

“The real Quon Tat”: proving identity and domicile to enter White Australia

Louise Thatcher
Potsdam University
louise.thatcher@uni-potsdam.de

Despite the oft-used metaphor in which the racist immigration restrictions of the early twentieth century are described as a ‘wall’ around White Australia, people of colour continued to travel in and out of the country, either with temporary exemptions or as returning residents. This paper is about the mechanisms through which Australian officials regulated mobility to and through Australia, and the ways that non-white travellers negotiated and challenged restrictions.

Using files from the National Archives of Australia, I tell a story from Tasmania. In 1913, a man calling himself Quon Tat, a Chinese miner, was convicted and imprisoned for entering Australia on false papers. Despite this illegitimate entry, he succeeded in being allowed to stay in Australia when he proved, with the help of white Australian and Chinese-Australian witnesses, that he had previously lived there.

Through this case I explore the interplay between documentation, identification, local knowledge and being known through which travellers asserted a right to passage across the Australian border, and how customs officers, police, immigration bureaucrats and the courts attempted to manage their movement.

Bio note

Louise Thatcher is a PhD candidate and research assistant at Potsdam University. She has a BA in History from the University of Sydney and an MA Global History from the Free University and Humboldt University Berlin. Her MA thesis, 'Policing the Border in Early White Australia', won the German Association of Australian Studies' Young Researcher Award in 2020.

Her doctoral research is on the development of border control techniques on the shipping routes between Australia and Germany in the early twentieth century.