

# MULTICULTURAL and MULTIFAITH BENDIGO: RETURNING to its PAST in a DIFFERENT WAY

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## INTRODUCTION: FAMILY HISTORY

My birth took place here in Bendigo just before the end of World War II after my parents' wedding in Sacred Heart Cathedral in the previous year. My mother, from hardy McNamara and McEvoy stock and still alive at 93, immediately took me back to the family wheat and sheep farm at Myola East. We always stayed with our grandparents during school holidays and for a short time in 1953 we lived on the farm whilst our house was being built in Melbourne. For a short time, I attended the long closed Myola East Primary School.

My grandparents and great-grand-parents, as well as their siblings, are all buried at the cemeteries at Runnymede, just outside Elmore, and at Colbinabbin. The family presence had begun in 1868 as part of the huge Irish migration movement during the 1860s. One hundred years later, in 1968, as a young student, I was the first of my family to make the return trip to Ireland where I viewed a letter written to my great-great-grandparents in 1868, sent from Heathcote. These Irish parents never saw their adult children again nor any of their grandchildren – such were the times when boat travel was long, arduous and expensive and well before the telephone, the mobile, Skype and Facetime. Because Australia was so far away, migration from Ireland was always a more thoughtful affair.

In the letter, the adult children complained about the heat and the flies – nothing has changed! As well, they were making arrangements for their

youngest sister to be sent from oppressed and impoverished Ireland. They were also commiserating with their parents who had just been evicted from their family home by an English family. My ancestors have never been admirers of the British. Of course, it was the Irish, in particular, who, with oppressed and occupied Ireland as a warning and inspiration, prevented the realization of the class-ridden vision of the squattocracy of Australia as the little Britain of the South (O'Farrell 1987). My family world at Myola East was a world far from multicultural realities and yet the beginnings of Bendigo are nested in such realities.



*View of Sandhurst (Bendigo) circa 1880*

## THE MULTICULTURAL BEGINNINGS OF HISTORICAL BENDIGO

The City of Bendigo began, of course, with the 1850s gold rush though it occupies land on which lived the Jaara Jaara people who speak the Dja Dja Wrung language. They are the true explorers, discoverers and first settlers of this land. The majority of the gold diggers who arrived after the first discovery early in 1851 were from the United Kingdom, including the Cornish miners who brought their knowledge of mining technology. With them came Rev. James Jefferey, a Wesleyan Methodist preacher, who, under the shade of an ironbark tree at Golden Point, warned his male flock of the wicked world, the perils of the flesh and the snares of the devil. Whilst there was much cooperation amongst the miners, there were also sectarian tensions between the British Protestants and the Irish Catholics which would reach down to the 1970s, including after the Labor split in 1955 (Cusack 1973; McDonagh 2001).

But there were miners from many other countries. In November 1857, there were said to be 32,544 on the Bendigo goldfields. The 1,266 Germans had such a strong presence that they were able to build their own club. The most prominent was Dr. George Henry Backhaus from Paderborn in Prussia, the first Catholic priest who arrived late in 1852 (Cusack 1973; Tampke 2001). Accomplished pianist, scholar, conveyer of alternative medicines, he was an astute businessman, laying the foundations of the Sandhurst diocese (Cusack

1973) to become a bastion of Irish Catholicism though this took several decades to happen. Soon after, the evangelical Lutheran clergy began arriving, not just for the German but for the Scandinavians who had fled their impoverished lands. The Scandinavians in Bendigo were mainly Danes and some Swedes, who also were concentrated around the McIvor diggings at Heathcote (Broome 1984; Martin 2001).

The riches to be found drew many others. The 118 French were prominent, including a few vigneron. There were some Italians, especially the Swiss Italians from the valley of Ticino, who drifted up from their concentration around Daylesford where some of their descendents still remain. There were Poles and Hungarians, often fleeing the revolutionary times in Europe. The American presence, both black and white, was often significant, bringing with them new mining techniques from the Californian goldfields (Cusack 1973). There were also a few Maoris and Malays together with some Mauritians (Duyker 2001). There were also Jewish miners, probably from the U.K., who built a weatherboard synagogue in 1856 before erecting a more substantial building in 1872 (Rutland 2001).



