Donald Horne’s ‘lucky country’ and the decline of the public intellectual

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Donald Horne saw Australia as a country that had got lucky, but was squandering its luck. Shutterstock.com

Steve Irwin and Donald Horne died a year apart, during the twilight of the Howard era. The government offered Irwin’s family a state funeral in 2006. It had not done the same for Horne, although he was famous for his 1964 book The Lucky Country and had been one of the country’s leading journalists, editors and intellectuals for half a century.

That may well tell us something about the value we attach to people who wrestle with ideas rather than crocodiles. It might also say something about a conservative government’s attitude to a renegade, or about the indifference or hostility of the wider political class to independent public intellectuals.

I read The Lucky Country for the first time as an undergraduate in 1990 and didn’t find it all that exciting. I can see now that the failing was that of my 21-year-old self rather than Horne’s. I re-read the book about four years ago and was struck that time by the raw power of Horne’s vision of Australia as a lucky country whose people were “adaptable” but whose elites were mainly “second-rate”.

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Horne's message was that while Australia had been lucky, he was doubtful whether it deserved its luck and was worried that, unless it lifted its game, its good run would not last. But the purpose of Horne's use of the phrase “the lucky country” is usually forgotten. It is commonly misunderstood as laudatory.

A new collection of Horne’s selected writings, edited by his son Nick, includes selections from The Lucky Country’s beginning and end. Their force, intelligence and insight had quite an impact on me yet again and, when seen in the context of a larger body of his writings, show how Horne refined his views over the years.

**Progressive, but not romantic**

The selection begins with an essay by a former student, University of Melbourne Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis, who reminds us that Horne was very much a man of the right early in his career, making his name as a staunchly anti-communist servant of Frank Packer’s media empire.

Horne edited two significant quality publications of that era: The Observer, in the late 1950s, and then the conservative, racist and decrepit Sydney Bulletin after Packer acquired it in 1960. The new collection contains an account, written late in his life, of Horne’s attempt to reform The Bulletin. To the objection that he should not remove the banner that it had carried “from time immemorial” – “Australia for the white man” – Horne replied that it had not always been the magazine’s slogan. Previously, it was “Australia for the white man and China for the chow”.

Although he never held public office, Horne was great at clearing away political rubbish of this kind, turning The Bulletin into one of the country’s liveliest and most influential publications. He was increasingly in tune with the modernising impulse in Australian life of the 1960s and ’70s. Modernising, but not revolutionary or romantic, Horne’s progressive views included anti-censorship, anti-White Australia and engagement with Asia.

The Lucky Country was Horne’s first book and, although he would write many fine and wise things in the years ahead, he never again managed that kind of magic. His fiction was not a great success, his history and biography competent and even lively without achieving for him a place in the front rank. But his writings on culture and society, and his more introspective (but not solipsistic) late and posthumous work, remain provocative.

Probably the biggest surprise of The Lucky Country was Horne’s support for the distinctly unfashionable republican movement, a cause to which he devoted much energy and thought in the second half of his life. The dismissal of Gough Whitlam as prime minister in 1975 angered Horne greatly. This was not so much because he was an admirer of Whitlam and all his works – he was not – but because the dismissal suggested that the democratic effort to change Australia had been defeated. The dismissal sparked Horne’s Death of the Lucky Country.
That attitude lost Horne some of his old friends on the right, but he was already making new ones who shared many of his catholic interests and passions. This new edition of selected writings allows us to gain a sense of the range of those concerns, which extended across politics, business and the economy to history, psychology, museums, tourism, everyday life, literature, the arts and much else. In the absence of a biography of Horne – surely something that will happen in due course – this collection traces the main contours of his life through his own writings, including chapters from his much-admired autobiography.

**Who will be the next Donald Horne?**

In many ways, Horne was an Australian pioneer in the field that eventually came to be called cultural studies. As an academic, he found a home in political science, but he was never the captive of any discipline. The role of roving commentator continued to appeal. Horne did not much like scholarly paraphernalia such as footnotes, bemoaning:

> the “universitisation” of intellectual life ... an arid division of labour increasingly related to the administrative manipulation of universities into specialist disciplines with career paths measured in citations.

But there were surely greater dangers to the public intellectual looming in the shadows, dangers hinted at in the reaction to Horne’s republicanism. The public culture that had allowed Horne to exercise such influence was already in decay by the time of his death in 2005.

It is not that there are no opportunities today for the kind of discussion Horne valued; there are probably more than ever, in part thanks to social media. It is rather that these occasions are mainly for preaching to the converted.

In Horne’s prime as a writer, that last decade of the post-war golden era between the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, a renaissance in the local media and publishing industries gave intellectuals with something to say, and the ability to say it well, brief access to a mass market. A central role of the public intellectual, as Horne conceived it, was to change the minds of this audience. Twitter and Facebook, however, are not places where people are likely to be persuaded to alter their thinking but rather to gain confirmation for what one already believes.

Australia has its public intellectuals, but it is hard to think of any who quite manage Horne’s range, insight or authority. There may in fact be good reasons for the more uncertain place of the public intellectual in Australia today, beside the trend towards specialisation and the impact of a more fragmented public culture.

Being white, Anglo and male, Horne would probably not be threatened with rape, or trolled out of the country – as appears to have happened to Yassmin Abdel-Magied. Ours is now hardly the kind of public sphere to encourage the adventurous expression of new ideas. The purpose of intimidation is to warn anyone who imagines that they might have something new and bold to contribute that they can run, but they can’t hide. Even an intellectual terrier such as Horne would have found the going hard.
Donald Horne: Selected Writings (ed. Nick Horne) is published by La Trobe University Press in conjunction with Black Inc.

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