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“Frank Clune Discovers and then Disowns Asia”

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Australian literature, Australian history, Asia literacy, Decolonisation

Abstract

Australia's attempts to achieve a better understanding of Asia have a longer history than is often acknowledged. In the late nineteenth century there were various speculations about what the rise of Asia might mean for Australia. The first appointment to a Chair of Oriental Studies dates from 1917, with the appointment of the Japan specialist, James Murdoch, to the University of Sydney at Duntroon. Murdoch's successor was also a Japan specialist. Among those tempted to learn Japanese in the hope of discovering new opportunities in Asia was a returned soldier and restless spirit, Frank Clune. Clune soon discovered that learning Japanese was no easy task. He began a career as an author of popular histories and racy travelogues. While he abandoned his language studies he retained his interest in Asia.

Clune's first book on Asia, *Sky High to Shanghai*, appeared in 1939. In the same year Australia's new Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, in his first radio broadcast as PM noted that was the 'Far East' for Britain was the 'Near North' for Australia. There was a growing awareness that Australia's proximity to Asia had profound implications for Australia's future. Over the next twenty years Clune wrote seven books with Asian themes. Having proclaimed himself as the nation's guide to Asia in the late 1930s he abandoned Asia as a theme in the late 1950s. What happened?

In the 1930s, Clune took the view that the Australian nation had moved beyond the pioneering phase of its development. He saw the bracing challenges of settling a new continent as the foundation stone of the nation. The adventurous spirit of the Australian people, he maintained, had been established on the hard, but character-building frontier. Through the twentieth century the softening comforts of city living posed a threat, in Clune's view, to the nation. New challenges were needed if the Australian nation was to re-invent itself. Clune saw Asia as a new frontier for the renewal of the Australian spirit. Asia also had an important role to play in making this possible. It would play host to Australians for whom Asia would serve as a compliant domain for the dominant 'white man'. In his early stories, Clune was cheerfully ironic about the role of the white man in the East. He did not want to give dominance a bad name by being too humourless about it, too British. His was an Australian project.

When Clune embarked upon his Asia adventure in the 1930s there was little talk of decolonisation. By the

late 1940s the decolonisation of Asia was in full swing. Asia was no longer the compliant, region Clune had envisaged. Decolonisation killed Clune's Asia.

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David Walker is the inaugural BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies at Peking University. He is a leading cultural historian with a special interest in the history of Australian representations of Asia. His influential book, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia, 1850 to 1939* (UQP, 1999) won the Ernest Scott prize for history. *Anxious Nation* has been translated into Chinese (China Renmin University Press, 2009) and an Indian edition was published in the same year. He is co-editor with Agnieszka Sobocinska of *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century*, (UWA Publishing, 2012). Asian themes also appear in his recent book *Not Dark Yet: a personal history* (Giramondo publishing, 2011). *Not Dark Yet* has been translated into Chinese by Professor Li Yao and published by the People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing (2014). Professor Walker is also a Visiting Professor in the School of Foreign Studies, Renmin University of China, Beijing and is Alfred Deakin Professor of Australian Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne. He is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia and the Australian Academy of the Humanities.