

# GREEKS IN AUSTRALIA

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## Introduction

Diaspora forms a significant characteristic of modern world history and it is created either by voluntary immigration of people leaving their homeland in an effort to achieve a better life for themselves and their families, or as a result of expulsion from their homeland because of political reasons or conflicts. Greece has a long and complex migratory record which stretches back to ancient times and lasting for centuries. Greek diaspora played an important role and sometimes was a determining factor in the history of the Greek nation. The immigration which occurred in modern times, especially after WWI, has greatly affected the history of Greece and has been an integral factor of the political economic and social evolution of the modern Greek state and modern Greek society. It has also affected the formation of the societies of the host countries such as USA, Germany, Australia and Canada by enriching them demographically, socially, economically, politically and culturally (Vryonis 1993:12).

The number of Greek immigrants is massive. It is estimated that one third of the entire Greek population (between 3-4.5 million Greeks) lives outside the geographical boundaries of the Greek state (Hasiotes 1993:11-12). Despite their numerical power, however, Greeks remain minority groups and thus try to survive and preserve their ethnic, religious and cultural identity using various means and creating trans-state relations. This attempt to fight against assimilation is very important for the diaspora itself, the country of origin and the host country. The Greek diaspora sustains its identity through community organisations, culture, religion and language.

In Australia, a country which belongs to the "New Worlds" with a predominantly Anglo-Saxon culture and language, lives an important

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part of the modern Greek diaspora. The first Greeks were sent to Australia as convicts by the English courts in 1829. Voluntary immigration started in the 1850's during the "Gold rush". Throughout the 19th century, however, the number of Greeks immigrating to Australia was very limited. Those who arrived in this continent came mainly from the islands and did not intent to stay permanently. Their aim was to acquire wealth and return to Greece,<sup>1</sup> so the number of Greek immigrants in Australia up until 1901 was only 977 people (Harvey 1988). Massive immigration to Australia occurred after WWII, specifically in the 1960's, because of the destruction that Greece suffered during the German occupation and the civil war which followed and because of the immigration programmes applied by Australia.<sup>2</sup> The post-war immigration rapidly increased the number of Greeks who formed organized communities and transformed community life.<sup>3</sup> Today, the number of Greeks in Australia is estimated between 375 000- 420 000.<sup>4</sup> For most of them Australia offered security, social stability and opportunities for economic or personal success. Vryonis argues that the peculiarities of the Anglo-Saxon institutions fitted the highly individualistic and regionally oriented trades of the Greek society. He supports the view that many Greek characteristics such as self governance, self-family-cultural prides, the strong desire for education, personal initiative, and self improvement found rich, legal and corporate underpinnings in the Anglo-Saxon legal and political system (Vryonis 1993:13-14). Thus, although the first Greeks in Australia experienced hardships, alienation and at times a hostile environment, gradually overcame the initial problems of their migration, they acquired material rewards and moved up on the social and economic ladder. They integrated successfully into the Australian community by accepting and influencing its way of life. At the same time they tried to sustain their distinct ethnic identity by developing ethnic community structures. However, even today in multicultural Australia, where ethnic diversity is officially recognized, they remain part of the "other", the "ethnics".<sup>5</sup> In their own communities their leaders are entirely first generation Greeks whilst the participation of the second generation is almost non existent. The result is that they try to preserve a culture that existed in the society they left behind at

the time of their migration. As Mary Kalantzis argues, to be a Greek in Australia is not simply a matter of maintaining the culture of the homeland. "It is a dialogue between tradition and changing social context; between historical experience and visions of the future. In this dialogue, the dominant culture and the culture of 'ethnic community' are always reshaping and redefining each other" (1997:30). Looking at Hellenism from an Australian perspective, she stresses the need of development of a postnationalist sense of common purpose where the oppositions of Australian/ dominant versus Greek/ marginal are abolished and both cultures are recognized as equal (1997:31).

This volume aims to analytically explore aspects of the settlement of Greeks in Australia where they form a significant community, *paroikia*. The knowledge developed through these papers will enable us to understand and re-evaluate the past, as well as further reflect critically on our future prospects in this country. It helps us to understand not only the Greek history and culture, but also that of Australia because of the cultural exchange between the two communities and the formation of an ethnically diverse society. The interest Australia has is reflected in its policies such as the policy of multiculturalism. The latter was introduced in an effort to socially and culturally accommodate the different ethnic groups that exist in this country. Furthermore, the knowledge of the past and present will help us understand our strengths and weaknesses in maintaining our ethnic identity and interacting with the wider Australian community. As we move from the first to the second, third and succeeding generations we must redefine our ethnicity and develop new strategies for its continuity.

