

Tall poppies and egalitarianism in Australian discourse

From key word to cultural value

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In Australian English, *tall poppies* are usually individuals who, on the basis of unwarranted self-adulation, itself a consequence of success, amassed fortune or fame, have become targets for criticism; or, less frequently, individuals who, overcome by success, amassed fortune or fame, and on the mistaken assumption that they are above the law, have engaged in unlawful behaviour, only to find that, eventually, the law catches up with them as well. They become the victims of a widespread tendency, known as the *tall poppy syndrome*, to scrutinize high achievers and *cut down the tall poppies* among them. Sometimes, especially in the world of science, the term *tall poppy* is also used to refer to outstanding scholars who deserve to be publicly acknowledged for their work. This paper looks at *tall poppies* and at the *tall poppy syndrome* in Australian discourse, and argues that the term *tall poppy* is a key word which, when studied closely in terms of its currency, its incidence in collocations, etc., reveals a great deal about the real nature of egalitarianism, one of Australia's most often named cultural values.

1. Language and culture: The importance of key words

In all the languages of the world, as well as in the regional varieties of languages spoken throughout the world (such as English), there are words whose status differs from that of most other words in the lexicon and which, walking in the footsteps of French lexicologist Georges Matoré, we shall call *key words* (Fr.

mots clés).¹ In addition, Matoré recognized so-called *witness words* (Fr. *mots témoins*); the distinction is sociological and does not appear to rest on purely linguistic criteria. Witness words were described as material symbols of an important spiritual event, symbols of social, ideological, economical, or aesthetic change; they were neologisms marking a “turn” (Fr. “un tournant”; Matoré 1953:66). Key words were located at a higher level; they were fewer in number than witness words, and pointed to “beings, feelings, ideas, alive inasmuch as society recognizes in them the ideals it aspires to” (Fr. “un être, un sentiment, une idée, vivants dans la mesure où la société reconnaît en eux son idéal”; Matoré 1953:68). Key words did *not* refer to abstractions, according to Matoré, even though he stated the exact opposite eight years later (Matoré 1961:97). It would take him another 24 years (Matoré 1985) to distance himself altogether from the theoretical framework he had developed in the 1950s, a framework which had brought him fame and in which notions such as “key word” and “witness word” were crucially important.

Our own use of the term *key word* will be different, though, from that found in the writings of Matoré, whose influence actually extended well beyond the borders of the French language (see e.g. Williams 1976; Moeran 1989). As stated previously, we recognize the existence of key words in *all* the languages of the world; they are merely words that are “more culturally laden” than others, words that assume, as it were, “more than their share of cultural work” (Jay 1998:4), that are “particularly important and revealing in a given culture” (Wierzbicka 1997:15–6). Some, like the term *fair go* in Australian English, are directly linked to a cultural value (Bigelow 1998:40); many others, such as the word *weekend*, again in Australian English, are more muted, but nonetheless enlightening, signposts (Peeters *fc.*). The identification and close study of key words is one way, among others, to gain a better understanding of a language community’s cultural values — and, through a process of extrapolation, of the communicative norms underpinned by them (Peeters *fc.* 2004). Of course, all of this is easier said than done. What is required here is a *discovery strategy*. The question to be answered is the following: On what basis can one say that X is a key word in language L, whereas Y is not?

While emphasizing on the one hand that there is no such thing as an

1. Matoré’s stated aim was to explain society through a study of vocabulary (Matoré 1953:50). He saw lexicology as “a sociological discipline using the linguistic tools that the lexicon provides” (Fr. “une discipline sociologique utilisant le matériel linguistique que sont les mots”, *ibid.*).

objective strategy resulting in the identification of all the key words of a language, and on the other hand that the number of key words is not predetermined either, Wierzbicka (1997:16) provides nonetheless some worthwhile criteria.² First up is frequency of use, against the entire lexicon or within particular semantic areas. It appears to be intuitively correct to say that key words are relatively common words; far from contributing to its salience, a peripheral status is more likely to keep a word out of the limelight.³ Occurrence in idiomatic expressions is another indication: Key words are often at the heart of a significant array of set phrases. Besides, they are likely to occur with some degree of regularity in the proverbs of a language, in its aphorisms, in song lyrics, book titles, and so on. Not mentioned by Wierzbicka, but not to be dismissed either, are such criteria as observations by social and other commentators, inclusion in regional dictionaries, direct borrowing (without translation) into another language, etc.

Importantly, the various criteria listed above are anything but rigorous, and it is not to be excluded that, in some cases, they will fail to lead to any tangible results. The fact of the matter is that the ensuing investigation will have to confirm the ultimate status of what, on the basis of the criteria, was shaping up as a key word. The researcher's job has only just started. What lies ahead is a demonstration of what a purported key word actually reveals. As the very name suggests, a key word is supposed to provide a key; if no doors can be opened, the key is worthless. The present paper makes a case for key word status, in Australian English, of the term *tall poppy*.⁴

2. Yang (1999:134) regrets the lack of neater and more numerous selection criteria in Wierzbicka (1997). He overlooks the adverb *particularly* in the Wierzbickian definition provided above, and reaches the surprising and illegitimate conclusion that any word can be a key word, as long as it is culturally specific.

3. This is not necessarily the case, though. I was informed by Katharine Podmore (personal communication, 7 September 2001) that in Australian English the verb *pike* and the noun *piker*, neither of which I had ever heard in my 14 years in Australia, call to mind in an almost instantaneous manner an entire constellation of cultural values that are typically Australian. The noun is used to identify the person who engage in the premature departure or withdrawal implied by the verb.

4. For a description which is as culturally unbiased as possible and which, using the principles of Wierzbicka's *natural semantic metalanguage*, relies on universal semantic primes and a universal syntax, see Peeters (fc. 2004).

