

## **Materials, trade and Empire: Australian wool research, marketing and promotion in the twentieth century.**

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There is great potential for design history to embrace and interrogate the networks and resultant interchange between the centre and the periphery. One area where design history has made a contribution is through studies of imperialism, especially, of the British Empire. Such design history texts have enriched our understanding of transportation, architecture, products and visual communication in the context of global consumption. Related studies within museology have enabled historians to situate these same artefacts within the development of intellectual ideas. (1) Studies of international exhibitions and propaganda have often been central to these histories where there has been an emphasis on discovery, cultural identity and trade. (2) These histories have often crossed over with studies of the history of science and technology. Empire trade was supported by scientific and technological innovation; and in turn the resources found in distant parts of the Empire underpinned manufacturing industries in Britain. In Australia colonialisation and industrialisation were experienced concurrently.

It is possible to bring another emphasis to this cultural narrative through an understanding of ecology and environment within the British Empire. Recent accounts of Imperial forestry have shown the relationships between conservation and commodity production, with environmental ideas emerging from scientists in the colonial periphery of European empires. (3) Ecological readings of Australian history have recognised the long history of the use of fire to cultivate the land by indigenous peoples in Australia. From this realisation it has been argued that Australia is the oldest landscape with Europe as the 'new land'. (4) This challenges assumptions about centre and periphery.

The Australian wool industry has played a part in the creation of one Australian historical myth - that of the settler taming and civilising the vast Outback 'wilderness'. There was great pride in 'living off the sheep's back' and an idealistic nationalism evoked by images and narratives of the pastoral frontier evolved during the twentieth century. (5) The wool industry was both nationally and internationally significant and an integral part of a white settler Australian national identity that was not critical of Britain. (6)

This paper will now discuss these issues in more detail through an account of design and promotion of Australian wool during the latter part of the twentieth century. This mutual interdependence of centre and periphery is part of that story. Wool was first exported from Australia to London in 1804 by Captain Macarthur who successfully bred Merino sheep in Australia. During the 19th century wool became an important colonial export. Wool markets then developed in Australia as part of a first phase of globalisation. From the 1860s until the Second World War, wool accounted for

one third to half of Australian exports. (7) Consumption of Australian wool expanded during the 20th century to include Continental Europe, North America and Asia as well as the UK.

As part of the dynamics between centre and periphery it is noticeable how there was a shift from a belief in science and the future through to an increasing sense of place. This can be seen as a modern/postmodern shift and, in wool marketing, evidence of a diminishing emphasis on production to a greater awareness of consumption. I will first consider the role of research through the C.S.I.R. (Commonwealth Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) and then the work of the Australian Wool Board from 1936 and the International Wool Secretariat (IWS) from 1937.

### **Research and Development**

The development of research was aimed at efficiency and standardisation with responses to British developments at the periphery. After the First World War, in 1916, the British Government established the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). The Australian Commonwealth Government set up an Advisory Council of Science and Industry which became the Institute of Science and Industry in 1920. In 1926 the Commonwealth Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) was set up to provide research for agricultural industries in Australia. After the Second World War CSIR became the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO).

During the 1920s rural industries, rather than manufacturing, were promoted in the dominions and CSIR's research agenda was expected to increase exports or import substitution and were related to animal pests and diseases, food, forests and fuel. (8) The Empire Marketing Board was constituted in 1926 and upheld this agenda. However it additionally encouraged an interest in Empire goods in the UK. One striking example of how the wool industry was seen in this context is shown by a poster design by A.B. Webb for the Empire Marketing Board in 1928. A. B. Webb's design for a lithograph, *A Flock of Merino Sheep* depicted the sheep against burnt orange earth and a vast sky, with a stockman in the distance and on horse-back cutting across a distant horizon that is only occasionally broken by a scattering of Eucalypts. This poster was in a set that also included forestry and wheat farming. A. B. Webb travelled between England and Australia and brought a combination of both sensibilities to his designs but with his calm and restrained use of form and flat colour, based on a European aesthetic, reinforced the pastoral version of the Australian landscape.

These developments reflected the colonial relationship with Britain as it was only gradually that wool research embraced textile manufacture or consumer related issues. Additionally, textile manufacturing in Australia remained dependent on importing equipment and technological know-how. Australia was expected to remain an exporter of raw materials rather than a manufacturer or contributor to design. This suggests that such relations between centre and periphery were central to definitions of modern design.

During the later years of the 20th century Australia contributed internationally to wool promotion through organisations such as the Australian Wool Board from 1936 and the International Wool Secretariat (IWS) from 1937. These activities were part of a general world-wide trend towards collective marketing and promotion of agricultural products but the wool growers were also responding to the growth in synthetics by concentrating on cooperative research and promotion. From the 1930s there was competition from rayon then in the 1940s wool was challenged by an expanding range of artificial textiles, especially nylon. There was only a small local market so the promotional activities were predominantly related to exports.

