Fear, Security and the Other: Competing Conceptions of India in the Australian Colonial Imagination

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of Australian national identity in the context of its external imperial relations with India. The first section discusses the theoretical approaches taken in international relations (IR) to state formation and state identity. The second examines Australia’s perception of India through analysis of the negotiations between Brisbane and Calcutta and the debate within Australia on where and if Indian indentured labour should be utilized. It concludes by examining the effect of the Indian connection on the formation of Australian identity. It will be argued that the ambivalent position of India in Australian thought helped to inform the production of Australian identity as conceptually ‘white’, an identity that has had a lasting effect on what is perceived as possible in Australian foreign policy and Indo-Australian relations.

Introduction: Australia’s National Identity in Foreign Policy

Australia occupies an ambivalent space in the world: a predominantly white, western nation geographically located on the periphery of Asia. This has been termed by John Howard, among others, as a conflict between history and geography. Howard has rejected this as a false choice when discussing Australia’s position between the US and China. Prior to Howard’s era, Gareth Evans and Paul Keating attempted to shift Australia’s international focus away from distant, great and

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powerful friends to further engagement with its region.³ The discursive emphasis was shifted back by Howard, who wished to be ‘deputy sheriff’ of the US.⁴ The subject has been debated more broadly within Australia over the past few decades – whether Asia represents a threat or an opportunity.⁵

Fear of Asia, however, is not by any means new. Australia’s position in Asia has been discussed throughout Australian history, and has been expressed until comparatively recently through colonial ideology, rather than foreign policy. Australia’s security policy presents a dilemma for mainstream IR theories of neorealism and neoliberalism. Australia has traditionally sought security from special relationships with ‘great and powerful’ friends: a result of its vast territory and small population and a fear of invasion from states in its region. Ignoring the importance of the fact that Australia feels a shared identity with the UK and the US makes little sense - why would the UK and the US care for Australia’s security any more than the great powers of Asia? The answer for neoliberal theorists might be shared democratic values, rather than shared identity. Why, then, is India not even considered a possible ‘great and powerful’ friend?⁶ India, instead, has been ‘rediscovered’ repeatedly by Australian politicians, without sustained success.⁷

This leads us to examine constructivist approaches to IR. Identities dictate what is considered ‘possible’ in foreign policy. What makes Australia’s region a ‘threat’ and the great global powers of the day ‘friends’? Why not pick a special relationship with a power in the region, which might make more strategic sense? Why not India, China or Indonesia? What is it about these states that make them not considered as possible special relationships? If Australia cannot trust any other state’s

motivations, as neorealist theory suggests, why continuously ally with culturally western, white states, over the powerful states in Asia? Why are they threatening when the US and UK are less so?

Anthony Burke’s *In Fear of Security* outlines the position of ‘security’ in Australian national discourse. The psychology of Australian settlement needs emphasis here: Australia as a vast ‘empty’ island continent, situated geographically within touching distance of ‘overpopulated’ Asia.  David Walker has examined the fear of Asia in Australia, as it grew from disparate colonies to a united nation-state. Srdjan Vucetic outlines the shared ‘closeness’ felt towards the UK and the US, rather than the negative fear felt towards Asia. Thus, for Vucetic, the answer also lies in a shared identity that is inherently racialized: the ‘Anglosphere’. Vucetic argues that this shared identity felt between the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand is derived from a white Anglo-Saxon identity that arose through the 19th and the early 20th century. This identity has shifted from one that is explicitly racialized to one that is explicitly anti-racist. It still exists in the foreign policy sense, as seen in the US-UK ‘special relationship’ and Australia’s support for the ANZUS treaty. For Australian identity, Burke and Vucetic constitute the same argument in different ways: the trust for the UK and the US on one hand and the fear of Asia on the other.

