

AUSTRALIA'S AMBASSADOR TO JAPAN

Doraemon has been an icon in Japan for decades. He has appeared as a manga strip, a television show and a feature film. Despite Doraemon being a show originally targeted at children, it has now taken on a wider audience. In March 2008, Japan's Foreign Ministry appointed Doraemon as the nation's first "anime ambassador." It is thought that Doraemon will help people in other countries to understand Japanese anime better and to deepen their interest in Japanese culture.

Australia needs such an ambassador to promote our country. The Australian continent has a lot to offer, from the lush rainforests of Queensland to the red soils of the desert outback, the ancient green 'hands' of the gum trees to the bold rainbow colours of the Great Barrier Reef. The continent varies greatly from the vast expanses of the Kakadu to the dry plains of central Australia, from the agricultural farms of wheat, sheep and cattle to the bustling cities with its multicultural communities bordering the oceans. And of course there is the abundance of fauna – the kangaroo, emu, echidna and kookaburra that are native only to Australia. We have a unique culture, colourful characters and distinctive Aussie language. It is time for an Australian icon to introduce these aspects of Australia, and many more, to a wider audience.

That Australian icon is non-other than **Blinky Bill**, that mischievous scamp of a koala that has entertained the youth of Australia since his creation decades ago.

Blinky Bill first graced the covers of children's illustrated books in the 1930's when he was created by Dorothy Wall, a freelance artist and writer. It was a time when Sir Donald Bradman was making magic with his bat, Australians were well into Vegemite and the wireless was having a profound effect on everyday life. The Great Depression had just begun and Australia, thrown into near economic chaos, was going to need all the heroes it could find. Little Australians looked to Blinky Bill for support. Dorothy Wall understood just what an Australian children's story should be. She skilfully combined simple yet vivid characters with imagination, action and humour, all set in the Australian bush. Having written many adventures of Blinky Bill, Dorothy set about producing designs for various items of Blinky Bill merchandise, ranging from chinawear, money boxes and pull along toys. Unfortunately she did not live to see the results as she died in 1942. Since then Blinky Bill has become an Australian classic, read and admired by Australians young and old. He has since appeared on a postage stamp, he and his friends have been sold as collectable dolls and puppets, and in more recent times appeared in a cartoon series on the television and in live children's stage shows.

Other authors have created characters unique to Australia, especially in the form of a koala, such as Snugglespot and Cuddlepup by May Gibbs and the Magic Pudding by Norman Lindsay. But I do not believe these characters would be well accepted by the youth of Japan. To me, they look outdated whereas Blinky Bill appears timeless, readily fitting into the modern world. Blinky Bill would relate to Japanese children as he would suit their taste for cute and cuddly characters. He is a naughty little boy in the form of a koala, always up to mischief, defying authority and getting away with it. He loves his mother but is best known for his antics. His friends include his adopted sister Nutsy, his kangaroo friend Splodge, his platypus friend Flap, Marcia his marsupial friend, and his mentor Mr Wombat or Wombo, as Blinky prefers to call him.

As well as grabbing their attention with his appearance, Blinky Bill would educate Japanese children about Australia. A series of Blinky Bill cartoons could be produced. At the conclusion of each cartoon, Blinky Bill would introduce the viewers to different aspects of Australian life. Each episode would showcase such topics as Aboriginal art to making lamingtons or damper, from throwing boomerangs to learning to surf at the local beach. Human characters in the cartoons may need to be modernised, seen using mobile phones, laptops, the internet and other futuristic satellite communications (along the same lines as Doraemon and the gadgets he retrieves from his pouch). But the animal characters should be left true to their creator's original idea using their natural skills and defence mechanisms to get them out of trouble.

Blinky Bill could be marketed through collectable figurines, plush toys and pens and pencils all related to the cartoon series. Fan clubs and websites could be set up where letters and emails could be sent to Blinky Bill and his gang. Blinky Bill would send young fans birthday wishes and their names appear on the cartoon show.

Marketing campaigns (similar to those appearing in England "Where the bloody hell are ya?" and in the United States "Throw another shrimp on the barbie") could be targeted at the Japanese audience. Live appearances by Blinky Bill and his friends could be made at shopping centres and other public places. Real koalas, wallabies, and goannas (Quarantine permitting) could be held, patted and photographed. Students from Funabashi on an exchange programme to my school loved to go to the wild life parks to see the koalas. Australian fare such as lamingtons, pavlova, damper and of course Tim Tams, and dainty Vegemite sandwiches (an acquired taste) could be sampled.

Blinky Bill, as a true Australian, would demonstrate the friendly, fun loving and helpful attitude that is indicative of Australia. He would promote the sunny days and warm climate with his cheerful smile. He would also be a constant reminder of Australia, 'the lucky country'.

If marketed cleverly and correctly, Blinky Bill's popularity in Japan could be similar to that of Doraemon. Like Doraemon, Blinky Bill teaches children moral lessons regarding values such as integrity, perseverance, courage, family and respect for elders. This will teach children to grow up to be better adults. But of more importance both address environmental issues such as homeless animals, endangered species, deforestation, pollution and conservation. These problems are not related to just one area, faced only in Japan or Australia, but are worldwide. Not only would both Doraemon and Blinky Bill be ambassadors for their country, they would also be making children more aware of the whole world around them.

Recently I returned from a home stay in Japan. While over there I witnessed the frenzied interest in Disney and other cartoon characters. Teenage girls went wild over these characters, often screaming "kawaii!" (Japanese for cute), at the sight of them. Smaller children toted stuffed toys. Unfortunately, it appeared to me to be all American.

As 'Blinky Bill' is also the nickname of the light at the top of Sydney Harbour Bridge, perhaps now is the time for **Blinky Bill** to leave the outback bush and to shine his light across Japan, to promote Australia, and all its wonders.

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