

*Papers on Parliament No. 32*

**SPECIAL ISSUE**

December 1998

**The People's Conventions:  
Corowa (1893) and Bathurst (1896)**

Editors of this issue:

**David Headon**

(Director, Centre for Australian Cultural Studies, Canberra)

**Jeff Brownrigg**

(National Film and Sound Archive)

---

Published and Printed by the Department of the Senate  
Parliament House, Canberra  
ISSN 1031-976X

*Published 1998*

*Papers on Parliament* is edited and managed by the Research Section,  
Department of the Senate. Copy editor for this issue: Kay Walsh

All inquiries should be made to:

The Director of Research  
Procedure Office  
Department of the Senate  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Telephone: (02) 6277 3078  
Email: [research.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:research.sen@aph.gov.au)

ISSN 1031-976X

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Centre for Australian Cultural Studies  
The Corowa and District Historical Society  
Charles Sturt University (Bathurst)  
The Bathurst District Historical Society

Cover design: Conroy + Donovan, Canberra

## Introduction

When Henry Parkes delivered his Tenterfield speech in October 1889, declaring federation's time had come, he provided the stimulus for an eighteen-month period of lively speculation. Nationhood, it seemed, was in the air. The 1890 Australian Federation Conference in Melbourne, followed by the 1891 National Australasian Convention in Sydney, appeared to confirm genuine interest in the national cause. Yet the Melbourne and Sydney meetings brought together only politicians and those who might be politicians. These were meetings, held in the Australian continent's two most influential cities, which only succeeded in registering the aims and ambitions of a very narrow section of the colonial population.

In the months following Sydney's Convention, the momentum of the official movement was dissipated as the big strikes and severe depression engulfed the colonies. The New South Wales government did not take the lead, as had been expected, after the completion and distribution of the 1891 draft constitution. By late 1892, the political support for federation had faltered as intercolonial relations deteriorated over a range of issues. Commercial and social barriers between the colonies created particular problems in the borderland of New South Wales and Victoria, and to a lesser extent between New South Wales and Queensland. The colonial governments were showing little interest in addressing the complex problems of constitution-making in a climate beset by economic and social upheaval. Sir John Robertson was wrong to say that federation was as dead as Julius Caesar, but it was certainly ailing. Far too many colonial Australians felt left out of the process. In the early 1890s, federation was perceived—quite accurately—as the politicians' plaything.

Yet in the period from the establishment of the Australasian Federation League, in July 1893, to the first session of the National Australasian Convention in Adelaide, in March/April 1897, federation's cause was steadily resuscitated. Indeed, by the time of the Adelaide session, as Helen Irving suggests in *To Constitute a Nation—A Cultural History of Australia's Constitution* (1997), the 'people had become the legitimating force behind Federation'. In this process, the Corowa Conference (1893) and the Bathurst People's Federal Convention (1896) had significant roles. Until recently, neither one had been accorded the attention it deserved in the federation story. However, on the centenary birthdays of both the Corowa and Bathurst federation gatherings, celebratory events were held in order to publicise the largely forgotten federation contributions of each town. The results are contained in this special issue of *Papers on Parliament*.

## Notes on contributors

**Stuart Macintyre** is the Ernest Scott Professor of History at the University of Melbourne.

**Helen Irving** is a Senior Lecturer in the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney.

**David Headon** is Director of the Centre for Australian Cultural Studies (Canberra) and teaches in the School of English, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy.

**Jeff Brownrigg** has developed a national federation community history project, ALFRED. He is an historian in Academic Outreach and Research at Australia's National Film and Sound Archive.

**James Warden** currently works for the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance, Darwin.

**Paul Keating** was Prime Minister of Australia from 1991 to 1996.

A former premier of South Australia, **John Bannon** is currently a post-graduate student at the Flinders University of South Australia. He is writing a biography of Charles Cameron Kingston.

**John Hirst** is Professor of History at La Trobe University.

**Anthony Cahill** is a senior lecturer in History at the University of Sydney. He is writing a biography of Cardinal Moran.

**Tessa Milne** is a member of the History Department, University of Sydney, and the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney.

**Mark McKenna** is a Research Fellow in the Political Science Program, Research School of Social Science, Australian National University.

**Robin McLachlan** is a senior lecturer in History and Cultural Heritage Studies at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst.

At the time of his death in September, **Kevin Livingston** was Head of the School of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Ballarat. His book, *The Wired Nation Continent: the Communication Revolution and Federating Australia*, was published in 1996 by Oxford University Press.

# Contents

## **Corowa**

- 1. Corowa and the Voice of the People** 1  
*Stuart Macintyre*
- 2. When Quick Met Garran: the Corowa Plan** 13  
*Helen Irving*
- 3. Loading the Gun: Corowa's Role in the Federation Debate** 20  
*David Headon*
- 4. Melba's Puddin': Corowa, Mulwala and Our Cultural Past** 30  
*Jeff Brownrigg*
- 5. From Little Things Big Things Grow:  
Thresholds of Citizenship (1893–1993)** 44  
*James Warden*
- 6. The Prime Minister's Centenary Dinner Speech,  
Corowa, 31 July 1993** 59  
*Paul Keating*

## **Bathurst**

- 7. Return Tickets at Single Fares:  
the Bathurst Convention as a Representative National Gathering** 67  
*John Bannon*
- 8. The Idea of the People** 76  
*Stuart Macintyre*
- 9. Federation and the People: a Response to Stuart Macintyre** 80  
*John Hirst*
- 10. Resurrecting the Federal Ideal: Mr Astley goes to Bathurst** 83  
*David Headon*
- 11. Cardinal Moran, Bathurst and the Achievement of Federation** 94  
*A.E. Cahill*
- 12. Barton at Bathurst: 'Front Stage/Backstage'** 103  
*Tessa Milne*
- 13. John Napoleon Norton and the 1896 Bathurst Convention** 108  
*Mark McKenna*
- 14. A Foreign Agent Unmasked: Colonel Bell at Bathurst** 113  
*Robin McLachlan*

<b>15. Joseph Cook's Contribution</b>	<b>128</b>
<i>Kevin Livingston</i>	
<b>16. 'The Sentiment of Nationality': Bathurst and Popular Support for Federation</b>	<b>131</b>
<i>Jeff Brownrigg</i>	
<b>Sources of illustrations</b>	<b>144</b>

From the files of the *Corowa Free Press*, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1893

## HYMN OF THE FEDERATION

---

The Corowa Conference July 31st, 1893

---

Where the waters of the Murray and the  
border cities meet,  
I hear the sound of voices and the tramp  
of many feet  
And as one the sound of voices, and as one  
the pulses beat  
True to the Union!

Our artificial borders they have caused us  
many hates  
That shall fade before the union which  
the world expected waits,  
Give way the barriers! Open all ye ever-  
lasting gates!  
Open to Union!

Not for us the bloody banner of an old  
king crafted land  
Our foundation shall be justice—their's is  
but the futile sand.  
Our flag, the Christ blessed cross of stars  
from Gulf to Southern strand.  
One in our Union!

Not ours to make a people slaves while we  
from bonds are free;  
Not ours to make our rivers run red-  
bosomed to the sea;  
But ours to build the basement as the sky-  
most tower shall be—  
Strength is the Union!

Within our land no sword shall come to  
well the widow's tears;  
For our yeomen are our legions, and their  
spoils the golden ears—  
We know not aught of lust of blood, nor  
war that slays and sears.  
Peace is the Union!

Where the steel-bound promontory bars  
the entrance to the South—  
Where the silver mirage trembles in the  
zenith of the drouth—  
Sounds the voice of all Australia, as the  
voice of but one mouth,  
"Speed the Union!"

With the old world wrecks to guide us

which the sands of hist'ry strew  
Let us build a mighty nation that shall not  
be for the few.  
Let us build on till perfect—let us build  
and build anew.  
Perfect the Union!

Throw down all our cruel barriers; for  
without them we're strong  
To defend from our wrong others—to defend  
ourselves from wrong;  
And our nation, built on honor, sings a  
clarion rapturous song.  
“Honor the Union!”

Randolph Bedford.  
Melbourne, July 30, 1893.



## **Corowa and the Voice of the People**

*Stuart Macintyre*

The parallels between the present and the past are uncannily close. The country is racked by doubt and uncertainty. The economy falters. Old ways of getting and spending no longer work. There is argument and division. The major political parties seem to have exhausted their capacity for constructive leadership. At the same time proposals for change fail to command enthusiasm.