*From The Boomerang of February 11, 1888.*

Of course, the biggest non-U.K. group were the 3,629 Chinese (11% of the 1857 total), including two women (Broome 1984), their presence now remembered in the Golden Dragon museum. The size of the Chinese group, the rapidity of their arrival, fear of the contamination of the priceless British heritage, their opium smoking habits and the unfounded rumors about their sexual practices led to the demand in 1854 by some European miners that they be expelled from the goldfields (Cronin 1982). Soon, there was established a less-than-successful Chinese protectorate, in imitation of the earlier and equally unsuccessful but well-intentioned Aboriginal protectorate, but the overall impact was to lead to the 'yellow peril' fear that still lies deep in the Australian psyche and the White Australia policy which was not fully abrogated until the arrival of the Whitlam government in December 1972. It is only now, even though it was always inevitable, that Australia is finally facing up to its Asian destiny now that it is being accepted and incorporated into the

many worlds of Asia, especially given that Chinese has now replaced Italian as Australia's second language.

From the 1860s, the quite diverse population of Bendigo stabilized before going into decline with the decline of the goldmining industry though offset by the growth of small industry at the end of the 19th century. Amongst many developments a very small group of Spanish migrants pioneered the growing of tomatoes at White Hills and Huntly and some of Victoria's earliest tomato sauce and canning factories were built in Bendigo (Priestley 1984).

Despite its diverse multicultural beginnings Bendigo became an Anglo-Australian bastion right throughout the 20th century. But only now has that begun to change. Even though one of the initial policy aims of the huge and successful post-WWII migration program was to settle immigrants in rural and regional areas, it was not successful in this aim and Bendigo did not receive any significant numbers of these immigrants except for the U.K. groups and groups of Dutch and Germans and some Italians during the 1950s.

## BENDIGO'S CURRENT POPULATION PROFILE

In demographic terms, Bendigo has begun to change, especially since the turn of the millennium. In any nation and city, immigrants and refugees are catalysts for change. They can bring, if given the space, dynamism and innovation, most especially through their transnational links not only with their home country but with their diasporic links across the world. According to the 2011 census data, compared to Victoria's other major regional cities (Ballarat, Greater Geelong, the Latrobe Valley, Mildura and Greater Shepparton), Greater Bendigo with 100,618 permanent inhabitants is the second largest after Geelong but with the lowest proportion of overseas-born persons (7.0%) and the lowest proportion of overseas-born in non-English-speaking countries (3.5%) (see Table One). Over the five year period, its growth in migration was second only to Shepparton. But this has begun to change quite significantly, especially from the non-English-speaking countries. Each of the six major regional cities in Victoria has developed and is developing its own demographic profile though there are reasonably close parallels between the Ballarat and Bendigo profiles, both cities having similar historical narratives.

**Table One: Migration Profile of Victoria's Major Regional Cities**

Name of City	Total	% Change 2006 - 2011	% OSB 2011	%OSB 2006	\$NESC 2011	\$NESC 2006
Ballarat	93,502	10.0	8.7	7.8	4.6	4.0
Greater Bendigo	100,618	8.0	7.0	6.0	3.5	2.6
Greater Geelong	189,028	6.2	15.9	15.8	9.4	9.1
Greater Shepparton	53,207	3.6	13.2	10.9	9.9	7.7
Latrobe Valley	64,626	3.5	13.7	13.2	7.9	7.3
Mildura	45,834	1.0	10.1	9.5	7.0	6.4

**Source:** 2011 Census Analysis of Victorian Multicultural Commission; OSB = Overseas-born; NESC = Non-English-speaking Countries

The multicultural profile of Bendigo is characterized by the following nine features:

(a) The influx of almost 1,500 persons in the 2006 – 2011 period has been quite diverse led by those Karen refugees from Myanmar, including those born in Thailand in the Thai refugee camps (279 persons) followed by India (201), England (122), China (117), New Zealand (103), the Philippines (87), South Africa (57) and Sri Lanka (51). In other words, the non-Anglo component is growing at a faster rate.

(b) A little surprisingly, the influx has come from Asia and the English-speaking countries, and not from Africa (except for South Africa) nor from Latin America and nor from the Middle East – immigrants and refugees from countries in the Middle East and Latin America have always focussed on urban settlement in the capital cities, especially Sydney.

(c) More surprisingly, and very contrary to the national trends, have been the rises, albeit quite modest, of the ageing, European-born communities from the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Malta though Bendigo's Greece-born population has declined.

(d) There are some interesting gender imbalances, especially and not surprisingly within the Filipino community with Filipino women presumably married to Australian men, and, to a lesser extent, with more Chinese women than men. The Filipino female population is distributed right across Australia in line with distribution of the general population except for small concentrations in isolated mining towns (Cahill 1990).

