

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



Donald Horne
1921-2005
Writer and Academic

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography Series 1** produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

Australian Biography: Donald Horne

Director/Producer Frank Heimans

Executive Producer Ron Saunders

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Study guide written by Darren Smith © NFSA

Also in Series 1: Neville Bonner, H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs, Dame Joan Hammond, Jack Hazlitt, Sir Marcus Oliphant, Nancy Bird Walton

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SYNOPSIS

Donald Horne is well known as an editor, author and academic. He has been chairman of numerous organisations including the Australia Council and Chancellor of the University of Canberra.

Horne has written 24 books including an autobiographical trilogy, three novels and social criticism including **The Lucky Country** and **God is an Englishman**. In works such as **Money Made Us** and **The Intelligent Tourist** he broke new ground in Australian cultural studies.

As an academic, he introduced the idea of 'political culture' to Australian political science. One of his persistent arguments is that Australia should have a plainly written republican Constitution that all Australians can understand.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Studies of Society and Environment, Religious Studies, Personal Development, Legal Studies, Geography and Careers Education.

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

Religious Difference

Donald Horne grew up in a society strongly divided across religious lines. Tensions between Catholics and Protestants reached areas of life usually set apart from religion, such as business associations and government departments. The social historian claims, 'it was a divided society of a kind Australia will perhaps never be again'.

These tensions have a history beyond Australia's own. We could trace it back to England's break with the Roman Catholic Church under King Henry VIII. The change ignited social and political conflict that would last for centuries, particularly in Ireland.

The establishment and growth of religion in Australia inherited this conflict. Protestantism was the dominant religious force in early colonial Australia. Soon though, increased arrivals of Irish convicts and settlers strengthened the Catholic minority. The Catholic Church would soon develop a significant institutional presence in Australia, including their own leadership, missions and schools.

Being a Catholic or Protestant was not just a matter of faith, but also of social identity. Religious division often mirrored other social divisions, notably whether a person was of British or Irish stock.

Despite this history, Australia has never had an official religion. The writers of Australia's Constitution not only continued this tradition, but expressly prevented any future government from prohibiting the free exercise of any religion (section 116). This not only serves to protect individual rights—it seeks to maintain the separation of church and state (government). In a liberal democracy, it is essential that these two institutions remain independent of each other.

Of course, the doctrine runs into some difficulty in practice. One major problem is that religious organisations are not just spiritual institutions, but social ones as well. They comprise people as well as principles, and can have legitimate interests in social/political issues.

Discussion questions

- What do you understand are some of the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism? Are these differences spiritual or social?
- Do you think religion is a source of social division today? If so, give some examples.
- Can you think of any other issues that divide society in Australia?
- Is there a clear distinction between the spiritual and social aspects of religion? Are there spiritual beliefs that have a social impact?
- For what other reasons might a separation of church and state be desirable?

Australian Identity

Despite being sensitive to division in his society, Horne is very optimistic about social unity as a possibility.

The idea of an Australian identity takes an interesting form in his mind. On the one hand, he is aware of social differences and his own negative feelings towards Australian culture that influenced his move to London. On the other hand, he speaks of characteristics and values that are typically Australian.

As a writer on Australian political culture, questions about Australia's identity are obviously very important to him. These questions frequently surface in public debate. What is an Australian? Is there an Australian spirit that ties people together? What is our connection with this place and culture?

The answers range from the nationalism of **The Bulletin** (its masthead formerly read 'Australia for the White Man') to the egalitarianism of 'a fair go'. We might include references to sport, decisive historical moments, republicanism and individual examples of an 'Australian spirit' such as Ned Kelly or Don Bradman.

Perhaps one of the major reasons why these questions constantly resurface is the diversity of Australian society, and its position amongst other nations. Even in the 1920s, Horne tells us how diverse a township such as Musswellbrook was.

Decisions about what an Australian is also involves deciding what an Australian is not, or what is 'un-Australian'. This is a popular expression, and one that our political leaders tend to use in an accusatory way. So, just as ideas of a national identity can bring people together, they can also exclude groups of people, values and cultures. This can not only discriminate, but also create myths about society that do little to reflect realities of Australian life, in all its complexity and wholeness.