If today the Australian republic lies becalmed in this Sargasso Sea of unrealistic expectation and fatalistic indifference, one hundred years ago the federal cause was similarly immobile. The representatives of the Australian and New Zealand colonies had met in conference at Melbourne in 1890 and agreed to the resolution of Sir Henry Parkes that a federal union was desirable. Delegations from the colonial parliaments had attended the Convention at Sydney in 1891 that drafted a federal scheme. The draft constitution was taken back to the colonial legislatures where it was criticised, amended, put off or rejected. 'Federation is as dead as Julius Caesar,' pronounced the leader of the 'Geebung' group of ultra-provincialists in New South Wales.<sup>1</sup>

Then came the formation of an Australasian Federation League, and the decision of its branches along the river-border of New South Wales and Victoria to convene a meeting of parties interested in federation. At that conference in Corowa, in 1893, the representative of the Bendigo branch of the Australian Natives Association, Dr John Quick, hit upon the device that would break the deadlock. He suggested that the preparation of a new Bill for a Federal Constitution of Australia should be entrusted to popular representatives elected specifically for this purpose and that this Bill should then be submitted for acceptance or rejection by a general vote of the people of each colony. The Corowa Conference having adopted his

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in John Quick and Robert Randolph Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1901, p. 150.

scheme, he drafted an enabling Australian Federal Congress Bill that the Federation League embraced and publicised. The premiers met in conference at Hobart in January 1895 and accepted the substance of Quick's proposal. The passage of enabling legislation led to the election of the delegates to the Federal Convention of 1897-8, and eventually to the popular endorsement of its work, which was enacted in 1900 and came into operation on the first day of January 1901. The people had spoken and brought the Commonwealth of Australia into being.

The story of Corowa was quickly codified. In the standard school textbook histories of Australia, which told the children of the new commonwealth how their nation had come into being, Corowa was an act of supervention which rescued the national destiny from petty vanities. As one put it, Quick's 'guiding idea was that a fresh impulse towards federation should emanate directly from the people':

From the adoption of this scheme in 1893 dates the irresistible march of the federal movement to victory. Jealousies, personal ambitions, particularist interests, the tinkering pettiness of party manoeuvring, might sprog the wheels for a bit, but there could no longer be more than temporary hindrances.<sup>2</sup>

This account of the triumph of the federal cause was also installed into the historical record by its heroes. Sir John Quick, who was subsequently elected a delegate to the later Federal Convention and knighted for his services on the proclamation of the Commonwealth, joined with his fellow-Corowan, Robert Garran, whom he met and befriended there, to write the authoritative *Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth* (1901), dedicated to 'The People of Australia'. Its Historical Introduction ran to 250 pages and traced the history of colonial development from the Greek city states to the new world. In relating the history of the federal movement, Quick and Garran told of the fruitless efforts of British statesmen and colonial negotiations conducted over forty years down to the failure of the Commonwealth Bill of 1891. Then came the chapter entitled 'The Popular Movement', which began with 'the people' waking up to the fact that a scheme 'with which politicians and Parliaments had been dallying so long, meant the salvation of Australia'. The authors noted the work of the Australian Natives Association and the Federal Leagues that led up to the Corowa Conference. Quick's resolution there was said to mark a new epoch, which transformed federation into a popular process.<sup>3</sup>

Garran provided additional detail concerning that miraculous transformation in his reminiscences, *Prosper the Commonwealth* (1958). As he described the Corowa Conference, it was largely taken up with formalities, dinners and speeches. The curious thing, he explained, was that 'the real achievement of the Conference, and the success of the movement which it started, came not from adherence to the routine agenda, but from an inspired break-away from that routine.' As the formal speeches proceeded, the desire for something more practical grew. 'Words, words, words—can't we do something?' interjected

---

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Scott, *A Short History of Australia*, Oxford University Press, London, 1916, p. 295. Cf. Edward Jenks, *A History of the Australasian Colonies (From their Foundation to the Year 1911)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1912, p. 298; Alexander and George Sutherland, *The History of Australia and New Zealand from 1606 to 1911*, Longmans Green, London, 1913, pp. 188-9.

<sup>3</sup> Quick and Garran, *Annotated Constitution*, op. cit., pp. 150-5.

an impatient enthusiast. Then came Quick's suggestion of a short recess while half a dozen delegates withdrew into a backroom. Within half an hour they came back and Quick proposed the crucial 'Corowa resolution':

That in the opinion of this Conference the Legislature of each Australasian colony should pass an Act providing for the election of representatives to attend a statutory convention or congress to consider and adopt a bill to establish a Federal Constitution for Australia and upon the adoption of such a bill or measure it be submitted by some process of referendum to the verdict of each colony.

Neither from the record nor from recollection could Garran trace any such previous suggestion. It emerged, he claimed, spontaneously from impatience with the futility of the formal proceedings and insistence on action. As Garran put it:

It was the sudden explosion of protests, largely from younger members of the Conference, that they were only talking and doing nothing, that caused Dr Quick to suggest a short recess, and the result was the drafting of a resolution that was like the striking of flint with steel to produce this new spark of inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

Quick himself narrated these events in recollections first published in the Melbourne *Herald* in 1926. These sketched a life of service as a Cornish immigrant boy on the Victorian goldfields who, forced by the death of his father to leave school at the age of ten, launched himself into public life through journalism and law by means of pious emulation and intellectual self-improvement. He recalled the men of affairs who inspired him: Moses Wilson Gray of the Land Convention; Richard Heales, the coachmaker, teetotaller and first Victorian liberal premier; George Higinbotham, the scourge of the wealthy lower orders; Graham Berry, the popular champion who persuaded Quick himself to enter Parliament in 1880. These former champions set the standards of public conduct. Though dead, he wrote, 'their works and influence remain behind'. Their careers intersected with formative events and their genius settled the destinies of the young nation. They showed him that 'Great men can only be created by great opportunities, and by participating in great events in the wide and attractive field of action.' Federation was Quick's field of action. Upon his defeat as a member for Bendigo in the election of 1889, he said, he took comfort from the words of Tennyson: 'That men may rise on stepping stones / Of their dead selves to higher things'; and abandoned colonial politics for the federal cause.<sup>5</sup>

Through his membership of the Australian Natives Association (made possible in that same year by the Association's decision to accept virtual natives) and his leadership of the Bendigo Federation League, Quick played a prominent part at Corowa. His explanation of its genesis linked the suggestion of a politician, Edmund Barton, that the Riverina form federal leagues to strengthen the hand of federalists in New South Wales, to the spontaneous ardour of nationalists. As he put it:

---

<sup>4</sup> Sir Robert Randolph Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1958, pp. 102–4.

<sup>5</sup> Edited by L. E. Fredman and republished as *Sir John Quick's Notebook*, Reg. C. Pognoski, Newcastle, 1965, pp. 13–20.

... there grew up in the electoral constituencies of Victoria and New South Wales, groups of men out of Parliament, but animated by patriotic impulse and interest in the common cause of federation, who thought the time had arrived when national unity should be made a people's cause and should be no longer dependent on the battledore and shuttlecock of colonial Parliamentary parties.

Of the circumstances that led to his impromptu resolution he gave no explanation (and his ageing memory of the terms of that resolution changed Australasian to Australian). He simply stated that the resolution was carried unanimously amid great enthusiasm. He observed the absence of the leading pro-federal parliamentarians, Parkes, Barton and Deakin. He related how he drafted enabling legislation for his scheme and pressed it upon Victorian, New South Wales and Queensland politicians. He rejoiced that George Reid, who as premier of New South Wales initiated the premiers conference in Hobart in January 1895, accepted his scheme and 'assumed the leadership of the Federal movement, which finally led on to fortune'.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is the version of Corowa given by Alfred Deakin as part of his inner history of the federal cause, written between 1898 and 1900 and first published in 1944. Deakin paid honour to Quick for his devotion. 'Dark, handsome, sturdy and intelligent', he possessed a dauntless determination and trustworthiness which he applied from 1889 to the federal cause. Deakin raised the possibility that the idea of the celebrated Corowa resolution might not have come from Quick. He suggested that the two principal objections of the radical critics to the 1891 Bill were that its authors had not been chosen by the people and that there was no provision to submit the Bill directly to the people—precisely the two shortcomings that Quick now proposed to remedy. He also said that it was Henry D'Esterre Taylor, the secretary of the Imperial Federation League (an organisation with which Deakin was associated) who suggested that remedy to Quick. (D'Esterre Taylor certainly believed this was so: he claimed afterwards that he had put forward the idea of the popularly elected convention to several of the delegates at Corowa before Quick appropriated it.<sup>7</sup>) There were errors and evasions in Deakin's account. He omitted to explain that he had begged off attendance at Corowa because he was working as a barrister to make good his losses as a landboomer. He attributed its genesis to the residents of Corowa when in fact the conference was instigated by a broader group of Riverina enthusiasts, and he misplaced Corowa itself as lying across the Murray from Echuca. But of the efficacy of the scheme hatched at Corowa, and of Quick's vital role in persuading Reid to take it up along with the premiers of Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, Deakin was insistent. Corowa revived the sacred cause from stagnation.<sup>8</sup>