2. *Tall poppies*: Origins and evolution of the term (1902–2002)

The term *tall poppy* has a distinctively — even though not exclusively — Australian ring. According to the *Australian National Dictionary* (AND; Ramson 1988:494), echoed by Moore (1997:1393), a tall poppy is “a person who is conspicuously successful; freq. one whose distinction, rank, or wealth attracts envious notice or hostility”. The *Penguin Book of Australian Slang* (Johansen 1996:414) provides a similar, two-part definition: It talks about a “very important person; influential person; person with status — often held in contempt by others, who try to bring about this person’s downfall or ruin”. Oddly enough, the quotes that follow the AND definition paint a different story: There appears to have been an appreciable shift of meaning over the years, which is not reflected in the definition — even though the AND calls itself a “dictionary of Australianisms on historical principles” — but which has been picked up by the *Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* (DAC; Wilkes 1996:299), where a distinction is made between two different meanings. One, illustrated with quotes covering the years 1931 to 1973, refers to “a person with a high income”; the other one, illustrated with quotes covering the years 1967 to 1991, refers to “anyone eminent in any way”. No mention is made of the rather common pejorative connotation identified by Ramson and by Johansen, in spite of the fact that, to reach a proper understanding of the tall poppy phenomenon, that particular connotation is crucially important. A combination of the various accounts is called for and will get us a whole lot closer to the reality/ies behind the term.

The oldest recorded usage (as documented in the AND) dates back to the beginning of the 20th century: Nielsen (1902:8) writes that “[t]he ‘tall poppies’ were the ones it was desired to retrench, but fear was expressed that, as usual, retrenchment might begin at the bottom of the ladder, and hardly touch those at the top at all”. The reference to retrenchment makes it clear that the tall poppies referred to by Nielsen were not necessarily “conspicuously successful”: They were merely high-income earners who represented too much of a burden on the payroll. Wilkes (1996:299) notes that it was not until the 1930s that this usage of the term was given some currency, particularly thanks to New South Wales premier John T. Lang, who introduced a bill intended to put a cap of £10 a week on all government salaries. Lang (1970:147) recalls how he “referred to those being paid more than that amount as the ‘tall poppies’”. Understandably, the proposed legislation caused quite a stir, and the phrase was used on several occasions in the NSW Parliament and in the daily press. Lang’s book may have

led to renewed calls, directed in 1973 by Labor politician and federal minister Clyde Cameron at his own political party, to stop lavishing public funds on “the ‘tall poppies’ of the Public Service”.⁵ More importantly, though, Lang’s initiative, back in the 1930s, followed the introduction of pensions and other forms of social security, as well as the inauguration of a tariff regime to protect Australian manufacturers from foreign imports the decade before, all of which had started to impact on “Australians’ attitudes to money, and to those who made lots of it”. Full-blown protectionism, which was to last for a good half century, until the 1970s, “fostered a less entrepreneurial, more disapproving attitude to wealth and its trappings ... accompanied by a ‘tall poppy’ feeling about those who did get rich and flaunt their wealth”.

In 1999, Sydney journalist Robert Milliken, to whom we are indebted for the previous two quotes, noted that it looked as though there was change in the air: “The tall-poppy syndrome on wealth and capital accumulation may be breaking down”, he wrote.⁶ In fact, a more broadly defined tall poppy syndrome had taken over many years earlier, after slumbering for many more. By the time Lang published his book, his usage of the term *tall poppy* was already no longer the only one. A second meaning had started to appear and was spreading at the expense of the older one, which has all but disappeared from the contemporary language.

Quite conceivably, the publication of Hancock (1930) may have acted as a catalyst in the spread of the newer meaning: This very influential work pinpointed, among Australians at large, a widespread “distrust of special excellence and a dislike of authority and status seekers” (Feather 1993:153). If high-income earners were tall poppies, the same image — which had a certain ring to it — could no doubt without too much trouble be applied equally well to authority and status seekers in general. These days, the phrase typically refers to individuals who, on the basis of unwarranted self-adulation, itself a consequence of success, amassed fortune or fame, have become a target for criticism; it also refers, albeit to a lesser extent, to individuals (mostly business leaders) who, overcome by success, amassed fortune or fame, and on the mistaken

5. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 1973, quoted by Wilkes (1996:299). Cameron was concerned at what he saw as the betrayal of genuine Labor principles (cf. Rubinstein 1984: 24: “the chief and explicit concern of one side in Australian politics, since 1890 at least, [had] been the cutting down of rich tall poppies”).

6. All quotes are taken from Milliken’s “Transformations: The rich century”, [Australian] *Business Review Weekly*, 28 May 1999.

assumption that they are above the law, have engaged in unlawful behaviour, only to find that, eventually, the law catches up with them as well. Describing someone as a *tall poppy* is therefore (generally speaking) not a compliment in Australian society. Tall poppies tend to be seen as people who are bragging or being egotistical. In Australian English, it is commonly said that they *bignote* themselves and need to be told to *pull their head in*, or that they *are too big for their boots*. An almost identical statement, viz. that “very successful people often *get too big for their boots*” (emphasis added) is in fact one of a list of items, submitted to subjects for rating in terms of agreement or disagreement, that make up the so-called Tall Poppy Scale devised by Australian psychologist Norman Feather in 1989 (1989a, b).

It should come as no surprise that Australian sentiment about tall poppies has been the topic of intense psychological research, primarily undertaken at Flinders University (e.g. Feather 1989a, b, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999) as well as at the University of Western Australia (e.g. Grove and Paccagnella 1995; Paccagnella and Grove 2001). The interesting thing, from a linguistic point of view, is that Feather appears to have “hijacked” the term *tall poppy* (and those who have followed in his steps have done the same): In publication after publication, he has used the term in a neutral way, i.e. without the pejorative connotation that remains very much (but not always) part of it in common parlance. Feather’s references to “unpleasant” and “boastful” tall poppies are quasi-tautological in everyday language; those to “quiet” and “modest” tall poppies are oxymoronic. In his work, the phrase *tall poppy* is simply synonymous with the term *high achiever*. The two often appear together, linked by means of the conjunction “or”. Again and again, Feather has shown the need for a distinction, among Australia’s tall poppies, between “the good” and “the bad”. Who is good and who is bad, and which contributing factors determine whether a tall poppy (in the broader sense) is good or bad, depends of course on who makes the call.

