

Australian Journal of Politics and History: Volume 66, Number 4, 2020, pp.560–577.

Federation and Australian Nationalism: Early Commemoration of the Commonwealth

CAROLYN HOLBROOK
Deakin University

Much has been written about the nature of Australian nationalism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While post-Second World War historiography analysed the role of class in nationalist sentiment, more recent work has examined the racialised and martial aspects of Australian nationalism and imperialism. There has been less consideration of how the nature of turn-of-the-century Australian nationalism affected the Federation that was established on 1 January 1901. This article examines early debates about commemoration of the anniversary of Federation, revealing an indifference to the occasion that was common to the public and most political and civic leaders, including Prime Minister Edmund Barton. It finds that popular enthusiasm at the inauguration of the Commonwealth in January 1901 and the opening of the first parliament in May was a response to imperial pageantry and celebrity, rather than the creation of the Australian federation. The article suggests that Australians' longstanding resistance to reform of the Federation is a legacy of their historic failure to attach to it.

In October 2014, the Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, travelled to Tenterfield, New South Wales to deliver the Henry Parkes Oration, in honour of the premier whose rousing speech 125 years earlier gave momentum to the stalled Federation movement. Abbott declared that the “dog’s breakfast” of a Federation had “come to a sorry pass”. He announced a white paper process, which he hoped would lead to fundamental reform of the division of responsibilities and finances within the Federation.¹ After Malcolm Turnbull replaced Abbott in September 2015, the white paper process was quietly shelved. The abandonment of Abbott’s plan conformed to a familiar pattern in Australian history, in which politicians have laid out bold plans for reform of the Federation and failed to achieve them.

The white paper process led by Tony Abbott was widely criticised. The political scientist Tracy Beck Fenwick viewed the initiative as a “top-down reform effort” by the Commonwealth to clarify roles, rather than a genuinely co-operative attempt to revive federalism by dispersing certain powers back to the states.² The constitutional law academic Cheryl Saunders condemned the government’s failure to stimulate popular interest: “federal reform was treated as something that concerns a very small range of stakeholders — governments and bureaucracies, very often with extensive overlordship by the Commonwealth. There was no consideration that this is something that affects

¹ Tony Abbott, “Address to the Henry Parkes Commemorative Dinner”, Tenterfield, New South Wales, 25 October 2014.

² Tracy Beck Fenwick, “Why the Commonwealth Can’t Have its Cake and Eat it Too”, n.d., <http://politicsir.cass.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/Federalism_Welfare_Australia.pdf>. Viewed online, 15 July 2019.

the lives and well-beings of all Australians.”³ Saunders had earlier criticised the process because it failed to make federalism reform part of a grander project to enhance Australian democracy:

If you really want better services and if you really want fairness [...] our commitment in a democratic state is to democracy as being able to deliver those things, you don't need to start with a bureaucratic approach. You should start with the people who give legitimacy to the government and in turn are owed accountability.⁴

Saunders' appeal for politicians seeking reform of the Federation to engage with and excite “the people” resounds with the issue that arguably lies at the heart of Australia's inability to reform its federal arrangements: the apathy of the wider population. John Hirst has argued that Australians' indifference to the Federation is part of a deep-seated historical pattern. He has traced the “strange gap” between the magnitude of Australian democratic achievements and public indifference about them to a disjuncture between civic arrangements and the wellsprings of communal identity: “there was never a time when [Australians] attached themselves to their political system as the embodiment of the nation”, Hirst claims.⁵ Whether this “lack of attachment” has contributed to Australians' reluctance to reform the Constitution — only eight of forty-four referendums have been passed since 1901 — is one of the questions underlying the research project of which this article forms a part.⁶

The lack of popular attachment is traced to the *act* of Federation itself, which simultaneously created the Commonwealth of Australia *and* the federal structure.⁷ Federation, as the occasion became known, failed to lodge in the Australian psyche as a decisive nation-making moment, in the way that the Gallipoli landing did fourteen years later.⁸ That the First World War stimulated national sentiment can be measured by the war memorials dotted across the Australian landscape — where are the monuments to Federation? In accounting for Australians' indifference to 1901, historians point to the peaceful and democratic nature of the union — a nation-making process apparently kick-started by the people after it had stalled in the hands of politicians, and a constitution endorsed by popular referendum.⁹ They also identify the rising tide of imperial nationalism, which subsumed the civic nationalism of the Federation movement.¹⁰ A more detailed, if implicit, explanation lies in the view,

³ David Donaldson, “Why We Gave up on Federalism Reform (This Time)”, *The Mandarin*, 5 May 2016 <<https://www.themandarin.com.au/64341-happened-federalism-white-paper/>>. Viewed online, 15 July 2019.

⁴ David Donaldson, “Cheryl Saunders: Ten Principles for Reforming the Federation”, *The Mandarin*, 15 July 2015, <<https://www.themandarin.com.au/44286-ten-principles-reform-federation/>>. Viewed online 15 July 2019.

⁵ John Hirst, *Australia's Democracy: A Short History* (St Leonards, 2000), p.329.

⁶ Brian Galligan, for example, has suggested that the record of referendum failure is unexceptional when compared internationally, and is evidence, not of apathy, but of contentment with the constitutional *status quo*, *A Federal Republic: Australia's Constitutional System of Government* (Melbourne, 1995), pp.111, 118-22. This article forms part of a larger project, “Australians and Their Federation: Commemoration, Identity and Engagement”, ARC DE190100677.

⁷ For example, John Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth* (Melbourne, 2000).

⁸ Carolyn Holbrook, *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography* (Sydney, 2014); John Hirst, “A British Dependency”, *Looking for Australia* (Melbourne, 2010), pp.246.

⁹ For example, Noel McLachlan, *Waiting for the Revolution: A History of Australian Nationalism* (Melbourne, 1989), p.168; W.G. McMinn, *Nationalism and Federalism in Australia* (Melbourne, 1994), p.197.

¹⁰ Hirst, “A British Dependency”, pp.244-46.

commonly propounded by scholars in the decades after the Second World War, that Federation was a hard-nosed, unsentimental deal imposed by self-interested elites.¹¹ The lack of affection sits less easily with revisionist explanations, which find more sentiment and idealism in the Federation movement.¹²

Despite its importance in explaining the contemporary state of Australian federalism, the relationship between Australian nationalism and the Federation has received little attention. In the decades after the Second World War, the historiography of Australian nationalism was concerned primarily with issues of class, as radical nationalists sought historical precedents for working-class radicalism.¹³ Since landmark publications such as Humphrey McQueen's *A New Britannia* and Miriam Dixson's *The Real Matilda*, it has been focussed increasingly on racial, martial and gender-based conceptions of Australianness.¹⁴ Various strains of nationalist ideology circulated at the time of Federation, but whether they were republicans, imperial federationists or a variant in between, European Australians were united in their desire for a White Australia.¹⁵ The stench of racialism has obscured the utopianism of some nineteenth century and early twentieth century nationalisms.¹⁶ Inspired by influences that included radical liberalism, German Idealism and Darwinian biology, the civic nationalism that propelled the Federation movement held that separation from Britain was the precursor to a more evolved union, first with Britain, and then with all the nations of the world. According to Alfred Deakin, "[e]ach nation will perfect itself harmoniously in its own sphere, until all are blended into a superb whole".¹⁷ Deakin's description of himself as an "Independent Australian Briton" accommodated both an assertive Australian nationhood *and* a formal union with Britain.¹⁸

Others placed less emphasis than Deakin on the Australian element of the dual identity. Neville Meaney's caution about imposing a Whiggish template over the history of Australian nationalism is crucial to understanding the sensibility of those

¹¹ The most well-known is L.F. Crisp, *The Parliamentary Government of the Commonwealth of Australia: with ap. Commonwealth Constitution Act* (London, 1949), p.14.

