

Lest We Forget

John Lack

Greg Gow

The Oromo in Exile: From the Horn of Africa to the Suburbs of Australia
MUP, \$29.95pb, 185pp, 0 522 84990 3

James Jupp

From White Australia to Woomera: The Story of Australian Immigration
CUP, \$29.95pb, 254pp, 0 521 53140 3
\$99hb, 0 521 82424 9

Jane Duncan Owen

Mixed Matches: Interracial Marriage in Australia
UNSW Press, \$34.95pb, 187pp, 0 86840 581 7

THE ARRESTING COVER of James Jupp's important *From White Australia to Woomera* features the distraught faces of the children of detained asylum seekers. As the blurb puts it: 'There never has been a greater need for a sober, historically informed yet critical account of immigration policy in Australia.' This is indeed a book for the times. The nation's left/liberal intelligentsia — much-disparaged by the right as 'the politically correct chattering elite' — has been in a state of profound shock ever since John Howard and Philip Ruddock swept the government to victory in November 2001 on the back of their hardline policy on asylum seekers. The *Tampa* episode, the 'Pacific solution' and the rising desperation of the families incarcerated and punished at Port Hedland, Maribyrnong and Woomera are surely all too familiar to readers. Labor's experimentation with temporary protection visas for refugees in 1990, and the introduction of mandatory detention for the 'boat people' in 1991, had been followed under Howard, from 1996, by the freezing of humanitarian programme levels, reductions in social security support and an increasingly draconian detention regimen. But none of these developments quite prepared observers for the Howard government's subsequent demonising and torturing of these wretchedly desperate folk in the final stage of their attempt to find sanctuary from evil Middle Eastern régimes. And nothing, perhaps, was more shocking than the government's dry-eyed response to the drowning of refugee women and children at sea.

Why, Jupp asks, did this government sacrifice Australia's international reputation and credibility in order to thwart

such a small surge in onshore arrivals? How did a Minister of Immigration once regarded as friendly and humanitarian — Ruddock, after all, had been one of a handful of Liberals to cross the floor of parliament in 1988 and distance himself from Howard on these very issues — 'end up operating a system as rigid as anything attempted since the end of White Australia [in 1966]?' Jupp's answer comes as no surprise: John Howard decided to arrest his flagging electoral fortunes by chasing the one million votes gathered by One Nation in 1998. This strategy went back a decade when Howard first attempted to stir fears of non-European immigration and of the allegedly divisive effects of the policy of multiculturalism. Howard's decision to break the bipartisan, non-discriminatory approach to immigration and to backtrack on the tolerant and open approach to the expression of diverse cultural values 'marked the revival of racist and xenophobic popular attitudes'. But Jupp's brief as an historian goes further than this (hardly surprising) verdict on recent events.

In addition to surveying thoroughly and perceptively the shifts in immigration and refugee policy over the thirty years since 1972, Jupp takes a long view to provide a perspective on recent happenings. He points out that by the time Australia's 150-year history of state-sanctioned and -assisted immigration came to an end in 1982 the nation was an immigrant society in the shaping of which the state had played an almost unique central role: 'Australia is ... the product of conscious social engineering' to maintain British hegemony and 'white' domination, to strengthen Australia economically and militarily by mass immigration, and to preserve state control of these processes, notably through the mechanism of the assisted passage. 'No other society, at least before the creation of Israel in 1948,' Jupp observes, 'has been so consciously shaped by public authorities and resources.' The critically important change from the 1970s was the abandonment of assisted mass migration for a new emphasis on exclusion of the unwanted migrant and selection of the desired. The rationale for immigration changed from the postwar 'populate or perish' (a desperate search for numbers and factory labour) to 'economic rationalism' (and the courting of 'quality' migrants in a globalising world distinguished by free movement of capital and labour).