‘Traditional’, for want of a better term, conceptions of Australian identity and Australia’s colonial past emphasise a masculine Anglo-Saxon Australia. Colonial, 19th century identities of Australia have been discussed from several perspectives. John Hirst has focused on pioneer narratives of pastoralists and farmers, suggesting that they ‘built’ the ‘nation’. Geoffrey Partington has focused on shared ‘Britishness’ as creating the national character. Russel Ward accounts for the ‘typical’ Australian through narratives of the independent, loyal, courageous bushman. Within these accounts, the stereotyped Australian is a rugged male living off the land, and little or

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11 Ibid.
no agency of ‘Australianness’ is given to aboriginals or women.15 These approaches have been critiqued effectively by Richard White, arguing that all are invented, and reflective of the hopes, fears and ideologies of their inventor: there is no ‘authentic’ Australian.16

Within Australian Foreign policy discourse, there remains a sense that ‘we’ can trust those who are most like ‘us’: the ‘great and powerful friends’, the UK and the US.17 The pioneer narratives discussed are the very early genesis of this approach. Inherent in viewing the US and the UK as more trustworthy than the states in Australia’s region is the idea the major powers in Asia (India, China, Indonesia) are less trustworthy. Thus, within elements of Australian policy, racialized identities have had lasting impacts on the policy options which Australia perceives as the best way to provide for security.

Thus, foreign policy positions are underpinned by national identity, which is in turn underpinned by historical experience. These can be analysed through discourses of national identity: stories states tell themselves about who they are and what they should be. Analysis of the history of these narratives can show us where they came from and enable us to better understand how they continue to play out in the present. This allows for far deeper understanding of Australia’s perceived place in the world than a purely positivist, ‘scientific’ approach to material concerns. This paper seeks to examine just one small aspect of Australian history: the attempt by the Australian colonies to use indentured labourers from India. It has three specific goals: to examine how Australian identity was shaped through the Indian connection, to argue that Australian discourse on India reveals ambivalence in Australian colonial identity, though racialized fear was ultimately dominant and to begin to examine how colonial / postcolonial ideational issues affect contemporary Indo-Australian relations and the culture of Australian foreign policy.

17 This has varied in emphasis over the course of different governments. For a discussion of ‘traditionalism’ in Australian foreign policy, see M. Wesley and T. Warren, ‘Wild Colonial Ploys? Currents of Thought in Australian Foreign Policy’, Australian Journal of Political Science 35, 1, p. 9.
Traditional IR theories have broadly ignored the relations between colonies as outside of the scope of analysis. IR was/is based on the Westphalian state system, which did not cover the entirety of the globe until decolonization gathered pace in the 1960s. Where does this leave colonial histories in international relations? The answer, for many mainstream theorists, is nowhere. Neorealism and neoliberal approaches offer little by way of explanatory power for this period. Darby and Paolini first noted in 1994 that, within IR, prior to decolonization ‘...Asia, Africa and other non-European territories were seen to be outside the civilized world... Hence, imperial relations were not international relations.’ Colonial societies were not modern states as they did not hold their own sovereignty. The goal here, however, is not to view the Indian government as its own state, but how in dealing the Anglo-Indian government, the Australian colonies were connected to India, and how this impacted on the Australian colonies gradual formation of their own ‘Australian’ identity within the geographical context of Asia.

Conventional, or ‘Wendtian’ constructivism, though allowing weight to identities as informing actors’ decisions, closes off the forming of identities as part of its analysis. Alexander Wendt has argued that a ‘theory of the states system need no more explain the existence of states than one of society need explain that of people’. Maja Zehfuss has performed a thorough critique of Wendt’s theoretical work on identity, arguing state identities are more complex, contradictory and unstable that Wendt’s approach allows. Here, I argue against Wendt’s approach. In the case of Australia, ‘pre-state’ identity was formed through experience of its external relations and perception of other colonial societies it came into contact with. It was impacted upon by two things in particular: colonial ideologies (which can be read as forming the dominant structure of the world at the time) and external Others.

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External ‘Threats’ and Identity Formation

While imperial relations have broadly been ‘beyond the pale’ in IR, critical identity studies rooted in historical analysis of nationalist narratives have become more common. David Campbell has performed analysis of identity formation in the US, arguing that with regard to the United States’ conception of security, it is based on Others being perceived as threatening or friendly. In doing so, he articulates the theoretical point that a state’s identity shapes which groups it perceives as threatening. Security then is dependent upon which peoples it fictitiously considers Other.²² A state’s perception of security is dependent on discourses of ‘danger’ which emanate from its identity. The classic example in IR comes from Wendt: that arms proliferation in the US holds different meaning for Canada than it does for Cuba.²³