¹² For example, Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia's Constitution* (New York, 1999) [1997]; Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation*; Bob Birrell, *Federation: The Secret Story* (Sydney, 2001).

¹³ For example, Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne, 1958); Geoffrey Serle, *The Creative Spirit in Australia: A Cultural History* (Melbourne, 1973); McLachlan, *Waiting for the Revolution*.

¹⁴ Humphrey McQueen, *An Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism* (Melbourne, 1970); Miriam Dixson, *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia, 1788-1975* (Melbourne, 1976); Holbrook, *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography*; Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation, 1788-1990* (Melbourne, 1994); Kate Darian-Smith, "Images of Empire: Gender and Nationhood in Australia at the Time of Federation", in Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw and Stuart Macintyre, *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Cultures* (Melbourne, 2007), pp.153-68.

¹⁵ See Mark McKenna, *The Captive Republic: A History of Republicanism in Australia, 1788-1996* (Cambridge, 1996), pp.188-204.

¹⁶ Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation*, e.g., pp.14-15; Judith Brett, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* (Melbourne, 2018), pp.145-46.

¹⁷ Sunday school catechism composed by Alfred Deakin in 1877, quoted in Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation*, p. 10.

¹⁸ Deakin was president of the Victorian branch of the Imperial Federation League, see Carolyn Holbrook, "Anzac, Empire and War: Australian Nationalism and the Campaign for Imperial Federation", *Australian Historical Studies*, forthcoming, 2020.

who neither desired nor imagined an evolution towards national independence.¹⁹ As Keith Hancock observed in 1930, “pride of race counted for more than love of country”.²⁰ The passage of time, however, inevitably stimulated a national consciousness, which complicated this derivative nationalism. The French historian Gérard Bouchard has claimed that Australia’s plagiarised culture extracted a heavy price: while British race patriotism lent instant “strength and credibility” to a fledgling nation, Australia was also “bound to imitation and dependency”, and burdened with an “inferiority complex that stifle[d] its creative potential”.²¹ Australians’ inferiority complex — compounded by their convict history — combined with New Imperialist bellicosity to leave them particularly susceptible to a mythology of martial achievement.²²

The commonly invoked reference among loyalist European Australians to Britain as “home” is reminiscent of the nebulous but powerful German concept of *Heimat*, which connotes an emotional, often nostalgic, attachment to one’s homeland.²³ *Heimat* evokes a broader conception of attachment than those suggested by Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s “invention of tradition”.²⁴ It emphasises the subjective experience of the connection as much as the means by which it is created and manipulated by the powerful. The provenance and uses of the concept of *Heimat* have been studied by scholars of German nationalism.²⁵ *Heimat* also provides an interesting means through which to conceive federalism, as it describes the enduring sub-national allegiance that accompanies the newly acquired national one. The states within federated Germany, for instance, retained a strong sense of local character that complemented the national identity created in 1871. The notion of *Heimat* has been broadened to encompass German imperialism, from the perspective of the metropole and its racialised control over who might be included within the homeland.²⁶

This article applies the concept of *Heimat* to the Australian setting, positing “settler colonial *Heimat*” as a means of advancing understanding of the nature of early twentieth century Australian nationalism, and how it affected attitudes to Federation, the Commonwealth and the post-1901 federal system. The article will examine attitudes to Federation in the years immediately following 1901 through initial efforts to commemorate the new Commonwealth. An examination of early Federation

¹⁹ Neville Meaney, “Britishness and Australian Identity: The Problem of Nationalism in Australian History and Historiography”, *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 32, 116 (2001), pp.76-90.

²⁰ W.K. Hancock, *Australia* (Brisbane, 1961 [1930]), p.49.

²¹ See Gérard Bouchard, *The Making of the Nations and Cultures of the New World: An Essay in Comparative History* (Montreal and Kingston, ON, 2008), pp.19-20.

²² Holbrook, *Anzac: The Unauthorised Biography*.

²³ See, for example, Stephen Alomes, *A Nation at Last: The Changing Character of Australian Nationalism, 1880-1988* (Sydney, 1988), p.27.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London, 2006 [1983]); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (New York, 1984), Alon Confino, “The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Heimat, National Memory and the German Empire, 1871-1918”, *History and Memory*, Vol. 5, 1 (1993), p.80.

²⁵ Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley, 1990); Alon Confino, *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance. Promises and Limits of Writing History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006).

²⁶ Krista O’Donnell, “Home, Nation, Empire: Domestic Germanness and Colonial Citizenship”, in Krista O’Donnell, Renate Briendenthal, Nancy Reagin, eds, *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Michigan, 2005), pp.40-57.

commemorations will offer insight into how the political class and ordinary Australians conceived 1901 and provide leads about whether early indifference established a pattern of civic indolence that remains an obstacle to federalism reform.

Federation and Sentiment

The earliest accounts of Federation were written by those who participated in its achievement. The work of federationists such as Alfred Deakin, Bernhard Wise, and Robert Garran and John Quick reflected their belief that they had achieved a feat of historic significance by grafting representative government to the state-of-the-art democratic practice of federalism.²⁷ Quick and Garran's account of "the popular movement" that led to Federation in *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth* was highly influential, if misleading about the extent to which politicians vacated the stage, and left the final push towards Federation to "the people".²⁸ The South Australian, John Cockburn, reflected the common view among early recorders of the origins of the Commonwealth: "Never before has the instrument of government of a nation been so entirely the handiwork of the people themselves".²⁹

The federal arrangement was also celebrated by early historians, such as A.W. Jose, Edward Jenks and Ernest Scott.³⁰ The enthusiasm and participation of "the people" were invoked in these heroic accounts. Scott, who witnessed the birth of the Commonwealth parliament first-hand as a *Hansard* writer, proclaimed Federation to be "the fruit of popular education and of the experience of a democracy in thinking out and settling its own problems".³¹ John Hirst's claim that there existed a "widely known and accepted" foundation myth that the Commonwealth was the people's Federation — that it had come "from the people by the people to the people" — seems exaggerated.³² While such an interpretation dominated the early historiography of Federation, there is little evidence that it was widely appreciated by a population that was more attached to its colonial, imperial and (after 1915) martially-derived national identities.

