



## The Myth of Mateship

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A history of mateship could be a history of Australia. In fact, in the years when the Old Left view of the Australian story dominated the history books, it often was.

In these tales, quintessential Australians such as the shearers demonstrated their mateship by reading Henry Lawson's poems in *The Bulletin*, forming a union and founding the Labor Party. The most famous of these interpretations was probably Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* published in 1958, which described a collectivist ethos built on the necessity of mateship in the outback. It wasn't just the intellectuals of the Old Left who idealized mateship, but the foot soldiers too. Good Labor blokes like Australian Workers Union leader Clarrie Fallon, considered mateship as 'the nicest word in the English language'.

However, the New Left generation of historians and activists who rose to prominence in the late 1960s generally had a very different take on mateship. One of the leaders of the New Left pack, Humphrey McQueen, savaged Ward's account of the idealized working class and accused Lawson of being a proto-fascist. Then, the feminist historians joined in the attack on Ward and



mateship, with Miriam Dixson in 1976 describing Ward's book as 'misogynist to the core' and arguing that mateship was 'deeply antipathetic to women'.

By the end of the 20th century, the impact of the New Left critique meant that mateship seemed more at home on the conservative side of the Australian political divide, highlighted by Liberal Prime Minister John Howard's attempt to insert the term into a new preamble in the Australian Constitution.

In his new history of Australian mateship, young historian Nick

Dyrenfurth shows that the use of the term has actually been contested territory for politicians and cultural warriors for quite a long time. Dyrenfurth himself comes from the left, but he generally approaches his task with intellectual curiosity rather than pre-conceived dogma. Importantly, he is alert to the fact that the traditionally Australian concept of mateship needs to be compared geographically, as well as temporally. He recognizes that there is nothing particularly unique to Australia about groups of males enjoying each other's company, while also considering when and how the term has been broad enough to encompass women.

Dyrenfurth describes how there was something distinctive about how male friendship manifested itself in the Australian colonies. Overseas visitors from as early as the 1840s were commenting on this. For example, British writer Alexander Harris told the story of a man carrying his mate forty miles across the Blue Mountains when he was too incapacitated to walk. Harris speculated that this deeper Australian form of mateship was caused by the absence of want—even among the poorer classes, making individuals more able to have regard for others—along with the greater need for cooperation in bush conditions. The trend already identified by the 1840s was reinforced in the 1850s by the Gold Rush. For a range of practical reasons, mining was a task best undertaken in pairs rather than individually.

Geoffrey Serle, another Old Left historian, described how on the goldfields a miner without a mate was regarded as a 'hatter', as in a type of madman. As well as the practical help a mate provided, sheer weight of numbers also meant Australia developed as a 'blokey' sort of place. The gender imbalance meant that only a quarter of men in early colonial times married. Then, just as the odds were improving, the influx of diggers to the goldfields skewed the numbers again so that in 1860 there were 140 males for every 100 females.

By the later decades of the 19th century mateship had taken on a political hue. Many of the early labour activists saw the Australian workers' mateship as a fertile source of unionists and Labor Party members. The socialist William Lane, most famous for his attempt to start a perfected New Australia in South America, regarded socialism as simply the 'desire to be mates'.

A crucial event in the evolution of Australian mateship was the First World War, an event which 'led many a conservative Australian to convert to the creed of mateship'.

The official war historian Charles Bean described the:

Prevailing creed ... inherited from the gold-miner and the bushman, of which the chief article was that a man at all times and at any cost stand by his mate.

Dyrenfurth has a particularly interesting section discussing how politically contested the concept of mateship became in the conscription referendums of 1916 and 1917, a divide which remained through the following two decades, until the Second World War when, for the first time in half a century, mateship 'was not the subject of overtly partisan conflict over its meaning'.

Despite mateship's association with some conservative institutions, such as the RSL, until the New Left came along, criticism of mateship more often came from conservatives, such as Peter Coleman, who saw in mateship 'the snarl of the collectivist bully'. Interestingly, Dyrenfurth's own sympathy towards mateship means that he is probably more relaxed when conservatives are attacking the concept than when they are trying to adopt it. And when it comes to John Howard adopting it, Dyrenfurth loses a bit of perspective.

Apparently, Work Choices and mateship are mutually exclusive. For Dyrenfurth, employees not able to seek redress due to changes in unfair dismissal laws can be mates; but a small business owner having to work more than the usual sixty or seventy hour week to cover for an incompetent employee who cannot be sacked, could not conceivably prefer to have some time to go to pub with their mates.

However, if you ignore Dyrenfurth's occasional partisan blind spots, this book is a very readable take on one of the most recognized features of the Australian experience. As Dyrenfurth comments:

Over the past two centuries, Australians of all ideological persuasions have written millions of words about mateship.

His book provides a useful summary of the history of those discussions.