Nations on the Move: Burmese Migration to Australia

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is the first work to undertake a long-range historical examination of migration from Burma to Australia. Moving beyond the conventions of a traditional community migration history, it interrogates the intersections between the discourses of race and nation in both places, and explores how they impacted on the decisions of individuals and groups to emigrate from Burma, and their ability to settle in Australia. Throughout, what it means to be Burmese is critically examined. This is a term that often acts as a monolithic identity, eliding the complex ethnic, cultural and political allegiances that tie the people of Burma together, and which has been used uncritically in the small number of studies of this migration previously published. In interrogating the diverse histories, politics and migration journeys that lie behind the term Burmese, this thesis provides a more nuanced understanding of this community.

Utilising government archival documents, parliamentary debates, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia case files, media material, memoir and oral history interviews, the thesis examines both the political and the personal, highlighting that there are multiple modes of representing and therefore understanding this history. It largely focuses on two periods during which significant amounts of migration from Burma to Australia occurred: the late 1940s to the late 1970s, and the early 1990s to the present. It argues, however, that this pattern of migration was shaped significantly by the development of racially based national identities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in both places.

The drive of central Burmese authorities, both civilian and military, to inculcate a restrictive form of national belonging around a pan-Burmese identity has been a key site of conflict in Burma since independence in 1948, and has contributed to a large-scale refugee situation that remains an issue in the present. Racially based understandings of Australian national identity, defined as white, prevented many people from Burma from migrating to Australia until the late 1960s. Despite the abolition of racially-based immigration restrictions and the adoption of multiculturalism in the 1970s, racially-based understandings of national identity continue to have traction within Australian political discourse, most recently in relation to refugee and asylum seeker policies. This is significant given that the majority of people from Burma to migrate to Australia have done so via the humanitarian stream. By critically examining the impact of identity politics in Burma
and Australia on migrants from Burma of a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, and over long historical period, this thesis makes an important foundational contribution to the limited, but emerging, work on this topic.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that

i. the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
iii. the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed: ______________________________________________________________
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INTRODUCTION

Understanding Burmese Migration to Australia

When Australia’s Foreign Minister, Bob Carr, made his maiden speech to the Senate on 21 March 2012, he drew connections between the multicultural nature of Australia and Burma. In doing so he argued that Australia’s foreign policy was, in part, about promoting and defending cultural diversity.¹ Carr’s tenure as foreign minister has coincided with rapid shifts in Australia’s relationship with Burma brought about by increasing political change in Burma, including the historic election of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to Burma’s parliament in by-elections held in April 2012.² Carr visited Burma in June 2012 and has since announced a series of policy changes comprising the lifting of the remaining financial and travel sanctions against the military regime,³ along with the doubling of aid by 2015,⁴ which includes aid to preserve Yangon’s urban heritage, that for Carr, ‘confirms the rich and diverse nature of Myanmar’.⁵ Notwithstanding the diplomatic requirements of office, Carr’s enthusiasm for, and celebration of, the multicultural nature of Burma and Australia fails to recognise the acute anxiety both nations have historically experienced about race. That anxiety has manifested itself in exclusionary national identities that have severely limited the definition of who could belong to each nation, both physically (via immigration restrictions) and symbolically (via the expectation that citizens would assimilate into the majority culture). Such attitudes have long been entrenched in Burma and Australia, and have significantly impacted on migration patterns as people from Burma began to arrive in Australia in significant numbers in the late 1940s. Making

connections between Burma and Australia as Carr has done is important, however, to fully understand and do justice to such connections. As many scholars have argued, unproblematic claims about multicultural success need to be questioned.\(^6\)

Drawing on oral history interviews, government archival records, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia (RRT) case files, memoirs, and political and media discourse, this thesis examines immigration to Australia from Burma since Burmese independence in 1948, and how Australian policies and politics regarding migration and settlement affected the administration of their migration applications and the ability of Burmese to settle in Australia. In doing so, it moves beyond the traditional territory of a community migration history to interrogate the intersections between the discourses of race and nation in both places. Through the diverse range of sources that it draws upon, this thesis explores both the political and the personal, highlighting that there are multiple modes of representing and therefore of understanding this history.

This thesis is the first work to undertake a long-range historical examination of migration from Burma to Australia and to consider both pre-migration and resettlement experiences. It is therefore an important contribution to the existing literature on Burmese migration to Australia, which is largely limited to single-ethnic group studies, or multi-ethnic group studies that focus on a single issue or restricted time frame. Its central argument is that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both places developed racially based national identities; that these identities emerged in the context of empire, specifically varying forms of British colonial rule; and that the politics and policies they engendered have shaped the flow of migration from Burma to Australia over the past sixty-five years.

This introduction begins with a brief overview of Burmese migration to Australia, incorporating a discussion of key terminology used. It then examines the available literature on Burmese migration to Australia and to other (third) countries of settlement. Literature that interrogates the impact of discourses of race on Australian nationalism, transnationalism and diaspora is also discussed; this literature has had a key influence on the theoretical approach of this thesis. It is followed by an explanation of the sources and methodology utilised in this thesis and concludes with

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an overview of the thesis structure.

**A Brief Overview of Burmese Migration to Australia**

The conditions that influenced migration from Burma to Australia in the second half of the twentieth century had their origins in nineteenth and early twentieth-century nationalist discourses in both countries. Chapter One provides a comprehensive analysis of that period, but it is important to briefly outline the era in order to explain the contours of migration between Burma and Australia that are mapped in this section. Britain annexed Burma in three stages in the nineteenth century, concluding with the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885.7 Britain’s colonial administration in Burma both exacerbated existing ethnic tensions and created new ones which resulted in the emergence of restrictive forms of national belonging through the development of competing ethnically-based nationalist movements in the first half of the twentieth century. Since independence in 1948, successive Burmese governments and the military regime have unsuccessfully attempted to impose a unifying pan-Burmese identity. Continuing conflict between ethnic nationalist groups and the military has led to a large-scale and protracted refugee situation that remains an issue to the present. Similarly, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Australia developed a narrow understanding of national identity, defined as white and predominately British.8 Associated immigration restrictions prevented many people from Burma from resettling in Australia when they were seeking to emigrate after independence in 1948 and again after the military coup in 1962. The Anglo-Burmese community was the first to migrate to Australia in significant numbers. With their adherence to many British cultural practices they challenged Australian administrators in their attempt to

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keep Australia white. However, it was not until the policy regarding the migration of mixed-descent people was relaxed in the 1960s that the majority of these people were able to migrate to Australia.

In 1947 the Burmese community in Australia was below 250, illustrating why this thesis is primarily interested in investigating post-Second World War patterns to migration. The Burmese community in Australia is still relatively small, numbering 21,759 Burma-born people at the 2011 Census; however it has grown rapidly in recent years (See Figure 1), including a sixty-five per cent increase since the last Census in 2006.

As Figure 2 indicates, migration between the two nations spiked between 1966 and 1971 due to increased Anglo-Burmese arrivals (discussed above). Although the Burma-born population of Australia increased from that point, it did not begin to spike again until the early 1990s. This marks the second period of significant migration from Burma to Australia, during which the Burma-born population in

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Australia almost trebled. This sharp increase reflects changes in the priorities of Australia’s humanitarian program (both offshore and onshore), through which the majority of people from Burma have migrated permanently to Australia in the past two decades. In 2007/2008 the quota allocated for Asia under the humanitarian program was slightly larger than that for Africa for the first time in a number of years. This mirrors the higher priority given to the Burma refugee situation by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), as the Australian government allocates places for different world regions based on UNHCR advice.

The earlier Anglo-Burmese migrants largely settled in Western Australia. However, as Figure 3 shows, more recent arrivals have tended to settle in Victoria and New South Wales, with Victoria recording the largest increase in the 2006-2011 period.

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Figure 2: Increase in number of Burma-born Australian residents since the previous census

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Over the past two decades the range of ethnic backgrounds to which migrants from Burma belong has also expanded significantly (an overview of the ethnic diversity of this community is provided in Chapter Five). It is important to note here that most of these people have fled ethnically or politically based persecution mostly perpetrated by the military regime. Thus this wave of migration has also been driven in large part by on-going tension and conflict arising from the continued salience of identity politics in Burma. The migrants have also arrived in Australia during an era when the politics around refugees and asylum seekers has become increasingly fraught and continues to be entwined with racially informed nationalist agendas.\(^\text{13}\)

While practical issues of resettlement, such as finding employment and learning English, were the central concerns of the people interviewed for this study, identity issues were also important. For members of ethnic minority groups in particular, the space they have found in Australia to practise and be recognised for their unique ethnic identity has been a profoundly positive element in their ability to make a home in their new country.

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\(^\text{13}\) For an excellent discussion of these issues, see: Don McMaster, *Asylum Seekers: Australia’s Response to Refugees* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2001).
The politics of utilising the name Burma versus Myanmar is often a fraught issue for writers on Burma, and the use of Burma in this thesis must be explained. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) military junta changed the official name of the state from Burma to *Myanmar Naing-ngan* in 1989. Since then, a continued usage of Burma has been seen to represent opposition to the regime. The National League for Democracy (NLD) and many other opposition and ethnic nationalist groups continue to refer to the state as Burma, as do the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States. However, as progress towards democratisation increases some Western governments have begun to relax their stance on the issue. In his recent and historic trip to Burma, the Burmese government saw U.S. President Obama’s use of both terms as an acknowledgement of its legitimacy (although this was countered by a U.S. official who described the usage as a ‘diplomatic courtesy’ only). The Australian government, after many years of refusing to acknowledge the name change, has gone a step further with its recent decision to officially recognise the state as Myanmar. Foreign Minister, Bob Carr, sees this shift as evidence that Australia is a ‘forward leaning friend of Myanmar’, with this change in nomenclature also occurring in conjunction with the relaxation of sanctions and increased Australian aid since April 2012. Despite these recent events, Burma remains the term used throughout this thesis. This reflects the fact that Burma has been the most common term in official and general usage throughout the time period canvassed in this thesis (late-nineteenth century to the present day). It is also a mark of respect to the participants of this study, many of whom fled persecution perpetrated by successive Burmese military regimes and/or were involved in pro-democracy or ethnic nationalist politics.

Given the complexity of people and relationships that have been grouped within the term Burmese, it is important that its utilisation throughout this thesis is explained from the outset. It is a problematic term. Within Burma’s borders live a

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17 Quoted in: March, “Australia Says Myanmar.”
large number of diverse ethnic groups, speaking over 100 different languages, brought together into a single state as a result of British colonisation of the area in the nineteenth century. People from Burma who now live in Australia comprise members of a number of different ethnic minority groups and the Burman majority, as well as the ‘mixed-descent’ Anglo-Burmese, whose relationships with each other are complex and sometimes tense. Many of Burma’s ethnic minority groups have a fraught relationship with the label Burmese, stemming from many decades, or centuries in some cases, of conflict with the Burman majority, whose culture and people have often been held up as synonymous with being Burmese.

The ethnic diversity of the people from Burma who are living in Australia has been somewhat hidden behind the term Burmese in the few accounts that have been written on their migration to, and resettlement in, Australia. Most of these accounts are predominately based on the experiences of Burman students and refugees who fled Burma after the 1988 military crackdown of the pro-democracy movement. While three of these studies use the term ‘Burmese’ in their titles, they deploy the term differently and with varying levels of self-awareness.

In her self-published booklet, *Burmese in Australia* (2005), Erica Stahr conflated the Burmese with people of a Burman, Buddhist background. She wrote of Burmese refugees fleeing into ‘ethnic (“Karen”) villages or camps’ with no acknowledgement that the Karen live in Burma and, as such, may have a basis for claiming a Burmese identity. For Rosamond Washington, whose MA thesis “Burmese Students in Australia: A Closer Look at Their Lives” (1996) focused on the second group of students from Burma to receive AusAID scholarships to study in Australia in the mid-1990s, the term Burmese was characterised as a ‘nationality’, denoting anyone who came from the state of Burma, regardless of ethnic background. It is really only David Corlett, in a study for the Ecumenical Migration Centre – *The Burmese New Arrivals: A Resource for Community Workers and Mainstream Agencies* (1999) – who has acknowledged that the use of the term Burmese as a descriptor may be in any way problematic. Albeit in a footnote, Corlett stated that some ethnic minority groups did not feel that the term reflected their distinctive identities. He argued for his decision to use Burmese as a category on the

basis of its ‘wide acceptance in academic and other fields’, and because the ‘88 Generation’ students ‘regardless of their ethnic identity, consider themselves Burmese’. More recent studies, most from a social science perspective, have tended to look at the experiences of individual ethnic groups, such as the Karen, and have not overtly dealt with potential claims to wider collective identities such as Burmese.

As Corlett’s study suggests, there are politically strategic reasons for utilising this term. Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s analysis of the ‘strategic’ use of collective identities in relation to the people who make up the group ‘indigenous peoples’ is relevant here. For Tuhiwai Smith, it is a term that ‘enabled the collective voices of colonized people to be expressed strategically in the international arena’; and allowed ‘communities and peoples to come together, transcending their own colonized contexts and experiences, in order to learn, share, plan, organize and struggle collectively for self-determination on the global and local stages.’ The Burmese people who have resettled in Australia lived in a state that has a long history of colonialism, one that did not end with the achievement of official independence from the British in 1948. The current regime’s attempts to establish a prescribed form of official Burmese nationalism have been characterised, by some breakaway ethnic based independence groups as a new form of colonialism.

For the people of Burma now living in Australia there is a need to transcend their own colonized contexts and experiences, as Tuhiwai Smith suggests, in order to work together to achieve those political goals they might have in common. On a local level, such goals might include an increase in resettlement places, and on a more global level, the aim might be the return of democracy in Burma, which has relatively widespread support among Burmese refugee communities worldwide. Achieving these objectives involves lobbying national governments. Given the Australian government categorises refugee

22 Dave Corlett, The Burmese New Arrivals, 32-34. Corlett argued that there was frustration within the Burmese community about the ignorance of the wider Australian public about Burma issues. He also argued that at the time of publication, migrant and refugee settlement service provision agencies had inadequate information about the needs of the Burmese community.
communities by nationality (and not ethnic or cultural background),\textsuperscript{25} there are clear advantages in having a common terminology in attempts to affect such change. Utilising the term ‘Burmese’ is also a useful way to communicate such messages to the wider Australian public who most likely do not realise the extent of the diversity of the people who make up Burma.

While there may be strategic advantages for mobilising a Burmese identity, there is still a responsibility to critique the use of national formations and claims of essentialised identities (national or ethnic), particularly where they are utilised as part of a management strategy. Such analysis is especially important in relation to the situation in Burma, where national identity is also deployed in a manner that elides both ethnic diversity and any claims to alternative ethnic nationalisms. In writing a history of Burmese migration to Australia there is a need to investigate and highlight the ways in which these different and sometimes competing identities are given meaning by the people who identify with, embrace, or reject them; or, as Ien Ang has argued, to explore the way identity operates in ‘practice, in different historical, geographical, political and cultural contexts’.\textsuperscript{26} All of these considerations feed into and impact on the type of history offered in this thesis – it is a history of the moment, not a master narrative of the Burmese experience of migration to Australia.\textsuperscript{27}

\textbf{A Review of the Literature on Burmese migration: Australian and International Perspectives}

There is very little work to date that analyses migration from Burma to either Australia or other Western nations of resettlement, or the experiences of Burmese migrants in those places. The work to date has been limited in scope, focusing on either one or two of the ethnic communities that form part of the wider Burmese community, a single policy through which migration occurred, or the response of Burmese migrants to a specific issue. As a result, none of the literature reviewed in

\textsuperscript{25} Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), \textit{Burmese Community Profile} (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2006).
\textsuperscript{26} Ien Ang, \textit{On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West} (London: Routledge, 2001), 40.
\textsuperscript{27} This conceptualisation draws upon the work of Stephen Muecke who resists claims to mastery and rejects notions of truth for honesty in his work \textit{Ancient and Modern}. He aims to ‘try things out rather than write down the truth because…this is the only way to proceed honestly’. See: Stephen Muecke, \textit{Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy} (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 8.
this section is able to provide a broad-based understanding of this migration or adequately address the nuances of identification that exist across the community as a whole. This thesis therefore seeks to bridge these gaps in the current literature by providing a holistic study that examines Burmese migration to Australia over a long historical period and from a broad range of perspectives. In doing so, it explores the experiences of both ethnic minority and majority people from within the Burmese community of Australia, and investigates: the political discourses and policies that shaped their migration; the practical challenges of resettling in Australia; and, through an examination of the politics of identity, the way in which their experiences have shaped their internal lives. As such, this thesis provides a foundation for what will hopefully be many more studies on this subject – essential given that the Burmese community in Australia and other nations is continuing to grow rapidly.

The earliest research, published or unpublished, featuring the experiences of elements of the Burmese community in Australia dates from 1994.\textsuperscript{28} Fourteen studies across a range of disciplines have since been written. They have been published over two relatively distinct periods: from 1996 to 2006; and from 2010 to the present. The most recent literature has been written largely in response to the rapid growth of the community since 2006, and explores the experiences of people who arrived during this period. Very few of these studies, from either period, have a historiographical focus. Klaus Neumann briefly mentions the migration of this community in his book, \textit{Refuge Australia} (2004), his short history of Australia's response to refugees up to 1973. He does so within a broader discussion of ‘mixed-descent’ migration under the provisions of the white Australia policy.\textsuperscript{29} While he reveals something of the policy considerations that affected the selection and entry of Anglo-Burmese migrants by Australian officials during the 1960s, no sense is given of the size, resettlement patterns, or lived experiences of this community. A published oral history collection, \textit{Journeys of Hope} (1994), contributes in a limited way to closing this gap. Focusing on family migration to Western Australia between 1937 and 1968, it features the stories and experiences of two generations of an Anglo-Burmese family.\textsuperscript{30} Simon

\textsuperscript{28} Maryon Allbrook, ed., \textit{Journeys of Hope: Six Stories of Family Migration to Western Australia, 1937-1968} (Wembley: State Print, Department of State Services, 1994). This oral history collection includes the story of an Anglo-Burmese family.
\textsuperscript{29} Klaus Neumann, \textit{Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record} (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 49-51.
\textsuperscript{30} Allbrook, ed., \textit{Journeys of Hope}.  

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Colquhoun uses this work to validate his findings in his PhD thesis, “Experiences of Anglo-Burmese Migrants in Perth Western Australia” (2004). While Colquhoun was working within the psychology discipline, he also conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with a number of first- and second-generation members of this community.

The narratives constructed in *Journeys of Hope* and Colquhoun’s study are two of only three available sources of information that explicitly focus on the lived experiences of those people of Anglo-Burmese descent who have migrated to Australia. The first generation Anglo-Burmese migrants interviewed for both publications shared a desire to maintain their Burmese culture, while still identifying as Australian and holding an appreciation for the political freedoms available in their new country. Many described positive employment and educational experiences in Australia which had led to a degree of upward social mobility. While instances of discrimination and racism were experienced by all, Colquhoun found that for second-generation Anglo-Burmese migrants such experiences reinforced a negative feeling of difference.

The extent and nature of ties to the Burmese community by individuals from Burma was another strong theme that emerged from these two studies. Although community ties were maintained through family and friendship networks, participation in formal societies and organizations was experienced as problematic for some, particularly as overt campaigning on Burmese political issues, or assisting refugees, had the potential to result in the denial of a tourist visa to return to Burma and visit family members who remained there. Colquhoun also found that

32 The third is a memoir, which is explored in depth in Chapter Three. See: Colin McPhedran, White Butterflies (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2002); An Honours thesis also explores their experience. See: Romana Lee, “Influence of Culture on Intergenerational Conflict: A Comparative Study of Burmese Adolescents, Immigrant Burmese Adolescents, and Anglo Australian Adolescents” (Hons. Diss., Edith Cowan University, 1997); In addition, some Anglo-Burmese people were interviewed for a study by Erica Lewin, however she subsumes their experiences within the wider category Anglo-Indian. See: Erica Lewin, “Perceptions About Skin Colour and Heritage: The Experience of Anglo-Indian Women in Western Australia,” *Social Identities* 11, 6 (2005): 631-651.
community ties among the second generation, while maintained through their extended family, tended to be looser given their lack of knowledge about their family and community past.\textsuperscript{37} A second-generation member of the family whose story is told in \textit{Journeys of Hope} likewise described a similar lack of knowledge.\textsuperscript{38}

The remaining studies from this first period of literature on Burmese migration to, and resettlement in, Australia focus on the experiences of those Burmese migrants who have arrived since the early 1990s.\textsuperscript{39} These studies are largely restricted to an exploration of the Burmese community in Melbourne. They are further limited by a bias towards the experiences of ethnic majority Burman migrants, and while all are based to some degree on interviews with their participants, this material is usually not emphasised and is not placed into any theoretical context.

In monitoring the progress of five Burmese students who had gained entry to Australia as part of an AusAID scholarship program, Rosamond Washington’s MA thesis served largely as an evaluation of both the educational and language support programs these students undertook, and their subsequent achievements in their first semester of tertiary study.\textsuperscript{40} She also charted the social aspects of the students’ lives (including accommodation arrangements and family relationships) that impacted on their ability to study successfully in Australia.\textsuperscript{41} A number of key themes that emerged through Washington’s analysis are of interest to this thesis. In particular, she highlighted that while the participants found cultural adjustment to Australian society difficult, each continued to be ‘staunch’ in their religion and ‘loyal’ to their nation and families.\textsuperscript{42} She also found that worry for the future and the situation in Burma had a negative impact on the ability of many of the students to study, as did feelings of guilt (associated with the opportunity they had to study in Australia).\textsuperscript{43}

Corlett’s work offered a succinct, yet relatively wide-ranging, account of the resettlement issues faced by Burmese new arrivals up until 1997. Themes similar to those explored by Washington are threaded through his analysis. These include resettlement problems such as accommodation issues, guilt, and cultural dislocation.

\textsuperscript{38} Allbrook, \textit{Journeys of Hope}, 184.
\textsuperscript{39} Corlett, \textit{The Burmese New Arrivals}; Washington, “Burmese Students in Australia”; Stahr, \textit{Burmese in Australia}.
\textsuperscript{40} Washington, “Burmese Students in Australia,” i.
\textsuperscript{41} Washington, “Burmese Students in Australia,” i.
\textsuperscript{42} Washington, “Burmese Students in Australia,” 56.
\textsuperscript{43} Washington, “Burmese Students in Australia,” 61.
Corlett also highlighted the significant levels of trauma, loss and isolation felt by members of the Burmese community. Of particular interest to the focus of this thesis are Corlett’s comments on identity formation, both at an individual and community level. He argued that ethnicity is an important part of cultural identity for Burmese people, and, while the limitations of the study meant he could not extrapolate, Corlett stressed that the experience of minority and majority populations are ‘in some ways different’. On the students who are the main focus of his study, he wrote: they ‘forged their sense of self through their political involvement. They see themselves as political activists fighting for democracy in Burma.’ This thesis aims to close the gap caused by the restricted scope of Corlett’s study, by delineating the experiences of those from ethnic minority and majority backgrounds in its discussion of emigration and resettlement in Chapters Four and Five.

Very little has been written about the nature and extent of connections that might exist between the earlier Anglo-Burmese community that was established in the middle decades of the twentieth century and those people from Burma who arrived from the early 1990s. Corlett indicated that the politics around the claiming of a Burmese identity may be fraught, and that divisions may exist within the Burmese community in Australia, when he stated in his work that ‘some suggest that the community has begun to assert itself as a community only since the new arrivals have come to Australia.’ Erika Stahr’s work also highlighted this issue, albeit briefly, when she argued that the earlier Burmese arrivals ‘do not have close ties to those who came later as refugees’. Colquhoun does not expound on this issue at all, however, nor does any of the literature that has emerged since 2010. Chapter Five of this thesis extends understanding of this issue by exploring in depth the identity issues that arise for people from Burma after resettling in Australia, in particular the politics of claiming a ‘Burmese’ identity in the Australian context.

The rapid increase of the Burma-born population in Australian since 2006 has led to the recent emergence of a new group of academic and other studies about this community. Some look at the experiences of this community by incorporating the

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perspectives of people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but a larger group of articles more explicitly analyse the experiences of one or two discrete ethnic groups. Each of these studies examines a specific element of the resettlement experience, such as: social suffering, social isolation and feelings of hope; cultural maintenance and identity issues; and practical resettlement issues such as navigating Australian financial systems.

A key element of this thesis is an examination of the complex identity issues that influence the resettlement experiences of migrants from Burma. Recent studies that take a single ethnic community perspective have also examined this issue, including “The Identity of Displaced Christian Karen in the Context of Resettlement Threat or Opportunity?” (2010) by Shirley Worland and Yvonne Darlington. They found that ethnic and religious based community organizations were the main providers of resettlement support for the Karen people interviewed – findings replicated to a large extent in this thesis. Worland and Darlington outlined how these organizations assisted with the maintenance of culture by providing Karen literacy classes and cultural and (Karen) national community celebrations. Anxiety over the potential loss of culture in younger generations was also a key finding of the study.

An excellent example from the literature which takes a more holistic community approach is the recently published article, “Unpacking the Micro–Macro Nexus: Narratives of Suffering and Hope Among Refugees from Burma Recently Settled in Australia” (2012) by Mark Brough et al. Analysing interviews with migrants from Burma from eight different ethnic backgrounds, this study presents findings that also resonate with interviews conducted for this thesis (discussed in

Chapter Five). In particular: both studies outline that hope for the future is largely invested in the potential achievements of participants’ children; and that feelings of freedom and a lessening of fear since resettlement coexist with feelings of sadness and loneliness created by separation from family and social isolation in Australia.\(^{52}\)

Although Brough et al’s study does not ‘assume homogeneity of experience or meaning across these diverse social and cultural positions’, they argue that collecting the experiences of people from Burma from multiple backgrounds together can open ‘up an understanding of this population in a way which can inform future more nuanced work.’\(^{53}\) The structure and scope of this thesis reflects a similar understanding of the value of writing a collective Burmese history.

Literature on Burmese migration to, and resettlement in, other Western nations is as scarce as that on the Burmese in Australia. Articles derived from four academic studies, two from the United States of America (USA), one from Canada, and one on the Burmese community in Japan, are discussed here. The two articles that explore Burmese migration to Japan and Canada each place their analysis within a framework of transnational theory. Susan Banki’s work, “The Triad of Transnationalism, Legal Recognition and Local Community: Shaping Political Space for the Burmese Refugees in Japan” (2006) examines the assumed ‘unidirectional’ relationship between legal status and transnationalism (particularly where secure legal status is supposed to better enable migrants and refugees to engage in political advocacy). Banki argued instead that transnational acts are ‘part of a three-way relationship including legal recognition and local community’.\(^{54}\) Through her analysis she was able to show that ‘the development and maintenance of local refugee communities in Japan influence and are influenced by both legal status and transnational political acts, often in surprising ways.’ Her central argument was that in Japan ‘conflict arises from the application and provision of legal status, and transnational space is often diminished as a result’.\(^{55}\)

The vast majority of the Burmese community in Japan are illegal overstayers, many of whom refuse (for a number of different reasons) to apply for official refugee


\(^{55}\) Banki, “The Triad of Transnationalism, Legal Recognition and Local Community,” 2.
status. Only a very small proportion of this community are legally recognised as refugees, while slightly more are undertaking the application process and are officially asylum seekers. Banki described the Burmese community in Japan as belonging to the ‘intermediate term’ category – ‘the nebulous and lengthy period between the post-emergency phase and the resolution of the conflict’ where they are likely to engage ‘in transnational political action in order to, and with the intention to, return to Burma when the conflict subsides’. For Banki, while the community is small, it is also one in ‘transition’, arguing that ‘unless there are drastic changes in Burma or in Japanese immigration policy in the next ten years, the refugee population will not only be better integrated and larger, but will have a significant second generation of children.’

In contrast to Banki’s article, the work of Jennifer Hyndman and Margaret Walton-Roberts, “Interrogating Borders: A Transnational Approach to Refugee Research in Vancouver” (2000), gives a very limited understanding of the small Burmese community in Canada. The main purpose of the article, however, is to contextualise their discussion on transnational approaches and development of a collaborative methodology. The Burmese community in Canada is made up of mainly ‘Convention refugees’ who have been resettled from refugee camps in Southeast Asia with the assistance of the UNHCR. They are a relatively new immigrant group, not arriving ‘in earnest until the 1990s’, and still small in size. While Hyndman’s and Walton-Roberts’ discussion of the ‘gender bias’ in the Canadian refugee determination system illuminates why there are significantly more Burmese men in Canada than women, their main focus is to chart the transnational connections of the Burmese community. Acknowledging the limitations of their work, they argued that ‘[e]vidence from the fifty interviews suggests that transnational connections are numerous and diverse.’ Hyndman and Walton-Roberts saw in such transnational connections a transformative political potential.

58 Banki, “The Triad of Transnationalism, Legal Recognition and Local Community,” 5.  
Education academic Gail Hickey,\(^{64}\) has also commented on the lack of research on Burmese migration to the USA in her article “‘This is American Get Punished’: Unpacking Narratives of Southeast Asian refugees in the US” (2005). In her work she aimed to ‘add to the sparse research base on Southeast Asians residing in the US’.\(^{65}\) Hickey’s focus was too broad, however, to offer any real insight into the particularities of the Burmese experience and her use of the term ‘ethnic Burmese’ calls into question her understanding of the range of ethnic groups who reside in Burma and their complex relations with one another.\(^{66}\) A more nuanced discussion is provided by Paul Kenny and Kate Lockwood-Kenny in “A Mixed Blessing: Karen Resettlement to the United States” (2011). Like much of the recent work from Australia, it focuses on the experiences of one ethnic community, and also found that ethnic- and religious-based community organizations provided important levels of resettlement assistance and support.\(^{67}\) While it provides comprehensive information about pre- and post-resettlement experiences for this community, there is still a need for additional research to examine other ethnic groups as well as the Burmese community in the USA (and other nations) as a whole.

It is clear that the literature that exists on the Burmese community in Australia and in other Western countries of resettlement is limited, although growing. Renewed attention to developments in Burma by political scientists and anthropologists, many of whom have been watching developments over many years (discussed more fully in Chapter One and where relevant throughout the thesis) are providing valuable new contextual knowledge.\(^{68}\) What has been published thus far on migration, however, is

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\(^{65}\) Hickey, “‘This is American Get Punished’,” 25-26.


\(^{68}\) For example, see: Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson, ed., *Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008); Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson, ed., *Myanmar: The State, Community and the Environment* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 2007); David I. Steinberg.
largely located in the psychology, social work and community development fields. While each work is a valuable contribution to understanding the resettlement needs of migrants from Burma, they lack historical depth and many elide the nuances of experience within the community as a whole – between and within the different ethnic and political groups that collectively make up the Burmese in Australia and overseas. This thesis is an important addition to the existing literature, as its close attention to ethnic and national politics, and its long-range historical perspective, provides an important contextual basis for the Australia-based micro-studies discussed above.

Interrogating Race and Nation in Contemporary Australia

Research for this project commenced in 2007, the final year of the federal Liberal-National Government presided over by Prime Minister John Howard (1996-2007), and its approach was heavily influenced by the identity politics that were a central feature of that era. This conservative period of government, and in particular Prime Minister John Howard, responded to a range of controversial immigration issues and Australia’s cultural diversity in ways that rearticulated Australian national identity so as to explicitly prioritise the position of the majority Anglo-Celtic people and culture. Such issues included the emergence of Pauline Hanson and her right-wing nationalist One Nation Party (1996-1997), and, increased arrivals of asylum seekers by boat, particularly during the Howard government’s second term (1998-2001). Howard and Hanson (whose concerns in this area were interestingly largely adopted

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72 See: McMaster, *Asylum Seekers*. 
by the Howard government), conceived of the Australian nation, and Australian national identity, as natural and stable entities, unchanged throughout history and under attack by multiculturalism. The narrow definitions of national belonging that they espoused went beyond symbolism: it had significant negative impacts on the lives and bodies of asylum seekers and other migrants,\(^{73}\) including Burmese immigrants and refugees, making it particularly urgent that prevailing constructions of race and nation in contemporary Australia continued to be interrogated and challenged.

The work of three theorists has been central to the understandings of race, ethnicity and nation that underpin the analysis of Burmese migration to Australia presented in this thesis: Ghassan Hage, John Stratton and Ien Ang. Their work on identity issues and Australian multiculturalism was also to varying degrees a response to the Howard and Hanson’s cultural and immigration policy agendas. An examination of these theorists illustrates that the deployment of identity politics and responses to immigration issues in Australia, since the Howard government was first elected in 1996, drew upon a set of historic anxieties about race and cultural diversity. The following discussion teases out the changing definitions of race, ethnicity and nation in Australia over the twentieth century, and the relationship this has had on the development of immigration selection and settlement policies and articulations of national identity. It concludes with a discussion of transnational history practice, which gained strength in Australia during the Howard government era and which also acted to challenge naturalised conceptions of the nation and national identity. While this thesis cannot accurately be described as a transnational history, throughout its analysis of migration from Burma to Australia it strives to interrogate the constructed nature of national boundaries.

Australia’s geographic position on the edge of Asia has contributed to the development of a specific form of national identity that idealises racial homogeneity and is associated with anxieties about invasion, particularly from Asia.\(^{74}\) Ien Ang has

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\(^{73}\) In 2005 a ‘citizen’s inquiry’, know as The People’s Inquiry Into Detention, into the impact of these policies was conducted. The oral testimony and written submissions of this inquiry are published in: Linda Briskman, Chris Goddard and Susie Latham, *Human Rights Overboard: Seeking Asylum in Australia* (Carlton North: Scribe Publishing, 2008).

\(^{74}\) Perhaps the best overview of these anxieties is provided by David Walker. See: David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1999); More recently, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have analysed the transnational nature of these anxieties. See: Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White*
argued that Australia's anxiety about Asia was not accidental to its history nor merely based upon outdated racial prejudices. Instead it was ‘fundamentally structurally informed [by] the antagonistic relationship of its history and its geography.’\textsuperscript{75} Through colonial dispossession of Indigenous Australians, white people claimed ‘exclusiveness of possession’ of Australia. This collapsing of racial and spatial boundaries ‘had a powerful imaginative effect on the white settlers. It provided the fledgling settler society with a singular sense of spatial identity.’\textsuperscript{76} For Ang, ‘the imaginary closure provided by the sense of continental wholeness and insularity, intensified – together with the distance from Europe – a feeling among the inhabitants of the new white nation that they were dangerously exposed to external threats.’\textsuperscript{77} In this way, the fear of invasion became the ‘crucial determinant of the psychogeography of ‘white Australia’. It was a fear that ‘was intensely heightened when the invader was imagined as “Asian”: so geographically proximate, so threateningly multitudinous, and not least, so alienly non-white.’\textsuperscript{78} Asia has therefore been historically constructed as the ‘utterly distrusted Other’ which Australia was ‘defined, foundationally, against’.\textsuperscript{79} One significant result of this racial/spatial anxiety was the desire to restrict non-white immigration through legislative measures that are collectively referred to as the white Australia policy.\textsuperscript{80}

An adherence to the tenets of a racially exclusive Australia remained strong and explicit well into the middle of the twentieth century. John Stratton has effectively shown that after the Second World War essentialist understandings of Australia, associated with reductivist conceptions of a racially white ‘Australian type’, began to shift to constructivist and cultural understandings of national identity. He argued that by the late 1960s and early 1970s, this discursive shift had culminated in the positioning of race as the signifier of a particular kind of culture, one based on a

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\textit{Men’s Countries and the Question of Racial Equality} (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2008). Both studies will be discussed in more detail in Chapter One.


\textsuperscript{76} Ang, “Racial/Spatial Anxiety,” 192.

\textsuperscript{77} Ang, “Racial/Spatial Anxiety,” 192.

\textsuperscript{78} Ang, “Racial/Spatial Anxiety,” 193.

\textsuperscript{79} Ang, “Racial/Spatial Anxiety,” 193-194. [Emphasis in original].

\textsuperscript{80} For a history of this policy, see Gwenda Tavan, \textit{The Long Slow Death of White Australia} (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2005).
shared Judeo-Christian morality. At the same time the concept of ethnicity emerged as an important political category of identity in Australia. Conceived of as a subset of race, it broadened the definition of who could be considered ‘white’. Linked with the emergence of multiculturalism during the 1970s, understandings of ethnicity in Australia were defined by national origin. As a result of the restricted nature of Australia’s immigration program at that time, ethnic groups were identified largely as European, and hence, remained white. Stratton contended that it was difficult to get the white Australian population to see groups from non-European backgrounds as belonging to an ethnicity, and they therefore continued to be defined by racial characteristics. A complex hierarchy of identity was therefore created, in which people and communities from Asia continued to be seen as ‘other’.

Shifts in understandings of what constituted the nation were occurring simultaneously. Stratton argued that prior to the 1970s nations were primarily naturalised and ‘experienced in an essentialist way, as, in some sense, always having existed.’ The state was seen as an outgrowth of the nation so that ‘the homogeneity of the nation, expressed in the complex and historically variable coupling of “race” and “culture”, is then reflected in centralised and standardised government structure of the state’. With the recognition that the nation is a culturally constructed entity, the nation and state began to be seen by theorists as separate. Stratton argues that as a result, nationalism was seen to be a process through which the nationalist constructed and identified shared sites of meaning, thereby calling the nation ‘into being’ and, ‘through the naturalisation of these sites’ ensured ‘its continuity’.

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84 Stratton, Race Daze, 110.

85 Stratton posits Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ thesis as being pivotal in new understandings of the nation. See: Stratton, Race Daze, 115-116, 125.

86 Stratton, Race Daze, 115-116.
addition, ‘shared features’ of the nation are imagined by its citizens in the drive to define the national community, and it is these shared features that then become the national identity.\textsuperscript{88} Stratton argues that a new form of preoccupation with national identity in Australia emerged in the early 1970s. Despite the development of a non-racially exclusive immigration program by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) government led by Gough Whitlam (1972-1975), nationalistic films such as \textit{Gallipoli} (1981) continued to construct ‘very conservative’ representations of Australian national identity that provided a continuity with both earlier racially based identities and ‘new claims by Hanson and Howard of the centrality of an Anglo-Celtic, mainstream culture’.\textsuperscript{89}

Stratton, Ang and Hage have all illustrated the continuing strength of race in contemporary Australia, both in national identity constructions and within the discourse of Australian multiculturalism. In Stratton’s opinion ‘whiteness has not disappeared’ but has become ‘coded through terminology that identifies certain people as Anglo-Celtic and mainstream’.\textsuperscript{90} For Ang, while Australian multiculturalist discourse ‘tends to present itself as having overcome the language of race, and therefore that of racism’, race cannot ‘be so easily repressed’.\textsuperscript{91} She argued that given whiteness is ‘[o]ne of the classic defining characteristics of the West’, it is inevitable that increased immigration of non-white people has ‘all too easily [been] read as a crisis in the making – a crisis of the very unmaking of the West.’\textsuperscript{92}

It is Hage’s work, however, that has been particularly influential to critiques of Australian multiculturalism, providing analysis of the continued centrality of whiteness in Australian society. In \textit{White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society} (1998), he mapped the way ‘certain cultural forms of white-ethnic power relations remained omnipresent in a multicultural society, and were reproduced by the very ideologies of cultural pluralism and tolerance that were supposed to transcend them.’\textsuperscript{93} In doing so, he successfully made connections between ‘White racists and White multiculturalists’ who:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{88} Stratton, \textit{Race Daze}, 125.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Stratton, \textit{Race Daze}, 130-131.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Stratton, “Multiculturalism and the Whitening Machine,” 180.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Ang, \textit{On Not Speaking Chinese}, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Ang, \textit{On Not Speaking Chinese}, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Hage, \textit{White Nation}, 15.
\end{itemize}
share in a conception of themselves as nationalists and of the nation as a space structured around a White culture, where Aboriginal people and non-White ‘ethnics’ are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a White national will.\textsuperscript{94}

Hage argued that one of the main features of Australia’s immigration debates is ‘the way the voice of the “ethnic other” is made passive not only by those who want to eradicate it, but also by those who are happy to welcome it under some conditions they feel entitled to set.’ Migrants are therefore silenced and constructed as ‘passive objects to be governed by those who have given themselves the national governmental right to “worry” about the nation.’\textsuperscript{95} In this way, ‘White Multiculturalism’ works to ‘mystify, to keep out of public discourse, other multicultural realities in which White people are not the overwhelming occupiers of the centre of national space.’\textsuperscript{96}

The voices and agency of migrants can also be denied within historical practice, which is often framed around national priorities. Transnational approaches to history have sought to challenge the hegemony of the nation, and in so doing to open up a space for multiple perspectives and pasts to be incorporated.\textsuperscript{97} The influence of transnational approaches on historical scholarship, however, has been slow to develop. When seeking to explain this issue, many of the historians commenting on transnational history have highlighted the particularly strong (and continuing) relationship between the nation-state and the discipline of history.\textsuperscript{98} Even histories of what Marilyn Lake termed ‘evidently global movements’ such as migration are often ‘re-construed as nation-based histories’.\textsuperscript{99} Donna Gabaccia has also commented on this phenomenon, arguing that ‘modern historiography makes migration a significant

\textsuperscript{94} Hage, \textit{White Nation}, 18.
\textsuperscript{95} Hage, \textit{White Nation}, 17.
\textsuperscript{96} Hage, \textit{White Nation}, 19.
theme mainly when it constructs nations’. For Gabaccia, this paradigm transforms both ‘migrants, and their historians, into “nowhere men,” occupying a historiographical nowhere land.’

Along with Lake, Ann Curthoys has been at the forefront of the analysis of transnational history within the context of Australian historiography. In her article, “Does Australian History Have a Future?” (2002), she succinctly and effectively charted developments in Australian historiography, complicating the notion of a historically continuous dominance of a national framework in the process. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s, she argued, that Australian historiography narrowed its focus from its conceptualisation as part of British imperial or Commonwealth history to finally develop a ‘nationalist identity’. And while this was a period of significantly increased immigration to Australia of people of a non-British and eventually non-European background, within this newly developed nationalist framework the stories of migrants were often co-opted into a contribution model of historical research and writing. It is a point also taken up by Lake and Gabaccia. Gabaccia’s work in particular highlighted that it is a phenomenon not limited to Australian historiography. Her involvement in the transnational history project “Italians Everywhere” led her to the conclusion that: ‘In decidedly different, and thus telling, ways, each national historiography touched by Italy’s migrants distorted their experiences to tell the history of a single nation and its making.

Gabaccia was interested in challenging this ‘tyranny of the national in the discipline of history’. In doing so, she argued that the nation should not be ignored or sidestepped but instead problematised and deconstructed. However, like many of the theorists from other disciplines discussed above, she also stressed the continuing strength of the nation-state as an organising force in contemporary society, one that ‘touched almost every dimension of…migrants’ lives’, and one that generated ‘much of the information’ historians use to study migrants and migration. As a result, even historians who set out to challenge national paradigms by writing transnational

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100 Gabaccia, “Is Everywhere Nowhere?” 1115.
102 Curthoys, “Does Australian History Have a Future?” 140-142.
103 Curthoys, “Does Australian History Have a Future?” 149.
histories ‘find that their research reveals global human movements as simultaneously threatening and sustaining nations’. Lake also recognised the continuing strength of the nation-state ‘despite globalisation’. And while she saw a national framework for historical research as clearly ‘inadequate’, her desire to create work that has progressive political implications led her to caution historians to remember that ‘[i]t is primarily within the domain of the nation-state that policies can be influenced and political change affected’.

Lake’s caution is important particularly in the context of the recent prominence of border protection mentalities and policies that have led to the demonisation of asylum seekers in Australia and elsewhere. To recognise the ongoing structural importance of the nation-state, however, does not preclude the taking up of Gabaccia’s challenge to deconstruct and problematise it. As Lake herself argued, ‘mentalities of border protection’ can be broken down by transnational histories through the documentation of ‘the interconnections of countries and the historical processes and relationships that have joined peoples around the world’. Tracing transnational patterns of influence and networks of connection as Curthoys advocates, and engaging in what Catherine Hall has termed ‘trans-national thinking’, can highlight the processes of nation building (and the concepts of national community and national identity) as constructed and contentious.

For Gabaccia, the concepts of diaspora and internationalism have the potential to challenge national paradigms. She did not take up these concepts uncritically however and criticised diaspora in particular, as a bounded entity and identity not unlike a nation. As a counter to this problem, and in recognition of the influence of regionalism on the migration of people from Italy, Gabaccia set out to instead investigate and write about ‘Italy’s many diasporas’. She ceased to see Italy as a primordial nation and ‘ceased writing of immigrants and emigrants in order to take

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110 Lake, “Nationalist Historiography,” 182, 184.
111 Lake, “Nationalist Historiography,” 184.
112 Curthoys, “Does Australian History Have a Future?” 145-146.
113 Quoted in Lake, “White Man’s Country,” 347.
migrants’ complex experiences seriously’. Her approach resonates with that of this thesis, particularly given the contested nature of Burma as both a state and a nation and the nationalistic self-conceptualisation by many of Burma’s ethnic minority groups. For while this thesis broadly offers a history of migration between two nation-states, in deconstructing prevailing discourses of race and nation in each place, and exploring the historical conditions that gave rise to them, it is able to problematise and challenge them. In doing so, it highlights the ways in which such discourses are connected across nations and the very real impact they can have on the lived experiences of migrants. Oral history interviews discussed in Chapter Five also provide a space for migrants to speak, revealing the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of identification occurring among the communities from Burma now living in Australia.

Sources and Methodology

This thesis draws on six key sources to tell the story of migration from Burma to Australia since the Second World War: interviews with people who have migrated here in the past two decades; government archival documents; Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia case files; memoir; parliamentary debates; and media sources. Using such a wide variety of sources provides a multi-dimensional view of migration between Burma and Australia, so that political, administrative, media and personal accounts and understandings of this history are able to be explored.

Government records held at the Canberra branch of National Archives of Australia are an important source for this thesis. They offer invaluable insights into how Burmese migration was administered by the Australian federal government, particularly in the 1960s when a peak in arrivals occurred. The Department of External Affairs correspondence file series, A1838, holds the most significant information on migration from Burma to Australia. Contained in it is the file, “Burma – Migration to Australia”, the only file specifically devoted to this subject across all government agencies. It details the policy debates that occurred between External Affairs and Immigration on Burma-specific issues such as ‘brain drain’ (discussed in Chapter Two). Other files in this series are based on internal Burmese politics;

Burma-Australia relations (in particular, Australian interests in and policy towards Burma); and reports and despatches from Australian representatives in Burma. Such material provides important context for how migration from Burma was administered, particularly given policy priorities of the Department of External Affairs influenced migration decisions. Reference to migration from Burma between the late 1940s and early 1970s in Department of Immigration files is largely subsumed into larger policy questions. For example, “Admission of Persons of Mixed Descent [Race] – Part 1”, in the Department of Immigration Central Office correspondence files series (A446). Individual migration application files from Burma are held in the Australian Embassy, Myanmar [Yangon], multiple number series, A9678/1. They are a particularly valuable source, illustrating the personal impact of policies on the lives of migrants and their families during that era.

Government archival records relating to the most recent wave of migration from Burma (dating from the early 1990s and accelerating from 2006) are not yet accessible. Therefore alternative archives needed to be both found and created in order to explore more contemporary experiences of migration between these two places. Oral history interviews provided one mechanism (discussed below), but as they were primarily restricted to a focus on participants’ experiences resettling in Australia, published case files from the Australian Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) of Australia are an important additional archive. They provide rich material that offers fascinating insights into the reasons for which people chose to leave Burma and seek protection in Australia since 1988. The RRT strives to publish forty percent of all cases that are representative of ‘the range of decisions across visa classes, claims, source countries and outcomes of review’. In the case of applicants from Burma, this means that the experiences of people from a large variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, and reasons for application, are made available. Since the RRT is also forbidden from publishing any material that identifies an applicant or an applicant’s

117 Although political progress has been made in recent years in Burma, there was a lack of optimism about change among people from Burma and Burma watchers when the project began in 2007 and in 2008 when the bulk of the interviews were undertaken. I was mindful that people may fear reprisal for friends and family in Burma if they spoke about their experiences of persecution in Burma or their opinion of the regime. Additionally, my small interview cohort could make identification possible, despite the use of pseudonyms; and I was unable to provide post-interview counselling if needed due to a lack of connections and funding constraints.

family or dependents,\textsuperscript{119} making the use of these files as a source in this thesis an ethical choice. By incorporating first person accounts of persecution through the inclusion of statutory declarations and oral testimony given at RRT hearings these files also allow the voices of the migrants themselves to be heard in a manner similar to the individual migration case files held at the NAA discussed above.

Public discourses on migration and related issues can enrich understandings of why policies are developed and how they are administered. An analysis of political debates and media coverage of events in Burma is therefore an important dimension to this thesis, providing a broader contextual discussion of how Burma and the Burmese were understood in Australia, and how they have figured in larger debates about immigration and foreign policy.\textsuperscript{120} This thesis utilises *Hansard* to undertake a comprehensive review of how Burma was incorporated in debates in the Australian federal parliament House of Representatives between 1947 and 1968. Discussions on Burma reflected larger shifts in Australian foreign policy concerns during this period,\textsuperscript{121} as well as the entrenched attitudes about race and culture that underpinned the administration of the white Australia policy for so many decades. While Australian press coverage of key events, such as the Third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885, augment discussion throughout the thesis, it includes a more in depth analysis of the way in which the *Australian*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *Sun* (now *Herald Sun*, based in Melbourne) reported on the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and subsequent coup in Burma, and the multi-party election in 1990. Doing so illustrates representations and (mis)understandings of the Burmese-Australian community and of Burmese history and politics.

The capacity of the sources discussed above to offer the reader insight into the


\textsuperscript{121} On Australian foreign policy during this period, see: I. M. Cumpston, *History of Australian Foreign Policy, 1901-1991* (Canberra: I. M. Cumpston, 2005); See also: Gary Woodard, *Human Rights in Australian Foreign Policy With Special Reference to Cambodia, Burma and China* (East Melbourne: Australian Institute of International Affairs (Victorian Branch), 1991).
thoughts and feelings of migrants are limited by their very nature. Memoir is one pathway through which to access such material. In particular, this thesis draws on White Butterflies, the only memoir to be published by a Burmese-Australian person. Texts such as Colin McPhedran’s White Butterflies (2002) act as ‘adjacent cultural knowledges’, and they offer unique insights into the interior world of migrant identity and belonging. Oral history interviews are the other avenue through which the individual voices and experiences of migrants from Burma are incorporated into this thesis. Oral history was initially seen as one way of ‘recovering the voice of those previously “hidden from history”’. However it was not long before the initial enthusiasm for oral history developed into critical attempts to analyse and problematise it. At the forefront of the shift to a theoretical examination of oral history was Italian scholar Alessandro Portelli who argued that oral histories tell us ‘less about events than about their meaning’. He argued that the analysis of memories offered by oral history work enables the historian to explore not just what people did, but ‘what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did’. In short, it gives historians access to the speaker’s subjectivity and if the research is ‘broad and articulated enough’, to a cross section of a group or class subjectivity.

For this thesis I conducted eighteen interviews in total between 2008 and 2011. Of those people interviewed, five were Mon, eleven were Chin and two described themselves as Burmese or Myanmar, claiming no separate ethnic identity.

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122 A fuller discussion of the use of these sources is provided in Chapter Three. Also, see: Jessica Carniel, “Who Josie Became Next: Developing Narratives of Ethnic Identity Formation in Italian Literature and Film” (PhD Diss., University of Melbourne, 2006), 17-18.


Eight women and eleven men were interviewed and the people ranged in age at the time of the interviews from twenty-one to their late forties. While three of the participants in this study arrived in Australia in the early to mid-1990s, the rest arrived between 2005 and 2009. This reflects the rapid increase in migration from Burma to Australia that occurred during that period. All of the Mon people interviewed reside in Canberra and the remaining participants are all based in Melbourne. Assistance with recruiting people to be interviewed for this project was sought through a large number of community-based organisations listed in the *Community Directory: People from Burma/Myanmar* (2006) and also those that had an online presence. Ultimately, few of these organisations had the capacity or the inclination to assist with recruitment for my project. The Australia Mon Association (AMA) in Canberra was an exception. In attending and assisting with the meetings and events of a newly formed activist group, Australia Burma Network, I also began to forge connections with people living in Melbourne from different communities from Burma, especially the Chin community, who provided invaluable assistance.

Interview participants were also recruited through my academic contacts within the Burma studies community in Australia and through day-to-day interactions with people from Burma who became interested in my research. The unique challenges of working with such a culturally and linguistically diverse group of people, including the limitations of my interview cohort, are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

**Thesis Structure**

Chapter One provides a historiographical exploration of race and nation in Australia and Burma through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which decades both nations developed racially based national identities. In doing so, the chapter constructs the foundation for understanding patterns of migration between the two nations. It argues that immigration restriction legislation enacted in Australia in

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129 The role of this organisation is discussed more fully in Chapter Five. Board members of the AMA assisted with the translation of the plain language statement and interview question list into Mon and the recruitment of community members for interviews.
130 Assistance included the translation of documents into Haka (a Chin dialect), the recruitment of participants and assistance with interpreting.
1901 was predicated on dichotomous racial constructions that divided the world into two categories – white and non-white – and that such thinking underpinned migration selection decisions up until the mid-1960s. At the same time that an emerging Australian nationalism was creating the conditions for the prolonged exclusion of migrants from Burma, Burma was grappling with an encroaching British colonialism that was to have an indelible impact on the formation of that nation in the mid-twentieth century. British attempts after annexation in the nineteenth century to inculcate a pan-ethnic identity unified around British subjecthood were unsuccessful, and its administration both exacerbated tensions and created new ones between Burma’s varied ethnic groups. In doing so, it contributed to the rise of competing ethnic nationalist movements in the early twentieth century which continue to have ramifications for the way identity politics are enacted in present-day Burma, and thus to have an impact on subsequent migrations.

Chapter Two takes a detailed look at the first group of people to leave Burma for Australia in large numbers: the Anglo-Burmese. Through an examination of *Hansard* and archival documents, it discusses the political and administrative responses in Australia to Burma and Burmese migration from the late 1940s to the early 1970s. The standing of the Anglo-Burmese community in Burma began to shift after independence in 1948 and deteriorated further following the military coup in 1962. Resentment and suspicion within Burma at this time about their European heritage, and the actual or perceived discrimination that resulted, meant the majority of Anglo-Burmese people made the decision to emigrate. Despite their claims to Britishness, many Anglo-Burmese people remained unacceptable migrants to Australia during the middle-decades of the twentieth century. Their experience exposes the continued salience of the exclusionary national identity constructions in both Burma and Australia discussed in Chapter One.

