

Hellenism's Contribution to Australia

The following was adapted from the keynote address, presented to the 7th Annual NIKE Awards Dinner of the Australian Hellenic Council, held in The Great Hall, Parliament House, Canberra, on Monday, 24 June 2002.

Hellenism. The Eternal Spirit of Freedom. This is the motto of the Australian Hellenic Council's Annual Nike Awards. In previous years, the speakers have very eloquently outlined the contribution of Hellenism to human civilisation. Indeed it is generally accepted that Hellenism forms one of the central pillars of Western civilisation. This address will focus on Australian Hellenism's presence and contribution to Terra Australis, the Southern Land.

Ancient Hellenic geographers and philosophers including Plato and Eratosthenes speculated about the evidence of a large land mass in the southern hemisphere that had to exist simply in order to counter-balance the large land masses of Europe and Asia. This is the origin of this continent's names. The Latin phrase "Terra Australis", Southern Land, became Australia in English.

Australian Hellenism is as old as European Australia. European settlement of this continent began with the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788. Less well known is that amongst the convicts who founded the Sydney Cove settlement was a young man from the Hellenic port of Thessalonike, convicted of theft and sentenced to seven years transportation. This individual was the founder of the Australian Jewish community.

The Australian Hellenic community traditionally dates its origins to August 1829, the arrival of seven young men who had been convicted of piracy. Two years earlier, these sailors from the Aegean island of Hydra, in the Saronic Gulf west of Athens, had stopped a British vessel in the waters south of Krete and taken some items they thought would be useful. The British vessel had been transporting supplies to the Egyptian port of Alexandria, then in the hands of the Ottoman Turks. These sailors were not pirates, but *pallikarria*, freedom fighters in the Hellenic War of Independence. They were fighting for the freedom of Hellas from the Ottoman Empire.

These sailors, who arrived here as convicts, were eventually given their freedom and a choice: to return to an independent Hellas or to make lives in this new land. Five chose to return home. Two, Gikas Voulgaris and Antonis Manolis, chose to make Australia home. They were the – quite unintentional – founding fathers of the Australian Hellenic community.

The sailor/convicts were employed, during their term of indenture, in the shipyards of Sydney Harbour, in the vineyards planted at Parramatta and Camden to the west and south-west of Sydney, and in the construction of buildings such as Elizabeth House at Vacluse in Sydney's east, which is today a heritage site. These young Hellenes used the skills learnt in their island-home to develop and enhance what became their new home.

This model has since been followed by hundreds of thousands of Hellenes who have migrated to these distant shores and made new lives. Gikas Voulgaris was a pioneer settler-grazier of the Snowy Mountains of southern NSW and now lies in the Old Nimmitabel Cemetery, a mountain town near Cooma, about two hours drive from here. His descendants bear names like Bulgary, Macfarlane, McDonald and Stewart and are scattered across the globe. In 2002, the Greek Orthodox Community of Canberra and District, under its President, Mr Costas Tsoulis, honoured the memory of this man by holding an Orthodox requiem mass at his restored grave. At this momentous occasion the Community brought together Snowy Mountains families who lived close to each other but who had no idea they were the descendants of this one Hellene pioneer, Gikas Voulgaris, and his Irish wife, Mary Lyons. Similar stories abound in this great southern land of ours.

Hellenic or Greek Australia is more than the prominent communities of Sydney and Melbourne. The traces of Hellenism in Australia are wherever we turn. An impressive number of Members and Senators of Hellenic descent have graced the twin chambers of Parliament House in Canberra: Mrs Maria Vamvakinou, Ms Sophie Panopoulos, and Mr Petro Georgiou from Victoria, Senator Nick Bolkus from South Australia., and Senator Andrew Bartlett from Queensland. The Democrats Senator is a descendant of George Tramontanas, also known as George North, South Australia's pioneer Hellene and a major part of the early development of the colony of South Australia. Every state and territory parliament has members of Hellenic descent, covering every major political party. In addition there are the numerous staffers and bureaucrats who work in Australian politics and who can trace their ancestry to that corner of the Eastern Mediterranean that encompasses Hellas, Asia Minor and Cyprus.

Setting aside the political sphere, which Hellenes seem to thrive on from a young age, people of Hellenic descent can be found in every part of Australian life. In medicine and social welfare men and women like Professor George Paxinos, Professor Archie Kalokerinos and Professor Vasso Apostolopoulou are leading the world in research in fields as diverse as neurology, the health of indigenous Australians and a cure for breast cancer. There are over 300 academics at work in Australia's universities of Hellenic descent, one of whom is a Chancellor, in Western Australia.