We might have expected such insights from Geoffrey Blainey at the height of his powers, before his lamentable 1984 statements on Asian immigration discredited him as a balanced observer of Australian public policy. But it seems to this reviewer that Jupp's general observations cannot fully explain the apparent reversals of policy in the 1990s, notably the abandonment of what he calls 'the humanitarian aspects of previous policies'. Jupp's (quite proper) insistence that Australia's 'strong xenophobic, racist and insular traditions ... have always influenced immigration policy' lacks force, because his otherwise fine monograph gives too little attention to the formative years of the postwar immigration programme, those immediately after the Pacific War.

Without a fuller appreciation of the rationale for Labor's immigration programme under Curtin and Chifley, we simply cannot understand that party's abysmal misjudgments under Keating and Beazley.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasised that postwar immigration was designed to boost economic, and specifically industrial, development to prepare Australia for an anticipated second war with Japan. Under Menzies, from 1949, immigration was touted as Australia's road to survival in Asia when the Cold War inevitably turned hot (as it was thought to have done in Korea in 1950 and Vietnam in 1965). Fear of Japan, and then more generally of Asia, was absolutely fundamental to the scale, funding and expanding sources of immigration. Only fear of Asia made possible the acceptance, and then encouragement and financial assistance, of non-British European immigrants. The replacement of the settlement ideology of assimilation by multiculturalism under the Whitlam and Fraser governments in the 1970s recognised that hegemonic British Australia was being transformed into something European. Jupp's chapter on refugees and asylum seekers, while valuable, seems mistaken in not emphasising that refugees have never been a truly accepted part of postwar immigration.

Jews fleeing Hitler received a niggardly response before the onset of war in 1939; Calwell's humane and generous resettlement programme of Holocaust survivors was dogged by virulent anti-Semitism; and the Minister could only sustain his Displaced Persons scheme (from 1947) through the subterfuge of parading before the cameras the most photogenic blue-eyed and fair-haired of the Baltic peoples. The DPs, indeed, were not strongly identified as refugees at all and, when the programme ended in 1952, Australia had no settled, long-term plan to accommodate refugees. As Jupp reminds us, those fleeing communist régimes in the 1950s and 1960s were treated in an ad hoc fashion. Self-selecting refugees had no continuing part in the Australian immigration story; white refugees could be accommodated at a pinch, but the few thousand wartime Asian refugees who had fled the Japanese terror in 1941–42 had been expelled after the war, along with their Australian-born wives and children, regardless of the role they had played in the war effort and their generally exemplary record as residents. This treatment of the people scorned by Minister Calwell as a 'recalcitrant minority' remains perhaps the most shameful episode in Labor's postwar history, meriting comparison with Liberal Minister Ruddock's recent disgraceful behaviour.

Attitudes to non-Europeans long remained deeply racist within the ALP, Labor being the last major party to abandon the White Australia Policy. The change from prohibition of non-European migration to a more flexible, selective approach was a change made only on paper; the numbers of non-Europeans arriving remained negligible. Only the end of the Vietnam War and the consequent refugee crisis in South-East Asia put White Australia effectively to the test. Calwell, as

leader of the Labor Opposition, had fearfully predicted the humiliation of the USA in Vietnam; Whitlam, totally at sea in 1974–75 under relentless Liberal pressure that pushed him to two elections in eighteen months, angrily and colourfully rejected the notion of large-scale refugee settlement by anti-communist Vietnamese. Yet the conservatives, under Malcolm Fraser, did face the moral logic of their pro-war record. On the whole, the Liberals acted pretty honourably on the Vietnamese refugee question. Labor, however, remained ambivalent, some spokesmen attempting to make political capital out of the influx of 'boat people', and of refugees arriving under orderly departure and family reunion programmes.

The historical record is important: John Howard is not the first Australian parliamentary leader in the postwar period to play political football with refugees. When he came into Parliament in 1974, Howard had excellent teachers in Whitlam, Hayden and Hawke whose example must have given him valuable pointers. The record that Labor and the left have to face fairly and squarely points to the party's deep ambivalence on Asian and Third World immigration and refugee settlement. It offers clues to Labor's fatal error of introducing mandatory detention in 1991 and Beazley's faint-heartedness in 2001. Labor must jettison the comforting myth that it inaugurated a postwar immigration programme notable for its generosity of spirit and humanitarianism. In reality, Labor's postwar immigration programme was conceived in fear and long underwritten by racism. If we do not understand that the programme was more a product of hard-nosed pragmatism than of idealism and humanitarianism, then recent events will continue to be fitted into a misread historical context.