On one occasion, displaying considerable metaphorical prowess, Feather (1993: 161) went one step further: He observed that “what were tall poppies to some were *tall weeds* to others, deserving to be cut down” (emphasis added). This unambiguously positive use of the term *tall poppy* is exceptional, not only in Feather’s work, but also, as foreshadowed a few moments ago, in more general terms. Quite possibly, the Adelaide psychologist had been under the same impression as Hobart historian Richard Ely (1984: 105) when he commenced his research into tall poppies. Feather, too, may have felt that, to quote Ely, “in recent usage, the earlier pejorative overtones have increasingly been displaced by commendative ones”. Ely, however, went one step further,

claiming that, from the outset, a shift of this nature (from negative to positive) was entirely within the realms of possibility:

From the start there were reasons for seeing the “tall poppy” usage as specially vulnerable to this kind of change. Had Lang (who probably did not coin the phrase, but must at least have boosted its currency) spoken of lopping the “tall petunias”, that expression might or might not still be with us, but would, I think, have been less suitable a target for implicitly ideological challenge. The point, of course, is that, since World War I, the poppy has come to symbolize the warrior cut down in a good cause, and so could be easily extended as a symbol of hero-martyrs generally. (Ely 1984: 105)

According to the same author, “trans-valuations” of this kind are not uncommon: Among Ely’s own examples are the trans-valuation of the noun *rats* in the name *Rats of Tobruk*, and that of the noun *bastard* in the Australian endearing form of address *You old bastard*.⁷ On the other hand, Ely’s assessment appears to take for granted that the tall poppy metaphor originated after World War I, which — as we have seen — is not the case. However, the link with the so-called *Flanders poppy*, artificial specimens of which started to be worn on Remembrance Day (also called *Poppy Day*), in commemoration of the Allied troops killed during the war (cf. OED, s.v. *poppy*), is not to be dismissed. It is quite possible that the emblematic elevation of the Flanders poppy has acted as a *catalyst* in the spread of the so-called “commendative uses” of an existing metaphor.

The trans-valuation of the term *tall poppy* continues to the present day, albeit at a snail’s pace, typically with minimal impact, and usually with reference to people who are less widely known than those who risk being referred to as tall poppies in the pejorative sense. It has almost certainly facilitated the neutral use of the term as found in Feather’s writings, with negative or positive overtones being contextual rather than inherent. Each of Susan Mitchell’s three best-selling books of interviews with and stories about successful and influential women in politics, business, sports and literature (Mitchell 1984, 1991, 2001) celebrates the lives and work of a number of women deliberately described as tall poppies — a term usually reserved for men, perhaps because women are less inclined to brag and show off. Also worthy of mention are the *Tall Poppy Academy (Australia)* and the Australia-wide *Tall Poppy Campaign*. The former

7. Linguists with a knowledge of the history of their discipline will immediately think of the fate reserved to the term *neogrammarian* (G. *Junggrammatiker*) in the second half of the 19th century: Originally an insult, it was adopted with pride by those whom it had been intended to ridicule.

is a recently established training and executive coaching company run by Ian Stephens, who has written a book (*Tall Poppyship*; Stephens 2001) with tips on “how to get ahead and stay there”. The latter is a remarkable (yet largely unnoticed) attempt, under the auspices of the Australian Institute of Political Science, to increase public appreciation and awareness of, and combat public indifference to, Australia’s scientific and intellectual excellence. Overall, the prototypical tall poppy is and remains very much an object of dislike. High achievers whose accomplishments are praised and who are treated with respect are not normally called *tall poppies*. The term is almost always reserved for those who, for one reason or another, are deemed not to deserve the respect that they, no doubt, think they do deserve.

3. Collocations

3.1 *Cutting down the tall poppies* and similar expressions

Out of the twenty items that make up Feather’s (1989a) Tall Poppy Scale, ten express positive attitudes towards tall poppies (i.e. high achievers in general). The other ten express negative attitudes. Among the latter, we have already referred to the statement that “very successful people often get too big for their boots”. Another item states that “very successful people sometimes need to be brought back a peg or two, even if they have done nothing wrong”. Only one statement actually uses the term *tall poppy*; it says that “people who are ‘tall poppies’ should be cut down to size”. Elsewhere (e.g. Feather 1994: 1), one finds references to the claim “that Australians feel a certain amount of satisfaction when tall poppies are cut down to size and suffer a major reverse in status”.

The use of the passive voice (as in “be brought back a peg or two”, “be/are cut down to size”) may go unnoticed among psychologists, but to the linguist it poses an interesting riddle. Feather appears to be saying that Australians are merely looking on, with glee, as someone else (or perhaps something else) goes about cutting down the tall poppies — or cutting the tall poppies down to size. Yet, nothing is further removed from the truth. The expression *cut down the tall poppies* and its variant *cut the tall poppies down to size* are used in Australian English to refer to a verbal activity, a speech act that the Australians themselves are said to take delight in. They are the ones who, by uttering criticism or by commenting on a reverse in status, cut down the tall poppies or cut them down to size (if and when they do so), and they are the ones who, at the same time,

derive pleasure or satisfaction from engaging in this activity. In the last two decades or so, both expressions have been widely used; both evidence the widespread antipathy of Australians for the country's tall poppies.

