Flora's Box: Empty Spaces, Memory and Migration

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What follows is the text version of a seminar delivered at Melbourne Museum on 10th September 2003, which follows the more informal style of an orally delivered paper. The paper takes as its point of departure a wooden box made for the author’s great-grandmother, and now in the possession of her mother, and uses it to reflect on the narratives produced in research on post-Second World War British migration to Australia. Noting how personal experience informs research, and drawing on interviews conducted with British migrants in Frankston, this paper discusses the voices that echo around objects such as Flora’s Box; both those that reflect memories under erasure and those coming to terms with their routes. A fuller version will be published; further details from the author at s.wills@unimelb.edu.au.
**Introduction**

In this paper I want to start with material culture but will end up a long way from it because what impresses me most about objects is the way in which they reveal stories. Indeed, I have always been impressed by the way in which very simple or ordinary objects can be used to tell quite complex and extraordinary stories, and it is the stories I’m ultimately interested in. But I’ll start with an object.

**Flora’s box**

The title of this paper refers to Flora’s box: a wooden box made of oak, about 20cm high, 25cm deep and 35 cm wide, which is inlaid with a black diamond pattern on the sides and has the name Flora written in a cursive script on the lid. Inside there is a pull-out tray divided into compartments that sits at the top of the box. This was probably used to hold reels of thread as Flora’s box was made as a sewing box, though it is a long time since it has been used in this way.

![Flora’s box, made c 1918.](image)

The box belongs to my mother, Pat Wills, and all I know about it comes from her. It was made by her grandfather for her grandmother Florence Vine. ‘Grandpa and Granny Vine’ were born, grew up, worked and lived in and around the town of Parkstone, part of the borough of Poole in Dorset on the south coast of England, like most of my family. Grandpa Vine, who was born in the 1890s, made this box when he came back from the First
World War suffering from the shell shock that would affect him for the rest of his life. He was taught carpentry as a form of therapy during his official period of convalescence – and he later became a carpenter – but it was during the convalescence period that he made this sewing box for his wife, Flora.

There is no happy tale of recovery that goes with this box. Grandpa Vine was deeply afflicted by his shell shock and often behaved in a violent manner towards his family. After having three girls – Cis, Hilda and Jean – the couple eventually divorced in the late 1920s and he then married a woman called May. The details I have of his life are sketchy because after the divorce, his role in the life of the family was limited and he failed to maintain much contact with his daughters. One of the few photos we have of Grandpa Vine shows him with friends and his second wife May at the Parkstone Labour Club in the late 1940s.

Although the family has only one photo of Granny Vine or Flora, more information survives about her life. We know that Flora was a devout and regular attendee at St Peters in Ashley Cross, Parkstone, and that she never re-married. During the Second World War she worked in a munitions factory in nearby Wareham and was badly burnt. Flora then became a cleaner; her daughter Hilda would tell my mother that ‘Granny Vine has gone scrubbing’,

‘Grandpa Vine’ (far right) at the Parkstone Labour Club in the late 1940s. With him are (from left to right): his second wife, May; a family friend; a member of a local jazz band; and his daughter Hilda.
generally at the local council offices. Hilda who was born in 1923, also remembers her mother forcing her to take the pledge at eighteen (Hilda is the coolly beautiful woman sitting next to Grandpa Vine at the Labour Club), but sadly would later die from cirrhosis of the liver. Married shortly before the Second World War, Hilda left her husband soon after his return from the war, and always had trouble forming successful or enduring relationships with men. She also ended up scrubbing for a living, and Flora’s box was the only thing of her mother’s received by my mother Pat when Hilda died in 1993. And this is the significance of the box for my mother Pat: it signifies, or perhaps we should say stands in for, family connections – of the links between daughter and mother and father – and is special also because it was done at a time of great emotional turmoil, and, as Pat put it, because it has stood the test of time.

Flora Vine (right) on the beach in Poole with her daughter Jean and grandchildren in the early 1950s.

There are many other ways in which I could reflect on the meaning of this box: crafted out of pain and as a way of expressing the inexpressible; it can stand for the sad extended legacy of war; and for the attempt to contain the violence that broke a marriage,
that led to a split family, to deep insecurities for future generations, and ultimately the kind of disconnections that enable migration. It is what I have chosen to fill it with, of course; indeed the box came to us empty and has largely remained that way. But I want to think about this empty box as a metaphor for memory – for absent stories. In so doing, I want to reflect on the place of British migration to Australia in histories of Australian migration; to ask what happens when the box of memory appears to be empty. And I want to explore something of my journey to find the memories and voices that echo around Flora’s box.

