



# Travelling by bicycle in Australia, from nationalism to multi-culturalism...: Brand names, marketing and national identity

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## Abstract

With the Australian-owned and Taiwanese-manufactured bicycle *Malvern Star* launching its premier model named *Oppy* after world champion racer Sir Hubert Opperman, it is harking back to the glory years of Australian bicycling sporting success. This paper explores the history of the bicycle industry in Australia and the role played by product branding. It also documents the change from this nation starting as a largely British 'settler' society, and becoming a modern multi-cultural one.

## Keywords

Bicycle, industrial design, Australia, culture, industry

## Introduction

A strict post-colonial 'centre-periphery' argument would suggest Australian culture (and bicycle design activity) was in every way deferential to major international design cultures. This was not the case. Even under British colonial rule, the first settlers from 1788 were beginning to form their own version of British culture in a distant land. There was increasing engagement with non-British cultures and companies; from the 1880s there were many attempts to develop a bicycle locally drawing parts and ideas from European countries and America, as well as the 'mother country', Britain.

This all suggests a situation of either multiple or shifting 'centres' of influence that the standard 'centre-periphery' argument does not take into account. Australia moved within this range of influences with some degree of freedom and to both its advantage and disadvantage. The international influences acting upon the local bicycle design industry that is explored throughout this paper suggests Australian industrial design culture has always been a response to world industrial design. Australian designers engaged with every major design trend, sometimes copying, sometimes manufacturing under license, sometimes adapting and sometimes even being at the forefront of experimenting with new international design ideas.

## 1880s–1902. Australia's 'pioneering' bicycle industry before the locally developed *Malvern Star*

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw great technological experimentation with bicycles as all countries with some industrial capability experimented with ideas for the new mode of transportation. 1886 is generally recognised as the date of the world's first modern bicycle; the diamond-shaped frame of the English *Rover Safety Bicycle*. This made the 'Ordinary'—popularly known as the 'Penny Farthing'—style of bicycle suddenly redundant. There were 100s of Australian attempts to design and manufacture a local bicycle before the dominant local brand, *Malvern Star*, emerged in 1902. The least successful of the early Australian designs were of total local design and manufacture. More successful were those local bicycles that incorporated imported design knowledge or mechanical parts, especially complex items such as tube-joining lugs, derailleurs and gears, difficult for an emerging industrial country to produce. For example, *Malvern Star* often used expensive-to-cast BSA lugs, and adapted them by cutting out their own decorations (Rapley, 2012, p.68). Adaptations were also made to imported parts to make the Australian bicycle sturdier to cope with rougher Australian dirt and gravel roads linking small towns with the major cities. A visit to the Australian National Museum in Canberra reveals several bicycles celebrated for their role in the social and explora-

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tion history of the nation. One example was owned by rider Ernie Old (1874–1962) who completed long distance rides of thousands of miles inspiring awareness of the vast continent. Sport was also a catalyst for local manufacturing. 1869 was the year of the first Australian bicycle race, held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). This race was won by a racer on a *Barb Boneshaker*; manufactured by local blacksmith James Finlay. While this was largely a copy of an American machine with some British parts (Farren, 2013, p.46), the machine was nonetheless made in Melbourne evidencing early manufacturing capacity.

### **Australia as a colony, a satellite, a province, and on the periphery**

Dieter Senghaas has suggested a 'peripheral' culture can be identified by the following characteristics: exports of primary commodities to one major trading partner, a large external debt, extensive foreign investment, a high level of technology imports and unfavourable terms of trade (1985, p.156). This surely described much of Australia's history where increasing levels of foreign investment, imports of technology and the practice of simply copying international design objects or even 'manufacturing under license' (with consequent royalty payments) resulted in low levels of Australian scientific and technological research and development, and a 'brain drain' of talent overseas (Todd, 1995, pp. 6-7).