Celebratory accounts of Federation increasingly slipped from view during the 1920s and 1930s. Far from being the most perfect democratic instrument extolled by the federationists, the English political theorist Harold Laski argued, in an assessment that was increasingly shared by Australian intellectuals during the 1920s and 1930s, that federalism was a conservative obstacle against the centralised implementation of a planned economy and social amelioratives.³³ Left-leaning intellectuals who were

²⁷ Deakin wrote regularly for the London *Morning Post* newspaper under a pseudonym. His reflections on Federation are contained in *Federated Australia: Selections from Letters to the Morning Post, 1900-1910* (Melbourne, 1968); John Quick and Robert Randolph Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth* (Sydney, 1901); Bernhard Wise, *The Commonwealth of Australia* (London, 1909).

²⁸ See Brian de Garis, "How Popular was the Popular Federation Movement?", *Papers on Parliament*, Vol. 21 (1993).

²⁹ John A. Cockburn, *Australian Federation* (London, 1902), p.73.

³⁰ A.W. Jose, *History of Australia from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, 11th edn (Sydney, 1925), pp.199, 202–203; Edward Jenks, *A History of the Australasian Colonies*, 3rd edn (Cambridge, 1912), p.302.

³¹ Ernest Scott, *A Short History of Australia* (Melbourne, 1964 [1916]), p.315.

³² Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation*, p.297; quote from *Adelaide Advertiser*, 2 January 1901, quoted in Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation*, p.297.

³³ See Galligan, *The Federal Republic*, pp. 56–60 regarding Laski, and also Harold Laski, "The Obsolescence of Federalism", *New Republic* (1939), pp.376–69; Gordon Greenwood, *The Future of Australian Federalism: A Commentary of the Working of the Constitution* (Melbourne, 1946). For a discussion of left intellectuals' attitudes to federalism, see Campbell Sharman, "Federalism and the

disillusioned by the limitations of the post-Second World War reconstruction project were inclined to accord some blame to the innate conservatism of the federal structure. The most influential account was published by the political scientist L.F. Crisp, who had been the speechwriter for H.V. Evatt during the failed referendum campaign in 1944 to give the Commonwealth expansive new powers in areas including employment and social welfare. Crisp claimed in 1949 (the same year that he became the last head of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction), that the Federation was moulded principally by “the big men of the established political and economic order, the men of property or their trusted allies”; those who were successful in their mission to make the Commonwealth “a splendid bastion of property”.³⁴ A subsequent variation of the top-down explanation for Federation suggested that people voted in the Federation referendums according to local economic interests, though this view was soon challenged.³⁵ Critical interpretations were compounded by later scholarship highlighting the state-led sexism and racism that were embedded in the Federation moment.³⁶

The encroaching centenary of Federation in 2001 and the campaign for an Australian republic spurred a burst of scholarship that was more inclined to hear the voice of the people. Helen Irving led a group of like-minded academics who acknowledged the centenary of significant anniversaries along the path to Federation, and produced a journal, co-edited by John Bannon and John Williams, called *The New Federalist — the Journal of Australian Federation History*. Irving’s *To Constitute a Nation* (1997) was skeptical of simple top-down explanations that attributed Federation to the triumph of ruling class and anti-Labor interests.³⁷ Nor did Irving think that Federation was achieved by a utilitarian impulse, a convenient coalition of interests, devoid of conviction and concern for the common good.³⁸ Irving concluded that Federation was achieved by an indecipherable mixture of *fin de siècle* Utopian enthusiasm, class and economic interests.

If Helen Irving showed the inadequacy of “top-down” interpretations of Federation, John Hirst’s *The Sentimental Nation* (2000) sought to rebut the Crisp thesis altogether. Hirst argued that Federation was far from a cynical business arrangement, but rather a sacred cause; the federationists believed that “God wanted Australia to be a nation”, he claimed.³⁹ Using sources including poetry, convention debates, correspondence, public rhetoric and memoirs, Hirst described the idealism of the federationists:

Study of the Australian Political System”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 21, 3 (1974), p.11.

³⁴ L.F. Crisp, *Australian National Government* (Melbourne, 1978), p.14, originally published as *The Parliamentary Government of the Commonwealth of Australia* (London, 1949). See also, McMinn, *Nationalism and Federalism in Australia*; Ronald Norris, *The Emergent Commonwealth* (Melbourne, 1975).

³⁵ R.S. Parker, “Australian Federation: The Influence of Economic Interests and Political Pressures”, *Historical Studies*, Vol. 4, 13 (1949), pp.1-24; Geoffrey Blainey, “The Role of Economic Interests in Australian Federation”, *Historical Studies*, Vol. 4, 15 (1950), pp.224-37; John Bastin, “Federation and Western Australia”, *Historical Studies*, Vol. 5, 17 (1951), pp.47-58; Patricia Hewett, “Aspects of Campaigns in South-Eastern New South Wales at the Federation Referenda of 1898 and 1899”, in A.W. Martin, ed., *Essays in Australian Federation* (Melbourne, 1969),” pp.167-84.

³⁶ For example, Patricia Grimshaw, “Federation as a Turning Point in Australian History”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 33, 188 (2002), pp.25-41; Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath and Quartly, *Creating a Nation*; Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: A History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney, 1999).

³⁷ Irving, *To Constitute a Nation*.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.215.

³⁹ Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation*, p.4

Federation would supplant the mutual suspicion and hostility between the colonies with brotherhood [...] The petty and provincial concerns of colonial politics — the struggle over roads and bridges; the endless deputations to ministers begging favours — would be replaced by a politics that dealt with a national life and the fate of a whole people.⁴⁰

Hirst did not argue that this idealism awakened a mass movement, or that Federation was achieved by a popular ground swell:

the role of national feeling is not to be measured by taking the pulse of the community at large. Nationalism has always possessed one section of the population first — whether poets or intellectuals or a new middle class or local officials of an empire. They become passionate for the nation while the mass of the people remain attached to their chiefs, villages, or provinces and can see no benefit in creating a new government. Nationalism in its creative phase is a minority movement.⁴¹

He did, however, contend that a Utopian nationalism was prominent among arguments for Federation, a sentiment reflected in the poetry referred to by Hirst and invoked in a referendum hand-bill that claimed: “of all the impulses to noble deeds which history records there is none more universal or more potent than this sentiment of Nationality”.⁴² Hirst argued that referendum voting patterns were influenced not merely by economic self-interest, but also by a belief that “the making of a nation” would be a good thing.⁴³

The Sentimental Nation argued that the idealism of the Federation era quickly evaporated:

All the people, events, and places that federalists declared would be historic never became so. The names of the convention delegates, the electoral battles of Barton against Reid, the landing place of the first Governor-General and the site of his swearing-in, the name of the first Prime Minister — all are forgotten.⁴⁴

Hirst provided passing explanations for the demise of civic nationalism, which included the peaceable nature of the Federation settlement and the decline of British race patriotism, but did not examine the reasons in detail.⁴⁵ His account of the 1951 Commonwealth Jubilee found there was little room for the Federation story in a commemoration that celebrated progress and industry.⁴⁶ Hirst detected more interest in the history of Federation during the centenary commemoration, but was not optimistic that the “strange gap” between Australians’ democratic achievements and their appreciation of them would be bridged.

