



Winner of the ESU Youth Writing Contest 2025

YOUTHFUL AUSTRALIA AND THE PIONEER SPIRIT

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'The heart's wave would not foam up so beautifully and become spirit, if the ancient, mute rock, Fate, did not stand opposed to it'

- Hölderlin, *Hyperion*

The Pioneer

The pioneer is exceptional, the spirit that guides him is particular in its choice of vessel. The greatest aid in identifying such individuals is therefore a discerning eye. To find these leaders, we must possess insight acute enough to spot specks of gold in plains of dust. We must search for the searchers. Australia was found and founded by searchers, men who knew *how* to look. There is an inborn agitation by which we may recognise this type. It is a ceaseless restlessness born not of frivolity, but of a will to action. A pioneer is one who is never satisfied with mere consumption of knowledge, there is always an urge to *say* and to *do*. An intellectual and a scholar may be a searcher, but the pioneer is that searcher who must always exceed himself, who longs always to distinguish himself amongst his peers. A desire for progress and the uplifting of the world around him motivates the pioneer. Mere negation of established and inherited norms is not his motivation – he longs for something greater. In fact, it is greatness itself which the pioneer covets. He understands that he cannot summit new heights by toying with what already exists, he is compelled to *invent*. What exactly an individual possessed by the pioneer spirit will invent is a product of his unique nature and proclivities.

Australia itself is the invention of pioneers. So great is the power of that spirit that it can birth entire nations. Every great historical achievement is a manifest invention of the pioneer spirit. A historical survey of human triumph reveals this plainly. A compilation of historical genius – whether it be intellectual, political, military, or artistic – could justifiably be entitled *The History of the Pioneer Spirit*. From the Palaeolithic to the age of extraterrestrial exploration, every innovation humanity has enjoyed has been a gift of the pioneer. Without the urging of that spirit, we would have remained subjects of the animal kingdom. The pioneer par excellence is a self-possessed genius of thought and action.

Tall Poppies

The perpetual problem facing the pioneer becomes self-evident as we characterise him: he is surrounded by those who do not share his uncommon spirit. He is suffocated and stifled in an

inevitable milieu of non-searchers and non-pioneers. They cannot recognise him. Not only this, but any display of his spirit is mocked out of ignorance, and often malice. Fear and insecurity dictate the lives of many, and there are few things more frightening than forceful action in new domains. Any noble values which may have originally motivated our renowned ‘tall poppy syndrome’ have been lost. That syndrome has become a subliminal social contagion. Perhaps in its origin it represented a desire to dissuade the vulgarity of unwarranted pride, but this is observably no longer the case. A desire to humiliate sneeringly our most ambitious peers is a hyper-egalitarian mockery of excellence, born of resentment. A fully-bloomed flower outstretching its petals to the sky is an eternal symbol of beauty. It is unwise for us to define ourselves by an eagerness to sever the heads of these blossoms. We should instead aspire to share in their delight and rise amongst them ourselves. The common social mode has become as crabs in a bucket – dragging down any potential escapees to ensure shared suffocation and darkness – rather than a field of upright poppies in the sun. James Cook was no ‘tall poppy’ in need of cutting down. We can only wonder how many potential James Cooks have been lost in the miasma of the last half-century.

A general stagnation has become inescapable. The generations now established – in their careers, in their beliefs, and in their society – have, for the most part, been drowned in this stagnant ocean of convention. Their thinking has calcified and has become resistant to novel suggestion, especially when it threatens either their self-estimation or their comfort. Youth, however, skips across the surface of that ocean, still unsure as to how so many have been pulled below. This nimble youthfulness is not exclusively possessed by the young in body, but any older individual who has retained it has likely done so through its careful and attentive protection. Only those who cherish the gifts of youth live their entire lives without succumbing to infirmity. An individual can be eighty years of age and still undrowned. Our land is indeed girt by sea, an ever-present reminder of our independence and will to establish ourselves regardless of whatever isolation we may face in charting new frontiers. It is therefore our responsibility to remain young and free, always vital, and liberated from decrepitude in all its forms. Hope is eternally renewed in that characteristically youthful Australian spirit.

