

Australia's Nobler Manhood— “Lo, the Unploughed Future”

By Noelene Isherwood, CEC 25th Anniversary Conference, May 18-19, 2013

Part 3 of 3

John Job Crew Bradfield – (1867–1943)

If ever there was a great Australian who realised Deniehy's dream of nation-building on a scale equal to the majesty of nature, it was Dr. J.J.C. Bradfield.

Australia's greatest engineer and nation-builder, John Job Crew Bradfield, Jack to his friends, was born in 1867 in Sandgate, Queensland. He graduated from the University of Sydney in 1889 and went to work as a draftsman for the railways in Brisbane before joining the NSW Department of Public Works. In 1896 he graduated from the Institution of Civil Engineers, London, with first-class honours.

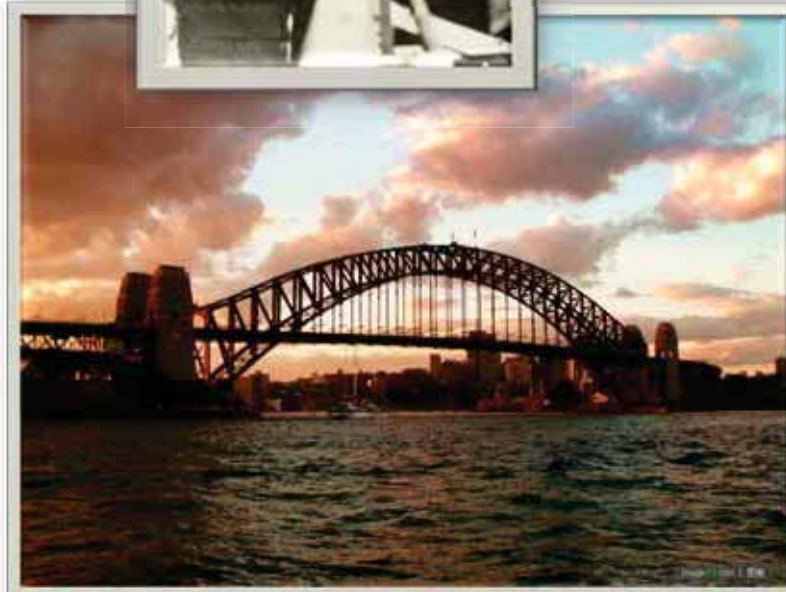
It was early in the 1890s whilst working for the NSW Government Engineer for Water Conservation on a proposal to build a network of locks and weirs along the Barwon and Darling Rivers that Bradfield first conceived of what would become his famous inland Water Scheme. From there he worked on the construction of Burrinjuck Dam on the Murrumbidgee, which enabled the establishment of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area during the 1910s before leaving the field of water

engineering to design the Sydney underground railway, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Story Bridge across the Brisbane River.

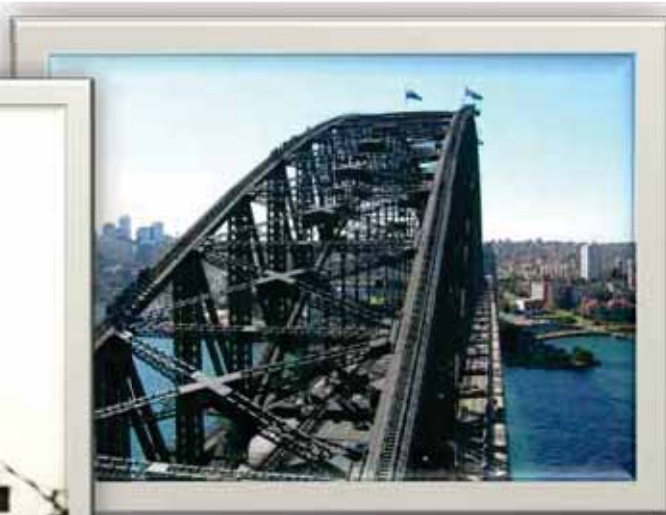
Today, I want to venture behind the scenes of just two of Bradfield's most iconic projects, the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Bradfield Scheme to see how he himself, conceived of these great projects.