Cut down is in fact the verb that comes most naturally to the "average Australian" confronted with talk about tall poppies. Occurrences in non-fiction books and reference works include the following:

[The assumptions of egalitarianism] produced a society in which the cutting down of "tall poppies" became an automatic reflex. (Wilkie 1977: 15)

Australians have always liked to cut down their successful people, their "tall poppies", especially when they consider they are getting too tall. (Mitchell 1984: 1)

If the democratisation of any society can be measured by its enthusiasm for cutting its tall poppies down to size, Australia is unusually democratic. (Hudson 1997: 405)

The mass media join the chorus. According to Feather and McKee (1992: 87), they often report "that Australians like to see tall poppies cut down to size". In fact, what they report is quite different. First of all, journalists are acutely aware that Australians are not just watching as tall poppies fall by the wayside. Instead, they write things such as the following:

Our national immaturity led us to cut down tall poppies and denigrate achievements.⁸

After all, what are we if not a nation of backyard cricketers? Desperate to imitate our idols' bowling actions but always eager to cut down the tall poppy from next door with his fancy new bat.⁹

Secondly, when they are in the firing line for engaging in the sort of behaviour that they should merely be reporting on, the written media eagerly relay the accusations that are levelled against them, as in this excerpt and the one that follows:

James Packer has remained a true believer. He has described [Jodee] Rich [co-founder of telephone company One.Tel] as a "visionary" and berated the media for its readiness to cut down tall poppies.¹⁰

8. *Canberra Times*, 26 January 1986, quoted by Ramson (1988: 494).

9. Richard Hinds, "Backyard heroes", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 2001.

10. Anne Davies, "Fluctuating fortunes on rich list", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 May 2001.

What else do Australians do with their tall poppies, linguistically speaking? Occasionally, they cut them *off* instead of *down*:

[Atlanta Olympic silver medallist swimmer Scott] Miller is a survivor — as is evidenced by the drama surrounding the AIS [Australian Institute of Sport; B.P.], where he was training in 1997. A night on the town, a brawl, a broken finger and Miller was told to go. He is still angry at the media for “trying to cut off a tall poppy” over the incident.¹¹

Lop is another favourite:

If there is one place where the genuine eccentric is crushed, the tall poppy lopped and the penetrating discussion stifled, it is Australia. (Yeomans 1967:85)

The indiscriminate lopping of tall poppies can be harmful to progress. (Feather 1989a:265, 1989b:19)

Although it may feed political prejudice, lopping tall poppies is not particularly productive. One person’s self-indulgent celebrity is another’s idol. A high profile may invite controversy but it also attracts attention.¹²

Ely (1984:105) uses — in short succession — the participles *pulled out*, *cut down* and *pruned*. Another historian, Geoffrey Blainey,¹³ deploys a different trio:

Compared to the British Isles, the idea of equality rode high in Australia. Indeed Australia was often viewed, rightly or wrongly, as the land where the tall poppy was deliberately cut down. In felling tall poppies, however, Australia is not unique. A democratic country, especially an experienced one, is specially prone to topple the tall poppy.

It is not without interest to note that, like Hudson (1997), quoted earlier, Blainey relates the treatment Australians inflict on their tall poppies to the democratic nature of the country. In the early eighties, social commentator Donald Horne (1981:9) had done the same:

It used to be said of Australia that it was a country that cut down its tall poppies. It was seen as a country so democratic that the destructive jealousies of the ordinary people stifled talent and reduced originality to mediocrity. As I have suggested one way or the other in half-a-dozen books, this may be the opposite of the truth.

11. Jacquelin Magnay, “Miller aims to enjoy his comeback”, *The Age*, 21 June 2002.

12. Mike Stekete, “A few stars short of a republic”, *The Australian*, 19 September 2002.

13. In a lecture called “Heroes and tall poppies”, broadcast on 9 December 2001 as the fifth of the ABC National Radio’s 2001 Boyer lectures.

Unlike Hudson and Blainey, Horne neither confirmed nor denied that Australia “was a country that cut down its tall poppies”. He did, however, take exception to the claim that the “ordinary people”, rather than the “elites”, were to be blamed. He was of the view that the latter had stifled the former’s potential for development, and that “if ‘destructive jealousy’ occurred it may have been the destructive jealousy of one part of the elites for another part of the elites”.

Cut down (or *off*), *lop*, *pull out*, *prune*, *fell* and *topple* do not exhaust the list. Most if not all of the other verbs that are used are phrasal and involve the adverb *down*:

One frustrated citizen has picturesquely described Sydneysiders as ‘a race of knockers’, alluding to the tendency to knock down not merely the tall poppies, but even to knock back the aspirations of the smaller ones. (Connell et al. 1957: 85)

Labor is obsessed with the ‘tall poppies’, and seems determined to pull them down. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 1975; quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*)¹⁴

This general belief that Australians like to see tall poppies fall and actively strive to bring them down is part of Australian folklore. (Feather 1993: 153)

Tear down, *mow down* and *chop down* deserve to be mentioned separately; like *cut down* and *lop*, they refer to some sort of severing:

Australians are supposed to make a sport of tearing down tall poppies.¹⁵

One of the Great Aussie pastimes is our love of mowing down tall poppies, except for sporting legends that is, who traditionally remain unscathed.¹⁶

Critics argue that it is futile to name an annual South Australian of the Year. It is elitist and meaningless. Nonsense. We have become a culture so obsessed with chopping down our tall poppies that we no longer want to create them. Individuals deserve credit and recognition for outstanding service.¹⁷

14. The *Sydney Morning Herald* quote is likely to refer to the original meaning of the term *tall poppy* (cf., in Section 2, the reference to the denunciation by Labor’s Clyde Cameron of “the ‘tall poppies’ of the Public Service”).

