

The Well-Springs of Identity

VAN RAVENSTEIN, Willem, *All Australians Now*, Victoria Park, WA: Hesperian Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-85905-295-5, 213 pp.

Although a modest publication, *All Australians Now* is undoubtedly a very important book, not just if you are of Dutch or Lithuanian heritage, it is a book that ought to be read by all Australians. Before justifying such a bold claim, perhaps I had better explain what the book is about. *All Australians Now* is the autobiography of Willem van Ravenstein, a *nom de plume*. It is his personal account of being born and brought up in Tilburg, North Brabant, in the south of the Netherlands. North Brabant was at that time predominantly Catholic, on the periphery of mainstream Dutch culture. At age 10 Willem came to Australia with his parents, arriving in Fremantle in Western Australia in January 1950. The succeeding years are, at a superficial level, a typical migrant story, the struggle to securely establish oneself in a new country, to adjust to an alien culture and to succeed. Willem and his family endured all the vicissitudes one comes to expect, but Willem seized his opportunities as the education system expanded and developed, passing through high school, technical college, teachers' training, university, and on to academia, marrying the delightful Rosamund, herself a child Lithuanian migrant, along the way. I could relate to much of this, being myself an Australian-born child of Dutch migrants, growing up in the country in Western Australia. Many places and people in Perth mentioned revived the pleasure of long forgotten memories. I too was infected by the same desire for knowledge and learning. But there is a darker side to the story, a sociopathic, avaricious, boorish father, a mother seemingly with serious personality issues, unwilling, unable to adjust, family secrets deviously buried. Yet Willem succeeds in spite of his parents undermining and lack of support.

In reading this I was reminded of two great works, Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, and Albert Facey's *A Fortunate Life*. Many readers would know *Matilda*, made into a popular movie. Willem's parents seem rather like Matilda's parents, only worse, they are not some caricature but cretinous, highly manipulative and problematic. Facey's *A Fortunate Life* is an Australian classic, the triumph of a child subject to physical abuse and neglect who overcomes the odds. *All Australians Now* has echoes of such a journey, but one marked instead by emotional abuse, a more insidious form of ill-treatment. But where *All Australian Now* really shines relates to the issue of identity, and so is a much richer, layered and more perceptive story than the relatively simplistic *A Fortunate Life*.

Von Ravenstein describes the very challenging, and at times excruciating, process involved in establishing his identity. It was something I could relate to, in milder form. Being born in Australia one osmotically absorbs the indigenous cultural identity, but with foreign born parents providing a constant cultural counterpoint. If one comes, as Willem did, with a partially formed cultural identity, that identity has to be effectively dismantled, deconstructed, and then a new identity consciously reconstructed. While Willem was grappling with this process, his parents were, away from their own families and communities, divesting themselves of their native cultural and religious pretences and taking on a range of new pretensions. The insightfulness, the self-awareness, the rationality shown by Willem in spite of his youth and the emotional challenges of teen years, is quite remarkable.

One other element of this book was a great revelation for me. Von Ravenstein provides interesting perspectives on Australian culture, how it was changing, and being changed by the wave of post-war immigrants. But the important point here was that curiously, Australian identity itself was a paradox in 1950. Australians ostensibly had a British culture, but in reality a second-hand British culture, and 'Australianness' was subsumed, really only emerging itself as Willem's new found identity was forming. This insight is just one of the many reasons why every Australian, be they of foreign heritage or native born, should read this book.