Now these versions of Corowa are inscribed in different sorts of writing: an authoritative work of reference, published reminiscences, informal memoirs, a private notebook. Each of

---

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> D'Esterre Taylor to A. H. Loring, 7 August 1893 and to Quick, 9 October 1900, quoted in Henry L. Hall, *Victoria's Part in the Australian Federation Movement 1849–1900*, Elliot Stock, London, 1931, pp. 96–

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Deakin, *The Federal Story: The Inner History of the Federal Cause 1880–1900*, 2nd edn, J. A. La Nauze (ed. and introd.), Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963, pp. 57–9.

them is written with a particular kind of intimacy with the events it records while at the same time imbuing those events with a monumental significance. Each author claims the privileged knowledge of the participant to install himself in a process of national procreation. They use both hindsight and foresight to mark out a particular form of public history on a human scale as the visionary foresight of the founders can be seen in retrospect to have been vindicated in the fulfilment of the Commonwealth. In a little country town great deeds were done.<sup>9</sup>

From a contemporary perspective, the personalities of the Federal Fathers are no longer apparent, the details of their actions lost with the effluxion of time and the decline of interest in that sort of patriarchal history. Yet the story of Corowa sits nicely with the commemorative urge. It is an exemplary story of practical civic endeavour, demonstrating the efficacy of voluntary initiative. 'Corowa', we have been told recently, 'is the story of the triumph of engaged citizens over doubt, apathy and entrenched resistance.'<sup>10</sup> It has an intimacy and tangibility lacking in the older account of compromise, negotiation and constitutional minutiae. It speaks to the contemporary preference for popular participation over the veneration of those remote progenitors, the Federal Fathers. In 1993, the Corowa Shire Council, Golf Club, RSL, Men's and Ladies' Bowling Clubs, and other local community organisations and businesses, held their National Federation Festival with military demonstrations, brass and pipe band performances, corroboree and barbeque, sky diving, helicopter rides, Koori fashion display, historical re-enactment, tractor pull, tug-of-war, grand parade (with a Tim Fischer \$1000 float award), tennis tournament, rowing regatta, bush tucker buffet, rock and country music concert, and church services, all under the patronage of Elizabeth Windsor.<sup>11</sup>

It is not yet clear how the Commonwealth itself will mark the federal centenary. As the experience of the Bicentenary demonstrated, such anniversaries call forth a particular kind of public spectacle and diverse kinds of public remembrance that are not easy to control. In its search for an inclusive, uncontentious form of celebration, the Australian Bicentennial Authority merely drew attention to competing claims. Witness the official selection of 200 Greats, carefully chosen to accord with contemporary sensibilities. It gave us sportsmen and women, but not scientists; celebrities but few intellectuals; Dame Enid Lyons but not her husband Joe, who after all was the prime minister; some non-anglophones but not enough to satisfy the multiculturalists; token Aboriginals who could hardly appease the wrath of those who thought 1788 not an occasion to celebrate. It is unsurprising that the Commonwealth Parliament declined the offer of a memorial sculpture to the 200 Greats; or that the unwanted artefact still lacks a home.

But public culture abhors a vacuum, and we can expect the approaching anniversary of the formation of the Commonwealth to call forth its own birthday ceremonies, just as they did in 1951. While the final form of this program has yet to emerge, it is a fair bet that Corowa will figure prominently for its popular symbolism. Already the city of Bendigo is assiduously

---

<sup>9</sup> See the cautionary remarks of Brian de Garis, 'How popular was the popular federation movement?' *Papers on Parliament*, no. 21, December 1993, pp. 101–118.

<sup>10</sup> *Age*, 26 January 1993.

<sup>11</sup> *Corowa January 1993: National Federation Festival, Friday 22 – Sunday 24 January 1993*, Program leaflet.

promoting Sir John Quick as the real Federal Father, and Geoffrey Blainey has grouped him with Lalor, Deakin and Curtin as one of our few genuine national heroes.<sup>12</sup>

How, then, should the events at Corowa be remembered? I want to revisit the Conference and its attendant circumstances in order to draw out some aspects that invite consideration.

The form of the gathering is itself instructive. It lasted just two days, the Monday and Tuesday of 31 July and 1 August 1893. On the Monday the delegates barely had time to open their proceedings and transact preliminary business before they adjourned to meet representatives of the New South Wales and Victorian governments. Yet even that brief opening session saw a squabble among the Riverina branches over the best site for their local headquarters, a squabble that echoed the earlier rivalry between Albury and the western townships over the location of the Conference.<sup>13</sup>

The New South Wales party, led by William Lyne, the Minister of Public Works, arrived at 1 p.m. on a special train which travelled on the newly opened railway line, from Sydney, via Culcairn, to Corowa. After lunch, they crossed the bridge over the river to Wahgunyah in order to welcome the Victorians, who also came up by train, led by the premier, James Patterson. With him was a large party of 62 delegates and visitors, the ageing Leader of the Opposition, Sir Graham Berry; young Alexander Peacock, the president of the Australian Natives Association and already famous for his deafening kookaburra laugh; William Maloney, flamboyant socialist and Member of the Legislative Assembly, and Quick. They made their way back over the river to the Globe Hotel, where Patterson and Berry responded to Lyne's welcome.

In the evening there was a public meeting in the Oddfellows Hall, where Patterson proposed and Lyne seconded the resolution 'That in the opinion of this meeting the best interests and present and future prosperity of the Australian colonies will be promoted by their early federation.' Further resolutions at a similar level of generality were moved and carried by general acclaim until the New South Wales radical E.W. O'Sullivan and the Victorian socialist Dr Maloney proposed:

That while approving of federation, this meeting desires to state that the only federation which would be acceptable to the people of Australia would be one of a democratic country, embodying one man one vote and the direct expression of the will of the people.

This was disconcertingly specific and both speakers were repeatedly interrupted as they spoke to their proposal. Patterson deprecated its contentious nature and appealed to O'Sullivan and his 'dear little friend' to withdraw the motion. O'Sullivan obliged over the protests of Maloney.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Special issue of the *Bendigo Advertiser*, 23 September, entitled 'Birthplace of a Nation'; and Blainey, 'In Praise of John Quick', *Herald* (Melbourne) 2 January 1986, reprinted in *Blainey, Eye on Australia: Speeches and Essays of Geoffrey Blainey*, Schwartz Books, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 55–8.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Pringle, 'The Workings of the Federation Movement in New South Wales 1891–1899: The Role of Parliament and Public Opinion', M. A. thesis, Macquarie University, 1969, p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> *Age, Argus, Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1893.

The conference proper resumed in the Corowa courthouse at 10 a.m. the following morning with depleted numbers. Lyne had returned to Sydney on the Monday evening, Patterson before breakfast in order to attend a budget session of the Victorian Parliament. Garran and Peacock initiated the formal business by moving ‘That in the opinion of this Conference the best interests and the present and future prosperity of the Australian colonies will be promoted by their early union under the Crown ...’ That last phrase, ‘under the Crown’, again provoked Maloney. He declared Australia was marching towards a republic. Amid cries of ‘No, no’, ‘Question’ and ‘Chair’, the chairman called him to order. ‘If that sort of question ... was not allowable’, Maloney persisted, ‘he would say that he trusted the federation of Australia would go forward and bring about a civilisation that would wipe out poverty from our midst.’ One or two other delegates ventured to make remarks on the same lines but were not allowed to proceed. Another Labor man wanted the conference to endorse the principle of one man one vote, but he was ruled out of order. The original motion was put and carried.<sup>15</sup>

Then came Quick with a resolution embodying the aims and objects of the Federation League. He immediately put the emphasis on popular initiative: ‘The main principle is that the cause should be advocated by the citizen and not merely by politicians.’ Indeed, even before that fateful interruption, ‘Words, words, words—can’t we do something?’, which led to the short adjournment and his impromptu additional resolution, Quick was talking of an Australian Congress constituted by popularly elected delegates as a means of breaking the deadlock. D’Esterre Taylor went further: ‘He ventured to say that if the present Conference were a Parliament, Federation would, ere it rose, be an accomplished fact.’<sup>16</sup>

The Conference then adjourned for lunch and it was during this break, claimed D’Esterre Taylor, that he learned Quick intended to introduce a new resolution. He said afterwards that he approached Quick and Peacock as they drafted that resolution and insisted that he should be associated with it since it was based on his ideas. Again according to him, Quick agreed that he could second the resolution, but then deliberately held it back until a prior engagement forced its rightful owner to leave Corowa at 2.35 that afternoon.<sup>17</sup>

The only other difficulty arose when the president of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce proposed the immediate abolition of all restrictions on intercolonial trade as a precondition of federation. A number of delegates objected that this proposition introduced a partisan note and that its adoption would be taken as an expression of free trade rather than federal sentiment. Eventually an amended version of the motion was adopted that called on the colonial parliaments to assimilate their tariffs preparatory to the creation of a customs union. This concluded the formal proceedings, which ended with three cheers for federation and three more for ‘Her Majesty Queen Victoria’. In the evening some delegates attended a further public meeting to hear Peacock expound the scheme of federation as drafted by the Sydney Convention. Others made their way home.