15. Kerry O’Brien, *The 7.30 Report*, ABC TV, 12 November 2002.

16. N.N., *Breakfast*, ABC Radio National, 28 November 2002.

17. Rex Jory, “Abundance of worthy winners for State’s best”, *The [Adelaide] Advertiser*, 5 December 2002.

A dozen different verbs, all followed by the same noun phrase, all referring to what is basically one and the same treatment, must be an amazing proliferation in anyone's books. The variety of verbs and nouns (or verb and noun phrases) on which each of them depends in the context of an infinitival or participial use is equally impressive. A mere glance at the various quotes in this section suffices to pick up noun phrases such as *its enthusiasm for*, *its readiness to*, *the tendency to*, *our love of* and verb phrases such as *like to*, *be eager/prone/determined to*, *be obsessed with*, and ... *make a sport of*. The depiction as a sport of what appears to be Australia's preferred treatment of tall poppies is particularly fascinating, and seems to have a certain currency when reference is made to business leaders. The statement (above) that "Australians are supposed to make a sport of tearing down tall poppies" was made with reference to business tycoon John Elliott. Alan Bond is another well-known example of a successful businessman who quickly gained tall poppy status; when his business empire started to collapse around him, a cartoon by Mark Lynch, published in *The Australian* on 28 June 1989, showed his face at the top of a huge poppy stem in the process of being sawn off, with numerous onlookers with handsaws, chainsaws, even a bulldozer on the one side, and a host of reporters on the other side. The caption said: "Australians enjoying their favourite sport".¹⁸

3.2 The tall poppy syndrome

High achievers who are given the tall poppy treatment by their fellow Australians are frequently referred to as "victims of the tall poppy syndrome". *Time Magazine*, in its issue of 25 October 1999, describes Dame Nellie Melba as "an early victim of Australia's tall poppy syndrome"; one of her usual responses to public accusations, e.g. of drunkenness, in 1903, was a dismissive "They say. What say they? Let them say". The *Sun-Herald*, in its edition of 31 March 1991, quotes footballer Steve Roach as claiming: "All I'm concerned about is making this season a successful one for [football club] Balmain and coach Alan Jones who is a victim of the tall poppy syndrome". In the American daily newspaper *USA Today*, Michael Hiestand singles out New South Wales Olympics Minister Michael Knight, "a victim of the tall poppy syndrome", "someone who has done

18. Commentators have often sourced the Australian metaphor of cutting down tall poppies to an ancient Greek and Latin literary motive found for instance in Livy. For a critical appraisal of what is at best a very tenuous link, see Peeters (2003).

a successful job but suffered a loss of public face and reputation in doing so".¹⁹ Jake Niall tries to read tennis star Lleyton Hewitt's mind: "Hewitt thinks he's been harshly treated and my guess is that, like most sportsmen who run foul of the fourth estate, he probably believes himself to be merely a victim of the famed tall-poppy syndrome".²⁰ Steve Connolly reports on Queensland rugby union coach Andrew Slack's assessment of public criticism of former Brisbane Broncos winger Wendell Sailor: "Slack said Sailor had been a victim of the tall poppy syndrome and fans and the media had expected too much of him."²¹

The term *tall poppy syndrome* appears to have been coined in the 1980s, and is defined in the *Macquarie Dictionary of New Words* (Butler 1990: 357) as "a desire to diminish in stature those people who have attained excellence in a particular field", and in the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Moore 1997: 1393) as "the habit of denigrating or 'cutting down' those who are successful, high achievers, etc.". A definition which, to a larger extent than those that have just been quoted, recognizes the complex nature of the tall poppy syndrome, which is after all a syndrome, i.e. a combination of symptoms, opinions or emotions, is that found in Grove and Paccagnella (1995). The tall poppy syndrome is not just a desire to do X or the habit of doing Y. "The phrase 'tall poppy syndrome' describes a tendency to closely scrutinise high-profile individuals, search for reasons to 'cut them down to size', and experience satisfaction if they suffer a reversal of status" (Grove and Paccagnella 1995: 88). Unfortunately, the most essential step appears to be missing: After the scrutiny of a high-profile individual and its identification as a tall poppy, after the search for reasons to cut down the tall poppy, but before the satisfaction felt as a result of a fall, there is of course the cutting down itself, curiously omitted in this otherwise remarkable definition.

The tall poppy syndrome, one of "the top cultural stereotypes about Australia",²² has been a "fairly constant theme in recent Australian affairs"

19. Quoted by Mark Riley, "Australian culture? US knows its onions", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 2000.

20. "The ball is now in Hewitt's court", *The Age*, 18 November 2001.

21. "Supporters slur Sailor, says Slack", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 November 2002.

22. Michael Hiestand, in the American daily newspaper *USA Today* (quoted by Mark Riley; cf. note 19).

and has been said to have “a firm grip” on the country’s population.²³ Australia is not merely the “land of the Tall Poppy Cutters”,²⁴ the “supposed home of the tall poppy syndrome”;²⁵ it has been referred to as “the country that *invented* the tall poppy syndrome” (emphasis added).²⁶ On the other hand, *syndrome* being a medical term, it is probably no surprise that the tall poppy syndrome has been defined as a virus, more particularly — as reported in Butler (1990) — as a “*built-in virus*” (*Australian Financial Review*, 28 July 1988; emphasis added). Fitzpatrick’s (1956:208) reference to the “rooted scepticism, so much deplored by moralists, of the merit and mettle of [Australia’s] own ‘tall poppies’” and Robert Hughes’ remarks on Australia’s “peevisly insecure hatred of tall poppies” which is “hardwired into us, a proof of ‘toughness’”²⁷ go in the same general direction. The first symptoms of the tall poppy syndrome often appear at a very young age, when primary students direct their attention at those of their classmates who perform better than they do. Among primary school children, those who know all the answers and show too much enthusiasm are at risk of being cut down and ostracized by their classmates — a practice which sometimes continues throughout the education system.²⁸ While many schools parade their sporting, academic or musical high achievers, once within the classroom walls, it is almost a crime to appear too smart amongst one’s peers. Intellectual achievement is often frowned upon. This is not to say that the teachers themselves are entirely beyond reproach. Some of them may feel threatened by unusually gifted students and bear down on them. That, at least, is the impression of Jones (1993), a consultant in educational

23. Miriam Dixon, “A nation in thrall to the third deadly sin”, *The Weekend Australian*, 26–27 May 1990.

24. Wayne Smith, “Perkinsmania!”, *Courier-Mail*, 19 September 1992.

25. Stephen Brook, “Brands look to the stars. Does fame lead to fortune?”, *The Weekend Australian*, 1–2 August 2002.

26. Ian Kortlang, *Background Briefing*, ABC Radio National, 17 December 1995.

27. Robert Hughes, “The real Australia”, *Time Magazine* (American edition), 1 September 2000. Emphasis added in both cases. Fitzpatrick’s may well be one of the first unambiguous usages of the newer meaning of the term *tall poppy* (cf. Section 2).