However, if we accept each state as having a unique and malleable identity which shifts in relation to its position in the international system, then historical processes of identity formation can reveal temporally deeper questions of identity. Here we can borrow, as other critical constructivist scholars have, from Derrida’s argument that identities are formed at least partly on the basis of threatening Others.²⁴ This refers primarily to the internal Other, such as the homosexuals, women, the homeless or racial minorities. For understanding the effect of identity on state action, however, perceptions of the external Other and its position in nationalist discourse are useful methods of analysis. An identity in a group of people is based on what they have in common, it is therefore inherently also based on difference to other groups. Asserting another group’s difference constructs the Self. Likewise, asserting the Self constructs the Other. A positive identity speech act (‘we are...’) does not necessarily imply a negative function, but as Campbell suggests ‘...it has historically more often than not been the case.’²⁵

Each state in international politics, then, is formed on the basis of some form of Othering – with citizens on the inside, and non-citizens outside. Amongst all the Others, some are perceived as safe (US and UK) and some considered threats. Who is a friend and who is a threat is dependent also on the historical formation of identities. Within Australia, the obvious Other in the formation of a new, Australian ‘white’ identity were the internal aboriginal peoples. However, once we consider recent advances in the historical conception of colonial networks, external Others become closer than previously suggested, and can be viewed as impacting on Australia’s perception of its place in the colonial experience and by extension, the world.

Between Geography and which History? The Historiography of Colonial Networks

Recent historical research has examined India’s centrality as a hub to the British empire. Christopher Bayly, Thomas Metcalf, Robert Blyth and Tony Ballantyne have shown the importance of India to the British empire as a ‘hub’, projecting power, goods and people around the empire.\(^{26}\) India’s network flourished after the Indian Rebellion and faded after World War One.\(^{27}\) Ballantyne has clarified the recentring of the empire by arguing for a different conception of the British empire. He writes that the empire had previously been viewed as a ‘hub and spoke’ system in which London was the ‘hub’ and various colonies were ‘spokes’.\(^{28}\) He describes the empire as a complicated web, consisting of ‘horizontal filaments that run among various colonies in addition to “vertical” connections between the metropole and individual colonies’. India was a sub-imperial centre in its own right.\(^{29}\) Metcalf takes this approach and expands upon India’s role within it. He emphasizes the sub-imperial role of India within this system, writing that ‘if not quite a “spider”


\(^{27}\) Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*, pp. 1-6, 204-221; Blyth, *Empire of the Raj*, pp. 2-8.

\(^{28}\) T. Ballantyne, ‘Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia’, in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and Through the Nation* (Durham, 2003), pp. 112-3.
sitting at the heart of the web, India is... more than just one of the many colonial “knots” that may be said to constitute that web’. 30 It has often been noted that Australia relied on India’s shipping in its earliest years to survive. 31 However, the connections between India and Australia ran far deeper and longer than just these early food shipments – they continued as Australian identity was shaped. 32 These connections allow the opportunity to study Australian perceptions of Self through the colonies’ dealings with India, rather than just the more obvious connection with London, and how this affected the formation of Australian identity.

Australia’s relationship with India is an ideal case study for how the external Other in Australian thought defined at this very early stage how Australia began to see its role in the world. Analysis of Australia’s relationship with India, then, can begin to show us how and why Australia’s national identity was formed as conceptually ‘white’. Fear in Australian society of the Other has mostly been discussed in scholarship with regard to China and Chinese emigration. 33 India, as the colonial ‘hub’, was never likely to invade in the military sense, but India’s place in the empire created the possibility of Indians emigrating to Australia as labourers, as had occurred in other British colonies. Through these connections, we can also view Australia’s perception of India’s place in the empire, as an example of the colonial Other. India’s position in the Australian imagination reveals the early political, cultural and discursive space in which Australian identity was formed, providing historical and theoretical insight into Australia’s contemporary identity, which in turn defines contemporary discourses of Australian foreign policy.


33 Andrew Markus, Fear and Hatred: Purifying Australia and California, 1850-1901 (Sydney, 1979).
Debate on ‘coolie’ labour centred on whether Indian labourers should be allowed in the far north of the country, or not all. Indian indentured labour had previously only been allowed into colonies with primarily indigenous populations such as Fiji, Guyana and Natal. This took place in the context of a broader debate: was Australia ‘of Europe’ or ‘of Asia’? This debate can therefore be regarded as a pretext of contemporary debates on Australian identity. To what extent was proximity to Asia a threat or an opportunity? The Othering of far away, potential, Indian labourers reveals Australian national identity being formed conceptually as ‘white’, while fitting into wider 19th century notions of racial hierarchy. Examination of this formative period of Australian identity reveals how the separate but connected states of the British empire affected the development of one another’s international identity.