### **The origins of Australia's dependence need to be explored**

Britain and Europe industrialised during the 19<sup>th</sup> century; a time which saw the development of the international economy under which, for the first time, 'peripheral' parts of world were united by trade—people, ideas, money and machines moved about from one country to the next. The European powers needed essential raw materials and then markets for selling manufactured goods. Thus began the 19<sup>th</sup> century scramble by most European countries to pillage less-developed countries. Britain colonised India; Holland, Indonesia; France, Indochina; Italy, parts of Northern Africa. Any number of historians could introduce the story of British colonial settlement in Australia. Of specific relevance to this paper about technology in Australia, however, is the work of Jan Todd. Todd claimed that from inception Australia was peripheral to Britain, and this unequal relationship has denied Australia the opportunity to build the necessary independence to become technologically mature. While the colony supplied the raw materials, Britain would undertake the design and manufacturing befitting its role as 'workshop of the world'. From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Australia became a useful dependant supplying Britain with wool for British textile mills. After the middle of century, gold became Australia's next important contribution to Empire. (Todd, 1995, pp.3-4) Put simply, the unequal relationship between the 'centre', Britain, and 'peripheral' (or 'provincial') Australia, forced the latter into the role of supplier of raw materials and importer of manufactured goods and technologies. This situation has led Paul Grant to declare Australia lacked 'technological sovereignty', the capability and the freedom to select, or create, the technology needed for industrial innovation (1983, p.239). The best outcome of importing technology is an assimilation of imported technology with local technology. However there have been many examples of the failure of technology transfer. This might involve a clash between imported and local technology leading to two separate technologies operating in competition with each other in the 'peripheral' country, or the failure of imported technology to aid local technology. There is also the case of inappropriate technology transfer where the 'peripheral' culture does not need the 'centre's' technology (Todd, 1995, pp.11-13). As can be seen, imperialism (and its consequences) can have devastating effects on a country.

### **Australian bicycle design, manufacturing and branding**

Consistent with the spirit of nationalism which left its mark on other areas of art and design in the early years after the Australian Federation of 1901, most early Australian bicycles had names which were intended to evoke a sense of 'Australian-ness'. Some bicycle names drew on 'rural' themes, *Bullock* (Rapley, 2012, p.20), while other names were overtly patriotic; *Carbine* was named after the racehorse that won the first Melbourne Cup horse race. This was the first of many links to the Australian love of sport. Similar overtly patriotic names were given to other locally designed and manufactured goods, for example cars. In the early days of the Australian motor industry in the late 1800s, patriotic names were favoured for local cars – *Austral*, *Australia*, *Australis*, *Roo*, *Shearer* and *Southern Cross*. But in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even the most nationalistically-named Australian bicycle was still indebted to international models. And the strongest influence on the early local attempts to produce an Australian bicycle was British. Following the discovery of gold in the state of Victoria, Melbourne in the 1880s was *per capita* the wealthiest city in the world, and

host to a two International Exhibitions. The Royal Melbourne Exhibition Buildings were full of agricultural produce and manufactured goods, amongst them, bicycles. An early local Australian example was the *Dick Davis Ordinary* (popularly called a 'Penny Farthing') that used British *Humber* parts.

A visit to the Farren Collection in Melbourne reveals many locally-made bicycles with a strong British influence, including both the *Argo* and the *Australian Army Folding Bicycle*, both of which contained *BSA* parts (Farren, 2013, p.240). So too the *Bates*, *Diamond*, *Hillman*, *Hartley*, *Healing*, *Hoffy*, *Martin*, *Neville*, *Olive*, *Parkside*, *Rossmore*, *Speedwell*, *Speedway*, and *Webster*. The *Moller* was based on *Humber* parts (Farren, 2013, p.46).

