Traditional Myths and Problematic Heroes: 
The Case of Harry Freame

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Abstract
This article reconstructs key elements in the life-story of Harry Freame, a Japanese-born Australian who served in both the First and Second World Wars. Freame’s courageous role in gathering intelligence as a forward scout at Gallipoli, Turkey, in 1915, was matched by a different kind of bravery in his intelligence work in Sydney and Tokyo in 1940. Yet Freame has received little public recognition for his remarkable feats. The main reasons for this neglect appear to be Freame’s mixed-race background and an Australian wariness about praising secret agents and spies. His unusual ethnic origins in a mainly ‘white’ Australia and his involvement in secret work made him a problematic hero. In contrast, British and American spies have achieved a mythological status as heroic figures in the public culture of these nations.

Abstract in Malay

1 This paper was first presented at the 13th Biennial Symposium on Literatures and Cultures of the Asia-Pacific Region, International Islamic University Malaysia, 20-23 November, 2009.

Keywords
Biography, nationalism, war, myths, hero, spy

Keywords in Malay
Biografi, nasionalisme, perang, mitos, wira, perisik

Prelude
This paper takes its cue from several sharp observations in Benedict Anderson’s revised edition of *Imagined Communities* (1996 edition) together with insights from previous symposia in this biennial series on Literatures and Cultures of the Asia-Pacific, especially the 1991 symposium which I had the pleasure of co-hosting with Dennis Haskell in Perth on the theme “Myths, Heroes and Anti-Heroes.”

Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* has been deservedly influential in thinking about nationalism in our region, rightly drawing attention to the region’s differences from European nationalism and its myths. With regard to this paper, which touches upon elements of nationalist thought and behaviour in Australia and Japan, I find Anderson’s observations on the biography of nations and on patriotism and racism in this context especially valuable. In his closing remarks on the narratives we construct for nations, Anderson focuses on deaths, especially violent deaths, and their place in such narratives: “to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths,” he says, “must be remembered/forgotten as ‘our own’” (206). In an earlier chapter (8), he reflects on the “moral grandeur” which dying for one’s country can have: “The idea of ultimate sacrifice comes only with an idea of purity, through fatality” (144). Complicating this picture however, are “dreams of racism” which have their origins in a somewhat different set of narratives – in “ideologies of class rather than of nation” and associated notions of “breeding” (149).

Also relevant to my paper are essays by a Japanese and an Australian academic, Orie Muta and Joan Newman, which were published in *Myths, Heroes and Anti-Heroes* (1992). Muta notes the close historical connection between Japanese myths of heroism and the Emperor system (36). In World War Two, she remarks, traditional sensibilities were reinforced by kamikaze pilots who died in combat and left haiku poems that likened their prospective fall from the sky to “cherry blossoms in the Spring/ So pure and radiant” (39). Writers who explored more individualistic personae were considered anti-heroic. Traditional Australian notions of warrior heroism have a shorter history than those in Japan but have been similarly pervasive. As Joan Newman reports:

> Although the governing view of the nation is the body of “the people,” the people are commonly confined to a particular Romantic image of the rural working man. The place of the white European male is naturalised within
the Australian environment. His history, his imposition on the land, the dispossessions of Aborigines, the presence of women, blacks and non-Anglo-Celts within society rarely play a part within the national heroic paradigm. (176).

With these observations in mind, we now turn to the troubling case of Harry Freame.

Introduction

The figure of Harry Freame, who was born in Japan of an Anglo-Australian father and Japanese mother, stands out as an unusually gifted on-the-ground secret agent for Australia whose contributions to military tactics and intelligence in two World Wars was cut tragically short in 1940. Freame stands apart from the figure of the “gentleman spy” who tends to dominate accounts of secret intelligence in Britain and its empire (Fisher). Harry Freame lived his life more physically than such self-styled intellectuals and high-level political intelligence operatives who tend to dominate public perceptions of the spy. He provides the worm’s eye view of the spying game and his story reveals the physical as well as mental demands on certain agents involved in clandestine activities.

