



## MIGRANTS' TALES

Barry York looks at the evolution in publication of migrant biographies and autobiographies

It's a cliché to say that Australia is a nation of immigrants. And it's also not entirely accurate. After all, the majority of Australians—about 75 per cent, in fact—were born here, not somewhere else. But the idea of a nation of immigrants is a useful reminder of the extent to which Australian society has been shaped by successive waves of immigration. About 40 per cent of today's Australia has at least one parent who was born overseas. In numerical terms, that's about eight million people.

The last major immigration wave reached our shores during the 25 years after World War II. Between 1947 and 1972, about three million migrants came here. To appreciate the magnitude of the intake, it should be noted that the population in 1947 was 7.5 million.

Who were these people? What motivated them to set out for the other end of the planet? What became of their lives?

The big picture is provided by statistical data. We know they were mostly English people and that there were also big numbers

from Europe: Italy, Greece and Poland. But statistics do not tell us what happened to them as individuals. For this knowledge, we must—and thankfully can—turn to the autobiographical and biographical writings by and about them.

Migrant biographies and autobiographies mainly come from the post-World War II experience. This can be explained by three factors. Firstly, the arrivals of the 1950s and 1960s did not have ahead of them the widespread unemployment and conflicts of the mass intake of the 1920s. For the 1920s 'wave'—which saw more than 300 000 people settle here—the future consisted of economic depression (1929–34) and world war (1939–45). As with the post-war generation, they were mainly working-class people, brought in to fuel economic growth and strengthen national defence. Their struggle to survive superseded any desire to leave for posterity a written record of their lives. For the post-war wave however, though life was still a struggle, most enjoyed relative economic security and fairly comfortable retirement.

Secondly, technological developments since World War II have provided means of publication to a wider range of people than ever before. By 1990, the computer

above left:  
Australian News and  
Information Bureau  
*Migrants Arriving at an  
Australian Port* 1964  
b&w photograph  
16.4 x 21.6 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3146421

above right:  
Two works from the National  
Library's holding of 1960s  
migrant biographies



above:  
Frederick Grosse (1828–1894)  
*Emigrants Landing at the Queen's Wharf, Melbourne*  
c.1860  
wood engraving; 16.4 x 25.3 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an7497113

below left:  
Title page from *A Settler's 35 Years' Experience in Victoria, Australia: and How £6 8s became £8,000, with Advice to Settlers* by Edward Hulme (Melbourne: M.L. Hutchinson, c.1891)

below right:  
Title page from *A Brief Sketch of the Long and Varied Career of Marshall MacDermott, Esq., J.P. of Adelaide, South Australia* by Marshall MacDermott (Adelaide: William Kyffin Thomas, Printer, 1874)

revolution had placed before unprecedented numbers of Australians the possibility of self-publishing. Concomitant with this phenomenon was the advent of 'vanity publishing', whereby authors and their families sponsored businesses to publish their work. Migrants of the post-war period were now retiring from work and were able to put pen to paper. The popularity of oral history since the 1980s is also a factor as, in some instances, the migrant's reminiscences were recorded by others and then transcribed and reworked into appropriate text. The process was, and still is, cathartic for many.

The third factor in the rise of migrant biographies and autobiographies was the ascendancy of the official policy of multiculturalism. This policy emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s and became institutionalised in the late 1970s and early

1980s. The 'multicultural' ethos, which accepted that cultural difference ought to be recognised and celebrated, offered enormous impetus to people of migrant background, especially those of non-English-speaking origin, to share their life experiences with everybody else.

The National Library of Australia holds more than 250 books in the Australian 'migrant biography/autobiography' genre. They may be found by browsing the subjects 'Immigrants Biography Australia', and by state and territory (such as searching 'Immigrants New South Wales Biography') on the Library's online catalogue. I located a dozen such works via the search 'Refugees Australia Biography'. Approximately half of the 250 books were published in the 1990s, and more than a third have been published since 2000. The rest, less than ten per cent, were mostly published in the 1980s. A handful appeared in the years before official multiculturalism. Two important works, to be discussed later, were published in the 1960s.

The great majority of the 250 books were self-published or published through 'vanity' businesses. As such, their print-runs tended to be small, which makes the Library's interest in them all the more important.

Some of the biographies and autobiographies were published in the individual's first language, but the great majority are in English and written for current and future generations in this country, rather than for a particular ethnic community or for a readership in the homeland.

About 30 national and ethnic groups are represented in the books. Jews are the principal writers of migrant biographies and autobiographies, accounting for about a third of the total. They are followed by the British (including specific Scots, Welsh and English works), Germans, Italians, Chinese and Poles, each group of which has published at least 20 books in the genre. The Dutch, Greeks, Hungarians, Irish and Russians are also well represented. Fewer contributions come from the smaller communities: Afghan, Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Finn, Latvian, Maltese, Norwegian, Slovak, Sri Lankan, Swiss, Syrian, Ukrainian, Vietnamese and Yugoslav.

The earliest titles to show up under the search 'Immigrants Biography Australia' were published in the nineteenth century.



They are: Marshall MacDermott's *Brief Sketch of the Long and Varied Career of Marshall MacDermott, Esq., JP, of Adelaide, South Australia*, which was published in 1874 by William Kyffin Thomas of Adelaide; and Edward Hulme's *A Settler's 35 Years' Experience in Victoria, Australia: and How £6/8s became £8,000*, which was published by M.L. Hutchinson in Melbourne in 1891.