---

<sup>15</sup> *Age*, 2 August 1893, *Argus*, 3 August 1893; *Official Report of the Federation Conference held in the Courthouse Corowa on Monday 31 July and Tuesday 1 August*, James C. Leslie, Corowa, 1893.

<sup>16</sup> *Official Report*, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> See note 7 above. Reports of the conference do not record the time Quick introduced his resolution, but its place in the *Official Report* suggests it was mid-afternoon.

Those who took the railway south to Melbourne skirted the town of Shepparton, where a mechanic named Joseph Furphy was working on a long and ‘loosely federated’ novel that eventually ran to more than a thousand pages. Set in the Riverina and northern Victoria, *Such is Life* gestures at the realism and fatalism its author undermines. Describing himself as ‘half bushman and half bookworm’, he blends the demotic with self-conscious displays of pedantry.<sup>18</sup> Taking as his motto ‘temper, democratic, bias, offensively Australian’, he celebrates the richness of possibilities in irony and comedy, twists and turns, digressions and false leads. Nothing is quite what it seems on these grassy plains. So also at Corowa, we have a form of theatre in which the characters assume changing identities and speak in different tongues as they manoeuvre for advantage.

Take first of all those cryptic exchanges between Dr Maloney and the other delegates. Maloney was an interloper, a socialist, a feminist, a companion of Tom Roberts in his early *plein air* days, an Old Scotch Collegian elected to Parliament by the votes of the railway workers of West Melbourne, and a founder of the Social Democratic League. The terms he introduced to proceedings at Corowa, one man one vote, the direct expression of the will of the people and the coming republic, alluded to events in Sydney just four weeks earlier when the Australasian Federation League was formally established. That meeting on the evening of Monday 3 July was orchestrated by Barton. It was held in the Sydney Town Hall and chaired by the Lord Mayor. But a large part of the audience, estimated at between 2,000 and 3,000, consisted of supporters of a new political movement, the Labour Electoral League, which already looked on the terms of the proposed federation with considerable suspicion.

Even before the Lord Mayor took the chair, they foreshadowed an amendment to Barton’s resolution, ‘That it is expedient to advance the cause of Australian federation by an organisation of citizens owning no class distinction or party influence, and using its best energies to assist parliamentary action.’ When they established their right to speak, the president of the South Sydney Labor Electoral League, W.G. Higgs, moved the amendment:

That it is expedient to advance the cause of Australian democracy by an organisation using its best energies to establish Australian Federation on the following basis:

1. That the colonies federating shall form themselves into a democratic republic to be called the United States of Australia.
2. That all laws necessary for the peace, order and good government of the republic shall be made by a Federal Parliament consisting of only one chamber.
3. That the Federal Laws shall provide for
  - (a) One Man One Vote throughout each State
  - (b) the Nationalisation of all Land

---

<sup>18</sup> Furphy quoted in John Barnes, *The Order of Things: a Life of Joseph Furphy*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1990, p. 221.



(c) the Abolition of all Legislative Councils and the Substitution of the Referendum

(d) the total exclusion of all Asiatics and other aliens whose standard of living and habits of life are not equal to our own, and whose entering into competition with Australian wage-earners is a direct menace to the national welfare.

Higgs was supported by George Black, a Labour member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly and leading figure in both the Australian Socialist and Republican League, and by the young orator of the Australian Socialist League and future premier, William Holman. When the amendment was put to a show of hands, the reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald* estimated it was carried by a margin of two to one. The chairman announced it narrowly lost (he said he noticed a number of people with both arms in the air), hastily pushed through the constitution of the Australasian Federation League and declared the meeting closed. The socialists then took the platform and carried a motion of censure against the Lord Mayor before the police arrived and cleared the chamber.<sup>19</sup>

The organisers of Corowa were determined to have no repetition of such nonsense. Maloney was present as a representative of the Melbourne Protection, Liberal and Federation League; another Victorian Labour man, George Prendergast, on behalf of the Progressive Political League; but they had little support from other delegates and were speedily called to order when they attempted to introduce their alternative version of a national settlement. There were republicans and socialists present at the recapitulation of Corowa, the Bathurst People's Convention of 1896, but again they were isolated, and deliberately so since its organising secretary had cautioned the League branches against issuing credentials to Labour bodies 'in order to prevent a swamping democratic vote'.<sup>20</sup> Few Labour representatives were elected to the official Federal Convention in 1897.

Their objections to the work of the Federal Fathers—'one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown of the United Kingdom', its scope carefully limited, its parliament bicameral, the upper house safeguarding the interests of the smaller states at the expense of the principle of equal representation—were disregarded. Quick himself was wedded to this constitutional monarchical, federal, non-majoritarian outcome with its safeguards against levelling democracy. A former honorary president of the Bendigo Branch of the Amalgamated Engine-drivers' Association, he was one of the group of Liberal Protectionists in the House of Representatives who condemned the growing influence of the Federal Labor Party and welcomed the fusion of anti-Labor forces. A Deputy President of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court from 1922 to 1930, he would condemn the expansion of the Commonwealth.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July 1893, and handbill by Higgs pasted into the minutes of the Executive Committee of the Federation League, Edward Dowling Papers, vol. 40, National Library of Australia.

<sup>20</sup> Minute book of Edward Dowling Papers, National Library of Australia, cited in R.S. Parker, 'Australian federation: the influence of economic interests and political pressures', in J.J. Eastwood and F.B. Smith (eds), *Historical Studies: Selected Articles, First Series*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1964, p. 163.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Daley, 'Sir John Quick: a distinguished Australian', *Victorian Historical Magazine*, vol. 15, no. 2, December 1934, pp. 33–52.

Given that initial skirmish in Sydney, the officers of the Australasian Federal League were wary of mass meetings. The next official meeting of the League in Sydney called to elect its officers and adopt its rules, described as the first general meeting, was restricted to just forty people. Corowa was safer territory than Sydney. The townships along the Murray had long chafed against the restrictions on trade between New South Wales and Victoria, and Barton had encouraged the formation of local groups of pro-federalists in the southern province of his colony precisely to bring pressure to bear on the apathetic metropolis. The Riverina was therefore a natural venue for a carefully stage-managed event. Of the 72 delegates who met there, 41 were from the border leagues.<sup>22</sup> The remainder were all drawn from the neighbouring colonies of New South Wales and Victoria. Far from being a protonational gathering, Corowa was an attempt to resolve an ancient rivalry between just two of the six Australian colonies, whose symptoms were still apparent in the proceedings there. In his speech at the Oddfellows Hall on the Monday evening, the pugnacious Victorian Sir Graham Berry was unable to resist a dig at his northern neighbours. He recalled that there had been agreement on the need for national union for at least a decade, but ‘from that day to this, New South Wales had failed them’. The disputatious William Lyne, representing the government of New South Wales, could not let that pass. It was ‘a vicious and nasty speech’, he told the press.<sup>23</sup>

The object of the Australasian Federal League was to bridge that division. It provided a platform from which those who favoured federation could mobilise public support. It was never a mass movement, for it was dominated from the beginning by a group of enthusiasts drawn from a narrow social base. An analysis of the 126 members of its Sydney executive whose occupations and interests can be identified revealed 53 drawn principally from the professions, 39 merchants, manufacturers or with shipping interests, seventeen involved in land, building and investment companies, and 24 in insurance and banking. Of the 78 Victorian committee members whose occupations can be ascertained, there were 20 lawyers, another 20 from other professions, nine ministers of religion, fifteen in commerce, six from banking and four manufacturers.<sup>24</sup> They were exclusively male and failed utterly to connect with ferment of interest in expanding the boundaries of citizenship to take in women. They constituted a particular alliance of businessmen interested in a customs union with members of what would now be called ‘the chattering classes’, seized with a temperate nationalism.