A Gerontocratic Age

Our age is spiritually gerontocratic, marked by a refusal to entertain the youthful energy necessary for the action of the pioneer. The status quo and safety are prioritised to the detriment of any higher values – this leads necessarily to mediocrity. Anyone who proposes movement forwards or the conditions that would allow it is shouted down as dangerous. It may be safer to remain still, but one cannot advance without uncertainty. The boat must be rocked if someone is to grab hold of the oars.

In recent history, the social and intellectual health of the youth has been sacrificed to placate the anxieties and preferences of the older population. This solipsism is a symptom of decadence; an older population with no view of the future and respect for the importance of a robust youth cannot sustain itself. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the majority would refuse the implications of this proposition even if its value were explained to them. In pursuit of any end, sacrifices are made, this is a pragmatic reality of life. What exactly a culture decides to sacrifice is determined by what it values. Conversely, what a culture truly values can be determined by reasoning backwards from what it observably sacrifices. It is axiomatic

that the future cannot exist without a next generation. And yet, the success of our next generations is being sacrificed. It is therefore unfortunately clear that Australia does not currently value the pioneering spirit that built it. Otherwise, the circumstances for its flourishing would not be sacrificed daily on the altar of other, lesser gods. These gods are those of uniformity, timidity, and passivity. That is, the future is being sacrificed for the present. This suicidal formulation can lead only to the death of a nation. The present has its inevitable twilight before the future's dawn – the dead, however, will not see that sunrise. This fact is no morbid platitude, and only in an age so ensconced in superficial comforts could such a truth be deemed unutterable. In just over a century, every person now living will be dead. Before that time comes, our duty is to leave our nation in better condition for the next of us. It is to be wondered how much of our myopia is attributable to an intentional refusal to confront our own mortality. We have blocked our ears and covered our eyes to the reality of our impending deaths, and have chosen to live in a hedonistic fantasy of silently hoped-for immortality. We believe there is no need to recognise and nurture the pioneering spirit and encourage those who possess it, because we want to believe that we will live forever. 'An inheritance should be squandered in fleeting pleasures and comforts, not preserved for posterity' – so whimpers the myopic man of greed. In truth, the proper place of our elders is to take their accumulated knowledge and prepare the way so that the successive generation may reap the same enjoyments in life.

All of this is not to say that a totally uncritical loosing of the youth from the reigns of older authority is an appropriate course of action. Youthful enthusiasm is most rationally tempered by aged wisdom. There is a place in society for a venerable *gerousia*. What is necessary, however, is an elder population that retains its vision for the future, and employs its body of wisdom to that end. A nation only concerned with the present moment will degenerate with every successive generation. No inheritance is being passed between generations, only the tattered remains of whatever is left over as an afterthought. It is no wonder that the would-be pioneers cannot collect and expend their energies towards meaningful ends, when they are instead preoccupied with ensuring their bare survival in an increasingly hostile landscape.

The pioneering spirit that built Australia is not lost; in every corner of our society there exist individuals who are torchbearers of that spirit. Our weakness is that they have been intentionally neglected in pursuit of lesser ideals. It is therefore our duty to cultivate and nurture a culture of intellectual vitalism of a uniquely Australian character. Too many serpents have been sent into the cots of our youth, and they do not all possess the Heraclean strength to strangle them alone.

