



historycouncilnsw

The Popular is Political

Struggles over national culture in 1970s Australia

History Council of NSW Annual History Lecture delivered by Associate Professor Michelle Arrow

When: 6-9pm, Tuesday 5 September 2017

Where: The Mint, 10 Macquarie Street, Sydney

[BOOK ONLINE](#)

Full abstract

The 1970s in Australia is remembered as a decade of protest and rapid social change. Women, Indigenous people, lesbians, gays, and migrants all made demands for equality, national recognition, and a rewriting of Australian history that took their experiences into account. At the same time, Australia's shift away from Great Britain and the election of Gough Whitlam saw the advent of the 'new nationalism'. In cultural terms, this translated into the scrutinising and celebration of Australian masculinity through characters like Barry McKenzie and the men of Don's Party. A few years later, television programs like The Paul Hogan Show and Kingswood Country brought the ocker into the Australian living rooms, while bands like AC/DC and Skyhooks provided a cheeky ocker soundtrack. The expansion of our film and television industries in the 1970s enhanced their significance in Australian cultural life. Contemporary life was viewed through genres like the cop show, the sitcom and the soap opera, while historical films and television mini-series became an increasingly popular – and celebrated - way for Australians to understand their nation's past and identity.

While the women's movement's challenge to Australian norms and institutions is well-known, the cultural dimensions of this struggle are less familiar. How might Australia's decade of contest over gender relations look through the lens of popular culture? Women tended to occupy limited, stereotypical positions on television, which drew sharp feminist criticism. Feminist films like *Caddie* (1976) and *My Brilliant Career* (1979) recovered stories of white Australian women from historical obscurity. Yet most historical films continued to place white men at the centre of their nation-shaping narratives, a tendency that reached its zenith with Peter Weir's *Gallipoli* in 1981.

Historian Marilyn Lake famously characterised the emergence of the bushman as a 'national type' in the 1890s not as the mere product of nationalist sentiment, but as the result of a contest between men and women for 'control of the national culture'. In this lecture I will suggest that we can see a similar contest unfolding in the popular culture of the 1970s. How did popular culture make sense of the social change of the seventies? Was the popularity of the ocker a reaction to the feminist challenge to male dominance in Australia? And how did popular histories on film and television contribute to this cultural contest?

The Annual History Lecture is proudly presented by the History Council of NSW and supported by Arts NSW, Sydney Living Museums and De Bortoli Wines. Find out more or book tickets at <http://bit.ly/AHL2017> or contact us at admin@historycouncilnsw.org.au.