I

Harry Freame enters Australian military history through his heroic conduct as a scout at Gallipoli, the ill-fated landing on 25 April 1915 when the Australian nation and character are said by a number of historians to have been born. Australia’s official historian of the war, C.E.W. Bean, described Freame as “probably the most trusted scout at Anzac” (Bean, The Story of Anzac 309) and extolled his courage and ingenuity at the Gallipoli landing for which Freame was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM); but for which, Bean suggested he deserved the Victoria Cross (Bean “Personal Records”).

Bean writes of Freame’s actions in his Personal Records:

Harry Freame, a lance-corporal at the landing, was one of the very few who received a decoration for his work in that battle…. [Freame] and others had held vital positions in that constantly moving and changing fight but none was so ubiquitous as he, now holding a key point on the Nek leading to Baby 700, now finding for his commander scattered parts of the battalion. On the second morning he discovered a group under Jacobs at Quinn’s – the embryo of that famous post. Finding them much exhausted and without water, Freame and a New Zealander from the group dashed down the dangerous slope and brought back a supply from the foot of the hill. That finished, he dashed down the hill again carrying his report to his colonel. As he reached the foot his voice was heard calling “All right!” Afterwards the party learnt that he had been twice hit during the descent.
While these actions led to his recommendation for the DCM, Freame’s fellow soldiers at Anzac seem to have been equally struck by his near magical powers as a gatherer of intelligence. In retrospect, Freame assumes autochthonous powers:

Possessed of an uncanny sense of direction, Freame was never more in his element than when, at night, he was wriggling his way, like an eel, across the divide of No Man’s Land, picking up information, and more information, to satisfy the voracious demands of the intelligence officers….

Silently, but surely, Freame moved about in the darkness, often up to the very brink of the enemy trench, even into it, and it is related of him that, on one occasion, he lay so close to the Turks that he could follow a game of cards in which a number of them were engaged. (“Assembly” 29)

But the unseen scout is also a man of action who knows how to defend himself in adversity:

During one of these nocturnal excursions [Freame] ventured too far, and was caught by the Turks in one of their trenches. There he was held prisoner until the next night, when he was marched away, under a guard of six men, to Anafarta; but, pulling out a revolver which he had had secreted in his tunic under his armpit, he shot down his captors and escaped to his own lines – keen as ever on further enterprise. (“Assembly” 29)

A man of dash and style whose courage bred confidence in others, Freame wore a recognisable black and white spotted bandana in the trenches.

Freame’s prominence in historical accounts of Anzac led to mythic tales of his prowess and his inclusion in Roger McDonald’s award-winning novel 1915 where he is depicted in colourful terms as “the scout Freame, steady as a snake…. He was part Japanese and had the silky unruffled look of someone constantly at the centre of important events” (McDonald 397-98).

Biographical commentators have remarked how Freame’s appearance and speech led to assumptions about him. Freame seems to have encouraged such speculation. Courtney remarks that “(h)is dark complexion and peculiar intonation of speech had led his companions to believe that he was Mexican – an impression which he reinforced at Anzac where, in cowboy fashion, he carried two revolvers in holsters on his belt, another in a holster under his armpit and a Bowie knife in his back pocket” (Courtney 581). The hidden holster under his armpit saved the day when he was taken prisoner by the Turks and shot his escort, but he did not escape injury. Later, after being seriously
wounded during operations at Lone Pine, Freame was evacuated and discharged as medically unfit on 20 November 1916.

Despite his remarkable exploits and appearance, the courageous and adventurous Harry Freame was yoked in his fellow soldiers’ retrospective accounts into the framework of the Anzac legend wherein he “typifies the spirit of the average Australian soldier” (“Assembly” 29). With this background, it is interesting to observe the historian Bean’s apparent hesitation and perhaps ambivalence as he considers whether Freame could achieve his ambition of becoming a commissioned officer with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). In a line which he subsequently crossed through in pencil in his personal records, Bean remarked of Freame’s commanding officer, “though not unsure of Freame, whose character and achievements he well knew, [he] was not sure how Australians would accept him as their officer. In this, I am sure, [he] was for once completely astray – they would have leapt to Freame’s skill and daring and the nobility of his leadership” (Bean “Personal Records”). One senses here Bean’s idealism at odds with his assessment of a less inclusive outlook among the rank-and-file Australian troops, and also officers. Bean resists any racist implications of these observations and proposes instead a blander official version of the legend he helped to foster – of undivided courage and mateship under the Australian flag.