On the athletic field, people of Hellenic descent have represented Australia in athletic pursuits as diverse as weightlifting (George Vasil), fencing (Jack Diamond), track and field (Nici Andronicus and Nick Howarth), volleyball (Spiro Maraziotis), rugby league (George Peponis and Braith Anasta), rugby union, Australian rules (Anthony Koutoufides), football (Charlie Yankos and Stan Lazarides) and even cricket (Jason Gillespie).

At every meal we are reminded that food and drink have always been very dear to a Hellene's heart. Foods once considered foreign and exotic, ingredients such as like oregano, basil, *taramosalata* and even garlic, now regularly grace Australian dining tables. An elderly Australian-born lady of Hellenic descent living in Townsville in north Queensland, what did she consider to be Hellenism's greatest contribution to Australia. After pausing for a moment, she replied "The Greek café because we showed the Australians how eating could become a social event." Looking the importance of restaurants and cafes to modern Australian life, who could dispute this?

The Greek café became an institution in rural and regional Australia over the years. I am sure that many people tonight grew up in, like myself, or owned one of these family businesses, which brought to the Australian palette such exotic tastes as carbonated sodas, ice cream and milk shakes. Imports not from Hellas, but from the Hellenic communities of the United States.

Australia's world renowned dried fruit industry, centred on Victoria and South Australia, can trace its origins, to some extent, to the survivors of the Christian Asia Minor Holocaust. Penniless refugees who came to these distant shores in the 1920s in search of a place to rebuild their shattered lives. In return for peace and security, they introduced the secret to their success in the Smyrne region of Asia Minor: the cold dip method by which drying fruit was soaked in olive oil, resulting in a juicier, tastier product. Today, chefs like Sydney's Janni Kyritsis, and Perth's Aristos Papandroulakis, better known as television's Surprise Chef, are creating a new Hellenic cuisine, one with a distinctly Australian flavour.

Beyond the world of food, Australian Hellenes are now leaders in global business, in industries like automobiles (like Nick Politis), tourism (like Nick Balagiannis), finance and banking (like Macquarie Bank's Stephen Kourkoulas). Since its earliest days, Hellenes have been associated with trade and commerce. Particularly involving the sea. Pearling was brought to Australian waters by a young man from Constantinople named Georgiades. Later adopted by families from the islands of Castellorizo and Kythera, the pearling industry centred on Western Australia and the Northern Territory is

now worth hundreds of millions to Australia's economy. Humble fishing folk from the Aegean islands now own fishing fleets worth even more, with names like Poulos and Manettas. What do all these people have in common, apart from their descent? They are all contributing to the evolution of their adopted homeland.

The influence of Hellenism on Australia extends to the physical landscape of our sunburnt country. Australian Hellenes laboured on the Snowy Mountains Scheme and built this country's railways, roads, houses and office towers. Now Australian Hellenic architects like Melbourne's Nondas Kalfataris and Alex Tzannes are creating the buildings and gardens of 21st century Australia.

Hellenic architecture resonates throughout this country. During his visit to Sydney for the 2000 Olympic Games, the Mayor of Athens, Mr Demetres Avramopoulos, unveiled a statue of Athena in Sydney's Barrack Square (off George Street, near Martin Place in central Sydney). He commented that the building behind the statue, once home to the Bank of New South Wales, is one of only a handful of buildings in the world that incorporate all three styles of Hellenic column. Indeed neo-classical architecture abounds in Australia. Just look at Old Parliament House, the Australian War Memorial or any old war memorial in any Australian country town. The columns and sculpted designs echo their Hellenic origins.

Many a time former Prime Minister the Right Honourable Gough Whitlam has eloquently spoken about classical Hellas and the cause of the return of the Parthenon Marbles. It is the contribution of Prime Minister John Howard, to the cause of the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles that the Australian Hellenic Council honoured in 2002.

The Hellenic influence on Australian topography includes the non-indigenous toponyms that now grace the "wide, brown land". Place names like Perth's 'Hellas Square', Queensland's Diamantina River and the country town of Roma, named for the wife of a Queensland Governor, Lady Diamantenia Roma Bowen, a native of the Ionian Islands. Not to forget Victoria's Mount Macedon, which as the Honourable Alan Cadman (MP for Mitchell - NSW) has been informing his Parliamentary colleagues for a number of years, can only be associated with Hellenism.

The Annual Nike Awards Dinner, with which the Australian Hellenic Council traditionally concludes its Annual Conference, is held to celebrate Australian Hellenism. No such celebration is complete without the people we call φίλληνες – philHellenes – friends of Hellenism. Another friend of Hellenism who has been recognised with a Nike Award was a great

champion of the cause of Justice for Cyprus, the Honourable Trish Worth (MP for Adelaide - SA).

The Australian Hellenic Council, like all of Australian Hellenism, is a hybrid: part-Australian, part-Hellenic. Australian Hellenes are an integral part of Australian society, as much Australian as Hellenic. As much a part of Australia as the olive groves of the Riverina.