Firstly, to the great “Coathanger” or the “Iron-Lung” as some called it. Peter Lalor, in his excellent book **“The Bridge,”** reflected on the art of bridge building. He said: *Using a bridge is an instinct; building a bridge is an act of evolutionary progress... It is as much a leap of the imagination as a triumph over geographical division... The aesthetics of a well-designed bridge do not only catch the eye, they fire the emotion and the imagination.*

Bradfield had both the *dream* and the *drive* to bring such bridges into being. Lalor added: *While some men look at the world and accept it for what it is, others strive to shape it, rearrange it, improve it. He was the only man who oversaw the bridge's conception,*



John Bradfield and his wife Edith on the Bridge.



birth, growth and completion. He was its father, midwife, wet nurse and mentor. A man of incredible vision, he not only had the astute and extraordinary mind capable of the engineering, political financial and public relations feats that would be involved in building a bridge across Sydney Harbour, he had the patience to pursue the project for 30 frustrating years as it was proposed and then deposed by government after successive government.

Bradfield was motivated by and consumed with an extraordinary passion for the Future and he felt deeply his obligation to transform the natural conditions of the

land, to create a more perfect nation. During the construction of the bridge he gave a speech which is truly breathtaking in its implications: *In the upbuilding of any nation the land slowly moulds the people, the people with patient toil alter the face of the landscape, clearing forests, draining swamps, tilling fields, constructing roads and railways, building factories and rearing cities; they humanise the landscape after their own ideals. Thus in the years to come will result the perfect land and people, body and soul, bound together by innumerable and subtle ties.*

Future generations will judge our part in the upbuilding of Australia by our works, and when designing the bridge and its pylons, mayhap the largest structure ever erected in Sydney, I have endeavoured as far as my limitations would allow, to blend utility and strength with beauty and simplicity so that the Bridge may in some degree typify the resourcefulness and idealism of this generation, for notwithstanding the materialism of today, we are not dominated by cold selfishness, Australia has an inner life, we still have our dreams of beauty, truth and justice.

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And no matter how frustrated or impeded Bradfield was in achieving his dream of the Future, he never ever despaired or gave up, always drawing strength and inspiration from the "poetic" vision he carried constantly within his own mind. For example, in August 1922 upon returning to Australia after seven months abroad examining bridges, talking to engineers and investigating new engineering technologies, he met with the then Minister for Works Mr. R.T. Ball.

Afterwards, he made this entry in his diary: *Do not think gov't are in earnest re Bridge Bill. They have introduced it in such a way as to ensure the defeat, if possible. However the work I have done will not be lost—it is one chapter in the romance of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which some day I hope to write. Romance never dies; it is as beautiful as the line where the sea and sky meet beyond the boundless expanse of the oceans, as the seven seas themselves in their varying moods, as the melody of the mountains or the setting sun. In the annals of the past each silver lake, each brimming river, both mountain and valley have been shining strong to tell and so also in the lives of men have courage, unselfishness, endurance and patience won through and so it has been so it will be. I will see my Romance of the Bridge become a Reality.*

His faith in not only his own capabilities, but in the very principle which animates and drives mankind forward, speaks for itself, every time a person crosses the great "Coathanger" and every time that iconic image of "The Bridge" is displayed for all the world to see.

Bradfield's other great legacy, the Bradfield Scheme to water Australia's inland, has unfortunately, yet to be accomplished.

In 1937, at age 70, Bradfield proposed an ambitious scheme to divert the flow of north Queensland rivers, the Tully, Herbert and Burdekin, into the Diamantina River and Cooper Creek,