II

Yet the mixed-raced aspects of Freame’s identity in the era of White Australia and empire contributed not only to ambivalence about him among Australian troops but also to his special qualities as a secret agent in the interwar period and World War II, as we shall see. Moreover it seems that Freame himself was highly aware of his mixed-race inheritance and its impact on his career. Indeed, this awareness led him to obscure his identity in certain significant respects.

Harry Freame grew up in Japan. To use his full name, Wykeham Henry Koba (or Kobe) Freame is believed to have been born on 28 February 1885 in Osaka, the son of Henry Freame, an Anglo-Australian clergyman/teacher and a Japanese woman, Shizu, nee Kitagawa (Courtney 581). Other documents however show alternative birth dates in 1880, 1884 and 1888 (see Ryan 58-59).  

Little is known of Freame’s parents except that his father was an Anglo-Australian Christian missionary and family tradition stressed that his mother Shizu was “of the Royal house of Kitagawa” (Ryan 60). Their son Harry went to sea and travelled widely from his late teens, but his sister Grace became a teacher who remained in Japan and married a Japanese.

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3 Ryan underlines the uncertainty of Freame’s date of birth: “(T)he actual date of birth in four places of record – the Army enlistment, his own passport, his son’s birth record, and his own marriage certificate, show, respectively, 1885, 1888, 1884, and 1880” (58-59).
Freame’s seaman’s record shows he made 22 voyages between May 1902 and November 1909 (see Ryan 62). On leave in 1906, he married an English woman, Edith May Soppitt, in Middlesborough, but after a two month break was back at sea for extended periods including 9 voyages from 1909 to 1912 (Ryan 64). Edith probably stayed with her parents until after the First World War. Their two children, Henry and Grace, were born in 1921 and 1927 respectively (Ryan 66).

Harry Freame’s own accounts of his life and career before the First World War are sketchy. His seaman’s record is complemented by official documents of various kinds and an interview he gave to the Australian returned servicemen’s magazine Reveille in 1931 (see “Assembly”). Taken together, these and other sources point to a certain evasiveness about his origins in Freame’s life of adventure and intrigue. While some romanticising of events may have occurred in his interview, sixteen years after the Anzac landing, these accounts are largely reinforced by his military colleagues; and deeper sources of identity conflict may be identified along with Freame’s recurrent interest and involvement in the world of secret intelligence.

In his marriage certificate in 1906 and his enlistment form for the Australian Imperial Force in 1914, Freame gave his place of birth as Kitscoty, Canada. J.S. Ryan surmises that this small hamlet near Edmonton, Alberta, “would seem to have been chosen either because of its total isolation, or because of some possibility of its affording credence to a Canadian Indian background rather than a Japanese one…. [These accounts] were concerned to present him as a North American and to disguise his real antecedents” (Ryan 59). Why would this have been the case? Were British and Australian racist attitudes towards Japan and the Japanese a reason for Freame’s subterfuge? Ryan suggests an earlier source of discomfort with his origins when he lived in Japan. As the son of a Christian missionary in the closing phase of the Meiji era (1896-1912), Freame would have felt the societal pressures in Japan against Christianity and towards national assertiveness and commercial and industrial development; and from his mother’s side the pressures towards “the military and samurai traditions of the house of Kitagawa” (Ryan 61). At the same time, he would have experienced the close links as well as rivalries of the Japanese and British naval traditions. His mixed inheritance could have led to complicated reactions.

III

Harry Freame’s trans-national credentials for secret work in military hotspots is evident from his early life. He joined the Japanese navy as a boy and received his early training in scout-craft in Japan, which was followed up later, he says, “under the scientific teaching of Indians in USA and Mexico” (“Assembly” 30). According to this 1931 interview, Freame’s first major intelligence role was in
his early twenties in revolutionary Mexico, during the Diaz regime, when he served in Diaz’s intelligence department under a German army officer, Major Zeigler. On Zeigler’s advice, according to Freame, he took a multi-national assortment of scouts to German East Africa for service against “a native uprising” (presumably the Hottentots) (“Assembly” 30). Thus before he appeared at Gallipoli and carried out his well attested acts of stealth and bravery, Freame was a seasoned on-the-ground fighter and intelligence agent. It is likely that habits of stealth, secrecy and covering one’s tracks became an early and continuing part of his make-up.