There are a number of papers included in this volume which have approached the subject Greeks in Australia from different perspectives such as: the history and settlement of Greeks in Australia; issues of identity; education; literature; politics. All perspectives are interrelated and interwoven. They have to do with the presence of this diasporic group in Australia, its attempts for integration into the wider Australian community and at the same time its struggle to maintain its ethnic and cultural identity and survive into the new millennium.

## **I. History of the Greek Immigration in Australia**

This first section deals with the history of Greek immigration in Australia. Anastasios M. Tamis's paper gives an account of the pre-WWII period. It refers to the Australian migration and settlement policies, their characteristics and to the formation of a culturally diverse society. It continues with reference to the problems and the achievements of the Greeks as well as to their impact on government policy formulation and implementation. Finally, he expresses the view that due to their economic prosperity, professional achievement and successful social adherence, large numbers of Greek migrants and their children were accepted by the wider Australian community. The emergence of second generation as successful professionals, technocrats, public administrators, merchants and business persons gave the Greek community prominence and seriously affected the entire society.

Christos Fifis's paper gives aspects of the Post-World War II Greek Australian community. He discusses the causes of Post-WWII migration; experiences of Greek migrants and problems of settling in; the development of the organized Community and relevant issues; the Greek language media and the dispute between Church-Communities. He concludes with a brief discussion on the contribution of the Greek community to the Australian multicultural society and its possible future prospects.

## **II. Issues of Identity**

In her paper Gillian Bottomley analyses the activities of several Greek Australians who demonstrate the 'connectedness' of social relations, of living across difference in a multicultural society. Some of the themes discussed are: the participation of women and the elderly, intercultural activities, studies of institutional racism, and of the consequences of multicultural policies. She also refers to the achievements of Greek Australians in the arts, as a means of 'conversation' between generations and ethnocultures. She argues that this narrative knowledge increasingly characterizes public discourse reflecting a heterogeneous Australian society.

Vrasidas Karalis critically examines the general *weltanschauung* of the Greek Australian intellectual and academic community, and argues that they failed to construct concrete cultural symbols which would express the mixed social reality they live in. He expresses the view that the trauma of immigration never became a political force and was restricted to the narrow perception of a self-excluded community which believed in the superiority of its language and its culture. Only few people succeeded in establishing new perceptions of identity and therefore symbols of collective recognition. The paper ends by mentioning the political factors which contributed to the creative immobility of the Greek-Australian community and to the absence of a political counter-proposal to the hegemonic Anglo-Celtic cultural paradigm.

In his paper Stathis Gauntlett examines the issue of Hellenic identity from a different perspective. He explores some signal instances of Greek songs functioning in the contestation of cultural identity in Australia by reference to three significant musical events of the 1990s. He explains why, whereas in metropolitan Greece the "rebetomania" of the 1980s has abated to the extent that it is nowadays viewed as an historical curiosity, the dynamics of ethnic self-assertion and multi-cultural bricolage seem set to ensure its continuing prominence of the genre in the Antipodes.

### III. Education

Nicholas Ganzis in his paper presents an analysis of the achievements of the Greek community in the area of Greek education and suggests what else needs to be done to ensure the continuation of Hellenism in South Australia. His view is that although Greeks in South Australia believed strongly in the role of Churches and their community schools to pass down to succeeding generations their culture and traditions, they proved to be inadequate in ensuring the maintenance and promotion of the Greek language and Hellenic values.

#### IV. Literature

Con Castan examines the origins of the term Greek-Australian Literature and its function. He relates the term with politics, nationalist multiculturalism, group identity, minority literatures and national literature. He concludes that Greek-Australian literature, though but one of many minority literatures, has probably been the one that has gained most critical attention and been the most successful in the above terms.

John Vasilakakos in his paper examines the most essential theoretical and practical problems and problematizations which arise in the study of Modern Greek Literature of the Diaspora and gives a concise profile of Greek-Australian Literature. He argues that Greek-speaking literature has been one of the most dynamic minority literatures of Australia. However, despite its boom, the cessation of large-scale migration and the passing away of first generation Greek migrants, Greek-Australian literature has been shrinking continuously. He believes that English-speaking writers of Greek origin play a leading role in the development of mainstream Australian literature and many of them are in the forefront of the Australian literary scene. He concludes that further research is needed in the field.

Leo Papademetre in his paper explores the 'contemporariness' of Hellenic drama internationally. He expresses the view that the ever-contemporary need to keep examining our theatre tradition has become the focus of many drama practitioners who re-evaluate our worldly perceptions through the performing arts. The Hellenic Studies section of Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, recognizing the importance of theatre, has been encouraging and fostering research and study of Hellenic theatre culture and its evolution with the assistance of the performing collective FRAGMENTS. The collective provides a cross-fertilizing 'space' for performers to resource the energies of their personal and collective bicultural and bilingual experience, (dis)placed and diasporic in nature. He gives examples of some of the collective's projects which are based on fragments of texts by Aischylos, Sophokles, Euripides, Marguerite Yourcenar, Heiner Müller, Aristophanes and Ionesco.