Where The Pioneer is to be Found

The pioneer is found where courage is displayed. Though, even in an ideal environment in which searching and action are fostered, the true pioneer may not appear; so uncommon is that type. The pioneer is he who seizes the moment and takes a decisive step forward. Action is used here not only in the sense of some courageous physical activity, but in any arena in which some form of valour brings victory. The pioneer is a practitioner of *parrhesia* by nature – that fearless speech being a sure sign of an individual in whom there burns a noble spirit. When an individual prioritises the proclamation of truth without regard to the mockery he may face from his peers, that is where the pioneering spirit is to be found. The will to stand up and speak the truth for its own sake, and to act according to that truth, is the power

possessed by the pioneer. In a culture of timid passivity, this power is either ignored or maliciously stifled by those in whom it is absent. Those of us, however, who retain a reverence for that spirit which built Australia must rebut the prejudices of those who do not. We cannot champion such a cause amongst ourselves only, as a mere intellectual exercise. We too must practice *parrhesia*. The company in which one finds oneself must not deter a commitment to fine speech and action. When an individual demonstrates that spirit, it falls to us to reassure him that he is not erroneous in his feeling, no matter the assailment or neglect he may endure. It is lamentable to envision the flames that have been snuffed out as soon as they began to glow. This lament amounts to nothing if we do not commit ourselves to fanning those flames wherever we see their light.

Our current situation is not meritocratic. Individuals and their contributions are not assessed on the basis of their virtue, but according to whatever arbitrary standard is presently fashionable. This, however, does not blind us to demonstrations of merit. We may identify those in whom the spirit resides not only through their fearless speech, but also in their meritorious actions. Again, where that merit is unrewarded by society at large, it falls to us to reward it through whatever means are available to us. Fortunately, the true pioneer does not wait for bureaucratic authorisation before presenting his unique contribution to the world. The pioneer stakes his claim in *terra nullius* and declares his sincerely-held convictions, acts according to them, and demands for them to be judged only on their demonstrable merits rather than weakly-justified conventions. In a culture rewarding primarily obedience and conformity to arbitrary rules, the pioneer is made to feel ashamed of the very spirit through which this nation came into existence.

The Future of the Spirit

Our lamentations over the rarity and suppression of the pioneer spirit must not consume us. Reality must be confronted, without reliance on either blind hope or despair. In all things we must take the attitude of tragedians, presenting honestly the unpleasant truths of the world so that we may face them uprightly. Only with such honesty and resilience can unfortunate circumstances be rectified. That there continues to be contemplation of these matters is proof in itself that the spirit survives – complete desolation would imply that not a single person lives who could even conceptualise what we are missing, this is not the case. Outnumbered though we may be, we who recognise our spiritual deficiencies endure. Surrender to hopelessness would be an unnecessary capitulation. Every age mourns what it has lost from the previous, we are in no unique situation. What will define the circumstances passed to our heirs is our ability to elevate what has been unjustly discarded. The pioneer spirit is one such jewel that has been pulled from the crown of our nation and impudently tossed aside.

Every one of us has encountered manifestations of the spirit in our lives, knowingly or otherwise. We may all think back to moments in our lives in which either ourselves or an individual before us demonstrated an unusual animation, spurred by a stirring of the soul for which we had no name. These moments of fearless speech, inspired innovation, and courageous action were no mere coincidences of circumstance – they were the embodiment of an ideal from which we have strayed. Perhaps, when we hear the words of our national anthem sung, we are often deaf to the beauty of their lofty sentiments. No matter, they are sung until there are those with the ears to hear them. If, however, we do hear those foundational meanings, we are obliged to take them to heart, and to allow them to stir within

us the spirit from which they were born. By doing so, we allow ourselves to be guided by those same principles valorised when that song was written, one-and-a-half centuries ago. We must be honest that the true pioneer is a rarity, but that does not mean we cannot aspire to the same spiritual vitality with which the pioneer overflows. Let us be ever vigilant for instances and manifestations of that spirit, it is what lifts us all to heights of which we ordinarily cannot conceive. Let us resist the forces surrounding us that encourage the apathetic dilapidation of our nation and our people – we are more alive, and therefore stronger. The spirit of the Australian pioneer lives on, and we owe it our diligent service. Even in such unfortunate cultural circumstances as our own, glimmers of that golden spirit glint in the corners of one's eye. One must not blink and miss them.