In 1911 or 1912 Freame made his way to his father’s homeland, Australia, where he worked as a “horse-breaker” in Glen Innes in the Armidale district of New South Wales. He would later be repatriated to this district when he returned injured from Gallipoli in 1916. At that time, as Colonel F.J. Kindon remarked, “he was too badly knocked about to serve and was returned to Australia” (Kindon 14).

When Harry Freame returned to civilian life in Australia he took up a soldier settlement block of land on the Kentucky estate in New England, New South Wales and became an orchardist. Kentucky was an orcharding community south of Uralla, about twenty-four miles from Armidale. When he stayed in Armidale, we know that Freame sometimes boarded at St John’s Hostel (Belshaw). Freame’s wife, Edith, whom he had married in England in 1906, and with whom he had had a son and a daughter, died in 1939. Freame married her former nurse and carer, Harriet Brainwood, in 1940.

An apparently successful fruit grower (of apples and pears), Freame enjoyed reminiscing with war-time colleagues and the walls of his home at Mt Salisbury, Kentucky, displayed sketches and paintings of war-time Anzac and France. According to his former officers, Freame was not only a courageous fighter, he was also a stern disciplinarian and a modest man with strong Christian principles (“Assembly,” Reveille 29).

IV

The date on which Freame re-entered the world of clandestine intelligence is not clear, though it appears to be some time in the late 1930s. Senior members of Australian intelligence, including Longfield Lloyd, held him in high regard for his exploits at Gallipoli. In particular, he singled out Freame’s “reconnaissance work”: “His scouting instinct was uncanny; his movements when so engaged usually defied detection and his endurance was as remarkable as his keenness…. He combined sincerity with an inflexible determination and a fierce but cool courage’ (“Assembly,” Reveille 31).

When World War Two broke out, Freame was probably 54 years old. He offered his services to the Australian war effort and was appointed to the Eastern Command Censorship staff at the Department of External Affairs.
Colonel F.J. Kindon, recalled that when he last saw Freame, he had “received an appointment on the staff of the Australian Ambassador to Japan, Sir John Latham, and expressed his satisfaction at being again permitted to serve the Empire which he loved” (Kindon). But this appointment was preceded by secret intelligence work in Australia. From 4 December 1939, Freame was engaged in “defence work of a highly secret nature” (McBride to McEwan). We now know that Australian military intelligence planted Freame as a secret agent among the Japanese community in Sydney (Courtney) and that he left his New England orchard in the hands of his son. Not only was Freame able to report on attitudes, values and suspicious activities of the Japanese community in Australia; according to Freame’s second wife, he was also shadowed by the Japanese in Sydney (Rowe). Spying is seldom a one-way operation and her claim is almost certainly true.

What contacts and enemies Freame made in the Japanese community in Sydney at this time and what he was able to report about suspicious behaviour there is not known. Given his earlier record, it is highly likely that he was an effective informant. What we do know is that on 26 September 1940 Freame was appointed as an interpreter on the first Australian legation to Tokyo. This was to be his cover job. Just as his official role for Defence in New South Wales was as interpreter and translator, so again in his new position he was described as “interpreter, translator and controller” in Tokyo; but both positions provided cover for his substantive role as a secret agent charged with discovering intelligence about Japanese military intentions, plans and procedures and who was supporting them in Australia and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, Harry Freame’s return to intelligence activities in the Pacific War was blighted from the beginning. First, and most seriously, his cover had been blown in an Australian newspaper. On 13 September 1940, the Sun published a small article headed “Interpreter Appointed for Tokio [sic] Legation,” which included the following sentences: “Mr Freame, who was born in Japan, speaks and writes Japanese fluently. He is at present engaged on special defence work.” It appears that this was Freame’s death sentence.