Chapter Three explores other ways of knowing the Anglo-Burmese migration story, beyond the politics and policy that made such migrations possible. In particular, it explores Anglo-Burmese identity in Australia using a key memoir, *White Butterflies* by Colin McPhedran, as a case study. It investigates what histories and journeys lay behind the claiming of an Anglo-Burmese identity. In addition, it explores the impact of discourses of race and nation on expressions of identity and senses of home and belonging for Anglo-Burmese people. A focus on *White Butterflies*, the only memoir by an Anglo-Burmese Australian person, illustrates the ephemeral nature of Anglo-
Burmese identity in Australia. It also shows the complex ways that the past and present are entangled and impact on the search for belonging and home in the formation of migrant identity. In writing his memoir, McPhedran grapples with these concepts, enacting and publicly claiming his identity as an (Anglo) Burmese-Australian.

Although the Burma-born population of Australia continued to increase after the early 1970s, when the first peak period of migration ended, it did not begin to accelerate again until the early 1990s. The remaining chapters of the thesis examine the conditions that led to larger numbers of people seeking to leave Burma from that time, and the reception and resettlement of these people in Australia, the majority of whom arrived as part of the humanitarian migration stream. It first analyses Australian press coverage of the pro-democracy protests in September 1988 and the multi-party election in May 1990, offering a snapshot of how events in Burma were understood in Australia at the beginning of a new era of Australia-Burma relations. The bulk of Chapter Four draws on case files published by the Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, which offer a rich and fascinating insight into the reasons people have chosen to leave Burma and seek protection in Australia since 1988. The analysis traces the variations in experience between people of different ethnic backgrounds and level of political involvement. None of the cases discussed in this chapter represent people who arrived in Australia on humanitarian visas after seeking protection via the UNHCR overseas; many had escaped to, and lived in, second and third countries for varying periods of time prior to arriving in Australia. Some arrived on legitimate visas, and others on false passports obtained through brokers. Hence, their stories uncover a little discussed facet of asylum seeking in Australia, one often eclipsed by the political and media focus on ‘boat people’.

Chapter Five utilises material elicited from oral history interviews to explore the personal dimensions of resettlement. It first focuses on the practical challenges to settling in Australia, arguing that for most migrants from Burma who have arrived in Australia over the past two decades, the key challenges are learning English, accessing vocational training or education, finding suitable employment and appropriate housing, and coping with associated feelings of social isolation. It then investigates the ways in which identity is felt and understood. In particular, it explores whether a ‘Burmese’ identity is important or even relevant in the Australian context. The interviews make clear that competing understandings of what it means to be
Burmese exist in Australia and vary according to ethnic background, level of involvement in political activism, age and reason for migrating to Australia. People from an ethnic minority background were more likely to express dissatisfaction with being labelled Burmese. The chapter concludes with a community case study, focusing on the ways the Mon in Canberra have collectively negotiated resettlement challenges and issues around cultural maintenance and integration into the wider Australian community.

Throughout the thesis, connections are drawn between Burma and Australia, particularly in the central role that the politics of (national) identity has played in managing the culturally diverse populations in each place. The ongoing conflict between the majority-Burman led government in Burma and a range of ethnic minority groups continues to reverberate with tensions that are a legacy of its colonial past. Since independence in 1948, successive Burmese governments have increasingly attempted to forge a cohesive Burmese national identity centred on Burman cultural and linguistic heritages as a mechanism for managing the competing demands for autonomy from some minorities. Ironically, these programs of ‘Burmanisation’ have only further distanced people of ethnic minority backgrounds from identifying with a Burmese nation. Similarly, recent Australian political debates and policies about asylum seekers, and more general unease about Asian immigration, illustrate that white Australians continue to claim the role of national gate keepers – the arbiters of ‘who comes here and under what circumstances’.131 Such sentiments echo the debates about immigration restrictions in the lead up to Federation in 1901, through which Australia was discursively established as a white man’s country.


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CHAPTER ONE
Empire, Race and Nation in Australia and Burma in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

To understand the historical and contemporary patterns of migration between Australia and Burma it is essential to examine the ways in which concepts such as race and nation have been deployed in both societies over time. The histories of these two nations are connected through their respective positions within the British Empire. Although Australia and Burma each had, and continue to have, very different social and political organisational structures, in each case race has played a significant part in their trajectories towards nationhood. The ways in which discourses of race and nation have been utilised in each place have acted to form boundaries between insiders and outsiders and have been a significant factor driving individuals or groups to emigrate out of Burma, and in the formation of policies that allowed certain groups of people from Burma to migrate into Australia at certain times.

While there has been significant debate among theorists over the origin and form of nations,¹ it is widely accepted that nation-states are a modern phenomenon.² Benedict Anderson’s extremely influential idea was that all collective communities, including nations, constitute an ‘imagined community’.³ His work neatly emphasises the idea that the nation is a discursive formation, a way of speaking that shapes our

consciousness. Communities are imagined through shared myths, symbols and history that in some cases are deliberately invented or produced by the nationalist intelligentsia. For Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, the effectiveness of Anderson’s thesis has meant that the nation has almost become reified as the model for imagined communities in modern times. The effect of this, they argue, is to obscure ‘the ascendancy of transnational racial identifications and their potency in shaping both personal identity and global politics.’

In some ways, a solely national focus acts to elide the connections that exist between the histories of places such as Australia and Burma: the continuing impact of empire and imperial ideals for instance, on the drive to nationhood in both self-governing white settler colonies, such as Australia, and ruled, predominately non-white Crown colonies, such as Burma. This chapter will first look at these developments in Australia from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century before turning to examine attempts in Burma to grapple with British colonialism. This chapter asserts that ideas about race were powerfully linked to understandings about nation and national identity in both places and provides the grounding for a fuller understanding of Burma-Australia migration.

Australia: The Anxieties of a Nation Becoming White

Lake and Reynolds’ examination of the drawing of a ‘global colour line’ has provided the foundation for a much more thorough understanding of the complex set of discursive frameworks that were utilised by Australian colonial elites in their advocacy not just for Australian nationhood and self-governance, but for codifying that nation as a white man’s country. Yet before turning to engage with the significance of this text for this thesis, it is worth examining again the important work of David Walker on the role that ‘Asia’ played in the formation of the Australian nation, national identity constructions and national myths and narratives during the

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4 Calhoun, Nationalism, 3.
8 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 6.
same period.9 Walker’s work will be drawn on to show how Australia’s relationship with Britain evolved during the nineteenth century alongside growing concerns about racial conflict and the survival of Australia as a white continent. In essence, pride of British imperial successes in India (and hence Burma) were increasingly subsumed by a set of national anxieties about Asia that informed a desire in Australia for increased political autonomy, and hence the right to legislate to restrict the immigration of non-white people.

A series of events from the mid-nineteenth century made Australia’s geographical position in, or at least close to, Asia gradually more apparent to Australian colonialists. When added to the perceived vulnerabilities of being a predominately white settler colony, this growing awareness of proximity to Asia led to the development of a series of anxieties centered around race and place. The arrival of significant numbers of Chinese migrants during the gold rushes of the 1850s was an important moment in which the Australian colonies began to articulate their desire for a racially homogenous society, and ultimately continent, and utilised immigration restriction legislation in an attempt to bring this about.10 Reactions to Chinese migration rested on a foundation of an understanding of ‘Asia’ that was predominately drawn from imperially mediated interactions with India.

Walker begins his influential work in Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850-1939 (1999) by charting the significant links between India and the Australian colonies during the nineteenth century. These connections were material and included increasing trade associations, the migration of British personnel between the colonies, and an increasing tourist trade.11 They were also discursive, and shaped ideas about culture, race, and the British Empire during the nineteenth century. Walker outlines how India was seen by Australians at the time as the ‘glittering jewel in the imperial crown’; a place of great strategic importance for its geographic position as a barrier to Russian imperial ambitions, which was a key concern in the

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mid to late nineteenth century; but also a shining example of the ‘unique capacity’ of British governance, where ‘no other race seemed able to retain so much territory and rule over such huge populations’.

This last idea is especially significant. It shows a tendency, prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of equating ‘Britishness’ with race and highlights ideas held throughout the Empire and beyond about the capacity of some races to rule, and others, who, lacking such a capacity, were destined to be ruled. Walker uses the fascination of Alfred Deakin with India as a basis for his assertion that the events in India in the mid to late nineteenth century were important in shaping the consciousness of Australian colonialists about ‘Asia’. Deakin utilized the phrase the ‘antique Orient’ to describe India, seeing it as timeless, ancient and heathen. For Deakin, India confirmed the ‘growth of civilization as an “unceasing struggle for supremacy between East and West”’ and that the ‘British presence in India would help determine the outcome of the struggle’. This struggle was to come to a head with the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857 and 1858.

A series of uprisings by Sepoy troops in the Indian army during this period, collectively known at the time as the Indian Mutiny, was a challenge to British rule. In fierce fighting resulting in many casualties – including British women and children – many British positions were captured. The British responded with the massacre of Indian troops and civilians in an attempt to break the siege and the uprisings were eventually quashed. Walker charts the extensive press coverage these events received in the Australian colonies. He argues that imperialist accounts at the time saw the Indian Mutiny as one where ‘the heroic British male gallantly defended vulnerable women and children against murderous “natives” guilty of “unreclaimed barbarism”’. Walker goes on to argue that the tales of these events ‘entered the complex mythology of Empire’, and were used even up to the early twentieth century

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17 Walker, *Anxious Nation*, 16.
in Australia to ‘stir imperial discipline in people through yarns of Anglo-Saxon fighting prowess’. For Walker, such rhetoric showed both a pride in race but also anxiety over imperial decline, particularly from the 1890s where there was a ‘widespread cultural concern about effeminacy, overcivilisation, and racial decadence’. While there is accord here in the concerns of Australian colonists and the wider British Empire, a pride in shared race was not enough to prevent tensions when Australian attempts to meet these challenges were opposed by British colonial officials.

The Indian Mutiny can also be seen as a key moment in which Australian colonists’ ideas of a slumberous, passive and ancient ‘Asia’ were confronted. Significantly, this shift was marked by a change in focus from India (and Empire) to China. The notion of a ‘passive’ Asia had already been challenged by the arrival of Chinese migrants during the gold rushes of the 1850s: suddenly people from Asia were mobile and migratory and ‘they had reached Australia’. By the 1870s the term ‘awakening East’ was being used to describe what was thought of as a ‘new condition of physical and mental alertness’ within Asian societies. Often this characterization was given gendered elements, with the East now seen as masculine, active and aggressive, and full of ‘rampaging hordes’ akin to Genghis Khan. Deakin’s struggle for supremacy between East and West was now also perceived as a struggle between two competing masculinities, in which white men in Australia, if not out-matched, were at least in grave danger of being out-numbered.

Walker has effectively shown that Australian colonialists did not necessarily fear the military might of a Chinese empire weakened by Britain in the Opium Wars of the nineteenth century. Instead, they feared the sheer ‘mass of humanity’ that the Chinese represented, often referring to potential Chinese migration with words such as a ‘flood’ or ‘rising tide’ that threatened to overwhelm boundaries and destroy

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18 Walker, Anxious Nation, 17, 26.
19 Walker, Anxious Nation, 26, 28.
21 Walker, Anxious Nation, 3.
22 Walker, Anxious Nation, 3.
distinctions, resulting in the submerging of entire peoples and nations and the defeat of races. In essence, argues Walker, white colonialists in Australia feared racial annihilation through overwhelming numbers of migrants from China. By the 1890s this fear had expanded to include many people from Asia, including the Japanese whose nation had recently been opened up to Western trade at the point of a gun. Increasingly, this was referred to as the ‘yellow peril’.

Clearly, ‘Asia’ was an evolving category which was used to justify both imperial and nascent national hopes and fears in nineteenth century Australia. As Walker argues, Asia was used in arguments for both the elimination and greatness of Australia ‘and almost every shade of possibility in between’. He outlines how in nineteenth century Australia, while there were ‘regular calls to find a stable, knowable Asia it was nonetheless apparent that Asia contained multiple and often sharply contradictory identities.’ Australian press coverage of the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885 and its aftermath highlight the evolving and contradictory understandings of both Asia and the British Empire explored above. It contained both passive and aggressive constructions of Asia operating simultaneously and highlights how the Chinese, in particular, were posited as aggressive and mobile in contrast with more passive and submissive renderings of the Burmese.

The war, during which Britain conquered the remaining sections of the Burmese kingdom, was a short and relatively uneventful affair. Troop movements were first reported in Australia on 3 November 1885, and after a regular series of updates the abdication of King Thibaw was reported a month later. The primary

23 Walker, Anxious Nation, 4, 36-37.
24 Walker, Anxious Nation, 2-3.
25 Walker, Anxious Nation, 3, 114.
26 Walker, Anxious Nation, 11.
27 Walker, Anxious Nation, 11.
28 The coverage of two Australian newspapers, the Sydney Morning Herald and the Argus, were canvassed for this study, from 1 November 1885 to 31 January 1886. Other newspaper articles cited were extracted via online keyword searches (i.e. a daily analysis and breakdown of coverage was not undertaken for those publications).
30 For example, see: “England and Burmah: Despatch of Troops,” the Argus, 3 November 1885, 5; “The Burmese Difficulty: Departure of British Troops for Burmah,” the Sydney Morning Herald, 3 November 1885, 10.
31 For example, see: “England and Burmah: The Surrender of Theebaw Confirmed,” 3 December 1885, 7; “Surrender of King Thebaw: The News Confirmed – British Occupation of Mandalay,” 3 December 1885, 10.
reported justification for the war was to stop French aggression in the region and secure a path for the British from India to western China via the Irrawaddy River. Along with the potential of new markets for Australia, the war was largely approved of by the Australian press. In many articles the misrule of King Thibaw in Upper Burma was contrasted with the stable and prosperous administration of British-held Burma. Britain’s right to the territory was characterised as one of imperial destiny:

> Whether she protect or annex Upper Burmah [sic], the unfurling of the imperial standard in Thebaw’s [sic] palace at Mandalay is eventually assured. It is the logic of Britain’s destiny. And though that flag may to-day flame as a blood-red menace in the cruel eyes of Thebaw [sic], will it not be hailed as an evangel of hope to his mis-governed millions?

British capacity to govern was not always uncritically accepted, however, as evidenced by a report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* of a lecture by Dr. James M. R. Robertson to the Young Men’s Christian Association. Dr. Robertson was a colonial administrator in Burma under the Indian government for eighteen months and had spent some time in Thibaw’s court in Mandalay. He cautioned not to:

> exclude from view that though on the whole our rule is an upright and generous rule in India…it is neither faultless nor unassailable. We permit practices to exist as offensive and indirectly as oppressive as any to be found within the realms of Thebaw [sic] or the Sultan of the Turks.

Despite his more nuanced approach, Dr. Robertson still conceived of the British as a civilising force for good in the world. As Walker suggested was common at the time, Britishness was for Dr. Robertson a racial category, one that had as its ‘object the social and intellectual elevation of all mankind’.

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34 For example, see: “The Burmese Difficulty,” *the Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 November 1885, 4.
35 For example, see: “British and Native Burmah,” the *Argus*, 7 November 1885, 6.
Much of our energy as a race must, in future, be directed to ameliorate and improve the condition and happiness of those teeming millions: to stimulate the enterprise of the races to pursuits that will elevate and refine: to cultivate among them precise and accurate habits of thought, and the performance of honest and useful work.  

These paternalistic statements point to a characterisation of the Burmese as, at base, inferior to British people. While he considered Burma to be ‘one of the great empires of the East’, and as having a society of marked social equality outside the royal family, ultimately he constructed the Burmese as lazy and simple:

They are too proud and too lazy to work as coolies – and they have no ambition to obtain manhood suffrage. … The Burmese races are not of a fawning disposition; yet they frankly acknowledge the superiority of the European, without showing them any marked respect.

Dr. Robertson further described the Burmese as ‘[c]heerful’ and ‘well-fed’, and a people for whom, ‘discipline and continued concentrated effort is irksome. As a nation they possess an unconquerable aversion for work.’ This view of the Burmese was common in press articles at the time. Writing eighteen months after the abdication of Thibaw, a ‘visitor’ to Burma similarly described the Burmese as an ‘indolent people’. Strikingly, he conceived that Burma, like Australia, was vulnerable to being overrun by the more aggressive and mobile Chinese: ‘What is to prevent the industrious and persevering Chinese from swarming over the border in thousands, leaving their own overpopulated country for this new region which is to be opened up?’

Concern about a teeming migratory Asia, as expressed by this writer, went hand-in-hand with concern over the relatively small size of the European population of Australia and its distribution, which was skewed heavily in favour of urbanised and coastal locations. Responses to the issue in Australia manifested the prevailing thinking about race and its attendant anxieties. Australia’s failure to colonise the ‘empty north’ led to concerns that some ‘stronger, manlier power would have to

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40 ‘Burmah and the Burmese,” 8.
41 ‘Burmah and the Burmese,” 8.
44 Walker, Anxious Nation, 114.
step in and do the work’. Such ideas tied in with associated thinking about race to create fears that Anglo-Saxons would not succeed in direct competition with emerging constructions of Asian workers with their perceived ability to live on less (less wages and less food for example) and endure harsher conditions. Together, these beliefs raised the specter of a ‘terrible racial conflagration’, manifested by the invasion of Australia by people from Asia. Fears of invasion were also driven by a growing realisation of the military might of Asian nations such as Japan; growing unease over British military alliances with Asian nations (often as a check to Russian imperial ambition) which from the 1890s left the naval defense of Australia primarily in the hands of Japan; and, popular fictional narratives which were drawn from anxiety about the decline in British power. These narratives expressed fear in the Australian context not of loss of cultural identity (prominent in other versions of the narrative internationally), but that as a historically young country, Australia might not survive long enough to form a ‘coherent identity at all.’

Not all Australian colonialists were against Asian immigration, and actively advocated for further commercial and cultural interaction with Asia. Walker argues that ‘Australian nationalists’ opposed to such engagement often represented these ‘commercial aims … as imperialist cant and crude self-interest.’ Their position was informed by a series of military and commercial treaties between Britain and Asian nations, formed in the 1890s without input from representatives of the Australian colonies. As a result, Britain was often depicted as ‘abandoning support for Australia as a white homeland and putting trade before any other consideration.’ During the ensuing debates, Walker argues, ‘white Australia emerged as a profounder and more important ideal than the promotion of world commerce. Locality and race won out

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45 Walker, Anxious Nation, 113-114.
46 For example, the theory of climatic determinism, which maintained that Anglo-Saxon people were only suited to working in temperate climates. See: Lack and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 51.
47 Walker, Anxious Nation, 114.
48 Walker, Anxious Nation, 101, 121.
50 Walker, Anxious Nation, 68.
51 Walker, Anxious Nation, 68.
52 Walker, Anxious Nation, 71, See also, 70-71, 74.
over cosmopolitanism and free trade." Thus Walker’s work demonstrates that prevailing Western thinking about race was at the crux of many of the ideas and fears prevalent when the Australian nation and national identity was codified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although white and British were often used synonymously as a racial descriptor, Australian political elites sought increasing political independence from Britain precisely because the commercial politics of Empire were seen to undermine the desire for a racially homogenous and white Australia.

Lake and Reynolds trace transnational ideas about race during the same era, effectively showing that key Australian commentators, politicians and thinkers were engaged in international discussions on what they saw as a complex set of political and social problems thrown up by more frequent inter-racial contact in the nineteenth century. These discussions contributed to the push for increased political self-determination and had profound implications for the conceptualisation and organisation of a federated Australia. By the 1890s they centered on two primary concerns: the prediction that ‘the white man’s “pride of place” in the world would soon be “humiliated”’ by the rise of ‘the black and yellow races’; and the impossibility of multi-racial democracy given the inability of primitive non-white races to equally participate as democratic citizens.

The first concern derived from the internationally influential work of British-Australian thinker Charles Pearson, National Life and Character: A Forecast (1893). Lake and Reynolds argue that Pearson’s work ‘represented a sharp rebuke to, and break from, the Anglo-Saxon triumphalism’ of previous thinkers. Predicated on the assumption that white men were suited to work only in temperate climates, Pearson and his followers (who included Alfred Deakin), argued that Australia should be

53 Walker, Anxious Nation, 68.
54 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 137-138.
‘preserved as white man’s country’. 57 According to Pearson, in seeking immigration restrictions, ‘Australians were guarding the last part of the world, for higher civilisation’. 58 On the second concern Australian nation-builders were influenced by analyses of the situation in the American South during Reconstruction, and in particular, the work of James Bryce. He wrote extensively on ‘The Negro Problem’, arguing that the childlike and primitive nature of African-Americans ‘rendered them ineligible for political rights.’ 59 Both arguments gave intellectual authority to Australian nation-builders in the 1890s in their quest to avert ‘race contact’ and thus the ‘race problem’ by utilizing immigration restrictions to establish Australia as ‘the very model of a modern white man’s country.’ 60

Despite the perceived strength of such arguments, there was tension between the desire of Australian colonies to enact legislation that restricted immigration on the basis of race and imperial law, which provided for the equality of all British subjects regardless of race. British treaties with China and Japan signed at various points in the nineteenth century often provided for free migration of subjects between empires (which included Australian colonies) and acted as flash points for anti-British sentiment and resentment. 61 British colonial officials eventually acceded to desire of the colonies on these issues with the 1894 treaty with Japan, not forcing Australian colonies to sign and therefore accept free migration provisions. 62 Lake and Reynolds see this capitulation by British officials as symptomatic of long-held imperial divisions between ruling and ruled races. In Australia, they effectively argue that these imperial discursive resources were combined with American-derived republican sentiments of races fit for self-government and not fit for self-government to ‘enshrine a dichotomy of white and non-white’. 63

57 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 77.
58 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 78.
60 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 74, 140.
61 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 143-144; On Australia-Japan relations, see also: Michael Ackland and Pam Oliver, ed., Unexpected Encounters: Neglected Histories Behind the Australia-Japan Relationship (Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 2007).
62 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 144.
63 Lake and Reynolds, Drawing the Global Colour Line, 9, 144; On American debates at the end of the nineteenth century, see: Stephen Tuffnell, “‘Uncle Sam is to be Sacrificed’: Anglophobia in Late Nineteenth-Century Politics and Culture,” American Nineteenth Century History 12, 1 (2011): 77:99;
Regardless of whether non-white people were conceived of as primitive and
passive or dynamic and mobile, whether they belonged to an important world power
or were British subjects, their colour was what linked them: their collective status as
non-white made them unacceptable migrants to, or citizens of, Australia. With
Federation in 1901, Australia’s new federal parliament legislated to restrict the
immigration of non-white people, with almost universal support, and in doing so laid
bare the racial basis for Australian national identity. In supporting the Immigration
Restriction Act (1901), Australia’s first prime minister, Edward Barton, referred to
Pearson’s work and argued that it ‘embodied the desire, “not merely of the
Government, but all Australia, for the preservation of the purity of the race, and the
equality and reasonableness of its standards”’. Labor leader J. C. Watson spoke of
averting the danger of ‘racial contamination’ and Attorney General, Alfred Deakin,
declared: ‘No motive power operated more universally on this continent … than the
desire that we should be one people and remain one people without the admixture of
other races.’ For Gwenda Tavan, the bi-partisan consensus of Australian politicians
on the issue was ‘more than a spontaneous expression of unity’ but rather was
‘consciously cultivated…in order to reinforce a somewhat fragile sense of national
unity in the general population.’

While politicians affiliated with the labour movement were less concerned
about British imperial opinion and were inclined to boldly state their desire for a
racially homogenous nation, other Australian officials and politicians were mindful
not to needlessly antagonise the Colonial Office. Immigration restrictions were

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On racialised thinking in American in previous eras, see: Reginald Horsman, Race and Manifest
Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

64 For a brief overview of the various legislation that provided for the restrictions of non-white entrants
to Australia, see: Gwenda Tavan, The Long Slow Death of White Australia (Melbourne: Scribe, 2005),
7-8. For a fuller examination of the white Australia policy, see: Myra Willard, History of the White
Australia Policy to 1920 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1923); James Jupp, From White
Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2002), 5-20; A. T. Yarwood, Asian Migration to Australia: The Background to Exclusion 1986-1923
(Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964); Lake, “The White Man Under Siege”; and, Keith


67 Tavan, The Long Slow Death of White Australia, 14.

68 For a discussion of the understandings of race and nation held by Australia’s first Labor Prime
Minister, John Christian Watson, see: Mark Hearn, “Cultivating an Australian Sentiment: John
labour union perspective, see: Julia Martinez, “Questioning ‘White Australia’: Unionism and
therefore based on a dictation test rather than explicitly stated objections on the basis of race. This was a system derived from attempts to disenfranchise non-white people in the USA and the Natal colony of southern Africa, and was in fact offered up by a Colonial Office official in the 1890s as a compromise between Australian colonial desire for racially based immigration restrictions and the desire to maintain the equality of British subjects regardless of race. Of course, such equality was from that point only a fiction, and these developments would have implications for the ability of people from Burma to migrate to Australia, even if they were British subjects. As Lake and Reynolds argue, immigration restrictions acted to deepen the ‘divide between white and non-white subjects of the British Empire.’ In the words of Alfred Deakin, the laws were ‘administered so as to draw a deep colour line of demarcation between Caucasians and all other races.’

While there has been debate more recently in Australia over whether racial or labour considerations were the primary motivation for immigration restriction, the work of Lake and Reynolds and Tavan (among others) effectively show that ideas about race were entwined with understandings of labour and the desire to protect the standards of living of white men and women. As Tavan argues:

White Australia was not just a racist, fear-inspired strategy to exclude non-Europeans. It was a positive, morally imbued affirmation of the type of society Australia wanted to build: white and British-Australian as well as cohesive, conformist, liberal-democratic, and egalitarian.

Hence, the belief that racial homogeneity provided the conditions through which such ideals would flourish underpinned the long-held bi-partisan support for immigration restriction.

Tavan’s important work details how the policy was administered throughout

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72 As an adjunct to the “history wars” which mainly centred on the treatment of indigenous Australians, Keith Windschuttle also published on this topic. See, Keith Windschuttle, *The White Australia Policy*; For an overview of the larger debates about history during that time, see: Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2003).


the twentieth century. She argues that it was incredibly effective for the four decades after Federation, during which time the numbers of non-white people in Australia declined. 76 The suite of legislation that made up the white Australia policy did not explicitly denote race as the category of exclusion however, leaving it open to interpretation by Australian bureaucrats and responsive to changes in public concerns, particularly in relation to security. 77 It was challenged at various points during those decades by Japanese, Indian and Chinese governments, all of which successfully negotiated exceptions that allowed their citizens or subjects to migrate on a temporary basis or have spouses and children join those already residing in Australia. 78 Despite these exceptions, the exclusion of potential migrants in the 1930s from southern and eastern Europe, including Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, highlights just how narrow the definition of white was during that era. 79 As the next chapter will show, physically defined features of race, and not culture, were the primary category of exclusion until the mid-1960s. This had inevitable consequences for the ability of people from Burma to migrate to Australia up until that point. For while British migrants were favoured even after categories were somewhat relaxed during the post-war migration boom, most Anglo-Burmese migrants who identified culturally as British and wished to migrate to Australia continued to be ‘beyond the pale’. 80

The Impossibility of a Burmese identity?: Colonialism, Nationalism and the Divisions of Ethnicity and Religion

At the same time that colonial Australians were beginning to codify their nation, and enacting legislation such as immigration restrictions to keep out those who did not fit the image of who an Australian should be, Burma was grappling with an encroaching British colonialism, which was to have an indelible impact on the formation of their own nation in the twentieth century. People from what we now think of as modern Burma also had to deal with the questions of race, culture, and power thrown up by the colonial context in which they found themselves, and then by a growing

76 Tavan, The Long Slow Death of White Australia, 26.
78 Tavan, The Long Slow Death of White Australia, 22, 26-27.
nationalist movement, especially potent from the 1920s onwards. While Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, ideas and events from colonial Burma have had a continuing impact on the rhetoric and ideologies of successive governments (both civilian and military) and insurgent groups up to the present day. In many ways they have also acted as push factors for migration out of Burma from the second half of the twentieth century. It is therefore important to ground this thesis with an account of the ways in which questions of race and nation and played out in colonial Burma.

The British colonial model was based on the principal of “divide and rule”, where racial, ethnic, religious, social and economic differences and contradictions were allowed to develop. 81 Resentment over differing treatment of ethnic groups by the colonial authorities and also by Western missionaries played out in Burma throughout this period in flashes of inter-ethnic violence, such as the Saya San rebellion of 1930-31, 82 and conflicting views on the appropriateness of home rule and other issues of politics among Burma’s indigenous political elite, often split along ethnic and/or religious lines. At the heart of events and political conflicts such as these was the rise of competing nationalist movements in the early twentieth century that had strong ethnic and religious elements to them. But to what extent did British colonial administrative decisions create these divisions? And on what foundations prior to British annexation of the territories of modern Burma were such divisions overlaid?

There is much speculation, although not much hard evidence, about the extent to which both the Burman and Karen – the two groups with the most prominent and organised nationalist voices in the first half of the twentieth century – had an ethno-nationalist outlook prior to British annexation of Burma in the nineteenth century. Mikael Gravers has argued that in the old state and kingdom of Burma the dominant identity was determined by ‘1) whether one was a Buddhist, and 2) whether one was a member of an alliance with the ruling dynasty, that is, what place one held in the

tributary hierarchy’. For Gravers, culture was subordinate to these two factors as a marker of identity. The territories under the control of the Burman kings of this era were not ethnically or culturally homogeneous. Burmans, Shan, Mon, and other minorities, as well as prisoners of war from Siam were all part of the mix. Gravers has shown that Burmans did consider certain minorities as ‘wild and uncivilised’ including some of the Karen, but argues such sentiments were ‘assigned predominantly to non-Buddhists.’

Similarly, in his study of Burmese political culture, Josef Silverstein has contended that in pre-colonial Burma commonality of religion – Buddhism – among nearly all Burmans and most minorities under their direct rule was the strength from which its social stability was derived. He, too, notes however that some minorities, particularly the Karen, were not considered by the Burmans to be equals and were treated with hostility. The Karen are a group with significant internal diversity, including adherence to different religious practices ranging from animism to Buddhism and Christianity. Silverstein gives no concrete reason for why the Karen in particular were the target of Burman hostility, nor does he differentiate between the treatment of Buddhist and non-Buddhist Karen. He does argue that minorities living beyond the plains and valleys of central Burma, such as the predominately Buddhist Shan, were not pressured to assimilate or Burmanize their culture and were considered to be separate and different. Those groups living in closer proximity to the Burman population centres, such as the Mon, according to Silverstein ‘found it relatively easy to intermingle and intermarry, and presumably assimilate, with their captors.’ This situation is more complex than Silverstein allows for in his analysis but, before exploring the circumstances of these minority groups in more depth, the question of whether a specific Burmese national identity existed in pre-colonial Burma will first be considered.

83 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma, 25.
84 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma, 26.
85 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma, 25.
86 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma, 26.
88 Silverstein, Burma, 11.
90 Silverstein, Burma, 11.
91 Silverstein, Burma, 11.
As we have seen in the introduction, the term Burmese is problematic and contested. Even in its most apolitical usages there is a lack of uniformity to how it is applied. The work of Thant Myint-U deals extensively with questions of identity in nineteenth century Burma. In his discussion Burmese largely equates with the Burman ethnic group, or at least the cultural and linguistic traits common to that group. He charts the usages of the term Myanmar or Burmese in Burmese historiography of the nineteenth century and earlier, and argues that by the mid-nineteenth-century, the court of Ava – the base of the Burman kings of the Konbaung dynasty who were the main power in central Burma from the mid-eighteenth century until full British annexation – had begun referring to their kingdom almost exclusively as the Myanmar Naing-ngan, the Burmese Kingdom, and to their king as the Myanmar Min, the Burmese King. These phrases gradually replaced older terms and for Myint-U, this ‘clearly implies an ethnic-based polity’. 92

Myint-U charts the increasing usage and uniformity of the Burmese language, given impetus by the early Konbaung kings who were exclusively Burmese-speakers and aided by conquests into territory held by rival ethnic groups and concerted campaigns to repress the speaking of non-Burmese languages in areas under their direct control. 93 He argues that the civil war which:

preceded the establishment of their dynasty had taken on vaguely ‘ethnic’ overtones, with Burmese-speakers in the north being set against largely Mon-speakers loyal to the new Pegu-based regime. The Konbaung conquest of the delta was followed by a quite ruthless campaign of repression against Mon-speakers, and included an active discouragement of the Mon language. 94

The Mon, he argues, utilised a number of strategies to cope with such a campaign, from migration out of area (some going as far as Siam), to assimilating by adopting a Burmese culture and language. Mon nationalist groups post-independence have placed a huge significance on such attempts by Burman kings to destroy their unique cultural identity. The defeat by the Burman king Alaunghpaya of the last Mon ruler in 1757 marked the end of the ‘golden age’ of Mon history, categorised as such by Mon nationalists who have since ‘struggled to defend the historical Mon identity from

assimilation into that of the Burman and Thai majorities’. While these more recent conceptualizations of this history are important, Mon nationalist groups were not a significant separate force in the politics of colonial Burma. For Thant Myint-U, in the context of nineteenth-century Burma the success of such linguistic-assimilation, combined with the strengthening position of Theravada Buddhism, and a common set of political and legal ideas and institutions which originated during the first significant known dynasty of Burma (the Pagan, 1044-ca.1325), point to the existence of a common Myanmar or Burmese identity at this time.

Myint-U does not attempt to argue that this Burmese identity was universal or even dominant. Instead, it was one of many possible identities individuals could embody or embrace. Some other facets of identity for those living in nineteenth-century Burma related to a person’s religious, social, economic and geographical affiliations. Any or all of these identifications may have been prioritised before a sense of Burmese or Myanmar identity, but as Myint-U has shown, such an identity did exist and it existed ‘in opposition to other “ethnic” identities, [and was] one based on an idea of shared culture and ancestry, of the Myanmar [sic]77 as a “race” or lu-myō. Lu-myō is a term used by the early modern people of Ava to refer to a particular descent group or kinship. Myint-U has argued that the ‘Myanmar [sic] lu-myō’ could be seen as an ‘expanded descent group, an identity perhaps also tied to language, religion, political institutions and a common historical experience, but perceived to be tied by blood (or semen in the local metaphor) as well.

Myint-U’s work on identity in nineteenth-century Burma offers a complex picture where a sense of shared ethnicity is a key strand of personal identification. Importantly, his work highlights that there was during this period a sense of a Burmese kingdom that was centered in a particular place and characterized by cultural and linguistic commonalities that were taken up by individuals of a non-Burman background, including the Mon and the Arakanese who were invaded and conquered during the years of the Konbaung dynasty. And while, like many nineteenth

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97 Myanmar is an alternative, Burmese-language, spelling of Myanmar.
100 Myint-U, The Making of Modern Burma, 85-87
century characterizations of identity in the West, it had foundations in biological understandings of ties based on blood (or semen as in the case of *lu-myō*), Myint-U has also shown that it was an identity that was actively created and strengthened discursively. In order to ‘mould local notions of belonging and nurture a sense of patriotism’ new histories and poems emerged during this period to celebrate ‘distant victories’. For Myint-U, such stories were in part, ‘celebrations of dynastic achievements of kings and princes. But they were also in part a celebration of the accomplishment of the Burmese people.’

The Burmese identity that Myint-U postulates was present in nineteenth century Burma can be seen as a type of pan-Burmeseness, used as an identifier that could be layered alongside a more specific ethnic or *lu-myō* identity among others. It is a conception of identity that recurs in many contexts in Burma throughout the colonial period and beyond. Writing in the mid-1940s, G.E. Harvey offers an example of the ways in which British colonial administrators both recognized and were interested in classifying specific ethnic groups, a number of which they felt could lay claim to a ‘Burmese’ identity. Harvey states that the ‘Burmese today’ are all those ‘whose language and customs are Burmese’. For Harvey, they are:

A ‘blend of four main types which also exist separately – the fair-skinned Mon (Talaing) of the south-east; the swarthy Burman of the dry zone; the Shan of the eastern plateau; the Arakanese of the coastal strip adjoining India, akin to the Burman but with an admixture of Indian blood. These races all possess a Buddhist culture, and although they differ, they probably feel themselves one as against the backward races when they realize their existence, which is not very often in a land of great distances and poor communications.’

Harvey’s notion of a pan-Burmesene identity is one that has been prominent in post-independence government rhetoric on a united Burma. As we will see in Chapter Four of this thesis, it is a problematic concept. Of the four ‘types’ Harvey subsumes under a Burmese moniker, all except the Burmans have waged both military and political campaigns for independence or autonomy on the basis of claims to a distinct ethnicity against what have been predominately Burman governments. Such campaigns by these groups have been primarily a post-independence development

however.\textsuperscript{103} The nationalist movements that arose in Burma during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were primarily dominated by Burman and Karen oriented groups.

The quote from Harvey above also points to a fundamental element of race and identity politics in colonial Burma, and one that still resonates in that country’s politics today: namely, the distinctions made between the peoples of the lowlands and delta areas of Burma, of which the Burmans are the most prominent example; and those of Burma’s hills, with which the Karen are often associated. Such dichotomies belie the complexities inherent in the situation in Burma, but they are in part a result of the colonial mindset that the British applied to their dealings with the people of Burma and their administration of the areas in which they lived, and they have had a major impact on the ways in which Burma as a nation and Burmese as an identity have been conceived of and deployed in pre-independence nationalist movements and beyond. Before this chapter explores the rise and influence of both the Burman and Karen dominated nationalist movements mentioned above, it will first chart the British annexation of, and patterns of administration in, Burma. By doing so it will tease out the complexities of the ways in which race, ethnicity, religion and nationalism became increasingly entwined, and increasingly fraught, in the lead up to independence in 1948.

The British conquered and annexed Burma in three stages – through three wars – during the nineteenth century. Martin Smith has argued that the annexation of Burma was ‘piecemeal and peripheral to India, their main concern’\textsuperscript{104} In fact, the first Anglo-Burmese war (1824-26) came about in response to the Burmese military aggression in the British-Indian provinces of Assam and Manipur.\textsuperscript{105} The second Anglo-Burmese war (1852), described as one of the ‘most “casually undertaken” wars in colonial history’,\textsuperscript{106} was instigated on the pretext of a ‘trivial incident’ and resulted in the annexation by Britain of all of lower Burma with very little loss and with very little resistance.\textsuperscript{107} This victory resulted in British control over much of Burma’s waterways and ports, including Rangoon. Unlike in the intervening years of the first

\textsuperscript{104} Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 40.
\textsuperscript{105} Silverstein, \textit{Burma}, 5-6.
\textsuperscript{107} Silverstein, \textit{Burma}, 6.
and second wars, the Burman kings did attempt from this point to enact political reform and to establish friendly diplomatic ties with the British. As was discussed above, however, their attempts to also form diplomatic ties with Britain’s colonial rivals in Southeast Asia, particularly the French, was a key motivational impetus for the British to undertake the third and final Anglo-Burmese war in 1885. The war was relatively short and low on causalities as King Thibaw and his advisors recognized they were no match for superior British military forces. It quickly ended in the surrender of the King Thibaw of Burma, his exile, and the full annexation of Burma on January 1, 1886.

Despite its brevity and the unconditional surrender of Burma, King Thibaw and his advisors did attempt to mount a significant defense to British aggression, particularly when seen in contrast to the previous war of annexation. To some extent this is not surprising, as Mandalay – the base of the Burman kings – was under direct threat. However, the threat the British posed was not conceived as solely directed towards the king, an important institution in Burman political and cultural life. The Hluttaw (the council of state of the Burman kings) proclaimed on November 7, 1885:

Those heretics the English kalas [foreigners] having most harshly made demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction of our religion, the violation of our national traditions and customs, and the degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our State.

Here, religion, culture and race are combined in an exhortation for a patriotic resistance to a foreign invasion. Ni Ni Myint uses this statement to argue that the war and the ten years of armed guerilla resistance movements that followed were ‘in essence, a struggle of the common man fighting for what he felt to be his national identity’. Her conclusion on this issue does accord in some respects with the work of Thant Myint-U, who, as we have seen, has charted the rise of the ‘development of patriotic sentiment tied to the Ava polity and the related “Burmese” or Myanma’

108 Silverstein, Burma, 6.
110 Silverstein, Burma, 6.
111 Quoted in, Myint, Burma’s Struggle Against British Imperialism, 41-42; For Burmese text see: U Maung Maung Tin, Könbaungzet Mahayazawinawgyi (Great Chronical of the Konbaung Dynasty), Volume III (Rangoon: Ledi Mangaing, 1967), 706-707.
112 Myint, Burma’s Struggle Against British Imperialism, 156-157.
However, as the director of the Historical Research Centre in Rangoon, and the wife at the time of writing of General Ne Win, the effective dictator of Burma from 1962 until 1988, it is important to see her work in the context of official state attempts to re-write Burma’s history to reflect the preferred narrative of successive military regimes. Doing so prompts questions about her positioning of these events within a seemingly unproblematic nationalist framework. As Thant Myint-U himself has highlighted in his nuanced discussion of this era, in both English and Burmese scholarship on the issue ‘there is hardly any questioning of “Burma” or the “Burmese” as a stable category’. Certainly Ni Ni Myint’s work fails to question who was and was not included within the nation articulated by the Hluttaw in 1885, and what this might mean for nationalist claims made in modern day Burma.

Opposition to the British annexation and administration of Burma was not universal. Having lived under British administration for many years in lower Burma, many Karen fought on the side of the British both during the wars of annexation, the rebellions that followed, and crucially for post-independence inter-ethnic relations during the Second World War. Harvey, a British colonial insider, argued in his work that ‘depressed minorities are continually attracted to an alien conqueror’. Significant numbers of the Karen (although by no means a majority) converted to Christianity. Harvey sees such conversions as a response for a desire for a ‘higher culture’, one that would provide a significant advantage in dealings with the Burman majority. Gravers has also argued that the low position of non-Buddhist Karen in the power hierarchies of Buddhist Burma would have meant they found converting to Christianity useful. And while there was fierce armed resistance to British annexation in the Chin hills in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Chin were another minority ethnic group who were over represented within the British colonial forces and fought with the British during the Second World War.

116 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 28.
117 Harvey, British Rule in Burma, 13.
118 Harvey, British Rule in Burma, 13.
119 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 28.
against the mostly Burman supported independence army that initially fought with the Japanese. In contrast, there were very few Burman converts to Christianity in the nineteenth century. According to Gravers, those that did make this change were seen as disloyal citizens of the Buddhist kingdom of Burma: ‘Christian Burmans were labelled *kala* (“foreigners”); the comparatively few Burmans who were converted were permanently placed outside of society.”

It is plain to see from this initial analysis that the advent of British colonial involvement in Burma added more complexity to the existing, and tense, relationship between religion and nationalism within Burma.

The decision was taken by the British quite soon after victory in the third Anglo-Burmese war to administer Burma as an annexed province of India, rather than as a protectorate. Many of the political and social institutions that were the foundations of the Burman kings’ power were dismantled and the nobility were scattered and other hereditary positions of authority were abolished. The position of the Buddhist *sangha* (order of monks) was also weakened with the severing of the King-client relationship and the refusal of the British administration to acknowledge and support their historical responsibility for education. In contrast, once British supremacy had been acknowledged in the vast hill tracts of Burma ‘there was to be remarkably little interference with the rule of the traditional rulers and chiefs.’

Burma was thus divided into Ministerial Burma, marked by tight British control over administration and positions of authority, and the Frontier or Scheduled Areas, where hereditary rulers had continued authority with the support of the British and were overlooked by very few British administrators. This divide fell along rough geographical lines, with Ministerial Burma encompassing Burma’s central plains and delta areas and the Frontier Areas Burma’s vast hills and mountainous terrain. It has also been characterized as a divide along ethnic lines, with the vast majority of ethnic minority groups located in Burma’s hills. The two tiered system of administration that evolved under British colonial rule of Burma has been seen as an important element

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in what has been characterized as the deployment of ‘divide and rule’ tactics. Such tactics were not unique to Burma, but deployed throughout the British Empire.\textsuperscript{127} In many former British colonies, the impact of such policies was felt long after independence was achieved. In Burma, resentment over the advantages received by ethnic minorities under the British simmered throughout the colonial period and beyond. For instance, during negotiations at the time of Burma’s independence, U Nu, one of Burma’s wartime heroes and later a prime minister, argued that special rights for ethnic minorities appeared to be a direct continuation of Britain’s divide and rule tactics.\textsuperscript{128}

Nevertheless, Smith has convincingly complicated the simple understanding of the administrative (and ethnic) binary discussed above. In particular, he has challenged the assumption that colonial rule was beneficial for ethnic minority groups. In making his argument Smith highlights that the geographical spread of ethnic groups in Burma never neatly accords with British administrative boundaries, hindering their attempts to establish a basis for autonomy. He uses the Karen as an example, a group which is internally culturally and linguistically differentiated, and which straddled many administrative and geographic borders and did not come under one administrative system.\textsuperscript{129} For Smith, British support for the authority of traditional hereditary meant that ‘what had often been fluid, mobile societies, usually with ample freedom to oust poor headmen or rulers, found themselves burdened with immovable tyrants, now sanctioned by British law.’\textsuperscript{130} And unlike the demands of the mainstream Burman dominated nationalist movement, the British often ignored minority political claims for autonomy made during the colonial era and attempts were made to actively block some groups from having their positions heard.\textsuperscript{131} Ultimately, regardless of any preferential treatment the ethnic minorities may have received under British rule, the end result was still the rise of nationalist movements.


\textsuperscript{128} Gravers, \textit{Nationalism as Political Power in Burma}, 51.

\textsuperscript{129} Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 46, 52.

\textsuperscript{130} Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 46-47.

\textsuperscript{131} Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 46.
among minorities, particularly the Karen, which eventually began to agitate for independence from Burma. Smith’s analysis neatly highlights that ethnic relations in Burma have been shaped not only by real differences in treatment created out of British colonial administrative systems but also by perceived differences.

British colonial administration of Burma acted to complicate ethnic relations even further through the encouragement of large-scale internal migration from Burma’s northern dry zones to its southern delta areas to facilitate increases to rice production. Much of this migration was undertaken by people of Burman background moving into historical areas of Mon domination. Smith has argued that this pattern of migration, along with British encouragement of the use of the Burmese language in the delta areas, helped to further erode the Mon cultural and political identity, a process that began during the Konbaung dynasty. In his work on colonial Burma, Harvey expressed pride in the agricultural changes brought about by Britain through the encouragement of rice cultivation in the Irrawaddy delta. Despite the preoccupation in his work with issues of ethnicity, he shows little understanding of the implications of such large-scale internal migration (around a third of Burma’s total population) on the indigenous groups in the delta area, which accords with his belief in a pan-Burmese identity.

Harvey does acknowledge, however, that the significant numbers of Indian migrants arriving in Burma after annexation by Britain did pose a significant problem in inter-ethnic relations for the region. Changes in agricultural production that the British introduced had significant impacts on the structure of economic systems in Burma. Many Indians migrated to Burma during this period to take advantage of the opportunities created through these changes. By 1931 there were over one million people of Indian descent in Burma out of a total population of approximately fourteen and a half million, and they comprised over half of the population of Rangoon. Indians came to dominate the money-lending industry as well as the emerging

132 Smith, *Burma*, Revised and Updated Edition, 43. Smith writes: ‘An 1856 census for Henzada district had calculated that nearly half the population were ethnic Mon (Talaing); but in the 1911 census, out of a total population of 532,357, only 1,224 described themselves as Mon, of whom only 399 could speak Mon and not even 50 write it. Undoubtedly this process was accelerated by the preference the British gave the Burmese language in these areas.’
professions in the legal, medical, accountancy and engineering fields, and in many cases made up the entire staff of government departments. It was the caste of landowners and the chettyar moneylenders of Indian descent, however, that were the main focus of resentment and anti-British feeling expressed by the growing nationalist movements in the first half of the twentieth century.

As we shall see, ethnic tensions in Burma during this period occasionally boiled over into violence. The British, aware of tensions in Burma, attempted a number of tactics to manage the diversity that was encompassed within its borders. They promoted the image of Burma as a diverse medley of races both for ‘reasons of administration and control as well as zeal for scientific classification.’ This unity in diversity was structured around ‘unity in Empire’ with both British symbols such as the Union Jack and national anthem promoted alongside Burma’s own history and literature. For Gravers, this program could be characterised by the slogan, ‘one empire – many cultures; one hegemonic identity above the many.’

Attempts to impose British identity, culture, and particularly the English language in Burma was met with fierce resistance from nationalist groups, particularly in the 1930s. Like other nationalist movements in Southeast Asia, the Burman and Karen dominated movements in Burma had their origins in cultural revivals of the late nineteenth century. Questions of culture, language, education, religion and identity were central features of both, and often acted as the impetus for demands for political reform, strikes and riots. Gravers has argued that the pacification period of the 1880s – which saw the British deploy tens of thousands of troops to quash numerous armed resistance movements – has ‘entered Burman historical representation as…the complete humiliation of their society, a literal trampling upon their religion and culture’. In the aftermath of this period societies such as the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) emerged and took on the traditional role of the Buddhist sangha whose authority had declined under British

137 Harvey, British Rule in Burma, 71.
138 Smith, Burma, Revised and Updated Edition, 43.
139 Smith, Burma, Revised and Updated Edition, 43-44.
141 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 34.
143 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 17.
rule.\textsuperscript{144} Seekins, like many scholars, has argued that efforts such as those by the YMBA to restore the strength and position of Buddhism in society were a significant element of the rise of nationalism in Burma in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{145} Monks themselves were not passive observers of the impost of colonial rule. As Smith has argued, although they were expected by the British to remain peacefully apart with little political or legal power, from the 1920s many of the strikes and political movements were linked to the activities of former and practicing monks.\textsuperscript{146}

The Karen movement predates the Burman but was motivated by and expressed many of the same concerns and had a similarly important relationship with religion. Spearheaded by the Karen National Association (KNA), which was formed in 1881, it was dominated by Christian Karens but open to all Karens regardless of religion or location.\textsuperscript{147} Its aims were ‘to promote Karen identity, leadership, education and writing and to bring about the social and economic advancement of the Karen peoples.’\textsuperscript{148} Much has been made of the role of Christian missionaries in the development of Karen nationalism. Access to written language and education provided by Western missionaries is often accorded responsibility for giving the Karen the tools to develop and express their sense of nationhood.\textsuperscript{149} Some writers have questioned the extent of their impact on the development of a written Karen language.\textsuperscript{150} Others have asked why the Karen developed such a strong nationalist movement in the early twentieth century, when other minority ethnic groups who converted to Christianity on mass, such as the Chin and Kachin, did not.\textsuperscript{151}

What is clear, however, is that the linking of Karen nationalism and Christianity has had an obvious impact on the way the demands made by that movement were received both by the British, and by Burman politicians before and after independence. Smith’s work is instructive here. He has shown that throughout the colonial period the KNA struggled for legitimacy as the representative of the Karen people, given they were largely a Christian run organization and Christian

\textsuperscript{144} Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 49.
\textsuperscript{145} Seekins, \textit{Historical Dictionary of Burma}, 20.
\textsuperscript{146} Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 49.
\textsuperscript{147} Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 45.
\textsuperscript{150} See: South, “Karen Nationalist Communities,” 59.
\textsuperscript{151} Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 45.
Karens then (as now) were a minority within that community.\textsuperscript{152} The KNA took steps to rectify this by creating the Buddhist Karen National Association (BKNA), but were often hindered by Burman suspicion and distrust of their close relationship with the British. Dr Ba Maw, Prime Minister of Burma during the Second World War refused to treat with the KNA until 1943 due to their Christian affiliations and support for the British war effort.\textsuperscript{153}

Such suspicions continued to find resonance in post-independence Burma as well. Missionaries were accused by U Nu’s government at the breakout of a Karen rebellion in 1949 of having ‘deliberately sown the seeds of racial and religious conflict.’\textsuperscript{154} U Ba Swe, prime minister of Burma from 1956-57 argued that the British deliberately converted the Karen to Christianity and gave them special privileges to drive a cultural wedge between them and the Burmese.\textsuperscript{155} And as Smith points out

\begin{quote}

despite the remarkable ideological journey of the Karen nationalist movement… [even in 1987] the state controlled press were still accusing the KNU [the Karen National Union of which the KNA was the precursor] of simply ‘invoking their old owner-masters and craving for colonial servitude, yearning for their distant relative over and above their own mother’\textsuperscript{156}
\end{quote}

Religion was not the only site of tension among the various nationalist movements active in Burma during the first half of the twentieth century. Increasingly questions of culture and race came to dominate the agenda. The Burman nationalist movement was given new strength and impetus by young students who formed the \textit{Dobama Asiayone} associate in the early 1930s. Its formation came in the wake of intense violence directed towards the Indian minority. Outbreaks of violence in Rangoon in 1930 cost 250 lives and more than 2,000 were injured. The driving force behind the violence was Burman anger over the Indian \textit{kalas} taking away Burman jobs. Gravers has argued that ‘the crisis of the 1930s started a war of Burman survival between a growing Burman proletariat and the Indian workers.’\textsuperscript{157} Workers were joined by the \textit{Dobama Asiayone} association, whose first slogan was “race, language,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[152] Smith, \textit{Burma}, 50.
\item[153] Smith, \textit{Burma}, 63.
\item[154] Smith, \textit{Burma}, Revised and Updated Edition, 45.
\end{footnotes}
Other slogans that emerged during the strikes were “[“Burma is our country, Burmese is our literature and language. Love our country, cherish our literature and uphold our language”]. The focus on language and culture in the students’ rhetoric reflected a long concern for these issues for the mainstream nationalist movement. A 1920 strike by Rangoon University students against the imposition of English as the language of instruction and for the establishment of schools free from British control is still celebrated as Burma’s National Day today and seen as the moment when a swelling cultural revival movement became an explicitly nationalist one. Just over ten years later more provocative and overtly racial elements had been added to the demand for schools to teach ‘Burmese language, literature and history’. Chants led by the Dobama Asiayone association in the early 1930s included: “[“Master race we are, we Burmans”].

Despite the above rhetoric of the Dobama Asiayone association, Gravers has argued that this movement was embraced by individuals of groups other than Burman, including people of Indian descent. Clearly, however, ethnic tensions were increasingly becoming entrenched within nationalism movements and society more broadly. Conflict between Burmans and Indians in Burma in the 1930s rested on long-held resentments that had political as well as economic dimensions. In particular, they were exacerbated by Burma’s subordinate position to India within the colonial administrative and economic structure. Agitation for home rule began as early as the first decade of the twentieth century. While some of the minority nationalist groups including the KNA initially argued against it, most of Burma’s political elite came on board and in 1935 home rule was established via the Government of Burma Act.

