

Constructions of the Rural in Australia

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Australia is the only nation in the world that claims sovereignty over an entire continent. A country of 'wide open spaces', roughly the physical size of China, it has a national population of just on 24 million people. Most, however, do not live in the 'wide open spaces'. Two-thirds reside in the capital cities and those that don't mostly live along its eastern, south-eastern or south-western coastline. Fully 85 per cent of Australians live on or within 50 kilometres of the Australian coast.¹ Migration of people to the cities and the coast, whether from within the country or from overseas, has been the long-term trend and appears irreversible. Yet in this nation of inveterate city and coastal dwellers the rural interior, 'the bush', continues to be central to the national identity, to how many Australians see themselves and to the values they hold dear. It is in 'the bush', so a dominant cultural narrative goes, that you encounter the 'typical' Australian and see the 'real' Australia.

There are many practical reasons to value the contribution that rural Australia makes to national life. Quite apart from anything else it is the highly productive source of most of the nation's food and much food exported to other countries. However, the mythologising of 'the bush', while it may gratify certain cultural yearnings, begs many questions and distracts from important social realities. Just what and where is 'the bush'? How does the idea of 'the bush' relate to other descriptors of life and the spaces and places outside the cities: 'rural' Australia, 'regional' Australia, 'remote' Australia? If it is regarded as the source of *the* national character and identity, just who and what is encompassed in such constructions (and who is marginalised or excluded from

* This chapter draws on, and reworks sections, of previous publications of the author: Russell Hogg, 'Governing Crime at a Distance: Spatiality, Law and Justice' (2011) 22(3) *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 361; Russell Hogg, 'Law's Other Spaces' (2002) 6 *Law, Text, Culture* 29 (Special edition on Legal Intersections, Rick Mohr (ed)); Kerry Carrington and Russell Hogg, 'Violence in Rural Australia' in Julie Stubbs and Stephen Tomsen (eds), *Violence in Australia* (Federation Press, 2016). My thanks to the publishers and to my co-author on the last of these publications.

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), *How many people live in Australia's remote areas?* (2004) Year Book Australia <www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/ABS@.nsf/46d1bc47ac9d0c7bca256c470025ff87/794d620169dd1a89ca256dea00053a6e!OpenDocument>; ABS, *How many people live in Australia's coastal areas?* (2004) Year Book Australia <www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/1301.0Feature%20Article32004>.

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