Some weeks after taking up his appointment in Tokyo on 21 November 1940, Harry Freame was apparently garrotted – a common form of physical attack in Japan at this time (perpetrators were known as “garotsuki”). Freame was admitted to a Japanese hospital in Tokyo then repatriated to Australia where he died on 27 May 1941. Severe throat injuries impaired his speech but he was able to whisper to members of his family, “They got me.” Although the official cause of death was given as throat cancer, subsequent investigations

4 The Director of the Australian Security Service commented that “there has long existed there [in Japan] a category of persons who bear the cognomen ‘Garotsuki’ – and the dying man’s own reported words were strongly suggestive of injury received perhaps in that way” (Longfield Lloyd).
established that Freame’s throat condition could not be connected with cancer but that it could have been caused by attempted strangulation (Rowe). It is difficult to escape the conclusion that a primary cause of Harry Freame’s premature death was the leak which led to the article in the Sun newspaper. The literature of intelligence and espionage contains many accounts of political and bureaucratic failures which endanger the lives of secret agents; Freame appears to be yet another victim. As he had done at Anzac, Harry Freame put his life on the line in Tokyo for Australian military intelligence but in this instance he was betrayed by his organisation. Following his death, a blame game of accusation and counter-accusation, suitably muffled in bureaucratese, floated between the Department of the Army and the Department of External Affairs. On balance, it seems that the leak emanated from External Affairs and indicates a failure of secure communication on intelligence matters between military and civilian arms of government (Scott).

V

The involvement of Australians in the Pacific War against Japan offered unparalleled opportunities for villainy and heroism. High on the list of villains, from an Australian point of view, were collaborators with the Japanese such as Alan Raymond in Shanghai whose radio broadcasts were designed to persuade Australians of the advantages of being under Japanese control (Wasserstein 179). This “Quisling of Canberra” called on his countrymen and women to “sever the British connection and withdraw from the war” (Wasserstein 180). On the other hand, the Australian agent as “good guy” is exemplified in a contrasting figure such as Norman Wootton who quietly went about his political work of reporting on Japanese military plans and helping Australians in trouble (Fraser 86-88).

The search for final answers in secret intelligence is fraught with puzzles and dead ends. Harry Freame appears to have left no written account of his various roles in “the spying game.” His discretion, like his courage under fire, seems to be part of his character. Loose talk among senior bureaucrats, journalists and others seems to have been his undoing. Yet no firm conclusion was reached about the cause of the leak that exposed Freame and no independent investigation was held. As with many such cases, despite the personal concerns of participants and their families, a cover-up in the interests of incumbent authorities, justified by the secrecy of undercover operations, is preferred to any searching investigation.

Compared with super-powers, such as the USSR and USA during the Cold War, Australia has almost no record of honouring, or even remembering its secret agents. Why then should we remember Harry Freame? First, Freame’s occasional engagements in spying activities for Australia in two world wars are reminders that high level strategic intelligence is always dependent on the men
and women on the ground listening, watching and reporting; often themselves being shadowed by their opposite numbers. Second, Freame reminds us of the special value of trans-national Australians in intelligence. Freame’s dual Japanese-Australian inheritance, and especially his speaking knowledge of Japanese, increased his value as a spy for Australia and his danger to the Japanese on the verge of war. Third, Freame’s example shows the problematic nature of intelligence work, balanced between civilian and military needs, in peace and war.

Behind the lines of his public persona, we can also discern some of the complexities in Freame’s sense of identity, and how his mixed-race inheritance played into his intelligence work. He learnt early the skills of reconnaissance and scouting techniques in Japan and developed these in military skirmishes in South America and Africa before he transferred to Australia and joined the AIF. Although adept at covering his tracks, Freame came into his own at Anzac and thereafter had no further need to conceal his Japanese origins. To officers and men, he was an Australian with special talents and skills, though never quite perhaps “one of them.”

Freame’s niece in Japan described her uncle in his fifties as a “lonely” man (Ryan 60). Though he retained strong Christian beliefs and principles throughout his life, Freame’s mixed inheritance and the external pressures which drove him to disguise his identity when he left Japan suggest an individual well suited for the kinds of secret intelligence work that he was called on to do at several stages in his life.