Many of Burma’s ethnic minorities had fought for a system based on communal representation. Smith has argued that these reforms did little to ‘address the very real problems of political representation posed by Burma’s complex ethnic background. The communal representation model was not evenly applied or universally supported. Not all of the minority groups that sought representation in this

158 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 40.
159 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 41.
160 Smith, Burma, Revised and Updated Edition, 49.
161 Smith, Burma, Revised and Updated Edition, 49.
162 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 41.
163 Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 41.
164 Smith, Burma, Revised and Updated Edition, 42.
165 Smith, Burma, Revised and Updated Edition, 42.
manner were given it: there were anomalies in representation brought about by the
continued division of Burma into Ministerial and Scheduled areas, and politicians of
Burman background in particular fiercely opposed the model finally adopted.166

Members of the Burman-dominated nationalist movement were less enamored
of British-led moves into democratic rule and drew more predominately on political
ideologies of communism and Marxism. It was from these ranks that the Thirty
Comrades were drawn: thirty men from the nationalist movement who received secret
military training from the Japanese and assisted the Japanese with their invasion of
Burma, leading the newly created and Burman-dominated Burmese Independence
Army (BIA). Atrocities committed by the BIA during the war years have had ongoing
impacts on ethnic relations ever since, just as Karen support for the British reinforced
Burman suspicions of their commitment to an independent Burma.167 Over half of the
Indian population of Burma, and significant numbers of Anglo-Burmese, fled to India
(or died in the attempt) as the Japanese and the BIA advanced, significantly altering
the ethnic makeup of Burma’s society.

With the BIA (renamed the Burmese National Army) switching allegiances
midway through the war, Burma’s competing ethnic, religious and nationalist forces
came together to fight for the same cause for the first time. Old tensions resurfaced at
the end of the war, however, as agitation for independence from Britain gathered
steam. Events from the colonial era, overlaid on an already complex combination of
ethnic and religious politics existing within the boundaries of Konbaung dynasty, had
a lasting impact on modern-day Burma. Nineteenth-century Western colonial interests
fundamentally determined its geographic boundaries, and British colonial
administration both exacerbated old tensions and created new ones among the
multiple ethnic groups living within its borders. In doing so it vastly widened the
number and geographic spread from within which people could lay claim to a
Burmese identity. And yet, with the granting of independence in 1948, the idea of a
pan-Burmeseness being embraced by all these people seemed like a remote
possibility. Successive post-independence Burmese governments have striven for this
ideal, and from 1962 it has had the sanction of a military regime. These attempts to
create unity from diversity, where Burmese instead of British was to be the ‘one

166 Smith, Burma, Revised and Updated Edition, 42.
hegemonic identity above the many’,¹⁶⁸ have been at the base of many of Burma’s ethnic insurgencies and hence many of the refugee outflows from Burma over the last seventy years.

Conclusion

In 1948 Burma achieved independence from Britain and Australian citizenship, for the first time, existed as a category separate to British subject- hood. Although at markedly different stages of development at this time, both nations shared racially based national identities that had emerged in the context of the British Empire. These identities, and the politics and policies they engendered, had significant impacts on the flow of migration from Burma to Australia from that point onwards. As will be explored in the Chapter Two, in the two decades following World War II despite becoming increasingly independent of Britain, Australia continued to be defined as a white nation, and thus was not an option for resettlement for many people from Burma seeking to emigrate during that time. In the anti-British atmosphere of post-independent Burma the Anglo-Burmese mixed-descent community was uniquely caught between the dying influence of empire and the rise of nationalism and Burman-dominated constructions of national identity. Their self-identification as British was not welcome in their homeland. It also confounded and challenged the administration of the white Australia policy, contributing to the relaxation of that policy in the 1960s – a time when cultural rather than racial characteristics were increasingly seen as important attributes for successful integration into Australian society.

¹⁶⁸ Gravers, Nationalism as Political Power in Burma, 34.
CHAPTER TWO

‘Generally Speaking Eurasians Do Not...Prove a Very Desirable Type of Migrant’: The Impact of Race and Nation on Migration from Burma to Australia, 1945-1975

The first people from Burma to migrate to Australia in any significant numbers were members of the Anglo-Burmese community. This group occupied a unique position within colonial Burmese society, which made Burmese nationalists suspicious of their loyalty and many Anglo-Burmese question whether there was a place for them within independent Burma. This chapter examines how the position of the Anglo-Burmese community began to shift after Burma achieved independence in 1947 and the push factors to emigration that emerged over the following two decades. During this period leading political figures in Burma attempted to inculcate a pan-Burmese identity in order to forge unity in a nation rife with inter-ethnic conflict, including secessionist demands from some ethnic minority groups. This conception of national identity gradually became more culturally restrictive, reflecting the Burman-dominated political elite, and making the position of many British-identifying Anglo-Burmese people during this period in Burma problematic.

For many of the Anglo-Burmese who chose to emigrate, Australia’s racially restrictive immigration policies proved to be a barrier to resettlement there. Thus, having examined conditions of emigration, this chapter then turns to consider Australia’s policies of immigration. In the late 1940s Australia embarked upon a program of immigration on a massive scale. ‘Populate or Perish’ was the slogan used to generate community support for what was a significant departure from the status quo. And yet, this program did not mark a radical break from long-held notions of the type of immigrant who was, and therefore was not, suitable for migration to Australia. During this period Australian officials were asked to navigate the murky waters between race and culture when implementing immigration policy, which was most challenging in the application of the policy governing the migration of people of mixed descent. It was this policy that regulated the entry of Anglo-Burmese people to Australia as permanent settlers during the middle of the twentieth century. Deciding where to draw the line between cultural adherence and physical appearance when granting an application of entry to Australia became increasingly fraught. Ultimately, it contributed to the overall demise of the white Australia policy.
Utilizing government documents held at the National Archives of Australia, this chapter analyses in particular Australia’s position on the migration of people of mixed-descent and how this policy was applied to those wishing to migrate from Burma. In the 1960s there was a gradual relaxation of regulations governing the migration of people from non-European backgrounds. Earlier policies such as the Colombo Plan had a role in this process by facilitating links between Asian nations and Australia and forging future pathways to migration. Until the mid-1960s, however, and despite an awareness of the humanitarian dimensions to some of the applications for migration from Burma, individual case decisions were made on the basis of wider immigration and external affairs policies such as the white Australia policy and a non-interference doctrine.

The way in which Australian bureaucrats administered migration from Burma reflected the priorities of Australian politicians. As an analysis of Hansard reveals, Burma and the Anglo-Burmese featured in debates about Australian immigration policy. Strikingly, Burma’s own restrictive immigration policies were used by some Australian politicians as justification for the continuance of the white Australia policy. Others lauded the Anglo-Burmese for being exemplary migrants. During the 1960s Burma was increasingly recognized in Australia as an important non-aligned socialist nation bordering communist China and as a potentially lucrative export market. After the military coup in 1962 Australian politicians and officials therefore advocated continued engagement with the Burmese government, which impacted on migration outcomes.

Who Are the Anglo-Burmese?

Before examining these issues in more detail, it is important to define the Anglo-Burmese and outline their position within colonial Burmese society. Doing so

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provides the context for why their position in independent Burma was felt by many to be untenable. As the name suggests the Anglo-Burmese are a community of mixed descent, a direct product of European colonialism in Burma. Questions of race and culture have always been of paramount importance to this community within the colonial context from which they originated. When members of this community began to make the decision to emigrate from Burma in proportionally large numbers in the mid-twentieth century, they often needed to negotiate racially based migration systems in their chosen country of resettlement. In particular, their entrance to Australia was governed by a series of migration and settlement policies that were informed by prevailing thinking on race and culture in Australia.

Categories of identification such as Anglo-Burmese are fluid and change over time and place. The Anglo-Burmese were officially referred to as Eurasian, Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Burman during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Burma, and upon arrival in Australia the Anglo-Burmese community began to refer to themselves more frequently as Burmese. Writing about Anglo-Indian identity Adrian Carton has argued that the ‘pursuit to name the community has always been an area of contestation that reflected the diversity and multiplicity of the Eurasian condition.’ For Carton, such contestations ‘reflect the changing cultural and political circumstances in which they found themselves and the varying importance of the imperial connection in the development of community self-consciousness.’ Debates over, and changes to, the names by which this community has been known throughout its history reflect both the way the community has been imagined by itself and by others.

Official definitions of mixed-descent communities in India and Burma were bound by notions of race, gender and geography. Changes to official nomenclature were often politically motivated, and reflected shifting power relations in Burma and

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2 Carton, “Beyond ‘Cotton Mary’,” 1.
3 Carton, “Beyond ‘Cotton Mary’,;” 1.
4 For example, *The Government of India Act (1935)* defined Anglo-Indians as: ‘a person whose father or any of whose other male progenitors is or was of European descent but who is domiciled within the territory of India, and is, or was, born within such territory, of parents habitually resident therein and not established there for temporary purposes only’. Quoted in: Sheila Pais James, “The Anglo-Indians: ‘Home’ in Australia and the Dilemma of Identity,” *International Journal of Anglo-Indian Studies* 8, 1 (2005). Available online: http://home.alphalink.com.au/~agilbert/pais05.html [Accessed: November 22, 2007].
the aspirations of the mixed-descent communities they labeled. For example, British administrators of Burma only accepted Anglo-Indian as a census category in 1911, replacing the term Eurasian, which the Anglo-Indian community saw as offensive due to the racist and derogatory stereotypes it had acquired in nineteenth century British literature.\(^6\) An official change in nomenclature occurred again in Burma in 1935, with Anglo-Burman becoming the accepted term for the communities of mixed-descent in that area.\(^7\) This move coincided with growing political independence in Burma from British administered India, and strengthened the claim by members of the Anglo-Burman community for communal representation in the new parliament of Burma in 1937.\(^8\) Commenting at the time of Burmese independence, John Clement Koop, himself a member of the Anglo-Burmese community, advocated for yet another change to the term ‘Burman Eurasians’. He argued that the term Anglo-Burman acted to elide the multiplicity of ancestries, both paternal and maternal, that people within this community could claim.\(^9\)

Although the British became the dominant European power in India and Burma, they were not the first to establish trade and other contacts with the peoples of this region. The Portuguese, Irish, French, Dutch, Italian and German, among others, all had some part to play in the creation of communities of mixed-descent within these societies.\(^10\) Anxiety around race and racial stratification was a hallmark of colonial society and ‘was linked to the emergence of a sizable mixed race community in European colonies.’\(^11\) After annexation in the nineteenth century, British government attempted to prevent relationships between British military personnel in particular and women from Burma. They were not always successful, however, and from this period the mixed-descent community in Burma began to grow in number.\(^12\)


Despite the multiplicity of European and Burmese ethnic and cultural groups that made up their background, by the twentieth century members of this community were unified by an adherence to ‘the Christian religion and the use of the English language’. The Anglo-Burmese came to be positioned in-between because no matter how they dressed, what language they spoke or what religion they adhered to, ‘they were locked in an ethnic limbo, in the hyphenated space between white and dark, civilized and savage, colonizer and colonized.’

Dean Burnett has argued that the Anglo-Burmese community became largely endogamous, with some intermarriage with Anglo-Indians and people drawn from Burma’s numerous ethnic groups, but that the children of such unions were usually ‘classed as Anglo-Burmans’. Members of this community came to dominate key positions in the colonial administration of Burma where non-European personnel were needed. Burnett contended that ‘[w]ithin time, the Anglo-Burmans dominated the colonial government, the railways and port authorities, the education system, the colonial police force and native army units, and were indeed a highly influential voice in colonial society.’ The position held by the Anglo-Burmese within colonial Burmese society was not unique to Burma. Communities of mixed-descent existed throughout the British Empire and in the colonies of other European imperial powers. They played similar roles within the colonial social, economic and political hierarchy, frequently acting to mediate the relationship between colonial administrators and the local peoples.

in Burma, 22. Koop lists census figures which show the Eurasian population of Burma tripled between 1891 and 1941. The total population in 1941 was estimated to be 22,000.


Research into other communities of mixed-descent that migrated to Australia at a similar time to the Anglo-Burmese sheds light on the unique position people from these backgrounds held in their home countries. Like the Anglo-Burmese, many decided to leave because their social and economic status had diminished and/or they experienced discrimination after independence. On the gen de couleur community of Mauritius, see: Klaus Neumann, “Anxieties in Colonial Mauritius and the Erosion of the White Australia Policy,” The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History 32:3 (2004): 1-24; and, Edward Duyker, Of the Star and the Key: Mauritius, Mauritians and Australia (Sylvania, NSW: Australian Mauritian Research Group, 1988); Work on the South African ‘Coloured’ community comes predominately from the field of community psychology. See particularly: Adrian T, Fisher and Christopher C. Sonn, “Aspiration to Community: Community Responses to Rejection,” Journal of Community Psychology 27, 6 (1999): 715-725; and, Christopher C. Sonn and Adrian T. Fischer, “Identity and Oppression: Differential Responses to an In-Between Status,” American Journal of Community Psychology 31, 1/2 (2003): 117-128; On the Sri Lankan Burgher community, see: Michael Roberts et al, People Inbetween (Ratmalana, Sri Lanka: Sarvodaya Book Publishing Services, 1989);
perceived to be pro-British by other groups in Burma.\textsuperscript{18}

Such perceptions were to have dire consequences during the Second World War when majority Burman nationalist forces in Burma aided the Japanese invasion of that country in 1942.\textsuperscript{19} The Second World War was a pivotal event that sowed the seeds of unease within the Anglo-Burmese community about their future in an independent Burma. At least half of the Anglo-Burmese population fled Burma ahead of the invading Japanese and Burmese Independence Army forces in 1942.\textsuperscript{20} The majority trekked out of Burma through to the Indian province of Assam, suffering an unknown but significant number of deaths en route. Those that stayed often undertook a process of ‘Burmanisation’, changing their names and adopting Burmese dress in attempts to avoid harassment and discrimination from occupying Japanese forces and their Burman nationalist allies. Any Anglo-Burmese who were unable to blend successfully into wider Burmese society were often subject to internment by the occupying Japanese forces.\textsuperscript{21} Similar assimilation tactics reemerged after the war and were prompted by the lowered status of the Anglo-Burmese community in Burma during the decades that followed.\textsuperscript{22}

**Post-War Push Factors for Emigration: Ethnic Politics in Independent Burma**

The majority of Anglo-Burmese people who fled Burma during the war did return at its end, but many were uncertain about their future as Burma’s predominately Burman nationalist leaders negotiated with the British for almost immediate independence.\textsuperscript{23} John Clement Koop undertook two surveys of the Rangoon Anglo-Burmese population at the behest of community groups in 1948 and again in 1949, one year after British rule ended. These surveys are the only substantial published accounts of this community during this period. While a number of issues emerge in Koop’s work,

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\textsuperscript{18} Burnett, “A History of the Anglo-Burmese Community.”


\textsuperscript{21} Burnett, “A History of the Anglo-Burmese Community.”

\textsuperscript{22} Koop, *The Eurasian Population in Burma*, 11-12.

they are ultimately connected to his primary concern: the potential for survival of this community as a distinct group in independent Burma. At the time that Koop conducted his research the Anglo-Burmese community was caught up in a period of instability and uncertainty. On top of the tragedies of the Second World War, the changing power dynamics of independent Burma had a major impact on the sense of social belonging and economic well-being that members of this community had in Burma.

In a post-independent Burma, race and ethnicity continued to be drivers of conflict and remained a central barrier to political unity. Smith has argued that although ‘Burma was not alone in suffering political and ethnic violence in the fall-out from colonial rule, ... there are a number of reasons why the difficulties of achieving post-colonial unity were especially acute in Burma’s case.’ British colonial administration in Burma created the conditions in which inter-ethnic conflict flourished after independence. Of particular significance was: the migration of huge numbers of Indian labourers into Burma, which was a major factor in the outbreaks of communal violence in the 1930s; the arbitrary division of British Burma into two administrative zones, the result of which was to ‘establish two ethnically-based territories on largely different routes of political and economic development that have never been truly reconciled’; and a precedence for inter-ethnic violence that increased the chances of post-independence conflict.

As Smith argues, ‘diversity does not, in itself, increase the risk of warfare in a multi-ethnic state’. It is in multi-ethnic societies where one group forms an absolute majority that ‘the risks of internal conflict are increased by 50 per cent.’ In independent Burma, the Burman majority ethnic group have dominated the political and military structures of government, gaining the political upper hand during independence negotiations with Britain and maintaining it ever since. It is against these Burman-dominated political parties and institutions that successive ethnically

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27 Smith, State of Strife, 9.
28 Smith, State of Strife, 9.
29 Smith, State of Strife, 8
30 Smith, State of Strife, 8.
31 Smith, State of Strife, 8.
based nationalist organisations have waged armed insurrection over the past seven decades. As Smith notes, however, although Burma may be accurately categorised as an “ethnocratic state”, ethnically partisan representations of its history can often elide the fact that ‘conflict in Burma should never be interpreted as simply a Burman-majority versus ethnic minority affair.’

Aung San, leader of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) faction and of Burma’s independence negotiations, was keen to promote ‘unity in diversity’ as a mechanism to ‘heal ethnic differences and build the new Union’, and is seen by Smith as ‘perhaps the one national leader who might have achieved inter-ethnic unity.’

Aung San addressed the Anglo-Burmese community in Rangoon directly on this issue in an attempt to allay fears surrounding their survival in post-colonial Burma. Invited to speak to the community by the Anglo-Burman Council in 1946, Aung San opened his speech with the statement: ‘The welfare of all people of this country irrespective of race or religion has always been the one purpose that I have set out to fulfil.’

Aung San had much to say about his conceptualisation of nationalism during his speech. His preferred version of nationalism was one that is ‘compatible with the welfare of one and all, irrespective of race or religion or class or sex.’ He argued that:

> [A]ll the world over, we cannot confine the definition of a nationality to the narrow bounds of race, religion, etc. Nations are extending the rights of their respective communities even to others who may not belong to them except by their mere residence amongst them and their determination to live and be with them.

Aung San reflected the long-held Burman nationalist opinion of the Anglo-Burmese, however, when he stated: ‘your community in the past did not happen to identify yourselves with national activities; on the other hand, you were even frequently on the other side.’ It was time, he argued, for the Anglo-Burmese to not just provide verbal declarations of their desire for Burmese nationality but ‘to prove that you want to live

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32 Smith, State of Strife, 8, 10.
and to be with the people of this country, not by words but by deeds.’ If they did so, Aung San was ‘perfectly prepared to embrace [the Anglo-Burmese] as my own brothers and sisters.’

In reassuring his audience that an independent Burma would continue to develop and utilise its natural resources and strive to modernise and industrialise, Aung San hints at the fear held by some members of the Anglo-Burmese community that they would be economically excluded in independent Burma. He stated that:

[T]here will be employments far more than the people in our country may be able to absorb ... I understand that there are a lot of undue apprehensions amongst you in this and other respects. I want to tell you here that you should have no apprehensions on any score provided that you choose to identify yourselves with the people of the country.

Tragically, Aung San, along with six members of his cabinet, was assassinated by political rivals in 1947. His promise of ‘unity in diversity’ was never fully realised in the decades following independence. Ethnicity remained the core around which most political allegiances were formed and competing claims to ethnically based nationhood have been a hallmark of the post-colonial era. Although not all ethnic minority demands were provided for in the legislative framework of independent Burma,

Aung San’s pan-Burmese nationalist vision was in some ways provided for. Eligibility for Burmese citizenship, and therefore a Burmese identity, was predicated on belonging to one of the nominated ‘indigenous races’ or naturalisation if certain residency stipulations were met.

The Anglo-Burmese were not considered to be an ‘indigenous race’ of Burma, a category restricted to those groups that were seen to have existed in Burma prior to British annexation. However, people not from a designated indigenous race could apply for naturalisation under the 1948 Union Citizenship (Election) Act and the Constitution if they were born in the British dominions. This act also provided for naturalisation if a person had resided in Burma for eight out of ten years before 1

42 Lee, Statelessness, Human Rights and Gender, 153.
January 1942 or 4 January 1948, a provision that would have allowed most Anglo-Burmese to apply for Burmese citizenship. The inclusion of ‘indigenous races’ highlights, however, the strength of racial and cultural understandings of national belonging in independent Burma, and established a pattern of tiered citizenship that contributed to feelings of uncertainty about the place of Anglo-Burmese in Burma, and, in more recent decades, the place of other ethnic minority groups.

There was confusion among the Anglo-Burmese community in Rangoon about whether the newly created Burmese citizenship applied to them. Anglo-Burmese associations in Rangoon, where approximately half the Anglo-Burmese community resided, took pains to explain the new citizenship laws to members of their community in an attempt to allay apprehensions about the future. In Koop’s study, fifty-three per cent of Anglo-Burmese surveyed had taken out Burmese citizenship. Of the remaining forty-seven per cent, only sixteen per cent intended to apply; forty-two per cent were uncertain about whether to apply and an equal number had no intention of applying for citizenship.

The decision of whether to apply for Burmese citizenship was linked with the desire to emigrate. Koop’s data reveals a significant increase in the number of people who had decided to emigrate between 1948 and 1949. In 1948, only three per cent of those surveyed had decided to emigrate, twenty-three per cent were undecided and seventy-four per cent had decided to remain in Burma. Koop argued that his results showed the majority of the community had ‘faith’ in ‘the Burmese majority’, and only a quarter lacked confidence ‘in the social and economic stability of [the] Republic’. By 1949 the number of people seeking to emigrate had increased significantly: eighteen per cent intended to emigrate; forty-three per cent were uncertain; and thirty-nine per cent had no intention of leaving Burma. This increase is unsurprising given uncertainty over the new citizenship laws were by then combined with unease created by armed insurrection that had broken out around Rangoon and in other areas of Burma. For many Anglo-Burmese, concerns about the ability to maintain their culture in independent Burma were also central to their decision. Koop argued that after the

43 Lee, Statelessness, Human Rights and Gender, 153 (Note 8).
44 Lee, Statelessness, Human Rights and Gender, 151-158.
46 Koop, The Eurasian Population in Burma, 32.
48 Koop, The Eurasian Population in Burma, 32.
war a section of the community,

viewed with uncertainty the coming of political independence, not because they were against the principle of a country achieving what is an inalienable right, but because they imagined or felt, rightly or wrongly, that their way of life, customs and religion might be denied or their livelihood threatened.  

Some Anglo-Burmese made attempts to assimilate into the Burmese population to varying degrees to combat perceived and actual discrimination. Koop charts the phenomenon of name-changing in both of his surveys as a measure of how many people within his community may have been attempting to assimilate into mainstream Burmese culture. He offered anecdotal evidence for the motive behind this decision arguing that economic considerations were primary, particularly the perception that someone with a Burmese name would be more likely to gain or retain work and advance in work already held. Significantly, Anglo-Burmese who worked in government jobs were more likely to take a Burmese name than those working in the private sector.  

British subject-hood was retained for those Anglo-Burmese whose fathers or paternal grandfathers were born in a British territory outside of Burma, creating a pathway to immigration within the British Commonwealth. Many of these people had already left Burma prior to Koop’s surveys. He argued that they ‘were motivated to leave by the disturbed state of the country and the fear that their way of life would not be tolerated in what appeared to them an intensely nationalist social environment.’ For those who remained, emigration was not always a viable option, despite their continued status as British subjects: Koop found that only a quarter of those who were considering emigration had the means to do so. Immigration restrictions in preferred places of resettlement, such as Australia, were also a formidable barrier.

No permanent migrants for whom Burma was the last place of residence arrived in Australia between June 1945 and June 1948. In 1948-1949 there were 117 arrivals, the highest yearly number until 1963-1964 when there were 152 arrivals.

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49 Koop, The Eurasian Population in Burma, 1.
51 Koop, The Eurasian Population in Burma, 41.
52 Koop, The Eurasian Population in Burma, 32.
53 Koop, The Eurasian Population in Burma, 60.
Over the remainder of the 1960s and the early 1970s yearly permanent migrants from Burma increased, numbering between approximately 250 and 750. Changes in Australia’s immigration policies account for some of this increase (discussed further below). However events in Burma were also responsible for larger numbers of Anglo-Burmese seeking to emigrate once more. Burnett argued that in the 1950s the Burmese government ‘gradually began to Burmanize the state.’ Buddhism was made the official national religion and Anglo-Burmese officers were removed from their positions in the military and other government roles. The right to dual citizenship was removed, as was communal representation in the parliament, and Anglo-Burmese were told to ‘Burmanize or leave’.

Increased numbers of Burma’s ethnic minority groups were engaging in armed insurrection by the end of the 1950s, culminating in a military coup in 1962 that was ‘ostensibly a reaction to threats of succession’. General Ne Win formed a military government along socialist lines and eventually the Burmese State Program Party, which was responsible for implementing the ‘Burmese way to Socialism’, a suite of policies that destroyed Burma’s economy. The ultra-national, anti-colonial rhetoric of the military regime resulted in increased discrimination against those still claiming an Anglo-Burmese identity. As demonstrated below, Australian officials administering migration applications recognised the impact of discrimination against the Anglo-Burmese in Burma during this era. It did not follow, however, that applications with humanitarian dimensions were automatically accepted, especially when the applicant was assessed as not meeting the criteria for the admittance of people of mixed-descent.

Australian migration policy has never been created and administered in a vacuum. Instead, it is the result of a complex interplay between external and domestic policy considerations and is influenced by economic, political and cultural factors. The mid-twentieth century was a period of transition in Australia on many fronts. Australia’s reengagement with Asia during these decades had a pronounced effect on

56 Burnett, “A History of the Anglo-Burmese Community.”
57 Burnett, “A History of the Anglo-Burmese Community.”
the makeup and administration of its migration policies, allowing for increased migration from Burma to Australia from the mid-1960s. To put this migration into a wider context, the following section uses Australian parliamentary debates from the late 1940s to the late 1960s to analyse how Burma was understood and featured in Australian political discourse during that era.

**Australian Parliamentary Rhetoric on Burma, 1947-1968**

The successful rise of nationalism in Burma after the Second World War, and the subsequent installation of a military government with socialist underpinnings in the early 1960s, reflected similar developments in other parts of Asia in the mid-twentieth century. While this increasingly post-colonial and independent Asia had implications for the way in which Australia was to administer its immigration and external affairs policies during this period, the impact was largely superficial until the 1960s. Crucially for the migration of the Anglo-Burmese, Australia also did not back away from its commitment to the tenets of the white Australia policy. Instead, Australian politicians and bureaucrats were faced with the challenge of simultaneously justifying the continuation of the policy in Asia – an Asia which was increasingly ‘demanding treatment as equals’⁶⁰ – in a way that would appease public and political opinion there, while maintaining the status quo at home, or at least the impression of it.

Sean Brawley’s important work on the nexus of foreign relations and immigration in Australia during the twentieth century, *The White Peril: Foreign Relations and Asian Immigration to Australasia and North America 1919-1978* (1995), charted these developments. As his title indicates, Brawley argued that race, particularly the desire to keep Australia white, remained central to the administration of both areas. Although the events surrounding the Second World War and the subsequent independence of Burma in 1948 meant that many Anglo-Burmese were looking to emigrate, the slow pace of administrative change continued to bar many Anglo-Burmese, or any Burmese, from migrating to Australia for many decades. Despite an adherence to many European cultural norms, they remained not white enough to pass Australia’s stringent migration selection criteria until the mid-1960s.

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During this period, Australia was also dealing with a changing relationship to the British Empire. The fall of Singapore and other events in the Pacific theatre of World War II raised profound questions for Australian politicians about Australia’s place in the world, and the alliances necessary to keep it secure.61 The rise of nationalism and then communism in Asia and Australia’s subsequent involvement in the Vietnam War contributed to a changing perspective in Australian foreign policy in the middle decades of the twentieth-century, during which Australia grappled with its relationship to Asia.62

Burma remained on Australia’s political radar throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century. The way in which Burma was discussed and represented in Australian political discourse changed over time and reflected these shifting policy concerns. Although Burma became fully independent in 1948, the shared history of Empire and continued connections through instruments such as the Colombo Plan meant that Burma continued to feature in Australian political discussions in the immediate post-War period and into the 1950s. The military coup in Burma in 1962 opened up a new chapter in Burma-Australia relations, however, one where a shared past connection with Britain became less important than Burma’s position as a socialist state bordering communist China.

Shifts in Australia’s foreign and immigration policy outlook during this period will be explored through the lens of Australian parliamentary statements on Burma as found in Hansard. This section examines closely the ways in which events in Burma were discussed in the House of Representatives in Australia’s federal parliament, primarily during two snapshots in time, 1947-1948 and 1962-1968. These years represent key events in internal Burmese politics and are also periods in which Burma was most frequently mentioned in Australia’s federal parliament. Burma was implicated in and incorporated into discussions on the rise of nationalism in Asia, the


decline of the relevance of the British Empire, Australia’s position in Asia, and the threat communism posed to Australia’s security. Burma also figured in parliamentary debates around immigration. Just as Australia was coming to terms with Asia in its foreign policy deliberations, so too was it forced to come to terms with the implications migrants from Asia were having on the administration of the white Australia policy.

Foreign policy dimensions

Australian political discussion on independence for Burma was located in a larger discourse on the future of the British Commonwealth. The stance of the federal ALP government led by Prime Minister Ben Chifley (1945-1949) on Burma echoed sentiments expressed about Indian independence: namely, that while self-determination of peoples in Southeast Asia was inevitable and right, political independence would best be achieved within the framework of the Commonwealth. Dr Hubert Evatt, Minister for External Affairs in that government, outlined in 1947 that, like Australia, India could achieve ‘all its national aspirations’ as a ‘free and autonomous’ nation ‘while still maintaining the link by which all members of the British Commonwealth are bound together.’ In the same speech, made after Britain’s decision to award Burma full independence was announced, Evatt outlined that his main concern was that Burma should also remain a self-governing state within the Commonwealth: 'I should like to express the hope that the Burmese leaders will decide that their country's democratic progress can best be achieved within the framework of the British Commonwealth of Nations.'

When pressed by Liberal member, Oliver Beale, as to whether Australia was consulted on the issue of Burma’s independence, Evatt replied: ‘We were informed by cable of the proposal, and I pressed the view that the proper solution of the Burmese problem was not for Burma to leave the British Commonwealth.’

outspoken member of the opposition,\textsuperscript{66} was encouraged by this remark. For him, and for what he claimed was ‘a great many of us on this side of the committee, and, indeed, a great many people through the British Commonwealth of Nations’, the decision by Britain to grant Burma full independence was disturbing. His reply was couched within a somewhat partisan attack on the way the Attlee Labour Government, then in power in Britain, had handled the entire affair.\textsuperscript{67} Beale argued that the decision had been ideological, and one that had little regard for the belief held by ‘many of us’ that ‘Burma, at least a large minority of the people of Burma, probably a majority of them, would have been prepared to stay within the British Commonwealth upon the basis of dominion status.’\textsuperscript{68}

While many Australian politicians in the late 1940s strongly held the belief that the Commonwealth should be supported and remain as intact as possible, they had varying reasons for holding this position. With the Second World War only recently ended, concerns for Australia’s security were obviously paramount. Evatt argued that: ‘The preservation of close relations between the countries of the British Commonwealth is important to those countries themselves, and to the world as a whole, in the interests of peace.’\textsuperscript{69} Although peace was a universal goal, Australia’s politicians were grappling with how that peace may be achieved and whether it had implications for the deep-seated and long-held view that Australia should remain a white outpost in Asia. Australia’s historical anxieties about race were often entwined with ideas about empire and concerns expressed by politicians at this time about the


\textsuperscript{69}Evatt, “Supply Bill (No. 1) 1948–49,” 2205.
disintegration of the British Empire highlighted the continued strength of the invasion narrative in Australian political discourse.

Conservative politician, Archie Cameron, argued in response to Indian and Burmese independence that the maintenance of the British Empire was essential to keeping Australia white: ‘If we are to maintain the British Empire as a world power - and we cannot survive as a White Australia unless we do - there are certain corners of the world that we badly need.’ Labor member, Herbert Barnard, also brought up the spectre of ‘invasion’ when he argued that Australia’s geographic position, ‘situated in the southern seas, with Asiatic races at its back door’, left it vulnerable to ‘annihilation’. Barnard argued that through colonialism Europeans had created an underprivileged people who may be looking for retaliation for the oppression they suffered. His suggested solution was for Australia to ‘cultivate improved relations with the countries associated with us as fellow members of the British Empire, such as India, Ceylon, Burma and Malaya’ in the spirit of friendship, inviting people from Asia to come to Australia to study, and open up and encourage reciprocal trade rights with the aforementioned nations. Barnard’s speech was a precursor to sentiments expressed by other federal politicians in the following two decades, where an increased focus was placed on Asia and Australia’s position in the region in both foreign policy and immigration discussions.

Parliamentary discussions about the trade relationship between Australia and Asia were also informed by the changing dynamics of the international community following the end of World War II. There was bi-partisan consensus in Australia in the second half of the 1940s that the rise of nationalism and the development of newly


72 On the development of this focus on Asia, see: Suares, “Engaging with Asia,”; Walton, *Australia, Japan and Southeast Asia*. 

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independent Asian states could have significant positive impacts on the Australian economy.\textsuperscript{74} Intrinsic to this stance was the argument that these nations would need to develop in order to become viable markets for Australia’s surplus goods, and that Australia and other western nations were eminently suitable for the task of assisting with this process. Robert Menzies argued in 1947 that the West had ‘some responsibility for raising the living standards and, with them, the chance of individual freedom of the Asiatic peoples’, and that doing so would ‘help us’ by creating increased consumer demand worldwide.\textsuperscript{75} His stance highlights the degree to which even a staunch empire man\textsuperscript{76} understood that Australia needed to take advantage of changing international dynamics.

Menzies’ opinion reflected a view that the predominately European nations in the region, such as Australia and New Zealand, would continue to have a key role in guiding the other Commonwealth nations within the Asia-Pacific.\textsuperscript{77} Within parliamentary debate during the late 1940s there was also a rising belief that Australia deserved to play an independent role in international affairs and that the war years had proved that it was capable of doing so. Donald Mountjoy declared Australia a ‘Pacific power’ as a result of the ‘authority and independence’ shown by Australia both diplomatically and militarily during the war.\textsuperscript{78} It was a view echoed by Evatt in 1947, who saw the impending independence of India and Burma as key moments in expanding Australia’s regional role. He stated, that: ‘As Britain relinquishes its

\textsuperscript{74}On the Australian economy during the decades under discussion, see: Stephen Bell and Brian Head, \textit{State, Economy and Public Policy in Australia} (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994).


\textsuperscript{77}See also: Evatt, “International Affairs,” 165.

\textsuperscript{78}Donald Mountjoy, “Question, Governor-General’s Speech,” in \textit{Official Hansard}, House of Representatives, Federal Parliament of Australia, Seventeenth Parliament, Third Session – First Period. No. 11, 14 March 1945: 600. Available online: http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number;doce_date- rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansard,hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221940s%22%20Year%3A%221945%22%20Month%3A%2203%22%20Day%3A%2214%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January 2012].
special responsibilities [in India and Burma], the degree of Australia's initiative and responsibility must be substantially increased. The record of Australia in international affairs is creditable and is worthy to be placed alongside this country's war effort. On the other side of the chamber, Menzies too saw that independence for India and Burma meant Australia would need to start charting a course in foreign relations that was separate from Britain and empire:

[It seems to me that the declaration made by the Government of the United Kingdom on India and the prospective developments in Burma, in particular, have made it more important than ever that the view of Australia on foreign relations should be clear and, if possible, continuous. In brief, our foreign relations become increasingly important to us as our isolation from the centre of the British Empire becomes more marked.]

In the security sphere, the events of World War II had already reoriented Australia’s focus to the Pacific, leading to the signing of the ANZUS treaty in 1951. The central defining issue for security from the late 1940s to the late 1960s was communism. Dealing with a continued communist revolt since independence and then becoming a socialist state after Ne Win’s coup in 1962, Burma figured in Australian parliamentary discussions about these issues. Security was seen not just in military terms, but as also being ‘dependent on a healthy economic, social, and political life and on co-operation among the countries of the region.’ As a result,

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instruments such as the Colombo Plan were important planks in Australia’s anti-communist strategy. While the Australian government attempted to assist with the development of Burma through the Colombo Plan and other measures, remarks on the internal politics of Burma by some of Australia’s federal politicians show that there was little optimism in political circles about Burma’s ability to withstand communist aggression in the long-term. Burma was seen to be irresistible to communist forces both for its abundant natural resources and as a pathway to the takeover of India. For example, Country Party politician, Hugh Leslie, argued that:

Burma is a tempting bait to the Communists in their quest for world domination, because it is an important rice-growing country and, as such, must have an important effect upon the political and economic policies of the countries of South-East Asia. The occupation of Burma by Communist forces would be a direct threat to India.

Minister for External Affairs, Richard Casey, traveled to Burma in 1952. He saw Burma as occupying a ‘key position in South-East Asia’, which was, however, ‘torn by civil war’, and therefore vulnerable to Chinese aggression. He told the parliament that developments in Burma and elsewhere in South-East Asia were ‘vital to

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84 Brawley, The White Peril, 252-257.
85 Questions were asked in the Federal House of Representatives about Australia’s commitment to Burma under the Colombo Plan. See for example: Reginald Swartz and Richard Casey, “Question, Colombo Plan,” in Official Hansard, House of Representatives, Federal Parliament of Australia, Twenty-First Parliament, First Session – Second Period, No. 16, 20 April 1955: 14-15. Available online: http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number;doc_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr.hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221950s%22%20Year%3A%221955%22%20Month%3A%2204%22%20Day%3A%2220%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January 2012].
86 Hugh Leslie, “International Affairs, Speech,” in Official Hansard, House of Representatives, Federal Parliament of Australia, Twenty-First Parliament, First Session – First Period, No. 32, 12 August 1954: 270. Available online: http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number;doc_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr.hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221950s%22%20Year%3A%221954%22%20Month%3A%2208%22%20Day%3A%2212%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January 2012]; See also: Reginald Swartz, “International Affairs,” in Official Hansard, House of Representatives, Federal Parliament of Australia, Nineteenth Parliament, First Session – First Period, No. 19, 9 May 1950: 2266. Available online: http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number;doc_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr.hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221950s%22%20Year%3A%221950%22%20Month%3A%2205%22%20Day%3A%2209%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January 2012].
Australia’, and he approved the creation of an Australian Legation in Rangoon so that
Australia could better keep informed of the political situation there.\(^{87}\)

It is important not to overstate the significance of Burma in parliamentary
discussions about security and related issues. As with the rhetoric on the
Commonwealth and Asian independence movements from the late 1940s – where
Burma’s situation was clearly of lesser importance to that of India’s – Burma figured
on a small scale in relation to the main foci of China and the Vietnam War. The coup
led by General Ne Win in 1962 did not give rise to much discussion within
parliament, which in itself is an indication of the relatively low level of significance
that internal Burmese politics played in debates about wider security issues in
Australia.\(^{88}\)

What is clear from a reading of *Hansard*, however, and what is backed up in
the Department of External Affairs (DEA) archival files,\(^{89}\) is that the neutrality of
Burma during the 1960s was an important element in Australia’s anti-communist
outlook, and meant that despite the political regression to a one-party state, Australia
was willing to maintain contact with Ne Win’s regime. The continued connections
and regard between the two nations is illustrated by a statement made by then

\(^{87}\) Richard Casey, “International Affairs,” in *Official Hansard*. House of Representatives, Federal
Parliament of Australia, Twentieth Parliament, First Session – Third Period, No. 8, 22 February 1952:
267. Available online:
http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number.do
c_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansard.hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221950s%22%20Year%3A%221952%22%20Month%3A%2202%22%20Day%3A%2222%22%20rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January
2012]; His sentiments echo those in a statement made by Evatt in 1949. See: Hubert Evatt.
“International Affairs,” in *Official Hansard*, House of Representatives, Federal Parliament of Australia,
online:
http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number.do
c_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansard.hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221940s%22%20Year%3A%221949%22%20Month%3A%2202%22%20Day%3A%2217%22%20rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January
2012].

\(^{88}\) For example, in 1962 Kim Beazley Snr made a brief reference to the failure of democracy in Burma.
See: Kim Beazley Snr, “Government Supporters. – No.,” in *Official Hansard*. House of
Period, No. 40, 3 October 1962: 1112. Available online:
http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number.do
c_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansard.hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221960s%22%20Year%3A%221962%22%20Month%3A%2210%22%20Day%3A%2203%22%20rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January
2012].

\(^{89}\) See, for example: National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma –
Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma.”
Mini
ster for External Affairs, Paul Hasluck, in parliament in 1965: ‘another neutralist
country in Asia - Burma, which I was able to visit recently - has also shown the same
outstanding marks of friendship and confidence in Australia as we have for Burma.’

Immigration policy dimensions

While Australia’s foreign policy outlook evolved and adapted to the changing
political and security realities of the mid-twentieth century, its immigration policy
during the same period remained relatively static. As the following discussion will
show, even in the mid-1960s justifications for the white Australia policy within the
domestic political sphere generally continued to rely on the same rhetoric and the
same arguments that had been deployed since its inception in 1901. Such rhetoric was
not solely inward looking, but was part of a wider international conversation about
immigration policy and incorporated references to the policies of other nations in the
region. Hence Burma figured in parliamentary debates about immigration during both
the late 1940s and the mid-1960s. Newly independent nations in Asia, such as Burma
and India, were also aware of and criticised the white Australia policy. Attempts by
Australian parliamentarians to counter these criticisms highlight the shift from racial
to cultural categories in migration selection decisions that was slowly occurring in the
1960s. Through these shifts the Anglo-Burmese began to be considered ‘very fine
migrants’.

As was the case on questions of foreign policy, India figured more
prominently than Burma in parliamentary debates on this issue, particularly in the
late-1940s. India was more vocal in its criticism of the white Australia policy than

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90 Paul Hasluck, “Question, International Affairs,” in Official Hansard, House of Representatives,
Federal Parliament of Australia, Twenty-Fifth Parliament, First Session – Fourth Period, No. 33, 17
August 1965: 8. Available online:
http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number,do
c_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr,hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221960s%22%20Year%3A%221965%22%20Month%3A%2208%22%20Day%3A%2217%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January 2012].

91 Richard Cleaver, “Appropriation Bill (No. 1), Department of Immigration,” in Official Hansard,
House of Representatives, Federal Parliament of Australia, Twenty-Sixth Parliament, First Session –
Second Period, No. 40, 3 October 1967: 1604. Available online:
http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number,do
c_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr,hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221960s%22%20Year%3A%221967%22%20Month%3A%2210%22%20Day%3A%2203%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January 2012].
Burma – there is no indication in *Hansard* that Australia had suffered a significant backlash from Burma as a result of its immigration selection criteria. In 1947, Australia’s then Minister for External Affairs, Evatt, was challenged on the issue of India’s objections to the white Australia policy. In his response, Evatt attempted to play down Indian criticisms, arguing for Australia’s right to regulate migration just as India did. Menzies, then leader of the opposition, expressed irritation that Australia’s immigration policy (or any policy) should be subject to interference from another nation.

Politicians attempted to play down the racial aspects of the white Australia policy, often arguing that Australia’s immigration policy was not derived from a feeling of racial superiority, but rather a desire to maintain a homogenous society free from racial strife. A key example is Arthur Calwell, Minister for Immigration in the Chifley government and chief architect of Australia’s post-war immigration scheme. He objected to the usage of the term, white Australia policy, arguing that it instilled the ‘mistaken belief on the part of many of our northern neighbours that we regard them as racially inferior.’ Instead, he argued that the ‘ideal which underlies our policy is the preservation of the homogeneous character of our population and the avoidance of the friction which inevitably follows an influx of peoples having different standards of living, traditions, culture and national characteristics.’ In the infamous speech in which Calwell raised the specter of a ‘mongrel Australia’, he also drew on restrictive immigration policies in Burma to justify the policy:

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92 Burma’s ‘suspicion’ of the white Australia policy is briefly mentioned in a speech by ALP politician, Leslie Haylen, in 1948. See: Leslie Haylen, “Supply. (Grievance Day),” in *Official Hansard*, House of Representatives, Federal Parliament of Australia, Eighteenth Parliament, First Session – Fourth Period, No. 17, 22 April 1948: 1052. Available online: http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number,doc_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr,hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221940s%22%20Year%3A%221948%22%20Month%3A%2204%22%20Day%3A%2222%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January 2012].

93 Evatt, “International Affairs,” 165-166.


The Burmese do not want any more Indians or Chinese. Is the action of the Government of Burma to be interpreted as anti-Asiatic? It is just as right to say that it is so, as it is to claim that we are anti-Asiatic when we tell people, who cannot mix with us and whose social and living standards are not high enough, that they cannot come here.\textsuperscript{96}

Similar arguments were still being utilised in the mid-1960s – where Burma’s program of returning Indians to India was used as an example of policies of nations in Asia. Take for example, statements made by Liberal Politician, Wilfrid Kent Hughes:

People seem to think that the immigration policy which we have had for some time in Australia is peculiarly Australian and is pointed at racial discrimination, but when we investigate the policies of our neighbours we find that, in reality, they are all quite similar. Let us consider Burma as an example. Burma has recently sent back to India, mainly from Rangoon but also from other parts, I understand - I speak subject to correction on the figures that I cite - about 300,000 Indians.\textsuperscript{97}

Burma’s immigration policies were also singled out by fellow Liberal Party politician, Keith Wilson, as justification for Australia’s own policy:

In Burma immigration for permanent residence is discouraged altogether. In other words, Burma does not have migrants. How wrong it would be for the Burmese to criticize Australia for its immigration policy when that country prohibits immigrants altogether?\textsuperscript{98}


In 1965 the ALP removed the reference to the white Australia policy from its party platform, ending bi-partisanship on the issue.\textsuperscript{99} Immigration policy reform was also underway in the middle of that decade, prompted in some measure by the retirement of Menzies in 1966.\textsuperscript{100} That year the federal cabinet approved policy changes that would allow for the migration of highly qualified non-Europeans who had been assessed as ‘capable of ready integration into the Australian community’, and liberalised waiting period for citizenship for non-Europeans, among other provisions.\textsuperscript{101} As Tavan has shown, these changes were deliberately modest and largely received bi-partisan support.\textsuperscript{102} While the Liberal Party has been known to claim responsibility for the dismantlement of the white Australia policy as a result of these changes, parliamentary debate of the policy changes showed that the ideas that had long underpinned Australia’s immigration policy continued to have traction. Kent Hughes again provides an excellent example. When arguing in favour of the changes, he echoed Calwell’s statements from the late 1940s when he told parliament:

I have never called it a white Australia policy because it was not so much the policy that caused objection; it was the use of the adjective ‘white’ which implied racial superiority. … [O]ur policy was not based on racial discrimination as such but on our ability to absorb into our own community people of different races and of different origins.\textsuperscript{103}

For Labor politician and later opposition spokesperson for immigration, Fred Daly, acceptance of the policy in Asia was also a question of semantics:

It is not that our policy is objectionable, but rather that it is not explained. I well remember the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell) explaining our immigration policy at a Commonwealth Parliamentary conference attended by many people of different colour. His speech was applauded and accepted because of the way it presented the policy.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{100} Tavan, \textit{Long Slow Death of White Australia}, 157.
\textsuperscript{101} Tavan, \textit{Long Slow Death of White Australia}, 158.
\textsuperscript{102} Tavan, \textit{Long Slow Death of White Australia}, 158-161.
\textsuperscript{103} Hughes, “Immigration, Ministerial Statement,” 677.
\textsuperscript{104} Fred Daly, “Immigration, Ministerial Statement,” in \textit{Official Hansard}, House of Representatives, Federal Parliament of Australia, Twenty-Fifth Parliament, First Session – Fifth Period, No. 12, 24 March 1966: 585. Available online: http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy= fragment_number_doc_date_rev_query=Dataset%3Ahansardr:hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221960s%22%20Year%3A%221966%22%20Month%3A%2203%22%20Day%3A%224%22;rec=0;resCount=Default [Accessed 27 January 2012].
Wilson, quoted above, also used Burma’s policies to argue that there was no racial basis to Australia’s policy. In fact, with the 1966 reforms, Wilson felt comfortable arguing that ‘Australia now has the most liberal immigration policy of any country.’ He had faith that the then Minister for Immigration, Hubert Opperman, could be entrusted to exercise his new powers of discretion to allow entry of non-Europeans for settlement ‘in the best interests of Australia’ – meaning that he could be assured that those allowed entry would be best able to be ‘successfully integrated into this community’. Wilson gave language, religion and educational standards as key markers of integration potential, all attributes that characterized most members of the Anglo-Burmese community whose migration may previously have been barred due to the colour of their skin.

In the late 1960s, the Anglo-Burmese and other people of mixed-descent were singled out in parliament as examples of ‘very fine migrants’. In making this call, Liberal Party politician from Western Australia, Richard Cleaver, raised the deteriorating situation in Burma as an additional reason for why the Minister of Immigration should look about their applications favourably. He stated:

I have noted in my representations over recent months that more and more people, embarrassed with conditions in Burma, are extremely keen for the Government to accept their applications for entry into Australia. During postwar years in excess of 15,000 persons of mixed descent have come to Australia to settle. They have come mainly from Ceylon, India and Pakistan. In recent years the number admitted from Burma has increased. I stress with the Minister that conditions in Rangoon are extremely embarrassing for a number of people who would, I believe, be very fine migrants.

Despite such recognition of the situation that many Anglo-Burmese faced in Burma following the coup in 1962, slow implementation of immigration policy changes in the 1960s, meant that larger numbers of this community only began to migrate to Australia towards the end of that decade. As the archives show, humanitarian concerns were only one element in the range of considerations that went into migration selection decisions.

110 Cleaver, “Appropriation Bill (No. 1), Department of Immigration,” 1603-1604.
Exploring the Archives: Administrative Responses to the Migration of Anglo-Burmese in the Mid-1960s

Studies of mixed-descent migration have shown that the processing of applications from people such as the Anglo-Burmese played a role in bringing about immigration policy changes in the mid-1960s, and hence the relaxation and eventual abolition of the white Australia policy. In processing these applications the racial and cultural backgrounds of potential migrants were scrutinised and judged by Australian officials in ways that became increasingly untenable when challenged. There have been two noteworthy studies that have argued that mixed-descent migration had a significant impact on the administration of the white Australia policy from the late 1940s, and contributed to its official demise in 1973. Each focuses on the experience of a different mixed-descent community. Alison Blunt centres her analysis on the Anglo-Indian community, while Klaus Neumann primarily frames his study on the migration of Mauritian gens de couleur to Australia.

Blunt begins her analysis with the arrival of the HMAS Manoora in Western Australia in 1947. The Manoora was carrying more than 700 Anglo-Indian evacuees from India, despite the Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell’s instructions that the passengers be ‘Australians…[or] British people of pure European descent’. For Blunt, ‘the arrival of Anglo-Indians on the Manoora prompted increasingly restrictive policies to create and to maintain a ‘White Australia’.

While in 1947 migrants of mixed-descent had to be “clearly more than 50% European and from appearance and conversations…could reasonably be regarded as predominantly European”, by 1950 they were required to provide documentary evidence of at least 75% European ancestry. Blunt and Neumann both show that while these regulations did act to restrict the number of mixed-descent migrants to Australia, the task of immigration officials to police them became increasingly difficult.

The issue was complicated by the strong self-identification of such

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116 Neumann discusses this in relation to the Mauritian gens de couleur community. See: Neumann, “Anxieties in Colonial Mauritius.”
communities – who spoke European languages, wore European dress, and practiced Christianity – as European. Neumann neatly sums up the dilemma immigration officials faced: ‘should the applicants be classed as non-white in spite of their strong self-identification? … And precisely how could officials ascertain whether a person of mixed descent belonged in the European or the non-European category?’ As Blunt points out, while many Anglo-Indians did not have documentary proof of their European ancestry, ‘their claims could equally not be disproved’.

Blunt shows that contestations over ideas of whiteness, Europeanness, and definitions of a suitable migrant also occurred between the Department of External Affairs and the Department of Immigration during the two decades following the Second World War. As early as 1947 the Department of External Affairs proposed that selection of migrants should not depend on ‘appearance alone, but should grant equal significance to other factors such as “initiative, personality, education, specialised skill [and] economic independence”’. Although the documentary evidence provision was finally dropped in 1957, it was not until 1964 that appearance was to be officially given ‘no overriding importance’ in migration selection decisions. Despite the slow implementation of this policy change among immigration officials, it was a significant shift and led to marked increases in the numbers of mixed descent applicants able to migrate to Australia during the mid to late 1960s. For the Anglo-Burmese, the 1966 policy changes discussed above further increased access to migration pathways.

The archives show that the Secretary of the Department of Immigration, Peter Heydon had quietly tried to assuage the concerns of critics of the mixed descent migration policy in 1962 by telling them that ‘the entry criteria were now based on way of life being 75 per cent European, not racial characteristics.’ And in 1963 he made assurances to critics that there had been ‘considerable liberalization [sic]’ of

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123 Neumann, “Anxieties in Colonial Mauritius,” 16; On the role of immigration officials, see for example interviews presented in the documentary Admission Impossible, VHS, directed by Alec Morgan (Lindfield: Film Australia, 1992); and Harry Martin, Angels and Arrogant Gods (Canberra: AGPS Press, 1989).
policy over the past few years.\textsuperscript{125} Heydon’s comment reflected a shift occurring at that time from racial to cultural understandings of whiteness. Despite these changing paradigms his assertions were premature.

In 1965 the Minister for External Affairs, Paul Hasluck, asked his department to prepare a briefing on the admission of Anglo-Burmese migrants to Australia. His request was prompted by representations made on behalf of this community by the Archbishop of Perth, who was concerned that the Australian officer in Rangoon making migration selection decisions had become ‘less-liberal in his attitude to applicants than in former years’. Policy changes in 1964 would have raised an expectation of liberalisation. The Archbishop was in particular concerned about those people placed in a vulnerable position by the new military regime in Burma and who therefore had an acute need to emigrate. In this briefing (completed with the assistance of the Department of Immigration) M. R. Booker, First Assistant Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, informed the minister that the entry of the Anglo-Burmese to Australia during the mid-twentieth century was not governed by a specific policy. Instead, decisions were made with reference to the policy covering the migration of all people of mixed race.\textsuperscript{126} Booker did note, however, that Anglo-Burmans (his preferred term) faced a situation in Burma that was ‘under present circumstances…more unenviable than that of the burghers in Ceylon or the Anglo-Indians in India.’\textsuperscript{127}

The briefing gave a short summary of the situation facing Anglo-Burmese people under the Ne Win regime since the coup in 1962. It argued that:

The pursuit of the Burmese way of Socialism with its policies of nationalisation, ‘demonetization’ [sic] and Burmanisation has caused foreigners resident in Burma to be discriminated against on political, economic or social grounds. Foreign personnel have been replaced by Burmese in all walks of life. An attempt is being made to remove all foreign cultural influences; and one manifestation of this is the discouragement of English. All these factors have led to a mass exodus of thousands of Indians, Nepalese and Europeans. Because of their Westernized [sic] way of life and the fact that they speak English, the Anglo-Burmans irrespective of the fact that many of them are Burmese nationals, tend to be identified with foreigners and to be subjected to many of the same difficulties.\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{125} Quoted in: Tavan, \textit{Long Slow Death of White Australia}, 134.
\textsuperscript{126} National Archives of Australia: A446, 1970/95021, “Admission of Persons of Mixed Descent [race] - Part I.”
\textsuperscript{127} National Archives of Australia: A446, 1970/95021, “Admission of Persons of Mixed Descent [race] - Part I.”
\textsuperscript{128} National Archives of Australia: A446, 1970/95021, “Admission of Persons of Mixed Descent [race]
Mr Booker challenged the Archbishop’s claim that the Australian officer in Rangoon was being less liberal than in previous years with reference to changes to the policy governing the entry of people of mixed-descent made in 1964. He stated that:

[T]he extent to which an applicant is non-European, either by appearance or attested origin, is no longer a factor which outweighs other considerations, such as compassionate circumstances, special skills or qualifications, or the ability of the application to make a positive and specific contribution to Australia’s development.¹²⁹

Booker argued that for the person of at least seventy-five per cent European origin, who would have previously ‘qualified virtually automatically by reason of the extent of his European origin’, the policy changes may indeed appear less liberal if he or she did not have compassionate circumstances or appropriate skills to strengthen their application for migration. However, for those who had previously been excluded because they were not ‘sufficiently European in origin’, but who did meet the new criteria, there was now a far greater chance that their application to migrate to Australia would be successful.¹³⁰

While the assertions about changes to policy in this briefing were confidently made, open access migration files from Burma that are discussed in this section show that race-based language and assumptions continued to be significant elements of interview reports and inter-departmental communication for some time beyond the 1964 policy adjustment. Case files also suggest that the Archbishop’s concerns about staff at the Australian Embassy in Rangoon are justifiable, as assessments made by one official during the mid-1960s, the administrative attaché J. D. Johnson, continued to place particular emphasis on these factors in his reports back to the Department of Immigration. Other cases illustrate that new considerations in migration selection decisions, like compassionate circumstances, had to compete with foreign policy considerations such as sensitivity in developing nations like Burma to ‘brain drain’, the emigration of highly qualified individuals to the West. Finally, they reveal the role of the Colombo Plan in forging pathways towards permanent residency in Australia.