**Indian Indentured in Australia and the Empire**

Some Indians did come to Australia as labourers. My concern, however, is with external influence of India and how it was perceived. Only a small number of Indians were allowed into Australia prior to 1901. From approximately 1862 to 1901, the possibility of allowing large numbers of Indian indentured labourers was debated heavily at the governmental level.\(^{34}\) Though South Australia also considered the use of Indian labour, I will focus here on Queensland’s efforts in the 1880s.\(^{35}\) The Queensland Indian Coolie Act of 1862 facilitated the immigration of Indian labour to work in northwest Queensland on cotton and sugar cane plantations. The act was ‘extended’ in 1882 and repealed in 1886 without any migration ever taking place.\(^{36}\) There was a considerable backlash against the prospect of Indian migration, resulting in these acts being repealed in 1886.

There have been extensive studies of the mechanics of Indian indentured labour and their experiences, the most influential of which is Hugh Tinker’s *A New System of Slavery*. Tinker eloquently shows how the indentured labour system came to prominence after the end of the slave trade, and the appalling conditions to which

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\(^{35}\) I have made this cut largely due to the space constraints on a conference paper. For discussion inclusive of South Australia’s attempts to hire Indian labourers, see Davis, ‘Sibling Rivalry’, pp. 100-133.

coolies were subjected. Approximately 1.3 million Indians migrated as labourers around the empire. 500,000 went to Mauritius, over 400,000 in the British West Indies, 150,000 to Natal and 60,000 to Fiji. On top of this, 4.25 million Indians went to Burma, Malaya and Ceylon. The huge numbers of Indian labourers that were transported around the empire gave weight to the idea that Indian labour might be used in Australia, particularly when Fiji took on such labourers in 1880. Geography also added to this belief: Indian labourers were regarded as appropriate for certain a type of labour in tropical regions, and Australia’s north was regarded as tropical.

**Coolie Labour for Queensland: For and Against**

Queensland began dealing with the Indian government over a renewed plan to use Indian labour in the 1880s. Proposed regulations were sent in early 1882, which were then amended by India, but were ultimately not acceptable to the Queensland government. The legislation was delayed for a further three years by a dispute over Queensland’s desire for the Indian labourers to be forced home after their period of indenture. There were two points that the Queensland government was uncomfortable with. First, Queensland did not wish to pay the salary of the Chief Protector because the person in this role was to be chosen by India. Their second, and major concern, was changing the regulations to prevent Indian labourers from staying in Queensland at the end of their indenture.

Thomas McIlwraith, the premier at the time, emphasized the government’s concerns over Indians staying in Queensland. He argued privately in negotiations

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41 McIlwraith to Buck, 21 June, 1882, in L/PJ/6/12/567 in India Office Records (hereafter IOR).
with Calcutta that the regulations had neglected to prevent Indians labourers who had finished their period of indenture from working outside of tropical and semi-tropical areas. Essentially, the Queensland government was trying to ensure that no Indians could become free to work within the colony as white inhabitants would. This perspective is confirmed later when this request was disputed by India. McIlwraith wrote:

In making the amendments to which your Government has taken exception, this government was influenced solely by the desire to confine these labourers to tropical and semi-tropical agriculture... by compelling them to return to India at the expiration of their engagements... and thereby prevent them from mixing with the European population in the several towns in the colony.43

Clearly, McIlwraith was concerned about Indians becoming a permanent part of the Queensland population, by referring to ‘mixing with the European population’. This was further clarified when in the second letter he wrote of his concerns about the Indians staying in the colony, stating that ‘…you will at once see how necessary it is to guard against the indiscriminate employment of this labour by other than those for whose particular benefit it is to be introduced.’44 ‘Indiscriminate employment’, an extremely unusual term, implies that the Queensland government was concerned about Indians becoming a part of the Queensland population.45 If the Indian labourers could not be sent home immediately, they would surely become a permanent feature of North Queensland.

In 1883 Indian labour became a divisive electoral issue. McIlwraith was challenged by Samuel Griffith, leader of Liberal party. McIlwraith supported Indian labour on the condition that the labourers were confined to tropical agriculture and had no choice but to leave the colony after the term of their indenture. Griffith was opposed to all coloured labour in the Queensland, but particularly Indian.