There's quite a jump from that era to the 1960s, when the next books in the genre in the Library's collection were published. In 1960, *Kato apo xenous ouranous (Beneath Foreign Skies)*, by Alekou Doukas, was published by Australian Greek Publications Pty. Ltd in Melbourne; and, in 1963, *A Migrant's Story*, by Oswald Bonutto, was published by H. Pole & Co. in Brisbane. Doukas and Bonutto are pioneers of migrant autobiography in Australia. Doukas (1900–1962), who came here in 1927, was also the subject of a biography by Dimitri Tzoumakas, *The Life of the Leftist Melbourne Writer, Alexis Doukas*, (National Centre for Hellenic Studies, Melbourne, 2002). Bonutto came to Australia from Italy in 1924. His book was reprinted by the University of Queensland Press in 1994.

The migrant genre really established itself in the 1980s, when 21 books were published. By the mid-1980s, many post-war migrants were approaching their sixties and seventies. Their initial struggle to settle had been accomplished and they could reflect on their



lives, often with the encouragement of their children, who were now in their thirties and forties.

Such efforts were assisted in the years leading to the 1988 Bicentenary, when the multicultural theme was vigorously promoted. During these years, histories of several ethnic communities were researched for the first time.

In the 1980s, several disparate writers took the risk of researching, writing and, in the main, self-publishing, in a genre

above:  
Douglass Baglin (b.1926)  
*British Migrants First Look at Sydney* 1968  
negative; 9.5 x 12.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3311942

below:  
A selection of the Library's  
holding of the many migrant  
biographies published in the  
1980s



that was barely recognised as such. Their names and their works are worthy of listing (in order of publication): Betty Preston (*Destination Australia*, 1980), Toivo Rautio (*Se oli sittenkin totta*, 1981), Christiane Meder (*History and Recollections of an Immigrant Family*, 1984), Maryanne Sanders (*Vietnamese Refugee: One Man's Story*, 1985), Zon Darveniza (*Australian Saga*, 1986), Richard Seligman (*Memoirs*, 1986), Henry S. Burge (*Northcliffe Experience: An Autobiography*, 1987), Edward Duyker (*Beyond the Dunes*, 1987), Norman Mosen (*One of the Likely Lads*, 1987), Anna Elisabeth Aliukonis (*Migrating: My Own Story*, 1988), James Dixon (*Going Bush: A Yorkshireman Settles in Australia*, 1988), Leslyanne Hawthorne (*Making It in Australia*, 1988), Lolo Houbein (*Vreemdeling in de spiegel: autobiografie van een Nederlandse emigrante*, 1988), Jay Leonard (*Some Call Him Caesar*, 1988), Olgerts Mieztis (*Survival, an Autobiography*, 1988), Felix Pisarewski-Parry (*Life in Three Dimensions*, 1988), R.A. Baggio (*Shoe in My Cheese: An Immigrant Family Experience*, 1989), Rocky Gattellari (*Rocky Road*, 1989), Mark Moshinsky (*Mietek Gringlas: A Biography*, 1989), Dave Towler (*Look Mum, I Can Speak Australian!*, 1989) and Barry York (*Josephine Zammit MBE: A Maltese Woman in Australia*, 1989).

Dutch, English, Finnish, German, Greek, Italian, Jewish, Latvian, Maltese, Polish, Vietnamese and Yugoslav experience is represented in these 'first wave' migrant

biographies and autobiographies. Nearly all were self-published, though Baggio's book was published by the Department of Humanities at Footscray Institute of Technology in Melbourne. Only boxer Rocky Gattellari's autobiography attracted a mainstream publisher. Five among the 1980s group, however, went on to further successes as writers: Edward Duyker, Leslyanne Hawthorne, Lolo Houbein, Dave Towler and Barry York.

During the 1990s, self-publishing remained the main source of book production in the genre, but greater respectability came with titles taken on by larger mainstream companies such as Hale & Iremonger, HarperCollins, Lothian, and Text Publishing, and smaller presses such as Five Mile Press, Kangaroo Press, and Ginninderra Press. Loretta Baldassar's *Visits Home* (MUP, 2001), Raimond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father* (Text, London, 1998), Peter Skrzynecki's *Sparrow Garden* (UQP, 2004) and Arnold Zable's *The Fig Tree* (Text, Melbourne, 2004) won critical acclaim and literary awards. University-based presses have also been important, especially Melbourne University Press, UNSW Press and the University of Queensland Press. The Centre for Immigration and Multicultural Studies at The Australian National University (Canberra) and the Makor Jewish Community Library in South Caulfield (Melbourne) have also both made notable contributions.

The rate of publication of new titles of migrant biography and autobiography in the new century strongly suggests that the post-war generation is far from exhausted in the field, and the National Library can expect new titles at an accelerating rate. An increase in biographical writing about the Indo-Chinese refugee groups that settled here between the late 1970s and 1980s may also be anticipated.

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below left:  
Cover of Peter Skrzynecki's *The Sparrow Garden* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004)

below right:  
Cover of Loretta Baldassar's *Visits Home: Migrant Experiences between Italy and Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001)