**Frames of research**

One reason for introducing Flora’s box is not just to relate my text to an object of material culture, but because it indicates my personal relation to the research I undertake. For Flora’s box is really a prop or tool I used to get inside the box of family memory: the personal family questions came first, Flora’s box came second, and broader enquiry followed. And I think it is useful to acknowledge these often hidden investments in the objects and subjects of our research: it can be illuminating to watch where and how this investment guides us. In my own case, constructing an understanding of our family’s migration to Australia, and trying to find out about Flora’s box, was something I did almost surreptitiously – snatching bits and pieces of stories in the moments I could get my parents to reflect on the process of migration. My personal experience of migration, in some respects, has been the experience of not talking about what was left behind, of not talking about what was risked and what was gained, and thus of an emptiness, of a lack of memory, and a loss in relation to that history. And I have come to realise that while this does in some ways reflect the dynamics of a particular family formation, it also has a context in broader understandings of British migration to Australia: that my parents’ memories are in fact not the only ones under erasure, and that there is perhaps a more common context for this.

The historian Paul Turnbull put this nicely. Describing the circumstances of his own family’s migration, he wrote that ‘[t]here’s nothing profoundly inspiring or tragic about post-war British migration’, and that ‘it has seemed an identity somehow apart from multicultural Australia, as bland as the flat and mildly bitter beer poms are generally supposed to favour’. ‘Most who migrated’, he continued, ‘did so to free their children from the constraints of being working class’, and these ‘British working-class migrants occupy a curious and still
largely unexamined place in Australia’s postwar history… rarely considered as ethnically
distinct or different. The only times we have merited scrutiny as a migrant group over the
past 30 years’, Turnbull writes, ‘seems to have been when … we have bitten the hands of
those responsible for our new lives, by resorting to collective action in the workplace to
protect wages and conditions. Otherwise, it has easily been assumed that culturally we are
little different from the established Anglo-Celtic society: the sum of the difference amounts
to speaking English in one of a number of quaint accents’.

And in part it is this sense that I’ve found lurking among some of the people I have
interviewed – that they have nothing special to tell me, no migrant story worth the telling, or
that these are stories they have presumed no-one wants to hear. But the narrativisation, the
telling of these stories has I think begun to change (for reasons I will explore later), and it
has meant that the process of filling Flora’s empty box has come to be something I have
wanted to do not simply to construct a genealogy that links Flora to her daughter Hilda, to
my mother Pat and thus to me, but to find voices for what has not been said about aspects
of British migration to Australia in general; to attempt to give voice to stories and memories
not told to me by my parents, but now beginning to be told by many others.

**British memory and loss**

And so I have become very interested in new configurations of British social and cultural
memory in Australia, and in new social and cultural memories of Britishness. These are in
some ways different things, although not of course entirely separate, because the process of
remembering a culturally British Australia is bound up in political stakes and meanings. And
without getting bogged down in arguments about the differences between history and
memory, certainly it seems to me that memory disrupts the kind of notions that the more
than one-and-a-half million British migrants who arrived in Australia since the Second
World War were always willing migrants, welcomed and easily assimilated into Australian
society; and the failure to consider that for Britons, also, migration might result in complex
changes in relationships with the ‘homeland’, and thus in their sense of self and community
in Australia.
In this respect, looking over Australian migration history, I’ve pretty quickly come to agree with the historian Mark Peel’s assessment that British migrants are among ‘the poorest served of all groups in the history of Australian migration, with accounts ranging from anecdotal whimsy to an almost hostile dismissal of migrant Britons as the pampered beneficiaries of Australia’s cultural cringe’. This isn’t to argue that Australian postwar immigration policies did not clearly favour migrants from Britain; or that the arrival of British migrants inspired the same kind of hostility often sparked by the arrival of other migrants; or that British migrants had it harder or as hard as others. Nevertheless, it is to say that it is too simplistic to suggest that British migrants were immediately accepted into Australian society. In fact I think it acts as a useful corrective to make the British visible as migrants, to understand their trans-national identifications and particular ethnic status, because it sharpens analysis of the construction of both British and Australian identities. I have written about this elsewhere, but you can sum it up by considering that while Prime Minister Robert Menzies said that we should ‘no more question the movement of people from England to Australia than we would question a movement of people from Yorkshire to Somerset or Melbourne to Perth’, for the migrants themselves there was plenty to question.