43 McIlwraith to Buck, 21 June, 1882, in L/PJ/6/12/567, in IOR.
44 Ibid.
45 McIlwraith to Buck, 6 May, 1883, in L/PJ/6/69/455, in IOR.
One Liberal party candidate for North Brisbane, William Brookes, was concerned that Indian labourers might bring diseases such as measles, smallpox and cholera to Queensland. Disease, however, did not scare him as much as the Indians themselves, stating that ‘If all their terrible epidemics were to come together they would not constitute so a terrible calamity to Queensland as the permanent establishment within our territory of coloured labour’.\textsuperscript{46} This particularly vitriolic comment against Indian labour was met with applause.\textsuperscript{47} He went on to state that death from these diseases would be preferable to living with Indian labour, as the coolies would take any job for less pay, leaving the white colonists with no choice but to return home.\textsuperscript{48}

Griffith also made public speeches in opposition to Indian labour, raising his fears that the employer of Indian labourers might die or become insolvent and that there would be 20,000 coolies ‘wandering about’, unable to feed themselves or work.\textsuperscript{49} Were this scenario to occur, the government (civilized as it was) would have no choice but to pay to feed them. In this speech, starvation is portrayed as natural and common to Indian people, as Griffith notes the likelihood of this scenario, because, ‘in one province of India alone three million of them died from famine lately’.\textsuperscript{50} Griffith played the ‘jobs’ card as well – raising another fear that Indian labourers might take the jobs of white labourers. Griffith and Brookes may have been playing to the crowd in these cases, overstating their cases to appeal to their supporters. These public speeches were, after all, campaign events. The Othering of Indian labourers is reflective of an identity forming in Queensland that was inherently white, exclusionary. Taking Campbell’s approach, we can argue that in Othering one group, a politician implicitly presents ‘sameness’ to the crowd they are addressing.\textsuperscript{51} Griffith and Brookes make the possible Indian labourers a mob, an indistinguishable mass of 20,000: aimlessly wandering northern Queensland, destroying civilization, taking ‘our’ jobs, riddled with disease, infecting white workers, stealing ‘our’ young girls, unable to feed themselves, draining state resources – parasitic on the state of

\textsuperscript{46} The Brisbane Courier (Qld: 1864-1933), Saturday 18 August, 1883, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{49} The Queenslander (Qld: 1866-1939) Saturday 18 August 1883, pp. 34-36
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Campbell, Writing Security, p. 99.
Queensland. These statements create, reinforce and sustain identity through the function of creating a security threat. ‘They’ are what ‘we’ are not. 52

Fearmongering may be an easy and well established way to whip up support from a crowd, but it cannot work unless the fears are already there in some form. The citizens of Queensland already had an identity, but the political and social climate of the time, through colonial ideology, made them ready to hear these words of Griffith and Brookes. India in Australia’s external relations occupied the space of a threat, as well as that of a colonial partner. The imperial connection drew Indian people ‘closer’ to Australian thought. The paternalism and the stereotyping of Indians of these statements were not unusual for the time in the context of colonial ideology. They would be a burden that the Queensland people would have to carry. Queensland, though, did not have to bear this ‘white man’s burden’ if they did not wish to. Brookes and Griffith empowered the Queensland electors with the choice to say ‘no’.

Of course, the debate was not completely one sided: McIlwraith put his case forcefully as well, albeit without winning the support of the majority of the voting public. When addressing the issue in a town hall meeting he began by attacking the populism of Griffith, stating that ‘popularity hunting politicians... have always found a strong point in starting bad feeling between the races’. 53 He countered Griffith’s argument that Indians would take away ‘white jobs’ by pointing out that no white men would want to work in the sugar plantations. Gilbert Smith wrote to the Brisbane Courier to write of his experiences in India with Indian labour. He assuaged fears by writing that Indians were hard-working, steady and would have no desire to mix with the white population. 54

In private, however, as was discussed above, McIlwraith ensured that Indian labourers would be forced to leave after their term of indenture. McIlwraith ultimately wanted to hire the Indian labourers, pay them little, confine them to the tropics and remove them immediately following their contract: thus aiding the sugar growers without permanent settlement. The argument between McIlwraith and Griffith was

52 Ibid., p. 100.
53 The Brisbane Courier (Qld:1864-1933), Wednesday 8 August, pp. 4-5.
54 The Brisbane Courier (Qld:1864-1933) Tuesday 3 July 1883, p. 3.
conducted within the discourse of colonial racial ideology and racial politics. It was over the extent to which Australia should be ‘white’, and European, or the extent to which it was part of Asia and whether or not the Indian connection could be of value to (tropical) Northern Australia.