By examining early attitudes towards commemoration of 1901, this article will seek to understand how the settler colonial concept of *Heimat* affected the connection that was formed between Australians, the new Commonwealth and the civic apparatus of the Federation. An understanding of the nature of attitudes to the new Commonwealth and the Federation will inform debate about Australians’ ongoing reluctance to vote for constitutional reform of the Federation.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴¹ John Hirst, “Federation: Destiny and Identity”, *Papers on Parliament*, Vol. 37 (2001).

⁴² “Historic – Documents, A referendum hand bill urging the case for Federation”, National Archives of Australia (NAA): B941, HISTORIC/DOCUMENTS/2.

⁴³ Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation*, p.265.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.297.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.297-332.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.322-28.

The First Commonwealth Day

The Secretary of State for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, bears responsibility for the fact that the Commonwealth of Australia came into being on 1 January 1901. Chamberlain was “captivated of the fitness of the date”, and the man who would soon become Australia’s first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, was inclined to agree that “it was a picturesque and appropriate date, being the opening of the new century”.⁴⁷ In response to the Australian Natives’ Association’s concern that combining the inauguration with the New Years’ Day public holiday might dilute its significance, Barton displayed a tendency to please the particular audience before which he stood, which would become familiar in his subsequent approach to Federation commemoration. He claimed to see no reason why 26 January should not be chosen as the commemorative day. Indeed, Barton “thought that the State parliaments should fix 26 January as Commemorative Day”.⁴⁸

The South Australian Premier Frederick Holder was also concerned about the selection of 1 January for the auspicious occasion. He foresaw that its existing status as New Year’s Day would dilute the significance of a public holiday declared for the creation of the new Commonwealth — “the national idea would run a risk of being lost sight of”, he declared. Holder campaigned for a separate day to “be set apart for the cultivation and expression of an Australian national sentiment”.⁴⁹ He urged other premiers to request the Queen’s proclamation of the Commonwealth be gazetted on 1 October 1900, so that the anniversary of that act might be celebrated as “Proclamation Day” in the future. The *Southern Cross* newspaper noted that, although 1 October had no particular, significance, it was preferable to 26 January, which would not only “give the senior colony a position of undue paramountcy in the Federal rejoicing” but “has too much association with the ‘Birthstain’ of which Mr Kipling sings”. Why, the newspaper demanded, “should Federated Australia deliberately fix upon a date for general celebration which will indelibly fix upon the history of the Commonwealth the blot which all Australians should be so anxious to forget”?⁵⁰ Holder received the backing of the New South Wales, Victorian and Queensland premiers, though Western Australia’s John Forrest favoured 1 January for the anniversary and joined with the Tasmanian premier in attaching “no importance to the date of the proclamation”.⁵¹ The proposal was conveyed by the South Australian governor to the Colonial Secretary, but nothing came of it, and the Queen’s proclamation appeared in the *Gazette* on 19 September 1900.⁵²

The new Federation was lavishly inaugurated on 1 January 1901 in Sydney and celebrated enthusiastically in cities and towns around the new nation. Many reports of the first “Commonwealth Day”, as it was commonly referred to, noted the confluence of the birth of the nation with the dawn of a new year and a new century. The convergence of three anniversaries conferred a sense of optimism and destiny. In Sydney, a procession including troops from around the empire, community leaders and dignitaries marched from the Domain towards Centennial Park. As the marchers proceeded beneath a succession of temporary arches, they were cheered by crowds

⁴⁷ Melbourne *Herald*, 5 September 1900, p.4.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *South Australian Register*, 19 July 1900, p.4; *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 1900, p.4.

⁵⁰ *Adelaide Southern Cross*, 21 September 1900, p.9.

⁵¹ *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 1900, p.4.

⁵² *Coolgardie Miner*, 8 September 1900, p.4; *Coolgardie Herald*, 10 September 1900, p.3, *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 1900, p.4.

thronging the footpaths, and peering down from windows, balconies and roofs. A correspondent recorded the crowds were hanging “from every niche like myriads of insects”.⁵³ Imperial associations — observed approvingly in the London *Times* as “the note of love and loyalty to the Sovereign and the Motherland” — overshadowed references to a distinctively Australian nationhood or the democratic achievement.⁵⁴ The biggest cheers during the Sydney parade were for the Queen’s Own Hussars and Imperial Life Guard.

The week-long celebration in New South Wales included a re-enactment of the landing of Captain Cook in Botany Bay in 1770 at which the New South Wales Lands Minister toasted the foundation of the Commonwealth as “the greatest event, with the exception of the declaration of American independence, in human history”.⁵⁵ A crowd of 5,000 that was “truly federal in character” watched from the shore at Kurnell as two boats separated from an old sailing ship painted with the name “ENDEVOUR” [*sic*] and rowed slowly towards them.⁵⁶ A group of Aboriginal men (arrived from Queensland for the performance) bearing spears charged towards Cook and his crew, uttering “loud yells of defiance”.⁵⁷ Though the charge evoked cheers from the spectators, it “looked exceedingly weird and barbaric”, wrote one reporter.⁵⁸ After the reenactment, a play was recited wherein the character of Australia was represented by a nymph. The *Sydney Mail* reported that the event would “live in the memory of old and young alike as a stirring scene in the opening pages of the Australian Commonwealth”.⁵⁹

Celebrations were not confined to the major population centres. A journalist on Beechworth’s local paper reported the enthusiasm of the north-east Victorian town’s celebrations, which “go to prove that patriotism and Federation are not sentiments confined to the leaders of the people and to the great cities, but [are] equally the subject of affectionate interest on the part of all classes of the people”.⁶⁰ Children featured prominently in celebrations. In the wheatbelt town of Northam in Western Australia, children marched through the town’s streets and enjoyed sporting activities and refreshments.⁶¹ Celebrations in Armidale in northern New South Wales included an improvised battle between a commando of Boers and Australian volunteers.⁶² In South Africa itself, where colonial contingents were fighting in British units against the Boers, a Commonwealth banquet was held at Mafeking, presided over by the commander of the Victorian Bushmen’s Contingent.⁶³

Celebrations in Melbourne were “modest and unassuming” according to one reporter, who noted the city was making “no attempt to vie with the celebrations in the

⁵³ Beechworth *Ovens and Murray Valley Advertiser*, 5 January 1901, p.8.