'Quite Asian in appearance – only about 25%': Assessing race in migration applications
Maurice Hirjee and his family originally applied for entrance to Australia in August 1964. The report of their interview with Johnson was brief and quite stark, with descriptions of physical appearance taking precedence over all other considerations: members of the family, described as either more European or Asian looking, were given numerical grades. The entry describing Mr. Hirjee, for example, states: ‘Light brown skin, reasonably spoken English. Wants to enter Navy in Australia, staying with cousins in Perth. British passport. Grading 60%.’ His wife, Margaret Hirjee, warranted only this short statement: ‘Grading 40-45%, speaks very little English.’ Their children were given ‘grades’ varying between twenty-five and seventy percent, and were described variously as ‘Quite Asian’ or ‘most European looking member of the family’ (see Figure 4).131

On his 1964 application, Mr. Hirjee described his nationality as ‘Anglo-Burman’.132 Like all prospective migrants to Australia at that time, he was asked to specify the race of his and his wife’s parents and grandparents, and ‘[i]f of mixed race give proportions e.g. ½ European ½ Indian’.133 This ‘Family Origin’ section was located on the migration application form M47 before sections on health, education, employment and language spoken. There was no section of the form for Mr. and Mrs. Hirjee to indicate that they both held British passports and hence were British subjects. As the interview report by Johnson indicates, ‘Britishness’ for the purposes of migration to Australia at that time was not a legally defined identity or even a cultural one, but one bound by race.

Mr. Hirjee appealed the decision to reject his application for migration in December 1964. In a letter to the Department of Immigration, Mr. Hirjee outlined Australian accommodation and sponsorship guarantees, and other qualities that he believed would make him an ‘asset’ to Australia: his work history with the Burmese navy; his sporting achievements (Mr. Hirjee played with and coached the Burma Navy soccer team, and later the national team); his educational background; his fluency with written and spoken English; his British subject-hood; his proactive

131 National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316, “Hirjee Maurice John.”
132 National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316, “Hirjee Maurice John.”
133 National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316, “Hirjee Maurice John.”
attempts to gather knowledge about Australian society; and his preparedness to ‘accept any type of work which will ensure a decent living for me and my family’.\textsuperscript{134}

The appeal prompted the Department of Immigration to ask Johnston to expand on his initial interview report on the Hirjee family. Johnston’s reply, dated 11 February 1965, was more detailed, but again, emphasis was first placed on the physical appearance of the members of the Hirjee family. For example, it stated: ‘[i]n appearance, Mr. Hinjee [sic] is perhaps a little more European than Asian, Mrs. Hinjee [sic] looks quite Asian and can hardly speak any English. The children’s appearance varies.’\textsuperscript{135} Johnston’s report then provided impressions of Mr. Hirjee’s character, in a less than complimentary manner:

\begin{quote}
I was not at all impressed with Mr. Hinjee [sic]. I have seen a copy of the letter of appeal he has written to you and I very much doubt whether the letter was written by him at all. His English was only reasonable. I did not gain the impression that he is at all an industrious person and I feel he is only interested in moving somewhere where life may be a bit easier for him. His only working experience is in the Burma Navy, and his whole twelve years employment has consisted in working his way up from a playing member in the Navy football team to the team’s coach.\textsuperscript{136}
\end{quote}

Unsurprisingly, given this assessment, Johnston reconfirmed his recommendation to reject the family’s application for migration. His recommendation was accepted by the Department of Immigration.

Gradually considerations other than physical appearance did begin to factor more significantly in decision-making processes, even in the case of the Hirjee family who again appealed their rejection in 1967. Mr Hirjee’s 1967 letter of appeal showed an understanding of the new priorities of Australian migration policy concerning mixed-descent migrants, and as such he outlined his solid family connections in Australia, his industrious nature and keenness to contribute to the Australian economy and, significantly, that he had been ‘bred to the English way of life, observing at all times in my home English manners and customs.’\textsuperscript{137}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[134] National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316, “Hirjee Maurice John.”
\item[135] National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316, “Hirjee Maurice John.”
\item[136] National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316, “Hirjee Maurice John.”
\item[137] National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316, “Hirjee Maurice John.”
\end{footnotes}
INTERVIEW REPORT

M. J. HIRJEE AND FAMILY

I interviewed these people at 3 p.m. on 13th August.

Appearance, etc.

Mr. Hirjee  Light brown skin, reasonably spoken English. Wants to enter Navy in Australia, stay with cousins in Perth. British passport. Grading 60%.

Mrs. Hirjee  Grading 40-45%, speaks very little English.

Keith  Most European looking member of the family. Grading 65-70%.

Olivia & Lorraine  Quite Asian in appearance - both about 25%.

Other Boys: Light brown skin - vary in appearance, but only about 40-50%.

Summing Up  Reject.

(J.D. Johnston)  
Attache (Administrative)

14th August, 1964.

Figure 4: “Interview Report. M. J. Hirjee and Family”
Source: National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316
The appeal succeeded in winning the family a second interview at the Australian Embassy, and ultimately the acceptance of their application to migrate. Perhaps significantly, a different Australian officer in Rangoon was responsible for writing the report that recommended approval of their application – Justin T. Berrell, Vice Consul. In a report dated 7 June 1967 physical appearance was still the first characteristic mentioned when describing members of the family, however it was
given much less space and emphasis than cultural adherence, family connections in Australia, and employment outlook (see Figure 7). Berrell stated that: ‘All have been educated in mission schools by Anglos, wore western dress, have been brought up in an Anglicised atmosphere and the parents appeared to have a western outlook and mode of living.’ Mr. Hirjee’s work history and ‘considerable talent as a football coach’ is canvassed. The report concludes:

Whatever the impressions of him gained at his first interview, Mr. Hirjee appeared very keen to find good secure employment and to obtain some future for his family. I consider they could contribute significantly to our economic development and recommend their favourable consideration in the light of the present policy.\(^{138}\)

Not all cases took three years to resolve. One Anglo-Burmese family’s application was used by the Secretary of the Department of Immigration as a test case for the new discretionary powers held by the Minister of Immigration after 1964 to allow the entry of people of mixed-descent whose ancestry was not at least seventy-five per cent European. Mr. Henry and Mrs. Florence Ford and their children originally applied to migrate to Australia in 1964. The way in which their case was discussed between, and within, the Australian Embassy and the Department of Immigration highlights the beginnings of the shift from racial to cultural understandings of ‘Europeanness’. Racial characteristics, however, clearly continued to strongly influence notions of assimilability, even in the case of the Ford family which was personally dealt with by the Secretary and Minister for Immigration, two key figures in the immigration reform process underway at that time.\(^{139}\)

Unlike the Hirjee family, the Ford family was originally recommended by the Australian Embassy in Rangoon for migration in May 1964 on the basis that Mr. Ford’s capabilities were ‘well above average’ and that all members of the family were ‘socially acceptable to Europeans in Rangoon’ and ‘Westernised in manner of living and outlook, and should make excellent migrants.’ The report concluded with the assertion that, ‘They will have no difficulty in assimilating in Australia.’\(^ {140}\) The Ford family had to be recommended as a special case because Mrs. Ford had a fully Burmese mother, and as such, did not meet the requirements of the seventy-five per

\(^{138}\) National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316, “Hirjee Maurice John.”

\(^{139}\) Tavan, \textit{Long Slow Death of White Australia}, 129-146.

\(^{140}\) National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/279, “FORD Henry Charles.”
cent rule that restricted the migration of people of mixed-descent at the time they applied.

Figure 7: “Mr. M. J. Hirjee & Family – Admission (Mixed-Race)”
Source: National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/316

Physical appearance was given priority in the report sent back to the department. As was necessary of officials making migration selection recommendations prior to the 1964 policy changes, the officer described and graded how European each member of the family looked:
Mr. Ford is seven eighths European and looks fully European. Mrs. Ford has fair skin but partly Asian features which make her look about 50% European. The children are all 75% or more European in appearance with the exception of Victoria who has more Asian features than the others and looks only about 70% European; she has a fair complexion, however. Robin has slightly darker skin than the others (Peter is fair, contrary to the impression given by the photograph), but still looks about three-quarters European.

Grading for ‘Europeanness’ was a subjective process, reliant on the perception and attitude of the officer making the report, and perhaps influenced by whether the recommendation was to accept or reject the migration application. For example, the author of the report quoted above, D. M. Allan, Third Secretary, perceived Peter Ford to be ‘fair’. Johnson’s interpretation of Peter’s appearance, however, was couched in terms that implied Peter did not meet the seventy-five per cent rule, although no ‘grade’ was given. In a report written for a subsequent individual application to migrate by Peter, Johnston described him as having, ‘light brown skin, and a mixture of European and Asian facial features’. His recommendation was that Peter’s application be rejected and the only information of substance in the report justifying his recommendation was this description of Peter’s appearance.

The Department of Immigration considered the application of the Ford family ‘carefully’ and the Secretary personally forwarded the decision to the Australian Embassy. Despite the favourable impression held of Mr. Ford by embassy staff, the family’s application was rejected. Heydon stated in his memo to the embassy that ‘in terms of policy, the application is not one which can be approved.’ Mr. Ford appealed this decision in August 1964. His letter to the Australian Embassy outlined six reasons why the decision should be reconsidered, the first being that his wife and children were British nationals ‘and as such there is no future for them in Burma especially with the present trend of nationalism’. As with the Hirjee family, holding a British passport was not sufficient grounds for migration selection for members of the Anglo-Burmese family. Instead, Mr. Ford’s fully-European appearance, his professional background, his cash reserves and support from friends already living in Australia made his family’s application a more palatable case to use as a test the
newly relaxed restrictions that came into force in 1964. Those connections in Australia also assisted the Ford family to enlist the assistance of Mr. R. Cleaver, federal Member of Parliament for Swan and member of the Liberal Party, who made representations on their behalf with Immigration Minister, Hubert Opperman.

Figure 8: The Ford family (Photos submitted with 1964 migration application)
Source: National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/279

Heydon submitted a two page briefing to the Minister on 23 October 1964 in which he recommended that the Minister approve the Ford family’s application using his newly acquired discretion to admit for residency of mixed-descent migrants who do not meet the seventy-five percent rule but where:

humanitarian considerations involving close family relationships or hardship on grounds of discrimination are present; or where the applicant has special knowledge, qualifications or experience useful to Australia; or has the ability to contribute to Australia’s economic, social or cultural progress.\(^{146}\)

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Heydon went on to advise Opperman that:

In all cases, the applicant is required to show that by appearance, upbringing, outlook and mode of dress, he is capable of ready integration in the Australia community...therefore it is within your discretion to admit any person of mixed race who qualify under the terms of the policy, unless you feel that because of the extent of their non-European appearance they may experience difficulties in becoming readily integrated into the Australian community.  

This statement makes clear that non-European appearance was seen as a barrier to assimilation, considered at the time to be the ultimate goal of a successful migration and settlement program. Heydon’s briefing for the Minister, in which the first point summarises the Ford family’s physical appearance, emphasises this point. Mr. Ford’s ‘fully European’ appearance was clearly of more importance than Mrs. Ford’s British subjecthood, given that she had ‘a non-European parent’ and while ‘reported to have fair skin’, she also had ‘partly Asian features, which [gave] her the appearance of a person who is half-caste.’ Mr. Ford’s service in the British armed forces in World War II was noted, as was his professional standing with his current employer, the United States Agency for International Development. Third on the list was the family’s ‘European...manner of living and outlook’ that would see them ‘have no difficulty in assimilating in Australia.’ The Minister approved the Ford family’s application for migration within three days of receiving Heydon’s briefing, and only three months after the policy changes were implemented. That it was perceived to be a test case for the new policy, and not just a standard application, is evidenced by this document’s inclusion in the National Archives of Australia file, “Admission of persons of mixed descent [race] - Part 1”.

As the above cases highlight, prospective migrants from Burma often contested unfavourable migration outcomes. The archives offer evidence that when personal appeals met with no success, some migrants utilised family and friendship networks in Australia to bring their cases to the Minister’s attention by enlisting the lobbying power of local Australian Members of Parliament. What was often being contested was not just a migration outcome, but the definitions of who could and who

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couldn’t lay claim to a European identity. Large variations in skin colour between close family members in particular, meant that the seventy-five percent rule had the effect of separating members of the one family by accepting some and rejecting others,150 making the policy problematic to enforce. As the Australian High Commissioner in New Delhi pointed out, ‘the degree of apparent Asiatic blood differs so markedly in a family that selection on this basis means either rejection of the acceptable members or acceptance of the non-acceptable.’151 In both cases, argues Alison Blunt, the rejection of non-white mixed-descent migrants exposed the racial basis of white Australia policies.152 Without denying the impact of factors such as growing domestic and international opposition to the policies,153 Blunt and Neumann both convincingly argue that the relaxation and eventual dismantlement of the white Australia policies in the 1960s and 1970s happened not as a result of ‘the difficulties the Department of Immigration had experienced when dealing with applications from people who considered themselves white or European.’154

The application of another Anglo-Burmese migrant, Anne Goddin, is illustrative of both issues. She applied along with her sister and brother-in-law for migration to Australia in August 1964. She was described in an interview report by Johnson as ‘very much Indian in appearance, and has predominantly Asian features … [skin] mid brown in colouring …. [with a rating] no higher than 45 – 50 % European,’ which, along with her supposedly ‘superior attitude’ was the basis for her rejection (see Figure 9).155

155 National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/295, “Goddin, Anne Marina Born 19 November 1934 – Eurasian.”
Miss Goddin’s letter of appeal indicated that information about the success rate of such measures was circulating within the Anglo-Burmese community. Addressed to Heydon, it stated that she had ‘heard of your sympathetic reconsiderations, and am hoping that you will give me a chance too.’ Her letter also offered glimpses into the emotional dimensions of the family separations imposed by Australian policies, a factor that was dismissed by Johnson when he wrote in his second interview report, ‘a thirty year old woman who is employed here, should be quite capable of caring for herself.’ As Miss Goddin pointed out, financial security was largely irrelevant:

156 National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/295, “Goddin, Anne Marina Born 19 November 1934 – Eurasian.”
Although I am a self-supporting person, I appeal to you to let me accompany [my sister and brother-in-law] because of the bond of affection that has always existed between us. … apart from my sister Joan, I have no other relatives anywhere, and to be separated from her now would be heartbreak.\textsuperscript{157}

Miss Goddin was admitted to Australia in August 1965 on humanitarian grounds. While the basis for the humanitarian need that allowed Miss Goddin to migrate to Australia was not clearly spelled out in her migration file, it appears that her plea for family reunification was strong enough to sway the Department of Immigration to approve her application. Official policies governing family reunification as part of Australia’s migration program were not introduced until later in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{158} Likewise, during the decades in which a significant number of Anglo-Burmese were migrating to Australia, there was no official humanitarian stream to Australia’s migration program.

\textit{Humanitarian dimensions to migration applications}

Many Anglo-Burmese who chose to leave Burma during the late 1940s and the early 1970s were suffering, or believed they would suffer, discrimination based on their cultural and racial identity. Without an official humanitarian migration stream however, decision-making on applications to migrate to Australia were often based on general migration policy, with humanitarian concerns cited to strengthen justification for approval where applicants already met general criteria. In the case of the Anglo-Burmese, this meant adherence to the policy governing the admittance of people of mixed-descent, and from the mid-1960s, also the policy for the migration of highly qualified non-Europeans.

Neumann has charted Australia’s history of responding to the humanitarian needs of migrants during the era under discussion in this chapter. He examined Australia’s response to migrants with humanitarian needs on a national level and Australian government involvement in the drafting of international programs and conventions governing this type of migration. During the drafting of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees,\textsuperscript{159} Neumann found that Australian

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\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{157} National Archives of Australia: A9678/1, 64/2/4/295, “Goddin, Anne Marina Born 19 November 1934 – Eurasian.”}
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\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{158} Jupp, \textit{From White Australia to Woomera}, 45.}
\end{footnote}
\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{159} United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, \textit{Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of}}
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officials were particularly concerned about the potential universality of the definition of refugee in this Convention.\textsuperscript{160} He quoted Department of Immigration’s Tasman Heyes, who wrote in May 1950 that:

There are thousands of non-European refugees, and acceptance by Australia of a convention which provided that such a class of persons should not be discriminated against and should not be subject to any penalty for illegal entry, would be a direct negation of the immigration policy followed by all Australian Governments since Federation.\textsuperscript{161}

While Australia acceded to the Refugee Convention in 1954, it did so with the knowledge that it restricted official refugee status only to those who sought asylum from events occurring in Europe. The 1967 Protocol removed this geographic qualification, opening up Convention refugee status to any person with a ‘well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion’.\textsuperscript{162} Australia did not sign the Protocol until 1973, however, limiting its utility to people from Burma wishing to migrate to Australia during the era under discussion.\textsuperscript{163} Neumann argues that Australia was reluctant to support any widening of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees’ (UNHCR) powers during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly where doing so would threaten Australia’s non-European immigration policy, more specifically in relation to the fraught situation in West Papua, which created significant numbers of refugees during that period. His analysis shows that the UNHCR was aware of Australia’s position, and took steps to accommodate Australian sensibilities on matters in the region, in large part due to Australia’s role in providing financial and administrative assistance as well as ‘a substantial number of resettlement places’.\textsuperscript{164}

Migrants from Burma did make attempts to utilise the UN Convention and Protocol to claim the right to permanent residency in Australia on humanitarian grounds. The case of U Saw Oo highlights the complex interplay of competing agendas in dealing with such claims between the UNHCR and the Australian federal departments of External Affairs and Immigration. U Saw Oo arrived in Australia in

\textsuperscript{160} Neumann, Refuge Australia, 81.
\textsuperscript{161} Neumann, Refuge Australia, 82.
\textsuperscript{163} Neumann, Refuge Australia, 85.
\textsuperscript{164} Neumann, Refuge Australia, 88-91.
1967 as a Colombo Plan student to study accounting. He applied for political asylum while he was in Australia and the UNHCR granted his application in 1968. His request to stay permanently in Australia on these grounds was not greeted favorably by Australian officials. It is reasonable to suggest that Australia would have preferred not to engage with the question of Convention refugees, and accordingly its refusal to accede to the 1967 Protocol left it room to deny permanent protection to people such as U Saw Oo. Aware of Australia’s position on Convention refugees, UNHCR representative in Australia, Dr Beerman, advised the Australian government that while it was not required to grant U Saw Oo permanent residency, it must allow him to stay temporarily in Australia until he could arrange settlement in another safe haven.¹⁶⁵ DEA files from August 1968 indicate that U Saw Oo had decided to appeal the decision to deny him permanent residency in Australia. It was clear, however, that he also attempted to gain residency in the United States of America.¹⁶⁶

K. C. O. Shann from the DEA wrote in a briefing for the minister that, ‘It would seem that while Australia cannot question the decision of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, it remains open to the Australian Government to decide whether or not to allow U Saw Oo to remain in Australia.’¹⁶⁷ The preference of the DEA was seemingly to secure U Saw Oo’s return to Burma in accordance with the provisions of his grant to study in Australia as part of the Colombo Plan.¹⁶⁸ Any move to accept U Saw Oo’s application had problematic ramifications as far as the department was concerned; both for relations between Burma and Australia and for its potential to influence other Burmese students to take similar action.¹⁶⁹ These concerns were not always considered by the Department of Immigration when making migration selection decisions. The granting of permanent residency to two other refugees from Burma, John Myint and C. W. Turner, was a source of consternation for External Affairs and prompted the issuing of a memo on consular procedures for dealing with Burmese political refugees. In it, Assistant Secretary, J. C. Ingram, wrote

¹⁶⁵ National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
¹⁶⁶ National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
¹⁶⁷ National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
¹⁶⁸ National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
¹⁶⁹ National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
that these approvals were made ‘without due regard to the effect that this might have on a political relations with the Burmese government.’

He stipulated that in future, the DEA should be provided with copies of all correspondence from the Department of Immigration on any similar case and that all applications for migration with political sensitivity must be immediately brought to the DEA’s attention by consular officials.

Why Myint and Turner were admitted by the Department of Immigration and U Saw Oo was not is difficult to say given the paucity of archival documentation on their cases. Whether Myint and Turner came from an Anglo-Burmese background, as their Anglicised names seem to suggest, is also not possible to verify through archival documents. However, if this is the case, their cultural background may have allowed for their selection for settlement in Australia under normal immigration provisions for the migration of people of mixed-descent; or by the late-1960s, migration may have been possible as highly-qualified non-Europeans. What can be gleaned from the archives is that humanitarian concerns, with or without official sanction from the UNHCR, were not given priority over normal migration selection criteria regarding the racial and cultural characteristics, and hence integration potential, of prospective migrants. Advice from the DEA to the Department of Immigration on migration to Australia from Burma, written in 1968, states that:

In the case of Anglo-Burmans, Anglo-Indians, Anglo-Chinese and persons of non-Burmese blood with such qualification admission should not be refused if they meet the requirements of Australian immigration policy, and if there is a reason to believe that their positions in the Burmese community are insecure.

The quote above highlights that in the late 1960s the racial and cultural identity of prospective migrants to Australia factored into selection decisions in two ways. While the physical appearance and cultural outlook of an applicant was important from the Australian prospective in terms of integration potential, Australian officials were also aware that a person’s racial and cultural background had profound effects on the way they were treated by Ne Win’s regime in Burma. The DEA was especially aware of

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\footnote{National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”}
\footnote{National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”}
\footnote{National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.” [My emphasis].}
\end{footnotes}
this situation, and it advised the Department of Immigration to prioritize the applications of people from Burma of mixed-descent or Indian or Chinese background in recognition that such groups had not fared well in Burma’s political and social climate since the coup in 1962.173

The Colombo Plan: A backdoor to permanent migration from Burma?

Colombo Plan students comprised a significant number of the cases extracted from the archives in which people from Burma claimed humanitarian reasons for staying in Australia. Established formally at a Commonwealth Conference of Foreign Ministers in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1950, the Plan was designed to provide a framework for various international cooperation efforts, including skills development and education. The regional initiative on education and technical capability supported around twenty thousand students between 1952 and 1985.174 As we have seen, some of the students from Burma applied for political asylum while in Australia and involved the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in their cases. Others simply requested the Australian authorities not to return them to Burma. Of those who were returned, a proportion later went on to apply for permanent migration to Australia for themselves and their families.

Sean Brawley has argued that the Colombo Plan was in part designed to act as a shield for the white Australia policy in the face of public opinion in Asia, or in Brawley’s words, ‘Australia needed an aid program that gave credit where credit was due; it was willing to buy Asia’s acceptance of the White Australia Policy.’175 Alongside the discussed changes to policies governing the migration of non-Europeans in the 1960s, this policy did to some extent achieve this goal. The archives throw up a hint of the way both policies were received by Burma’s ruling elite. The outgoing Australian Ambassador to Burma noted in a report on a conversation with General Ne Win in 1965 that:

He said he had noticed a ‘change’ in Australian policy in recent years, particularly in our interest in being ‘part of Asia’ and in our immigration policy. He was well aware of our own aid programme and clearly appreciated it…176

173 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
174 For an account of the Colombo Plan, see: Lowe and Oakman, Australia and the Colombo Plan.
176 National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian interests in
Burma was at first uninterested in being part of the Colombo Plan, preferring to source international financial assistance and other aid from organisations such as the United Nations. The announcement in 1952 that they would join the plan came as a surprise to British diplomatic staff in Rangoon. In a media release welcoming the announcement the then Minister for External Affairs in Australia, R. G. Casey, stated that Australia and Burma shared ‘warm feelings of friendship’. He saw Burma’s participation in the Colombo Plan as a ‘great step forward’ in the ‘equal partnership to raise the standard of human welfare in South-East Asia’. While Australian aid to Burma and other nations throughout the region undoubtedly had such altruistic motivation, such support also reflected the desire of Australia and other Western nations that Burma maintain its strategic position as a non-aligned socialist nation.

DEA documents surrounding the visit to Burma in 1965 of Mr. Hasluck, Minister for External Affairs, give clues to Australia’s position on Burma post-coup. They express concern about Burma’s position on communism and their relationship with the various communist states in the region. Therefore, the stated preference by Ne Win for neutrality and his seeming lack of warmth for the Chinese and North Vietnamese delegations that had recently visited Burma were a significant point of interest. A representative of the USA embassy informed Australian officials in Burma that his government felt that Australia was better placed to form a special connection with Burma, and have an influence with the country that bigger western nations such as the USA and the British could never hope to achieve. Their position was partly predicated on Australia’s relatively small size and therefore its lack of interest in imperial or economic control of Burma. How much this advice from the USA factored into Australia’s relatively hands-off non-interference stance to internal

177 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
178 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
179 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
180 National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma”.
181 National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma”.
182 National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma”.

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Burmese issues is difficult to quantify however.

Clearly Australia desired to increase its profile in Burma, but also in Asia generally, and to make sure this profile was a positive one. Comments by a DEA staffer when notified of positive press in Burma about Australian administrative systems highlight this desire nicely: ‘this kind of thing is most valuable for Australia’s prestige in SEA.’ They were also clearly intent on giving the impression that the nationalist aims of Asian nations should be respected and that the people of Asia should have control over how they wished to structure and live their lives, unless direct aid or other assistance had been asked for. A confidential memo from the Australian Embassy in Rangoon to the DEA, for example, stated:

If we hold that each country has the right to choose its own political and economic system, and that we have no right ourselves to make moral judgments on the system each country wishes to adopt, we cannot withhold aid from Burma on the grounds of its socialist objectives.

The Colombo Plan was a way of keeping the connections alive between regimes such as Burma and western nations like Australia, and fitted into the paradigm of aid Burma was willing to accept. Australia wanted Burma to be involved in this program and sought to make sure that Burmese people took up all the opportunities made available to them (which they did not at first, preferring to go to the United States and the United Kingdom). A significant element to this aid program was the provision of training places to Asian students in Australian universities.

Although Colombo Plan students were offered only temporary residency, this scheme threw up a complex range of issues to do with migration during the 1960s, in particular at the nexus between external affairs and immigration policy. Public controversies mainly surrounded those cases where students wished to stay permanently in Australia, often due to fears of persecution in their home countries. The archives also show private controversies – primarily inter-departmental tension between the DEA and the Department of Immigration in relation to the handling of

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183 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
184 National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma”.
185 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
these cases but also the cases of those who had returned, whose social and cultural
connections to Australia meant they looked to this nation as a place of potential
permanent migration when their home-country position became insecure.

In this way, the Colombo Plan complicated the policy of non-interference. While recognising that the programs of the Burmese Way to Socialism and the inexperience of the new government in Burma was contributing to widespread shortages of food and other goods, and that insurgency was a significant and ongoing problem, the DEA hoped to ignore the impact of these issues on the people of Burma, preferring not to get involved in the internal matters of another state. With the Colombo Plan, however, came students from Burma who highlighted the poor conditions in their homeland by stating a preference for staying in Australia at the conclusion of their studies. This was clearly not the intent of this program, but was a very real outcome with which the Australian government and its various departments of the day had to grapple.

Archival files offer glimpses into the ways in which these issues impacted on the lives of individual migrants. Some Colombo Plan students were more successful than others in achieving their preferred outcome of remaining in Australia. Whether this outcome was achieved often relied on the grounds on which permanent residency was sought. Marriage to an Australian citizen was one avenue that offered the hope of success. An excellent example of this was Dr. Mullerworth, who came to Australia in June 1963 as a member of a group of doctors training in thoracic surgery. He subsequently successfully claimed British nationality, married an Australian and was permitted to remain in Australia. The Burmese Embassy was kept fully informed by Australian officials of all developments in his case.\(^{186}\) In 1965, however, three other trainees, Miss Latt, Miss Ghosh and Mr. Naing, who wished to extend their stay, were refused permission to do so by the Burmese Government and were eventually persuaded to return, after strong representations from the embassy.\(^{187}\) No further information could be found on the cases of Miss Latt and Miss Ghosh. However a DEA cablegram on Mr Naing’s case states that he:

\(^{186}\) National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma”.
\(^{187}\) National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma”.
is determined to remain in Australia by all possible means, but fears this may have adverse affect on his parents and relatives. He has cabled his parents and his cousin but has received no reply. Grateful you verify whether there is any substance to his fears.  

Mr. Naing was eventually deported from Australia. The last mention of him in the archives reports that he left the ‘plane at Singapore on his return journey and may not have reached Rangoon.’ The statement is a haunting and poignant reminder of the desperate position faced by people such as Mr Naing, who felt they could not return to Burma despite the harm such an action may have inflicted on loved ones back home.

Claims of potential political persecution if a student returned home were investigated by the DEA via the Australian Embassy in Rangoon. For example, U Maung Han, a Colombo Plan student who claimed in 1968 that he would face unlawful imprisonment on his return to Burma, because ‘of own history and ideas and because father was a Minister of Shan State government’ and was at the time imprisoned. The Australia Embassy in Rangoon in a response to a DEA request for information on U Maung Han’s claims, stated that they would ‘find it hard to believe’ that he would be imprisoned upon his return to Burma, even if his father was still in detention. They went on to argue that, '[b]y delaying his return U Maung Han may well incur official Burmese displeasure which could affect his employment prospects or his chances of obtaining permission to leave Australia again.'

The case of U Saw Oo, whose situation was discussed earlier in this chapter, is illustrative of yet another divide between the DEA and the Department of Immigration during this period. His case sparked a wider discussion between these departments on the deportation of Colombo Plan students who refused to return home on completion of their studies. The DEA was concerned that ‘there is no present prospect of him being obliged by the Department of Immigration to depart’ if the Minister for Immigration was, as suspected, unwilling to enforce deportation.

Details about U Saw Oo’s case are contained in a DEA file and forms part of a wider

188 National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma”.
189 National Archives of Australia: A1838/280, 3008/10/1 PART 2, “Burma – Australian Interests In and Policy Towards Burma”.
190 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
191 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
discussion within that department about Australia’s obligation under the Colombo Plan to return students once they had completed their studies. The files indicate that it was becoming increasingly clear to External Affairs that the failure of Australia to return all students in the past was not so much due to problems with administrative procedures in the Department of Immigration but a product of policy held by the Immigration Minister. Lyndon Megarrity’s research has shown that the Department of Immigration’s unwillingness to deport overseas students, particularly after 1966, was a policy that applied widely to private and sponsored overseas students from all countries. Alongside the Burmese government, the Cambodian and Vietnamese governments had written to the DEA stressing the importance of their students returning home upon completing their studies. Despite entreaties from the DEA, the Department of Immigration refused to shift its stance on the issue, arguing that a harsh attitude to deportation created a risk that the government would receive intense public criticism of the white Australia policy.

Along these lines, the intervention of the UNHCR in U Saw Oo’s case increased the likelihood that his potential deportation would be problematic. The DEA was deeply concerned, however, about the impact of such cases on Australia’s relationship with Burma, citing examples of instances where the Burmese government had on a number of occasions relating to individual (non-specified) cases approached the Australian embassy in Rangoon, or made representations through the Burmese Embassy in Canberra, to ensure that Burmese students return home so that they could use their new knowledge to ‘serve the nation’. As with migration applications that contained a humanitarian dimension, the DEA’s primary concern in the management of Colombo Plan students was to maintain cordial relations with Burma, and it gave advice to the Department of Immigration on that basis. Consequently, the DEA advised the Department of Immigration that no applications from highly-qualified people of Burmese background should be accepted for migration to Australia. In providing this advice,
DEA officials made reference to the internationally recognized problem of ‘brain drain’. Brain drain was the phrase given to the emigration of highly qualified persons from Burma (and other developing nations) to the West and its potential impact on immigration selection decisions was a source of tension between these two departments in the mid- to late-1960s. The Department of Immigration was hesitant to deny applications from suitable applicants on these grounds, arguing that as Britain, the USA and Canada were not rejecting applications on this basis, Australia would lose out on high quality applicants as they would go elsewhere in the West.\(^\text{195}\)

A particular effect of the Colombo Plan was to create a cohort of people from Burma who had returned home, but now had a substantial connection with Australia and looked to that nation when they made the final decision to emigrate, feeling their position in Burma had become untenable. Unlike their acceptance into the Colombo Plan however, these people were now subject to the requirements of Australia’s permanent migration program, with particular reference to those surrounding the racial and cultural heritage and physical appearance of applicants. Not all those people deemed acceptable as temporary student migrants were also deemed acceptable as permanent residents for Australia. And yet their connections to Australia, through friendships and sometimes family, as well as their proven track record of success as students in Australia, challenged strongly held beliefs about who could and could not assimilate successfully into Australian society.

The case of Mr. Kyaw Nyein highlights the interconnected nature of all of the issues discussed above. Mr. Nyein and his family applied to migrate to Australia in 1968. Mr. Nyein had previously been a Colombo Plan student who had fulfilled his obligations under the Plan by returning to Burma in 1960. As a fully Burmese man, albeit with an Anglo-Burmese wife and children who remained British subjects, he and his family were not eligible to migrate to Australia under the mixed-descent policy. Instead, his case came under the new policy that regulated the migration of well-qualified non-Europeans. The interview report in his migration application canvasses his physical appearance and the influence of his Colombo Plan experience on his integration potential:

Although Kyaw Nyein is fully Burmese in appearance and in upbringing, his manner and dress is completely Western, largely as a result of the four years he spent in Australia as a Colombo Plan student.\(^{196}\)

His case became a focus for heated debate between the DEA and the Department of Immigration on brain drain, and featured prominently in the inter-departmental discussions on the issue as outlined above.\(^ {197}\) As fully Burmese, he did not have the preferred ethnic background for migration as a highly skilled non-European from Burma. For the DEA however, that Mr. Nyein returned to Burma after completing his Colombo Plan studies swayed its decision to agree to his application.\(^ {198}\)

His case also developed humanitarian elements that neither department could ignore. At the time of his interview at the Australian Embassy, Mr. Kyaw Nyein and his family were ‘suffering no economic hardship’ and had a ‘secure, unprejudiced future’.\(^ {199}\) Their motive for migration was mainly family reunification as Mrs. Nyein’s parents and siblings had migrated to Australia in the early 1960s. Upon applying to the Burmese government to exit Burma however, Mr. Nyein was dismissed from his government job and the family was evicted from their government-owned house. The Burmese government also withheld permission for him to leave the country by refusing to supply an exit visa.

Mr. Nyein suggested to the Department of Immigration that his wife and children travel ahead of him to Australia. He outlined his plan to leave Burma illegally, and travel on to Australia from Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan). His wife and children, as Anglo-Burmese, had access to British passports and were encouraged to leave Burma by the regime. The Department of Immigration had no objection to his plan. Concerns raised by a DEA staffer – that if Mr Nyein was not able to leave Burma as he planned, his family would become a drain on the public purse and may pressure the Australian government to lobby the Burmese to allow him to exit lawfully – were dismissed by that department’s First Assistant Secretary, Mr. Booker, as ‘inhumane’, who argued it was obvious that Mr Nyein had no future in

\(^ {196}\) National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”

\(^ {197}\) National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”

\(^ {198}\) National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”

\(^ {199}\) National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
Burma. He stipulated in a letter to the Department of Immigration on the case however, that ‘our willingness to grant visas does not mean that the Australian Government in any way condones any illegal actions that may be taken by Mr Kyaw Nyein.’

**Conclusion**

The continued dominance of racial and ethnic definitions of national identity in Burma and Australia in the middle decades of the twentieth century had a profound impact on the migration between those two nations during that time. Conflict between central Burman-dominated governments and ethnic minority insurgent groups was a feature of post-independence Burma, particularly from the late 1950s and after the military coup in 1962. When General Ne Win’s military regime undertook an aggressive program of ‘Burmanising’ Burma’s military and government from the early 1960s, members of the Anglo-Burmese community that had not emigrated at the time of independence faced ethnic-based persecution that led to the loss of livelihood for many.

Migrating to Australia was a more viable option in the 1960s than in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. From 1964, Australia progressively relaxed the criteria which governed the migration of people of mixed-descent and the annual number of Anglo-Burmese migrations grew three-fold over that decade as a result. Implementation of the policy changes was slow however. While cultural rather than racial characteristics were increasingly being recognised by Australian bureaucrats and politicians as markers of integration potential, interview reports from the Australian Embassy in Rangoon reveal a continued reliance on race and the grading of physical appearance when migration selection decisions were made up to the late 1960s.

This issue was undeniably a complex one and, while race was an important facet, it was not the only issue under consideration when it came to deciding who could and who could not be given permission to migrate to Australia. As the above discussion of case studies from the archives reveals, the agency of migrants in

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200 National Archives of Australia: A1838/315, 3008/10/1/1 PART 1, “Burma – Migration to Australia.”
appealing adverse decisions, alongside growing humanitarian concerns for those living in Burma (particularly those from ethnic minority backgrounds), had increasing influence in the approval of applications that had been rejected earlier in the decade. And despite the concern of the DEA that Australia maintain cordial relations with Burma’s military regime, the Colombo Plan provided pathways to permanent migration in Australia for people from Burma concerned about their future in that nation. Archival case files are only able to offer a glimpse into the personal dimensions of seeking asylum, however, leaving the interior worlds of migrants largely inaccessible. Given the important role identity has played in the migration between Burma and Australia the next chapter examines Anglo-Burmese identity more closely through the lens of memoir.
CHAPTER THREE

Migrant Identity and Memoir: Exploring Anglo-Burmese
Uprooting and Regrounding

Sara Ahmed et al., in Uprootings / Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration (2003), have persuasively challenged the centrality of location in migration studies, arguing for the need to ‘escape the immediacy of location as a discrete entity, and to blur the distinction between here and there.’ Doing so, they argue, posits ‘home as a site of movement’, unsettles ‘linear narratives of origin and migration’ and reorients ‘the relation between embodied subjectivity, place and belonging.’ This chapter seeks to explore other ways of understanding Anglo-Burmese migration to Australia, beyond the politics and policy that made such migrations possible, and in doing so collapses the categories of here and there. In particular it explores Anglo-Burmese identity in Australia using a memoir as a case study, and examines three key questions: what does it mean to be Anglo-Burmese, for those who lay claim to this identity; what histories are invoked and what journeys lie behind the naming and claiming of this identity; and what impacts have discourses of race and nation – specifically assimilation and multiculturalism in the Australian context – had on expressions of identity and senses of home and belonging for Anglo-Burmese?

The case file notes from the National Archives of Australia discussed in the previous chapter give a glimpse into the personal dimensions of this migration story. They provide, however, little detailed insight into the pain, uncertainty, hope and expectation that people felt when choosing to migrate from Burma to Australia. Administrative processes that reduce a person’s identity to a numerical grade based on physical appearance can tell us little about the internal worlds of migrants. Memoir, autobiography and other forms of self-representative narrative allow access into migrant subjectivity, and can be seen as adjacent cultural knowledges. Such narratives ‘supplement existing and often dominating socio-historical cultural knowledges’ and ‘allow new and imaginative ways to articulate identities and new ways of becoming.’

2 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 163.
Ann Cvetkovich, in her work on trauma, has argued however, that some knowledges are marked by forgetting and dissociation and thus can often leave behind no records. It is necessary, she argues, to ‘challenge common understandings of what constitutes an archive’ by incorporating more ephemeral texts such as personal memory and memoir, which may give us access to an ‘archive of feeling’. She posits cultural texts as ‘repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception.’ The text around which the analysis in this chapter is based is *White Butterflies* (2002), the memoir of Anglo-Burmese migrant Colin McPhedran. It is the only published memoir by an Anglo-Burmese person with an Australian connection. In it he recounts the traumatic experience of escaping Burma at the beginning of the Second World War and the death of his mother and siblings on that journey.

Stuart Hall’s work makes also viable the utilisation of memoir and other autobiographical texts in an exploration of the formation of identity. Hall has effectively made the case for identity to be thought of as an ongoing production and process which is ‘always constituted within, not outside, representation.’ He sees cultural identity as a ‘matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”, constructed through “memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.” In this sense, texts such as *White Butterflies* do not solely mirror identity but produce it. For Hall, although cultural identities ‘come from somewhere, have histories’, they are not ‘fixed in some essentialised past’. Instead, ‘they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, 

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culture and power.'\(^7\) Ultimately, Hall argues, ‘[i]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.'\(^8\)

Identity and migration researcher Anne-Marie Fortier drew on Hall’s work to emphasise the fluid, dynamic nature of identity and identity production. Fortier sees identity as ‘a location that by definition frames the passage from one space to another; identity as transition, always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming.’ Fortier prefers to work with the concept of belonging, less likely than identity to be conceived of as static. Migrant belonging, she stated, is ‘constituted through both movement and attachment’ through which identity can be seen as a ‘momentary positionality which is always already becoming.’\(^9\) For Sara Ahmed et al, homing, like belonging, is a dynamic and fluid process. They are particularly interested in how homing is entangled with migration, arguing that they should not be considered as discrete processes but ‘in terms of a plurality of experiences, histories and constituencies, and of the workings of institutional structures.’ They seek to explore ‘how uprootings and regroundings are enacted – affectively, materially and symbolically’.\(^10\)

*White Butterflies* is a particularly useful text with which to explore the entanglement of past and present and the impact of the search for belonging and home in the formation of migrant identities. In writing his memoir, McPhedran grapples with these concepts, enacting and publicly claiming his identity as an (Anglo)Burmese-Australian. The blurring of here and there that occurs in this text highlights just how dynamic the process of migration and settlement is – a two-way exchange between migrant and nation(s), where Burma can be found to exist in Australia in surprising ways. As geographers Rachel Silvey and Victoria Lawson contend, ‘migrants participate in ongoing reworking of their identities, as well as the places and social contexts among which they are moving’.\(^11\)

\(^7\) Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.
\(^8\) Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.
The Ephemeral Nature of Anglo-Burmese Identity

As previously discussed, scholarship with a specific focus on Anglo-Burmese migration and identity (in both an Australian and a broader international context) is scarce.\textsuperscript{12} While other mixed-descent groups who migrated to Australia during roughly the same era, such as the Anglo-Indians, have been more thoroughly researched,\textsuperscript{13} their experience is also little studied. Only a small number of memoirs and autobiographies have been published by people from Burma over the last two decades.\textsuperscript{14} They have largely been written by people living in exile, having either fled themselves, or being the descendants of those who fled Burma at earlier points in the twentieth century. Less than a handful are by people who claim an Anglo-Burmese


identity and only one of these memoirs, *White Butterflies*, has been written by someone who eventually came to resettle in Australia.

What accounts for this scarcity? Adrian Carton and Debjani Ganguly, both argue that the rise in globalisation studies has acted to elide the messy and sometimes painful histories of mixed-descent people and the experience of living ‘in-between’. Carton has argued that while this move may have created a ‘third-space’ that offers ‘a strategic point of resistance and articulation for Eurasian and “mixed-race” identities and an enormously fruitful terrain from which to interrogate the hegemonic discourse of race and ethnicity’, it is ‘anchored within the social and economic context of the fetishism of ethnicity’. As such, “the lived experience of history” in narratives of self representation is often absent from the genre.’

Ganguly’s work also canvasses the progressive and celebratory narratives that have coalesced around mixed-descent identities within the context of globalisation studies. She laments the push within Anglo-Indian studies to make a break with the colonial past. She argues that less celebratory and more introspective life-stories about being Anglo-Indian:

serve as a counterpoint to claims of transcending colonial histories of shame and oppression through mobility offered by an increasingly globalised world order and suggest that many practices of the global continue to carry traces of dissonance, dysfunction and depredations that characterised older forms of imperialism.

Both Carton and Ganguly are interested in putting the (post)colonial history back into self-narratives by people of mixed-descent. Carton has argued that an ‘[c]xploration of the self through the apparatus of personal memory is one strategy to retrieve and recapture the agency of the Eurasian subject.’ For him, the ‘postcolonial role of autobiography is, therefore, an attempt to recover the hybrid voice as an act of strategic disruption to an otherwise totalising discourse of globalisation that, indeed, claims to represent hybridity and speak in its name.’ He uses the metaphor of the

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16 Ganguly, “From Empire to Empire,” 31, 35.
17 Ganguly, “From Empire to Empire,” 35.
transit lounge in international airports and the work of Homi Bhabha to argue for a place which acts as:

the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. And in that moment of complexity within a new discourse of transnational historiography, the hybrid voice starts to recuperate itself.19

In some respects, Carton also sees Australia as able to act as this ‘third space’ within which people of mixed-descent can ‘negotiate difficult oppositions and manage multiple levels of identification’.20 While most of the memoirs by Anglo-Burmese people internationally grapple with questions of identity, and the legacy of colonial discourses of race,21 the location of resettlement has a profound impact on not just the identity felt, but also the space to express identity. McPhedran made the decision upon migrating to Australia in 1950 not to outwardly express his identification as Burmese or as Buddhist, even within his own nuclear family context. His memoir was published half a century later and was the culmination of a process of reclaiming and revisiting his ‘Burmeseness’, a journey that began for him in the 1980s. Australian migration settlement policies of assimilation, integration and multiculturalism all impacted on the ability of McPhedran (and by extension other people of mixed-descent) to articulate his identity at various times. As such, his memoir – the text, its timing and its reception – can tell us about the real impact prevailing discourses of race and nation can have on the ability of migrants to speak and to feel fully at home in this nation and in their identity. As Fortier argues: ‘The routings and rootings of diasporas need to be located within specific maps and histories … particular forms of diasporic imagination connect with historically specific conditions of dispersal and (re)settlement.’22

*White Butterflies* does not represent a universal or even typical experience of Anglo-Burmese migration, settlement and identification in Australia. It is also important to note, however, that there is no ‘authentic’ Anglo-Burmese identity that people can be more or less similar to or representative of. As Carton has argued,

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21 These include: Arnold, *A Burmese Legacy*; and Baird-Murray, *A World Overturned*.
people of mixed-descent occupy ‘hybrid historical spaces’ and have identities which ‘straddle (if not dissolve) any essentialist or rigid conception of the ‘national’’, and by existing, question understandings of ‘racial authenticity’. In many ways McPhedran’s experience runs counter to those explored through archival material in the last chapter: as a predominately European looking person he was able to migrate to Australia at a time (1950) when the white Australia policy prevented many other Anglo-Burmese people from doing so. In their response to Cotton Mary (1999), a controversial filmic depiction of an Anglo-Indian woman in India, Carolyn and Glenn D’Cruz discussed the distinction that can be made between a person, such as McPhedran, who has one English parent and one Burmese (or Indian) parent, and someone whose parents are both categorised as mixed-descent. Only the latter, they argue, belong to a ‘specific race, albeit a mixed one’, a category marked by and for specific bureaucratic and political purposes from the latter half of the eighteenth century, producing ‘a distinct, self-conscious sense of identity among people of ‘mixed race’.

Although McPhedran may not ‘belong’ in this sense to the Anglo-Burmese community, and does not explicitly claim an Anglo-Burmese moniker, he must still grapple with the challenges that come with living ‘in-between’. While it could be true to say that his identity was not written on his skin, like many other people of mixed-descent whose Western cultural leanings are mis-recognised and complicated by their physical appearance, McPhedran’s Burmeseness was also hidden from view and went unrecognised for many years. His memoir offers up one way of knowing or understanding of what it means to be ‘Anglo-Burmese’, but it is no less valuable for that. As a case study of a public reclamation of a mixed-descent heritage, White Butterflies reinserts the post-colonial by opening a space through which to interrogate the impact of historically and locationally specific discourses of race and nation on one migrant’s sense of identity and belonging.

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25 C. D’Cruz and G. D’Cruz, “Public Narratives, Minority Voices,” 113; See also, Glenn D’Cruz, “Beyond the Pale,” Meanjin 63, 2 (2004).
Constructing Narrative: Significant Moments in the *White Butterflies* Journey

Colin McPhedran is the youngest child of Archie, a Scottish oil company executive, and Daw Ni, a university-educated Mon woman from an influential family. His childhood was largely spent at his family’s home, Jamshed Villa in Maymyo, a hill town in Central Burma not far from Mandalay. His memoir predominately spans a period of nine years. It begins with his journey, at the age of eleven, out of Burma at the outbreak of war with the Japanese in 1941, and ends with his arrival in the Australian town of Bowral a few months after his migration to Australia as a young man in 1950. It also charts the intervening years, in India, in the years during and after the war as he finished his secondary schooling; and in the United Kingdom, in the latter stages of his teenage years, pursuing further education and undertaking a series of odd jobs.

McPhedran begins *White Butterflies* with the outbreak of war in Burma in December 1941. As refugees began to fill his home town, his mother – the person he loved most in the world – made the decision to leave Maymyo for Myitkyina. Her decision came as a blow to McPhedran and his siblings. Despite evidence that many other ‘Eurasian families’ were also making decisions to flee, he remembered wondering why his mother did not call on her influential relatives to protect them and enable them to stay – particularly his mother’s cousin, Dr Ba Maw, who went on to become Prime Minister of Burma during the Japanese occupation. McPhedran recalled his mother explaining, however, that she was fearful of the treatment her predominately European-looking children – and her daughter Ethel in particular – could expect at the hands of the Japanese. As the first stage in his journey to Australia, McPhedran conceptualised this moment of his life as simultaneously a beginning and an end.

McPhedran’s mother’s determination to leave Burma remained unwavering even when the only means of escape was to trek with her children out of Burma and into India via the Hukawng Valley and the Patkoi Ranges. It was a path taken by tens of thousands of refugees and retreating soldiers. With the monsoon approaching, this

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29 The first chapter of *White Butterflies* is titled, “Was it the beginning or the end?”
was a treacherous journey marked by severe physical and psychological challenges. It involved trekking hundreds of miles through mountainous jungle in almost constant rain, over hundreds of streams that became torrential rivers during the monsoon, through the territory of the infamous Naga head-hunters, all the while facing the threat of Japanese attack by air and land, starvation, dehydration, exhaustion and disease. Ultimately, McPhedran was the only member of his family to survive, his mother, brother and sister numbering among the thousands of refugees to die along the trail.

The traumatic events of the trek form a significant element of the first part of *White Butterflies* and reverberate throughout the text as they continued to shape the direction of McPhedran’s life. They are related by McPhedran with a simple straightforward eloquence that conveys the horror of the situation he and his family faced and the emotions they generated in him as a young boy. Unsurprisingly, encounters with death and related struggles with the will to live feature frequently. Along the path and particularly at each night’s camp, McPhedran and his family were confronted with the corpses of people who could go no further, including those of friends and acquaintances the McPhedrans had made along the journey or those they recognised from home. Some instances of death made a significant impression on the young McPhedran and are given particular attention in the text. The white butterflies of the title refer to one such occurrence. As the family arrived in the large but relatively deserted village of Shimbuyang where ‘the smell of death lay like a shroud over the whole area,’ they were ‘greeted…[by a] corpse in the middle of the track’. Among the hundreds of corpses he had seen already this one stood out as it was covered in white butterflies, for McPhedran, a ‘fitting veil for the deceased’. It was a sight they were to ‘encounter often after that.’

The image of white butterflies returns in the chapter in which McPhedran relates the deaths of his mother, brother and sister. For the majority of the trek, he recalls feeling a constant drive to continue on, to live. Confronted with the inability of his mother to go any further, he writes:

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Despite having witnessed the death of thousands along the way, I did not ever foresee this situation. Day after day along the trek, even during the most difficult times, I had never contemplated our death. Certainly there were times when, utterly exhausted, I felt like lying down and drifting into a long sleep, but death, never!  

As he sank down into the mud to hug his mother after a futile attempt to will her to rise and continue walking, the ‘special smell of a mother, the scent that bonds a mother and her child, flooded back’ and for the first time he ‘reached that point in the trek’ where he would have willingly stayed and died alongside her.  

He reflects on the special bond he, ‘the most Burmese of all the children’, had with his Burmese mother, who he thought of as his ‘guardian angel’. It is his mother who persuades him to live, to keep walking, her last words to him ‘remained embedded’ in his mind: “The world is full of good people … I know you will find them and be well cared for, for the rest of your life. Son, you must walk on … don’t look back.” Days later McPhedran and his sister wake to discover their brother had died in the night. After covering his body with a blanket they find they can walk only a short distance until they let their bodies sink ‘down into the ooze’. McPhedran remembers feeling at peace and that: ‘As I lay there so near to death I observed, or perhaps I dreamed, a cloud of white butterflies floating down towards me. It was a comforting vision and I was not afraid.’  

For McPhedran, this heart-rending section of White Butterflies was the most difficult and traumatic to write. He has explained that ‘[i]t took me about two years to write the part where I say goodbye to my mother,’ and four years in total to finish the section on the trek. While he was able to comply with his mother’s parting suggestion to him that he not ‘look back’ as he walked away from her, he has in a sense been looking back ever since. He writes in White Butterflies that ‘I lived with that memory [of parting from my mother] for years, never prepared to accept that my mother had indeed passed away on that hillside in the jungles of Burma.’ After his

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32 McPhedran, White Butterflies, 97.  
33 McPhedran, White Butterflies, 97.  
34 McPhedran, White Butterflies, 96.  
35 McPhedran, White Butterflies, 97.  
36 McPhedran, White Butterflies, 102.  
39 McPhedran, White Butterflies, 98.
rescue on the trail by a Scottish tea-planter, he rediscovered the ‘desire to live on’, motivated by the need to convince someone to return to search for his mother: ‘That was the hope, the wish, all the time. That’s why I thought I shouldn’t die.’ His years in India during and after the war as he finished his secondary education were marked by a burning desire to return to Burma to search out his mother. And for many years after having migrated to Australia he applied for visas to no avail. It was not until 1982, forty years after he had left, that he was finally able to return. On this trip, which he undertook with his son and daughter-in-law, he finally discovered that his mother had indeed died on the trek: ‘I was sad, but profoundly relieved. The uncertainty was finally over.’