In my research, indeed, you find that traditional history has a paradoxical relationship to the individual who has lived through an event such as migration: that these individuals often disrupt the closure of a particular history, and I am particularly interested in history-making as a process in which objects such as Flora’s box and the narratives that come along with it tangle with history’s stories. Moreover, I have introduced certain memories to tangle with Australian history because I am motivated as much by an interest in forgetting as remembering. I believe the empty spaces of memory tap something different to what might usually be tapped in stories of British migration. Thus in the interview process I have been engaged not only by rich memories, but also by narratives of loss and emptiness and forms of dealing with the results of such feelings. Not surprisingly, these were things that many interviewees had not spoken of before, and there was a strong confessional element present, with many stating ‘I’ve never told anyone this before’. And often I found people, like myself, willing to construct stories around objects in ways that revealed broader or different stakes in attributing meaning to the British migrant past than others have pointed to before. Jim Hammerton has been doing similar research and has described the stories he has heard
as ‘battler’s tales’, and they are in some ways. I think they are also, however, something more.

Doing this work has reminded me that memory is both fragile and enduring; that it is a narrative rather than a replica of experience, and that what we remember is highly selective and says as much about desire and denial as it does remembrance. But to say this, or to say that memory is unverifiable, or changeable, does not imply that it is only constructed through the agendas of the present. Rather it shifts discussion of memory away from questions of truth and towards questions of intent. In an exploration of the cultural meaning of the Viet Nam War and the creation of memorial quilts for those who had died of AIDS, the historian Marita Sturken argued that what these cultural memories tell us, more than anything, is the stakes held by individuals and institutions in attributing meaning to the past. I too have been interested in how forgetting is often highly organised and strategic and determines who gets to participate in creating national history or meaning. Although tensions between local memories and public nationalist rhetoric are apparent in stories I present in this paper, this is not my focus here. It does, however, indicate the need for more inclusive forms of conceiving Britishness, and indeed any other conception of identity – including national identity. (And in noting that we constantly revise our memories to suit our current identities, it has been interesting to watch over the last few years, how the Australian national remembrance of migration might be directly related to how the nation further propagates migration.)

But what Sturken showed in her work was that ‘the explosive pertinence of a remembered detail may challenge repressive or merely complacent systems of prescriptive memory or history; memory like the body, may speak in a language that reasoned inquiry will not hear’. Flora’s box points back to a family history that is sometimes more comfortable to forget, and my understanding of the role of history or the historian is, like Sturken, to step in as memory is lost in order to tell the stories that people forget – the gaps in collective remembering – and in turn to hopefully be reminded by people of what we as historians forget. In part I have been able to do this because of my own position of being both inside and outside these histories, and this has made me even more aware of the role of my own memories, their status as ‘evidence’ and relationship with history. Constructing his version
of the history of Elizabeth, Mark Peel asked himself: ‘Who am I speaking to and speaking for, if not simply telling my life story to myself?’ To paraphrase Peel’s answer in relation to my own work, the history I am producing is in part my dynamic and changing relationship to various migrant stories, the various stories I am part of or experienced; but it is also affected by the fact that I am no longer simply the person who migrated – I am now also the person who remembers, who intervenes in the production of memories which are important not because I remember them but because the experiences are important stories of what happens to people who migrate to Australia.11

**Frankston case study**

I want to turn now to this research on what happens to people who migrate to Australia, and particularly an area study in which I am currently engaged. In his early analysis of post-war British migration, James Jupp claimed that British migrants to Australia have aspired to a ‘respectable suburban existence’, and has backed his argument by pointing to concentrations of British migrants in peripheral housing estates and outer suburbs. In Australia, Jupp claimed, ‘most of the British have found what they seek – comfort and security in a warm climate’. 12 One way of testing such claims is to search out those migrant communities, and this process has taken me back to the Frankston area, where I arrived in the early 1980s as a thirteen year-old migrant from Britain. Frankston has proven to be a rich location in which to reconnect migrant memory and identity in time and place.