Above all, the Federation League aimed to mobilise the people to make good the failings of the politicians. The main principle, insisted Quick at Corowa, was that the cause should be advocated by the citizen and not merely by politicians. The time was gone by when it should be merely a political question.<sup>25</sup> This was a calculated appeal to popular prejudice. The Australian colonists, having nearly four decades of experiment with representative government, were none too pleased with its results. They had widened the franchise, paid their parliamentarians, pressed their interests on the legislature, made the state serve their

---

<sup>22</sup> L.E. Fredman, ‘Quick: the Role of a Founding Father’, M. A. thesis, University of Melbourne, 1956, p. 51.

<sup>23</sup> *Age*, 1, 2 August 1893.

<sup>24</sup> A.W. Martin, ‘Economic influences in the “New Federation Movement”’, in Eastwood and Smith (eds), *Historical Studies: Selected Articles*, p. 218; Fredman, ‘Quick’, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 1893.

needs, and despised the patterns of flattery and jobbery that characterised public life. In the populist rhetoric that was so powerful, politics was a process of ignoble and divisive self-interest, the politician a professional placeman. Yet what else was Quick but a quondam and future parliamentarian?

The problem which the supporters of federation perceived in 1893, was the entanglement of their cause with the factional rivalries that operated in the colonial parliaments. When the Commonwealth Bill had been brought back from Sydney to the various legislatures, it had become the victim of opportunists who were able to seize on features that seemed to jeopardise local interests in order to garner support. In the key colony of New South Wales the premier, Henry Parkes, was assailed by his rival, George Reid, for giving away too much to the other colonies in the Commonwealth Bill. Parkes' Free Trade ministry gave way to George Dibbs' Protectionist one, yet still it proved impossible to secure passage of the Bill. Barton, who was a member of the Dibbs' ministry, promoted the idea of the Federation League as a device to exert leverage over his unsympathetic colleagues. He was able to secure the participation of a leading Free Trader, William McMillan, to broaden its appeal, though the Corowa assembly still had a strong protectionist tinge—hence its resistance to the proposal of that representative of the Melbourne Chamber of Commerce who suggested the immediate abolition of all colonial tariffs.

But there is surely something odd in Barton's insistence that this was to be a citizens' movement. As he put it when speaking in the Sydney Town Hall, there were two aspects to any issue: 'one was the view of the politician, and the other was the view of the citizen'; hence his resolution defined the League as 'an organisation of citizens owning no class distinction or party influence'. For similar reasons the rules he devised for the League restricted the proportion of members of its governing body who might be members of Parliament to two-fifths and made the introduction of political topics other than federation a ground for expulsion.<sup>26</sup> Yet he himself had called both the League and its riverine branches into being—as the secretary of the Corowa Conference described his role; he was a 'Galloper' working on behalf of General Barton to 'keep the non-commissioned officers at their work'.<sup>27</sup> And while he was not present at Corowa, for he was overseas at the time, he prepared the resolutions that occupied it until Quick's inspired deviation.

My purpose here is not to impugn Barton's motives. With Deakin, Griffiths, Inglis Clark and perhaps a few other of the Federal Fathers, he served the federal cause with singular devotion. Rather, I am struck by the way this conception of politics involves an act of ventriloquism. The politician, having impugned his calling, has to call forth a voice that can restore its legitimacy. He instates the people as a disembodied presence capable of an altruism that he and his colleagues can never achieve. The people are inscribed as citizens, owning no class distinction or party loyalty. They speak at his command and then fall silent as the business of government is subsumed into the Commonwealth that the politicians bring into being.

---

<sup>26</sup> Rules of the League are in the Minutes of the Executive Committee, Dowling Papers; see D.I. Wright, 'The Australasian Federation League in New South Wales, 1893–1899', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 57, pt 1, March 1971, pp. 58–73.

<sup>27</sup> Edward Wilson to Barton, 13 June 1893, Dowling Papers, Box 18, quoted by Pringle, 'Workings of the Federation Movement', op. cit., p. 106.

This is a remarkably attenuated conception of citizenship and politics, one whose effects are still with us today as we debate the future form of our Commonwealth. The call for the minimal republic proposes to alter the head of state without in any way changing the relationship between government and governed. The sovereignty that was once exercised by the Crown has passed to elected representatives, appointed officials, courts and tribunals that bestow our freedoms upon us and prescribe their limits. Joseph Furphy would have appreciated the irony, for had he not written, as the Corowa delegates did their work:

See where we stand—with no lack of abuses to correct, by no means now illegal but strictly legal when passed into law; not hampered by rotten tradition, nor fettered by the rusty chains of feudalism, nor blinded by racial antipathy, or religious bigotry; with earth's fairest continent beneath our feet, and heaven's bluest sky above our heads: what nation ever had such opportunity, and when?

In the portion of his manuscript published as *Rigby's Romance*, the principal character tells a Sheriff that 'You can't make men virtuous by Act of Parliament,' but the Sheriff has the last word: 'You can make men anything you please by Act of Parliament, Tom, provided that such Act is sanctioned by a preponderant moiety of the national intelligence'.<sup>28</sup> Corowa can hardly be blamed for this outcome but neither should it be celebrated for the democratic qualities it so conspicuously lacked. I offer two cheers for Corowa.

---

<sup>28</sup> The first quotation is an unpublished passage from '*Such is Life*'; the latter appeared in Chapter 32 of *Rigby's Romance*; quoted by Barnes, *Order of Things*, op. cit., pp. 236–7.

## **When Quick Met Garran: the Corowa Plan**

*Helen Irving*

The Corowa Conference came to a close ‘with cheers and congratulations at having really done something besides talk’, wrote Robert Garran many years later.<sup>1</sup> But, he added, not everyone who attended could have explained just what it was they had done. Like many achievements, Corowa’s was to be realised later, in a different forum. By the time of federation, Garran’s (and Dr Quick’s) account would enshrine the Conference as one of the key moments in the federation process; it was, Quick and Garran tell us, a turning-point where a stagnant federalist movement re-gained momentum and forged a path which was to culminate in federation’s ultimate success. The point of departure, and the key to Corowa’s triumph, was the ‘Corowa Plan’.

The Corowa Plan was, in essence, a resolution. It was moved by the representative of the Bendigo Australian Natives Association, Dr John Quick, towards the end of the two day conference. With much acclaim, the Conference resolved, unanimously:

That in the opinion of this Conference the Legislature of each Australasian colony should pass an Act providing for the election of representatives to attend a statutory convention or congress to consider and adopt a bill to establish a Federal Constitution for Australia and upon the adoption of such bill or measure it be submitted by some process of referendum to the verdict of each colony.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1958, p. 105.

*Sir John Quick, by Charles Nuttall*

Only minutes before, both Garran (on behalf of the Central Federal League), and then Quick had moved resolutions. These amounted to a rather predictable affirmation of support for federation and a commitment to working for its accomplishment. The first resolution was passed, again unanimously and with much applause. Then, with the second, a debate ensued. No doubt elated by two days of intense discussion and the enthusiastic reception of senior politicians and statesmen, a desire for action had begun to grow in the participants. With it came a feeling of dissatisfaction that the Conference was to wind up with nothing but ‘words, words, words!’ As Garran later described the scene, the reader may imagine one of those moments where the desire to avoid anti-climax leads to bold initiative: ‘the dramatic moment of change from routine to inspiration’.<sup>2</sup> At the prompting of Mr Herbert Barnett, a small committee retired for some minutes, re-emerging with Dr Quick’s motion: the Corowa Plan.

Many years after the event, in a personal but colourless account Quick says simply that he and others prepared the Plan in consultation. Together, however, Quick and Garran identify its origins more closely with Quick’s authorship. There remains still some doubt as to the original source of the proposal. Alfred Deakin’s intimate account *The Federal Story* (1944) mentions that Mr Henry D’ Esterre Taylor, Secretary of the Imperial Federation League, had suggested the popular Convention and referendum to Dr Quick in the train going up to the Conference. But, Deakin adds, ‘the same idea had probably occurred independently’ to Quick.<sup>3</sup> Someone else, almost two years after the Conference, thought it worth reminding others that Quick was not the author. In early 1895, the ‘Melbourne Correspondent’ of the *Corowa Free Press* wrote: ‘At the Corowa gathering, Dr Quick got the credit, but he is not entitled to it. The man who suggested the Federal Convention being elected by the people ... was Mr H. D’ Esterre Taylor. I am able to speak definitely on the matter.’<sup>4</sup> The correspondent describes discussions he had with Mr Taylor beforehand and his own unfortunate inability to travel up with Taylor, who went to Corowa early to ‘work up a feeling in favour of his proposal’. Whether Taylor’s contribution, assuming it was such, was overlooked because of his own reticence, or because of his commitment to Imperial rather than national federation, or for any number of other reasons, the plan was henceforth always known as Dr Quick’s Plan.