It was his return to Burma that brought him to the realisation that he could not keep denying his children’s requests to know his story and the story of his family. While he told them childhood bedtime stories of a little boy’s adventures in the jungles of Burma, they were unaware that the central character was their father. He found that he could not answer their natural curiosity about their grandmother as ‘talking about my mother would have meant that somewhere along the line I’d have to tell them that I had walked away from her. I couldn’t do that. Not until I had healed a bit.’ He began writing *White Butterflies* six years after his return from Burma, following the death of his wife, and at the suggestion of a journalist friend, intending it to be for his family and ‘the Burmese relatives who kept asking what happened after he left Maymyo.’ Instead, his daughter-in-law arranged for it to be published and his story reached, and touched, a much wider audience.

Maintaining his silence about his experiences on the trek, including the deaths of his family, was encouraged by the medical staff in the Indian hospital in which he recovered from his ordeal. Throughout his years in India – first with missionaries in Calcutta and Bangalore, and then at an Indian boarding school – he was never asked to share, and he remembers being aware that in each place he lived people were

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making an effort not to speak to him about his ordeal.\textsuperscript{49} McPhedran recollects being thankful that neither his father nor his brother Donald (who survived the war and his time in the armed forces) asked him for details of the trek when they visited him in India. The reader learns of Donald’s reactions to the trek first hand as he contributed some small passages to \textit{White Butterflies}. He relates his first meeting with McPhedran after the trek in Calcutta where he was shocked, ‘dumb and inarticulate for a minute or so’ at finding McPhedran so ‘withdrawn and non-communicative’.\textsuperscript{50} For Donald, prior to the publication of \textit{White Butterflies}, ‘the veil that had enveloped the horrific details of the trek had still not been lifted’.\textsuperscript{51} McPhedran expressed in the text that:

\begin{quote}
I feel sad that I was unable to share with Donald the details of the trek. He was entitled to know. It must have taken great stren\textsuperscript{gth} on his part to refrain from interrogating me. I suppose I was simply too traumatized to unlock the door and let him in.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

Sharing his story with his family and with a wider audience through \textit{White Butterflies} opened up a series of connections with people from all over the world who wanted to share their own experiences of war or of being a refugee with him. He also found unexpected joy in receiving from five different groups of people from Canada, the UK, Burma and Queensland, copies of photographs of his family that he never knew existed. What he calls the ‘most touching communication’ was a letter from a distant relation in Canada who gave him a painting done by McPhedran’s mother for his father. He marvelled that he did not even know his mother painted: ‘Here I was, sixty years on, learning something about my own mother I would never have found out otherwise.’\textsuperscript{53} In being at last able to speak about his experience and in particular about his mother, McPhedran was able to find out about his mother’s last moments before her death. Ironically it was not in Burma, but in a lounge room in Perth, Australia, that her final moments were related to him by a captain from the Burma army who came upon her where she lay in the mud during his own trek out of Burma. He told McPhedran the story of his own experiences with reluctance. Of McPhedran’s

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\textsuperscript{49} McPhedran, \textit{White Butterflies}, 129, 163.  \\
\textsuperscript{50} McPhedran, \textit{White Butterflies}, 145.  \\
\textsuperscript{51} McPhedran, \textit{White Butterflies}, 145-146.  \\
\textsuperscript{52} McPhedran, \textit{White Butterflies}, 146.  \\
\end{flushright}
mother he said: ‘I stopped by the tree under which your mother sat, and talked with her. She was very near death and I was sad that I could not be of any assistance.’

McPhedran and his brother, Donald, both agonise in *White Butterflies* over what factors led the McPhedran’s to take the Hukawng Trail. Of those Anglo-Burmese or other people of mixed-descent who tried to leave Burma, not all made the trek, with many finding passage via ship or plane. Of those who decided to stay, some were able, through appearance and language ability, to pass as Burmese and kept a low profile. The remainder were interred in Japanese prison camps. The experiences of one Anglo-Burmese family who suffered this fate are canvassed in one of the very few additional autobiographical accounts from Anglo-Burmese migrants to Australia that are publicly available. Mrs. Marie Bond (nee Sancho) describes her time living as an internee under Japanese occupation as ‘horrendous’ and asks ‘[i]s this what we deserved?’

McPhedran described those who made the choice to stay in Burma as the ‘brave ones’. Given the horrors he too was to face, it is a poignant moment in which he acknowledges that each person had a difficult journey to travel through the war, regardless of whether that journey included a trek through the mountains to India.

McPhedran spent the first few months after surviving the trek recovering in various hospitals in India. As his health slowly improved, his desire to live also began to return. While he recovered, his future was, unbeknownst to him, being mapped out by ‘oil company executives, government agencies and missionaries whose lot it was to care for refugees.’

Declared fit for travel, he was placed with a European chaperone for the train trip to Calcutta where he was to be billeted by an elderly missionary couple. McPhedran’s description of the behaviour of his adult European companions on this trip – including an attempted rape by a male European army officer – highlights his contempt for the social structure of colonial society and his

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growing consideration of, and understanding for, the rise of nationalism in India.  

In contrast to his antipathy for the Europeans he encountered, he felt ‘at home, among friends’ surrounded by Indians on the Calcutta train platform.

This short passage also establishes a pattern for many of his experiences over the four years he spent in India, during which his affinity for and friendships with the local people of India in the various places he lives contrasts sharply with his many negative experiences in his interactions with Europeans. McPhedran’s life in India was directed by his father from afar – he had only one visit from his father during those years, and no additional correspondence. Instead, McPhedran was left in the hands of a series of missionaries, and eventually a boarding school, while he travelled India alone during his school holidays on trips organised directly by Thomas Cook travel agents.

McPhedran’s representation of his years in India are infused with loneliness and restlessness. On those few occasions he finds a semblance of happiness something happens to disrupt it, such as a sexual assault in the one missionary household where he felt comfortable, and the death of his soul mate at boarding school. His pride in his Burmese heritage, and his desire to connect with local Indian people is mostly met with hostility or bewilderment by the Europeans and people of mixed-descent he encountered or lived with. And while he tremendously enjoyed the few opportunities he had to spend prolonged periods of time with the families of the Indian servants he befriended, the colour of his skin and his European appearance always served to set him apart.

The loneliness and restlessness which imbues the text is also a result of his one driving goal of those years – to return to Burma to search for his mother. He acknowledged this as being an impossibility throughout the duration of the war. However, hearing the news of war’s end during a holiday in Calcutta, he had ‘no thoughts of returning to school to complete my studies. I had to find a way home.’ His desire was thwarted by the ‘brutally frank’ explanations of the soldiers he

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canvassed in Calcutta who told him he would likely be killed in the turmoil that was post-war Burma, and his financial dependence on his father who ‘would never have allowed it’. While many of the Anglo-Burmese who fled Burma at the outbreak of war did subsequently return, for McPhedran, with no immediate family left in Burma, and a father determined for him to live as a European preferably in the United Kingdom, return to Burma remained impossible.

Unable to return to his true home, McPhedran was also unwilling to leave India, which had become his ‘de facto home’ during the war. While for much of that time he was ‘desperately sad and grief-stricken’, there had been good times and adventures which had tempered the sorrow. In contrast to the warmth of his feelings for his adopted India, his perceptions of England upon arrival in Liverpool were immediately and viscerally negative:

I had spent less than 24 hours in the country, and I had hated every moment of it. I knew I could never love it. I was a stranger in a strange place and I lay in bed and cried.

Ultimately, McPhedran ‘could not believe anybody could call such a depressing place “home”.’ Although his travels through Britain had brought him to the realisation that it was not such a bad place, his interactions with his father, including the discovery that his father had a second family, conceived while he was still married to McPhedran’s mother, eventually brought him to the realisation that he wanted to get out of England.

How and why did McPhedran end up migrating to Australia? For many of the Anglo-Burmese people who migrated to Australia, connections to family and friends already resettled, its British heritage, its dominant Christian religion and its climate all may have been important factors in their decision-making process. For McPhedran, his migration was the result of random chance and opportunity more than careful planning. On a whim he inquired through a travel agency about fares to Australia and was told there was a five-year waiting period. But through his willingness to leave

68 Burnett, “A History of the Anglo-Burmese Community”.
with minimal notice, he gained a fare within a few days when a cancellation occurred. The provisions of the white Australia policy also proved to be no barrier to his migration, placing McPhedran’s experience at odds with many of the other Anglo-Burmese people who eventually migrated to Australia. His predominately European appearance, which was the driving force behind his mother’s decision to undertake the trek, now provided him with virtually unhindered acceptance for migration to Australia. And despite his firm stance on equality and his rejection of the racialised structure of colonial society, the existence of the white Australia policy did not concern him or cause him to question his hasty decision to migrate there. Instead, he was driven by the strong urge to ‘get out of this cold, dreary place’ – England – to which he ‘vowed [he] would never return.’

While the white Australia policy may not have been a barrier to McPhedran’s migration to Australia, it was an outward manifestation of a social system in which any expression by McPhedran of his Burmeseness during the initial decades of his resettlement was seen as unwelcome. How did McPhedran reconcile what is a fierce attachment to his Burmese heritage and cultural roots, with forging a sense of belonging and attachment to a nation which sought to disavow a significant element of his identity? It is a question that White Butterflies in large part fails to answer. McPhedran clearly conveys in the text that he was able to find in Australia a substitute for the home he had lost in Burma in the small New South Wales town of Bowral. His connection to the town was immediate and emotional: ‘I felt good. The place had a good Karma.’ This (re)discovery of ‘home’ is for McPhedran the end of his journey and hence the end of his memoir. McPhedran has subsequently explained that, for him, it was the end of the journey because it marked the beginning of what he termed was ‘the first day of an ordinary life’. Given the terrible traumas he had undergone to get there, for McPhedran this ordinary life was ‘the greatest gift that I could possibly have been given in my new country.’

It is in the act of writing White Butterflies, more than in any explicit content of the text, that McPhedran is able to publicly lay claim to his Burmese identity and in doing so he injects himself into a raging national debate about the treatment of asylum

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76 McPhedran, White Butterflies, 236.  
seekers. This political moment in which *White Butterflies* seeks in some measure to intervene will be discussed further later in the chapter. First, however, this chapter will look more closely at the questions raised in *White Butterflies* about the impact of race and nation on mixed-descent and Anglo-Burmese identity and the concepts of home and belonging.

**Forging Identity and Finding Home: The Impact of Empire, Race and Nation**

The opening chapter of *White Butterflies* foreshadows what become some of the central concerns of McPhedran’s life during the years that span this work. His reaction to the outbreak of war highlights the importance of home – a concept with which he grapples and a place that he searches for and strives towards throughout the text. McPhedran’s angry and contemptuous descriptions of his Rangoon boarding school, where boarders are rigidly divided into classes that determined the standard of their accommodation and food, mirrors his anger over the segmentation of colonial society along race and class lines that threads throughout the memoir. Integral to these two concerns are his relationships with his mother and father, and his response to the cultural heritage he received from each.

While his love and adoration for his mother is clear from the outset of *White Butterflies*, and unwavering, McPhedran’s relationship with his father is ambivalent, and frequently troubled. McPhedran’s enthusiastic embrace of his Burmese cultural and linguistic heritage is a constant element of his memoir. In contrast, he is disconnected from his European heritage, despite learning Scottish history as a child and being encouraged by his mother to ‘pride’ himself on being the child of a ‘great Scottish clan.’ Similarly, in McPhedran’s portrayal of these nine years of his life, events and encounters with people from Burma and subsequently India are relayed in a positive light. Conversely, the text is sprinkled with numerous negative encounters with people of European origin, especially his father. In this way, his father is portrayed in *White Butterflies* as the embodiment of a colonial conception of racial hierarchy and anxiety about race and sexuality. In rejecting his father, McPhedran also rejects this worldview.

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McPhedran’s father made two pivotal decisions, related in the early stages of *White Butterflies*, which had a resoundingly negative effect on his relationship with McPhedran and in turn resulted in McPhedran’s rejection of his Europeanness. First was his decision to send McPhedran and his siblings to boarding school in Rangoon. The purpose of this decision, McPhedran believed, was to remove them from the ‘influence’ of his mother, a fate shared by many Anglo-Burmese children during that era. Second was his decision to leave Burma as the Japanese army advanced, leaving McPhedran and the rest of his family behind. When McPhedran’s oldest brother, Donald, subsequently joined the armed forces, McPhedran, his mother, his sister Ethel, and his brother Robert, were left to fend for themselves. This second decision made it necessary for McPhedran and his family to make the trek out of Burma to India via the Hukawng Valley and the Patkoi Ranges. The deaths of McPhedran’s mother, sister and brother further entrenched McPhedran’s feelings about his father and the cultural and social systems that he represented.

McPhedran’s love of his life in Burma, its people and environments, shine through in the first few chapters of *White Butterflies*. They are full of tales of boyhood fun, which include frequent stories about his mother that are infused with pride and love. He continues to reminisce about his childhood in Burma at intervals throughout the memoir, particularly in the chapter ‘Looking Back’, which explicitly focuses on identity. A chance meeting while on the trek with a group of Naga tribesmen who manage to communicate their invitation for the McPhedran family to stay out the war in their village, brings the young McPhedran to the realisation that he ‘was truly a native of Burma.’ He remembers his mother’s attempts to make her children ‘aware of the two cultures’ so that they may choose whichever path they desired once adults. For McPhedran, at that moment it was ‘no contest. I felt I was a Burmese child and I spoke like one.’ It is not surprising then that the memories of his childhood in Burma related in this chapter connect with this articulation of ‘Burmeseness’, one that was often entwined with the politics of colonialism and nationalism in Burma in the lead up to the Second World War. McPhedran recalls

81 See, for example: McPhedran, *White Butterflies*, 12.
with pride and accord the egalitarian doctrine espoused by his mother despite her willingness to acquiesce to the restrictions imposed on her by colonial society; listening to adult discussions that included his ‘father’s unease at the family’s Burmanisation’; and verbal challenges to British cultural and political superiority by his mother’s nationalist relatives.\(^{84}\)

While he understands his father’s unease to a degree, he ultimately associates him with the colonial power structure, not least because of his willingness to accept the second-class treatment of his wife, McPhedran’s mother, within it. One incident in particular, in which his mother is denied entry to the sailing club where the family was to eat afternoon tea, still resounds with anger for the adult McPhedran. It is his father that he is angry at for his easy acceptance of a discriminatory system that viewed anyone not British as a second-class citizen. He relates that:

I never forgot the incident and I never forgave my father. Forty-five years on, during a visit to the same club as a dinner guest of the Burmese Minister for Tourism, I walked over to the edge of the verandah and urinated into the water below.\(^{85}\)

McPhedran’s strong identification with his Burmese heritage continued throughout the years he spent in India as a teenager. At his first day at school in Bangalore McPhedran unhesitantly and to some extent unproblematically introduces himself to the class as ‘Anglo-Burmese’.\(^{86}\) As previously discussed however, McPhedran’s willingness to strike up friendships within the local Indian population, regardless of culture or caste, was viewed askance by many of the European and mixed-descent members of the community, including his classmates. He found the Anglo-Indian children in particular to be ‘conceited’ for their shame in their Indian heritage,\(^{87}\) and was quite willing to label his father racist for his inability or unwillingness to value the Burmese elements of his children’s identity.\(^{88}\)

To what extent does McPhedran’s enunciation of his identity, and the resulting experiences and interactions that led from it, conform to the experiences of Anglo-Burmese people in general, and other Anglo-Burmese migrants to Australia in

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particular? *White Butterflies* seems to place McPhedran’s strong attachment to his Burmese heritage as outside the norm for mixed-descent communities living in Burma and India, as evidenced by his comments on the Anglo-Indian community quoted above. If this is the case, it is worth asking what it is about McPhedran’s experience that might have made this possible. First, however, it is important to canvass what elements are posited as typical of Anglo-Burmese identity in the available research. In doing so, this discussion will broaden its horizon to incorporate material on the identities of other mixed-descent communities, such as the Anglo-Indians.

Questions of identity have always been paramount for the mixed-descent communities that grew out of European contact with local populations in Asia, Africa and the Americas, first through trade and then through more formal colonial structures. For Sheila Pais James, identity, and in particular, certainty about identity, have been a problem for the Anglo-Indian community since the early days of colonial rule. Culturally, linguistically and religiously oriented towards the British who refused to accept them as equals, and yet maintaining boundaries between themselves and the local indigenous populations, these groups occupied a fraught middle-ground in the racially stratified colonial societies of which they were a part. In a succinct but effective analysis of the attitude of the Anglo-Indian community to the Indian communities in India, Erica Lewin argues that ‘Anglo-Indians in India valued their western heritage more than their Indian heritage’. She goes on to suggest that the Anglo-Indian community in India chose to identify as a separate group in order to be ‘identified as a higher class than the Indian population’. She draws on the work of Hawes and Younger to suggest that the Anglo-Indian community, in striving to belong to British society, emulated “many of that society’s prejudices” and “expressed bitter contempt for Indians”.

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91 Lewin, “Perceptions About Skin Colour and Heritage,” 641.


94 Lewin, “Perceptions About Skin Colour and Heritage,” 642.
Unsurprisingly, many of the studies done on the identity of mixed-descent communities focus on the role played by race and more specifically skin colour. Lewin’s study on Anglo-Indian women in Australia argues that since the early days of colonialism, ‘the issue of skin colour and “race” consciousness were part of the policies relating to the interaction [between Anglo-Indians, Europeans, and Indians].’ Race and skin colour continued to be significant for people of mixed-descent who migrated to Australia during the white Australia policy. Lewin’s study is a significant contribution to research in this area. Her findings suggest that ‘skin colour has been an indicator of status and influenced identity within the Anglo-Indian community in India and in Australia. It was also an indicator of status vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in the Indian environment.’ Fair skin enabled passing and social mobility, making the boundaries maintained between races porous for some. Lewin found that a desire for distance from the ‘Indian component of identity’ was manifested as disregard for the Indian component of her participants’ ancestry and in some cases a deliberate avoidance of discussing it, creating ‘an element of secrecy around Anglo-Indian heritage’.

Lewin rightly points out that such attitudes grew out of specific historical and political contexts of the colonial environment in which her participants were born and positioned vis-à-vis the colonizer and the colonized. The Anglo-Burmese community shared a similar place in the history and politics of British colonialism, despite the comparatively late annexation of Burma by the British. By the 1930s the Anglo-Burmese community had emerged as ‘an important and distinct ethnic group in Burma … dominant in the political, educational and economic spheres of Burmese life’, and with an ‘innate cultural affinity with all things European’. While as yet no studies have been completed on the attitudes of Anglo-Burmese people towards identity, Lewin’s study included Anglo-Burmese participants and their responses informed the conclusions she drew on Anglo-Indian identity, highlighting the

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95 Lewin, “Perceptions About Skin Colour and Heritage,” 636.
96 Lewin, “Perceptions About Skin Colour and Heritage,” 636.; Klaus Neumann’s work on the migration of Mauritian gen de couleur highlights the ways in which potential migrants to Australia were aware of and attempted to circumvent the racial requirements of the white Australia policy. See: Neumann, “Anxieties in Colonial Mauritius,” 2-3, 11.
97 Lewin, “Perceptions About Skin Colour and Heritage,” 647.
100 Burnett, “A History of the Anglo-Burmese Community”.
commonalities that exist between communities of mixed-descent. The enunciation of identity by McPhedran in *White Butterflies* speaks to the wide variety of experience on an individual level, however, and pushes us to examine not just macro historical forces which act to shape collective identities but also the nuances that shape variations of identification on a personal level.

What was it about McPhedran’s specific history that drove him to reject an identity predicated upon notions of racial hierarchy that prevailed at the time? Clearly his strong love and affinity for his mother, coupled with witnessing her death in circumstances for which he blames his father, helped to cement his strong identification with his Burmese heritage. In addition, his relatively short time spent in a boarding school and his ability to link, at the time and in retrospect, his attendance there with his father’s fears about the Burmanisation of his children, meant that he maintained strong connections with his Burmese family and cultural roots until almost the beginning of his teenage years.

Burnett has suggested that placing Anglo-Burmese children in Christian boarding schools was a common tactic used in attempts to undermine the ‘Burmese heritage’ of Anglo-Burmese children through an ‘emphasis on European culture, society and religion.’\(^{101}\) As Edwards has demonstrated, one enduring response of British administrators to the growing communities of mixed-descent in Burma was to promote ‘education and segregation as the key to … “improving” the presumed racially defective and politically untrustworthy mixed-race populations’.\(^{102}\) Special schools for the education of Burma’s Eurasian population were established as early as the 1860s in Rangoon.\(^{103}\) Memoirs of some first-generation Anglo-Burmese people, who were children in Burma during the 1930s and 1940s, highlight the extreme lengths colonial educators went to enforce adherence to European (and largely British) cultural norms among their students, including physical beatings for any deviation.\(^{104}\)

The only other full-length memoir by a member of the Anglo-Burmese community to discuss childhood in Burma during this era was written by Maureen Baird-Murray. While many of Baird-Murray’s experiences were strikingly different to

\(^{101}\) Burnett, “A History of the Anglo-Burmese Community”.


McPhedran’s, particularly during the Second World War, their placement in Christian boarding schools by fathers seeking to weaken the cultural influence of their Burmese mothers was one commonality. Baird-Murray was, however, much younger than McPhedran when she entered the convent school and with the death of her mother not long after, she quickly lost familial and subsequently cultural ties to her Burmese heritage.\(^\text{105}\)

Another factor may have been McPhedran’s lack of immersion in the Anglo-Burmese community, and hence immersion in the politics and history of the collective identity of that group. He does not give the impression in \textit{White Butterflies} that his family in any sense strongly identified with the Anglo-Burmese community. His memories of his interactions with other people and communities in Burma while living with his mother in Maymyo always emphasised the variety of backgrounds from which they were drawn.\(^\text{106}\) In addition, he frequently emphasises his mother’s belief in equality and her desire that her children ‘see the different paths in life.’\(^\text{107}\) It is likely that McPhedran’s father also objected to a strong affiliation with the Anglo-Burmese community but for reasons that lay at the opposite extreme of the spectrum. His father repeatedly refused to allow or strenuously objected to his children marrying into Anglo-Burmese families or families from other mixed-descent communities due to their perceived inferiority.\(^\text{108}\)

Religion may also have played a part in McPhedran’s wholehearted embrace of his Burmese heritage and his antagonistic relationship with his European heritage. While his parents were both Christian and members of the same church, McPhedran displays a strong aversion to the Christian faith in \textit{White Butterflies}. Again, his mother’s influence is important. Despite her own religious beliefs, she felt strongly that her children should learn about their two cultures. In her desire to leave her children to decide their birthright for themselves, she taught them two religions, Buddhism and Christianity.\(^\text{109}\) His inability to reconcile his experiences on the trek and the deaths of his family with the concept of the Christian God,\(^\text{110}\) his many negative experiences with missionaries and other Europeans who purported to be

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\(^{105}\) Baird-Murray, \textit{A World Overturned}.

\(^{106}\) McPhedran, \textit{White Butterflies}, 139-140.

\(^{107}\) McPhedran, \textit{White Butterflies}, 55, 139-140.


Christian, and his affinity for Buddhist philosophy, all led McPhedran towards a stronger connection with his Burmese cultural roots. While he may have de-emphasised much of his Burmese cultural heritage and history upon resettlement in Australia for the sake of his children, his adherence to Buddhist beliefs seems to have been steadfast.\textsuperscript{111}

What impact did resettlement have on the ways in which Anglo-Burmese identity is experienced in Australia? Material relating to the Anglo-Indian community is again useful in providing insights into this issue. Much of this work explores the impact of the emerging paradigm of multiculturalism in Australia on the concept of Anglo-Indian identity, and its changing meanings over time. Glenn D’Cruz’s work is particularly useful, specifically his conceptualisation of Anglo-Indians as ‘The Good Australians’ within the context of official multiculturalism. While the narrative of \textit{White Butterflies} does not consider the implications of resettlement in any depth, and makes little reference to multiculturalism, during the period in which it was written and published multiculturalism was an ongoing and long-running component of Australian social policy. As such, it can be seen as part of the ‘continuous “play” of history, culture and power’\textsuperscript{112} which would have impacted not just on the way McPhedran experienced his Anglo-Burmese identity, but on the representation of it in his memoir.

D’Cruz argues that ‘within the social and political milieu of multiculturalism…Anglo-Indians have generally been represented as desirable migrants’.\textsuperscript{113} Drawing on the work of Ghassan Hage, he contends that Australian multiculturalism is a management strategy that continues to value whiteness, where whiteness ‘is an aspiration that one accumulates various capitals to try and be’.\textsuperscript{114} It is within this context, he explains, that Anglo-Indians are seen as good Australians – for although they may be ‘visibly different, their predominantly “British” cultural habits enable them to be easily assimilated to the dominant Anglo-Celtic culture’.\textsuperscript{115} D’Cruz does not argue that multiculturalism was designed to ‘hasten [the] probable demise of the Anglo-Indian community as a specific ethnic minority’. It acts, however, as an ‘ambivalent discourse; one that simultaneously works to reinstate white normativity

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{111} McPhedran, \textit{White Butterflies}, 154.
\textsuperscript{112} Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 225.
\textsuperscript{113} D’Cruz, “‘The Good Australians’,” 144.
\textsuperscript{114} Quoted in: D’Cruz, “‘The Good Australians’,” 148.
\textsuperscript{115} D’Cruz, “‘The Good Australians’,” 150.
even while it celebrates cultural diversity.’ He recognises that many Anglo-Indians, after experiencing prejudice individually and as a community, wanted to become ‘Good Australians’. Connections can be drawn here with McPhedran’s desire for, and appreciation of, an ordinary Australian life after the traumatic upheaval of the years following his flight from Burma.

Alison Blunt’s analysis of the Anglo-Indian community fundamentally accords with that of D’Cruz. She too uses the descriptor ambivalent when describing the place of Anglo-Indians in multicultural Australia. She found that many Anglo-Indians ‘stress their successful assimilation and emphasise the “Anglo” parts of their identity, while at the same time asserting a distinctive and visible Anglo-Indian identity in the context of multiculturalism’. The participants in Lewin’s study, discussed above, also tended to emphasises the ‘Anglo’ elements of their identity and downplay or have limited knowledge of their Indian ancestry. Despite this, there was an awareness among them of the ‘racist implications of Anglo-Indian identity’ alongside ‘an increased respect for Indian culture and feelings of shame for a past that denigrated the Indian aspect of their heritage.’

Although McPhedran de-emphasised elements of his Burmese identity so both he and his family could live an ordinary life in mid-twentieth century Australia, it was perhaps the advent of a multiculturalist discourse in Australia that fed his children’s desire to know more about and celebrate his, and therefore their, cultural and historical connection to Burma. It would seem that McPhedran’s return to Burma in the early 1980s was a significant step in both this process and in the journey towards writing his memoir. Various anecdotes from this trip are related throughout the narrative of White Butterflies. There is a moment where McPhedran’s Burmese roots seem to suddenly become real for his son. Stopping to look at a landmark bridge, McPhedran and his son are hailed by a Buddhist monk who recognizes McPhedran as an old school friend. McPhedran described his son’s reaction to this reunion, and the friends’ embrace, as ‘astonishment’. The monk then produced a photo of the two of them at school – tangible evidence of McPhedran’s past in Burma and of their

117 D’Cruz, “Representing Anglo-Indians,” 308.
connection. Perhaps in this moment McPhedran’s son was recognizing his father as a part of Burma, as truly belonging there. In writing *White Butterflies* McPhedran completes this journey back to his roots through what is a public reclamation of his Burmeseness.

The search for home is another of the central themes and concerns which drive the narrative constructed by McPhedran in *White Butterflies*. Ien Ang and Michael Symonds have argued that the ‘idea of home occupies a place in the heart of modern cultural experience – as an apparently inescapable centre of return and a rare site of idealized mutual love and belonging.’ Similarly, Fiona Allon has argued that ‘home’ ‘occupies a salient position – a position of “profound emotional legitimacy” in the … ever multiplying debates of place and belonging, globalisation and the politics of identity.’ It is certainly the case in *White Butterflies* that the concept of home, and McPhedran’s constant desire to return to it or recapture it anew, is the emotional heart of his story.

The early stages of McPhedran’s narrative particularly convey his seemingly effortless emotional and physical connection to his home in Burma. In the beginning home has a particular location for McPhedran – Maymyo, the town in which his childhood home, Jamshed Villa, is located. As McPhedran is forced by circumstance to journey from this location his definition of home and the instances in which he feels at home begin to expand to encompass a wider space. In the moment of meeting with a group of Naga tribesman on the trek out of Burma, McPhedran comes to the realisation that it is Burma which is home, and people from Burma – regardless of cultural or ethnic background – with which he feels most at home. The overarching connection between these various homes is the love McPhedran has for his mother.

As the sole survivor from his family of the horrendous trek into India, McPhedran loses both his physical home (Burma) and his emotional home (his mother). McPhedran’s actions throughout the remainder of the narrative are driven by his need to return to and recapture his lost home(s). Ang and Symonds argument that,

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‘the notion of homelessness becomes associated with a sense of lack, with a sense of desperate longing propelling the urgency with which the ongoing search for home is commonly pursued,’123 resonates strongly here.

When McPhedran is confronted throughout the narrative of White Butterflies with a new place that could be a possible new home, he often weighs its potential through his immediate emotional reaction. England is rejected upon his arrival in Liverpool, largely because of its connection with his father, portrayed by McPhedran as the antithesis of his mother. The contrasts in climate between Burma and England – it is snowing when he arrives – also prove to be a factor in McPhedran’s inability to feel at home there and his desire to depart for Australia seems principally motivated by his desire for sunny skies and warm seas. McPhedran does not find an immediate sense of connection, a pull towards home, upon his arrival in Australia. In fact, the harsh realities of trying to make it on his own as a new migrant with only five pounds to his name left McPhedran beginning to feel he had ‘blundered in choosing this country to escape to’ and with the desire to ‘head away to some other land’.124

Ultimately, it is not Australia as a nation in which he finds a sense of home, but a specific place – Bowral in rural New South Wales. It is the geography of Bowral that first resonates with McPhedran: ‘I looked out at a landscape that seemed miraculously to have changed to a place I remembered dearly, my home town in Burma.’125 It was a place that he saw as a ‘ghost’ of his home town and contemplating his surroundings brought to his mind pleasant childhood memories of his life in Maymyo. McPhedran imbues the text here – in what is the last passage of his memoir – with a sense of tranquillity and peace. His satisfaction and happiness in finding a new home mirrors his satisfaction and happiness at coming to the end of his journey – for it is the search for home around which the narrative of White Butterflies is structured. In addition to a common geography, Maymyo and Bowral are both places where McPhedran was able to live an ordinary life – one with comfort, love, family and imbued with a strong sense of connection and belonging.

I would argue, however, that McPhedran’s search for home did not end with his arrival in Bowral. As Ahmed et al argue, ‘homing’, or ‘home work’, is an ongoing and fluid process: ‘Homes are always made and remade as grounds and conditions (of

123 Ang and Symonds, “Home, Displacement and Belonging,” v.
125 McPhedran, White Butterflies, 235.
work, of family, of political climate, etc.) change.'

The memory work, the engagement with his family about his past, and the act of shaping of stories into a narrative, undertaken by McPhedran in writing *White Butterflies*, can all be seen as ‘home work’, of making sense of the past as part of a process or mode of ‘questioning that is carried out through the location of migrant belonging’. Ahmed et al also argued that ‘homing depends on the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted – in migration, displacement or colonization.’ Following the work of Hage, for them, ‘home-building’ is about gathering ‘fragments which are imagined to be traces of an equally imagined homely whole, the imaged past “home” of another time and another space’. Such work is therefore:

intimately bound up with the idea of home: the idea of a place (or places) in the past, and of this place in the future. Making home is about creating both pasts and futures through inhabiting the grounds of the present … And indeed, both uprooting and regrounding can entail forms of mourning, nostalgia and remembrance as well as physical sickness and experiences of trauma.

The writing of *White Butterflies* can be seen as part of a process of (re)claiming home by McPhedran – both in Burma and Australia. In a way, McPhedran is writing home and creating a sense of belonging in writing his memoir. And he is, perhaps for the first time, truly at home in Australia, as he is able to reclaim and recreate the homes of his past, and in doing so, make interventions into the future of this home (Australia). After writing *White Butterflies* McPhedran went on to claim a voice in the public debate around the reception of asylum seekers in Australia in the aftermath of the *Tampa* affair and the institution of the (first) Pacific Solution. On a broader level through his memoir he also widened the narrative frame of Australian history by claiming that his story is also Australia’s story, creating the space for his son to share their story in an article titled, “An Australian War Story: What Did You do During the War, Dad?”

130 On these contentious episodes in Australia’s more recent immigration history, see: David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory* (Crow’s Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003).
A Universal Refugee Narrative?: Asylum Seeker Politics and the Reception of White Butterflies

_White Butterflies_ is a representation of McPhedran’s past, one that was written within the context of a specific moment (or span) of time. Hall argues that: ‘We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always “in context”, positioned.’\(^{132}\) Similarly, Australian historian Bain Attwood argues that one of the ‘basic tasks of … memory-work’ is the ‘making sense of and composing ourselves in the light of present circumstances, and it is invariably framed and shaped by the wider cultural and political discourses of that time.’\(^{133}\) Given the timing of the publication of _White Butterflies_ its reception was inevitably entwined with the immigration and refugee-related controversies and tragedies of the _Tampa_, the children overboard affair and the sinking of the SIEV X in 2001.\(^{134}\) Bernadette Brennan wrote the most comprehensive review of _White Butterflies_ in 2002, placing McPhedran’s work in the context of Australian literary criticism, which she argues was concerned with the ‘need for literature…to rise above the politics of fear and division and to engage readers on the level of moral truth’\(^{135}\). Reviewers of a more overtly activist outlook also saw in _White Butterflies_ the potential to counteract the damaging and simplistic portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers that was characteristic of the rhetoric used by members of the Howard government.\(^{136}\) For Magella Blinksell, the ‘process (or the events) that force a person into seeking refuge were often lost in contemporary discussions of refugee issues, in which the ‘moniker of refugee is [often] objectified.’\(^{137}\) She saw ‘strength and

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\(^{132}\) Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 222. [Emphasis in original].

\(^{133}\) Bain Attwood, “‘Learning About the Truth’ The Stolen Generations Narrative,” in _Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand_, eds. Bain Attwood and Fiona Magowan (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2001), 188.


timeliness’ in McPhedran’s ‘simple but beautifully evoked exposition of transition – from that of a happy schoolboy…to that of a refugee.’

More than one reviewer argues that *White Butterflies* filled the silence which asylum seekers detained by the Howard government in remote detention centres were prevented from filling. For example, Christopher Bantick feels McPhedran’s work ‘has a certain resonance with the yet largely untold stories of today’s asylum seekers and refugees’. Reviewer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Peter Cole-Adams – who himself arrived in Australia as a refugee in the 1940s – argues for the transformative potential of the work, stating that, ‘Prejudice tends to crumble when people find that the debate is really about ordinary humans who have suffered terribly, survived, and seek a chance to build new lives.’ Taking an openly political stance, his review concluded with this: ‘I hope [Immigration Minister] Philip Ruddock reads *White Butterflies*. Many of those now languishing in Australian detention camps came here after journeys as searing in their way as the one the young McPhedran endured 60 years ago.’

McPhedran has stated that he did not intend to become involved in contemporary refugee political activism, having written his memoir before controversy over the issue spiked in 2001. Speaking at an Amnesty International gathering in Wollongong in 2002 he said: ‘I don’t want to make any political mileage – it was a story which I wrote mainly for my children’. Whatever his original motivation, McPhedran was willing to lend his voice to the chorus of objections levelled at the Howard government over its treatment of asylum seekers. In his 2003 Alan Missen Memorial Lecture address, given to federal Members of Parliament, McPhedran explained that since the publication of *White Butterflies* he had been invited to speak with many different groups about his story, from writers’ festivals to events such as the Amnesty International gathering cited above. He went on to argue that Australia was at a ‘terrible crossroads’ in its attitude towards and treatment

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138 Blinksell, “Book Review”.
143 McPhedran, “Dukkha-Tay”, 103.
of asylum seekers. He utilised his own past experiences as a refugee as a way to illustrate the possibility of a different policy approach. Summing up his argument, he stated:

When I look at the faces of these poor devils in the refugee camps of Australia, my mind goes back to the generosity I was afforded. I keep thinking, surely there must be a better way. And when I see the faces of the children peering through the wire, I know there must be a better way.

For Brennan, McPhedran’s memoir has ‘raised the shroud on a painful personal but also universal history.’ Other writers also see in McPhedran’s tale a sort of universality to his refugee narrative, and often conceptualize it as a thread of Australian history – or Australia’s ‘complicated shared heritage’ – that is more common than usually thought. In a review of another Pandanus Books publication, *Weaving a Double Cloth* (2002), the writer argues that ‘the joys and tragedies that spur people to radical decisions such as leaving one’s homeland can be the same whatever one’s cultural background.’ McPhedran also draws parallels between his experiences and those of more recently arrived refugees. His Alan Missen address was titled “Dukkha-Tay” (2003), a Burmese term meaning ‘people escaping from suffering to seek a better life’. In it, he reflects on how his mother spoke this phrase often in reference to the thousands of people who also attempted the journey out of Burma along the Hukawng trail during the Second World War. It is a sentiment he found reflected in the words of an Iraqi asylum seeker quoted in David Marr and Marian Wilkinson’s *Dark Victory* (2003): ‘he and his companions had believed they were “seeking a better future for our suffering families, and to save them from their threatened life, and to reach a place where there was basic human respect”. Since the publication of *White Butterflies* McPhedran has been approached by people wishing to share their stories with him, many of who were also refugees.
have contacted him to thank him for telling his story; others have spoken of the painful reminder it was of their own experiences.\textsuperscript{152}

*White Butterflies* followed many years of silence in which McPhedran’s children’s questions about his past were brushed aside. His son, Ian McPhedran, explains that for his father, ‘silence was his way of dealing with his very traumatic war story’.\textsuperscript{153} In part, he also seems to account for this silence by reference to the era in which he and his siblings grew up. In an article he wrote about *White Butterflies*, which appeared in a number of major daily newspapers in Australia, he commented that:

> Growing up in a typical Aussie family in the 1960s, the early exploits of our immigrant father were not high on the agenda’. However, by ‘the early 1980s…the interest of his children had become irresistible and the stigma of an immigrant heritage had faded.\textsuperscript{154}

In writing *White Butterflies* McPhedran can be seen to be responding to several simultaneous needs. The need to finally break his silence and tell the tale of his trek out of Burma to his family (and in particular his brother Donald); the need to place the story of the trek and the deaths of his family within a larger narrative of his journey as a migrant through several nations in his search for a new home, answering for his children in particular their questions regarding his past, his identity and how he came to live in Australia; and also the need on some level to intervene, however subtly, in ongoing debates in Australia during the time of writing (the 1990s and early 2000s) on cultural and migration issues, with particular reference to the treatment of asylum seekers. *White Butterflies*, reaches beyond the confines of family history to tell a larger story about the particularities of race, nation and empire in Burma, India and Britain in the 1940s and their impact on the identities and life choices of the individuals caught up in the tensions between them. *White Butterflies* resonates with a universality, drawing forth a series of transnational exchanges, of sharing of stories and experience from those who saw their story reflected in McPhedran’s memoir.

\textsuperscript{152} Tydd, “Refugees’ Plight Saddens Fugitive Writer.”
\textsuperscript{153} I. McPhedran, “An Australian War Story,” 29.
\textsuperscript{154} I. McPhedran, “An Australian War Story,” 29.
Conclusion

_White Butterflies_ is a story of journeys. Its basic structure charts McPhedran’s nine-year journey from Burma to Australia, via India and the United Kingdom. Interwoven throughout the text are other, smaller, journeys. The first part of the book focuses on the most harrowing – his trek, along with his mother, brother and sister, out of Burma to India as a child during World War II. His years in India as the war finished and he finished school are dominated by stories of his travels, as he moves from one home to another, from one school to another, and takes off on school holidays to see the countryside and cities of that country. McPhedran’s time in the United Kingdom is also related as a series of restless journeys that culminate in his impulsive decision to take a ship to Australia.

In addition, _White Butterflies_ contains a number of metaphorical journeys. On a basic level, it charts his journey from childhood to adulthood. It is also a journey of memory and remembering. For McPhedran, this journey of remembering took place later in life, once his children had grown, he had semi-retired, and after the death of his wife. And while the memories he relates are vivid and can lull the reader into a sense that the events of his life unfolded exactly as he wrote them, at times McPhedran’s text reveals the mechanics and even the fallibilities of memory. For example, memories of his childhood in Burma and of his return there many years later are intertwined with, and triggered by, his memories of the trek to India. He also highlights his inability to remember pivotal events, such as his first meeting with his father in India after the trek – and includes the memories of his older brother as a way of relating the incident.

_White Butterflies_ can also be read as a journey toward, and a search for, home and belonging. McPhedran’s memoir beautifully captures and conveys his love for Burma, his childhood home and home of the culture(s) he most identifies with. The book and the journey end when he finds a new home, the town of Bowral in rural New South Wales, where he has lived out the majority of his life in Australia. As we have found, it is a home he chose because it resonated with his original home in Maymyo in Burma. For McPhedran, finding his new home felt instinctively good.

In undertaking this journey of remembering through the writing of _White Butterflies_, McPhedran can be seen to be ultimately searching for and finding a
resolution to his sense of conflicted identity. For while, he ‘had arrived’ in Bowral in 1951, conflicts over his identity were unresolved. His strong conviction that he was in fact Burmese, reached during the hellish trek out of Burma during the war, was an untenable identity to claim publicly in mid-twentieth century Australia. His attempts to keep his Burmese identity hidden from his children are an indication of this. Although *White Butterflies* ends its narrative very soon after McPhedran’s arrival in Australia, these glimpses into his resettlement experiences highlight that while he may be grateful to Australia for providing him with an ordinary life, it was also a life, at first, in which some parts of himself went unrecognised. The writing of *White Butterflies* ends a process that first began by returning to Burma with his son. Through writing the book, McPhedran is finally able to acknowledge all the facets of his identity, bringing all the pieces of himself together into a sensible whole, through a story which through its telling, makes Anglo-Burmese identity real.

At the time that McPhedran was writing *White Butterflies* (c.1988-2002) the number of people migrating from Burma to Australia was increasing once again. These people have fled a Burma where the politics of ethnic identity continue to play a significant role in conceptualisations of national identity and hence, national belonging. The conflict that has ensued has acted as a push factor in the (forced) emigration of many. As the discussion in this chapter has highlighted, during this period Australia was also grappling with questions of national belonging in its response to onshore asylum seekers. The next chapter will examine identity politics in Burma and Australia in more depth, with a particular focus on its impact on the experiences and lives of individuals who have applied for protection visas in Australia over the past two decades.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Impact of the Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism: Seeking Refuge Since 1988

We marched almost every day and our activities were growing and getting bigger and bigger. After the coup, they ordered me to see … the commander of the military regime from our city. He pointed a gun to my head and said that what you’re doing is just destabilising the country, that I was an insurgent and that if I keep doing this, they will shoot me. So finally I decided for me it’s too much. Because we know that we couldn’t get what we want by shouting slogans, asking them to attend meetings, things like that. No, these guys won’t listen to us. They have weapons so we have to find weapons. So we have to fight by armed struggle to get democracy and our ethnic national rights. … I left with my two friends, towards the border. This is when I left my country, my area. I’ve never been back there.¹

The fight for democracy and ethnic autonomy in Burma is complex and multi-layered. Individuals are caught up in these movements to varying degrees: some are reluctant or periodic participants, whilst others enthusiastically support and participate in pro-democracy or ethnic nationalist causes in a sustained fashion. Some are deeply involved in anti-regime activities; others limit their involvement to smaller scale activities, such as prayer meetings or distributing pamphlets, all aimed at promoting change. No level of involvement in the politics of democracy and ethnic rights in Burma protects individuals from surveillance and reprisal from the regime. For some, like the man whose story is quoted above, the regime’s response to their peaceful protests for change prompted them to increase their involvement and legitimised the use of force in their struggle. For others, ongoing surveillance and harassment by the regime led them to step away from politics altogether. The protracted nature of the struggle or a growing disillusionment with developments in the politics and policies of their arm of the movement has meant that many people from Burma have sought out a more stable life for themselves and their families. Thousands of these people have subsequently resettled in Western nations such as Australia.²

¹ Interview with Nai Meang Muw, 23 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
² 102,278 refugees from Burma were permanently resettled between 1995 and 2010 in Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom (UK), and the United States of America (USA). The USA resettled 75,464 refugees during this period; Australia resettled the second largest number, at 11,453; followed
This chapter focuses on those who have sought refuge in Australia since 1988, drawing on a range of sources to present both an overview of the climate of reception in Australia since 1988, and the details of particular circumstances of persecution faced by those fleeing Burma. By analyzing press coverage of both the nationwide pro-democracy events in 1988 and the national election in 1990, the chapter begins by exploring how understandings of Burmese politics and society were being framed in Australia on the eve of a new period of significant migration from Burma. It then notes the development of particular debates in Australia regarding immigration and multiculturalism throughout the 1980s and 1990s and through to the watershed events of 2001 – all of which re-framed immigration policies and the conditions in which refugees and asylum seekers were received. Having noted these developments, the chapter then focuses on the cases of Burmese asylum seekers considered by the Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia (RRT) between 1994 and 2012. Drawing on case files made available under the provision of the Migration Act (1958), these files provide evidence that, as with the Anglo-Burmese who migrated to Australia in the 1960s, the politics of ethnicity and nationalism in Burma continue to have a significant impact on individual lives and therefore have been central reasons why people have chosen to leave.

**Australian Media Rhetoric on Burma, September 1988 and May 1990**

The year 1988 was a watershed in modern Burma. It was a moment in time in which a new generation of people from Burma became politicised and actively campaigned for a transition to democracy after decades of living under a quasi-socialist dictatorship. The large-scale student uprisings of that year forced the resignation in July of General Ne Win, the leader of Burma’s governing Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) regime. In a military coup in September, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) took over Burma and promised its people multi-party elections in 1990. In the intervening period Daw Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as a key leader of the newly formed political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), which went on to win a landslide victory in the national election. The refusal by Canada, which resettled 5,904. See: “UNHCR Statistical Online Population Database,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Data extracted: 23 January 2012. Available online: www.unhcr.org/statistics/populationdatabase.
of the SLORC to allow the parliament to convene, its long-term arbitrary detention of many political leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi, and its widespread and systematic use of human rights abuses against its population, resulted in international condemnation and raised Burma’s profile in the West over the past two decades. Before examining the response to these events in more detail, it is important to ask: why 1988? What conditions existed in Burma that provided for the large groundswell of popular support for political change after a quarter of a century of living under a quasi-socialist dictatorship?

In 1987 Ne Win, then Chairman of the BSPP regime, publicly stated that there was a need for political, economic and constitutional change in Burma, in order to respond to the deteriorating conditions in the country. That year Burma also applied for ‘least developed country’ status to protect it from international creditors, having failed to liberalise the economy in the manner promised when taking out billions of dollars of official development assistance (ODA) loans. This decision has been characterised as indicative of the overall failure of Burma’s experiment in socialist economics since the BSPP regime came to power with the coup in 1962. The BSPP’s socialist agenda was linked to its aversion to foreigners, creating the conditions under which many Anglo-Burmese and other people not from an ‘indigenous’ race of Burma experienced discrimination and decided to emigrate. Soon after taking power, it suspended all import and export licences granted to foreign business enterprises and people. In pursuit of its socialist agenda, the regime also quickly retreated from its support of ‘indigenous’ businesses, carrying out extensive nationalisation of the economy and issuing tough laws that allowed the state to execute people for ‘economic crimes’. Despite the success of the BSPP in dismantling the previous economic power base of Burma, it did not have the fiscal or technical capabilities to

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meet the needs of the Burmese population. By the late 1980s, the economy was described by David Steinberg as being ‘potentially rich but devastated by mismanagement, poor policies, political rigor, and the economic whims of its leaders, who eschewed foreign advice.’ Despite Ne Win’s calls for change, in 1987 a demonetisation program was instituted that did not allow compensation for circulating currency, ‘wiping out as much as eighty percent of the country’s savings because most people hoarded cash, reluctant to put their funds in the unreliable state banking system’. This policy mirrored other demonetisation events from the past, and reflected the adhoc way the BSPP regime had run Burma’s economy, creating ‘a pervasive atmosphere of economic fear’, and was an important contributing factor to the rise of nation-wide anti-regime protests in 1988.

Over the almost three decades it was in power, the BSPP regime was also responsible for widespread and systematic human rights abuses against its population, particularly within the ethnic minority areas of Burma. The various political and ethnic nationalist insurgencies that began soon after independence, ‘intensified under General Ne Win’s dictatorship.’ Sakhong has argued that the chauvinistic ‘Myanmarization’ measures launched by the Burma Army under Ne Win’s leadership left many ethnic minority nationalist groups with ‘no choice but to struggle for their survival by any means, including the use of arms.’ The military’s tactics for undermining the insurgencies are known as the ‘Four Cuts’ policy (pyat lei pyat). Developed in the late 1960s, it was designed to deny, or ‘cut’, food, funds, information, and recruits to the ethnic minority and communist insurgents. It was responsible for forced relocation and labour programs, and the conscription of child soldiers, among other abuses, which were responsible for large outflows of refugees from Burma into neighbouring countries since the late 1970s. What is different about the events that unfolded in 1988, and throughout subsequent decades, is that for

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10 Steinberg, Burma, 133.
11 Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar), 163.
12 Steinberg, Burma, 5.
13 Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar), 164.
15 Sakhong, In Defence of Identity, 135.
16 Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar), 192.
17 Seekins, Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar), 192, 376; Steinberg, Burma, 132,
the first time the western world focused its attention on Burma.¹⁸ The events that unfolded as a result of the pro-democracy uprising in 1988 also had profound effects on the political and military ethnic nationalist campaigns against the state. A new style of military rule was established in 1988, which fostered periods of engagement with ethnic nationalist groups and a suite of cease-fire arrangements. Of course, much stayed the same – with military conflict, human rights abuses, and the surveillance and detention of political activists all continuing unabated.

The way in which the Australian media have understood and represented Burma, its politics and its people, is important because of its role in forming wider public understandings of these issues, and for its potential impact on the way in which asylum seekers and refugees from Burma would be subsequently received by both the government and the wider public. This is particularly the case in Australia in regards to immigration policy where governments of either political persuasion are notoriously sensitive to, and influenced by, public opinion. The way in which the *Australian* (a national publication), the *Sun* (now the *Herald-Sun*, a Melbourne based publication), and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, understood and reported on Burma’s complex ethnic and cultural landscape during 1988 and 1990 will be discussed in this section.¹⁹ It analyses the ways in which these publications defined and characterized Burma and its history of ethnic-nationalist conflict. The events that were unfolding in September 1988 and again in May 1990 were critical to why the first group of refugees from Burma began to resettle in Australia, and therefore the analysis of this period offers a snapshot of how Burma was being understood at the very beginning of a new era of Australia-Burma relations, one in which the levels of migration began to increase significantly again.

The pro-democracy uprising made front-page news in all three publications in September 1988,²⁰ when large-scale demonstrations and deaths were occurring and

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¹⁸ Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, 211.

¹⁹ These three publications have been chosen to provide a cross-section of newspaper type (i.e. broadsheet and tabloid), perceived political ideology (i.e. right- or left-leaning), and to a limited extent, geographic location. A close analysis was done of each paper for each day during September 1988 and May 1990, two key months in the pro-democracy movement unfolding in Burma at that time.

the situation was unpredictable and evolving quickly. In contrast, in May 1990 only the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried a front-page story on Burma, on the day after the election.  

Similarly, coverage of Burma in September 1988 was more extensive than in May 1990 across all three publications. A strength of the reportage in the *Australian* in both 1988 and 1990 was its use of correspondents in or near Burma. The *Sydney Morning Herald* had a range of articles over both time frames and did have reports from correspondents; however it relied much more on articles from international wire services and re-printed articles from newspapers overseas in its coverage of events within Burma itself. Despite this, some of the most nuanced analysis of the background politics of the pro-democracy movement and Burma’s ruling regime, particularly the politics of identity, were found in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. For both broadsheets, while there were fewer articles focusing on Burma in May 1990, the proportion of articles from correspondents during that period was high, and both papers provided some lengthy and thoughtful analysis on the upcoming poll. Perhaps to be expected, the *Sun* ran far fewer articles in both months than either of the other publications. They used a small number of articles from Neil Kelly in 1988 – a correspondent based in Bangkok who also provided articles to the *Sydney Morning Herald* – but mostly relied on international wire services and domestic reporters to gather information from Australian officials on Australian government reactions to events in Burma.

Burma’s governing BSPP regime was variously described in the Australian media as ‘totalitarian’, ‘socialist and authoritarian’, and as a ‘military dictatorship’. Interestingly, ‘xenophobic’ was a term used on more than one occasion, both via quotes from diplomats, and directly by correspondents, such as Bruce Loudon, the Asia-Pacific editor for the *Australian* who wrote a series of

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articles on Burma in 1988. Despite the usage of this term, the complex history of ethnic conflict in Burma was rarely given space within the analysis and reportage of unfolding events. Most correspondents created mini-historical narratives within their analysis that tended to focus on the impact of Ne Win’s regime on Burma’s economy. For example, Loudon wrote in the *Australian* that:

> in little more than a quarter of a century [Burma’s Marxist-military dictatorship] turned what was an extremely prosperous and promising nation, the ‘garden of Asia’, into an impoverished country that outdoes, in terms of its pitiful penury, most of the other begging bowl states throughout the world.

This statement was made within a large article on Burma that also made mention of ‘ethnic guerilla armies’, but gave no further clues to the important role that ethnic conflict played in Ne Win’s rise to power, how it shaped his regime’s agenda, or the implications these complex issues could have for the opposition movement’s aims and agenda.