(e) In terms of languages, Chinese, with 374 speakers of the Mandarin and Cantonese languages, has been, since the turn of the millennium, Bendigo's

second language after English, thus reverting to the 1850s profile. Chinese is followed by Karen (283), Italian (240), Greek (155), German (132), Arabic (121), Hindi (109) and Tagalog (107). Regarding English language proficiency, the 2011 census suggests that there is a serious problem with the Karen and, to a far lesser extent, among the Chinese speakers.

(f) In Christian and secular humanist terms, the Catholic Church as the largest religious group in Bendigo has grown significantly in line with the national trend with declines in numbers in the Anglican Church, Uniting Church, the Salvation Army and the Churches of Christ. Over the five year period, there has been a very large growth in those who describe themselves as Christian (+63%). A large increase (+27%) has occurred in those who say they have no religion, somewhat higher than for the rest of Australia. But this is partially offset by a decline (-18%) who did not state their religion on the census form.

(g) It is often said that Australia is becoming more secular but such an observation is only half the truth. Australia is also becoming more religious, but religious in a different way with the emergence of multifaith Australia. This is also true of Bendigo even though the percentages are still quite low. There are significant numbers, in order of size, of Buddhists (+64% since 2006), Hinduism (+94%), Islam (+48%) and Sikhism (+625% but from 4 to 29 Sikhs) and a drop in the small Jewish contingent (-19%).

(h) The schools of Bendigo, unlike in previous decades, have especially since 2000, had to cope with newly arriving immigrant and refugee children and their Australian-born siblings, especially the 130 under 18 born in Thai camps and Myanmar itself, and the 51 children born in India.

(i) In terms of overall age profile, in the key 26 – 44 age category, the following groups have their biggest group in that particular category: New Zealand, India, Philippines, China, South Africa, Myanmar, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. On the reverse side, except for the New Zealanders and the Sri Lankans, these groups have very few aged over 65. Ethnic aged care is an issue for the English-speaking immigrant communities and for the Dutch, German and, to a lesser extent, Italian groups.

In reflecting on these special features, the arrival of the Karen refugees since 2007 has been a game-changer which resulted from the policy push to populate regional and rural areas, begun slowly in 1996 at the initiative of the immigration minister, Phillip Ruddock, in his address to the Centre for

Economic Policy Research. It has been implemented much more in Victoria than in New South Wales. The policy was driven by several factors: (1) many regional and rural areas were being depopulated, especially as the young moved to the city for post-secondary education and job opportunities and for the sheer excitement of the city (2) because of this depopulation skill shortages in many occupational areas had begun to appear and (3) the relative population pressures upon the metropolises of Australia, particularly Sydney.



*Karen Refugee Children, Bendigo, 2012*

## IMMIGRANTS AND A REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Unlike in the days of my great-grandparents, contemporary immigrants and refugees have strong and deep transnational links through air transportation and the internet. These links can have important trade and commercial implications which ought to be incorporated into any business development strategy. Part of the Australian definition of multiculturalism passed with bipartisan support in 1989 has been related to economic development, usually now called productive diversity, and utilizing the knowledge and skills, including linguistic skills, of immigrants and refugees for the economic well-being of Australia.

Let us focus firstly on the Karen community. Myanmar, a resource-rich country, is in the process of change in its move away a socialist military dictatorship which caused the Karen to flee. Myanmar has significant problems with its minorities which in the medium term can probably be defused only through

economic development. Myanmar is an important country because it is the land bridge between the world's two most populous countries of India and China and because it is China's land bridge to the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal. China is wishing to develop its south west region around the city of Kunming which borders on Myanmar. Rapid infrastructure development is occurring on both sides of the border because for China it means that its trade goods do not have to be transported the long way around from its ports on the East China Sea through narrow sea lanes. It would be mere speculation to determine what opportunities lie there for Australia and, not least for Bendigo but it is worth thinking about.

Bendigo has growing Indian and Chinese communities, who have emigrated from the world's two largest countries – India will surpass China in the mid 2020s as the world's most populous country. Both countries have strong business traditions, and this is an aspect that should be encouraged in developing business links with these two countries.

