians, for the horse was ubiquitous in their society.

Mantle's research is formidable although her argument is not always easy to follow, not least because it is sometimes overwhelmed by the richness of her source materials. Where Ward's noble bushmen were a proletarian lot, Mantle places more emphasis on the class ambiguity of figures such as the stockman. The Australian image of horse and rider, she suggests, represented a convergence of '[g]entrified and proletarian cultures' (p. 3). It was never entirely working-class: an employer could be a stockrider. The image also owed much to the elitist English sporting culture of the hunt and to ideas of chivalry associated with the cavalry charge. Mantle believes that, in Australian conditions, the 'hunt' probably became more egalitarian in image and reality, with the aristocratic and elitist aspects being gradually lost. Dress was less formal. Work became conflated with sport, and the 'perils of the hunt and the cavalry charge' came to 'replaced by dangers of the muster' (p. 119). Yet some 'old' values, such as 'courageous horsemanship and male companionship' remained (p. 108). Particularly before the 1880s, in both literary and visual cultures, 'participant artists and writers' (p. 88) were critical: that is, those who wrote about or produced pictures of horses

and riders tended to be riders themselves. The painter S.T. Gill and the poet Adam Lindsay Gordon both played important roles in disseminating an essentially English and socially exclusive culture across the looser class spectrum in Australia. From the 1880s, non-participants were more significant, although ‘Banjo’ Paterson continued the older horseman-poet tradition epitomised by Gordon.

Where Ward had little to say about any British context for his *Australian Legend*, Mantle stresses that the image of horse and rider developed, in large part, as a function of an Australian desire to respond to English interest in the colonies. This supposedly ‘unique Australianness’ (p. 81) emerged under a British gaze. In some cases, the actual source of Australian images of horse and rider was an overseas illustrated journal such as the *Illustrated London News* rather than any colonial product. Yet she rejects Leigh Astbury’s claims concerning the influence of north American sources for Australian visual images of horsemen. Mantle argues that Australian stockman iconography was not necessarily derivative and actually pre-dated cowboy themes from the United States of America.

Mantle, in line with modern scholarship, is also more concerned than Ward with the exclusions that were involved in the process of image-making, especially of women and Aborigines — including Aboriginal women. And where Ward dates what he calls the ‘apotheosis of the nomad tribe’ in the legendary 1890s, Mantle believes the early twentieth century to be more significant in converting the ‘stockman as an employee’ into ‘a major national icon’ (p. 62). She sees both the South African War (1899-1902) and the Great War as having played a critical role in this transformation. Ward, although he gives some attention to the role of the Anzac and digger in embodying legendary characteristics, appears to treat military influences as less significant. They tend to illustrate a process that has already occurred rather than actually playing a major formative role in the making of the legend.

This book is beautifully produced, lavishly illustrated and in the wide variety of evidence — both visual and literary — on which the author draws, it bears comparison with Roslynn D. Haynes’ *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (1998). Yet *Horse and Rider in Australian Legend* might also miss the audience that its author’s massive labour and its publisher’s generous production both deserve. The book began its life as a PhD thesis, and I suspect that many general readers will find some parts of the text hard work. On the other hand, some academic researchers might be looking for a sharper engagement than they will find here with the historical controversies to which this book is a contribution. For all its virtues, and they are many, Mantle’s important book might slip down the crack — or is it now a gulf? — between the interests of the scholar and those of the general reader.

FRANK BONGIORNO
University of New England