At the southern extremity of Melbourne’s bayside suburbs, and with a population of around one hundred thousand,13 Frankston functions as a regional retail, service and commercial centre, largely as a result of extensive residential development since the Second World War. Until the 1950s, however, Frankston existed largely as a seaside resort for Melbourne. And this was why in its period of rapid population growth in the 1960s, Frankston became especially attractive to British migrants in part because of this ‘on the beach’ aspect of its location. The expansion of industry both at Frankston, and within commuting distance (for example, the opening of the General Motors Holden plant at nearby Dandenong, the Nylex factory and the construction of an oil refinery at Crib Point), also provided employment opportunities. Most importantly the availability of cheaper housing, including government funded ex-servicemen’s homes and a series of new
residential estates, meant that Frankston, with its scenic beaches, seemed to be a place where migrant dreams of seaside suburbia could become a reality.

Census statistics reflect Frankston’s popularity with British migrants: from the 1950s on, the percentage of British-born residents in Frankston has been much higher than elsewhere in Melbourne, and indeed throughout much of the state. By the mid 1960s, almost twenty per cent of those living in the municipality were British-born,\textsuperscript{14} and while this percentage is slowly diminishing due to an ageing population, in 2001 roughly eleven per cent of the Frankston population were born in Britain or Ireland (compared to an average of approximately five-and-a-half per cent of British-born elsewhere in Melbourne). Thus it’s no accident that the Melbourne ‘Britfest’ was held at the Frankston football ground between 1999 and 2001, organised by members of the UK Settlers Association. The UKSA now shares rooms with the English Speaking Union in South Yarra, but was initially formed in Frankston as a migrant support network in 1967.

It is not the ‘professional’ British, however, that are the focus of my study, and I believe that events and associations such as Britfest and the UKSA have rarely been broadly representative of British migrants in the area, nor can be seen as evidence of ‘self-ethnicising’ on any significant scale.\textsuperscript{15} I would agree with those who claim, however, that the Britfest phenomenon builds upon feelings of loss, and I explore the nature of that loss to some extent below, but more extensively elsewhere. Nevertheless, initially, a sense of loss and/or emptiness was something I thought I might find in Frankston; that whereas once British migrants in Frankston had ‘found comfort and security in a warm climate’, that they were now doing it hard, feeling marginalised and embattled both economically and in terms of their status and identity.

But while the Britfest may be one small group’s attempt to negotiate a sense of a loss of heritage, identity and status by reasserting a return to roots – to old forms, symbols and means of identification – there are and have been places in Frankston where people have done things a lot differently. And these are also places that, in a sense, confound the assertion that the British \textit{found} comfort and security and \textit{settled} into suburban existence. For
these are places where often people have made, and sometimes struggled to make, community in spite of their environment.

When I first spoke to ‘Doreen’, for example, about her experiences of migration to Australia in 1964, she showed me a letter that her family had received from the Chief Migration Officer at Australia House in London. It emphasises British migrants’ great fortune to be part of the task of building ‘a new life in a prosperous country with a great future’, and I only understood later the way this prefaced what else ‘Doreen’ had to say. For, after a number of nervous exits to make tea and bring other photos and objects into the room, she then went on to tell me that she had miscarried five months after arriving in Australia. Indeed it was almost as if ‘Doreen’s’ miscarriage was a metaphor for her journey here. She led into a description of what happened in the following way, beginning before she moved to Frankston:

It took quite a few years for us to blend in here, because… well, always when people come from overseas they miss their home, you can’t help it… and so you had to be very careful not to say ‘I don’t like it here, I want to go back…’, but I did because I just missed everybody… everybody was gone… And I don’t think people realise when you don’t know where you are and you don’t know anybody… I used to look around the streets and think I wish someone’d ask how the kids are, because in the village they all knew them you see… And, so, I used to go along to Coles on the Nepean Highway… they used to have a cake place, you know, you could sit there, and I’d hope someone would speak to me.