Correspondents from all three publications tended to use the term Burmese uncritically as both a descriptor of nationality and of ethnicity in their coverage of events in Burma in September 1988 and May 1990. Despite the participation of students from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds in the 1988 demonstrations, the students were only ever described as ‘Burmese’ in the coverage examined. And yet ‘Burmese’ was also clearly understood to refer to an ethnic identity. For example, a sub-section of a larger article by Neil Kelly, titled “Portrait of Burma”, gives a breakdown of key facts, including ethnicity, where Burmese is the term given for the majority ethnic group, the Burmans. In using the term Burmese in this way, correspondents for Australian newspapers were often following the lead of those with closer ties to the situation. An article titled, “Burmese Used as Human Mine Sweepers”, is a good example. It outlines the ways in which ethnic minority groups (in this case the Karen) have assisted ‘Burmese’ students who escaped forced

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26 Loudon, “Clerks Foil Ne Win Cash Transfer,” 15.
portering situations with the army. The article sets up a dichotomy between ‘ethnic minorities’ and ‘ordinary’ or ‘ethnic’ Burmese, mirroring the utilization of the term ‘ethnic Burmese’ in a US Committee for Refugees report quoted in the article.\(^{30}\)

A more complex picture of the situation emerged from articles by Alan Boyd for the *Australian*, which began on 16 September 1988 and brought in the ethnic minority perspective through interviews with representatives of the Karen National Union (KNU). He quoted an intelligence officer inside Burma on the potential fallout of the refusal at that time by the KNU to support the student movement with weapons or other forms of assistance: ‘Now the students and other leaders are furious with the KNU and there will be no place for them in a future government. It will do what the government couldn’t achieve: destroy the rebels.’\(^{31}\) An article by Neil Kelly for the *Sydney Morning Herald* was one of the few during the period under study to mention Burma’s history of ethnic insurgency when he stated that U Nu, as prime minister, ‘failed to pacify the ethnic minorities’. He highlighted the way in which animosity about this history is still felt by key ethnic minority anti-regime groups when he quoted a National Democratic Front (NDF) spokesperson who described U Nu as ‘one of yesterday’s men’: ‘Burma needed leaders who know something of the outside world, not old men who had been locked up inside Burma during a quarter of a century of isolation.’\(^{32}\)

The most nuanced and in-depth analysis of the complexity of the disparate anti-regime forces, and historic importance and impact of political struggles over identity in Burma came from Peter Hastings, a long-time reporter on Burma issues for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He was the only reporter to distinguish Burmese from Burman, and he contended that the original 1962 coup and the entire BSPP regime were founded on an ideology of Burman supremacy. He also argued that a key problem for Burma since independence had been its lack of a sense of ‘nationhood’, which was in no small part a legacy of the way in which colonialism was played out there. The nationalist movement of the 1930s and 1940s, he explained, entrenched ideas of Burman supremacy within Burma’s political elite, most of whom have been

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\(^{32}\) Kelly, “Burmese Regime on the Brink,” 1.
drawn from this ethnic group throughout Burma’s history of independence.\textsuperscript{33} For Hastings:

The unresolved problem of what Burma was to be has haunted Burma’s administrations since independence in 1947. All have described themselves as Burmese but in fact have acted to ensure Burman supremacy. … Armed insurrection and secessionism have resulted primarily from Burman unwillingness to treat minorities as equals. The differences between the two are bitter and entrenched. Clearly Ne Win's long, stultifying, cranky rule is finished. But real change embracing a new political and economic deal for all Burmese, regardless of race, may be as far off as ever.\textsuperscript{34}

Unsurprisingly, all three publications were interested in teasing out Australian connections to the events occurring in Burma.\textsuperscript{35} The \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} was, once again, the only one of the three publications to offer a more detailed and nuanced coverage of what the events in Burma might mean for Australia and Australians, particularly those with ties to Burma. For example, in a small article on 11 September 1988, it reported on the strategic importance of Burma’s geographic position, and its role in the Australian drug trade in an article titled “What Burma Means to Aust”.\textsuperscript{36} On the same day an in-depth article appeared about Aung Gyi, a key opposition leader, who was in Australia undergoing heart surgery when the protest movement broke out earlier in 1988. Urged by friends already living in Australia to stay and live a comfortable suburban life, he refused, saying ‘my country still needs me’.\textsuperscript{37} The \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} was also the only newspaper during the period canvassed to mention attempts by Australian-based lobby groups to pressure the Australian government over the issue of levelling sanctions against Burma,\textsuperscript{38} and to investigate the ways in which Australian companies became

\textsuperscript{33} He argued that, ‘Burmans broadly claim the right to lead the state because historically they unified Burma, led the modern anti-colonial struggle, have remained the guardians of Buddhism, comprise the majority, are the only race contained within Burma's borders and, to boot, don't trust the minorities anyway.’ In: Peter Hastings, “Change, for Burma, May be as Far Off as Ever,” \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 12 September 1988, 14.

\textsuperscript{34} Hastings, “Change, for Burma, May be as Far Off as Ever,” 14.


implicated in the situation by making deals with Burma’s regime after the 1988 massacre of pro-democracy protesters.\textsuperscript{39}

Most importantly for the focus of this thesis, the \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} was also the only newspaper to report on the reaction of people from Burma living in Australia to the pro-democracy movement in Burma.\textsuperscript{40} In an article titled, “Burmes Migrants Live with Fear”, Malcolm Brown canvassed the reactions of some individuals to the events in Burma, and gave both a general picture of the make-up of this community as a whole, and some personal stories of migration from people within it. As the article title suggests, this community and the individuals within it were described and referred to as ‘Burmese’, without specifying whether the term was being used to describe an ethnic or national identity. Many of those interviewed for the article also use the term ‘Burmese’ to describe the community and themselves, but the article makes clear that it is a problematic identity and not one that all people from Burma living in Australia feel comfortable claiming. The article highlights the lack of identifiable Burmese districts in Australia, even in Western Australia where three quarters of people from Burma were then living. Kyu Kyu Tan, a migrant from Burma who had just opened up a pan-Asian restaurant which included Burmese dishes, chose not to actively identify as Burmese: ‘Like other Burmese she did not cling to a Burmese community. Only once a year, she said, did she go to a Burmese dinner-dance’.\textsuperscript{41}

The article surmises that as most Burmese ‘speak English’ and have ‘integrated easily’ into Australian society, there is perhaps less necessity for a strong cultural or national affiliation among members of this group. However, it also offers another compelling reason why people from Burma living in Australia did not necessarily choose to closely identify with a Burmese collective. As Philip Smyth, a migrant from Burma, explained, ‘there was still fear and paranoia in the Burmese community, sufficient to inhibit formation of cohesive Burmese groups’. Many people, he felt, did not want to reveal themselves as Burmese publicly, particularly in a politically active way, for fear friends and family back in Burma could face

\textsuperscript{39}Williams, “Burmese Road to Democracy a Sham,” 17; Williams, “‘Fire Sale’ of Resources Helps Prop Up Regime: Burma,” 20.
\textsuperscript{41}Brown, “Burmes Migrants Live with Fear,” 4.
repercussions from the military regime.\textsuperscript{42} Despite this concern, the pro-democracy uprising in Burma led some members of this community to involve themselves in politics for the first time, lobbying the federal government and protesting outside the Burmese embassy in Canberra. Norman Alexander, secretary of the Burmese Association of Western Australia, was also quoted in the article, stating that ‘the community is profoundly disturbed by what is happening in Burma’.\textsuperscript{43} Although most people from Burma migrating during the 1960s were not officially classified as refugees, many were fleeing discrimination or persecution at the hands of Ne Win’s regime. Australia was seen as a safe-haven for many such as Jimmy Kyawhoe, who left Burma after facing discrimination and two and a half years of ‘protective custody’ following the 1962 coup. After fielding many phone calls from other people from Burma living in Australia asking what they should do in response to the violence in their home country, and having experienced first-hand persecution by the regime, Mr Kyawhoe became politically active and was responsible for organising community delegations to Canberra to ‘discuss events with the Department of Foreign Affairs’\textsuperscript{44}

As this discussion has shown, some of the coverage of the pro-democracy uprising in Burma in September 1988 and May 1990 highlighted the ways in which Burma’s experiences of race and ethnic relations were implicated in the pro-democracy movement. That Australia was simultaneously engaged in debates about immigration, in which race and identity issues were prominent, is significant, particularly as John Howard’s terms as prime minister (from 1996 to 2007) of the Liberal-National Coalition government, coincided with the period in which significant numbers of people from Burma were once again settling in Australia. Howard’s views on immigration and multiculturalism as prime minister created the discursive framework for national debates in politics and the media on these issues for the following two decades. The next section will briefly outline the politics of seeking asylum in Australia under the Howard government, and its antecedence in immigration debates that occurred in the 1980s, before turning to discuss the individual stories of persecution of people who have sought protection in Australia over the past two decades.

\textsuperscript{43} Brown, “Burmese Migrants Live with Fear,” 4.
\textsuperscript{44} Brown, “Burmese Migrants Live with Fear,” 4.
The Politics of Seeking Refuge in Australia: The Reception of Asylum Seekers under Howard

In September 1988 reports and commentary on events in Burma shared media space with the continuing fallout from comments made by John Howard, then Coalition Opposition leader, with respect to multiculturalism and Asian immigration. Earlier that year, in a move that James Jupp has characterized as the end of ‘bipartisan agreement’ on these issues, Howard made a series of attacks on multiculturalism and the make-up of the immigration intake.45 He did so in response to issues raised by the FitzGerald immigration policy review (commissioned by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) government, led by Prime Minister Bob Hawke (1983-1991), which argued that ‘support for immigration [in Australia] was faltering’, in part due to ‘confusion and hostility about multiculturalism’),46 and in the context of announcing and explaining the Coalition’s ‘One Australia’ policy.47 In August that year, he spoke publicly about Asian immigration, stating that: ‘It would be in our immediate-term interests and supportive of social cohesion if it were slowed down a little.’48 Howard’s comments were an important element to wider immigration debates that occurred in Australia in the mid- to late-1980s, and that focused largely on Asian immigration.49 These comments presaged the immigration policies he would adopt as prime minister from 1996. They were also indicative of the deep anxiety within some sections of Australian society about a non-discriminatory immigration policy, multiculturalism, and the perceived impact they were having on the central position given to Australia’s Anglo-Celtic heritage and identity.

46 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 110.
47 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 110.
49 There has been extensive coverage and commentary on these debates, sparked in part by comments made by historian Geoffrey Blainey in 1984. See, for example: Geoffrey Blainey, All for Australia (North Ryde: Methuen Haynes, 1984); Bill Cope and Michael Morrissey, The Blainey Debate and the Critics of Multiculturalism (Stanmore: Social Literacy, 1986); Andrew Markus and M.C. Ricklefs, ed., Surrender Australia? Essays in the Study and Uses of History (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985); Renata Singer and Michael Lifflman, ed, The Immigration Debate in the Press, 1984 (Richmond: Clearing House on Migration Issues, 1984); and Don McMaster, Asylum Seekers: Australia's Response to Refugees (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 146-152.
Multiculturalism was adopted in Australia as official government policy in the 1970s.\textsuperscript{50} Implemented soon after the official demise of the white Australia policy, support for multiculturalism was tested with the migration of Indochinese refugees from the late 1970s. The concurrent arrival of small numbers of Indochinese and East Timorese ‘boat people’ created a public outcry in Australia,\textsuperscript{51} alongside rapid increases in migration from Asia as a result of an expanded family reunion program,\textsuperscript{52} meant that migrants from Asia bore the brunt of the backlash against multiculturalism that occurred in the 1980s.\textsuperscript{53} Don McMaster argued that during this period ‘multiculturalism was a new and confusing concept for many Australians’.\textsuperscript{54} Opposition to multiculturalism, and to Asian migration more generally, was exacerbated by resentment towards the perceived inequity of increased services provided to newly arrived migrants as a result of the policy. Instrumentally, however, opposition was also explicitly framed by a fear of the ‘Asianisation’ of Australia, with claims made by historian Geoffrey Blainey in 1984 (and echoed by Howard and later right-wing politician Pauline Hanson in the 1990s),\textsuperscript{55} that: the encouragement of cultural identification had been taken too far, especially in the case of Asian migrants whose cultural traditions and practices are markedly different from those of the ‘dominant Anglo-Saxon culture of Australia’\textsuperscript{56}

While these concerns were based on a misreading of the aims of multiculturalism in the Australian context, which continued to prioritise the core position of Anglo-Celtic identity and institutions,\textsuperscript{57} they were powerfully felt.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{50} On the emergence of multiculturalism in Australia, see: Mark Lopez, \textit{The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics 1945-1975} (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 2000).
\textsuperscript{51} McMaster, \textit{Asylum Seekers}, 145; For a discussion of the response to ‘boat people’ during the 1977 federal election and the impact this had on refugee and multiculturalism policies, see: Erin Taylor, ‘“Y’Know, We Could be Watching History Repeat Itself”’: The Arrival of the Song Be 12 and Australia’s Responses to Indochinese Asylum Seekers During the Federal Election Campaign of 1977,” (Hons. Diss., University of Melbourne, 2006); See also: Nancy Viviani, \textit{The Long Journey: Vietnamese Migration and Settlement in Australia} (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1984), chapters 4 and 5.
\textsuperscript{52} McMaster, \textit{Asylum Seekers}, 147; On family reunion provisions of Australia’s immigration program during the 1980s, see: Robert Birrell, \textit{The Chains That Bind: Family Reunion Migration to Australia in the 1980s} (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1990).
\textsuperscript{53} McMaster, \textit{Asylum Seekers}, 146.
\textsuperscript{54} McMaster, \textit{Asylum Seekers}, 146.
\textsuperscript{55} McMaster, \textit{Asylum Seekers}, 146.150-156.
\textsuperscript{56} McMaster, \textit{Asylum Seekers}, 147; See also: Geoffrey Blainey, \textit{All for Australia}, 123-124.
\textsuperscript{57} Theorists who argue this include, Ghassan Hage, Ien Ang and John Stratton. See: Ghassan Hage, \textit{White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society} (Annandale: Pluto Press
Unease about Asian immigration in the 1980s was further exacerbated by increasing levels of immigration during that decade, during a period of rising unemployment. The 1980s was also a key decade for multicultural policy development in Australia, with Prime Minister Bob Hawke (who led the ALP federal government from 1983-1991), personally in favour of the policy. When Paul Keating took over as prime minister in 1991 the federal ALP became more explicitly focused on Asia. While the immigration intake initially decreased during the Keating government’s first term, the origins of immigrants ‘continued to be largely from nationalities which would have been excluded under White Australia’, and his government promoted the notion that Australia was ‘part of Asia’. What is important to note, however, is that even during the Keating era, Australian government responses to ‘boat people’ from Asia remained unwelcoming. The power to mandatorily detain all unauthorised non-citizens without a valid visa or entry permit was introduced by the governing ALP in 1992 in response to the arrival, in northern Australia, of asylum seekers from Cambodia by boat.

The Coalition government led by Howard inherited and continued this policy from 1996. Howard’s terms as prime minister were particularly marked by controversies over immigration and race. The politics of seeking asylum in Australia became most contentious in the lead up to the 2001 federal election, with the arrival

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58 Some theorists have argued that failure by politicians and bureaucrats to give Anglo-Celtic Australians space to mourn the loss of the primary position of their culture in Australian society was also a key driving force in opposition to multiculturalism. See: Miriam Dixon, The Imaginary Australian: Anglo-Celts and Identity – 1788 to the Present (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1999), 44; Katharine Betts, The Great Divide: Immigration Politics in Australia (Sydney: Dufy and Snellgrove, 1999), 4-5; The demographic profile of those most likely to hold such views is discussed in: Frank Jones, “The Sources and Limits of Popular Support for a Multicultural Australia,” in The Future of Australian Multiculturalism: Reflections on the Twentieth Anniversary of Jean Martin’s The Migrant Presence, ed. Ghassan Hage and Rowanne Couch (Sydney: The University of Sydney, The Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, 1999); Mark Lopez has argued that multiculturalism never had widespread support in Australia but was pushed as public policy by a small number of lobbyists. For a succinct overview of his argument see: Mark Lopez, “The Politics of the Origins of Multiculturalism: Lobbying and the Power of Influence,” People and Place 8, 1 (2000): 22-28.

59 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 47.
60 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 46.
61 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 50.
62 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 50.
63 McMaster, Asylum Seekers, 81.
of the *Tampa*, the ‘children overboard’ affair, and the subsequent ‘Pacific Solution’, which provided for the processing of asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea.\(^6^4\) These events, policies, and their critiques were instrumental in creating an atmosphere under which the arrival of asylum seekers and refugees was debated and perceived in Australia. Much of the debate drew on concepts pertinent to this thesis: in particular, the deployment of claims about race and nationalism, and their relation to ongoing narratives of invasion. These debates were also an important element of the political context in which asylum seekers and refugees from Burma found themselves when they arrived and resettled in Australia in increasing numbers from the early- to mid-1990s.

Peter Mares argued in his book, *Borderline: Australia’s Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers* (2001) that responses to asylum seekers during the Howard government era accorded with ‘deeply held, yet irrational’ fears of invasion, which were played upon by the government to engender a ‘mood of crisis around the issue of boat-arrivals and promoted an attitude of hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees’.\(^6^5\) Following Walker’s work in *Anxious Nation* (discussed in Chapter One), he highlighted the historical nature of these fears, and argued that:

> for much of our brief history we have been preoccupied with controlling our borders to prevent the entry of others. The White Australia policy is recent, not ancient history: its influence is still felt.\(^6^6\)

The response to the Howard government to asylum seekers in 2001 occurred in the context of larger debates about race and immigration that were sparked by the emergence of Pauline Hanson (and subsequently her One Nation Party) onto the national stage in 1996. Hanson’s policies, which included ‘halting immigration, especially from Asia because Asians “don’t assimilate and they form ghettos”, and the abolition of multiculturalism’,\(^6^7\) were extreme and xenophobic.\(^6^8\) Some credit

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\(^6^4\) For an overview of these events, see: David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, *Dark Victory* (Crow’s Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2003).


\(^6^6\) Mares, *Borderline*, 5, 27.

\(^6^7\) McMaster, *Asylum Seekers*, 153.

Howard, however, with creating the atmosphere under which Hanson and her policies could emerge and gather support to the extent that they did.\textsuperscript{69} Don McMaster saw Howard and Hanson as ‘one’ in ‘their need to retain the past and to isolate and exclude all those deemed different’.\textsuperscript{70} For McMaster, Howard’s silence, and thereby his tacit agreement with Hanson, fractured social cohesion and divided Australian society into a ‘them’ and ‘us’ binary divide,\textsuperscript{71} conditions under which the increasingly harsh policies developed by the government in relation to asylum seekers at the turn of the century were able to take firm hold.

The language used to describe asylum seekers by the Howard government has been the central focus of a number of critiques. Michael Leach argued that the government used systematic negative and dehumanising rhetoric (as well as tightly controlling media access to asylum seekers which may have acted to counteract their statements) to foster a national border ‘crisis’ about onshore asylum seekers who arrived in Australia by boat.\textsuperscript{72} The rhetorical placement of these asylum seekers as ‘other’ or ‘foreign’ to Australian values (of decency and of family) was used to justify the treatment they received under policies such as mandatory detention, the ‘Pacific Solution’, and temporary protection visas. For Leach, the government’s success at questioning the morality of detainees acted to negate criticism of such policies by flipping the issue in a way that positioned Australia as needing protection from asylum seekers.\textsuperscript{73} Peter Gale and Sharon Pickering also discussed the impact of binary and militaristic language on the positioning of asylum seekers during this period as ‘bad’, ‘illegal’, and ultimately ‘other’. They argued that the utilisation of militaristic rhetoric, and eventually the military, in responding to the arrival of asylum seekers via boat served to emphasise that they posed a ‘threat’ to national borders and national security. Gale found that these elements combined to ‘engender public support for the mandatory detention policy’.\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{70} McMaster, \textit{Asylum Seekers}, 154.

\textsuperscript{71} McMaster, \textit{Asylum Seekers}, 154-155.


\textsuperscript{73} Leach, “‘Disturbing Practices’,” 29.

\textsuperscript{74} Peter Gale, “The Refugee Crisis and Fear: Populist Politics and Media Discourse,” \textit{Journal of
Notions of race and national identity formations were central to Gale’s work. Utilising the work of Stuart Hall on Thatcher’s Britain as a foundation of his argument, Gale charted the shift from the 1970s to ‘new’ or ‘postmodern’ racism, where:

inherent ‘racial’ assumptions of inferiority and superiority within colonial discourse have given way to new and more subtle forms of racism founded on symbolic national boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within contemporary popular nationalism.  

He argued that, in this context, refugees and asylum seekers were constructed as the ‘alien other’ and a threat to the core values of the West and even democracy. In this way, government justifications of policy were framed around the claim that Australia was a ‘compassionate’ nation. By portraying asylum seekers as ‘illegal’, the government was able to argue they were undeserving of a ‘humanitarian response’, as ‘unworthy of being Australian and not the sort of people “we” want to come to this country’.  

In this context it is unsurprising that charges of ‘queue-jumping’ have historically been leveled at asylum seekers who arrive in Australia by boat. Australia’s humanitarian program is divided into offshore and onshore streams and since 1996, for every person granted a protection visa by applying for asylum after arriving in Australia (onshore), one less place is made available for those refugees who are directly resettled from overseas (offshore). Hence, the charge of ‘queue-jumping’ was given renewed vigor during the Howard government era. In the aftermath of the his government’s refusal to allow asylum seekers rescued by the Tampa to disembark in Australia, Howard was quoted as saying:

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75 Gale, “The Refugee Crisis and Fear,” 322.
76 Gale, “The Refugee Crisis and Fear,” 323.
We are opposed to a situation where people can force their way to the front of the queue, arrive illegally and having got to Australia, in effect push other people out of the way.\footnote{Kerry Taylor, “Australia Not Hard-Hearted, Says PM,” \textit{Age}, 1 September 2001, 5.}

Since 1988 the vast majority of people from Burma who have resettled in Australia have done so via the offshore humanitarian program (See Figure 10). Recently, refugees from Burma have been represented by Australian politicians as ‘deserving’ refugees whose places have been taken by ‘queue-jumping’ asylum seekers. The ALP government, led by Prime Minister Julia Gillard (2010-present), responded to increased arrivals of asylum seekers by boat in 2011 with a policy of returning to Malaysia 800 asylum seekers who arrived by boat for 4000 UNHCR registered refugees (known as the ‘Malaysian people swap’ deal)\footnote{Adam Gartrell, “FED: 13 Refugees Arrive from Malaysia,” \textit{AAP Australian National News Wire}, 11 August 2011. \textit{Newspaper Source Plus}, EBSCOhost [Accessed 24 January 2013]; see: Misha Schubert, “‘We Were so Happy We Danced With Our Children’,” \textit{Sunday Age}, 7 August 2011. Chin refugee in Malaysia, Kham Kap Thang Taitloul, quoted in this article, was also critical of those people who chose to use people smugglers to enter Australia. He stated: ‘This is not a good way because it makes other people wait longer for a chance with the UNHCR to find a chance to go to Australia’}. In defense of the policy Chris Bowen, Immigration Minister in the present ALP government, argued that Chin refugees in Malaysia were among the ‘forgotten people’ who had waited ‘patiently’ for a visa from Australia and should not be disadvantaged by those who chose to use people smugglers or other means to apply for protection in Australia via the onshore program. Bowen’s comments, the ultimately unsuccessful ‘Malaysia people swap’, and the recent reintroduction of the ‘Pacific Solution’\footnote{One of the recommendations of a government-appointed panel charged with proposing solution to increased arrivals of asylum seekers by boat, was the reintroduction of the processing of asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island. See: Michelle Grattan, Daniel Fitton, David Wroe and Jo Chandler, “PM’s Pacific Solution Mark II,” \textit{Age}, 14 August 2012, 1.} are typical of the entrenched nature of dichotomous and simplistic constructions of asylum seeker and refugees within Australian political discourse.

Significantly, people from Burma have also received permanent protection visas via Australia’s onshore humanitarian program. While some were caught up in the Howard government’s ‘Pacific Solution’, and therefore could be categorized as ‘boat people’, most arrived by plane on either legitimate or false passports and
visas. Some of these people had their claims for protection denied by the Department of Immigration, and applied for a review of the decision through the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) of Australia. The following section explores some of their stories in more detail. In doing so, it complicates and problematises the dichotomy constructed in Australia between ‘undeserving’, ‘illegal’, queue-jumping ‘boat people’, and ‘deserving’, ‘legal’ and patient refugees.

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Figure 10: Entrants from Burma by Migration Stream between 1991 and 2011
Source: Department of Immigration and Citizenship Settlement Reporting Facility
Well-Founded Fears: Fleeing the Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism in Burma

Cases before the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) of Australia have proved a valuable source for understanding flight from Burma. While the quote which begins this chapter is a story of persecution and resistance told to me by a participant in this study, I emphasized that none of my interviewees had to share this part of their story with me. This project was specifically designed so that interviews would focus on the resettlement experience to prevent the risk of retraumatising my participants by asking them to recount the persecution that caused them to flee Burma. I decided that, without a partnership with a counselling service or the financial resources to pay for counselling, it would be unethical to expect the people interviewed for this project to share their experiences in Burma. Very few did. It was therefore necessary to find an alternative window into the experiences in Burma of refugees who have resettled in Australia over the past two decades.

Internationally, there are only a small number of published oral history collections that focus on migrants from Burma, and none explicitly focus on the stories of people who have resettled in Australia.87 I have therefore drawn on case files from the RRT, who are required under the Migration Act (1958) to publish decisions that are considered to be of ‘particular interest’ (subject to certain restrictions).88 They offer a rich and fascinating insight into the reasons why people have chosen to leave Burma and seek protection in Australia since 1988. They are limited in that they tell only the stories of people who have sought protection onshore. However the journey to permanent protection is not always linear or straightforward.

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88 These are published online by the Australian Legal Information Institute (ALII) and are considered to be of ‘particular interest’ if decisions are representative of a range of decisions across visa classes, claims, countries and outcomes; or if particularly complex, unusual, relevant to policy or having precedential value. See both the RRT and ALII websites: http://www.mrt-rrt.gov.au/Decisions.aspx and http://www.austlii.edu.au/cases/cth/RRTA/.
While none of the people whose experiences are discussed below arrived in Australia on humanitarian visas after seeking protection via the UNHCR overseas (like most of the participants in this study), many of them had also escaped to, and lived in, second and third countries for varying periods of time prior to arriving in Australia. Some arrived on legitimate visas, and some on false or fraudulently obtained passports and visas. While a small number of Rohingya asylum seekers from Burma were caught up in the Howard government’s ‘Pacific Solution’, the people whose stories are discussed in this section all arrived by plane and therefore their experiences are largely hidden from public view and debate. Most Burmese asylum seekers have not been ‘boat people’, and the tribunal case files offer a complex picture of the myriad pathways that asylum seekers take in the search for permanent protection. They also expose a little discussed aspect of asylum seeking in Australia, one often eclipsed by the political and media focus on ‘boat people’.

The backgrounds and stories of persecution of the people who have applied for asylum since arriving in Australia are diverse. They include people from the Burman majority ethnic group as well as a range of ethnic minority backgrounds; people who have sought protection for political, religious, ethnic and gender based persecution; and people whose basis for protection was through no action or political stance they took, but rather harassment and persecution suffered because close family members were involved in politics either in Burma or in Australia, where the activities of Burmese nationals are closely monitored by the regime. The following section focuses on a select few of these stories, taken from a group of one hundred cases that were selected in an ad hoc way from the database on the RRT website – they were in fact the first one hundred cases listed after using the search term ‘Burma’. The cases ranged in date from 1994 to 2012 and approximately half involved positive outcomes for the applicants. Any cases where the Tribunal member took issues with the applicant’s credibility were discounted to prevent discussion of false stories or experiences. While debates have occurred about the RRT’s processes for, and record on, judging credibility, these concerns are outside the scope of this


90 Guy Coffey has argued that the RRT does not adequately acknowledge the variable quality of
thesis. For a historian, this archive primarily illuminates stories of persecution and pathways to protection. Those discussed below also illustrate the continued salience of the politics of nationalism and ethnicity in Burma, and the impact they have on individuals – both those seeking increased political and cultural autonomy and those just trying to live with a measure of safety.

Both the people who gain refugee status through the UNHCR in one of the nations bordering Burma, and the people who claim protection after arriving by other means in Australia, must prove entitlement to refugee status by demonstrating persecution on ‘Convention grounds’. These grounds are defined by the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which states that a refugee is a person who:

[O]wing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.\textsuperscript{91}

The RRT considers whether the persecution feared by an applicant for refugee status involves ‘serious harm’ such as ‘a threat to life or liberty, significant physical harassment or ill-treatment, or significant economic hardship or denial of access to basic services or denial of capacity to earn a livelihood, where such hardship or denial threatens the applicant’s capacity to subsist’. The ‘persecution may be directed against the person as an individual or as a member of a group,’ and, ‘must have an official quality, in the sense that it is official, or officially tolerated or uncontrollable by the authorities of the country of nationality.’\textsuperscript{92}

The persecution faced by the people


\textsuperscript{92} Most RRT case files include this summary prior to relating the details of the case. See for example: Irene Tsiakas, Case Reference Number 060425408, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 11 September 2006. Available online: http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-
who have applied for protection in Australia has resulted in ‘serious harm’ across the spectrum outlined above. None of those whose stories are canvassed here are high-profile political or ethnic minority activists. What follows are the stories of ordinary people from Burma, who, through seemingly small-scale political expression or through their ethnic or religious background, have faced persecution at the hands of Burma’s military regime.

Persecution of pro-democracy activists and their families

The first story is that of a Burman Christian man who was in his final year of high school when widespread protests occurred in Burma in 1988. He ‘did not have a sophisticated understanding of politics but was very angry at the actions of the military’ taken against the student demonstrators. He became a student leader at his school and on the day of the coup – 18 September 1988 – he and his fellow student activists were briefly in possession of guns that were later used by ex-military protestors against the military. Fearing reprisals from the military they left their school and dispersed. The applicant did not return home, hiding from the authorities at a relative’s house. Before long afterwards, however, he was arrested, blindfolded and driven to a building where he was put into a cell alone. The next day he was beaten and interrogated, specifically about the whereabouts of the guns and whether he was connected with the Communist Party of Burma. After several weeks of such treatment he was again transferred, this time to a prison camp where he was forced to do manual labour, despite never being ‘informed of any charges against him, nor of a sentence’. The conditions were harsh and cold. He had no warm clothes and was given only a ‘gunny bag to use as a blanket’. If he did not meet his labour targets on any given day he was beaten. He was held in these conditions for a ‘few years’ until he was suddenly released with no explanation, after being forced to sign an undertaking not to be involved in political activity again.

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For the most part he kept this promise. He would speak quietly about politics with other students in privately run tuition courses (the authorities did not give him permission to return to study on campus), and with colleagues after he went to work in a relative’s business. While he was forced to report his business trips out of Rangoon to the police, and was therefore ‘monitored to some extent’, he went largely unnoticed by the authorities until 1996. That year the SLORC increased the pressure on the NLD, arresting hundreds of members in May and again in September. Confrontations between students, NLD supporters and police and USDA members ramped up in the following months. During December, large student demonstrations and mass arrests occurred.\(^95\) In May, the Applicant was approached by some former colleagues and asked to assist with organizing a demonstration. He declined, not wanting to take the risk after being in prison, but he did speak with other students and encouraged them to join the anti-government protests. Later that year he approached the campus in an attempt to join a protest but was turned back at a military checkpoint and he went back to work. That night the SLORC, some police and Military Intelligence officers searched his house, blindfolded him and took him away for questioning. He was again asked about his activities in 1988. He was released but his parents were concerned that he could be arrested and tortured again and made arrangements with a distant relative in Australia to provide him with a sponsorship letter for a visa. Some time after arriving in Australia he received a letter from his wife, sent via a second country to avoid interception, informing him that the local authorities had searched for him at their house not long after he left.\(^96\) The Tribunal found that by the time of his departure from Burma he had become a “usual suspect”, likely to be detained arbitrarily whenever there was an outbreak of violence’ and ‘had a well-founded fear of persecutory treatment at the time he left Burma.’\(^97\)


The arbitrary arrest suffered by this man and years of long detention in a forced labour camp constituted an unusual and extreme example of the persecution found within the range of stories in the RRT files. His experience illustrates, however, the willingness of the regime to severely and arbitrarily punish people who played small roles in the 1988 protests. His story also highlights the protracted nature of the situation in Burma and the pervasive nature of the regime’s surveillance of people with pro-democracy leanings. Although Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD won a landslide victory in the 1990 elections, the SLORC never allowed the elected parliament to convene. Instead, the regime postponed the sitting of parliament until a new constitution was drawn up under a process they labelled the National Convention. The pro-democracy protests of 1988 and ongoing conflict with ethnic nationalist groups contributed to justifications by the SLORC and subsequently the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) for the prolonged suspension of the National Convention and democracy transition process, by feeding into the military’s self-image ‘as the guardian of the state, which steps in at times of crisis to put the country back on track.’ The man’s story, discussed above, has highlighted the harassment and persecution by the regime of NLD members and their supporters, which left it little space or power to advocate for change. Arguing against the legitimacy of the process, the NLD pulled out of the National Convention in 1996. The entire process was subsequently postponed by the regime and not reconvened until 2004. In the intervening years, the NLD suffered a death by a thousand cuts. Elected parliamentarians and party members have been harassed and had their political activities severely curtailed, with significant numbers jailed for prolonged periods or living in exile. Aung San Suu Kyi (now freed) herself was under house arrest for a total of fifteen years at various times from 1989. In post-1988 Burma, ‘[o]pposition is interpreted as tantamount to “treason”’ and, as the American

September 2012].
academic Mary Callahan has written, ‘there is little or no space for opposition politics to function’. 102

Individuals who participated in the 1988 protests at minimal levels, and in a benign fashion, also continued to suffer harassment for many years afterwards. Many also suffered arbitrary detention and torture, but for shorter durations in time than prominent NLD members or the man whose story has already been discussed. A Burman, Christian man who was in his twenties when he arrived in Australia in late 1995, 103 began his involvement in student demonstrations in June 1988. He was angry about the violent police response to student demonstrations earlier that year but also about the currency devaluations introduced by the government. He told the Tribunal that ‘the government claimed the action to be on account of there being counterfeit money but the people “knew” that it was just another means of reducing the standard of living and keeping the people oppressed.’ 104 During the ‘largely peaceful’ demonstrations between June and August he assisted by organizing marches and collecting food from residents who supported the students. He was arrested and detained in October 1988 but while he was released the next day, he was placed under surveillance from that point, his father lost his government job and his own access to further education was denied.

In late 1992 he began an unofficial small-scale tour and travel business from his home. When requested, he would take tourists to Aung San Suu Kyi’s home and stop to allow them to take photographs. He did this to express, in a small way, his continued solidarity with the pro-democracy movement. In late 1994 police visited him at home during the night, questioned him about his contact with foreigners and accused him of passing information out of the country. He was officially warned by the police in the first half of 1995 not to continue his business and he became frightened – a friend who was jailed in 1992 for a similar offence had not been seen again. He paid a bribe to gain a passport and obtained a visitor visa to Australia to visit a cousin who already lived there. The Tribunal found that ‘after 1988 the

103 His maternal grandfather was English and hence his mother was Christian. While she may, or may have in the past, referred to herself as Anglo-Burmese, this man did not identify as such in his application to the RRT.
Applicant did not alter his political opinion but, through fear of persecution, did not express it as he did that year. In the Tribunal’s view, ‘there is a chance, which cannot be dismissed as a remote chance, that the Applicant would in the reasonably foreseeable future after he returned to Burma, again experience mistreatment amounting to persecution’.

The fight for democracy has been a long and slow process in Burma. New generations of people have grown up post-1988, too young to be involved in those events, but committed to contributing to political reform. Like the 1990s, the past decade has been characterized by periods of widespread public protest against the regime followed by increased surveillance and detention of those considered to hold anti-regime views. A build up of tension in pro-democracy politics occurred with the release and then re-arrest and detention of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2002 and 2003. Social activism and political activities in the middle of that decade also increased following the release of a number of 1988 pro-democracy student leaders in 2004. This growing tension in Burma erupted in 2007 in what has become known as the Saffron Revolution. Like the uprising in 1988, this monk-led movement was nominally triggered by a sudden and massive hike in the cost of fuel, but was, as Trevor Wilson and Monique Skidmore have argued, ultimately a reflection of ‘longstanding, pent-up frustration on the part of the people with what they generally saw as the hopeless situation in their country and the reckless economic mismanagement of the military’. The uprising was again suppressed, and the regime was not deterred from continuing with the National Convention Process: it held a referendum on a new national constitution in 2008 as scheduled, despite only

being weeks after Cyclone Nargis caused widespread devastation in Burma. The NLD was banned from participating in national elections subsequently held in 2010, the results of which were largely discredited by regime critics and international Burma commentators. Aung San Suu Kyi remained under house arrest until six days after the election. Throughout this period, the regime had continued to keep its critics under surveillance and harass and detain them, as the following stories will show.

Those people involved in more recent waves of pro-democracy politics in Burma, whose stories are contained in the tribunal case files, were often characterized by a relatively high level of international mobility, accessing education and employment in a range of countries, including Australia. For example, a young Karen, Christian man who applied for a protection visa in 2010, first arrived in Australia on a student visa in 2007 to study a business related course. It was not his first time studying overseas, since he had studied media courses in two separate countries in the early and mid-2000s. Growing up in Burma he witnessed his father being forced out of his job due to his ethnic and religious minority status. And so, as he stated in his application for protection, ‘since my childhood it was stuck in my head that I hate the junta government Myanmar because of its discrimination to ethnic minorities and Christian [sic].’ During his first stint studying overseas he met Mr. A, a student leader from the 1988 protest movement in Burma, who was working as an underground political publisher and blogger in that country. He introduced him to a political discussion group and encouraged him to work as an ‘undercover reporter’ for them upon his return to Burma. In 2005, after witnessing and

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112 Designated name for this person in the RRT file.

providing reports on a series of bombings, he was taken in by authorities and questioned for two days about his work before a relative paid a bribe to obtain his release.\(^{114}\)

Fearing further reprisals, he left for a second country, where his father was already living and working, to undertake further study. Worried about his son’s mental health and his political involvement, his father encouraged him to stop his involvement in politics and media and undertake business studies in Australia. Leaving behind his commitment to political activism proved to be impossible. As he stated, ‘people personality and habit cannot remove at all, I went back to Myanmar in October 2006 and I had connected and had contact back with [Mr. B (the owner of media company he previously worked for)] and other mate and talked about Myanmar politic and current issues’.\(^{115}\) From Australia in 2007 he provided Mr. B with his views on the Saffron Revolution, and narrated a political documentary for him on a trip back to Burma in 2009 to visit his sick grandmother. In 2010, however, he received word from his father that Mr. B had been arrested, that their house had been searched by police, his personal belongings were taken, and an arrest warrant had been issued on the grounds he was working within an underground media organization.\(^{116}\) His family told him not to return to Burma and not to contact them so they could avoid ‘big trouble with junta’. For this young man, the prospect of elections in 2010 did not represent hope for change:

In Myanmar, the politic is becoming very complicated and there will be no guarantee for me to protect from putting into jail or punish because I already had record on political opinion contributor and working with the underground politic media era. I am strongly believed of when the USDP (Union of Solidarity and Development Party) will be taken the power after calling parliament as they had recently won from the fake election, they will defiantly seize the people who had been distributed and argued with their activities.\(^{117}\)


The Tribunal ultimately agreed. After taking into account ‘the country information regarding recent political changes in Myanmar’, the Tribunal accepted that ‘a significant process of liberalisation is underway’. However, it gave:

more weight to the fact that most reports indicated that these changes are at an incipient stage and remain to be entrenched in the system. … [T]he Tribunal also accepts the country information which indicates that certain patterns of ‘gross and systemic violations of human rights’ still exist in Myanmar, including in relation to ethnic minority groups such as the Karen.

The above case highlights the high levels of mobility of some asylum applicants, as well as the international web of connections between activists advocating for increased democracy in Burma. There are also a range of cases in the RRT files where it is clear that exposure to different and more liberal societies outside of Burma first sparked and drove their subsequent increased political engagement and activity. For one young Burman man who was granted protection in 2001, it was his time spent studying in Australia in the 1990s that pushed him to become politically active: ‘Friends in Australia told him about the way things were here, and about basic human rights, all of which he had been denied back home.’118 Engaging in political activity in Australia, both before and after applying for protection, was a common feature across a number of files, and was either a contributing or sole factor in the decision to grant a protection visa. In each case it was necessary for the Tribunal to decide whether or not that activity was undertaken for genuinely held political views, or in order to strengthen an application for asylum. In doing so, it often highlighted the ‘pervasive security apparatus’ of the Burmese authorities, ‘which intrudes generally on all forms of civilian life and that this extends to activity in Australia’. In a separate file of a man who was granted protection in 2001 on the basis of his own political activity in Burma and Australia, but also harassment resulting from the political activity of a relative, the Tribunal member stated:


There is credible evidence from DFAT which I accept as fact, that the Burmese authorities monitor and record political activists in Australia. The evidence (Miranda 1997) that the Burmese authorities have ‘spies’ entering Australia clearly suggests a capacity to identify protesters by name, and to have this information passed to the Embassy. This is supported by the applicant’s evidence that he suffered repercussions when relative A came to Australia.¹¹⁹

The member also highlighted in deciding on this case that: ‘Australia is a country known to have an active dissident community of Burmese nationals, and this fact may serve to fuel suspicions about his activities outside Burma.’¹²⁰

Concern about potential reprisal by Burmese authorities for political activism undertaken in Australia was not contained to those who sought asylum in the 1990s and early 2000s. The case of a young Burman woman who applied for, and received, protection in 2008, is an excellent example. One of her grandparents was an active student protester and a prominent member of the NLD. She was, however, not politically active as a young person living in Burma. She stated that:

I support the NLD and I believe in democracy. I believe that Aung San Suu Kyi should rule Burma and I desperately hope that one day there will be peace in Burma. I was not politically active in Burma myself however, on account of the fact that I was too young when living there to be very politically active, and also on account of the fact that I knew what happened to people who protest given the persecution Grandparent A suffered throughout his/her life.

Her parents wanted her to achieve a good education and arranged for her to come to Australia to study. When her family ran into financial difficulties and could no longer pay her tuition, she wanted to return to Burma but could not even afford an airfare. In 2007, while she was working and saving money for her flight, the Saffron Revolution broke out and it prompted her, for the first time, to publicly express her opposition to the military regime in Burma. She stated:

On or about 18 September 2007 I was horrified to learn that there was a huge uprising in Burma that attracted world wide condemnation. … I felt very personally effected by what was happening in Burma and


wanted to do something about it now the world was finally paying attention to the situation there. I attended a candlelight prayer session to support the monks in Burma. I made a sign saying ‘we want peace in Burma’ and took it along to the meeting. I attended with friends. Later that month I attended a protest where we marched in city B demanding democracy in Burma.  

Despite her involvement in these protests, she still planned to return to Burma, until a friend informed her that a photo of her attending the protest in Australia and holding a placard supporting the NLD was on a website that linked protests about Burma all over the world. She told her mother who became scared and upset. Her mother told her that a neighbour’s son, who protested while studying in the UK, had been arrested upon his return to Burma. She urged her daughter to stay in Australia:

My mother explained that the situation in Burma was not good and that the authorities were arresting anyone on mere suspicion of being against the government. This was confirmed for me by my own understanding of what was happening in my country through reading media reports here in Australia, and my knowledge of the oppressive Burmese regime. I was also very scared that if the authorities discovered who my relative was that they might take an extra interest in me and my activities in Australia. Instead of taking my scheduled flight home, [I] decided I could not return to Burma.

Another group of applicants for protection in Australia were people who were not politically active in anti-government movements, but were harassed by the authorities as a result of the political work of their relatives. A key example is that of a widow who arrived in Australia in March 2010. She had three daughters already living in Australia (having received protection visas in the past), and two children living in refugee camps in Thailand. She and her husband participated in 1988 by providing protesters with food, drinks and money. Many of her children, however, were actively involved in the protests as students. In a statement provided with her application she recalled:

In October 1988, officers from the Military Intelligence Services (MIS) raided our home, questioned us about the part played by us in the


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demonstrations and blindfolded 3 of my children and took them away. They were tortured by the authorities and my husband and I were trying desperately to find out where the authorities had taken them but to no avail. Finally after nearly 8 months of frantic search we managed to find out their whereabouts. … We paid huge sums of money to the authorities at both places to visit our children … We also had to pay the guards to be compassionate to our children … Our children were eventually released about 3 years later in 1991 and despite their torture and imprisonment, they continued to actively participate in pro-democracy activities.\textsuperscript{123}

Two of her children eventually fled to Thailand; however two of her other daughters were ill, and despite being harassed by the authorities, she remained in Burma to care for them. The family had to relocate several times due ‘to the persistent visits from the security officers, threatening and harassing us and taking money from us’.\textsuperscript{124} She explained that her neighbours would inform the police of her whereabouts and the police would come around:

> checking to see if we heard from my children (who left Myanmar) … They threatened to take me away for questioning and each time I had to beg them as I was looking after a very sick daughter. They only left the house with a bribe.\textsuperscript{125}

Her daughter passed away in January 2010 and there were no longer any members of her family living in Burma. Two of her three daughters living in Australia returned to Burma for the funeral and assisted her to collect documents to support her visa application. When applying for protection in Australia she stated:

> My family and I are terrified of what would happen to me if I were to return to Myanmar. I am very certain that they will lock me away and at the age of [age] I am unable to bear any further stress which could be detrimental to me.\textsuperscript{126}

In accepting her claim for protection, the Tribunal found that:

The security forces in Burma do not tolerate dissent and political activists are commonly subjected to serious violations of core human rights including arbitrary arrest and torture. The Tribunal finds that the applicant is at risk of extortion, interrogation, arbitrary detention and torture by the authorities in Burma because she has been, and will continue to be, implicated in her children’s political activities against the government of Burma. The Tribunal finds the Burmese government does not respect the elderly and is prepared to imprison, for reasons relating to their political opinion, people who are even older than the applicant.  

Not all cases for protection based on ‘imputed political opinion’ had their origins in the widespread uprisings of 1988. One man received protection in 2010 because of political activities undertaken by his son, beginning in 2007. He originally left Burma in 1994, working in Singapore as a CNC machinist up until 2005. In 2005 he came to Australia on a 457 visa, working here as a CNC machinist until December 2009. He told the Tribunal about his limited involvement in politics in Burma in the past: like many Burmese he was involved in the 1988 uprisings, was arrested, detained for a week and endured torture during interrogation. He vowed, however, ‘not to have any political involvement in the future. … [H]is son had been born two months later and he had had to look after his family.’ Subsequently, he was able to return to Burma to visit his wife and son every two or three years while living in Singapore, and every year while living in Australia. It was not until his son became involved in the “‘Young Blood Generation Campaign”, also known as “Generation Wave”,’ while studying to be a doctor in 2007, that he became concerned about his own and his family’s safety. When he visited Burma in 2007 he

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128 The subclass 457 visa is for skilled workers who have been sponsored and nominated to fill a position listed in the Consolidated Skills Occupation List provided by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The percentage of Burmese citizens entering Australia on 457 visas is very small. Between 2008-2009 and 2011-2012 visas granted have fluctuated between 100 and 160 per year (with 125,070 issued overall in 2011-2012). See: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “Country Profile – Burma (Myanmar),” (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2012). Available online: http://immi.gov.au/media/statistics/country-profile/-pdf/burma.pdf [Accessed 22 January 2013].

warned his son not to get involved, however his son continued circulating anti-
referendum pamphlets in 2008 and gave information to Radio Free Asia and the
Democratic Voice of Burma (Norway) to raise international awareness.

His son was arrested in November 2009, his family’s home was searched, and
later that month his wife was also taken to the police station for questioning. He last
spoke with his wife in December 2009 when ‘she told him that the house was under
surveillance and that she was going to go away as she was scared. He said that this
was the last he had heard of her and he had no way of contacting her as all their
relatives lived in villages.’\(^{130}\) His son was sentenced to six years in prison in February
2010. This man had not been politically active since 1988 but, given his son’s
involvement in politics, he feared that ‘if he returned to Burma he would be
questioned and they would think he was a political dissident. He said that he believed
that he would be arrested at the airport.’\(^{131}\) Ultimately, the Tribunal agreed that there
was ‘a real chance that the applicant will be arrested, tortured and imprisoned for
reasons of his real or imputed political opinion opposed to the current regime in
Burma if he returns to that country now or in the reasonably foreseeable future.’\(^{132}\)

Political involvement, ethnicity and religion were often jointly responsible for
the conditions and treatment that led people to seek protection in Australia. It was
rare that only one facet of a person’s circumstances was solely responsible for the
decision to afford them protection. Take, for instance, a Rohingya man, married with
nine children, who has suffered persecution by the regime as a result of his ethnicity
and religion but also due to his participation in mainstream pro-democracy politics in
Burma. He was arbitrarily detained by the regime in the 1970s during general military
campaigns of harassment against the Rohingya that occurred at that time. The
authorities attempted to arrest him again in 1991 during a crackdown on Rohingya
but he was able to hide. It was then that he decided to use a broker to arrange a move

\(^{130}\) Giles Short, Case Reference Number 1002195, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 5 November

\(^{131}\) Giles Short, Case Reference Number 1002195, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 5 November

\(^{132}\) Giles Short, Case Reference Number 1002195, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 5 November
to Rangoon for him and his family where they continue to live. This move was necessary because internal migration for Rohingya is illegal in Burma. He was not involved in pro-democracy politics until he participated in the 2007 Saffron Revolution protests after which he was again able to avoid arrest. He then actively campaigned for a boycott of the national election in 2010 believing it would ‘entrench military rule with civilian faces and ignored the needs of the Rohingya community’. Considering himself at risk of arrest, he went into hiding and arranged a safe and secret exit from Burma. His case shows that people in Burma from ethnic or religious minority backgrounds contribute to the pro-democracy movement in Burma and have faced persecution as a result. They are also, however, subject to a range of additional oppressive measures taken by the regime directed at people specifically because of their ethnic or religious background. As the following group of case studies will show, like those who have received protection on political grounds, no level of involvement in ethnic nationality politics protects individuals from reprisals from the regime.

Persecution on the basis of ethnicity

Ethnic nationalist politics have a long and continuous history in post-independence Burma. Some groups have been in a state of constant armed insurgency against successive Burmese governments since 1949. Ethnic minorities make up roughly a third of Burma’s population and inhabit half the land area, and as such are ‘an integral part of the country’s complex social and ethnic mosaic’. Ethnic nationalist groups operating in, and controlling large areas of Burma’s border with Thailand for many years, are the third element of the ongoing struggle for peace and democracy in Burma, a fact recognized by the United Nations when it first called for tri-partite talks to resolve the political stalemate in 1994. Ethnic minority groups tend to see both

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the military and the NLD as Burman-majority or Burman-based groups, and as Christina Fink asserted, have been fighting what they have seen as ‘the central government’s lack of investment in their states, along with increasing centralization and Burmanisation’. Since 1988 especially, they have attempted to carve out their own space within any national dialogue for democratic change, unwilling to let the NLD or other Burman-dominated pro-democracy groups speak for them. Nineteen ethnic nationalist political parties won the second biggest block of seats after the NLD in the 1990 elections, most under the banner of the United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD), and more recently, organizations such as the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) have emerged to play prominent roles in Burma’s political negotiations. Most of these groups advocate for a democratic Burma with a federalist structure, where much of the everyday workings of government would be decentralized, as opposed to outright succession.

Unlike the NLD, many of the ethnic nationalist groups were willing to enter into talks with the military regime, negotiating a series of ceasefire agreements from 1989 to 1996. They were therefore allowed to nominally participate in the National Convention process when it resumed in 2004, and many did. However the process was tightly controlled by the regime, and proposals from these groups were rarely seriously considered. Some groups, such as the Karen National Union, have remained ‘outside the fold’, continuing their armed struggle in light of the regime’s refusal to make any political concessions to regional or ethnic autonomy. In her excellent study into the militarization of Burma’s ethnic states, Christina Fink has argued that ceasefire agreements actually increased the presence of the Burmese military, or tatmadaw, in the ethnic states, even in areas where there was never any significant fighting. ‘In many cases’, she stated, ‘economic interests are driving this

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139 Lian H. Sakhong, an important Chin national leader, offers an overview of ethnic nationality politics in Burma post-1988, including the roles and policies of the UNLD and ENC. See: Sakhong, In Defence of Identity. Most relevant is Part Two: Searching for a Political Solution, 65-188.
140 Fink, “Militarization in Burma’s Ethnic States,” 448.
141 Fink, “Militarization in Burma’s Ethnic States,” 448-449.
142 Fink, “Militarization in Burma’s Ethnic States,” 448.
143 Fink, “Militarization in Burma’s Ethnic States,” 447.
process as the military seeks to secure control over natural resources.'  

‘Developmental Legitimacy’ was a key plank of the military’s justification for continued control post-1988. As Taylor has argued, ‘Having failed to achieve through the ballot box legitimacy for a new political order which would allow for the continuation of military dominance, the SLORC sought to achieve a degree of support and institutional security through economic development.’ Infrastructure projects, such as the building of roads, may have some benefits for the local ethnic minority populations. On the other hand, ‘the increased presence of tatmadaw soldiers throughout the ethnic states has exposed more civilians to human security threats, such as forced labour, extortion, sexual violence, and forced relocation.’ This litany of abuses supports the long-held contention of many ethnic minority community leaders, ‘that Burma’s minority peoples have always paid the highest price for the political volatility in the country at large.’ The stories explored in this section illustrate the range of ways that people from Burma with ethnic and religious minority backgrounds have been mistreated by the military regime. The tribunal cases include people who have never been involved in ethnic nationality politics or movements, and those that have faced persecution primarily on the basis of their political work for key ethnic minority rights organizations.

Two Karen Christian siblings who were awarded protection in 2006, were caught up in ethnic nationalist politics not through choice but as a result of a combination of their ethnic and religious background, geography and circumstance. The RRT found they were refugees owed protection on the ‘cumulative grounds of their race, their religion, their imputed political opinion and their membership of a particular social group of surrendered KNU’ They told the tribunal that fighting between the KNU and the Burmese army in their area forced their family to move in the late 1980s. Their parents were employed in a religious capacity, and in 1988 many people fleeing the protests in Rangoon stayed with their family in their compound.

144 Fink, “Militarization in Burma’s Ethnic States,” 447.
146 Fink, “Militarization in Burma’s Ethnic States,” 447.
Others came from KNU occupied areas to stay, and as a result their ‘parents were questioned and interrogated by the military intelligence many times.’ Eventually their parents ‘sensed that it was no longer safe to remain in Burma’ and so the family ran away to a village in a KNU occupied area.¹⁴⁹

Their story also highlights that factional fighting between ethnic minority groups has also had detrimental impacts on the lives of ordinary people from Burma at different points in its history. For example, in the mid-1990s the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) broke away from the KNU, aligned with the Burmese military and attacked the village to which the siblings and their family had moved, causing them to flee into the jungles of Thailand. They were concerned about being in Thailand illegally and about being forcibly returned to Burma, so they eventually accepted repatriation. For a time they lived in what was modelled a ‘peace village’, where they were placed under close surveillance by the authorities. The Burmese government registered them as ‘KNU surrendered people’, placing this designation on their identity cards, which impacted on their ability to gain employment. Their education had been obtained in Karen religious schools on the border with Thailand and therefore went unrecognised by the government, making employment additionally hard to obtain. Their ability to worship as Christians was also severely curtailed. Again, circumstances forced the family to move, but they continued to be watched and their home raided. Family members were interrogated and they constantly feared arrest. The family seriously considered leaving Burma again for a refugee camp in Thailand, but did not do so. Eventually, the family used old identity cards that did not contain the KNU designation to obtain passports for the siblings and they left for Australia where another sibling was already a citizen.¹⁵⁰

The case of a Shan woman who received asylum in Australia in 2003 illustrates that the pervasive human rights abuses that occur in Burma’s outlying ethnic states also has a gendered dimension. In her testimony to the tribunal she explained that the Burmese army had ‘ruthless control in our area’. One night she was


taken from her home by some army officers, despite pleas from her relatives to leave her alone. She stated: ‘I was taken to an army camp. I was raped and sexually abused sexually [sic] at this camp numerous times.’ A woman also at the army camp (who possibly worked for the military) assisted her to leave but instead of being taken home she was placed in a truck and informed she would be sent to Thailand. In Thailand she was ‘forced to work as a prostitute’. As she explained: ‘My Boss (a man known only to me as Boss) told me that I had to work to pay debts to the woman who took me from the army camp.’ In explaining its decision to uphold her application for a protection visa, the tribunal argued that ‘It is well recognized that the Burmese military have systematically raped ethnic Shan women and girls. And that the Burmese military is also at least indirectly involved in the procurement and trafficking of women into prostitution in Thailand and other neighbouring countries.’ Such tactics were thoroughly documented by a key human rights organization, the Shan Human Rights Foundation, which argued that there is evidence that Burma’s regime ‘continues to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity in Shan state’.