George Kanarakis approaches his subject from an Australian perspective. He examines literary works by contemporary Australian writers to ascertain how Greeks and Greek culture are portrayed. He pays particular attention to the change in the mentality and attitudes of the society, and in what ways this change is reflected in literature. Thus literature is discussed within its socio-cultural context. He believes that the externalized images and impressions which the body of Australian literature contains will influence, to some extent, the perceptions and possibly even the attitudes of its reading public towards Greeks and Greek culture.

In her paper Maria Herodotou refers to the immigration of the Greek Cypriots in Australia and examines how Greek writers of Cypriot descent identify themselves with Greece, Cyprus and Australia as a place and as a culture. The writers are distinguished into three broad categories depending on the language they use (English, Greek & English, Greek). She believes that, although the use of language is not the most important factor of their identity, it is an indication of the extent of their connection to a particular place. The examination of the texts reveals that for some writers the bicultural identity creates a tension or even a conflict whilst others are more at ease with their Greek identity, they develop a nostalgia for Cyprus and try to recreate or reconstruct, in a painful way, the place and its culture. She concludes that for all writers, Greece and Hellenism become a conceptual world and that the expression of their identity is a constant process.

## **V. Politics**

In his paper, Michalis Michael discusses the Cyprus issue in Australian politics with particular reference to the federal parliament. The paper claims that the Cyprus issue occupies a visible position within Australian politics which under normal circumstances would have been treated as marginal, due to the role that the Greek-Australian community has played especially since 1974. Furthermore, it claims that the formation of an Australian policy on Cyprus rests on the capacity of the Greek-Australian community to act as an interest

group within a pluralist political environment. Australia, however, can not undertake a substantive role in the conflict because the issue is not relevant to Australia's immediate national interest and sphere of influence.

The paper also examines how and to what extent the Cyprus issue in Australia has been determined by the triatic relationship between the Greek-Australian community (diaspora), the host country (Australia), and the home country (Greece and Cyprus).

### NOTES

1. Details about the immigration and settlement of Greeks in Australia during the last century and up until WWII, see Gilchrist, 1992 and 1997 and Tamis 1997.
2. About the causes of immigration from Greece as well as about the immigration programmes created by various countries including Australia, see: Hasiotes 1993: 127-152 and Vgenopoulos 1985.
3. For the formation of the Greek Community since the 1880's, see Tsounis 1993.
4. The number is based on the 1996 census. See also Fifis 1997 and Hasiotes 1993.
5. For the relationship between multiculturalism and ethnic Greek identity, between dominant/mainstream and marginal/ethnic culture, see Kalantzis 1997.

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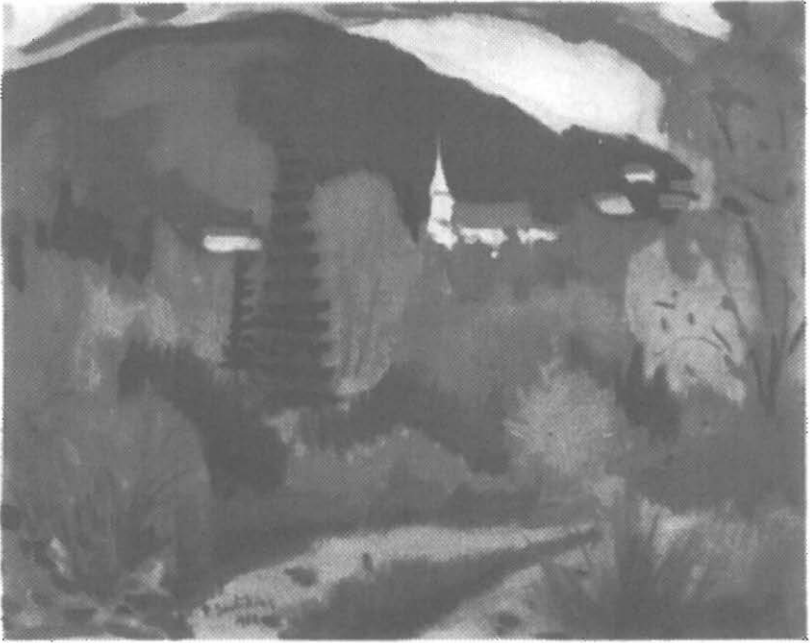
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