But there were also many attempts to develop an Australian bicycle drawing parts and ideas from European countries and America, other than the 'mother country', Britain. This was sometimes reflected in their branding and model names. There were bicycles of American influence, often using the handlebars designed by the first black American super-star rider Major Taylor including the *Maine Star* and *Trooper*. There were bicycles of French influence, for example French *Nervex* lugs were used by many Australian frame-builders including *Ace*, *Toseland*, *Rob Special* and *Super Elliott*. Other local designers used French *Prugnat* lugs *Paino* and *Cecil Walker* amongst them. There were bicycles of Italian influence including the *Frejus-Hillman* (Rapley, 2012, p.172), while in recent times, the great local designer Daryl Perkins learned from Faliero Masi (Rapley, 2012, p.218). Other bicycle names were plucked from Greek Mythology witnessed by *Ixion* and *Orion*.

Clearly Australia drew from a rich array of international sources to design, manufacture and brand its bikes. This worked to the nation's advantage, as Australia has always been an early adopter of new technology and enjoyed these benefits. Within all this Australian experimentation and interaction with the rest of the world, most bicycles on Australian roads prior to the first substantially mass-produced Australian bicycle (the 1902 *Malvern Star*) were either fully-imported (largely from Britain) or, in larger numbers, Australian-built versions of what were basically a set of 'world bicycles'.

There were some uniquely Australian design innovations. As early as 1896 patents protected 'chainless variable gear mechanisms' developed by two separate local companies *Triad* and *Love*. (Berto, 2009, p.47). Also innovative was the *Barb Sprung Frame* while *Gem* brakes of the 1930s predate current V-brakes by many decades (Farren, 2013, p.108). Australia has also been innovative in being an early adopter of new technology. For example *Malvern Star* embraced and popularised the *Cyclo* gear rear derailleur system in this country. Australia also seems to have lent many of its unique words and names to international brands. For example, many foreign companies see a marketing advantage in using exotic Australian animal names. Many use the word and image of the Kangaroo. The earliest was *The Premier Kangaroo Dwarf Safety* of 1884 designed and manufactured by *Hillman*, *Herbert*, *Cooper*, of Coventry, England. (Farren, 2013, p.116). This continues today. *Stumpjumper* is an American bicycle model that surely owes its unfamiliar name to the Australian-designed Sunshine Harvester 'stumpjumper' agricultural plough. There are also *Kona Utes* (named after the Australian coupe-utility 'ute' light truck), *Platypus* water bags, and American company *Soma* have just released *Oppy* pedals (named after Australia's greatest sports rider.)

### **Multiculturalism is the Australian national identity; Australian industrial design culture interacting with the world**

A strict 'centre-periphery' argument would suggest the Australian bicycle design activity was in every way deferential to the major international design cultures. This was not the case. Even under British colonial rule, Australians were beginning to form their own version of British culture in a distant land. From the very first weeks of settlement, circumstances forced innovation in the manufacture of unique tools to cope with different physical conditions. These pioneers up until Federation, and in some cases beyond, were arguably the dynamic face of Empire abroad, and were as much British as they were Australian. Later within this relationship, there was freedom for local bicycle companies to also engage with non-British companies. French, American and Italian examples have already been cited. This all suggests a situation of either multiple or shifting 'centres' of influence which the standard 'centre-periphery' argument with its emphasis on Britain and its colonies does not take into account. Australia moved within this range of influences with some degree of freedom and to both its advantage and disadvantage. The Australian design community did defer to the 'visiting expert' from 'centre' design cultures. Australians did value the prestige of the imported product over the local product and so did engage in the practice of manufacturing under license. On the other hand, despite the strong influence and domination from various design 'centres', the Australian design community managed to negotiate its own 'space'. Australia seems to have been able to choose larger, more industrialised partners from whom to import technology and research and development findings it could not otherwise afford. The

Australian bicycle industry occasionally even managed to shame the 'centre' culture by occasionally producing a better product through adapting 'centre' designs to suit local needs.

The international influences acting upon the local bicycle design industry explored throughout this paper suggest Australian industrial design culture has always been a response to world industrial design. Australian designers seem to have engaged with every major design trend, sometimes copying, sometimes manufacturing under license, sometimes adapting and sometimes even being at the forefront of experimenting with the new international design ideas. The evidence presented in this paper suggests that 'multiculturalism' is the true Australian national design identity.

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## Biographical note

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