This little mystery, with its intimations of not-quite-proper behaviour, need not have arisen, even in 1895, if the real originality of the Corowa Plan had been properly recognised. Like the ‘Melbourne Correspondent’, historical memory has focused on the idea that the people (rather than the parliaments) should elect the Convention and that the Constitution should be submitted to a referendum. But the genius of the plan was rather, as Quick and Garran themselves make clear (and Garran re-affirms in a later analysis of D’ Esterre Taylor’s claim), ‘the idea of mapping out the whole process in advance by Acts of Parliament—of making statutory provision for the last step before the first step was taken.’<sup>5</sup> This meant that the colonial politicians were each able, if they wished, to set in train a definite and manageable process, one which rested upon a claim to popular support and was political

---

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Deakin, *The Federal Story*, Robertson and Mullins, Melbourne, 1944, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Melbourne Notes’, *Corowa Free Press*, February 15, 1895. I am very grateful to Dorothy Irving for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> John Quick and Robert Randolph Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1901, p. 154.

without being obviously partisan. It is not, however, the sort of political achievement that is easy to recognise or admire.

In the political culture of the 1890s the ever-familiar character of intransigent party rivalries and public disdain for politicians as a type, were well-entrenched. The federal movement of the early 1890s was a politicians' movement. It had begun with great promise and had produced two conventions and a draft federal constitution. This constitution was to have been put before each colonial parliament for debate leading to adoption, but changes in the composition of governments, obstruction and conflict between politicians (especially in New South Wales), had seen the draft lie abandoned and the federal movement sullied by 'politics'. For federation to come about, it is certain that the parliamentary process would have to be avoided at least at the (new) beginning. This became obvious to many observers: 'The reception which the Bill of the 1891 Convention had received was sufficient warning that no merely parliamentary authority would be held sufficient to prepare a Federal Constitution', said Alfred Deakin.<sup>6</sup> By the time of the movement's culmination in federation itself, it was the *democratic* character of the Constitution—meaning its endorsement by the people and not the politicians – that was fixed in the public mind. Against this claim to democracy Dr Quick's name was readily mentioned. Along with other leading figures of the federation movement, Quick received a knighthood for his services in the Queen's Honours on 1 January 1901.

If all that Quick had done was to move his (or another's) motion at Corowa in 1893, the attribution of achievement would certainly be misplaced. But a motion may remain no more than a motion. As Quick saw immediately, if anything were to come of it, more action had to be taken. The idea for the first step came, he tells us, from an editorial in the *Argus* soon after the Corowa Conference.<sup>7</sup> Who, the editor asked, would draft the enabling bills for the colonial parliaments? Quick, both a former politician and a lawyer, took this upon himself. By early 1894 he had presented to the Central Committee of the Australasian Federal League his 'Australian Federal Congress Bill'. It was adopted, slightly modified, and Quick was to spend most of that year meeting with politicians and lobbying for his Bill. He made particular headway with George Reid, who was about assume the premiership of New South Wales and who had hitherto been unenthusiastic about federation, to the point of obstructing its progress in his colony. As everyone recognised at the time, the support of the premier of the 'Mother Colony' was crucial if federation were ever to be achieved.

Neither Reid nor Henry Parkes had attended the Corowa Conference, although they had been invited. Perhaps among their other reasons the desire to avoid each other may have figured in their minds. The two men were mutually and publicly hostile, and this hostility had at the very least contributed towards Reid's reluctance to support the earlier federation movement which was so identified with Parkes. Quick's approach represented not only a new start for the movement, but the chance for Reid to see it taken out of the hands of Henry Parkes at a time, said Alfred Deakin, 'when local reactions were rendering it possible for him to reappear as a popular leader.'<sup>8</sup> While the Corowa Conference met, and then as Quick wooed Reid,

---

<sup>6</sup> Deakin, *Federal Story*, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> L.E. Fredman, (ed.), *Sir John Quick's Notebook*, Reg. C. Pognooski, Newcastle, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.



Parkes made one final attempt to regain the leadership of the movement. But it was too late. The Corowa Plan was on the table.

By late 1894 George Reid was ready to put the Plan into action. He took advantage of the sixth session of that rather worn and lame body, the Federal Council, to be held in Hobart in late January, 1895. This meeting would bring together, among others, the premiers of the four member colonies. Although NSW did not belong to the Council, Reid's own presence could of course be guaranteed and the remaining premier Charles Kingston, from South Australia, was sympathetic to the plan. Indeed, Kingston and Reid stopped off in Melbourne on their way to Hobart and, with the Victorian Premier George Turner, addressed a large meeting of the Victorian Federal League. The Premiers' Conference, although relatively informal, was scheduled to overlap with the Federal Council and it immediately overshadowed the latter. The intrusion did not go unnoticed. Mr Byrnes, the Queensland Attorney-General, was particularly strident in his views; he and others, he said, 'had come a long distance to do business, and not to be thwarted or overshadowed by a meeting of individuals elsewhere. He ... declined to turn the discussions in the Council to suit the Premiers.'<sup>9</sup> Speculation about the Federal Council's purpose was expressed in the press; would the Federal Council raise the topic of federation or would they attempt to avoid it?

They had almost certainly not intended to debate federation but they eventually did, beginning with a motion that the dormant 1891 draft Constitution be put before the colonial parliaments as soon as possible. The motion caused a stir, especially with the Victorian delegates who were convinced that it was intentionally antagonistic to the Premiers' Conference. No doubt they were right. But if the principal aim of the Federal Council was to circumvent the popular process envisaged in the Corowa Plan, they were too late. The premiers, already armed with Quick's draft Bill, concluded with a resolution themselves. They would pass enabling acts in their respective colonies, so that ten delegates each could be chosen to meet in a Convention, draft a federal constitution, have it considered separately by each colonial parliament, re-convene the Convention to consider proposed amendments, and have it put to the people before submitting it to the Crown.

This resolution followed the Corowa Plan almost exactly, except for the commitment to individual parliamentary scrutiny of the draft constitution in the middle of the process. This extra step (borrowed from the Federal League) represented a stroke of further political ingenuity; arguments that the original Corowa Plan did not allow the separate colonies to consider a proposed federal scheme in the light of their own distinct interests, could be met. Despite Henry Parkes' view that it was 'preposterous to talk of a mob of people making a constitution' the plan took off.<sup>10</sup>

The popular involvement it inscribed was twofold. First, the people would elect the delegates; the draft bill would then be put to a vote in a popular referendum. It should be noted in passing, that the abstract idea of 'the people' referred almost exclusively to male people; women had gained the vote in South Australia between the Corowa Conference and the Premiers' Conference, but their absence from the category of 'people' in all other colonies does not appear to have excited contemporary comment.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Courier* (Brisbane), 1 February 1895.

<sup>10</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 4 February 1895.

Critics such as Parkes aside, there was a widespread conviction expressed in four colonies at least that it was both necessary and right for the people to choose the delegates. And although the Brisbane *Courier* raised the question of whether the ratifying authority for a Constitution should be each parliament or ‘the foreign expedient of a referendum’, it soon decided that the referendum was not so foreign after all (it was found to have been used in ‘other Anglo-Saxon countries’) and it was suited, it seemed, to this exceptional case.<sup>11</sup>

But we must not overlook the two colonies where the first role of the people was not embraced. This at least puts into perspective the homage so readily paid to the Corowa Plan and to its democratic offspring, the elected Convention. In Hobart, the Queensland Premier Hugh Nelson was placed in an awkward position, with his Attorney-General leading the attack on the Premiers’ Conference and the Corowa scheme from the Federal Council meeting. Nelson prevaricated, denied any conflict between the two meetings, expressed vague doubts about the value of the referendum, but did extract an agreement from the other premiers that each colony would be free to choose its Convention delegates as it wished. John Forrest, the West Australian Premier, was unequivocal. He was at first unwilling even to attend the Premiers’ Conference and then, having decided to come, remained immovably opposed to the popular election of delegates.