### **The International Wool Secretariat**

The International Wool Secretariat, brought together by Australia, New Zealand and South Africa in 1937, had a budget of £50,000 sterling. (9) They hoped other countries would join the organisation. The early publicity was aimed at a broad audience of fashion designers, manufacturers and the public about the qualities of wool. Exhibition stands were set up at trade fairs and international exhibitions and showrooms opened in London and Paris. The Secretariat funded research that was carried out in the UK. The budget increased after the Second World War and gradually other nations joined during the 1950s. In 1957 the Australian Wool Testing Authority (AWTA) was established by the Commonwealth Government in response to requests from the Australian Wool Industry, and was created as a Statutory Authority reporting to the Minister for Primary Industry. The Australian Wool Board was reconstituted in 1962 with the AWTA as a separate division within that organisation from 1963. The Australian Wool Commission was created in November 1970. The AWTA retained the same status within the Australian Wool Corporation when it was formed by the amalgamation of the Australian Wool Board and the Australian Wool Commission on 1st January 1973. In 1991 the functions of the Corporation were divided between three newly established entities, the Australian Wool Realisation Commission, the Australian Wool Corporation and the Wool Research and Development Corporation. Further changes in the 1990s led to the formation of the Australian Wool Research and Promotion Organisation (AWRAP) and its merger with the International Wool Secretariat in 1994-5. In 1999 the Woolmark Company became independent and two organisations, the Australian Wool Services (AWS) and Australian Wool Innovation (AWI), were set up in 2001. In 2007 AWI acquired the Woolmark Company.

Throughout all these changes in organisation the focus was on international promotion. Probably the most significant design development was the completion held by the IWS in 1962 to find a suitable design or symbol for wool which could be used and recognised internationally. Francesco Sarrogli, an Italian graphic artist, won the competition and his design was then introduced as the distinctive symbol for the promotion of wool throughout the world. An international brand identity for

wool was developed using the 'Woolmark' from 1964. In 1971 the Woolmark blend was introduced to support wool consumption in product areas being dominated by man-made fibres.

Several themes ran concurrently within the promotion of wool during this period. One was the association of wool to its origins and the use of Australian farming or images of the landscape to provide associations with purity and naturalness. Wool garments were also shown in Outback locations by fashion photographers, such as Helmut Newton and Henry Talbot, to create a contrast between sophisticated garments and an unsophisticated 'other'. Or designers appropriated iconic Australian imagery, such as koalas or indigenous motifs. The work of Jenny Kee, a designer of highly coloured and patterned wool knits, falls into this category. Another theme was the use of international designers for its promotion. A third, more recent theme has been the association of wool with sport and uniforms for Olympic Games.

### **The International Outlook in the 1980s**

The Bicentennial celebrations of 1988 provided an opportunity for wool to be showcased in fashions shown at the celebrations. Nine international designers and six Australian designers showed collections using wool at a cost of \$4 AUD million. The emphasis in these promotional exercises has been on the quality of fine wool. The AWI celebrated the first commercial shipment of wool from Australia to England in 1807 with an exhibition *Fashion from Fleece* in 2007. This celebrated merino wool through historical documentation and through high-end fashion using wool. The exhibition showed a strong interest in documenting the contribution of design to the Australian wool industry, which included assessing its cultural significance and design achievements in the international context. The exhibition highlighted personal narratives that showed the contribution of talented individuals to the Australian design profession, in particular the work of fashion photographers, Helmut Newton and Henry Talbot. It was also a marketing initiative for the use of wool for the Australian fashion industry, showing the work of Jayson Brunden, Josh Goot and Collette Dinnigan. The international context was shown through connections with Italy. (10)

During this period of greater internationalisation, an emerging design confidence was evident Australian design where wool was integral to narratives of national identity. A greater emphasis on consumption and lifestyle became evident in the use of wool for sports and leisurewear alongside a claim for the 'naturalness' of wool and, more recently, an awareness of the ecological issues for sustainable wool production. Wool has therefore obtained symbolic capital within the context of postmodernism and consumption, which is nevertheless underpinned by technological and materials research. The wool industry in Australia is both celebratory of Australian cultural identity and aimed at influencing and working in international markets.

It is important to see the history of wool promotion and marketing against understanding of imperialist history, the mutual dependence of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ markets and eventual independence. Australia is central to this narrative for wool, providing over a quarter of the world’s wool as the world’s largest producer of wool.

## NOTES

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