⁵⁴ Reported in Melbourne *Age*, 3 January 1901, p.5.

⁵⁵ Sydney *Evening News*, 8 January 1901, p.3.

⁵⁶ Sydney *Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 12 January 1901, p.80; Sydney *Evening News*, 8 January 1901, p.3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* Archibald Meston, Queensland’s Southern Protector of Aborigines, was asked by the New South Wales government to bring a troop of Aborigines to Sydney for the re-enactment. Meston had a reputation as an expert on Indigenous people, see Judith McKay and Paul Memmott, “Staged Savagery: Archibald Meston and His Indigenous Exhibits”, *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 40 (2016).

⁵⁸ Sydney *Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 12 January 1901, p.80.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Beechworth *Ovens and Murray Valley Advertiser*, 5 January 1901, p.8.

⁶¹ Northam *Advertiser*, 5 January 1901, p.3.

⁶² Sydney *Morning Herald*, 14 February 1901, p.5.

⁶³ Murchison *Advocate*, 5 January 1901, p.3.

mother capital".⁶⁴ Perhaps Melbourne was saving its energies for the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York and Cornwall and the opening of the first Commonwealth parliament, scheduled for 9 May 1901.⁶⁵ Parliament House was the centrepiece of Melbourne's festivity, where five hundred pounds had been expended to dress its central columns in gold bunting, with banners fluttering above and flags draped in between. The sandstone steps of the building were decorated with plants and fountains, giving the effect of a miniature garden. The focus of the spectacle was a painting of the coronation of "The Young Queen", inspired by Kipling's poem about Australian Federation, which was illuminated at night and attracted admiring crowds, despite the brisk north-westerly.⁶⁶ The old Treasury Building, Town Hall, Princes Bridge and some private buildings along Collins Street were bedecked in bunting and banners, and crowds moving through the city were larger than usual, "but of rowdyism there was practically none".⁶⁷

Preparations for the First Anniversary

As the new Commonwealth marked its six-month anniversary on 1 July 1901, Prime Minister Edmund Barton was enthused about the prospect of celebrating the one-year milestone in style. Reflecting with satisfaction on the government's achievements, the Prime Minister said: "If there are no more heartburnings than now, at the end of the year the celebrations of Proclamation Day, and the first anniversary of Federation, should be on a scale to be remembered". The *Age* observed "an evident determination to make 1st January as great a day in Australia as is 4th July in America".⁶⁸

The first milestone to be acknowledged in the life of the Federation was the anniversary of 9 July 1900, the date on which Queen Victoria gave royal assent to the Constitution Act. Prime Minister Barton sent telegrams to the British Secretary for the Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, and the private secretary to the Duke and Duchess of York and Cornwall, conveying his best wishes on Australia's "happy birthday".⁶⁹ Newspaper columnists reflected positively on the progress of the Commonwealth, whose achievements included marking the inauguration in a manner that "will not easily pass into forgetfulness", settling a ministry, electing a parliament and establishing the machinery of government.⁷⁰ While challenges were sure to beset the Federation, the *Sydney Morning Herald* detected that "[a] sentiment of federal loyalty has sprung up" and that problems would be tackled with "a fair spirit" and "loyalty to the federation".⁷¹

Prime Minister Barton's declaration in July 1901 that the first anniversary of Federation would be marked on a "scale to be remembered" was belied by his subsequent actions. In late December 1901, Barton released a statement regarding celebration of the inauguration of the Commonwealth. The *Sydney Evening News* observed unkindly that the Prime Minister's admission that: "Nothing has been done" with regard to the anniversary was "very similar to most of the statements he has been making recently concerning his political undertakings".⁷² The explanation for the

⁶⁴ *Geelong Advertiser*, 2 January 1901, p.2.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Age*, 2 January 1901, p.7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Age*, 1 July 1901, p.5.

⁶⁹ *Shoalhaven Telegraph*, 10 July 1901, p.8.

⁷⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 July 1901, p.8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Sydney Evening News*, 26 December 1901, p.4.

inaction, according to the Prime Minister, was twofold; firstly, the government had been preoccupied with “Commonwealth business” and “no opportunity was afforded for making arrangements”.⁷³ Secondly, there was “a certain embarrassment of choice in the matter” of the anniversary. Barton thought that “several dates of notable events in connection with the foundation of the Commonwealth” demanded consideration: “The 1st of January is the anniversary of the actual inauguration, but there are other days, which, like certain sites for the Federal Capital, have equal claims to choice”.⁷⁴ Barton listed the alternatives as 1 July — by which he meant 9 July, the anniversary of the date on which Queen Victoria assented to the Constitution bill; 1 May — by which he meant 9 May, the anniversary of the date on which the Commonwealth parliament first sat, and 30 September — actually 19 September, the anniversary of the date on which Queen Victoria’s proclamation of the Constitution Act appeared in the London *Gazette*. Barton expected that one of those dates would “probably be chosen to mark the federation of the Australian state”, but he showed no inclination to do the choosing.⁷⁵ Barton’s vacillation and his bungling of three significant anniversaries suggest that the strain of the prime ministership was weighing on him. Further, tariff negotiations indicated that Commonwealth revenue would be lower than anticipated, imposing parsimony across all areas of government expenditure.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the *Age* anticipated a decision by Cabinet early in the new year.⁷⁷

The Problem with 1 January

While Barton’s equivocation about dates may have been driven more by a desire to excuse the government’s inaction than by genuine ambivalence, it was clear from the outset that the proclamation of the Commonwealth on 1 January worked against its observation. Formal protocols were followed; the Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun, sent a telegram to the Prime Minister conveying his best wishes to the “young nation, which I have learned to love” and the prime minister responded.⁷⁸ Barton also received a congratulatory message from Sir Gordon Sprigg, the Premier of the Cape Colony and from Australian troops in Johannesburg, who held a banquet on 1 January in honour of the birthday of the Commonwealth.⁷⁹ But there is little evidence that the wider Australian population was enthused by the anniversary.

The *Daily Telegraph* reported that Sydneysiders had enjoyed an “ideal holiday” for the first anniversary of the Commonwealth. The pleasant weather encouraged harbourside picnickers and crowds thronged to the Randwick races and the Highland Games at the Sydney Cricket Ground. Others kept an eye on the scoreboards about town, posting news of the Ashes test being played in Melbourne. The theatres did big business in the evening. Despite the *Daily Telegraph*’s headline proclaiming 1 January to be “Commonwealth Day”, no formal activities were planned to commemorate the first anniversary of the Commonwealth and the occasion passed like any other New Year’s Day.⁸⁰

⁷³ Launceston *Daily Telegraph*, 24 December 1901, p.3.

⁷⁴ *Evening News*, 26 December 1901, p.4.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Geoffrey Bolton, *Edmund Barton* (Sydney, 2000), pp.251-70.