These two positions translated into a part of the history of the Constitution’s evolution. Queensland never managed to get the Enabling Bill before its Parliament and thus remained unrepresented at the 1897 and 1898 Conventions. This was something of an irony since Samuel Griffith, former Premier and ultimately Chief Justice of Queensland, had been recognised as the principal drafter of the 1891 Constitution. While Griffith’s draft served as the point of departure for the Convention, no fellow Queenslander was represented during its transformation into the final Bill. The Western Australian Parliament chose its own delegates without reference to the people and agreed to hold a referendum on the Bill only at the last minute in 1900, after the British Parliament had already passed the Constitution Act. Behind their departure from the process adopted elsewhere, these colonies shared a particular problem. Both had significant regional tensions, with a large section of the colony outside the capital hostile to the incumbent parliamentarians. The premiers had good reason to fear that a popular election might produce a different result from that achieved by the choice of their parliaments.

The Premiers’ Conference and the Federal Council were not the only inter-colonial meetings in Hobart during that week at the end of January through to early February 1895. The colonial Postal Conference was in session as well, and an Australian National Association special meeting took place, addressed by Alfred Deakin, who was in Hobart as a member of the Federal Council. There, Deakin delighted his audience with his descriptions of existing intercolonial restrictions as ‘the crutches with which they attempted to walk after they had outgrown them’, and the 1891 Constitution as ‘a splendid attempt’, but like Robinson Crusoe’s canoe, ‘the largest that he built—when he built it the difficulty was he could not get it into the water.’<sup>12</sup>

Having recovered from the sea-sickness they had all experienced crossing Bass Strait, the various visitors and their Tasmanian counterparts got together for a picnic with the

---

<sup>11</sup> *Courier* (Brisbane), 29 January, 2 February 1895.

<sup>12</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart), 29 January 1895.

Tasmanian Treasurer at Fenton Forest on 5 February, and an evening ball at Government House. Whether or not they spoke about federation is not recorded. It was 'The Season' in Hobart, when members of Australia's middle class regularly made their way to Tasmania, to avoid the extremes of the mainland summer, and picnics and balls were abundant.<sup>13</sup> Even then, it must have been a memorable week for Hobart, with the country's premiers, and other senior colonial politicians and public servants arriving together, filling available venues and sharing social functions. Dr Quick, although absent from Hobart, must have been gratified too. He had seen the Corowa Plan pass from an apparently impromptu resolution into an almost nation-wide political commitment in a matter of eighteen months.

Quick had also met Garran. Their later accounts of 'this memorable occasion', as Quick described it, are somewhat reserved and formal. More than sixty years after the Corowa Conference Garran was to write of Quick's dour and meticulous personality as if still in awe of the older man. 'I soon found out', said Garran, 'what it was ... to be the junior partner of a steam roller.'<sup>14</sup> But their collaboration in the massive work of 1901, which bears their name, signals their mutual respect as well as the significance of this meeting. It also points to the greater force the federation movement must have gained at that time, with the combined strengths of these two men, one young and energetic in New South Wales and the other well-established and experienced, in Victoria.

When Quick was elected to the Federation Convention in 1897, Garran became secretary to the Convention's drafting committee. In that same year, Garran had published *The Coming Commonwealth*, a historical survey of the world's federal constitutions and Australia's federal prospects, which attracted much attention and was read extensively by the Convention delegates. This, along with his experience of the federal movement, qualified him to work with Quick on their *Annotated Constitution*, a book which every student and practitioner of law, of federalism and judicial review, knows to this day as the bible of constitutional commentary. Doubtless, as fellow members of the federal movement, Quick would have met Garran sooner or later. But it is another, lasting achievement of the Corowa Conference that they met sooner rather than later.

---

<sup>13</sup> Henry Reynolds very kindly pointed this out to me.

<sup>14</sup> Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, op. cit., p. 137.

## **Loading the Gun— Corowa's Role in the Federation Debate**

*David Headon*

I grew up in 1950s Australia. My postage-stamp of the world was a cosy little bush suburb called Newport, squeezed in between Pittwater and the Pacific, on the northern beaches of Sydney. To use Mark Twain's phrase, it was 'a heavenly place for a boy'. Near the Newport pub of old there was only a small post office, a mixed business that my father ran and, across from us on the hill, a corrugated iron shed about fifty or sixty yards in length. A huge garage, all grease and petrol fumes. It was there, on my way home from school, for well over a year, that I used to pester the garage owner for those Menzies-era treasures. Icons really. Atlantic cards. Do you remember them? You used to put each series into a thirty-two card album. A generation of Australian kids glued every item with utmost care.

One series of cards dealt with Australian history. I well recall that the hardest one to get, it could cost you up to twenty or more cards when you swapped for it, was 'Fort Denison'—Pinchgut, that stone oddity in Sydney Harbour built to repel the Russians in the 1850s. Much easier to obtain was the card that had a portrait of Sir Henry Parkes. The heading on the back I remember exactly: 'Henry Parkes: Father of Federation'. Despite considerable academic reassessment in recent decades, this affectionate description of Parkes has maintained its popularity in the community at large. The 'Father of Federation'. In her poem, 'Old Henry Parkes', Mary Gilmore was conspicuously into the business of myth-making when she wrote about

Old Henry Parkes,  
In his big top hat,  
His lion-like head,  
Eyes like a sword,  
Blazing in a thought,  
Blazing at affront,

Blazing for a word --  
But, in-drawn, still, and cold as the ice,  
as vision-held he sat, and saw  
Commonwealth and Empire, brotherly and brother,  
This State and that State, all linked together.  
For Parkes had a vision,  
And the vision came true;  
And Pitt Street, Macquarie Street,  
Never shall forget  
That great old man coming down the way,  
Coming into Sydney like a king! <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Old Henry Parkes' in Mary Gilmore, *Selected Verse*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1948, pp. 169–171. I am indebted to Kenneth Wiltshire, *Tenterfield Revisited—Reforming Australia's System of Government for 2001*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld., 1991. Wiltshire begins the booklet (a reprinted lecture) with a quotation from the poem.

Henry Parkes was born in 1815 at Stoneleigh near Coventry in England. He arrived in New South Wales as a twenty-four year-old assisted migrant in 1839. He was a toymaker, as well as being a very ambitious young man, determined and well-read in radical working-class literature. By 1850, Parkes had begun his own newspaper in Sydney, the highly influential *Empire*. He would later become Premier of New South Wales, and by the end of the 1880s, he was widely regarded as the leading advocate of federation. In the years before his death in 1896, many people still viewed him as the senior citizen of the expanding federation movement.

The Parkes story—his elevation to the pantheon of Australian heroes, to eventual Atlantic card fame—appears, for many Australians today, to be relatively straightforward, just like that of the federation movement itself in the 1890s. Parkes: the migrant who revels in his New World home, works hard, makes good, ultimately leads the continent’s oldest colony and paves the way for federation. Similarly, the course of federation seems uncomplicated. It was the movement, to re-assign the words of former Prime Minister, Paul Keating, that Australia had to have.

However, in neither case, Parkes nor federation, is the actual story nearly so simple. Parkes in fact continues to puzzle contemporary historians. As early as the 1850s, that brilliant yet tragic native-born republican Daniel Henry Deniehy, a man destined for elevation in the coming Australian republic, anticipated the Parkes of later years when he wrote to his friend, the Reverend John Dunmore Lang, that in Parkes there was too much not of the ‘English man *in*, but of *Englishmanism* about him’.<sup>2</sup> Currency lad Deniehy discerned that working-class Englishman Parkes could never escape his background. He would always culturally cringe, tug his forelock to the Crown, even a hemisphere away in a New World land. And how do we reconcile the behaviour of a man who, in later life, as Manning Clark put it, wanted to be ‘a Moses leading the Australian people into the Promised Land of federation’, yet could be accused by the *Bulletin*, Australia’s most popular periodical of the time, of having as his sole motivation the accumulation of Imperial honours?<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Alfred Deakin, a key player in the federation story and ultimately the second prime minister of Australia, wrote in a letter that Mr. Parkes ‘had always in his mind’s eye his own portrait as that of a great man, and constantly adjusted himself to it.’ To compound matters, Parkes was a monumentally incompetent money-manager throughout his life. This led some unkind contemporary critics to label him, not the ‘father of Federation’, but the ‘bankrupt from Balmain’.

The Grand Narrative of Federation, too, has its curiosities. There is a significant gap between the myth—what is lodged now in the nation’s unreliable memory—and the reality. One reason for this is that some of the leading federalists of the time, in subsequent books, tended to portray the federation movement, as R. Norris observed in *The Emergent Commonwealth* (1975), ‘as carried forward on the crest of an irresistible wave of national enthusiasm, and the Commonwealth as launched on a high tide of popular approval.’<sup>4</sup> Subsequent school

---

<sup>2</sup> Letter to John Dunmore Lang, 6 June, 1854, MS 869, Mitchell Library.