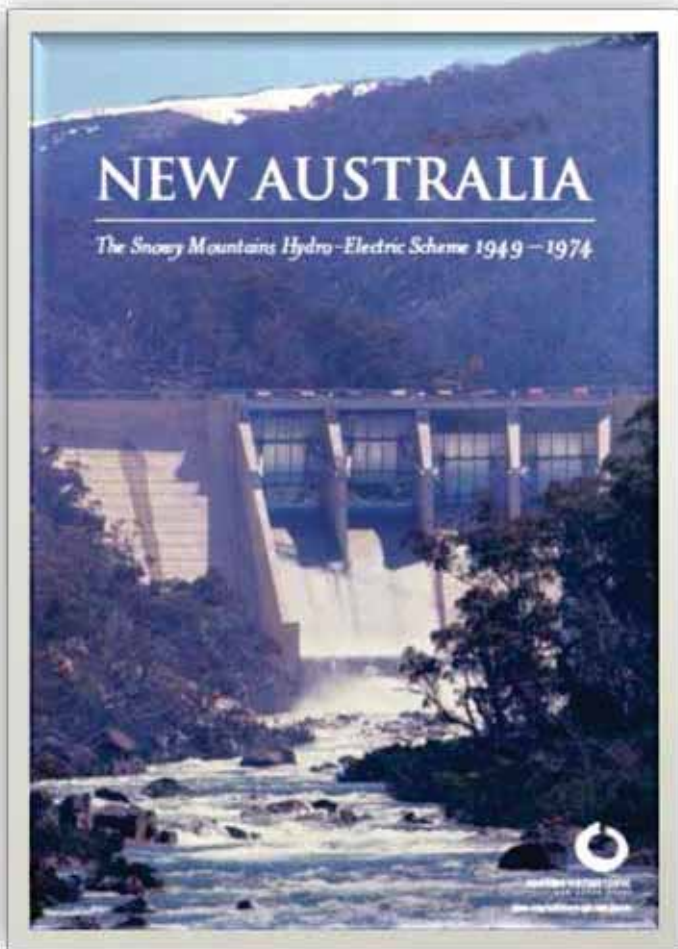


eventually watering the arid inland and making Lake Eyre a permanent water body. As well as providing permanent water in the river system, the large body of surface water would alter the hydrological cycle, producing rain over areas hundreds of miles from Lake Eyre itself.

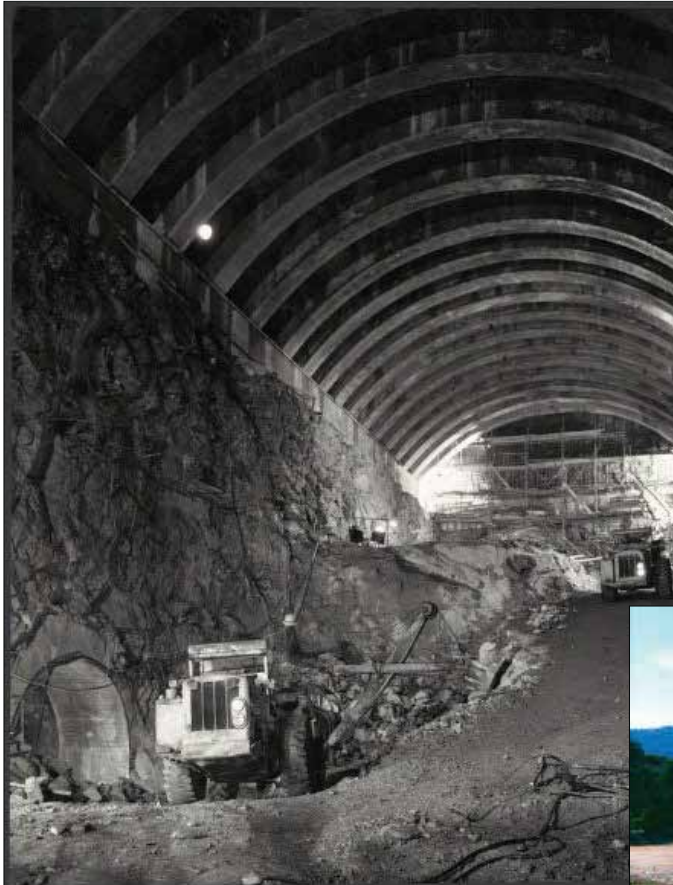
Bradfield wrote in an essay "**Augmenting Queensland's Inland**" his reasons for pursuing the project: the estimated flow from over 1800 artesian bores had diminished steadily during the previous 20 years, and if it continued to decrease uniformly during the next 20 years, most of the artesian bores would become sub artesian, that is, the water would have to be pumped. He also knew that Australia was suffering from extensive erosion and dust storms across more than 2.5 million square kilometres of productive land, that many farmers had been driven from the land, and that the central deserts were rapidly expanding. Bradfield could see the writing on the wall and knew that water was the key.

But the then Premier of Queensland, William Forgan Smith, who had secretly commissioned Bradfield's report, canned the proposal after being told that the scheme would cost £30,000,000. Given that the Commonwealth Year Book of 1937 listed 14 major droughts between 1868 and 1928 and that the cost of the 1902 drought alone was put at up to 200 million pounds, this cost argument was transparently ridiculous.