While this woman was eventually able to leave the situation in Thailand in which she was forced to perform sex work, she was scared to return to Burma, fearing she would be captured by the military once again. Her subsequent experiences show the transient and insecure position of many people from Burma seeking refuge in neighbouring countries such as Thailand. As she explained to the tribunal:

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155 The tribunal argued that, ‘The ruling SPDC not only fails to take responsibility for migrants, it
After I left the house I … changed jobs regularly sometimes working in [hospitality] or [occupation]. I was also unlawful in Thailand I was often on the move and it was difficult. On one occasion I was deported by the Thai authorities and I was taken to the boarder [sic]. After [duration] I re-entered Thailand because I did not know where to go or how to get home. I was scared that I would be taken again by the army.156

Many Rohingya people in Burma also face generalized persecution as a result of their ethnic background, divorced from any political opinion or activism. Burma’s restrictive citizenship laws play a large part in the discrimination experienced by members of this ethnic group. Despite having a history of living in Burma since the eighth century, Burmese citizenship laws do not class the Rohingya as one of the national races. Those whose ancestors migrated to and settled in the Arakan region of Burma during the colonial era (after the first stage of British annexation in 1823) are directly excluded from citizenship. For others, the burden of proving pre-colonial lineage is ‘onerous’, ensuring that only a small number of Rohingya have been able to claim Burmese citizenship and its associated rights and freedoms. The vast majority has formal legal status as ‘resident foreigners’, which restricts their freedom of movement, access to education and government employment.157 The introduction of identity cards by the Burmese government in 1989, which lists ethnicity, religion and citizenship status, has compounded the difficulties faced by Rohingya in Burma by making it much more difficult to circumvent government surveillance and control of their lives.158 Like other ethnic minority groups in Burma that live in Burma’s

outlying ethnic states, the Rohingya are also subjected to human rights abuses perpetrated by the military, including ‘killings, beatings, torture, forced labour, forced relocations and rapes of ethnic groups by government soldiers.’ Take, for example, a Rohingya man who came to Australia in 2007, having fled Burma to Bangladesh a year earlier after being subjected to forced labour by the Burmese army. In his case file his story is summarised as follows:

He stated that on three occasions he was beaten and otherwise mistreated by the soldiers. He claimed that on the last occasion he was beaten to such an extent that the soldiers thought he was dead. He claimed that they abandoned him at the place where they were working and when he regained consciousness he was able to make his way back to his village. … He claimed that his family arranged for him to flee to Bangladesh [in] October 2006, because they feared that he would be subjected to further harassment from the military.

Many people whose applications for protection visas were reviewed by the RRT had engaged in political activity in Burma that was explicitly centered on ethnic national rights. A Kachin Christian man who arrived in Australia with his wife and children in 2009 told the tribunal that he suffered discrimination as a child because of his ethnicity and religion. He played a small part in the 1988 protests but lived a ‘quiet life’ until he became involved with the Kachin National Organisation (KNO) in 2000. He had previously resisted becoming involved with the more militant Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), ‘because I was interested in promoting political change to improve the rights of Kachin people within a democratic system. I was not supportive of an armed struggle.’ His desire to participate was fuelled by the stories

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told by KNO representatives at a church gathering of abuses suffered by Kachin
people on the border of Shan state, which resonated with his experience of being
forced by the military to porter for three to six days on a visit to his family in that
area.\textsuperscript{162}

In 2003, despite not yet undertaking any work for the KNO, he was arrested,
detained and beaten by the police. He sustained a permanent back injury that
prevented him working. After this, his house was routinely searched and he was
asked to pay bribes to avoid arrest. In 2006 he followed his brother to Malaysia where
he connected with KNO representatives in Kuala Lumpur and was encouraged to
promote the KNO in Burma on his periodic trips back to visit his family. He did so,
distributing printed material about the KNO and travelling to various parts of Burma
to participate in protests ‘condemning forced labour and torture’ and supporting
‘freedom of religious observation.’\textsuperscript{163} Fellow protesters were arrested and so he fled a
final time with his family in 2007.\textsuperscript{164}

He and his wife ran a Burmese restaurant in Kuala Lumpur and he continued
to work for the KNO and participate in protests in Malaysia. Burmese Embassy
officials visited his restaurant and told him to stop his political activities and
subsequent attempts to renew his business permit were unsuccessful. When his
family’s Malaysia visa was due to expire in 2009, he and his wife decided that a
return to Burma was not possible and they eventually decided that Australia was their
preferred place to seek protection.\textsuperscript{165} They had a number of options available to them,
with family members already living in both Denmark and the USA. It was on the
advice of a friend, however, that they eventually settled on Australia. This friend had

\textsuperscript{162} Peter Tyler, Case Reference Number 0906820, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 16
December 2009. Available online: \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-
bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/RRTA/2009/1149.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=0906820} [Accessed
15 September 2012].

\textsuperscript{163} Peter Tyler, Case Reference Number 0906820, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 16
December 2009. Available online: \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-
bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/RRTA/2009/1149.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=0906820} [Accessed
15 September 2012].

\textsuperscript{164} Peter Tyler, Case Reference Number 0906820, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 16
December 2009. Available online: \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-
bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/RRTA/2009/1149.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=0906820} [Accessed
15 September 2012].

\textsuperscript{165} Peter Tyler, Case Reference Number 0906820, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 16
December 2009. Available online: \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-
bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/RRTA/2009/1149.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=0906820} [Accessed
15 September 2012].
already resettled in Australia after having also lived and worked in Malaysia. As the husband explained, his friend ‘suggested that I apply for an Australian visa then apply for asylum here. I saw Australia as a good place to raise my children.’ As this man’s story shows, along with many of the other case studies explored in this chapter, asylum seekers from Burma are involved in a complex series of movements across national borders and in the transnational exchange of ideas and labour (both voluntary and forced). Many of the people whose stories are detailed in the tribunal case files already had connections with Australia that they were able to utilise to gain entry to this country before applying for protection. The remaining section will explore in more detail the pathways many undertook to reach Australia.

*Journeying to Australia: Multiple pathways to protection*

As this chapter has shown, Australian politicians and the Australian public have historically been anxious about the arrival of asylum seekers in this country. Most often this anxiety centers on those asylum seekers who arrive by boat and for most of the past two decades, a two-tier system of response to onshore asylum seekers has been in use. The RRT case files complicate public and political responses to ‘boat people’ by detailing the experiences of asylum seekers from Burma who have utilized a complicated transnational network of ‘brokers’ to obtain passports and visas to enter Australia by plane. Importantly, these files detail their experiences in a way that protects the identities of the vulnerable individuals who have fled Burma over the past two decades. Describing the variety of methods asylum seekers from Burma have utilised in their journeys to Australia makes interventions into the binary discourse that characterises public conceptions of asylum seekers in Australia, whereby terms such as ‘illegal’ and ‘queue-jumpers’ emerge again and again. Such constructions are overly simplistic and ignore the complex range of factors, including available financial resources, that motivate people from all backgrounds to seek permanent protection in nations such as Australia.

People have many different reasons for claiming asylum in Australia. As the case of the Chinese-Karen businesswoman demonstrates, not all people from Burma

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who arrive in Australia do so with the intention of applying for a protection visa. Concerned about physical harassment and requests from bribes by military and government officials, the family arranged for their son to be adopted by a Chinese-Australian family. Their son received his permanent residency visa for Australia in September 2008 and she and her husband traveled with him in January 2009 to settle him into his new home. Her husband returned to Burma and she was going to follow later, but additional demands for bribes from the authorities on her husband’s return, and his subsequent need to go into hiding, precipitated her application for permanent protection while she was still in Australia on a visitor visa.  

Other applicants worked in industries, such as the international maritime industry, where access to Australia is facilitated by their employment and gave rise to the opportunity to apply for protection here. One Burman man who abandoned ship in Australia in 1999 explained to the RRT that he initially sought work in international shipping as a means of escaping persecution in Burma for his political activism. He began sailing in 1997, and visited Australia on two previous occasions prior to jumping ship in 1999. He had an aunt already living in Australia and he stayed with her without a legal visa status for a decade. During that time he met and married his wife and had a son. It was at his wife’s urging that he applied for asylum in 2009. Another man who arrived in Australia in April 2010 on a Maritime Crew Visa Subclass 988 also abandoned ship here. He had a history of political activity in Burma and told the RRT of reprisals he faced by fellow Burmese sailors who had connections with the regime. The RRT file outlines why and how he left his ship in Australia:

He claims that [in] March 2010 he spoke by phone to his wife in Yangon while he was in the port of [city deleted: s.431(2)] in China when his wife told him that he would be jailed upon his return to Burma because of his demonstrating. She told him that 8 of his friends who demonstrated with him had been arrested and imprisoned in [jail]. … He claims when he arrived at [Location C] on an iron ore ship he was allowed ashore to purchase some medications. He left the ship and

169 Giles Short, Case Reference Number 1009339, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 3 February 2012. Available online: http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/RRTA/2012/95.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=1009339 [Accessed 15 September 2012]. His application was rejected by the RRT and the delay between arriving and applying for asylum was one of the key grounds for its decision.
then ran away and hid in the bushes overnight. The applicant claims that the next day he went to the Department of Immigration and informed them of his intention to apply for a Protection visa.  

Some people attempted to gain entry to Australia on a permanent basis without applying for protection, but with escalating concerns for safety, applied for a permanent protection visa after arrival if other visa category applications were denied or processing was delayed. Take for example, the case of the widowed Burman woman discussed earlier. She stayed in Burma despite escalating harassment from the authorities in order to continue looking after her critically ill daughter. After her daughter’s death, three of her other daughters living in Australia sponsored her for a Contributory Parent Visa, but while this application was being processed concerns for her safety grew and in 2010 she came to Australia on a tourist visa, applying for protection after she arrived. Another example is that of a young Anglo-Indian man who arrived in Australia in 2006 on a student visa. He only applied for a protection visa after he finished his course and his application for a skilled visa was unsuccessful. He explained that he decided to apply for a protection visa at that point as his niece and sister had onshore protection visas granted in 2010. Like the widow, he also had family members living in refugee camps in Thailand who were applying for protection via UNHCR processes. Their stories highlight how, even within immediate families, the pathways to permanent protection are diverse and dependent on circumstance.

A number of people from Burma have come to Australia on student visas and  

then subsequently applied for a protection visa. Some of the applicants explained that they always intended to apply for permanent protection, and that they used any means necessary to get to Australia first. A Muslim man who arrived in June 2009 with his wife and two children, gained a student visa for Australia to study his PhD with the backing of a Burmese Muslim organisation. He was involved in student politics, detained and tortured, and subject to forced portering while in Karen state in the 1996. He fled Burma that year with the assistance of brokers who smuggled him first into Thailand and then into Malaysia where he completed both undergraduate and a Masters degree in engineering. He accepted the financial assistance to study in Australia from the Burmese Muslim organisation even though a requirement of the sponsorship was that he return to Burma after completing his PhD. As he explained to the RRT, ‘he had never intended to go back. He said that he had told the organisation that he would return because otherwise they would not have supported him. The applicant said that it had always been his intention to apply for protection in Australia.’

Another case highlights that the Australian Embassy in Rangoon occasionally issued temporary visas to applicants who supplied it with false information. A Burman man who was granted protection in 2000 arrived in Australia on a business visa. He explained that he had a long history of anti-government activity in Burma in the lead up to his departure. He used a broker and bribery to obtain a passport from the Burmese government. When questioned by the Department of Immigration about discrepancies between his business and protection visa applications, he indicated that:

[A]ll the information provided to the Australian embassy in Rangoon, for the purpose of obtaining a business visa to enter the country, was false. He stated that his relative in Rangoon engaged an agent to facilitate his departure. The applicant stated that bribery and false documents enabled him to leave the country.

Some applicants arrived in Australia after significant periods in second and third countries in which they were unwilling to claim asylum or unsuccessful in

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claiming asylum. In a few cases the applicants had spent significant amounts of time in Japan before deciding to seek protection in Australia. A Burman man who first fled to Japan in 2003 did not arrive in Australia until 2010. His claim for protection was partly founded on political activism he had engaged in while living in Japan on a series of temporary visas. He told the RRT that he did not apply for asylum in Japan because ‘he was afraid that he would be put in detention. He stated that the Japanese were sympathetic to the Burmese military regime and he did not think he would be treated well by the Japanese authorities if he claimed asylum.’

When asked to justify his fear, he explained that his fluency in Burmese and Japanese enabled him to assist up to 30 asylum seekers from Burma apply for refugee status in Japan and that many were placed in detention and few were successful in their applications and faced deportation. When his temporary visa for Japan was revoked after a failure to attend a meeting with the Department of Justice, he came to Australia and applied for protection.

In contrast, a Rohingya family came to Australia after their asylum application in Japan was unsuccessful. Their protection visa application in Australia was approved by the RRT in 2008 based on the political activities of the man. He had lived in Japan for many years after he overstayed his original temporary visa. His journey from Burma to Japan took him through two other unnamed countries on false documentation. The situation in the third country, he felt, was not ‘free’ and he ‘felt he could not express his views there’. He went to Japan as he ‘had heard there was an association in Japan and thought he could be more effective for his people there’. He eventually applied for asylum in Japan after he was detained by authorities for overstaying his visa; however he was unsuccessful. He and his family then decided to travel to Australia. They did so on Japanese travel documentation that they destroyed enroute out of fear that Australia would think that they could avail themselves of

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A second Rohingya man, who experienced discrimination and persecution due to his ethnicity over many decades, fled Burma for the last time in 1990. He stayed in Bangladesh for almost a decade, pursuing his political aims through his involvement with the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation. In 1998, however, ‘there was a split in the leadership of the RSO and it became weak, unstable and disintegrated. He states that when the organisation became very chaotic, he decided to go to a third country in search of asylum.’ He eventually made his way to Thailand where he lived as an ‘illegal immigrant refugee without any identity documentation’. He faced ongoing uncertainty due to this illegal status there – even after marrying a Thai national he was unable to access permanent residency or citizenship. He ‘came to know from some reliable sources that the government of Australia gives legal protection to stateless refugee people’, and like many other applicants, ‘he was determined to come to Australia and was prepared to use agents who send people from country to country’. He paid a Chinese agent $2000 to arrange a ‘faked’ Burmese passport for himself and visas for both himself and his wife. He and his wife arrived in Australia soon after and cleared through immigration and customs despite their false documents. As he explained to the RRT, as soon as they ‘left the Sydney Airport, the Chinese agent received them and took them by taxi to a named location. He states that the agent took back the false Burmese passport that he had used to enter Australia and left them at the location.’

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Geographical proximity and cultural similarities have led to a number of Chin people crossing into India to seek protection but also educational and economic opportunities. None of the Chin people whose cases were analysed for this study had gone through the process of registering with the UNHCR in New Delhi. A Chin woman who came to Australia on a student visa and subsequently applied for a protection visa explained to the RRT that:

[I]t was hard and expensive to go to Delhi but after hearing her cousin in Delhi, she went there. She said she tried to register herself in UNHCR but people had to wait a long time. She was told it was better to get a student visa and so she didn’t register herself.\textsuperscript{185}

She already had two cousins living in Australia and so she ‘didn’t think of any other country’ when she decided to seek permanent protection in a third country. Her Indian passport was obtained by her father using a fraudulent birth certificate. She explained that her father got her the passport specifically to send her to Australia so she could ‘live there and have a better life and do right things and enjoy freedom.’\textsuperscript{186}

As the above examples have already highlighted, there are a number of reasons why Australia became a destination for people seeking permanent protection. Like this Chin woman, for many of the people whose RRT files were analysed, some form of chain migration was a factor in their decision to travel to and seek protection in Australia. An excellent example is that of a Karen woman who was persecuted in Burma for the political activities of relatives already living in Australia. When her relative was unable to sponsor her, she came to Australia on a visitor visa and applied for protection.\textsuperscript{187} For others, such as the Shan woman trafficked to Thailand to work as a prostitute, arriving in Australia was largely involuntary.\textsuperscript{188} She travelled to

\textsuperscript{185} Mary Urquhart, Case Reference Number 1109316, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 5 April 2012. Available online: \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/RRTA/2012/263.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=1109316} [Accessed 15 September 2012].
\textsuperscript{186} Mary Urquhart, Case Reference Number 1109316, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 5 April 2012. Available online: \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/RRTA/2012/263.html?stem=0&synonyms=0&query=1109316} [Accessed 15 September 2012].
\textsuperscript{188} Paul White, Case Reference Number N03/45573, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 24 February 2003. Available online: \url{http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-
Australia on a temporary visa, informing the RRT that she was again required to engage in sex work ‘in order to [fulfill an arrangement] and have her false passport returned to her.’ The people with whom she had this ‘arrangement’ submitted a fraudulent protection visa application on her behalf under a false name claiming she was a Thai citizen. It was denied and she was arrested and detained for overstaying her visa. Subsequently, it was found that she did not know about the original protection visa application and she was granted one on the basis of her experiences of persecution in Burma and Thailand.

For those who utilized agents or brokers to assist with moving over international borders, there was often a lesser degree of choice in destination as they could only go to those places for which brokers were able to provide appropriate documentation. A Rohingya man who was shot while attempting to flee the Burmese military, told the RRT that he had originally ‘planned to apply for refugee status in Europe’ but did not because an agent in Country A had ‘told him he could get him to Australia’. Another Rohingya man, who had already been returned over the border into Burma by Thai authorities once before, also utilized an agent to get papers to journey to Australia. While he had relatives in another unspecified country, he told the Tribunal he could not go there because ‘he did not have the documents necessary to enter that country’. Although he had traveled to Australia on a passport that indicated he was a citizen of that country, he stated that:

[H]e did not know anything regarding the origins of the passport he used to travel to Australia. He stated that his arrangement with the agent was that he would obtain a passport and visa which would enable


him to enter Australia. The applicant stated that he did not discuss the
documents with the agent or how they were obtained.\textsuperscript{193}

**Conclusion**

Ethnic-nationalist conflict has been a significant element of the political and military
landscape in Burma especially since its independence in 1948. Successive military
regime responses to widespread pro-democracy activism since 1988, combined with
the ongoing persecution of Burma’s ethnic minority groups, have created a large and
protracted refugee situation. Australian press coverage of the nation-wide uprising
against the BSPP regime in 1988 and subsequent national elections in 1990
demonstrated a general lack of awareness of Burma’s complex history of ethnic
conflict. However, a small number of articles did highlight the power of identity
politics in Burma, in particular the impact of attempts by centralized Burman-
dominated authorities to prioritise Burman culture and hold it up as synonymous with
a ‘Burmese’ identity.

At the same time as Burma was grappling with these issues in new ways and
under new regimes, Australia was also coming to terms with the ways in which
immigration was challenging its national identity. Policy responses by the Howard
government to refugees and asylum seekers illustrated the continuing salience of
racialised understandings of belonging in Australia. The focus of public discourse
around ‘boat people’ has forged a binary logic that hides the complex reality of the
lives and choices of people who seek asylum in Australia. For Burmese refugees this
had meant some have been portrayed as ‘deserving’ of protection, in contrast to
asylum seekers from the Middle East, who, in the wake of the attacks on the World
Trade Centre in New York City in 2001, and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’,
extensively became the focus of race-based attacks on ‘boat people’ in Australia.\textsuperscript{194}
The exploration of the experiences of persecution and flight of Burmese asylum
seekers found in the RRT case files disrupts and complicates binary understandings in
Australia of which asylum seekers are ‘legal’ and who is ‘deserving’. By highlighting

\textsuperscript{193} Philippa McIntosh, Case Reference Number N01/38229, Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia, 6
September 2012].

\textsuperscript{194} Mark Lopez, “Reflections on the State of Australian Multiculturalism and the Emerging
the diverse backgrounds and journeys of the people from Burma who have sought asylum in Australia, this chapter has shown that regardless of religious and cultural background, people will attempt to seek asylum in a safe place if they have the financial means and access to the appropriate documentation to do so. The next chapter explores the resettlement experiences of Burmese migrants to Australia from both individual and collective perspectives. Based on a series of oral history interviews, it explores (in part) how Burma’s identity politics continue to contribute to and shape the lives of people from Burma living in Australia.
CHAPTER FIVE

Identity and Belonging in Australia and Burma: Oral history
Accounts of Resettlement

Chapter Four constructed an analysis of the persecution and flight of refugees from Burma primarily from the Refugee Review Tribunal of Australia’s published case files of protection visa applications. In doing so, it traced the continued impact that discourses of race and nation have had on shaping emigration from Burma. This chapter seeks to explore the challenges of resettlement. The main sources for this chapter are eighteen interviews conducted between 2008 and 2011 outlining the experiences and stories of people from Burma who had resettled in Australia over the previous two decades, 1990-2010. In utilizing oral history interview material, this chapter seeks to explore individual experiences and personal dimensions of resettlement. These interviews provide an oral history that assembles the ‘moving stories’\(^1\) of migrants from Burma to Australia: what migration has felt like, and how it has been perceived.

Nevertheless, due in part to the necessity of working with an interpreter, but also due to the relatively short period of time many of the participants have been living in Australia, this chapter canvasses broad themes and specific issues relating to recent resettlement rather than the nuances of language and memory. It provides evidence that for most migrants from Burma who have arrived in Australia over the past two decades, the key challenges to resettlement have been learning English, accessing vocational training or education, finding suitable employment and appropriate housing and coping with associated feelings of social isolation. But it also highlights aspects of identity construction and development in Australia, noting the various personal responses of interviewees to the label ‘Burmese’, and providing a case study of the Mon community living in Canberra.

\(^1\) Alistair Thomson, *Moving Stories: An Intimate History of Four Women Across Two Countries* (Kensington, University of New South Wales Press, 2011), 5, 15. Thomson argues that more personal sources, such as memories and letters, create moving stories that can enrich and explain the larger historical picture. Instrumentally, they are also ‘constantly evolving and moving’, and thereby help to illuminate how migrants understand and represent their experiences at one specific moment on their migration journey.
Methodology Issues Revisited

As outlined in the introduction, eighteen people were interviewed for this thesis, ranging in age from their early twenties to late forties. All arrived in Australia over the past two decades, although most arrived in the past seven years. The participants laid claim to three different ethnic backgrounds: Mon, Chin and Burman (although, as discussed below, the Burman participants described themselves as ‘Burmese’ or ‘Myanmar’ rather than Burman). Clearly, therefore, not all communities from Burma now living in Australia are represented in this study. The 2011 Australian Census offers a breakdown of the ancestry of the Burma-born population of Australia (Figure 11). It shows that Karen and Chinese are the two most common ancestries claimed after Burmese, with Chin the fifth most common and Mon the twelfth.

![Figure 11: Ancestry of Burma-born Australian residents, 2011 Census](image)

*Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. 2011 Census of Population and Housing*

Responses to requests for interview, therefore, necessitated a restricted focus in this chapter, and it is hoped that future studies will be able to cover both a broader range of communities as well as look at individual communities in more depth. Despite these limitations of representation, however, the participants and communities
featured in this study are broad enough to cover a range of different types of migrant from Burma, both in terms of ethnicity, religious adherence, history of flight from Burma, and method of arrival in Australia. For example, both the Mon and the Chin are ethnic minority groups from Burma and have been subject to similar attempts by successive regimes in Burma to suppress their unique cultural and linguistic heritages. Both groups, however, have different histories of flight and asylum.

The majority of the Mon (and all interviewed for this study) are Buddhist. They have historically lived in the lowlands of Burma and have a long involvement in the politics and elite classes of Burma going back many centuries. Through the New Mon State Party, the Mon have been waging armed insurrection against various Burmese regimes in an attempt to gain more political and cultural autonomy. The height of this activity occurred after the 1988 pro-democracy uprising in that country and resulted in large refugee flows out of Burma and into Thailand. As a result, some of the leaders of the Mon community in Australia also have a history of post-1988 pro-democracy activism or service with the New Mon State Party (NMSP) in Burma’s border areas; they subsequently resettled in Australia during the 1990s or early 2000s. The Mon community in Australia is relatively small (205 people claimed a Mon ancestry in the 2011 census), and the majority of Mon in Australia live in Canberra.

In contrast, the majority of the Chin are Christian and their homeland, Chinram, is in the mountains in northwest Burma, straddling the border with India and Bangladesh. Given the geographical location of Chinram, tens of thousands of Chin refugees reside in India and up to 70,000 to 80,000 reside in Malaysia. Most

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3 South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 3.
4 South, *Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma*, 178-179. South describes the active role the NMSP has had in forging a Mon ethno-nationalist identity among Mon refugees.
5 For a comprehensive examination of the situation faced by Mon refugees in Thailand, see: Hazel J. Lang, *Fear and Sanctuary: Burmese Refugees in Thailand* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2002).
7 Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, xvii, xv.
Chin now living in Australia are relatively newly arrived, only becoming a resettlement focus for the UNHCR in 2006. They too have a long history of opposition to central control by the Burmese government, first formally expressed during the Panglong Conference in 1947 (an important event in Burma’s history during which ethnic minority demands were presented to Aung San and his party, the AFPFL). In 1988, following the nation-wide pro-democracy uprising, the Chin National Front and an armed wing, the Chin National Army, were formed. These Chin nationalist organisations were some of the few ethnic-based groups to resist signing a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese army. One, however, was finally entered into in January 2012. It is impossible to say to what extent the participants in this study may have been involved with either of these organisations, or anti-government politics more broadly, as during the interview process very few discussed their reasons for leaving Burma (see below for a discussion of this). What is clear, however, is that the Chin, like the Mon, have maintained a strong ethnically based community focus since resettling in Australia.

Like the majority of people from Burma who have migrated to Australia in the last two decades, most of the Chin and the Mon were resettled here on humanitarian visas. Others, like one participant of this study, arrived through a process of chain migration, being sponsored by relatives through family reunion mechanisms to join them once they had settled. Throughout the last two decades there has also been a concurrent stream of international student migration of people from Burma to Australia. Of the two participants in this study who claim a Burmese or Myanmar...
identity, both arrived in Australia as international students but under remarkably different circumstances.\(^{14}\)

The way in which some participants were informed about the interview project, and also the necessary use of interpreters, had repercussions for the flow of the conversation and the ability of participants to direct the interview. Most of the participants for this study were recruited through key community members, who tended to work for an ethnic community organization. All participants were willing to tell their story, and had been provided with a plain language statement information in their own language. Although they were encouraged to ask questions about the project prior to the interview, there were a few encounters where the participants appeared not to have sufficiently internalized and reflected on this information before the interview began. This may account in some measure for the capacity of some participants to reflect spontaneously on their experiences of migration and resettlement.

All but six of the interviews were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter. The use of an interpreter in most interviews also had an impact on the way in which the stories of participants were expressed. Without the funds to access professional interpreters (of which there are relatively few with accreditation in each of the languages), interpreting assistance was provided by community members. As the interpreters were key members of the communities from which participants were sourced, there are clear implications for the privacy of individual participants, who may not have felt comfortable revealing some details of their experience, particularly in relation to community relations within Australia. This is reflected in the fact that dissatisfaction with ethnic-based community interactions was expressed only twice, each time in interviews conducted in English with no outside party present. In all instances the interpreters were men, which was problematic particularly in relation to the interviews with women. While the interviews did not delve into personal relationship issues and the stress resettlement may have caused in this area, it may be the case that the use of a male interpreter made for a less conducive space for some of

\(^{14}\) One was a refugee living in Thailand and received a scholarship to study in Australia in the early 1990s. The other arrived more recently and is a full-fee paying international student who intends to return to Burma after he completes his study. In 2011-2012, 376 Burmese nationals were granted a student visa, and at 30 June 2012 there were 670 Burma-born student visa-holders in Australia, representing 0.2 per cent of the total international students in Australia. See: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “Community Profile – Burma (Myanmar).”
the female participants in this study to raise an issue such as this voluntarily.

The interviews were mediated by the presence of interpreters in other ways. While it can be difficult to assess from the standpoint of a non-Mon or -Chin speaker, it is very likely that the interpretation provided of a participant’s story was not done accurately or with full attention to nuance or detail. Often a participant would speak for quite a long period of time, sometimes with the interpreter seeking clarification of a point, before the interpretation was given. In this way, some of the English language translation could be seen as a summary of the participant’s response. In one interview the interpreter made clear that he was adding information in addition to what the participant had said (on a question about employment he added details about the participant’s current position which he knew as a friend, but which the participant had not himself made clear). Whether other instances such as this occurred that were not divulged by the interpreter remains unknown. Thus it is necessary to acknowledge the extent to which some material has been ‘lost in translation’.

Although not necessarily an issue solely related to the use of interpreters, there were occasions in which there was a clear conceptual gap between languages that hindered understanding, or the ability of the participant to explain how they felt about a particular issue. For example, during an interview with three Chin women, the interpreter had difficulty explaining one participant’s answer to the question, ‘Do you remember how you felt during your journey to Australia and how you felt when you landed?’ The following exchange occurred:

**Interpreter**: It is very difficult to describe in English; I don’t know the word.

**Participant** (via interpreter): But when I left, when I boarded the airplane and left the airport for Australia, it’s different from the Asian country and I feel like something, lonely... No, ah... I don’t know how to explain...

**Interviewer**: Homesick?

**Interpreter**: Yeah it is like homesick. I don’t know how to describe it in English. Maybe there is no English word. When you separate from your parents or family, you may call it homesick. On the one hand we are very happy but at the same time we are homesick.  

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15 Interview with Chin man (No.1) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.

16 Interview with Chin woman (No.1) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 8 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
As widely acknowledged in the field of translation studies, even under the best of circumstances the process of translation ‘involves more than just a literal transfer of information’, with Sherry Simon acknowledging that ‘[t]ranslators must constantly make decisions about the cultural meanings which language carries, and evaluate the way in which the two worlds they inhabit are “the same”’. In gathering information about the experience of migrants from Burma for these interviews, therefore, it has been necessary to be aware of the extent to which the largely unavoidable reliance on inexpert translators meant that this thesis could not outline in close detail the accumulated and particular cultural, social and political meanings, concepts, values and beliefs that might otherwise have been communicated. Nevertheless, there have been very few studies that have attempted to provide even rudimentary information about migration and settlement experiences from the perspective of Burmese migrants. What follows is intended to provide one of the first qualitative accounts of migration from Burmese perspectives.

These interviews yielded information that focused on resettlement issues in

18 Oral historian Alessandro Portelli has outlined, of course, the specific value of oral history for generating a specific kind of information or ‘meaning’ about the past. See Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” History Workshop 12 (1981), 96-107.
20 Thus the work of this chapter is more akin to the provision of initial ‘contact’ and ‘understanding’ of the Burmese as a specific social/cultural group, envisioned by Paul Thompson as the work of the oral historian. See Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
Australia. This was not surprising, given that ethics considerations and project design limitations (as discussed in the Introduction) required this focus on post- rather than pre-migration issues. It is also worth noting that many of the findings of this thesis correlate with findings conducted by refugee settlement agencies, advocacy groups and academics from a range of disciplines. Interviews conducted for this thesis revealed housing and employment to be key concerns among the people from Burma living in Australia, as well as language issues and the way these impacted on access to government services, and questions of identity. My study found that many commonalities exist in these migrants’ experiences of settlement in Australia – i.e. across ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic differences – and this is reflected in the organization of the material that follows (which does not privilege ethnicity, but rather the issues faced).

Nevertheless, due to specific opportunities presented during the course of this study (detailed further below), sufficient material was gathered to highlight aspects of the Mon experience, and the Mon form a particular case study at the end of this chapter. This focus in turn serves to highlight the impact that factors associated with identity can have for both individual and collective experiences of settlement.

‘How to Work, How to Buy a House’: Issues of Employment and Housing

How to work, how to buy a house, how to support my family in Burma, how to finish my study. Continuing my study is the main challenge. And the second challenge is to support my parents and my family in Burma.

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22 This is similar to other studies that incorporate the perspectives of refugees from Burma. For example: Refugee Council of Australia, *Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program.*

23 Interview with young Chin man (No.1) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 September 2008, Melbourne, Australia.
According to the 2011 Census, the employment prospects for those born in Burma are poor compared to the general population. Only forty-eight per cent of Burmese aged fifteen or more were working at the time of the Census (a ten per cent drop since 2006), five per cent were unemployed and forty-seven per cent were not in the labour force.\textsuperscript{24} The above statement, made by a young Chin man who was interviewed in 2009, succinctly sums up the competing challenges facing many of the participants in this study. Personal goals, such as attaining educational qualifications, often had to give way to the immediate challenges of finding employment, both to meet high living costs in Australia, but also to provide financial support to family and friends still living in Burma or in countries of second or third asylum.\textsuperscript{25} Finding employment was also clearly a factor in the ability of many of the participants to access appropriate housing for themselves and their families.

The resettlement experiences of Hre Cem Sawm Hal, a middle-aged Chin man living with his family in the inner-west of Melbourne, are an excellent illustrative example of how access to suitable employment is a major challenge to successful settlement. Obtaining relevant employment, appropriate for his skills, has been difficult for Hre Cem Sawm Hal since his arrival in Australia in early 2007, particularly as the work experience he acquired in Malaysia has not been recognized in Australia. He told me:

\begin{quote}
[S]o far, as I said, I haven’t worked. I think it will be very difficult to get a job. We cannot use our experience here. For example, most of the Chin people worked in Malaysia and they have a certain amount of experience. For example, I worked myself … on construction sites doing electrical wiring. So I am very expert at doing this but they will not accept another country’s qualifications in Australia. So I think it will be very difficult to get a job here doing what we want to do.
\end{quote}

Hre Cem Sawm Hal has been proactive in trying to convert his Malaysian work experience into a recognised Australian qualification through a course at a nearby university campus. When asked what it was like for him to study in Australia, his

\textsuperscript{24} Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “Community Profile – Burma (Myanmar).”
\textsuperscript{25} For an excellent analysis of this issue, see: Sean Turnell, Alison Vicary and Wylie Bradford, “Migrant-Worker Remittances and Burma: An Economic Analysis of Survey Results,” in Dictatorship, Disorder and Decline in Myanmar, ed. Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2008), 63-86.
\textsuperscript{26} Interview with Hre Cem Sawm Hal, 24 June 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
response was, ‘very, very difficult’. He continued:

Why I say it is difficult in here, engineering practice and workshop practice, just when I look it is very easy because we did it every day in Malaysia when I was in Malaysia. So I can do straight away, but you have to know the theory. They taught us, you have to learn by theory…not practice. In practice I can go and do it straight away. And if you don’t know the theory you are not allowed to do it. So this way I see it is very, very difficult.  

Hre Cem Sawm Hal’s low level of English language proficiency has been the most significant element in the difficulties he has faced in understanding and completing the theoretical elements of the coursework and this has made it difficult for him to succeed. When we spoke in 2008 he was thinking of giving up his training and trying to find a job instead.  

The ability to successfully complete tertiary or TAFE qualifications is no guarantee of a successful employment outcome. For a second Chin man, who lives with his family in Melbourne, obtaining an apprenticeship position with a local electronics repair firm was a welcome development, but did not promise ongoing work:

**Participant:** They give you Certificate II when you finish, like an apprenticeship for electronic repairs for broken fridges or TVs.

**Interviewer:** How did you feel when you got that job?

**Participant:** Yeah, at the moment I’m happy. Back when I finished the certificate I didn’t know if they would accept me in the company. I don’t know how difficult it is to get a job for this kind of work.  

Other participants of this study expressed frustration at their inability to get a job, any job, regardless of whether it matched their skills. Their experiences often did not match their expectations prior to migrating to Australia. Take Emanuel for instance, a Chin woman living with her family in Melbourne:

> [O]ur expectations were different before we came. As soon as we

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27 Interview with Hre Cem Sawm Hal, 24 June 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
28 Interview with Hre Cem Sawm Hal, 24 June 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
29 Interview with Chin man (No.2) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
arrive to Australia we were going to find a job and work and … as soon as we get a job we’ll save some money and buy a house. But in reality, we have applied for so many jobs, but we are declined. So our experience is very different to our expectations when we came. So the main thing is it is difficult to get a job.\footnote{Interview with Emanuel, 16 September 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.}

Emanuel and her family have had to adjust their dreams for their future due to their inability to access ongoing and significant work. As has been found in other studies on refugee resettlement,\footnote{See, for example: Pittaway, Muli, and Shteir, “‘I Have a Voice—Hear Me!’,” 143.} this has led to a focus on their children and the expectation that they will fulfil educational and employment aspirations for the whole family. Emanuel, who has four children, explains the interconnectedness of employment outcomes and her dreams for her children:

[O]f course our hope is on our kids. …We want our kids to go to a good school, like a private school, but we don’t have a job. If we send them to a private school then they might get a good education here and then they’ll get a degree and then they can look after themselves. But we do not have a job and we cannot support our kids. We can just send them to the government school but it not really good for [them]. Their dad is working in a casual position so we are thinking now about reducing our expenses … and then we’ll save us much as we can to send our eldest daughter to private school.\footnote{Interview with Emanuel, 16 September 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.}

Similarly, Hre Cem Sawm Hal expressed his disillusionment with his situation in Australia, simultaneously with his hopes for his children’s futures:

I am halfway through of my life. I’m more than forty years of age, so I think that my life expectancy is more than half way through. So I don’t have much hope for myself, but for my family and the kids. I want them to get a good education at an Australian level or international level qualification and skills. I hope they get a quality education in this country. … [F]or me, I don’t have much hope that I might get a good mansion or a good car … and that I would be living luxuriously. I don’t expect that for myself. As I said before, I am more than half way through my life. But for the kids, maybe there is a lot more chance for them. … The way I look at things it is difficult to buy a house or whatever and I am not expecting that for myself anymore. But I hope for the kids that one day they can achieve it.\footnote{Interview with Hre Cem Sawm Hal, 24 June 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.}
As the above quotes indicate, home ownership was a key goal of life in Australia expressed by many of those interviewed. Partly this expectation reflects the situation many participants left in Burma. For example, Mi Chan, a Mon woman from Canberra, explained with the assistance of an interpreter that ‘even though they are poor in Burma, they have their own house or land’. While only two of the participants in this study had achieved home ownership at the time the interviews were conducted, its significance as an internal marker of successful settlement was evident by the announcement and celebration of recent home purchases by members of the Mon community at an Australia Mon Association event I attended. For many of those who arrived within the past five to seven years, however, gaining access to suitable rental housing remained a significant challenge.

The inability to access paid employment has been a key factor in the difficulty in accessing appropriate housing for recent migrants from Burma. Living on government benefits in conjunction with extremely tight rental markets in many major Australian cities means that many migrants from Burma are not seen as desirable tenants by real estate agents or landlords. As the second Chin man explained:

I have had some difficulty with applying for a house. As I mentioned before we are relying on welfare payments. Once I was looking and there were plenty of houses but whenever we applied for a house we liked we were declined because … they gave it to those who have a job. So this was the difficult part of approaching a real estate agent to get a good house. We like a house, but it is expensive. And then, even when we apply for it, they prioritise people who have a job.

Finding appropriate housing has also been a difficult task for Hre Cem Sawm Hal and his family. At the time of the interview, they had lived in Australia for eighteen months, and had lived in four houses during that time. His current house, where he finally feels settled and at ‘home’, was found for his family with the assistance of a resettlement service provider agency. When Hre Cem Sawm Hal was

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34 Interview with Mi Chan, 22 February 2008, Canberra, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
35 Interview with Nai Meang Muw, 23 February 2008, Canberra, Australia; Interview with Nai Din Pla Hongsa, 25 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
38 Interview with Chin man (No.2) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
asked if he had had any negative or upsetting experiences with Australian people since his arrival, he related his interactions with real estate agents during his attempts to find a house. His account highlights that perceptions about ‘Burmese’ culture also have a role in difficulties migrants from Burma face in the private rental market:

I applied for three houses and I was declined. They said, we don’t want to accept Burmese people because they live with too many people in one house. Or this is what I heard and this is my negative experience. I may say, they don’t understand our situation, how we live. … What I’m saying is, our way of life is different to English people. If we are a family, no matter how big we are, we don’t want to live separately. Even if we are ten people, we want to live in one house, we don’t want to separate. So sometimes they don’t want to accept that so many people want to live in a house. It is a very unhappy situation for us.  

Difficulties in finding suitable employment and housing may lessen for Chin people such as Hre Cem Sawm Hal, the second Chin man and Emanuel, the longer they live in Australia. The Mon in Canberra began to establish their community approximately a decade earlier than the Chin in Melbourne and in 2009 it was reported that approximately 30 per cent of families in that community were home owners. The impact of accessing housing and employment may also vary according to age at the time of migration. Immediate economic needs were not presented as an issue in an interview I conducted with two young Mon sisters living in Canberra. In a conversation that ranged over two hours, the issues of housing and employment rarely featured, and they were not seen as problematic by either of the women. They have both worked in a number of casual jobs, in conjunction with their studies, since arriving in Australia in 2005. In fact, when asked if it was difficult for them to get work, their response was a simple ‘not really’. They were actually enthusiastic about the work experience they had gained, and despite punishing schedules that saw them in school from 9:00am until 4:00pm and working from 5:00pm until 10:00pm, or even later on weekends, they explained that juggling work and school was ‘good. It’s normal.’

39 Interview with Hre Cem Sawm Hal, 24 June 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
41 Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
Both sisters experienced interrupted schooling during their childhood, having grown up in a series of towns and camps (including refugee camps) in Mon controlled areas of Burma or Thailand. Both also gained work experience in these settings, as interpreters in hospitals in the border areas and, for one, teaching in refugee camps and working as a nanny for a family in Bangkok:

Younger sister: When we lived in the camp it was a good experience as well. We were involved with the BSA doing translation: we can speak Thai and Burmese. … And also I volunteered to translate at the hospital as well. So every time someone is sick I took people to hospital and stayed with them and translated Thai to Burmese, Thai to Mon.  

Older sister: I studied on the border in the Mon school and … I finished year seven there. And then I didn’t study any more. I did volunteer teaching children for about one and a half years …and then I moved to Thailand. And after that I worked in Bangkok [for a year and a half] … [M]y mum moved to the new camp first and we moved later when the UNHCR called us to go inside the camp. I did teaching again in the new camp, in my language, in Mon…for three years until I came here.

Their experiences have informed their future career ambitions (nursing and childcare respectively), and they are both interested in returning to the Thai-Burma border once they have completed their education to work with NGOs providing assistance to refugees. The sisters had arrived in Australia with their family when they were teenagers and completed their secondary education over an extended period of time, first enrolling in an ESL school to improve their English before transferring into the refugee student program at Dickson College. What will become clear in the next section of this chapter is that the eligibility (or ability) to access support to learn English, and therefore take up training or employment opportunities, has a marked impact on whether a migrant feels included or isolated from wider Australian society.

It is important to note before discussing language issues, however, that responses about housing and employment by those interviewed for this project reflect

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42 Younger sister, in: Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
43 Older sister, in: Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
44 Older sister, in: Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
45 Older sister, in: Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
findings from other studies of refugee experience. A 2008 Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) report also focused on employment and housing, arguing they were two of the most significant areas of challenge and discrimination in the refugee resettlement process in Australia.\textsuperscript{46} While looking across refugee communities in Australia, the Burmese were highlighted as one of three community case studies in the report. Similar findings emerged also in a more recent profile by the South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre (SER MRC), which also canvassed concerns raised by refugees from Burma living in Melbourne about employment and housing. The SER MRC report highlighted, however, that, ‘[n]o settlement experience is the same for any two individuals. Despite common experiences and backgrounds, the relationship between communities and their environment is unique.’\textsuperscript{47} Language can be one particular indicator of this.

‘I Don’t Have a Place to Communicate’: Issues of Language, Isolation and Access to Services

In Malaysia even if we cannot speak the language, we work and we communicate in the workplace and we can learn the language easily. But here it’s very difficult to get a job without speaking the language. So I only go out when I go to school and I don’t have a place to communicate with others – with Australians – and it is very difficult for me. I don’t think I’m ever going to improve my English through this. … I cannot get a job without speaking the language so this is the difficult part of living in Australia.\textsuperscript{48}

Language emerged as a profound barrier to successful resettlement for many of the participants of this study. At the 2006 Census, only a third of Burmese migrants indicated that they spoke English at home, with twenty per cent of these indicating they did not speak it well or not at all.\textsuperscript{49} The above quote, from a Chin woman living in Melbourne, highlights the way that English-language ability intersects with, and impacts on, so many other elements of life in Australia for migrants from Burma. As this section will show, an inability to gain employment or communicate with the

\textsuperscript{46} Refugee Council of Australia, \textit{Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program}, 2-3.
\textsuperscript{47} South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre, “People of Burma in Melbourne: Perspectives of a Refugee Community,” 5.
\textsuperscript{48} Interview with Chin woman (No.2) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 8 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
\textsuperscript{49} See: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “Community Profile – Burma (Myanmar).”
wider community can have negative consequences for social and emotional well-being. While the Australian government delivers programs to assist with English-language training, as the above quote indicates, they are not always successful in facilitating ‘social inclusion’ – the intended policy outcome.\textsuperscript{50} Instead, for many of the people interviewed, their ethnic community was the main sphere in which they communicated, interacted and from which they drew support. Language barriers also impact negatively on the ability of many of the people interviewed to access other government programs or services intended to assist migrants and refugees with the resettlement process.

Most refugees from Burma who have resettled in Australia have had little or no English language ability upon arrival. Those who are eligible\textsuperscript{51} have had to rely on the Australian government funded Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) through which they can access 510 hours of English language classes. According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), this program ‘reflects the government’s commitment to long-term sustainable settlement outcomes for newly arrived migrants through integrated, targeted and well designed programs that support clients in their transition to life in Australia.’ Additionally, it recognizes that ‘English language proficiency is central to successfully settling in Australia.’\textsuperscript{52} Humanitarian entrants ‘with limited education or difficult pre-migration experiences, such as torture or trauma’ can also access from between 100 and 400 additional hours through the Special Preparatory Program (SPP).\textsuperscript{53}

Government-funded English language program such as these, expanded significantly with the establishment of multiculturalism in the 1970s in Australia.\textsuperscript{54}


\textsuperscript{51}For a list of visa categories that are eligible for the program, see: Department of Immigration and Citizenship, “Fact Sheet 94: English Courses for Eligible Migrants and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia.” Available Online: http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/94amep.htm [Accessed 22 October 2012].


\textsuperscript{54}The adoption by the Liberal-National Coalition government led by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser (1975-1983) of the recommendations of The Galbally Report (1978) led to the development of extensive on-arrival English language assistance targeted at newly arrived migrants. See: Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Report of the Review of Settlement Services
James Jupp has argued that ‘Australian multiculturalism is best understood as an aspect of immigration settlement policy’. In the Australian multicultural context, language was understood to be at the ‘core of ethnic diversity’, and as such, subsequent policy and service delivery models have centred on the successful integration into Australian society of migrants from a non-English speaking background. Current DIAC rhetoric on the AMEP, discussed above, illustrates the continued strength of these motives for the provision of English-language training to newly arrived migrants. Since multiculturalism’s inception, government provided language assistance has also focused on English literacy as a means of ‘improving human capital or enhancing commercial contacts’. The prohibitive costs of such programs has meant, however, that successive governments have restricted the number of hours each migrant is able to access.

The responses to the AMEP classes of those interviewed for this study varied. Some, such as the woman quoted above, clearly found them to be ineffective mechanisms through which to improve their language skills, despite stating that the classes were ‘really good and the teachers are really good’. Locked out of employment without adequate English, she feels that there is ‘no place’ she can go to improve her language skills and communicate with and participate in the broader community. She expressed her concern about this language barrier many times throughout the interview, her lack of hope resonating in the statement: ‘I don’t understand English so it is difficult for us to live in Australia. And I think that I’m never going to speak English.’ The first Chin man, who has worked within the settlement service provision sector as a community guide and as a teacher’s assistant at a local school, reflected on both his personal circumstances and what he feels are structural deficiencies with the way the AMEP program is designed:

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56 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 84.
57 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 95.
58 Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 96.
59 Interview with Chin woman (No.2) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 8 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
60 Interview with Chin woman (No.2) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 8 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
I think it is inadequate; it is not enough to be able to communicate in English. Even myself, when I finished my Certificate II I then continued my Certificate III, and in the middle my hours finished so I could not continue. In my opinion the provision for English classes is not enough. … [If we don’t understand the language we cannot continue to do what we want. For example, if we can finish Certificate III then we can be an apprentice. In order to get the apprenticeship we need to have Certificate III at least. So what is provided by the government is not enough.]

He feels that the program should be more tailored to the individual’s background and future needs. In particular, he outlined his belief that the government should foster the language skills of those who received adequate education prior to arriving in Australia, to better facilitate their transition into the workforce:

For those who are illiterate … who went to school when they were a child, you could give them a 1000 hours and it still may not make sense to them. It depends on the person. Those who have some background in education, those who have finished year 10 or whatever, if you can give them more hours, they can build up their skills. But for older people, those who never went to school, or illiterate people, even if you give them 1000 hours it doesn’t make sense for them.

Finding time to access AMEP classes is not always possible. For women in particular, attending classes often took a back seat to family responsibilities. Take, for instance, Mi Chan. She is a young mother with two children who, at the time of the interview, had not participated in language classes since arriving in Australia in 2005. The (male) interpreter explained her circumstances: ‘After she arrived in here she didn’t do any language course yet because she got two children. She is busy with the kids. Her husband works and she waits at home like a good housewife.’ Clearly the interpreter (and possibly Mi Chan, although it is difficult to gauge the accuracy of the translation) is expressing here some quite firm ideas about gender relations within his community that impact on the ability of women to interact outside the home

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61 Interview with Chin man (No.1) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
62 Interview with Chin man (No.1) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
63 Again, this situation is not unique to migrants from Burma. Other studies on refugee resettlement have found this to be the case. See, for example, Anikó Hatoss and Henk Huijser, “Gendered Barriers to Educational Opportunities: Resettlement of Sudanese Refugees in Australia,” Gender and Education 22, 2 (2010): 147–160.
64 Interview with Mi Chan, 22 February 2008, Canberra, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
without the mediation or assistance of their husbands. Later in the interview, in relation to a question about who Mi Chan relies on to get assistance with resettlement needs, the interpreter stated:

She have to depend on her husband. Because her husband …. He know a bit about how to get access the education, where even though there is 510 supported from the immigration, to get you know the education, English as a second language.

When asked if she felt connected to the wider Australian community, the response was brief: ‘No, because she can’t communicate with others. There is a language barrier.’

The social isolation experienced by Mi Chan was reflected in other interviews. While clearly language is a key barrier to wider social participation, some also reflected on cultural and social differences between their ethnic community and ‘Australians’ that they feel contribute to the issue. As Emanuel explains:

I have been here in Australia for four years. … and I have been a little bit disappointed with the way they live here in Australia. I have lived here for four years but I don’t have any friends who are Australians. This is the hardest thing that I face in Australia. … We live in our country very closely. But in Australia, even brothers and sisters live separately. I’m disappointed not to have made friends. We would love friends, we want to make friends, but it is very difficult. … For those like us, from a non-English speaking background, it very difficult to make friends with Australian people. It is a little bit difficult to approach them. … They like privacy or something like.

As with other refugee and migrant groups, continued separation from family still living in Burma or in second or third countries of asylum was an added source of pain and loneliness for many of the participants. Many wish that they could bring their family out to Australia to join them. For Mi Chan happiness in Australia is not truly possible without her family, or at least knowing her family’s situation has

65 The Mon community in Canberra have taken active steps in recent years to make interventions in traditional gender dynamics through the “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” the outcomes of which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.
66 Interview with Mi Chan, 22 February 2008, Canberra, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
67 Interview with Mi Chan, 22 February 2008, Canberra, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
68 Interview with Emanuel, 16 September 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
69 For an overview on the positive and negative impacts of family reunion on refugee families, see: McMichael et al, “Negotiating Family, Navigating Resettlement,” 180.
improved:

I’m not really happy. I still feel sad about the past. Even though I am in Australia and I have freedom of land… I miss my family, my parents. They live in a village – they are poor, in a position of poverty … so I have sad feelings about that. I wanted to stay in Burma but the military did not treat me fairly. I experienced oppression. I feel very angry with the government.\(^{70}\)

Retaining contact with family is incredibly difficult due to safety concerns and poor telecommunications infrastructure and poverty in Burma. Mi Chan’s explanation of how difficult it is for her to maintain contact with her parents who are still in Burma, highlights these issues as well as the continued porous nature of Burma’s international borders:

I still have contact with a friend in Thailand in the border area. Also, my nephew and sister in Thailand. It’s not easy to get contact with my village. My parents are there. They get older. There is no telephone in the village. For my parents to go to Moulmein and get contact with me it is not easy. There is also a danger. [Break for interpreting.] I get in contact through a correspondent through Thailand. I tell something to her, if someone is going back to Burma.\(^{71}\)

In one of the few studies to focus solely on the experiences of migrants from Burma, Bernadette Rosbrook and Robert D. Schwitzer explore the impact family separation has on well-being and the ability to feel at home in Australia. They found that family connectedness was a key component of their participants’ understandings of what constituted a home. Interestingly, however, ‘the nature of the relatedness to family required for the experience of home is not necessarily dependent upon physical proximity’. Further, they noted that ‘[w]here families were forced to separate, an adequate sense of connection could be sustained if it was possible to maintain reliable contact, sufficient to allow for mutual care and support.’\(^{72}\) They provided a vivid example of the emotional impact disconnection from family had on one of their participants:

\(^{70}\) Interview with Mi Chan, 22 February 2008, Canberra, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
\(^{71}\) Interview with Emanuel, 16 September 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
'I feel like I was in a room without any electricity, dark and with little air to breathe. . . . But when I was able to talk to them, I feel like release from that' (Male, age 33). The participant went on to describe how, in Australia, with contact to family re-established, he had ‘the beginning of a feeling of home’.