Discussion questions

- What values does Horne believe reflect the 'true Australian'?
- Think of five images that are used to portray an Australian identity. Think of five values popularly associated with Australian identity.
- How have ideas of an Australian identity been expressed in the past? Some are mentioned above.
- What are some of the challenges to the idea of an Australian identity?
- Horne believes that there are things that bind people together, and could bind Australians together. Can you think of any times when people have been brought together in society? What was the trigger?

Pluralism

For Horne, it is the value of 'a fair go' that has greatest potential to bring Australians together. The society he envisages is a pluralist one.

Pluralism is the belief that society is not simply comprised of individuals, but of many different groups of people. These groups have different values and needs. This stands in opposition to ideas of an authoritative set of national values and aspirations. A pluralist view values equality, cooperativeness and understands difference to be a most vital aspect of society.

However, as Horne says, 'we don't express values just in what you say, but how you act...' This he believes to be the greatest challenge for Australia. Pluralism requires not just the belief in these values, but that political and social systems change to reflect this view of society. In a pluralist society, power ought to be distributed across society, rather than contained within a single structure or hierarchy.

One example of this is multiculturalism, an understanding that continues to influence public opinion, social policy and governments. Multiculturalism signalled a move away from the tradition of cultural assimilation and the White Australia Policy. Some may suggest another example is federalism—the spread of power between the federal, state/territory and local governments.

Discussion questions

- We commonly think of ethnicity when we consider cultural differences. How else can people be culturally divided?
- What values does Horne associate with pluralism? How can they work to promote a pluralist society? Can you think of any other values?
- Is government the only source of power in Australia? Where else do we find power?
- Think of some other examples of pluralism from our political society and your own communities.

WRITING

Magazines

Horne started writing as a journalist, a career step that was unintended. His first significant assignment was with a 'rubbishy magazine' called **Weekend**. Soon after, he convinced media owner, Frank Packer, to publish a more serious fortnightly magazine called **The Observer**.

The interview gives us a few insights into the frantic world of magazine publishing. The life of a single magazine is often as tumultuous as any newsagency's magazine section.

People read magazines for all kinds of reasons. Originally, their popularity rested on their length and frequency—less hasty than a newspaper, more regular than a book. Today, this remains an important key to their success, but not the only one.

The magazine industry is highly competitive and cut-throat. A magazine's lifespan can last for decades (such as **Vogue**, **Harper's Bazaar** or **Time**) or just a few weeks. Success can turn on a number of factors, including:

- how well publishers know their audience
- quality of content
- production costs
- advertising revenue for funding

A magazine's front-page is particularly important. A single magazine must visually compete with many others on sale in a newsagency. Design, layout and headline 'grabs' are all important in catching the attention of potential readers. These visual elements should also reflect the tastes or interests of the intended audience.

One of the great things about magazines is that they are different things to different people. They may contain gossip, photography, true stories from readers, reviews, recipes, articles, short stories ... the list inexhaustible. So, there is no right way of publishing a magazine.

Nor is there any reason to make a business out of them. People can write and compile internet-based 'zines' for people who share their interests, with the hope of building some kind of community from them.

Discussion questions

- Why do people read magazines? What are some different categories of magazines? (Give actual examples as well.)
- What ones do/would you read? What makes a magazine successful for you?
- How does an audience influence the look and content of a magazine? Are there any other things that influence the final magazine product?
- In what ways might writing for a magazine be different from other forms of journalism and writing?
- The interview mentions the names of two major media owners: Frank Packer and Rupert Murdoch. What issues/problems do you know of concerning media ownership?

Autobiography

Socrates' expression 'the unexamined life is not worth living' has obviously been significant for Horne throughout his life, not least because he wrote an autobiographical trilogy. A strong motivation in his writing, he explains, was a curiosity about the enigmas in his life.

There are many reasons why people write autobiographies or memoirs, whether personal, literary or social. They are written by many different types of people—from celebrities and political leaders, to the much more obscure and private amongst us—and are read for many different reasons.