⁷⁷ *Age*, 19 December 1901, p.7.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Melbourne *Argus*, 1 January 1902, p.5.

⁷⁹ Sydney *Australian Star*, 1 January 1902, p.5.

⁸⁰ Sydney *Daily Telegraph*, 2 January 1902, p.3.

The Sydney *Australian Star* chose an alternative nomenclature, anointing 1 January as “Australia Day: The Birthday of Federation: The First Anniversary”. Its report recalled the inauguration of the Commonwealth as “a period of abandoned joyousness to Australian people”, when “Sydney was transformed into a wonderland”.⁸¹ Yet, despite the significance of the occasion, the paper thought it was “rather notable that there has been no effort to more immediately identify the day with its true significance to Australians”.⁸² The Sydney *Evening News* cut to the chase when it declared that 1 January was “out of the running” for a Federal holiday because it fell on New Year’s Day. This sentiment was echoed by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which thought that 1 January “could hardly be diverted from its present use to form a federal festival”.⁸³

If New Year’s Day was unsuitable, politicians were reluctant to suggest an alternative date on which to celebrate Federation because of a widespread perception that there were too many public holidays. The Prime Minister himself declared there was a superfluity when asked about a proposal for a public holiday to celebrate Empire Day.⁸⁴ In any case, the Commonwealth lacked the power to declare a nation-wide holiday, even if it was inclined to do so. While the federal government could mandate holidays for its employees, the determination of public holidays remained with individual states. The declaration of a new national holiday to celebrate Federation would require the states’ cooperation, and add to an already crowded calendar. The *Evening News* argued that if an alternative date was selected — and the paper favoured 9 July — then one of the many other public holidays in New South Wales, such as the Prince of Wales’ birthday on 3 June, should be abolished.⁸⁵

Parliamentary Debate

While Barton equivocated and the public showed little appetite for any form of commemoration, the Department of Home Affairs made plans to celebrate Federation. The Department’s Estimates for 1902-03 included the provision of £500 for the raising of a monument in Corowa, in recognition of the 1893 conference at which the idea of an elected constitutional convention was formulated. There was a range of responses to the proposal for a monument, all of them negative. Frank Tudor, the Labor Member for Yarra, moved an amendment to strike the item from the Estimates. Like his Labor Party colleague, Hugh Mahon, Tudor thought Corowa was too obscure a location for the monument, not that he supported the idea at all: “The Federation itself is the greatest monument to the Commonwealth” and given the “dire distress which exists in the Commonwealth”, such an expenditure could not be justified, Tudor told parliament.⁸⁶ Thomas Brown, the Labor Member for Canobolas, thought it premature “to erect a monument to commemorate the birth of Federation”. If such a monument were to be built, Brown thought it should be raised to the memory of Henry Parkes, who “did more than any other man to establish federation”, or even to John Dunmore Lang, an early proponent of union.⁸⁷ Others contested the elevation of Corowa above other locations and milestones in the

⁸¹ *Australian Star*, 1 January 1902, p.5.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Evening News*, 26 December 1901, p.4; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 January 1902, p.2.

⁸⁴ *Orange Leader*, 21 July 1902, p.3.

⁸⁵ *Evening News*, 26 December 1901, p.4.

⁸⁶ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, House of Representatives (House), no. 22, 29 May 1902, p.13094.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Federation movement. In a rebuff to John Quick's assertion that the Corowa resolution was a pivotal moment, the Labor Member for South Australia, Lee Batchelor, claimed it was "of no more historical importance than many other meetings of the kind which led up to the same end". Joseph Cook, the Free Trade Member for Paramatta and future prime minister, thought the 1896 Bathurst convention "had a much greater effect" than Corowa, and given Bathurst might well be chosen as the federal capital, the monument "would not only serve as an historical memorial, but would beautify the metropolis of the Commonwealth".⁸⁸

In a neat illustration of parliamentarians' inability to find consensus on the issue of commemorating the new Commonwealth, the Free Trade Member for Wentworth, William McMillan, proposed that the monument "should take the form of a wooden Colossus, with one leg planted in Corowa and the other on the other side of the [Murray] river. That would be a very fair settlement of the difficulty, and if the Minister will insert the provision to that effect in the Estimates, I shall be prepared to vote for it."⁸⁹ Needless to say, Frank Tudor's amendment was agreed to and the proposal for a monument was struck from the Estimates.

The Attorney-General Alfred Deakin was less interested in monuments to Federation than in impressing the date of 1 January in the budding national imagination. In debating amendments to the Public Service Bill in July 1901, Deakin proposed a list of public holidays to be observed by Commonwealth public servants. The first of these was: "The first day of January, being Commonwealth Day". When an interjector accused Deakin of "robbing the civil servants of New Year's Day", Deakin responded: "It is turned into Commonwealth Day".⁹⁰

When the Public Service Bill was debated by a Senate committee in January 1902, senators reconsidered Deakin's assignation of 1 January as Commonwealth Day. The committee's discussion revealed just how difficult it would be to reach consensus about an appropriate date, particularly in the absence of political leadership. The Postmaster-General, Senator Drake, told committee members there was "some doubt as to whether the 1st of January will be observed as Commonwealth Day". He successfully moved an amendment that disentangled 1 January from Commonwealth Day, and left the issue of a date for the Federation anniversary open:

It has been pointed out that the 1st of January is always a holiday — that a great number of persons desire on New Year's Day to go to sea-side resorts, and that it would not be a convenient day to adopt as Commonwealth Day. It would have no special significance. It would be celebrated, as it has been for years, as New Year's Day. Taking that into consideration, it is probable that some other suitable day may be fixed upon, but I do not wish the Senate to commit itself to any day. The amendment which has been agreed to will leave the matter open.⁹¹

Senator Josiah Symon from South Australia suggested that the Postmaster General urge the government to determine a date on which to observe Commonwealth Day as soon as possible. Symon was confident that Australians were not disposed towards the selection of New Year's Day or any other existing holiday: "If the Government could insert in the clause a date which would be acceptable to the whole of Australia, it would be a distinct advantage". Symon himself favoured 9 July: "It would be an

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.13095.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.13093.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2 July 1901, p.1831.

⁹¹ *CPD*, Senate, 29 January 1902, p.9323.

excellent time of the year, certainly much better than the 1st of January, for the commemoration of a great historical event".⁹²

Another committee member, Senator Stewart from Queensland, took the opposite view. He could not "understand this rushing up and down the calendar for a day on which to celebrate the proclamation of the establishment of the Commonwealth".