McIlwraith infuriated the working class by his attempt to bring in Indian labour and was defeated easily in the July elections.\(^5^5\) The fear that white jobs may be lost to Indians was an element of Griffith’s victory. Griffith and Brookes won the two north-Brisbane seats on offer.\(^5^6\) Other aspects of the McIlwraith government’s labour policy, its planned transcontinental railway and allegations of corruption in land grants also counted against it heavily in the election.\(^5^7\)

India may have been Australia’s colonial partner, but it was also a threat. Indian emigration was stopped by widespread opposition, from political leaders in Queensland and from the voters who elected them. When the vision of Australia as a ‘white’ nation, which became institutionalised just over 15 years later the door was finally shut on Indian indentured labour to Queensland. Of course, the concept of a ‘white Australia’ was just that, a concept. The Australian colonies did have an indigenous population, but they were not shown the same level of respect as other non-white populations in the British empire. Queensland still took Pacific Island labour, but did so because it was possible to enforce their departure far more easily than with Indian labour.

**Conclusion: Colonial Identities and Australian International Thought**

Australia’s national identity has historically been obsessed with ‘race’. This issue has been overcome in Australian domestic politics and is being overcome in its foreign policy. Though Australia’s national identity has shifted from explicitly racist to explicitly anti-racist, the perceived policy options have been slower to shift than

\(^{55}\) Dignan, 'McIlwraith, Sir Thomas (1835 - 1900)'.
\(^{57}\) R. B. Joyce, ‘Griffith, Sir Samuel Walker (1845 - 1920)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 9 (Melbourne, 1983), pp. 112-119. Waterson, in his very brief history of McIlwraith’s time in Queensland, does not discuss the electoral defeat in detail, and fails to mention the Indian labour issue. Rather, he lists ‘regional separatism’ – the north-south divide – which was partly caused by the Indian labour issue. See D. Waterson, *Personality, Profit and Politics: Thomas McIlwraith in Queensland, 1866-1894* (St Lucia, 1984).
nationalist discourse. How does this conception of Australian identity from the late 19th / early 20th century relate to contemporary Australian foreign policy? I would suggest that, while this racial approach to Australian national identity has been filtered out, the broader privileged position of the Anglosphere manifests itself in the popular perception within Australia that distant great and powerful friends are the best hope for maintaining peace and security. In this sense, colonial ideologies from the 19th century, can be viewed as fundamentally responsible for forming Australian national identity, and can be viewed as having had a lasting effect on the discursive and cultural space in which Australian foreign policy decisions are made.

Perhaps the most obvious implications of this research are for Australia’s relationship with India: how do these colonial differences play out in this bilateral relationship? The meandering nature of Indo-Australian relations since Indian independence might suggest that colonial discourses have had a more lasting impact on this relationship: as India is Australia’s closest (both discursively and geographically) postcolonial Other. The position of India as both inside and outside the Anglosphere remains in mutual perceptions of the Other in Indo-Australian relations today. It is clear that colonial ideology in the late 19th century was crucial to Australia constructing a ‘white’ identity, in which India held a particularly threatening position due to its proximity through the empire. The after effects of this identity are still being dealt with in postcolonial Australian society, and play out in foreign policy discourses to the present day. Accounts of Indian-Australian relations stressing the weaknesses of the relationship, such as those of Kuruppu, Vicziany and Gurry, have thus far failed to examine these issues of identity that affect the relationship and thus sketch an incomplete picture.58 This relationship is in need of further research.

The debate over the extent to which Australia was ‘Asia’ reveals a contest of Australian identity, in which India occupied the space of both a colonial friend and a threatening ‘Asian’ Other. The Othering of Indian labourers reveals that India, despite

being controlled by the British empire, could be perceived as either a threat or an opportunity as ‘Australian’ identity grew within colonial discourses of ‘race’. The position of India in Australian national identity has shifted only slightly. The period discussed here helped construct the fundamental ambivalence of Indo-Australian relations: colonial histories are grounded in racialized discourse, but still leave legacies of liberal democracies, Westminster politics and shared political spaces such as the Commonwealth and the Anglosphere.
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