And, as we know the Bradfield Scheme did not go away. It was examined by the Chifley Government as part of its intensive policy deliberations on post-war reconstruction. In 1947, the Queensland Government's "Nimmo Report" also re-examined it but concluded that while it may be technically feasible, again, the cost would make the scheme nonviable. In 1983 the Bjelke-Petersen government commissioned a consortium of leading water engineers to report on its feasibility but that report was never released. And finally, in 2007, Queensland Premier Peter



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Snowy Mountains Scheme

Beattie attempted to push a modified Bradfield Scheme, in the context of discussions about management of the Murray-Darling river system.

It's clearly hard to keep a great nation-building Scheme down, but that doesn't mean the anti-progress, anti-development ideologues don't keep on trying. In December 2007 Australian National University hosted a conference entitled "Australia Under Construction" at which a bunch of academics did their best to smash Australians' natural affinity for nation-building.

Seemingly perplexed at this ingrained trait, one speaker confessed, "the fact that white elephants repeatedly occur at regular intervals does not seem to shake the implacable faith of those interested in promulgating the next wave of nation-building projects." Another acknowledged that even though the time for active nation-building has passed, "Every now and then, when someone promotes a grand scheme to reverse the nation's rivers, water its deserts or in some way profoundly transform its productive heartland, Australians sit up and take notice. Somehow nation-building is inextricably bound up with the 'idea' of Australia and still resonates in the popular consciousness."

Most shockingly, Dr. Richard Evans, author of the book which accompanied the 2007 ABC TV documentary series *Constructing Australia*, which told the story of three great engineering projects: the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Kalgoorlie Pipeline, and the Overland Telegraph, insisted that even though the Harbour Bridge was a genuinely debatable proposition, to criticise it now "seems like shooting Skippy: unthinkable, if not un-Australian." But "shoot Skippy" he did, also dismissing the Snowy Hydro Scheme and insisting that economically the scheme cannot be defended, that its primary worth is purely psychological and that it has been an environmental disaster. The Federal and State governments "can't even sell the bloody thing" he said.

But the big denunciation of Dr. Bradfield's scheme came from University of Tasmania's Dr. Robert Wooding who spoke on the topic "Populate, parch and panic: two centuries of dreaming about nation-building in inland Australia". Wooding lamented: "... we have perceived the inland areas of Australia as having almost unlimited potential as future sites for nation-building projects such as dams, irrigation areas, railways, roads, new towns and cities and vast mining and industrial projects. However, during times of drought or uncertainty, our optimism has rapidly dissipated and we have become haunted by apocalyptic visions of decline and despair which we have attributed to our own selfish and heedless actions in neglecting or unsustainably exploiting the environment. At these times, we have demonstrated an urge to reach for all-embracing solutions; the grander and more unrealistic they are, the better we seem to like them. ... [God forbid] the most popular of these possible solutions has always been that of building dams, channels and pipelines to bring water from where it is plentiful to where it is scarce."

Given the British Crown's long and relentless drive for green fascism and depopulation, it is hardly surprising that Wooding and his academic henchmen, not only hated the fact that by the 1930s and 40s, the idea of 'opening up' and irrigating the dry interior of Australia had gained further inspiration from projects such as Franklin Roosevelt's Tennessee Valley Scheme, but that Bradfield, in the wake of Japan's military push south after Pearl Harbour, had

picked up his pen to promote the “populate or perish” imperative.

I will leave you with these prophetic words from an October 1941 article in Rydge’s Magazine, where Bradfield boldly called for a population for Australia, of 40 million by 1991, and an “eventual” population of 90 million. Echoing Alexander Hamilton’s American system of economics mindset, he wrote:

To populate and develop Australia we must spend money to make money. The money spent would all be for labour and materials of Australian origin. An expenditure of 5 shillings per day or 500 million pounds, in well thought out schemes throughout Australia during the next 40 years would greatly increase the value of our heritage, and add the population we need to hold what we have. To do this we should endeavour to have a population of 40 million say fifty years from hence. Australia eventually should easily accommodate 90 million people, 30 per square mile. [12 per square kilometre]

Australia needs to adopt a long range constructive policy to develop, populate and defend itself. Australia must control her own economic independence, not London. A rejuvenated inland, creating employment and settling a population in comfortable circumstances would be one part of such a long range policy. The nation without vision perishes, but the heart and mind of any vigorous people responds to the dream of its national destiny and will endeavour to make full use of its heritage. We can hold the Commonwealth only by effective occupation.