28. Cf. the following statement, printed in the *Cairns Post*, 28 October 1983 (quoted in Butler, 1990: 357; possibly the first recorded usage of the phrase *tall poppy syndrome*): “Why are our young people so tongue-tied when compared to young people of similar age and background from the US? Some people say it is the ‘tall poppy’ syndrome. Others say it is a failure to educate young people long enough.”

technology, who notes that “discussions about how systems or schools in general deal with gifted students can quickly become contentious”. In the media, he says, the debate is often characterized as “peopled by stereotypes – bumptious, middle-class brats (usually male), ambitious parents, pusillanimous administrators and mediocre teachers, intent on cutting down the tall poppies” (Jones 1993:6). Bullying by peers and by teachers frequently has considerable psychological effects in later life, both in terms of the care taken not to shine above others and the desire to criticize those who do. This does not mean that Australians, at any point in their lives, are not allowed to be ambitious; it does mean, however, that there is enormous pressure on them to downplay their achievements before they are being singled out. Bullying of the kind described here may well be among the worst manifestations of the tall poppy syndrome, which could explain why, in recent years, efforts to eradicate it have been on the increase. Many schools now have so-called extension, enrichment or acceleration programs. One such program, at St John’s Regional College, a co-educational Catholic secondary school in Dandenong, on the outskirts of Melbourne, involves enough students, according to the school’s director of studies, to “create a peer group and help avoid the tall-poppy syndrome”.²⁹

4. The cultural significance of the tall poppy syndrome

4.1 Myth or reality?

“Do Australians have a tendency to want to cut down tall poppies or is this a myth that is promulgated by the media?” (Feather and McKee 1992:87). Do Australians really *cut down, lop, chop down, knock down, pull down, tear down, bring down* their tall poppies? Or do they merely say they do, but then carry on with their lives regardless? If it is a myth (some actually believe that it is), then surely it is one that is promulgated, not merely by the media, but in the media, by journalists and reporters as well as by others, such as readers and interviewees. If it is a myth, it is one that is further reinforced by those who, when they find themselves subjected to public criticism, try to dismiss such criticism by blaming their fellow Australians for falling foul of the tall poppy syndrome.

A rather common observation is that the syndrome is “alive and well” — or “well and alive”. One of its earliest occurrences is found in the Brisbane-based

29. Rebecca Scott, “Smart moves for clever kids”, *The Age*, 15 May 2002.

Courier-Mail of 24 May 1986.³⁰ Two other, much more recent, examples will suffice. On *Inside Business* (ABC TV, 11 August 2002), Sydney banking analyst Brian Johnson did not hesitate: “I think in Australia the tall poppy syndrome is alive and well”, he said. Russell Coight’s claim in *The Age* (“The tall-poppy syndrome is alive and well, and once you become successful people are always trying to cut you down”) is a definite overstatement, since not everyone who is successful is being cut down.³¹ The other phrase was used on 22 September 2002 by ABC Radio National reporter Natasha Mitchell who, in a broadcast on *Schadenfreude*, referred to “the great Tall Poppy Syndrome that seems to be so well and alive in Australia”.

Rubinstein (1984:30), on the other hand, claims that “much of Australia’s apparent propensity to cut down tall poppies is illusory”. He says he knows of “remarkably little evidence to support the contention that Australians do cut down tall wealthy poppies” (*ibid.*), then broadens his observation as follows (Rubinstein 1984:35): “I would also argue that something quite similar has been true in the cultural realm. There were simply few tall poppies to cut down. However, the question still remains, whether Australians did cut down such tall poppies as there were. On the whole — and, again, the parallel with the economic sphere is clear — I would say no”. Shifting his attention to the second half of the 20th century, he then points to a possible change (*ibid.*): “Australia now exports its culture and cultural values, and is highly regarded for these around the world. Yet, strangely enough, an Australia that has been transformed in this way is perhaps more likely to cut down its tall poppies than the Australia of old”. An ambivalent statement, if ever there was one.

Not nearly as ambivalent is the so-called *Black Friday Declaration*, “signed and sealed” by Melbourne-based Prodos Marinakis and available commercially on parchment paper. It contains the following statement:

This destructive myth — which has for decades been promoted by our academics, commentators and journalists — as an article of faith — without evidence — without ever having been tested — in order to undermine the characteristic confidence and forward-looking, benevolent nature of Australians — this myth which claims that we — as a people — resent or envy achievement and success, that we are “a nation of knockers” and that this

30. “The tall poppy syndrome is alive and well as many have found to their chagrin and anyone who is different will come in for their share of attention, good or bad, some time in their life” (quoted by Butler 1990:357).

31. “Wandering star”, *The Age*, 15 August 2002.

should be treated as a defining characteristic of our culture is an ignorant, wrong and thoroughly vicious misrepresentation.

Another paragraph reads as follows:

The “Tall Poppy Syndrome” has never, ever been substantiated by evidence. It has no substance. It does not and has not ever existed. Australians enjoy, appreciate, admire and aspire to success and achievement in all fields.

Of course they do — provided such success and achievement does not go hand in hand with the bragging and egotistical behaviours that turn a high achiever into a (prototypical) tall poppy. One has to be mindful of the fact that not every high achiever is a tall poppy (only the braggers are), and that not every high achiever becomes a victim of the tall poppy syndrome (only the braggers do). The question that needs to be asked is this: If confidence, benevolence etc. are as characteristic of the Australians as Marinakis has it, and if the tall poppy syndrome is indeed as destructive as Marinakis has it, one wonders what it has in fact destroyed.