But, well, the worst thing was I didn’t know I was in trouble with the pregnancy, and I was walking through the main street and started to miscarry. I think it was the heat and everything, you know. So I went into a doctors, the nearest doctors, and he said I had to get quickly to hospital. And these things happen, you know… But it was really nice when I went into the doctor – he was a Scottish doctor, strange to me – and he stood up and shook hands with me and said welcome to Australia, and I really didn’t
expect that, you know. And by the time I got home, he was there at the door to meet me to tell me that he’d got me into hospital. But you see if you don’t know, I didn’t know even where the doctors were… So anyway, that child I did lose. I would have been about five months pregnant. So I think in my own mind, it was all the stress of coming here and leaving everything…

But anyway we eventually had another baby … and everything like that was strange to me because my older child had been born at home with the little midwife who used to come on the bicycle. But with the baby here they insisted you go to hospital, and it was really good that they did because if I hadn’t I would have lost him. And that was Frankston Hospital, and after that we sort of started a new life. We bought a house in Frankston… and on one of the first mornings I heard this banging and went out to see and it was this woman who used to bang a gong for the women on the estate to go and have tea at her house. Well, after that, with the baby coming on, even though I still missed things, things got better…

Towards the end of her interview, when asked if she ever thought of going back to live in England, after her son was killed there in the 1980s, and after a difficult divorce, ‘Doreen’ insisted:

I’ve had so much turmoil over the last 20 years I’m glad to settle down, and that’s why with Frankston I know every street, I know exactly where I am and I’ve got more friends now than I would have had, you see, if I went back to England, so this is where I have to be.

Although reserved and hesitant, ‘Doreen’ always gave me the sense of a well of emotion just below the surface, and of much time spent reflecting where life had taken her and of the emotional costs involved. She was one of those who emphasised she’d never spoken to anyone about all this before. When we did the interview ‘Doreen’ also confessed to something she’d done more recently:
Two years ago … I went back to Melbourne docks and I stood on the actual spot where we got off the ship, and I was starting to shake because I could remember when we got off and I had hold of the children’s hands and I was shaking thinking where are we going, and no idea what we were going to do…

But she went on to say ‘Well, you have to settle somewhere don’t you?’, and was happy that her son who was born in Frankston feels settled and doesn’t want ‘to see the world’ because he’s ‘quite happy with what I’ve got here’. At this moment she then reflected: ‘it doesn’t matter where people come from, it’s where you’re born and grew up, it’s in your heart, isn’t it?’ And, after recalling memories and sensations from childhood in England, she reflected when prompted about how sharp and sensual these had been, ‘Well, you see our memories here are a different type of memory, aren’t they?’ I have yet to make up my mind about the exact meaning of that, but in ‘Doreen’s’ case I certainly felt I had uncovered rich memories rarely revealed, and a knowledge of the making of Frankston, and those drawn to tea by the banging of a gong.

‘Doreen’s’ first home in Frankston was on the Karingal housing estate in east Frankston. Many of the people I interviewed, however, while perhaps aspiring to a new home somewhere like Karingal, found they were unable to afford to build their own home or required greater financial assistance from the government. Many of these people lived or still live on what is usually referred to as ‘the Pines’. The Pines is an estate on part of the old Frankston Pine Plantation, and was established in various phases in the 1950s to provide affordable housing, first to ex-servicemen and then was more broadly settled by the Victorian Housing Commission. It is now the residential section of the suburb of North Frankston, and within a municipal city that has quite a diverse income range, the Pines has a history of being looked down on by all as the Frankston ‘badlands’. In many ways poorly planned, poorly built, poorly serviced and maintained, and with little to cushion it against the effects of wider economic ‘restructuring’, it could be argued that the Pines is the kind of place that was ‘made poor’.

But within the Pines, which had come to be known to some as an English or British ‘ghetto’ by the mid-1960s, there were ways of creating value and making place and identity for migrants to whom I’ve spoken, and this reflects I think a very different attitude to those who produced something like Britfest. For ‘Joy’, who came out from Halifax in Yorkshire in 1959 and is now a self-proclaimed matriarch of the Pines, moving into her new brick two bedroom unit meant that she could now get her mother out from Yorkshire to share a bedroom with their son, which for her meant the beginning of a sense of belonging. In the two years prior to her mother’s arrival, she told me she cried herself to sleep almost every night in the rented flat behind a milk bar in Edithvale, and saw herself as simply working towards repaying her fare and saving up to go back. But with her mother here she got involved with the Hearts of Oak club that met next to the Catholic Church in Frankston, and they then formed their own version on the Pines. This became a British migrant support club with a credit union, and also a soccer club. This was the first version of what eventually became the very different UK Settlers Association now based in South Yarra.