Was it not proclaimed on the 1st of January, and, if so, why should we seek to alter the date? [...] If the Commonwealth had been established on the 29th of February, the 12th of July, or any other day in any other month, we should celebrate the anniversary of the event on that date. We cannot, without stultifying ourselves, depart from the 1st of January.⁹³

Senator Glassey from Queensland was also adamant that the date should remain fixed on 1 January:

I entirely dissent from the proposal to alter the day. The 1st January is the day on which the proclamation was issued, and on which Ministers took office. It has an historical significance, and to substitute for it any other day would rob the celebration of its charm and effect in the minds of a great number of people. I do not believe in any alteration, not that I wish to deprive any one of an extra holiday, but because I think that the Federal Parliament should adhere to the day which possesses an historical significance. In Scotland great importance is attached to the 1st January, and as Scotland is the home of my fathers, I attach importance to it also as a holiday. But so far as Australia is concerned, the 1st January is the day which should be celebrated in connexion with the inauguration of the Commonwealth.⁹⁴

In response to Symon's request that the issue of Commonwealth Day be settled before the Public Service Bill left the Senate, Drake told him that he did not think the matter would be "settled quite so early".⁹⁵

The Second Anniversary

The press continued to ask the Prime Minister about plans for the commemoration of the new nation. In November 1902, Barton told reporters that "the ordinary idea would be to call the anniversary of the inauguration of the union Commonwealth Day".⁹⁶ The *Argus* reported that if such a celebration ran the risk of being overshadowed by New Year's Day, Barton suggested that "another more distinctive day can be fixed later on", though he thought there were already too many public holidays.⁹⁷ The *Age* was more blunt, claiming that the Prime Minister was "not disposed to add to the list of public holidays by setting aside a day for congratulations over the advent of federation". The paper reported that Barton expressed the view that New Year's Day was "federation day, and he refuses to fix a special holiday, on the ground that the doing so would seriously hamper business".⁹⁸ The following month, Barton told journalists that he did not propose to take any special steps to celebrate the second anniversary of Federation, because it fell on New Year's Day: "If the people feel inclined to celebrate the anniversary, they can do so without the Government taking the initiative".⁹⁹ In January

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Argus*, 14 November 1902, p. 2.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Age*, 14 November 1902, p.4.

⁹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 December 1902, p.5.

1903, the Melbourne *Herald* reported that “no Commonwealth Celebration Day has been officially fixed upon. The Government and the Parliament have been too busy with matters of more practical concern.”¹⁰⁰

The only official recognition of the second anniversary of Federation in Melbourne — the temporary seat of the national parliament — was the flying of the Royal Standard and the Union Jack on the flagstaffs at each end of Parliament House in Spring Street. The prime minister enjoyed some respite at his home in suburban Sydney, and the Governor-General, Lord Tennyson, passed a quiet holiday at Marble Hill, South Australia. “In the absence of the Governor General”, noted the *Age*, “no official functions were held.”¹⁰¹ Tennyson sent a telegram congratulating the Prime Minister on the second anniversary of the Commonwealth. The Governor-General referred to the early challenges of the Federation, principally the dissatisfaction of the smaller states at the loss of customs revenue: “With patience we will overcome, I have no doubt, all the difficulties necessarily arising at first in our new-born constitution”.¹⁰² In his reply to Tennyson, Barton also acknowledged challenges: “I share your confidence that, like other federations, we shall overcome these early difficulties which arise from the necessary assimilation of conditions hitherto widely diverse”.¹⁰³

The lack of interest in commemorating the anniversary of the Commonwealth did not go entirely unremarked upon. A columnist in Victoria’s *Numurkah Leader* contrasted the apathy of 1903 with the enthusiasm of 1901:

He would have been a bold man indeed who in 1901 would have ventured to predict that in two short years the patriotic fervor (we had almost said fever) and imperialistic rejoicings with which the inauguration of the Commonwealth was celebrated would have been practically non-existent.¹⁰⁴

The writer thought that the lack of interest in commemorating Federation could be explained by the hostility that was widely felt about the effect of the union, speculating that if the referendum were held again, voters would answer in the negative. All the States, the writer claimed, were “dissatisfied with the results of federation”. They were promised that the cost of government would diminish, only to find that costs had increased. Such increases were not inherent in the federal system, but due to the “absence of administrative ability of our rulers”. The Prime Minister was “content to sit at the feet and obey the mandates of the Labor Party, and Mr Kingston’s administration of the Customs duties has been so overbearing that he is in a continual state of turmoil with the importers”. If this “federal extravagance” could be checked, the “federal spirit” would rise, the author claimed.¹⁰⁵

Tasmanian Enthusiasm

Tasmania had long been enthusiastic about Federation, though it quickly became disillusioned when the new financial arrangements were determined and the state found its income reduced. Such disaffection did not prevent the Launceston City Council from seeking to institute “Commonwealth Day” celebrations in 1903. Despite the tardiness of their preparations — the councillors were considering the issue in late December — officials believed that their city “might as well make a beginning in

¹⁰⁰ Melbourne *Herald*, 1 January 1903, p.1.

¹⁰¹ *Age*, 2 January 1903, p.5.

¹⁰² Adelaide *Observer*, 10 January 1903, p.38.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Numurkah Leader*, 9 January 1903, p.2.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

commemorating the birth of the Commonwealth, an event which would always have the first historical recognition in the life and records of the Australian people” and would, no doubt, become an annual event.¹⁰⁶

The second anniversary of the Commonwealth would coincide in Launceston with an official visit by the commander of Australia’s military forces, General Edward Hutton, and the summer holiday of the federal Minister for Trade and Customs, William Lyne.¹⁰⁷ While some had suggested that General Hutton’s visit be combined with Commonwealth Day celebrations, others urged that the two functions be kept separate: “The commemoration of federation was a matter of very much greater importance than the mere entertainment of General Hutton”, Lieutenant Colonel Martin said to the support of others at a December 1901 meeting of the council. If only half a dozen met and celebrated Commonwealth Day, “it would be recorded and be a step towards the recognition of what was now only New Year’s Day as Commonwealth day, and help make it a national festival”, the councillor declared.¹⁰⁸ A motion to hold a luncheon banquet — “a most truly British way of celebrating”, declared Mr A. Gye — commencing at 1pm, with tickets not exceeding half a guinea, was carried.¹⁰⁹

In reporting these preparations, the Launceston *Examiner* contrasted the feebleness of Australian national feeling with the sentiment attached to the Fourth of July in the United States:

The fact that the Commonwealth was inaugurated on New Year’s Day should make it the great national holiday of Australia. So far, however, we have not been able to get away from the old surroundings. We have hardly come to realise our new nationality, and hence it sits lightly on our shoulders. In the United States the Fourth of July is regarded as the day of the year, but then they won their independence after a protracted struggle, while ours was a free gift from the dear old motherland.¹¹⁰

Americans had “sedulously cultivated” national sentiment, not least through the flag ceremonies that involved young children. A similar ceremony could be initiated on Commonwealth Day, the *Examiner* suggested, without interfering with Caledonian Society or New Year’s festivities. Perhaps the Australian Natives’ Association could take the lead in forging the sentimental association among the rising generation.