Sydney Morning Herald reader Dean Johns, too, talks about a myth.³² He calls for an end to all the “bitching about the myth of the tall poppy syndrome”, but only at the end of a masterful piece of metaphorical craftsmanship in which he actually professes his belief that the syndrome does exist. Indeed, an elaborate paragraph which lists a number of Australians (no entrepreneurs, no politicians...) from different walks of life, all of whom Johns considers to be tall poppies (he clearly uses the term in a neutral way, much like psychologist Norman Feather; cf. Section 2), is followed by another one which leaves no doubt about the reality of the tall poppy syndrome. Here is part of what he has to say:

[T]hey'd better be genuine tall poppies. Because when weedy, inferior specimens try to sucker us into treating them like the genuine lofty article, we're inclined to reach for the shears. When common-or-garden creepers, climbers and other seedy species start trying to take us for saps and passing themselves off as poppies, that's when we get the secateurs out. Even real tall poppies should be careful not to get too far above themselves. Because we don't hedge around or gild the lily. The moment even the loftiest of poppies get too big-headed, we'll prune, lop, trim, cut and slash them down to size. And in the event that they get too greedy — and as we all know, there have been some so meretricious you'd swear they were on a mission to put the “whore” back in

32. “We're a decent bunch... When some are cut down to size”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 2001.

“horticulture” — we’ll nip them in the bud quick as look at them. In short, both imitation poppies and genuine tall ones who come to consider themselves to be above the law and lore of the land, and take to behaving like pr---s, will sooner or later be cactus.

Where does all of this leave us? I, for one, have seen and heard enough to be convinced of the reality of the tall poppy phenomenon in Australia. But perhaps I have allowed myself to be fooled. Perhaps it should be left to psychologists and social commentators to work out, once and for all, whether the tall poppy syndrome is a myth or a reality. Feather (1994: 69) talks about an “oversimplified belief”, but it must be borne in mind that his tall poppies are in fact high achievers in the broadest sense. His research, and that of his associates, when translated into the language of the average Australian, does show that Australians, in appropriate circumstances, see themselves as tall-poppy cutters. However, what matters much more than what people do is what people think and say they do. Cutting down the tall poppies is part of the Australian psyche, of Australian folklore (as indicated by Feather 1993: 153, quoted above) — more so than of the psyche and folklore of other English-speaking nations (with the likely exception of New Zealand), as is abundantly clear from the numerous relevant expressions that refer to it and that are showing no signs of becoming less common. In what follows, we shall take the existence of the tall poppy syndrome for granted.

4.2 Good or bad?

Australian film director Peter Weir once declared (*Cinema Papers*, August 1990): “The good side of the tall-poppy syndrome is that we have a healthy attitude to pomposity and a good, hard eye on the reality of situations. That’s the positive side. But it can lean over to suspecting anyone who’s been successful”. The claim that the tall poppy syndrome has a good side is an interesting one; it is a point which has also been made among media representatives, as well as among politicians.

First of all, in January 1996, Rosey Golds, a freelance writer and social commentator for ABC Radio, expressed the view that one thing she had learnt over the years was that the tall poppy syndrome was not nearly as bad as she had been led to believe in her youth.³³ As a child, she had been taught that Austra-

33. “Don’t deflower a great leveller”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 January 1996.

lians “resent other people’s success”, and that it was evil to do so. Australians “mistrusted anyone who broke from the pack and placed themselves above others”, “were suspicious of ambition and wealth”, and “despised the conspicuous expression of either”. All that mistrust, suspicion and aversion was misplaced. Golds believed what she was told, because she did not know any better:

I accepted this view of Australian culture for some time, but over the past 10 years or so changes in the landscape of our cultural values have made me see the tall poppy syndrome in quite a different light.

The realization that there are two post-war cultural trends that are on the rise, one the idea that those who have made it deserve our utmost respect, and the other that worth can be measured in terms of income and of material success, led Golds to rethink her acquired, negative assessment of the tall poppy syndrome. It was a good thing to have, because it “expressed our great reluctance to defer to authority figures (and thus establish a new class system) and our abhorrence towards a society predicated on the worship of money”. It also expressed the average Australian’s mockery of the “desire to impress”. Rather than a “bland hymn to mediocrity”, it was — and still is — a “powerful check” on shifting values. It is “integral to a classless Australia”: a “great leveller” which is not to be “deflowered”.

Has the great leveller been deflowered? If Golds had not at least perceived there was a threat, she would not have gone out of her way to defend the virtues of the tall poppy syndrome. All the available evidence suggests, however, that there is no threat: The syndrome is alive and well — even though the country is not nearly as classless as Golds would like it to be. There is no reason why a tall poppy syndrome cannot exist in an Australia that has a class division. On the other hand, Golds does identify “an ugly aspect” to the tall poppy syndrome: It may degenerate into an “attitude which translates into a hostility to success or difference of any kind”, or into a kind of “parochial bigotry towards anything that transgresses the mediocre”. Nonetheless, “a measure of the tall poppy syndrome is a valuable and unique aspect of Australian culture”. It is “at the heart of our most treasured quality — our egalitarianism”.

A similar point was made more recently by two politicians on opposite sides of the political spectrum. On 19 February 1998, the day after he and 99 fellow Australians were inducted as “National Living Treasures”, Liberal Prime Minister John Howard appeared on the *Midday Show* (Channel Nine TV). When asked by show host Kerri-Anne Kennerley whether, “given the history of Australia” and “the tall poppy syndrome in this country”, celebrating success in

such a fashion meant “we are turning the corner rather than cutting down our achievers”, he answered:

I think as we approach the 100 years of Federation we are looking a bit more reflectively and positively on what we have achieved, and who we are, and what we represent, than we used to. And some of that cynicism is going. It won't go altogether and it shouldn't either. One of the great strengths of Australia is that we have a certain protective scepticism and that allows us not to get too carried away with what people say or do. But I think we are getting a nice happy balance now in a way that we perhaps didn't have before. And we really have achieved so much.