Going into ‘Joy’s’ house on the Pines now, with her entrance porch full of Yorkshire memorabilia – tea-towels, stickers, china ornaments – you are aware that you are entering a small space that says ‘this is me, Yorkshire-born, bred and biased’, and you’d better accept this as you enter the home I have built in Australia because these memories are part of what made me and how we made a space for ourselves in this ‘ghetto’. Her memories are all about connections, about who started what, who organised this, who ran that: telling the story of the kind of people and place described by Marion Beattie in her poem ‘We of the Pines’. Mentioned several times by those I interviewed, the poem asserts that ‘When old man trouble comes to our doors / Neighbours soon gather with kind words and more’, and ends ‘So please do not scorn us because of our zone / To us it’s a haven, to us it is home’.

‘Pauline’ and ‘Tom’ who have also lived most of their lives on the Pines since migrating from London in 1964 say they would never have had the chance to own their own home if it hadn’t been for these sort of people and especially the credit union, which they described as giving them their ‘start in life’ on the Pines. Prior to that they’d been at hostels in Broadmeadows and Holmsglen and then at a flat in Mentone while ‘Tom’ worked two shifts a day as fork-lift driver for Frigidaire in Dandenong. Still in that same home on the
Pines, they told me that while their children have now moved off the estate, they both feel that they have made their ‘nest’ on the Pines and would never want to leave.

Yet when they first arrived ‘Pauline’ in particular felt completely lost and bewildered and she doesn’t romanticise their early days on the Pines. Recalling the lack of services when they first moved in, ‘Pauline’ stated that it affected women left at home with children particularly hard; the only bus was on the Frankston-Dandenong Road, an impossible walk with young kids; and at that time there were no shops on the estate. ‘Pauline’ believes it was part of the reason she suffered so badly with post-natal depression, recalling there was ‘this terrible long time between them all going off and the kids going to school and all you had was the tv. That was hard. I think it would be even harder for people that didn’t talk English.’ Today, while both ‘Tom’ and ‘Pauline’ admit that their fibro-cement house is in bad repair, they take a huge amount of pleasure from their garden and the wildlife attracted by plants and seeds. For ‘Pauline’ the memory of migration is traumatic, but both feel they have rectified their losses on the Pines.

It would be possible to provide many more descriptions of the ways in which people have more or less successfully identified the empty spaces left in their lives through migration, and their various strategies to fill it: ‘Ed’, for most of his life a sailor who has in the last few years written his life story so that his children will have a record of who he is and where he is from; ‘Doris’ who collects miniature English country houses; ‘Norma and Ernie’ who get a Newcastle newspaper delivered weekly; ‘Eric’ who is involved with the local genealogical society in the village in which he was born in southeast England. There is no space for further detail here, but these are people who have made a sense of place and identity out of loss and have rich memories of their journey to find some kind of belonging in Australia.

**The routes of belonging**

By way of drawing out some conclusions and comparisons with others working on the experiences of British migrants, it seems to me important to distinguish between reflection upon these memories, and what others have described as a ‘sense of marginalisation’ expressed by many British migrants, which has resulted in a ‘palpable’ need ‘to express their version of a distinct “British” … ethnic identity, apparently overwhelmed by the
multicultural emphasis on non-British ethnicities'.16 Instead it seems to me that the
construction of individual and collective identities is motivated by deeply personal as much
as cultural factors and thus is multiple, and a much more complex process. For despite the
identity tensions of some British migrants in Australia, most do not need to self-ethnicise;
they carry their history with them in the patterns of life, habits, memories, continuities and
discontinuities that make identity and link it to place. Rather it is more often groups wishing
to delineate and/or curtail cultural identity who feel the need to publicly narrate that cultural
identity through performative and symbolic displays. Their recreations of a British space in
‘multicultural’ Australia anxiously negotiate a nation of ‘others’, but produce spaces of
exclusion for many migrants from Britain.17