Jupp also offers possibly the best short account of the rise of multiculturalism as a policy since 1973, and of the sustained attack upon it over the last twenty years. It is rather difficult, however, to understand the vehemence of the attack if Jupp is correct in insisting that the maintenance of migrant cultures has not been a central feature of a policy that has always stressed the supremacy of existing institutions and the English language. This is not how June Duncan Owen understands multiculturalism in *Mixed Matches*, her study of what she terms 'interracial' marriages in Australia. Owen is herself a partner in a 'mixed race' marriage. Of Anglo-Scots background, she married a Malaysian of Sinhalese and Indian parents in 1956, when such marriages were uncommon and frowned upon. This perhaps accounts for the readiness of more than 100 couples or partners (and some of their children) to give the warm and frank interviews that form the heart of this intriguing book. *Mixed Matches* examines the complexities and human drama of interracial marriages since 1788, against the background of the construction and eventual demise of the White Australia Policy. There are historical chapters on 1788–1950, and chapters on marriages involving Aboriginal partners, as well as extensive treatment of marriages between Australian and overseas-born partners for each of the five decades to the 1990s. Oddly, *Mixed Matches*,

despite its chronological structure, doesn't attempt to tell us whether public attitudes to 'interracial' marriage have altered over time. What the book does demonstrate is the almost unremitting hostility that many of these marriages faced, from both Australian and overseas families. We are reminded that racism remains endemic in Australian society. Social history demonstrates this point more readily than Jupp's study of immigration policy. Without an understanding of the continuing power of racism, the scapegoating of Middle Eastern refugees remains incomprehensible.

Owen concludes that, apart from dealing with pressures from disapproving in-laws and the public, relationships in 'interracial' marriages have required a degree of negotiation over and above that of ordinary marriages, especially where cultural differences have been pronounced. Her book would benefit from some formal definition of terms, and class and social status are ignored as variables. And is it not wrong-headed to persist in calling these marriages *interracial*, when race is such a deservedly discredited concept, and when these marriages are really inter-ethnic or cross-cultural partnerships, of varying complexity? Owen's insistence that the term multicultural be abandoned in favour of 'multiracial' as a descriptor of the realities of modern Australian society seems misguided, even confused, as does her plea that migrants eschew their homeland cultures for some sort of blended mainstream Australian culture.

To this reviewer, such language and formulations play into the hands of those who insist that persistent cultural differences lie behind physical appearance. There is no gain-saying, however, the fascinating and engaging nature of the interviews that dominate this study. Owen reminds us, very forcefully, that behind immigration and refugee policy there exist human lives and dramas.

This is reinforced by Greg Gow's distinguished work of participant observation, *The Oromo in Exile*, a book that conveys 'the pain of exile' experienced by the Oromo people who fled Ethiopia and now live in Melbourne's inner-western suburbs of Sunshine, Footscray and Kensington. The story of persecution, escape, flight, refugee-camp existence and eventual reassembly in Melbourne is told in a series of asides as Gow explores how the Oromo enact in story, song, music and ritual their sense of nationalism, and sustain their notion of home with the assistance of modern technology such as the VCR and cassette player. The chapters of *The Oromo in Exile* seem at times like a series of barely linked reports and seminar papers, and social theory is occasionally over-thick, so the book is not always an easy read. Parts, however, have an astonishing power to move, and the whole is an extraordinary product of a five-year, and ongoing, project. Gow has taken the ethnography of refugee and migrant settlement and adaptation to a new level of sophistication. The author, his family, his supportive colleagues at Victoria University, and his Oromo confidantes are to be congratulated on this fine study, brought to book so elegantly by MUP.