It was a media appearance he had forgotten everything about just over a year later, when “one of the great strengths of Australia”, provided it was practiced in moderation, turned out to be a bad thing. During an interview with Mike Carlton on 23 March 1999, on Radio 2UE, while commenting on selected excerpts of a new preamble to the Australian constitution co-authored with poet Les Murray, the Prime Minister stated: “The last bit of course is a blow against the tall poppy syndrome and if there's one thing we need to get rid of in this country it is our tall poppy syndrome”.³⁴ Labor Opposition leader Kim Beazley's turn to sing the praise of the tall poppy syndrome came on 10 May 2001, in a speech to the House of Representatives. He made the following statement:

I have no doubt that it is a good thing in a democracy for people to show healthy skepticism for political discourse. Our larrikin spirit, our convict origins, our well-known and often lamented “tall poppy syndrome” are probably good for this country. This attitude has stopped in his tracks many an aspiring dictator. It is hard to imagine a Hitler or a Mussolini ever surviving the dry wit of an Australian pub crowd. Nevertheless, it cannot be healthy for our democracy that there has been such a decline in regard for our major institutions.

The one institution that Beazley was thinking of in particular was the House of Representatives itself, the politicians. They were in danger of losing, or had perhaps already lost, the respect and the confidence of the people they were meant to represent; they were tall poppies, wasting their time arguing, spending taxpayers' money on all sorts of hidden entitlements, and behaving arrogantly.

34. Ironically, at a subsequent public referendum, the preamble was overwhelmingly rejected, and in the following days many people took delight in mocking John Howard for his failure. In other words, they tried their best to cut him down, but to no avail.

The opposition leader called for a set of codes of conduct, and for the appointment of an independent auditor of parliamentary allowances. Were it not for the negative feedback received from the electorate over the years, the tall poppy treatment inflicted upon ministers and members of parliament in general, these are things he may not have thought of including in his speech.

5. Towards a better understanding of Australian egalitarianism

It is important to reach a better (i.e. more explicit) understanding of egalitarianism, Australian style, than we currently have — and this is what we have set out to do here through a detailed study of the Australian key word *tall poppy* and of the entire tall poppy phenomenon in Australia. We have seen that egalitarianism has much less to do with (utopian) ideals such as the radical redistribution of the nation's riches or the elimination of the gap between rich and poor than with the (down-to-earth) realisation that there is nothing wrong with success, as long as it goes hand in hand with an awareness that nobody is entitled to special status because of it. Hugh Mackey³⁵ once put it like this: “Australians are irritated by tall poppies who act tall. The egalitarian ideal has made us uncomfortable with the idea that success implies superiority. The Australian ethos is to be modest about our success and humble about our achievements”. Australia is suspicious of the kind of free-flowing unconcealed ambition or pride that often stems from becoming *too* successful. Kevin Hindle, director of Swinburne University's School of Entrepreneurship, blames the country's economic woes in 2002 on the tall poppy syndrome, which is one of “a number of cultural negatives that work against Australia”. “We like others to be successful, but not too successful. It's quite a hard concept to get at”.³⁶ It is not that hard, really. How successful is “too successful”? *Too successful* simply means ‘blinded by success to the point of being unable or unwilling to be like everyone else’.

No matter how successful Australians are, their ultimate aim must always remain to be like everyone else. That is why Australian Prime Ministers attend cricket matches and cry on television when the country is in mourning. Radio

35. Quoted by Jillian Broadbent, “Efficiency but not Equality?”, Kenneth Myer Lecture, Australian National Library, 7 October 1999.

36. Christian Catalano, “Australia sags entrepreneurially”, *The Age*, 15 November 2002.

personality John Laws is another example of someone who turned “being like everyone else” into something of an art form, until he, too, came under scrutiny, allegedly for having accepted money to broadcast favourable comments on some of the bigger national companies. This was not happening in 1999, though, or if it was, he had not been accused of it yet. On 17 June, on ABC Radio National, in a program called the *Media Report*, Robert Bolton interviewed Gil Appleton, who had analysed several hundreds of hours of Laws programming for a PhD on radio talkback shows. He asked her: “Australians have a reputation for intolerance of the well-to-do and the wealthy and the successful, but why is it that John Laws does not seem to be a victim of the tall poppy syndrome?” Gil Appleton’s answer was as follows:

Isn’t it a paradox? It really is. I think if you listen to him constantly, you get the impression that despite all that, he’s very self-deprecating in some ways. He talks a lot about his problems. For example, if anyone rings in with depression, or says they’re depressed, he’s always hugely sympathetic, because he says that he’s a depressive himself. And I think that sense of identification with him somehow overrides all those other considerations. I mean people know that he’s immensely wealthy, and there’s this kind of paradox. On the one hand, people probably sneer and say ‘Oh, he’s got all those cars and that beautiful house in the country’ but on the other hand, they feel he’s one of us. It really is very paradoxical.

Or is it? Gil Appleton clearly had an explanation, and once explained, a paradox is no longer a paradox. Moreover, it did not last. As soon as there was a perception that, because of some of the things he did or said, Laws was no longer “one of us”, the value of egalitarianism caught up with him and brought him down.

There is more to egalitarianism, though, than the Australian aversion for conspicuous pride or ambition, or for any form of behaviour someone feels entitled to on the basis of success or expects to get away with. Egalitarianism has other linguistic manifestations, which link it up with other cultural values, such as the commonly heard phrase *a fair go for all*. That, however, will have to be the topic of another paper. For now, the detailed linguistic and cultural study of an Australian phenomenon as obvious as the tall poppy syndrome has taught us a few invaluable lessons about one particular aspect of one of the most prominent cultural values in the minds of most Australians, one that even cultural outsiders such as Béal (1992:45) have been acutely aware of: “There is no need”, she wrote, “to convince anyone that egalitarianism is a fundamental Australian value. It is strongly and openly advocated, and reflected in colloquial expressions such as ‘cutting down the tall poppies.’”

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