All spies are part of larger contexts. Before Japan’s southward advance and the bombing of Pearl Harbour in December 1941, Australia had a number of “Japan watchers” who provided useful intelligence to authorities in Defence and External Affairs. These included the academic historian Professor James Murdoch and foreign policy analyst Edmund Piesse. In some respects, Murdoch was in the “gentleman spy” tradition: he wrote and published open source accounts of the history and politics of Japan but was also engaged in secret work in liaison with Piesse and he gave briefings to prime ministers and senior government officials; Piesse was responsible for intelligence in the Pacific during the early interwar years. Together, these men and others attempted to gauge Japanese intentions and strategies in the Pacific in the light of history and changing race relations. But Piesse’s conclusion in 1919 that there was “probably little reason for applying discrimination based purely on race towards the Japanese” was summarily dismissed by Australian Prime Minister Hughes, a strong advocate of White Australia policies, as “rot.”

The relatively small-scale Australian intelligence engagements with Asia in the interwar and early Second World War years is thrown into sharp relief by

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5 See Meaney, Fears and Phobias, 29-30.
the now well documented accounts of Richard Sorge’s spy ring for the Soviets in Tokyo from the mid-1930s to October 1941 (see Whymant). From 1929, Sorge spent four years being trained as a professional spy in Moscow. Ideologically committed to revolutionary communism, Sorge used his cover role as a journalist and close contacts at the German embassy to obscure his busy other life as a master spy for Stalin. His major intelligence coup was to give Stalin advance warning of operation Barbarossa, Hitler’s impending attack on Russia, which Stalin chose to reject, to Russia’s great cost (Whymant 123). Sorge also provided well researched, high-grade intelligence on Japanese intentions in the Pacific.

Like Harry Freame, Richard Sorge was a “cross-breed” – his mother was Russian and his father German – and this was a major component in the cross-cultural adaptability required for many kinds of international intelligence work. But there is no simple formula for success in the spying game, and even for master spies like Sorge or Kim Philby who betray their countries for another, luck plays a major factor in the success or otherwise of their activities. Fortune did not favour Harry Freame, an Australian patriot of Japanese extraction whose full value to the allies’ war effort was never realised when his working life as a spy for Australia was snuffed out in Tokyo in October 1940. Yet the hidden, often heroic lives of men such as Harry Freame, and their talents and skills displayed in perilous situations, deserve due consideration as Australians review their expanding intelligence role in the international community.

Conclusion

The case of Harry Freame poses some intriguing questions about heroism within different national contexts during and between two world wars.

First, the secret agent or spy is shown to be a problematic figure when it comes to assigning heroic status in Australia and Japan. (In contrast, British and American traditions have allowed full-blown heroic status to spies from James Bond to Jason Bourne). For most exponents of “the second oldest profession,” suspicion and distrust are far more prevalent than praise. When deaths occur, “moral grandeur” is seldom assigned to spies and the details and circumstances of their work often remain obscure, mysterious.

A second observation is that mixed-race individuals can have a difficult time in ethnically homogeneous, nationalistic fighting forces such as Australia’s and Japan’s in the first half of the twentieth century. This accounts for Harry Freame’s evasiveness about his origins and the myths that developed about him. But his inheritance of both samurai and Western military traditions contributed to his adaptability as a fighting man and secret agent. Never fully accepting himself, or being accepted fully by others, he nevertheless found his home, for a time, in Australia and its mythologies of war, especially the legend of Anzac – even if, at his death, a corresponding loyalty was not shown by his superiors.
Early twenty-first century Australia is a much more diverse, globally connected culture than the one Harry Freame inhabited. A conspicuous aspect of this change is the leading role played by many Asian Australians in Australian public life. One of these is Tim Soutphommasane, an Australian of Lao and Chinese extraction, an Oxford graduate who does not accept the mythology of the global market-place. He calls Australia home and wants to play his part in reformulating our sense of nationhood. His book *Reclaiming Patriotism* (2009) challenges Australians to restore a proper sense of patriotism in the post-Howard years as “an inclusive language of shared civic values and as an instrument of progress” (138). This is the project we now see opening before us.

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