On the other hand, I don’t want to claim too much for the British migrants of
Frankston, and I feel that some concluding comments about migration more generally would
be apposite. For it often seems our duty in Australia to constantly re-write the migrant
success story – to construct our whole history as a migrant or multicultural marvel – and
there are of course good reasons why we do this. But migration is a process that comes at
enormous costs and I am fascinated in listening to the reasons why people chose to migrate,
the reason why people chose to leave family, boundaries and familiar horizons, the places
that held them, the people that held them, especially when later some realise they want or
need places or people to be held by. The writer Brian Castro has written with great depth
about these kinds of ideas: about whether the ‘freedom’ that comes with migration is
ultimately a ‘cheap trick’ that results in the need to distance yourself from sentiment, and a
sense of living (at least at first) with the feeling and fear of having been ‘transported mapless’
– not knowing where social spaces and boundaries begin and end. The immigrant may end
up, Castro writes, by creating a ‘sacrosanct immigrant self’: a ‘wall … which keeps out
turmoil by protecting’ but which allows, paradoxically, ‘nothing besides the ritual of
exclusion.’18

There may of course be good reason for resisting the rituals of inclusion, and there
are also those who make their way over here with neither yearning nor nostalgia. Those
sensitive to loss interest me, however, because of a confluence of personal factors and
broader academic and public discussions about the nature of place and belonging in
Australia. And I think it is appropriate to speak with emotion about these issues, mainly because I am not sure how to do otherwise, but also because this was the way in which most migrants speak to me about their sense of place. Many also endow objects with meanings and memories they sometimes cannot speak. These might be small and private treasured items – a grandmother’s ring or brooch; they might be sideboard displays; they might be plants cultivated in a garden; photographs or a carefully assembled scrapbook; records or pieces of music. I found little altars to Britishness (or Englishness, or more often indicating a regional affiliation) that were not so much about national identity but personal identity: the soccer shirt or the picture of the most picturesque local village (and in kitchen cupboards, I saw Branston Pickle, Bovril, McVities Digestive biscuits). These things are perhaps only noticed from experience: through noticing things that are obvious but not mentioned, or only really alluded to, or things shown but somehow people being unable to comment on them, or only after considerable prodding and prompting. Perhaps this is because, as I read in the paper the other, ‘memory for most emigrants provides not only delight but an exquisite form of torture’.

It may not seem obvious that British migrant memory is torturous or even empty, or that their migrant experience echoes with emptiness in Australia. With the notable exception perhaps of British child migrants, who were sent out as supposed orphans under various schemes, the experiences of British migrants are not ones that have been seen in terms of social upheaval, grief or trauma, and thus have not been seen as producing very rich kinds of memories and memory debates. They may not have been traumatic, but because there are major strands of British migrant experience that are not widely known – a class experience, regional experiences, gendered and racial experiences – I would argue that while on the one hand British memory in Australia has been present in highly superficial forms, relying on evidence of memory in traditional forms and narratives, much of this is based on a kind of amnesia that has actually been central in shaping how British culture in Australia functions and how it is defined.

You could read Britfest for example as a representation of the status of British cultural memory in Australia. It does of course say something about it, but it is more interesting for what it doesn’t say and for the fact that non-attendance at this event and its
eventual demise represents memory under transition, being negotiated by those moved to think about their memory in new ways because of new social formations. I think that rather than be corralled into collective identity-making at places like Britfest, people are more likely to do their memory work at times and places of their own choosing, and you might say that it is only in certain places and at certain times that British migrants have either wanted to, or been prompted to do this.

So to conclude, the narratives produced by exploring the apparently empty spaces in Australian history of British migration tells me that what is at stake in the telling of these tales is more often personal identity than national or ethnic identity: ‘Doreen’s’ nostalgia is not a desire to return to the past, but a reflection on what it has meant in terms of her sense of place in Australia; and likewise for other people. Their ‘migrant dreaming’, to borrow a phrase from Glenda Sluga, is not about a return to roots in the past, but a coming to terms with routes into the present and future. This is what opening Flora’s box has done for me: it’s about the synthesis of life, bringing things together, in a way that allows for a reorientation towards the present and the future rather than a focus on an uprooted past.

References
9 Wills and Darian-Smith, ‘Beauty Contest for British Bulldogs’.
In 1947 the British-born represented approximately 9.6% of the total Frankston population; 13.6% in 1954; 16.1% in 1961; 18.1% in 1966; 18.3% in 1971; 17.9% in 1976; 15.9% in 1981; 14.6% in 1986; 13% in 1991; 11.4% in 1996; and 11.3% in 2001.


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