

Junctures in the history of immigration to Australia

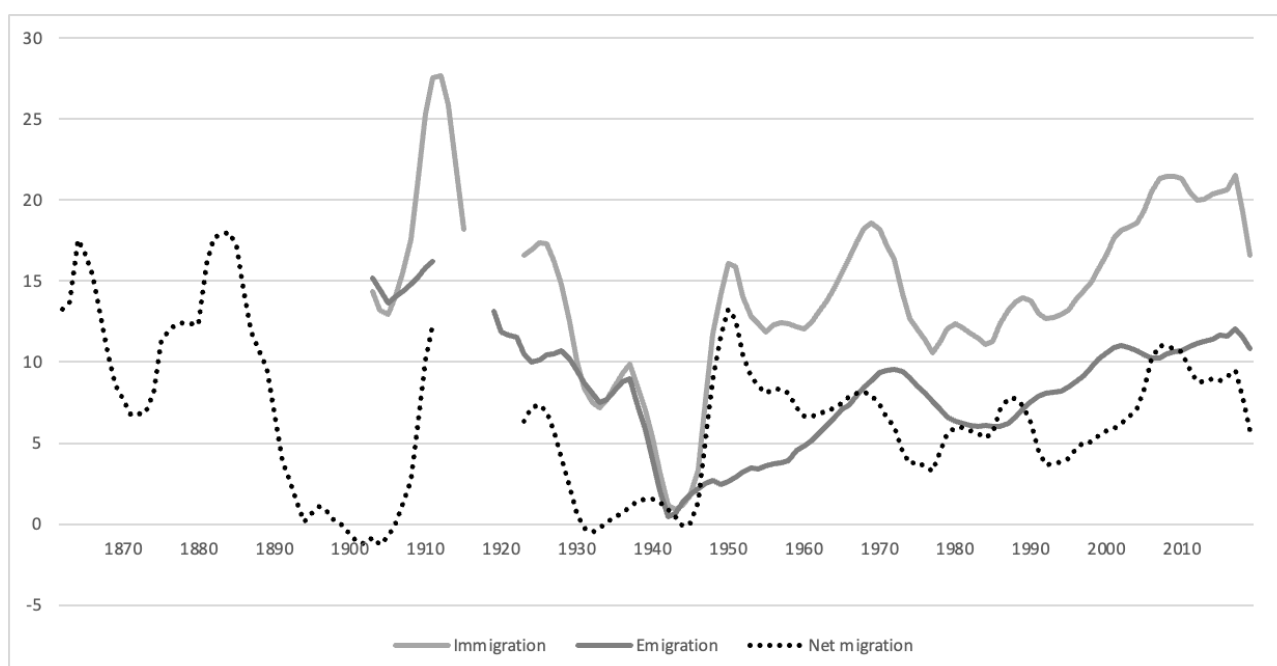
Migration histories typically describe the migration experience — the journey, the settlement process, the dislocation and the discrimination — and underplay the economic forces that drive migration flows and outcomes. They are mostly memoirs, studies of a particular ethnic group, or focus on a single period (e.g. the immigration boom following World War II) or issue (e.g. refugees, White Australia policy).

There are few general histories, only one this century (Eric Richards, *Destination Australia*, UNSW Press, 2008). I'm embarking on a general (economic) history, provisionally titled *Waves of Plenty: Immigration and the Making of Australia*, to be published by Black Inc. in 2026.

Following an opening part that sweeps through 200 years of Australian migration flows and policy settings, the second part examines six periods in some detail, arguing that each of them constitute a transition point, a juncture, which had the consequence of changing the face of Australia. I want to use this seminar to gauge reaction to this approach, and the identification and attributes of these six periods. The attached table provides a brief overview of the six periods, while the chart summarises aggregate migration flows. The final part of the book is an assessment of how immigration changed the lives of those who came and how the different waves of immigration have remade Australia.

Juncture	When	Economic and political context	Main immigration attributes	Consequences
Dispossession	Late 1820s to early 1840s	Massive expansion of land occupied by colonists, dispossession of native owners Large-scale British investment Development of staple industries for export, notably wool	Beginning of assisted passage (funded by land sales), primarily poor from Britain and Ireland Free immigration exceeds convict arrivals	More men than women migrants, but gender balance improves Likely cross-over point between white and Indigenous populations Foundations laid for self-government
Upheaval	1850s	Free trade, free movement Gold rushes, Australia's first major economic shock Self-government of colonies	Massive increase in arrivals, most unassisted, less poor among them Large numbers of "foreigners", especially Chinese and German	Population of Australia almost triples, passes one million people Very high (relative) living standards Beginnings of backlash against non-British, especially Chinese
Fortress Australia	1900s	Nationalism, protection Trade unions arrive as political force Federation	Immigration dwindles White Australia policy locks out foreigners Emigration, some forced, of foreigners	Stock of immigrants shrinks, becomes more white/British Growth in living standards stagnates
Bold experiment	Late 1940s to late 1950s	Post-war reconstruction, initially under Labor government Managed economy and planning, including of migration (populate or perish) Assimilation	Massive increase in arrivals, most assisted Majority of migrants not British	Immigration underpins sustained period of economic growth as Australia industrialises High population growth, greater ethnic diversity in population
Bloody reffos	Early to late 1970s	Stagflation Official recognition of China Race Discrimination Act Embrace of multiculturalism	Increase in family (chain) migration Large-scale arrivals of Asian migration, many refugees Introduction of NUMAS (precursor to points system)	Even greater ethnic diversity in population Economic outcomes for new migrants begin to wane
Australia unlimited	Mid-1990s to late 2000s	Neo-liberalism, globalisation Resources boom States counter terrorism, antipathy towards irregular arrivals of migrants	Temporary migration (students, skilled workers, backpackers) outnumbers permanent migration Net migration levels reach record highs (in volume)	Strong bias in migrant intake to young, well-educated, ameliorates economic impacts of ageing Immigration share returns to 19thC levels, among highest in world Record high ethnic diversity

Figure 1 **Migration flows, 1860-2020**



Notes: (1) Migration flows are shown as per 1000 people in the population. (2) 5 year centered moving average to remove year-to-year volatility. (3) Net migration is the official ABS historical series and does not always concord with immigration minus emigration, due to adjustments made to align with population estimates. (4) Figures for immigration for 1915-22, for emigration for 1912-18 and net migration for 1912-22 are excluded to remove effects of troop movements in World War I. (4) Population counts prior to 1971 did not fully enumerate Indigenous peoples.