We must make no mean plans for our future development, for mean plans have no magic to stir any man’s blood or awaken enthusiasm in any one. The cost of the major works should be financed by the Commonwealth without interest, as Australia would be spending money to increase its wealth....

On that note, and with tomorrow’s panels on “An Australian Credit System” in mind, I want to conclude with a few crucial words from another truly great Australian who was not only a contemporary of Jack Bradfield, but who embodied the same devotion and commitment to a bigger, better and more beautiful future for the nation.

John Curtin – (1885–1945)

John Curtin, our most beloved Prime Minister, whom Robert Barwick will say much more about, especially regarding his war-time mobilisation for the protection of Australia and his invaluable contribution to advancing an Australian credit system, was a humble and spiritual man.

It has been said of Curtin many times that “he saved Australia”, and without doubt, this is true. His decisive actions at critical times during the war, in particular his break with Britain, his request for MacArthur, and his resoluteness against Churchill, were the critical factor in Australia’s war-time mobilisation. Yet Curtin’s decisiveness wasn’t exactly one of his inborn character traits. In fact, before he became Prime Minister he was racked by self-doubt and depression, which saw him grapple with alcoholism for many years. In other words, what Curtin had to do wasn’t easy for him, but he did it anyway, because he had a mission that was bigger than himself. He knew that what he stood for was right, and that, by virtue of this knowledge, he was the person called upon to stand up when it counted, and lead this country through its most trying time.

Perhaps the greatest insight into the philosophy and principles that guided him, comes from a speech he made on “Ideals” in the early 1900s, when he was still a young man. He concluded the speech:

Let your highest ideal be what Christ showed most—an infinite pity for the people and a hatred of injustice. Enthroned this ideal in your hearts and you will find your work. Your voice, perhaps your pen, will smite injustice and tyranny; your truest prayers will be ardent work for others and that trembling, cowardly, introspective gazing into your own soul to find out whether you are the Lord’s or whether you are not, will give place to a brave endeavour and a noble and constant self-sacrifice which shall consume your being with enthusiasm and make life really worth living.

We have visited, if only briefly, the lives of five members of Australia’s Nobler Manhood. They have spoken to each one of us from their well-earned station on high. As you contemplate whether or not you will join their noble ranks, I have asked Ben Pearce to conclude this panel, with a prophecy from Charles Harpur, which echoes “This Southern Land of Ours” which we heard earlier.



John Curtin

The Spirit of Beauty (A Prophecy)

By Charles Harpur

The Spirit of Beauty is the soul of all
That’s great and good and lovely. ‘Tis the smile
Of a foregone Perfection, dreaming back
Through all things and all forms that deepest dye
Its morning glory, till its glow is thence
Reflected in the clear, wide, sea-like mind
Of absolute Genius: even that *first smile*
(Itself creative) which Creation felt
Flash into light at its great heart, and o’er
Its universal face, when God beheld
The finished fabric and pronounced it good.
Hence wheresoever Genius dwelleth, *there*
Dwells Beauty also. Hence its voice is heard
In every tongue, and its ideal seen
In every region; harsh at first and crude,
But gaining ever from its primal cause
Original Perfection—till, at length,
Each loss of Nature in consummate Art
Be found or findable. So sings the Muse
In her prophetic mood, and so believe
Her children: for, in whatsoever form,
The Beautiful is loved, its lovers all
Are Poets, and the Prophets of their race.

And in this Southern Land there yet shall be
A race begotten in the Spirit of Beauty,
Such as the olden Greeks were, limbed and shaped
By that deep ideality which works
Into the stuff of nature, and becomes
Progressively its mould; and in and through
This physical perfection manifest,
Shall burn a soul of power surpassing that
Which was in Greece only the effluence
Of an artistic, not an actual life.
But here it shall be Actual—making all
Man’s instincts with his motions modulate,
Till thus perfectionised, his native growth
Embody forth the Living Beautiful.