Despite these differences, there are things that make something an autobiography. Most obviously, it is a writer's personal account of their life. There are also 'conventions' or rules about how an autobiography ought to be written. For example:

- the narrative is in the first person
- the story moves with the author's life, from beginning to end
- there is an emphasis on facts and events, less on imagery or poetics
- the point-of-view is the author's

These conventions set an autobiography aside from biographies or stories based around a fictional character. These are the things we as readers come to expect.

Discussion questions

- Why might a person write an autobiography? Why read them? Do you think Horne wrote his for purely literary reasons?
- What other conventions or common features do autobiographies have? In what ways can autobiographies be different from each other?

- How does Horne describe the freedom involved in writing? How important is it to know the rules or conventions of writing?
- What other types of books are there? What kind of conventions do they have? For example, what makes a science-fiction book?

CRITICAL THINKING

Horne's book, **The Lucky Country**, was the first comprehensive analysis of Australian society as a whole. Published in 1964, the book is a collection of essays, each challenging ideas and practices in Australia's political culture at the time.

Donald Horne tells of a 'critical spirit' that grew with him during his childhood. Reading was obviously important in his developing such a spirit—it enriched his curiosity and knowledge about the world. Both these things continued to be nourished at university, where he encountered many new ideas and books.

A strong influence for Horne was John Anderson, a Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University. Anderson is a very important figure in Australia's intellectual history, a history of ideas and thoughts. His extreme concern for independence of thought made him a controversial academic who criticised many institutions (including Christianity, social welfare and communism) for encouraging servility. He challenged any idea that sought to provide a total answer, always stressing the complexity of human experience.

Philosophy involves thinking 'critically'. Some argue that what sets this more contemplative activity aside from other forms of thinking is that it may be more reactionary. In the context of philosophy, being critical does not necessarily mean finding fault. It does involve questioning, and a questioning mind is a curious one. While philosophers may differ greatly about their area of study, most remain in agreement on this point.

While the word 'philosophy' comes from the Ancient Greek for 'love of knowledge', this does not necessarily mean it is about knowing everything. As Horne says, this would be quite impossible and pointless. At least in philosophy, knowledge refers to an attitude or process that questions.

Discussion questions

- What events in Horne's life may have encouraged his 'critical spirit' to develop? How might these events have been influential?
- How does he respond to accusations of arrogance or being a 'know it all'? Do you agree?
- In what ways might Horne's idea of 'a fair go' relate to critical thinking?
- What contribution can critical thinking make to the life of an individual and of a society?

ACTIVITIES

1. Writing Imagine you are setting out to write your autobiography. Draw up a plan for it, including chapter headings to mark out parts of your life. Where will you begin and end? How can you write about your life in a way that gets your personality across? Then, write a short prologue/introduction that sums up your intended piece.

2. Essay Why might media ownership be an important issue to consider in building a pluralist society? What would the media industry look like in a pluralist society?

3. Magazine brief Work in groups to develop a new magazine proposal for your school. The only brief is it must be something that encourages discussion and tolerance. Come up with a plan that includes proposed features, audience, design, frequency and distribution. Be sure to discuss how you will target your audience.

4. Face of Australia Make a mask that represents your idea of Australian identity. Use all kinds of material, whether media images, artworks or objects. Compare each other's masks in class. What were the recurring images? What were the radically different ones? What questions did you ask yourself as you were putting the mask together?

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Donald Horne—Selected Works

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The Intelligent Tourist. Gee, Sydney, 1992

An Interrupted Life. Harper Collins, Pymble, 1998

Looking for Leadership: Australia in the Howard Years. Penguin, Ringwood, 2001

Australian Society

The Church in Australia—The Catholic Tradition (Australian Catholic University) http://www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/our_university/governance/office_of_the_vice-chancellor2/the_idea_of_an_australian_catholic_university

The Uniting Church in Australia
<http://uca.org.au/>

Tolerance.org (includes a section for teachers)
www.tolerance.org

The Pluralism Project—Committee on the Study of Religion, Harvard University
www.fas.harvard.edu/~pluralism/

Writing

Australian Centre for Independent Journalism
www.acij.uts.edu.au/

Information on John Anderson—Australian Studies Resources, Sydney University
<http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/oztexts/andersback.html>

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