Language ability also created communication barriers between migrants and government agencies that deliver essential services or support that could lead to profound impacts on the ability to live and feel settled in Australia. Emanuel again provided an excellent illustrative example when she described the difficulty she has had when dealing with Centrelink. It is worth looking at her explanation in some depth for it reveals a number of issues, from unmet expectations of Australian social systems, to the negative emotions language barriers create, and to the assistance and support that was found in community:

**Emanuel:** I thought before I came to Australia that everything would be perfect but some systems here are not perfect. Let me share my experience. The other day I went to Centrelink to ask about the child benefit... [a]nd I was told that I had a debt, a $1000 debt, with Centrelink, and that they cannot pay [the child benefit] unless I pay the debt. What debt do I have? I asked them and they gave me a hard time for almost two months, and then later they found out that it was their fault. But it took me two months, and they gave me a hard time. Some times I asked for an interpreter but you have to make the call yourself – they gave me the telephone but I cannot speak English. So sometimes I think they look down on us a little bit because we don’t understand the language. … Sometimes there is a language problem and we cannot say what we want to say. It is difficult for us. This is the worst thing I experienced in Australia. … I thought the Australian system would be perfect but in reality there is a lot of negligence or imperfections in the system.

[Break for interpreting.]

How they found out about the debt in the end is that I called a friend of mine, they met with the officer and they checked the system, asked what’s wrong with the system. I spoke with my friend and told her what I wanted to say and everything and Centrelink found it was actually their mistake. It was relief, a big relief, but they gave me a very hard time for two months. For me it was almost like a heart attack. It was a very bad experience.

**Interviewer:** Who has supported you and your family in facing these issues? Has it been government agencies, your community? Who have you found supportive?

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Emanuel: Friends, and the pastor from the Melbourne Chin Church and the Melbourne Chin community.74

The difficulties some participants had in negotiating government services were not just about language ability, but also about unmet expectations of what that service would be. The main examples that arose from the interviews were regarding health service provision. Two Chin women were particularly upset about the way the health system is structured in Australia. Both presented to doctors’ clinics when ill only to be told that they had to make an appointment first, and would not be seen for two weeks. One of the women was particularly distressed:

[W]hen I got sick, I approached the doctor to take some medication…but instead of giving me medicine or an injection, they gave me an appointment. Without the doctor’s prescription I cannot get medicine. And I was really sick, but when I approached the doctor they gave me an appointment in maybe one week, or two weeks. During this time I could have died! It was really difficult for me. … I wanted treatment on the spot because I was ill. If they give me another two or three weeks I could be died during this time so this was very difficult.75

Both women contrasted this system with Burma where treatment is provided by doctors immediately, with no appointment necessary. For example:

The health system, I was really disappointed in it when compared to Burma. We say that Burma is a very bad country, but … we go to the hospital and we can meet with the doctor straight away and we can be treated on the spot. But here the system is very difficult. Even though we are seriously ill, when we go to the clinic or the hospital we have to make another appointment, we are not treated on the spot.76

Some of those interviewed expressed satisfaction with the range of support provided by the government to assist with resettling. In particular, income support payments that gave them a chance to attempt training before being pushed into the workforce:

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74 Interview with Emanuel, 16 September 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
75 Interview with Grace, 8 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
76 Interview with Emanuel, 16 September 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
Life is better than I expected. I came as a family. Before I came I was worried because I didn’t speak English and when I thought that when came to Australia I would have to find a job as quickly as possible to support my family. But when I arrived here I was surprised that the government looked after the house and the family and gives to … those who are in need. We were looked after well but I was surprised. I never expected to get this kind of assistance from the government before I came. … So even now, if I want to continue my study, probably I can continue until December. So I can still continue to get assistance from the government and it is really, really good and a lot better than I expected before I came. I am grateful for the government.  

Others, such as the two Mon sisters discussed earlier, expressed no frustration with accessing services. They explained in the interview that they had received extensive support from agencies such as Centrecare and a local multicultural youth centre since they arrived in Canberra. The Mon community was also instrumental in assisting and supporting them as well as providing a much needed social outlet. Instrumentally, as teenagers when they arrived, they were also able to access much more intensive English-language training and general education than that offered to the other adults interviewed. They illustrated during the interview their increase in confidence as their English language ability improved. Keen to give back, they have put their language skills to use to assist other members of the community, which has been emotionally rewarding for them and has created a sense of connectedness. As they explain:

Younger sister: I volunteer for them and I also do work experience through college as well. Just … finding a job, taking people to appointments to Centrecare, Centrelink, the bank, trying to help them get a job.

Interviewer: And how does that make you feel, that you are able to do that for people?

Younger sister: Much better. … [W]hen we first came we wanted to do things for our selves but we can’t do it because of the language. But now I can understand a little bit, kind of like more than them but not perfect. But I still can help them. So the times that you help them you feel much better. If you don’t help them who is going to help them? Because we’re been in that position before [in Thailand]. … So if you can help them, they just thank you but it makes you feel much better. But it’s ok. My life is like more –

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77 Interview with Hre Cem Sawm Hal, 24 June 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
Older sister: Not lonely.

Younger sister: Not lonely.\(^78\)

What is clear from this quote (and from the other interviews conducted) is the pivotal role that ethnic community organizations and key individuals within the community have in easing the way for other community members when resettling in Australia, particularly when attempting to access services provided by the government. As Mi Chan stated, her community organization acts like a parent, offering assistance and guidance:

It’s really meaningful for me. Because the association is like our parents. … We can contact each other, get information from each other, share information, celebrate something, get closer, or spend time outdoors together. And when you need some help you can get it. The association will help. The association helps new people who don’t have enough information.\(^79\)

The sometimes problematic nature of requesting assistance from community organisations or individual community members was explained by other participants, who were conscious of the impact frequent requests for help may have on the busy lives of other members of their community. As the second Chin man explained:

Participant: As a newcomer, if I can ask, if I want to do something I can get advice from the Chin community or from some Australian people who can teach me, that would be great. But as a newcomer we don’t have someone who can teach or show the way so it is a little bit difficult.

Interviewer: So you don’t feel like there is anyone at the moment that fills that role for the Chin community in Melbourne?

Participant: There are not many Chin people who you can go to and ask advice. There are a few but they are busy with jobs. We cannot approach any time because they are busy with their work. Sometimes we can approach but not every time so that is the difficult part.\(^80\)

The contrast in the two quotes above may be due to the different communities to which each person belongs. Since the length of initial settlement for the Mon

\(^78\) Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.

\(^79\) Interview with Mi Chan, 22 February 2008, Canberra, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.

\(^80\) Interview with Chin man (No.2) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
predated the Chin by approximately a decade, the two communities and their associated organisations have varying levels of capacity and experience in negotiating government and other services. One clear commonality, however, is that very few of the Mon and Chin participants in this study had connections with the wider ‘Burmese’ community in Australia. While they may come together for candlelight vigils or combined church services on an irregular basis, most tended to socialize and find support within their own ethnic community. What this might mean for the expression of identity in the Australian context will be explored in the following section.

**Identity: To be Burmese or not to be Burmese**

To write about Burmese identities in Australia is to write about complex identity formations that are often in transition, are multifaceted and in no way stable. Through my interviews I was interested to explore the notion of a ‘Burmese’ identity and community in the Australian context. It became clear from the interviews that there are competing understandings of what it meant to be Burmese and that this varied, depending on ethnic background, level of involvement in political activism, age and reason for migrating to Australia. For some of the participants of this study what it meant to be Burmese had clearly been an important issue for self-reflection independent of the interview context. For many, the question had little or no relevance to their lives in Australia. For these people, finally having a space in which to express their own unique ethnic identity, without fear, was more significant, and a profoundly positive outcome of their decision to resettle.

The Burmese woman interviewed was one of the original AUSAID scholarship holders who were given visas and financial support to undertake tertiary education in Australia. At the time of taking up the scholarship she was living as a UNHCR registered refugee in Thailand where she had resided for the four years following her escape from Burma after the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. In her interview, she tended to use Burmese as an inclusive category that incorporated all people from Burma, regardless of ethnic background. She was ambivalent about the term Burmese as both a political and cultural category. She held on to Burmese citizenship for a number of political reasons; in particular, she did not want to risk political reprisal from the regime, who may have perceived her as Westernised. She
also continued to hold onto her Burmese citizenship despite years of discrimination in other Southeast Asian nations. In this context, regional politics played a part in denying her the right to say she was Burmese. As she explains:

Although I was trying to avoid applying for [Australian] citizenship I know that being stateless is quite problematic. Back in Thailand I worked in an executive role where I needed to be an activist and it involved a lot of travelling to other countries. It wasn’t so bad when I had to travel to Canada or Europe, but within Southeast Asia, gosh, these governments, you won’t believe the fuss they made. I can’t even call myself Burmese. I have to say Myanmarese or Myanmar. Especially the Malaysia government officials or you know, the embassy. They wouldn’t let me say Burmese. And I got really, you know, quite pissed with that.\(^{81}\)

Applying for permanent residency in Australia was a pragmatic and obvious choice for her: ‘But otherwise, no choice. We couldn’t go back to Burma and Thailand would not accept us back, so Australia is the only country that we can call home. Yeah, that was it, that was it.’\(^{82}\) Applying for citizenship was a significant step, however, and one that reflected practical concerns for her safety and her conflicted feelings about Burmeseness as a cultural category:

For my husband, having Australian citizenship is a security blanket. It will be for me too. I’m very, very sure about that. That’s why I don’t want to lose that privilege. I stubbornly don’t want to let go of being a Burmese citizen, but being Burmese does not make me feel safe at all. … That’s why I want to let go of being Burmese: it’s not just cultural but also to do with legal rights.\(^{83}\)

For this woman, Burmeseness as a cultural category is defined by ‘typical’ characteristics including being ‘[t]oo conservative, too traditional, too nationalistic’, an opinion informed partly by her gender:

[B]eing Burmese, especially being a Burmese women, you’ve got to be stubborn, … you have to be a survivor. … [B]eing Burmese is being too traditional and at the same time being a bit conservative.\(^{84}\)

\(^{81}\) Interview with Burmese woman [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 15 November 2008, Melbourne, Australia.

\(^{82}\) Interview with Burmese woman [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 15 November 2008, Melbourne, Australia.

\(^{83}\) Interview with Burmese woman [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 15 November 2008, Melbourne, Australia.

\(^{84}\) Interview with Burmese woman [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 15 November 2008, Melbourne, Australia.
In saying this, she was aware she was constructing a stereotype that did not represent all Burmese people. ‘Sometimes I … joke with my friends’, she noted, that ‘I really want to lose this bloody Burmeseness’, indicating her rejection of the stereotype rather than her identification as Burmese. Describing herself when she was young as ‘very nationalistic’ and ‘a good little socialist girl’, she saw herself as having an internal struggle with her Burmeseness, wanting to change in herself the ‘very very negative part of Burmese people, the way they think, the way they interact with others.’ This struggle has had external manifestations as well. This woman expressed frustration that the Burmese community in Australia, for example, exhibits strongly the traits she sees as characteristic of Burmeseness and this is something she wants to change.

She described herself as a ‘political animal’. Active in the Burmese political opposition for two decades, she is clearly aware of the identity politics that swirl around that movement, with particular reference to ethnic minority demands for recognition. Her use of Burmese as an inclusive category can be seen as a political act, one that relates to her commitment to what she terms ‘working federalism’ through which pro-democracy proponents of all backgrounds struggle together to achieve consensus and a shared way forward. She finds Thailand a more hopeful space than Australia in this regard, and is committed to returning to live in Thailand once she has received her Australian citizenship. In Thailand she believes people from Burma of all backgrounds are forced to work together to forge a better collective political future. This is in contrast to Australia, where communities can remain segregated:

In Changmai for example, I belong to the Burmese Women’s Union which is part of the Women’s League of Burma. The Women’s League of Burma is not perfect. But it is an umbrella group for twenty different ethnic women’s groups. If they have to make one decision it takes such a long time because of that. But for me, it is working federalism. … And I have never seen that before in any other organization. So that’s why, when I was in Changmai, I had a lot of hope about Burma changing. It have to come from us right? I don’t see that here. People are so segregated…Some people want to work through and break that barrier down. But it seems like…[i]t is not their immediate concern. They don’t have to live with one another. In Australia you can be segregated into suburbs. You can be segregated into Williamstown, Springvale, Noble Park. You don’t have to try.  

85 Interview with Burmese woman [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 15 November 2008, Melbourne, Australia.
86 Interview with Burmese woman [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 15
Like this woman, Nai Weang Muw, a middle-aged Mon man from Canberra, could be categorised as a ‘88 Generation’ activist. He arrived in Australia on a humanitarian visa in 1995, after many years of working on behalf of the New Mon State Party in the ethnic-insurgent controlled jungle areas in Burma’s east and in Bangkok. Unlike the Burmese woman quoted above, in his interview he adhered to a more restrictive definition of ‘Burmese’, tending to utilise it as if it were synonymous with ‘Burman’. His sense of Mon identity is strong and is linked with his understanding and experience of identity politics in Burma and within Burma’s pro-democracy movement. For Nai Weang Muw, the Mon’s position as one of the first cultural groups in Burma, their role in bringing Buddhism to the region, and their continued position at elite levels of Burmese society all make him proud to be Mon. I interviewed him on Mon National Day, as community members were setting up for the event to be held that evening. Our surroundings led to a discussion of the meaning of such events, both in Burma and in Australia. In Burma, Mon National Day was a valuable day in which the community could raise its flag and speak about their people in a way they would normally be too scared to do. They would talk about history and ‘you learn and your blood gets wound up. You refresh or encourage yourself to join in nationalism.’ In Australia, in contrast, he described the day as:

[A] gathering: coming together to commemorate what we did in Burma. Because here it is free – you can raise your flag speak whatever you want. … [H]ere it is about gathering, commemorating, and raising awareness of the Mon in the Australian community, and in particular with the government.

The importance of paying due consideration to a person’s or organization’s demand for recognition of their specific ethnic identity for the success of collaborative lobbying efforts in Burma (but also in Australia) was illustrated by Nai Wean Muw, Reflecting on his attempts to start an activist organization in Thailand, he stated:

Only Burmese and Mon tried to join in. We wanted to join as a group. Not individually because we didn’t want to mix up. We wanted to stand as ourselves and then we wanted to share representatives. But the Burmese didn’t want that. They wanted to mix up. I said, ‘No’. And then finally, this wasn’t a success so we stand alone by ourselves.

November 2008, Melbourne, Australia.
87 Interview with Nai Meang Muw, 23 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
88 Interview with Nai Meang Muw, 23 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
89 Interview with Nai Meang Muw, 23 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
Burmese and Mon are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories of identification. Not all members of the Mon community refuse to identify as Burmese, seeing Burmese as one layer of their multi-faceted identities. The personal and political investment in the Mon nationalist struggle also varies in intensity from person to person. The story of the two Mon sisters, quoted earlier in this chapter, perfectly highlights the complex nature of these issues. What is significant about these two young women is that neither has lived in Burma proper. Instead, both were born in Thailand and grew up in insurgent-held independent areas of Burma and also inside and outside of the official refugee camps in Thailand. The following exchange shows the willingness of the younger sister to claim a Burmese identity despite some ambivalent feelings towards Burma. But she does so while simultaneously identifying as both Mon and Thai:

For me, I feel Thailand is more than Burma. Because I’ve never been to Burma, I don’t know much about Burma. So I was born in Thailand and I was brought up in Thailand in the camps. So I prefer Thai more than Burmese. But I still use Burma, I am Burmese.  

When further prompted she stated: ‘Yeah, I still use Burma. I’m from Burma but I’m Mon. And I use Thai. It’s kind of fake Thai.’ Their responses implied that identifying with Burma or as being Burmese was a surface response to the question, ‘Where are you from?’ If confronted with any further questions on Burma, the younger sister said she would admit that she was actually born in Thailand and use that as a jumping off point for a different type of conversation:

**Older sister:** Because we have never been to Burma so we don’t know much about Burma. But we learn about Burma and about the Mon people and about culture, religion, yeah everything. I think we know a lot.

**Younger sister:** When they start asking what is Burma like now, that’s when we’re going to say ‘I don’t know because I was born in Thailand. So I’ve never been there.’ They say, ‘Oh really’, and we start a conversation about that.

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90 Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
91 Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
92 Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
Clearly for these two women, laying claim to a Burmese identity, if only in certain specific situations, lacks the political implications ascribed to such an action by the older members of the community discussed earlier. Although both sisters also have a clear affinity with Thailand, both also clearly identified as Mon and appreciated that being part of an established Mon community in Canberra enabled them to express their nationality and culture. Both denied feeling Australian, and while they enjoy the opportunities and rights that come with living in Australia and being Australian citizens, as the exchange below demonstrates, they strongly articulated their desire to maintain their cultural identity – described by the younger sister at this stage of the discussion as ‘Asian’ – and to just be themselves:

**Interviewer:** You said that you don’t really feel Australian. What does Australian mean to you? Who is an Australian person?

**Younger sister:** We are Australian now. We’re happy to be Australian because we’ve got the rights and we get a chance. We’re a lot of different from other people, like non-citizens. But we didn’t think ok, I’m Australian now and I’m kind of cool and stuff and you have to change the way we live and the way we dress up and what we eat –

**Older sister:** Yeah, we didn’t feel like that.

**Younger sister:** We didn’t feel that way. But most of the other people, they might change and say, oh we have to eat Australian food … we have to dress up like Australian people, and we have to… kind of like copy Australian style, what they’re doing. … We are happy to be an Australian citizen but we can’t change these things. 93

Nevertheless, their determination to continue cultural practices associated with food, language, dress and behaviour has not stopped them from coming into conflict with some members of the Mon community. Both experienced a level of surveillance of, and gossip about, their personal lives which was so unacceptable to them that they stopped participating in Mon community activities for over a year. An interesting element to this distancing from their community, which points to yet another layer of identification these women expressed, was the role played by their friendships with people of many different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Although frowned upon by some elements of the Mon community, both women took pride in their diverse friendships, arguing that it was their experiences in refugee camps in Thailand

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93 Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
that taught them to appreciate and interact with people from different backgrounds to themselves. The younger sister commented that, ‘[i]t made us more mature, like more responsibility…I met a lot of different kinds of people and issues in the camp. Like mostly issues, like um, different cultures and different…nationalities.’

The story of these two women clearly shows that identity for people from Burma is much more complex than an ‘either/or’ dialectic, with ‘Burmese’ as the central and controversial category of identification. In their work on migrant youth cultures in Australia, Melissa Butcher and Mandy Thomas argue that ‘youth culture is perhaps multicultural in the truest sense of the word, and young people are perhaps the most culturally competent of all demographics in this country’. The experiences of both sisters reflect the validity of these comments. The sisters believed that some members of their Mon community would also benefit from being more proactive about adapting to their new environment. However, despite the existence of some conflict, they conceptualized their local Mon community as for the most part supportive and tight-knit and appreciated that through it they had the opportunity to express their nationality.

Both sisters expressed an emotional attachment to Australia, and Canberra in particular but they appreciated their citizenship for largely pragmatic reasons, similar to many of the categories discussed in the work Batrouney and Goldlust. The older sister believes that their desire to maintain the ‘Asian’ aspects of their personalities and culture is a result of their relatively advanced age at the time of migration (late teens, early twenties). On the other hand, they see their brother, who was much younger when they arrived, as a ‘real Australian’. The younger sister again:

He’s a real Aussie, kind of like an Australian guy. Dressed up like a gangsta, real casual with girlfriends. And we are like, ‘we are your sisters, we are a lot older than you, but we never have boyfriends. How come you have girlfriends?’ He’s like, ‘I’m an Australian man.’ (Both laugh).

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94 Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
96 The younger sister described the Mon community as ‘a great and strong group’ and said ‘we work together well’. See: Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
98 Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.
When asked how they felt about the ways in which their brother has changed after resettling in Australia they reflected on the positional nature of his identity:

**Younger sister:** It’s ok, we don’t really mind.

**Older sister:** It’s ok, but we still say don’t forget your background and your culture. Whatever you’re doing, you have to think about family first and culture.

**Younger sister:** He’s just like, ‘Ok ok’. He’s like, ‘I’m involved with the Mon community’. So, for example, he played guitar last night [at the Mon National Day celebration] where he’s going to stay Mon style, Asian style. But when he goes out with his friends he’ll act more Australian.99

The concern of these sisters that their brother not forget his background and culture was expressed by many of the other participants in this study when reflecting on their identity, community and their expectations for the future of their children. This was particularly the case in a number of interviews with members of the Chin community. None of these people claimed a ‘Burmese’ identity – the culture they were concerned their children would lose was explicitly a Chin and a Christian one. None, however, rejected the ‘Burmese’ label outright. Hre Cem Sawm Hal understood why he or his community might be labeled Burmese but he preferred to be recognized by his ethnic identity: ‘When they call us Burmese they don’t know that the Chin exist so they are not wrong. But we prefer to be called Chin.’100

Hre Cem Sawm Hal expected that his children would need to find a way to integrate their Chin heritage with the ‘Australian way of life’ given their upbringing in Australia. He was primarily concerned they maintain family living arrangements and religious observance:

I want them to live according to our traditional culture. But at the same time you have to adapt to the Australian way of life. I want them to live according to our traditional culture because I don’t want to separate the family. In Australia once a person is over eighteen years of age they live separately from their parents so I don’t want them to live like that. In my country we look after our neighbours and our friends, we look after everything, so I want them to live like that but at the same time they have to adapt to the Australian way of life as well.

[Break for translation] I know that Australia is a Christian country but when we go to church I don’t see any young people there. So

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99 Interview with two Mon sisters [Names withheld at participants’ request to protect identity], 24 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.

100 Interview with Hre Cem Sawm Hal, 24 June 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
particularly, I don’t want my children to live like this. If they adapt to this way of life it will be sad for me and for the community as well.101

Similar concerns were expressed by Emanuel who stated: ‘We hope that the Chin community will grow and if we can we want to live together, we don’t want to separate. Even for our kids in the future, we hope they can stay very close.’102

For the first Chin man, a strong Chin community was an important mechanism for cultural maintenance. Strikingly, his concerns about integration for his children centered on whether they would be able to one day live comfortably back in Burma. He explained that ‘everybody wants to live in their native land’, and stated that:

This is a very important matter. It is good to have a community so we can live united and build the community [and] strongly educate our kids about our culture and traditions. … [O]ne day Burma may become a more secure country and one day the kids may want to go and visit their grandpa or grandmother or friends. If they maintain Chin culture and traditions then when they go to Burma they can integrate into society. So it is very important to have our community here.103

When he was interviewed in 2008, however, he was not hopeful that return migration would be possible in the near future, describing Burma as ‘only a place to live for soldiers’.104

Only one of the people interviewed for this study came from a non-refugee background. He arrived in Australia in 2010 to undertake postgraduate study in the medical field and described himself as coming from an average Burmese family in Yangon. He had little contact with the Australian-based communities from Burma during the eighteen-months he had been living and studying in Australia. His conception of the politics of ethnicity and identity in Burma did not reflect an understanding of the drive for political and cultural autonomy that has been the focus of many ethnic nationalist movements (and the wish of many of the other participants of this study). For instance, when asked ‘Do you consider yourself to be “Burmese”? How do you describe yourself?’”, his response posited ethnic and identity conflict as a

101 Interview with Hre Cem Sawm Hal, 24 June 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
102 Interview with Emanuel, 16 September 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
103 Interview with Chin man (No.1) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
104 Interview with Chin man (No.1) [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 3 July 2008, Melbourne, Australia. Conducted with the assistance of an interpreter.
past, not a present, problem for Burma. He said in the interview that:

Oh, Burmese, ah, Burmese… I describe myself as a Myanmar. Because in Burma there are about seven tribes. For example, it’s like in China. In China there are fourteen groups and they speak different languages. But their main language is Mandarin. So our main ethnicity is Burmese but there were also many others. But that was hundreds of years ago. But then they all intermarried and everybody became all mixed up. It is also similar in Australia. Maybe you might have Italian in you or English or British, but what do you call yourself? You don’t call yourself French-Australia or German-Australia, you call yourself Australian. So I am a Myanmar.105

His lack of awareness of the ongoing struggle for minority ethnic rights in Burma acts as a counterpoint to the above discussion. International student migration from Burma has roughly doubled in the last decade. Although the numbers remain small (383 in 2010-2011),106 and some may in fact have recourse to refugee status as Chapter Four highlighted, this group add another facet to the Burmese community in Australia. This international student’s perspective is not necessarily pro-government (at one point in the interview he described Burma as ‘rotten’),107 but it perhaps highlights an ‘average’ urban Burman person’s (mis)understanding of the politics of ethnicity in Burma. The final section of this chapter will look in more depth at the way that a minority ethnic group from Burma express and perform their identity in Australia.

Meeting the Mon: Community Development in Multicultural Australia

In 2007 I contacted the Australia Mon Association Inc (AMA) about my project and requested its assistance in approaching members of the community who might wish to

105 Interview with Burmese man [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 17 July 2011, Melbourne, Australia.
107 Interview with Burmese man [Name withheld at participant’s request to protect identity], 17 July 2011, Melbourne, Australia.
speak to me about their experiences of resettlement.\textsuperscript{108} The response was enthusiastic and immediate. I was invited to speak about my research at the tenth anniversary celebrations of the AMA the following month, which was a significant event for the community. I returned to Canberra on a number of other occasions over the following two years to attend and participate in AMA events, and to assist with the creation of a short video about the Mon in Australia as a way to repay the support given to my project by the association and the community as a whole.

In the past ten years, over 1000 Mon refugees have been resettled in third countries, including Australia, Canada, parts of Europe, the United States and New Zealand.\textsuperscript{109} The Mon community in Australia makes up a small proportion of this figure. In 2007, approximately forty Mon families, and one hundred and fifty Mon individuals, had resettled in Australia, with most residing in Canberra.\textsuperscript{110} A Buddhist monk of Mon background is located in Canberra, and his presence in that city acted as the original impetus for the settlement of many of the Mon families there. The AMA has acted as a focus organisation for the Mon community in Australia since its inception in 1997. Formed ‘to provide for the social welfare of the Mon community’, its four objectives encompass maintenance of culture, language and tradition, and the facilitation of engagement with wider Australian society and traditions.\textsuperscript{111} The AMA runs free Mon language lessons and cultural classes (particularly dance and music), a Mon language community radio program, a number of community social events such as Mon National Day celebrations, and assists with the sponsorship of other Mon refugees to resettle in Australia.\textsuperscript{112}

The Galbally Report (1978), credited with establishing the foundations of multiculturalism in Australia on both symbolic and practical levels,\textsuperscript{113} was predicated on the idea that ‘every person should be able to maintain his or her culture without prejudice or disadvantage and should be encouraged to understand and embrace other

\textsuperscript{108} The then AMA President, Nai Din Pla Hongsa, and Secretary, Nai Hong Sar Channaibanya, were instrumental in assisting with locating participants for this study.
\textsuperscript{109} Hongsar Channaibanya, “Perspective: The Mon Community: Ten years in Australia,” in Information for all Members in 2007 (pamphlet) Australia Mon Association Inc, Canberra, 2007; For an excellent discussion of the treatment of Mon refugees in Thailand in the 1990s, see: Lang, Fear and Sanctuary, 100-121.
\textsuperscript{110} Channaibanya, “Perspective: The Mon Community”.
\textsuperscript{111} Australian Mon Association Inc, Information for all Members in 2007 (pamphlet).
\textsuperscript{112} Australian Mon Association Inc, Information for all Members in 2007 (pamphlet).
\textsuperscript{113} Jupp, From White Australia to Woomera, 87.
cultures.\footnote{F. Galbally (chair), \textit{Migrant Services and Programs} (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1978), para 1.7.} While it provided for substantial increases in government services for migrants, it also encouraged ‘self-help’ to be provided by newly established ethnic-based organizations and a network of migrant settlement workers.\footnote{Nancy Viviani, \textit{The Long Journey: Vietnamese Migration and Settlement in Australia} (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1984): 161.} Continued government support for groups such as the AMA, which also assists with welfare programs through the provision of workshops on ‘community development’ workshops,\footnote{Australian Mon Association Inc, \textit{Information for all Members in 2007} (pamphlet).} highlights the longevity of this policy model.

The Mon community has also been actively engaged with members of other communities from Burma on the lobbying effort towards peace and democracy. A significant number of the organization’s committee in 2007, including the President and Secretary, could be categorised as ‘88 Generation’ activists, with many of them continuing their activist activities during the 1990s from bases on the Burmese side of the Thai border and in Thailand itself before resettling in Australia.\footnote{Interview with Nai Din Pla Hongsa, 25 February 2008, Canberra, Australia; Interview with Nai Meang Muw, 23 February 2008, Canberra, Australia.} While they could claim a ‘88 Generation’ identity, they tended to reject an identification with the generalized category ‘Burmese’, as I quickly found out when I presented the President and Secretary of the AMA with Burmese translations of my ethics material. For them, the descriptor ‘Burmese’ denoted the Burman ethnic group, and their disavowal of it and the Burmese language was linked to their stance on Mon nationalism and the historical Burman oppression of the Mon in Burma.\footnote{Conversation with Nai Din Pla Hongsa (then AMA President) and Nai Hong Sar Channaibanya (then AMA Secretary), 26 August 2007.} The intensity of their stance is reflected in the claims made about the history of the Mon nationalist struggle in Mon National Day statements distributed annually by the AMA at community events celebrating the occasion. Such literature outlines the two hundred and fifty year struggle for sovereignty of the Mon, ‘once one of the leading civilizations in Southeast Asia’.\footnote{International Committee for Mon National Day, “58\textsuperscript{th} Mon National Day General Statement,” 26 February 2005.} It is figured as a struggle that has occurred in the face of invasion, occupation and attempts to destroy their unique cultural identity by successive Burman kings, the British colonial administration and post-independence
governments mostly made up of the Burman ethnic majority.\textsuperscript{120}

In their efforts to maintain and practice their unique Mon cultural heritage, the AMA has developed a strong relationship with the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) government. In 2007-2008, Mr John Hargraves, the then ACT Minister for Multicultural Affairs, attended and spoke at many AMA functions. The apparatus of official multiculturalism has provided the community and the AMA with office space, and small amounts of funding for their language and cultural activities. During a conversation I had with Minister Hargraves during an AMA event, he emphasised the ongoing importance of multiculturalism for migrant groups, particularly in relation to the maintenance of language, and especially for those groups that are small in numbers (and resources), such as the Mon.\textsuperscript{121} He placed his support for the Mon community as Minister for Multicultural Affairs in the wider context of the ACT Labor government’s stance on refugees; this encompassed an active and positive policy agenda in opposition to the then federal Howard Liberal government.\textsuperscript{122}

The Mon have built up a profile within Canberra’s community and are active participants in events such as the annual National Multicultural Festival, where they have run popular food stalls and participated in dance and other cultural programs for many years. The AMA website states that participation in such events is about joining:

local, cultural and social activities to promote our language and culture under a policy of multiculturalism in Australia. We respect other cultures, share social concerns and engage with the wider community for the prosperity of this nation and people from all culturally diverse backgrounds.\textsuperscript{123}

A key member of the community, Banya Hongsar writes about what participation in such events means for him:

Mon music, dance and food impressed Australian. We hand out the paper of ‘What is Mon’, to our guests. They know us well by now. It is proud to be Mon and a day of full pride for all. We are united in the

\textsuperscript{120} International Committee for Mon National Day, 58\textsuperscript{th} Mon National Day General Statement, 26 February 2005; See also: South, Mon Nationalism and Civil War in Burma, 3-6, for an overview of the Mon nationalist struggle. Importantly, he argues that, unlike many other ethnic nationalist groups in Burma, the Mon are fighting not to establish a nation, but to re-establish one.

\textsuperscript{121} Personal communication with the author, 26 August 2007.

\textsuperscript{122} Personal communication with the author, 26 August 2007; See Chapter Four for fuller discussion of the Howard Liberal government’s policy agenda regarding asylum seekers.

spirit of proud to be Mon in Australia’s largest event in town. Our helpers and volunteers enjoy the day of pride and the unity of our community is acknowledged by the local. I am proud to be Mon and many all do.\textsuperscript{124}

At the events I attended, the sense of community created by the Mon in Canberra was evident. In February 2008 I attended the Mon National Day celebrations and spent the day and evening at the community hall where the event was held. Community members drifted in and out all day, setting up, preparing food and practising performances. Most Mon who attended were dressed in traditional dress and the family atmosphere was emphasised by the entertainment, which was exclusively performed by Mon children and youth. While this incorporated traditional costume and dance, particularly for the girls and young women, western influences could be seen in the rock music performed by many of the young men and some young women.

These events also highlighted the economic successes of members of the Mon community in Canberra. In his speech at the AMA tenth anniversary event, Minister Hargraves spoke about how hard-working the Mon community was. He contrasted their achievements to his own when, as a migrant to Australia in the 1950s, he spent his first five or six years living in a migrant hostel. Other speeches that night also emphasised the endeavour of the Mon and the place they had made for themselves in the Australian community and society. Nai Din Pla Hongsa, the AMA President, spoke at length about how ten Mon families had recently been able to buy a home (including his family). He described this as extremely difficult and therefore an important individual achievement for those families. He spoke of the achievements of the Mon community with caution, stressing that while economic times were good now, and jobs could easily be found, the community was in danger of being hit hard when there was an economic downturn. The final report of a long-term Companion House project, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition” (2009), recognized both the need for more Mon people to enter the workforce, but also for more sustainable career pathways to be forged. This project ran from 2006-2009 and therefore covered some of the global financial crisis period, but was able to report that over the course of the project, despite continued reliance by many on long hours of casual work, five Mon

parents had entered into traineeships in the construction industry, another in the medical profession, and sixty per cent of Mon women had also been able to enter the workforce.\(^{125}\)

The concepts of ‘community development’, ‘social cohesion’, and ‘social integration’ are important drivers for the work of the AMA.\(^{126}\) Individual members of the AMA, and the organization as a whole, were involved in the Companion House project. Community consultations were held by Companion House in 2004/2005 prior to the launch of the project. It found that the Mon were a ‘vibrant, young community with most working community members engaged in cleaning or hospitality work’. The project and the final report were strongly mindful of the gender dimensions of the community, shedding light on issues that went beyond the scope of interviews conducted for this project. Significantly it revealed that:

Mon women were particularly focused on the difficulties of parenting without the assistance of extended family and worried about their own capacity to raise their children in the very different context they found themselves in. The lack of confidence amongst many of these bright young women was striking, they were not confident of their English language skills; described themselves as inadequate and saw their status in the family as having diminished since they came to Australia.\(^{127}\)

Mon men also nominated issues around parenting in a new context as important challenges for them and so the project focused on ‘family and community strengthening’ by building ‘capacity in the Mon community to respond to early year issues, navigate and influence relevant service systems and to make cultural transitions as parents’.\(^{128}\) As a ‘strongly collective culture’ the Mon had ‘struggled with the new Australian environment where privacy, confidentiality and individualism are the key features of community life.’ The project thereby aimed to work with the community ‘to gain confidence and understanding of cultural expectations and to make connections to the community at large’.\(^{129}\)

The final outcome report of the project charted success in connecting members of the Mon community to key service provision agencies relating to employment and

\(^{125}\) Chan and Channabanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 23, 25.

\(^{126}\) Words taken from a speech by Siri Mon Chan, AMA Advisory Board Member, at the AMA Tenth Anniversary, 26 August 2007.

\(^{127}\) Chan and Channabanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 3.

\(^{128}\) Chan and Channabanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 3.

\(^{129}\) Chan and Channabanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 23.
education. The arrival of seven new families during the project period highlighted the increased independence of the community in accessing such services as they assisted the newcomers and navigated them without support from project workers.\textsuperscript{130} The report authors argue that, ‘Crucial to this new dynamic was a new confidence and sense of belonging which was equally important as the building of knowledge about what services can provide.’\textsuperscript{131} The project workers, both Mon men, had to actively work to ‘create an atmosphere in which women could talk without disturbing cultural norms’ during their work on the project.\textsuperscript{132} Despite reservations about the model, Companion House saw ‘the change in the role of women and communication styles in families’\textsuperscript{133} during the project as a significant measure of its success. In some respects, traditional gender roles within the Mon community were therefore also in transition. For example:

Women are now in a better position to share leadership roles within the family, particularly in decision making processes at home in areas such as family budgeting and children’s education. A traditionally male dominated culture is beginning to be seen as less productive in the Mon community and the imbalance of power between genders is increasingly recognized at home and in the community. A culture of discussion and listening between men and women started to grow in Mon families. … The development of women’s role and confidence has very positive practical implications, as many fathers are absent for large amounts of time working. Women and their children can then participate more actively in both the Mon community and broader community events; they are more mobile and have developed more confidence in their abilities to do some things independently. This trend includes a greater confidence to deal with community services and agencies.\textsuperscript{134}

This report is an indication of the important work done by NGOs such as Companion House in assisting new migrants to settle in Australia. By utilizing insider project workers, it is crucially able to shed light on issues, such as those around gender, that were not easy to access and explore for an outsider English-speaking researcher such as myself.

During his speech at the tenth anniversary event, Nai Din Pla Hongsar, then AMA President, reflected on his own sense of connection to Australia and Australian

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Chan and Channaibanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 8.}
\footnote{Chan and Channaibanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 22}
\footnote{Chan and Channaibanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 5.}
\footnote{Chan and Channaibanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 22-23.}
\footnote{Chan and Channaibanya, “Mon Community in Cultural Transition Project,” 23.}
\end{footnotes}
society. He and his family arrived in Australia as refugees with seventy dollars to their name. After securing a taxi in the civic centre of Canberra to travel to their new home, Nai Din Pla Hongsar was asked by the driver, ‘Sir, would you prefer to sit in the front seat or the back?’ This moment may seem mundane and unworthy of recall. For Nai Din Pla Hongsar, however, it was momentous. Having never before been addressed as ‘Sir’, he credits this sign of respect from the taxi driver with returning to him his human dignity, which had been robbed from him during his life as a refugee. It was also the moment that he decided he had found the home he had been searching for over the many years since he had fled his former home in Monland (located in the southern regions of Burma). What is also clearly important for Nai Din Pla Hongsar and other members of the Mon community is recognition not just of their humanity, but of their ethnicity. The AMA and community members have learnt to navigate the apparatus of Australian multiculturalism, which has allowed recognition and celebration of their ethnicity to occur in a manner that would be impossible in Burma and in neighbouring countries of asylum.

Conclusion

Interviews with Burmese migrants to Australia conducted for this thesis provide a picture of individuals and communities coming to terms with the basic, but by no means easy, challenges of making a new life in Australia. Having left a country and societies with few cultural or linguistic similarities to Australia, many of the interviewees struggle with the essential day-to-day interactions that can create a sense of being ‘settled’. Difficulties speaking English are a significant barrier hindering the ability of those interviewed to negotiate key health and welfare services. English-language ability also impacted negatively on access to employment and educational opportunities. Some of those interviewed expressed frustration about the inadequacies of settlement services, particularly English-language training; for others, government support, such as welfare payments that allowed them to pursue vocational training, exceeded the expectations they had of life in Australia prior to arrival.

The resettlement experiences of Burmese groups in Australia share similarities with other refugee groups that arrived in the past, such as the Vietnamese most of
whom arrived in the late 1970s and the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{135} Nancy Viviani argued that for the Vietnamese learning English and accessing employment were ‘the most important manifestations of settlement’, but that government provision of English-language training had ‘limited impact’.\textsuperscript{136} Despite almost two decades of refinement of settlement program provision, the experiences related by the participants in this study illustrate that the attainment of English-language proficiency, and therefore access to training and employment opportunities, continue to be a concern for newly arrived refugee groups and impact on their ability to access key services and participate actively in Australian society.

Many of those interviewed live, for the first time, within a society that encourages the maintenance of their unique cultural and linguistic heritage, and this was clearly a profoundly positive element to their experience of resettlement. This is not to say that identity issues for Burmese people in Australia are uncomplicated or unproblematic. As this chapter has demonstrated, contests over identity, that have their origins in Burma’s complex history of ethnic relations, continue to shape self and group identifications and community interactions. Those from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to identify with, and seek support from, their ethnic communities. Most expressed ambivalence about the term ‘Burmese’, and, while understanding why they may be described as ‘Burmese’ in Australia, preferred that their unique ethnic identities were recognised. In her work on the Vietnamese community, which is also internally ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse, Mandy Thomas argued that investigating questions of identity is important ‘because representations of migrants often contain the assumption that identity is somehow homogenous, coherent and stable’\textsuperscript{137} Her nuanced analysis of Vietnamese identity in Australia disrupts such notions. Likewise, this chapter has explored the complex interplay of groups, representations and politics that are encompassed within the term ‘Burmese’.

\textsuperscript{135} Viviani, \textit{The Long Journey}, 1.
\textsuperscript{136} Viviani, \textit{The Long Journey}, 196.
\textsuperscript{137} Mandy Thomas, \textit{Dreams in the Shadows: Vietnamese-Australian Lives in Transition} (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999), xiii.
CONCLUSION

As this thesis was being researched and written, Burma was undergoing significant political change. International condemnation of the regime’s response to the Saffron Revolution in 2007, the referendum on the proposed constitution in 2008 (which was held on schedule despite the devastation wrought by Cyclone Nargis only days previously), and the widely discredited national elections in 2010, has now given way to cautious optimism that real progress is possible. In early 2011 the SPDC handed over power to President Thein Sein and the military backed United Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which won seventy-six percent of the non-military allocated seats in the 2010 election. Since then, Thein Sein has adopted practices and policies that indicate a reform agenda, including: removing pre-publication censorship of Burma’s media; meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi and amending political party registration laws to allow the NLD to contest by-elections in April 2012; and releasing many political prisoners (although by no means all, and often in politically strategic circumstances such as during the recent visit of U.S. President Barack Obama). Despite these positive trends, Hong Kong based Burmese academic Yin

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Hlaing Kyaw has cautioned that ‘the democratization process … still has a long way to go’.\(^6\) Significantly, he sees the relations between the government and ethnic nationality groups as a key site of tension that may allow space for hardliners in the government to successfully advocate for the scaling back of reform.\(^7\) Similarly, the International Crisis Group is gravely concerned about the potential for intercommunal strife in Burma as ‘nationalism and ethno-nationalism rise and old prejudices resurface.’\(^8\)

Inter-ethnic communal violence and conflict between the tatmadaw and armed ethnic minority nationalist groups has remained a fixture of Burma’s political landscape since the 2010 elections. In mid-2011 the 1994 cease-fire between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the military broke down. In the ensuing conflict 75,000 people have been displaced and at least 10,000 refugees have fled across the border to China. Altsean-Burma (Alternative Asean Network on Burma), a prominent human rights advocacy organisation, claims that human rights abuses continue unabated in the region, including ‘extra judicial killings, rape of women, arbitrary arrests, torture, forced displacement, the use of human shields, forced labor, and the confiscation and destruction of property.’\(^9\) It argues that the renewed violence has its roots in dissatisfaction with the pace of change in ethnic minority areas, and in particular the failure of the 2008 constitution to ‘promote and protect the rights of ethnic nationalities and … provide for a federal system that would allow local participation on key issues such as land administration, natural resources, justice, health, and education.’\(^10\)

The outbreak of inter-communal violence between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya people in Rakhine State (previously Arakan State) in June 2012 also illustrates the continuing importance of struggles over identity and history in present day Burma. The violence that was sparked by the alleged rape of a Rakhine woman by three Rohingya men, and which escalated with the retaliatory murder of

\(^{6}\) Kyaw, “Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar,” 211.
\(^{7}\) Kyaw, “Understanding Recent Political Changes in Myanmar,” 213.
\(^{10}\) Altsean-Burma, “The War in Kachin State.”
ten Muslim pilgrims, and has since led to the displacement of 115,000 people.\textsuperscript{11} Most of these people are Rohingya who have been isolated by government officials in camps ‘for their own protection’, in terrible conditions.\textsuperscript{12} Although the UNHCR has urged Burma’s neighbouring countries to keep their borders open, Bangladeshi authorities have pushed back thousands of fleeing Rohingyas, arguing that Bangladesh is already ‘overburdened’ with Rohingya refugees and cannot take any more ‘under any circumstances.’\textsuperscript{13} Hundreds of Rohingyas have drowned after making the decision to cross the Bay of Bengal by boat in the hope of reaching Malaysia.\textsuperscript{14} One group, having been rescued by a passing cargo ship, became involved in a standoff with Singaporean authorities who refused to grant them entry or asylum, in circumstances reminiscent of the \textit{Tampa} affair in Australia in 2001.\textsuperscript{15}

That the Burmese authorities have allowed a number of anti-Rohingya protests to be held across the country\textsuperscript{16} indicates that the violence in Rakhine state is motivated by more than competition for scarce resources in what is one of Burma’s poorest areas.\textsuperscript{17} Despite assurances from President Thein Sein to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that Burma would consider new rights for Rohingyas (including birth registration, work permits and permits to travel across the country, all of which are restricted at present), in November 2012 the government began a registration program for the Rohingya population to enable them to identify those that may be


\textsuperscript{16} Altsean-Burma, “‘Burma Bulletin,” October 2012, 3. This document lists the protests that occurred in October 2012, some led by monks, and most expressing opposition to the presence of Rohingya in Burma.

\textsuperscript{17} United Nations, “Rakhine Response Plan (Myanmar),” 3-4.
illegally residing in Burma. It has been reported that many Rohingya have refused to cooperate with this process after attempts by Burmese authorities to force them to register as ‘Bengali’, a tactic they fear would permit their automatic deportation from Burma as ‘illegal’ migrants.

Many reports on this issue from Australian media outlets have provided a nuanced and critical understanding of Burma’s history of inter-ethnic conflict (in contrast to the majority of the press coverage examined in Chapter Four). In 2012, Zoe Daniel, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) correspondent for the region, outlined the position of many Buddhist Rakhine (and ultimately the Burmese government) when she stated that they ‘object to the term Rohingya, because they say it represents a made-up claim to Burmese ethnicity. They call them Bengalis, claiming they're invaders from neighbouring Bangladesh.’ In a format that allows for more in-depth reporting, another ABC program, Rear Vision (2012), investigated the historical roots of this viewpoint and in doing so, drew links back to Burma’s colonial past. The analysis in this program rested primarily on the opinions of two Australian academics, Nick Cheesman and Jane Ferguson. Both outline the fraught politics around racial and ethnic identity in Burma, and the conflicts that have arisen as a result. For Cheesman, the central issue for the Rohingya is the problem of indigeneity, or who can and cannot claim to be one of Burma’s national races, and therefore, who does and does not have the right to reside in Burma’s territory.

burden to prove eligibility for full citizenship under Burma’s 1982 citizenship law lies with the individual who must show that their ancestors resided in Burma prior to the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1823. As Ferguson argued, this is extremely problematic in what is essentially still a peasant society. For her, the fault lies with the categories of identification used by the Burmese government to define who belongs in Burma – their rigidity results in a failure to recognise the true diversity of Burma’s population.22

Both Cheesman and Ferguson argued that although categories of belonging in Burma became more restrictive after the military coup in 1962, the concept of national races that underpins much of the identity politics in Burma has its antecedents in the British colonial census system and its preoccupation with classifying Burma’s people by racial and linguistic background. Similarly, this thesis has argued that the manner in which the British administered Burma has given rise to racial understandings of national identity that continue to have very real consequences in the present. The current situation faced by the Rohingya is an extreme example of this, illustrating that conflict over identity in Burma continues to have life-altering negative consequences for millions of ethnic minority people. For the Rohingya and other ethnic minority people, both in the present and in the past, competing claims about identity have also acted as a significant push-factor for (forced) emigration, and have thus played a significant role in shaping the migration between Burma and Australia.

The separate administration by the British of majority-Burman areas and predominately ethnic-minority areas allowed for the differential treatment of ethnic groups in colonial Burma, contributing to inter-ethnic and religious tensions and the rise of ethnic nationalist movements in the early twentieth century. By the 1930s, influential national movements in Burma such as Dobama Asiayone linked race with culture and language to define Burmeseness, excluding the claims of ethnic minority groups that were equally anxious to maintain their unique linguistic and cultural heritage. This meant that subsequent attempts by post-independence governments to inculcate a ‘pan-Burmese’ identity among Burma’s varied people did not succeed. In addition, the refusal of authorities to consider ethnic minority demands for a

decentralised federal system, or outright succession, led to increasing levels of insurgency and instability in the country in the middle of the twentieth century. The language of national belonging became increasingly restrictive after the military coup in 1962, and those considered foreign faced discrimination and in some cases forced emigration. With their biological and cultural connections to Europe, the Anglo-Burmese were particularly vulnerable during this period and became the first group to migrate to Australia in significant numbers.

Despite the eruption of nation-wide pro-democracy protests in 1988, and the emergence of a plethora of opposition groups such as the NLD, the governance of Burma has changed very little for almost five decades. Ongoing control of Burma during this period by the military was partly justified by the long-running state of insurgency of many ethnic minority nationalist organisations. The events of 1988 did act to refocus international media and political attention on Burma however, and this exposed the extent of human rights abuses occurring in Burma that have been largely perpetrated by the military against both political opponents and ethnic minority people. In conjunction with the UNHCR, Australia began to recognise that many refugees from Burma needed options for permanent resettlement and since 2006 in particular, the Burma-born population of Australia has increased rapidly. As the stories explored in Chapter Four illustrated, these people belong to both ethnic minorities and the Burman-majority group and have been granted permanent protection for either persecution suffered in response to specific anti-regime or pro-ethnic nationality actions undertaken by them or their family, or persecution suffered as a result of belonging to a specific ethnic or religious minority group.

This thesis has demonstrated that competing understandings of what it means to be Burmese have been transferred to the Australian context. Responses to this category of identification vary most acutely according to ethnic background, but are also influenced by the level of involvement in political activism in Burma and Australia, age at resettlement and reason for migrating to Australia. For many people from Burma of ethnic minority backgrounds, finding space and government assistance in Australia to either celebrate and maintain their unique culture and language, or interact and identify with multiple groups and identities (such as the Mon sisters discussed in Chapter Five), has been a profoundly positive element to living and developing a sense of home in Australia. Practical challenges to settling are also clearly important. While refugee settlement services provided by the Australian
government have developed over a number of decades, many people from Burma interviewed for this thesis expressed varying levels of dissatisfaction with this system and its ability to aid them in accessing training and employment opportunities and in fostering greater connections within the broader community.

Like all migrations, migration from Burma to Australia has been shaped by a complex interplay between push and pull factors. Central to the development of the Australian nation in the late nineteenth century was the conscious cultivation of a national identity bounded by race, specifically a white race. Developed largely in response to anxiety about invasion and racial annihilation by what was often envisaged as an over-populated and aggressive Asia, the result was a series of immigration restrictions that prevented many people from Burma from migrating to Australia for many decades. These restrictions essentially made a fiction of British subject-hood by preventing the free movement of subjects within the Empire. It was not until the policy governing the entrance of people of mixed descent into Australia was relaxed in 1963 that migration from Burma to Australia began to increase. Archival documents explored in Chapter Two showed, however, that racial rather than cultural markers of identity continued to be prioritised in immigration selection decisions for a number of years after the policy change. They also illustrated the important role that the Colombo Plan played in forging future pathways to migration for people from Burma once policies allowed for more non-Europeans to settle permanently in Australia, again from the mid-1960s. During this period, Inter-departmental disputes between External Affairs and Immigration about important issues such as the brain-drain highlighted that Australian bureaucrats were aware of Burma’s identity politics, and the adverse outcomes this had for people from minority ethnic backgrounds, particularly the Anglo-Burmese, Chinese and Indian populations.

Australian resettlement policies at this time also impacted on the lives of migrants from Burma, specifically their ability to express and maintain the Burmese aspects of their identity. The discussion of the memoir, *White Butterflies*, in Chapter Three highlighted the real impact that prevailing discourses of race and nation had on the ability of migrants to speak and to feel fully at home in Australia and in their identity. Australian migration settlement policies of assimilation, integration and multiculturalism all impacted on the ability of McPhedran to articulate his identity completely at various times. Given his predominately European appearance, the white Australia policy was not a barrier to his migration to Australia, however it was an
outward manifestation of a society in which any expression by McPhedran of his ‘Burmeseness’ during the initial decades of his resettlement was seen as unwelcome. In the act of writing White Butterflies McPhedran publicly laid claim to his Burmese identity, and was finally able to bring together all the pieces of himself.

The last legislative remnants of the white Australia policy were dismantled in 1973 by the Whitlam ALP government. That year Australia also signed the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, officially providing a basis for the resettlement of non-European refugees for the first time. During the 1970s Australia developed a distinct humanitarian migration stream through which increasing numbers of people from Burma migrated to Australia from the early 1990s. More recently, Australian responses to asylum seekers and attitudes towards immigration from Asia, indicate the continuing strength of national identity constructions and their impact on the cultural and political centrality of its majority white population. The acute anxiety expressed by both political and ‘ordinary’ members of this group about the arrival of asylum seekers by boat (both during the Howard government and more recently during Gillard’s prime ministership), indicates that the founding fear of invasion from Asia continues to have salience in Australia.

Any history of a migration as diverse and of such long duration as that of the Burmese to Australia can only ever be a partial one. This thesis is no exception. Across the time of writing this thesis, the Burma-born population in Australia has grown by sixty-five per cent. The findings presented here have been limited by a range of factors, including the willingness of interviewees to come forward, ethical considerations concerning discussion topics, availability of archival material relating to some periods under review, time and material resources (traveling to Western Australia to interview the sizable number of Burma-born migrants in Perth, for example, was not an option), and a dearth of previous studies upon which to build. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the findings presented in this thesis provide a foundation for other scholars to look in more detail at the variety of experiences of Burmese

24 Western Australia was a popular destination for early groups of Burmese migrants. At the time of the 2011 Census this state had the largest share (thirty-four per cent) of Burma-born people in Australia, ahead of Victoria with twenty-six per cent. Nevertheless, among more recent permanent migration, Victoria has been the most common destination for Humanitarian migrants at forty-two per cent. See: Department of Immigration and Citizenship. “Country Profile: Burma (Myanmar).”
migrants in Australia, to pay greater attention perhaps to differences between ethnic and language groups, to gender dimensions, to the experiences of children and the second generation as they emerge, to schooling and educational outcomes, to social and economic mobility and to the settlement outcomes of those more recent visa applicants caught up in Australia’s immigration detention regime.25 For each of these, however, this thesis will provide an important foundational understanding of how histories and discourses of race and nation have shaped constructions of identity in both Burma and Australia, and the significant impact they have had on the pattern of migration from Burma to Australia. This thesis has critically examined what it means to be Burmese: a term that can act as a monolithic identity that elides the complex ethnic, cultural and political allegiances that tie the people of Burma together, and which has been used uncritically in most of the few studies of this migration previously published. In interrogating the diverse histories, politics and migration journeys that lie behind the term ‘Burmese’, this thesis provides a more nuanced understanding of this community. In doing so, it offers an intervention in contemporary Australian debates about asylum seekers. As the first long-form historical account of migration from Burma, it also adds a new strand to the complex range of ethnic and national histories that have constructed Australia.

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