The Launceston *Examiner* did not approve of the council’s decision to host a luncheon in the banquet room at Albert Hall, at the cost of seven and six-penny a head. In a rare evocation of “the people”, the newspaper announced: “It was the voice of the people that called the Australian Commonwealth into existence. On Thursday’s celebration, if the projected lines be adhered to, the people will be rigorously excluded.”¹¹¹ The paper imagined instead, “a simple outdoor function in which all inclined can join”. If held at an early hour, it need not interfere with the “Caledonians’ carnival”. “Federal celebrities”, such as General Hutton, could be entertained at a subsequent luncheon, but the priority in the design of Federation commemorations should be given to “all who helped by voting aye in its glorious consummation”. The article concluded with the prophetic words: “The best way to stimulate popular interest is to encourage it from the start”.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ Launceston *Daily Telegraph*, 20 December 1902, p.9.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Launceston *Examiner*, 20 December 1902, p.9.

¹⁰⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 20 December 1902, p.9.

¹¹⁰ *Examiner*, 1 January 1903, p.4.

¹¹¹ *Examiner*, 24 December 1902, p.4.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Subsequent Years

In 1904, a poem called “Commonwealth Day” appeared in a newspaper in Charters Towers, in northern Queensland. The composition reflected on a fountain throwing “far and near its glittering spray” that had been raised as “a *lasting* monument [...] To grace our natal holiday [...]

But now alas! the marble slabs
 Are peeling in the sun’s bright ray
 The friezes and the architraves
 Are fading in the usual way —
 As fades the grass — a coat of paint
 Ephemeral, and very faint,
 Not fitted to illuminate
 The future; as to our day
 Except that, in a far off time,
 Some future councillor may say
 ‘What sort of men were those that ruled
 When we became a Nation, pray?’
 Did tin and paint and putty stand
 The shoddy emblems of the band?
 Then is their history writ in sand
 And their mean glory passed away.¹¹³

The “mean glories” of those who laboured and compromised to create the Commonwealth were soon forgotten. Driven by the advocacy of the Australian Natives’ Association, the anniversary of New South Wales’ establishment came increasingly to speak for the foundation of the entire nation. In 1905, amid the deluge of martial imperialism, Empire Day was added to an already crowded commemorative calendar, though the date would not be proclaimed as a public holiday.¹¹⁴ Like the weather-beaten fountain in Charters Towers and the statue of Ramses II that inspired Shelley’s “Ozymandias”, the achievements of Federation faded in historical memory.

On 26 October 1910, John West, the Member for East Sydney, asked the Attorney-General, W.M. Hughes, whether the government had made any steps towards celebrating the “Commonwealth decennary”. Hughes replied that that the government had not given the issue consideration.¹¹⁵ West was persistent. When he asked Hughes again a few weeks later, the Attorney-General’s reply echoed in the vacuum of ambivalence and apathy that had characterised the issue from the start: “It has not been considered by the Government, but Ministers are willing to consider it, and will be glad to receive any suggestions which the honorable member may have to offer”.¹¹⁶

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this article suggests that, with the occasional exception, neither politicians nor the general public were much enthused about commemorating Federation in the years immediately following the event. The aspirations of republicans

¹¹³ Organ Grinder, “Commonwealth Day, 1901”, Charters Towers *Evening Telegraph*, 28 March 1904, p.2.

¹¹⁴ *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 18 March 1905, p.2.

¹¹⁵ CPD, House, 26 October 1910, p.5185.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 November 1910, p.6848.

and civic nationalists such as Deakin for a distinctively Australian occasion were overwhelmed by the apathy of the majority. The creation of the Commonwealth of Australia was an imperial rather than a national event. Public engagement was momentarily provoked by the fact that British attention was turned on Australia. In lamenting the public's apathy about federal politics, Deakin conceded that it was "perfectly plain that the arrival of the Duke and Duchess [was] [...] the predominating attraction" at the opening of parliament in May 1901.¹¹⁷ Once the pageantry subsided, and the imperial troops and royal celebrities had departed, there was little interest in the civic apparatus of the new nation. Martial endeavor — Australians were fighting in the Boer War at the time of Federation — and the celebrity power of the British royal court were far more likely to quicken Australian hearts than the birth of the Commonwealth.¹¹⁸ Fourteen years after Federation, a martial legend formed around the invasion of a remote Turkish peninsula filled the vacuum left by the failure of Federation to spark a national mythology.

In formulating his argument that the nascent Commonwealth was swaddled in far more noble sentiment than had been previously acknowledged, Hirst never claimed that the Federation was the product of a mass movement. Yet even that minority who were seized by a religious zeal in the cause of the Commonwealth were curiously lackadaisical about elevating and perpetuating its memory. Further research into the turbulent early years of the Federation might shed light on how the civic nationalism that inspired the poems and rhetoric of Billites was overwhelmed so quickly.¹¹⁹ Those, such as Frederick Holder, who sought to establish a commemorative tradition in the interest of nourishing national sentiment, were motivated more by the insight that nations are more usefully bound by genesis mythologies than by visceral patriotism. Debates about Commonwealth commemoration in the federal parliament — focussed on the schedule of public holidays — were decidedly functional and bureaucratic.

Obstetric complications, as Noel McLachlan characterised them, conspired to diminish the occasion of the national birthday.¹²⁰ The list of complications was long: the lack of war or revolution to herald the new nation, the march of the chest-beating imperialism that led to the First World War, the distraction of the Boer War, the death of Queen Victoria three weeks after Federation, a belief that national federation was but a prelude to imperial federation, the ineffectiveness of Barton, the financial and political vicissitudes of the early union, above all, the fact that many preferred a British to an Australian identity.

As Alon Confino writes, federalism has its roots in "cultural regionalism, as a set of beliefs about the place of local and regional identity within the nation".¹²¹ In the case of the Australian Federation, however, those beliefs were not attached to Western Australia or Victoria or Tasmania, but to a homeland — a *Heimat* — that was twelve thousand miles away. The fact that "the all-embracing national feeling" that Alfred Deakin had hoped for did not flow from the moment of civic creation has had lasting consequences.¹²² It has left the Australian Federation without the popular engagement essential to its continued vitality.

¹¹⁷ Alfred Deakin, London *Morning Post*, 16 February 1901 (2 March 1901).

¹¹⁸ McLachlan, *Waiting for the Revolution*, p.177. See also, Benjamin T. Jones, *This Time: Australia's Republican Past and Future* (Melbourne, 2018), pp.35-36.

¹¹⁹ Bolton suggests in his biography of Barton that the prime minister was depressed and ineffective, *Edmund Barton*, pp.258-60.

¹²⁰ McLachlan, *Waiting for the Revolution*, p.177.

¹²¹ Confino, "Federalism and the *Heimat* Idea", p.72.

¹²² Interview with Deakin in Melbourne *Punch*, 1 October 1903, p.460, quoted in Brett, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin*, p.287.