## INTEGRATION AND SOCIAL COHESION IN BENDIGO

As a developing multicultural community, Bendigo has challenges, not least whether to continue expanding its multicultural mix and expanding its population. The gold towns were built on optimism and there are no reasons not to have optimism now. Australia now has a world-wide reputation for its enormous capacity for a systematic and well-ordered immigrant and refugee settlement program. But migration is always a risk, individually and collectively. In all immigrant and refugee groups there is always a small group (0 – 6%) for whom the decision to migrate ends in disappointment, if not disaster. Expectations may not have been met. The support may not have been enough. Opportunities may not have been available. They may not have had the psychological resources or the key adaptability attributes to cope. The spectre of the defeated immigrant who has lost control of his or her life haunts all migration movements.

Inter-ethnic and interreligious harmony and social cohesion are important for Bendigo. There is no agreed definition of social cohesion but generally descriptions revolve around a shared vision held by a well-functioning core group or community that acts in a continuous and interminable process of achieving social harmony. Markus (2009) for his work based his notion of social cohesion on the five domains:

(1) creating a **sense of belonging** incorporating shared values, trust and identification with the nation state of Australia and the City of Bendigo. This first task at all levels is to create continuously a sense of belonging to the City of Bendigo and its hinterland. Australia has made citizenship relatively easy to obtain though the return to four years' residency period before becoming eligible to have naturalization was a step backwards.

(2) ensuring **social justice and equity** in terms of access to government services and funding. The second task is to ensure, firstly, that all immigrants and refugees are treated justly, with equity and equitably, including that the youth and the adult young receive their fair share of the local resources and are provided with multiple opportunities to develop themselves and their talents through educational and occupational pathways.

(3) encouraging **participation** with regard to the social, economic and political life of Bendigo. This third task is to ensure participation by all groups in civic and social life as part of creating this sense of belonging. Civic leaders as well as members of parliament need to attend the many varied ethnic and religious community functions as part of creating the sense of welcoming and participation that lie at the heart of social cohesion.

(4) bringing about **acceptance** of newcomers and minorities and working against racism and discrimination. Welcoming includes resisting racism, bigotry and discrimination – the police need to be part of this strategy. A particular problem here is the workplace. The workplace is an important element of intercultural relations. Secondly, there is the increasingly multicultural nature of workteams where management must be conscious of the need to appropriately supervise staff and adopt multicultural management techniques.

(5) forging a **sense of worth** incorporating people's general happiness, life satisfaction and future expectations. People in our cities must all have a sense of their personal worth as individuals, generally happy, generally satisfied with their lives and with achievable and realistic expectations.

*In conclusion of this overview, I wish to make two final observations:*

Firstly, regional Australian cities such as Bendigo are being asked to welcome, accept and integrate skilled migrants, refugees and family members. If this is a major challenge, it is also a major danger. The danger is the creation of a rural refugee underclass. It would be a worry if these refugees were to be a high source of unemployment or if they were employed only in unskilled, dirty work positions. This is why serious government resourcing together with strong business and entrepreneurship support together with community support.

Secondly, we should not underestimate the resilience of refugees nor the creativity of all types of migrants in creating or finding business opportunities. They come as catalysts for change in which the global is being made local.

In all population movements, immigrants and refugees in the medium- to long-term have to find their occupational and identity niches. It may be working in a particular industry, whether primary or secondary. For the skilled migrant as well as the refugee settling in regional, rural and remote Australia, will their hopes be fulfilled or their dreams be shattered? It depends on them but it depends more on us as we broaden and deepen the great vision of a multicultural Australia.

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Born in Bendigo, Des Cahill spent part of his childhood at Myola East near Elmore. He now is Professor of Intercultural Studies at RMIT University in Melbourne, researching cross-cultural issues, multicultural societies and interfaith relations for the past 35 years. He is chair of Religions for Peace Australia and co-president of Religions for Peace Asia. He led Australia's successful bid to stage in Melbourne the 2009 Parliament of the World's Religions, the world's largest interfaith gathering, and was subsequently its honorary Program Director. In 2010, he was awarded the Order of the Medal of Australia for "his services to intercultural education and to the interfaith movement".

Since the events of September 11th 2001, he has played a major role in researching and bringing together the various faith communities in Australia and across the world through his research and community activities. He currently chairs the Australian chapter of Religions for Peace International, the world's largest interfaith organization, and represents Australia on the



executive committee of the Religions for Peace Asia – in October 2008, he was elected its Deputy Moderator by the Governing Board representing the 18 member nations including Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Japan and the two Koreas. He is a member of the Australian Partnership of Religious Organisations (APRO) and of the Victoria Police Multifaith Advisory Council.