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Charles Darwin University

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# Colonial Voices: A Cultural History of English in Australia 1840–1940 by Joy Damousi

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## **A New Voice of Australian English Considered**

Author: Damousi, Joy.

Title: *Colonial Voices: A Cultural History of English in Australia 1840-1940*.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press.

Publication date: 2010.

Pages: 326.

Series: Cambridge Social and Cultural Histories (No. 15)

ISBN: Hardback 978 0 521 51631 0

Review by James Lambert, City University of Hong Kong

University of Melbourne historian Joy Damousi's *Colonial Voices: A Cultural History of English in Australia 1840-1940* is an examination of the imperial spread of English from the Australian perspective, taking as its focus the key role voice culture, elocution and eloquence played in the civilising mission of the British Empire and how this impacted Australian culture over the century covered by the book. Rather than looking at the English language in Australia from a linguistic point of view of lexis and pronunciation, as is the wont of many commentaries on Australian English, for example Baker 1945/1966, Ramson 1966 and Moore 2008, Damousi uniquely concentrates on the oral and auditory aspects of language, language as speech and listening, language as it is spoken and heard in everyday life.

The chapters of *Colonial Voices* are presented largely in chronological order.

Chapter 1 covers the fifty years from 1840s to the 1890s, looking at the ways in which English was brought to Indigenous Australians by missionaries and educators as a means to 'civilise' the 'savage' which they viewed as an "illiterate and primitive other" (7). Damousi, with a nod to postcolonial theory, sees this as an imposition of a "Western paradigm onto an oral culture" and discusses how "values of eloquence and elocution" were used by the European interlopers to define "otherness and savagery" (7). Sadly, it is with this short chapter that the impact of English upon Indigenous Australia ends, and the later manifestations of this positioned perspective and the power imbalances inherent within it are not further dealt with.

From this point the book moves wholly to an exploration of eloquence and voice culture in White Australia. Thus Chapter 2 resets to the 1840s, this time detailing the emergence of public speech and oratory in the emerging public sphere of colonial Australia, important in "defining self-government and shaping national independence" (50). Damousi further shows how this was "a sphere dominated by white male, middle-class ministers, lawyers and politicians" (50) and how newspapers played their part by meticulously reporting "male public speeches" (49). Chapter 3 deals with elocution theory and practice, revealing how for Victorian society elocution had implications far beyond mere training for public speaking but was rather a more wide-reaching "theory about the mind, body and self in society" (86). The ways in which speech was connected

to conceptualisations of gender and class, especially speech as a defining feature of femininity, form the burden of Chapter 4, in which Damousi explains that the “art of correct speech...was central to definitions of culture and gender” (101). The chapter further discusses the importance and prevalence of the notion of etiquette in colonial society and how “accomplishment in recitation, drama, and recital was expected of middle-class women” (110). Chapter 5 deals with the former prominent place of elocution in the Australian education system and how correct speech was used to promote values of class distinction and formed “a central part of bourgeois moral training” (146). Chapter 6 turns its gaze to the once ubiquitous elocution contests and the now largely forgotten Grand National Eisteddfod, while Chapter 7 concentrates on two famous political orators of their day, Alfred Deakin and Vida Goldstein, showing not only the importance of the platform and the soap-box as vehicles of social and political change, but also the difficulties politicians, particularly female politicians, faced from unruly crowds intent on disruption, and how this led to widespread debate in the media about freedom of speech.

Chapter 8 examines public speech during World War I, including the passionately heated conscription and anti-conscription rallies, which again raised questions of freedom of speech. It also notes the move to a less formalised style of public speech, reflected in the slangy, informal and ultra-Australian language celebrated by C.J. Dennis in his immensely popular poetry. Damousi argues that the war was responsible for “the beginning of the breakdown in ties to the empire” and that one effect of this was a growing number of people “who began to see value in the vernacular” (212), challenging the long-held prestige of an elocutionary voice that mimicked British English. How these contradictory viewpoints existed side by side in Australia is further analysed in Chapter 9 which treats the 1920s and 30s in terms of speech and accent in the British Empire, concentrating on popular debates about the Australian accent.

With the final two chapters Damousi turns her attention to the enormously influential effect that the introduction of radio broadcasting and the ‘talkies’ had on Australian English, helping to create a new Australian sound, and to instigate the attitude of strong disapproval of the American accent that still persists in Australia today. An epilogue briefly discusses the post-WWII period.

*Colonial Voices* is a handsomely bound, professionally packaged, typeset and printed book. The dust-jacket is graced by Patrick Harford’s 1923 superb oil *Yarra Bank Meeting*, and throughout the book are scattered numerous contemporary photographs and illustrations from newspaper, magazines and elocution manuals.

The book is masterfully researched and written in an engaging and easy-to-read academic style that clearly favours clarity over obfuscation. By choosing the 1940s as an endpoint for her discussion, Damousi instils a desire that a future volume continuing the story into the 1950s and on to the present day is hopefully in the workings, a period in which the migrant Englishes of the post-war influx of New Australians play an important part. That more attention was not given to the influence of English on Aboriginal Australia is not so much a flaw, for scholars have inevitably to limit their research, as it is a shame, since

Damoussi's treatment of this topic in the first chapter was tantalisingly interesting. The great achievement of *Colonial Voices* is its refocussing of the story of English in Australia from the written word to the spoken voice, reminding us that despite the invention of printing and the development of the information age, culture is still primarily orally and aurally transmitted.