<sup>3</sup> See C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, vol. 5, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1981, pp. 31–2. I am indebted to Prof. Clark for the information which follows in this paragraph.

<sup>4</sup> R. Norris, *The Emergent Commonwealth: Australian Federation, Expectations & Fulfilment 1889–1910*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1975, p. 31.

textbooks confirmed this triumphal image. Yet for most of the 1890s, federation was far from a certainty to succeed. If the present group of hardened Darwin bookmakers were fielding odds, back then, I suspect federation would have been about 12-1 in 1891, then out to 20-1 in 1892, the worst year of the 1890s depression; back in to 10s, maybe 8s, after Corowa; fractionally shorter after the Bathurst 'People's Convention' in 1896; probably 3-1 after the 1897-8 Convention; and still 6-4, or better, before the first referendum went to the voters of each state.

Federation momentum steadily increased after Corowa, certainly. But an irresistible wave? Not at all. As Professor Kenneth Wiltshire put it in a 1990 lecture:

If the River Murray could talk it would whisper the story of Federation, a story of the artery of a continent which, through a stroke of a pen in the Colonial Office in London, became the border of three of the fundamental colonies and the scene of wrangles and disputes over riparian rights, inter-colonial poaching of business, incompatible duck-shooting seasons, the depredations of the fruit fly, and what was described as the 'lion in the path' of Federation which federalists must either slay or be slain by—the issue of inter-colonial tariffs which made Victoria protectionist and New South Wales free trade. Those vital pieces of our European heritage, the old customs houses on the Murray River, stand today as sentinels reminding us of how visionaries travelling on the path to nationhood can be slowed by invisible barriers of parochialism, economic self-interest and fear of the future.<sup>5</sup>

To understand the important role of the Corowa conference is first to appreciate the half dozen or so years preceding it, during which the likes of Henry Parkes, Alfred Deakin, Edmund Barton, Charles Kingston and John Quick made a concerted effort to get the federation issue on the agendas of the separate colonies. There had, of course, been murmurings for many decades. Both Deniehy and Lang, committed republicans, canvassed the idea in the 1850s (after Earl Grey, Secretary of State to the Colonies, had toyed with it in the late 1840s). Henry Parkes raised it with considerable enthusiasm at an inter-colonial conference in Melbourne in March 1867, during which the concept of a Federal Council was suggested. But it was not until 1887, when Alfred Deakin returned from the Colonial Conference in London, that interest intensified. At that conference, the British Government appointed a Major-General James Bevan Edwards to report on the state of Australian colonial defences. Subsequently, Edwards claimed that federation of the colonies was the only way of preventing foreign invasion.

Parkes, by then in his middle seventies, saw opportunity in Edwards' report. He began a federation push by confirming the support of Victorian premier Duncan Gillies, and then he wooed the other premiers. His celebrated October 1889 speech, delivered at Tenterfield in northern New South Wales and in which he proposed a conference of politicians to appoint a convention of leading men from all the colonies, is one of Australian federation's more important moments. 'The great question', Parkes told his Tenterfield audience, is 'whether

---

<sup>5</sup> Wiltshire, *Tenterfield Revisited*, op. cit., p. 2.

the time [has] come for the creation in this Australian continent of an Australian Government ...<sup>6</sup> He passionately quoted contemporary poet James Brunton Stephens for support:

Not yet her day. How long 'not yet?'  
There comes the flush of violet!  
And heavenward faces, all aflame  
With sanguine imminence of morn,  
Wait but the sun-kiss to proclaim  
The day of the Dominion born.

Parkes thrived on visionary rhetoric. Yet the colonial rank-and-file in his audience were not yet ready to assist in the birth of the infant Dominion.

Indeed, for many federalists the aftermath of the National Australasian Convention, held at Sydney's Parliament House in March/April 1891 and intended by its organisers to be the catalyst for a federated Australia, was utterly depressing. In his capacity as President of the Convention, Parkes talked of 'One People, One Destiny';<sup>7</sup> however, he also demanded that his adopted country 'remain side by side with that dear old England that we all love so well.' The *Bulletin* was disgusted with this apparent hypocrisy, but theirs was almost certainly a minority view. Australia continued to be deeply provincial. One problem with the 1891 Sydney Convention was that the Draft Bill to Constitute the Commonwealth of Australia was perceived by some in the media to be the product of scheming politicians, striving for personal advantage. An atmosphere of distrust and confusion in the colonies was intensified by the Barcaldine shearers' strike, the defeat in New South Wales of the Parkes government in October 1891, and the deepening depression and drought of 1892. At one of the 1891 Convention dinners, New South Wales Governor Lord Carrington remarked that 'Federation is in the air.'<sup>8</sup> Cynics suggested, post-Convention, that it was not in the air so much as in the clouds. Henry Parkes would later refer to this period as one in which the 'sham actors in the Federation comedy' took to the stage. More memorably, Sir John Robertson, whose best political days and more accurate social prophecies lay well behind him, would say that 'Federation is as dead as Julius Caesar.'<sup>9</sup>

Federalists used this remark as a motivational strategy. They argued that just as Caesar's ghost reappeared, powerful and omnipresent, so federation would re-emerge from the setbacks of 1891 and 1892. Edmund Barton, along with a number of adherents including the young and highly energetic constitutional lawyer Robert Garran, determined to renew the federation movement. People power was wanted. Enter, into the federation narrative, the border town of Corowa. Barton paid a missionary visit to Corowa and Albury in December 1892 to address public meetings in both towns. As Corowa's own Edward Wilson would later write:

---

<sup>6</sup> Clark, *History of Australia*, op. cit., p. 26. Clark also quotes the lines of James Brunton Stephens.

<sup>7</sup> J.A. La Nauze, *The Making of the Australian Constitution*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1972, p. 34; Clark, *History of Australia*, op. cit., p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> See J.C. Neild, 'Obstacles to federation', *Cosmos Magazine*, 29 December 1894, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> John Quick and Robert Randolph Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1901, p. 150.



[Barton] threw out a hint that a League, to be formed among the people on both sides of the Murray on strictly non-political lines, would undoubtedly prove of great assistance to the movement ...<sup>10</sup>

In January 1893, Corowa and Albury acted on Barton's promptings and both formed Federation Leagues. By the end of May there were fifteen branches in the towns of the Murray valley. The reasons for this apparently sudden burst of enthusiasm are not hard to find. As John Quick and Robert Garran suggest, in their authoritative *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth* (1901):

The general stagnation of trade set everyone enquiring for himself into the causes which clogged the wheels; and the folly of interprovincial barriers became increasingly apparent. Federation began to appeal to the pocket as well as to the heart.<sup>11</sup>

The border towns, in particular, were feeling the burden of intercolonial duties. They demanded action. So, in June 1893, the Berrigan Federation League suggested a meeting of delegates with the express intention of more effectively representing the views of the people in all colonies, and of those in their own area specifically. The idea was enthusiastically embraced and Corowa selected as the meeting place, on the basis of its keen Federation League branch, its central location and its accessibility by road or rail.

Albury was far from happy with the decision, especially when one Corowa correspondent prefaced a newspaper report with the assertion that Corowa would '[become] in time the capital and seat of Government of Australia. ...'<sup>12</sup> The editorial pages of the *Albury Border Post and Wodonga Advertiser* practically choked with indignation. On 1 August, the leader writer concluded his column in desperate search for the moral high ground: 'I can fervently promise Corowa that they have no rival in Albury in a scheme for entertaining guzzling politicians ...'<sup>13</sup> Two weeks after the conference, the *Post* was still suffering the effects of Corowa's propaganda success. No nearby town was safe from the fury of its editor. Unfortunate Berrigan received a particularly ill-humoured appraisal:

There's Berrigan, of course. Perhaps Berrigan has higher aims. It has the stupendous advantage of being unapproachable by rail, and an enemy would be at the further disadvantage of losing its way in trying to find it.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> James C. Leslie, *Official Report of the Federation Conference, Proceedings and Debates*, Free Press Office, Corowa, 1893, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Quick and Garran, *Annotated Constitution*, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Albury Border Post and Wodonga Advertiser*, 1 August 1893.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 1 August 1893.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 15 August 1893.

Sister towns in the Murray region they might have been, but when it came to the prospect of social and economic advantage, solidarity disintegrated completely.

Despite Albury's scarcely concealed petulance, the historic 1893 Conference was Corowa's day, or days, in the sun. The so-called 'popular' phase of the federation movement unofficially began when some seventy-four delegates from Federation Leagues, the Australian Natives Association, and other bodies such as the Cobram Progress Association and the Imperial Federation League, headed to Corowa for the two-day event. John Quick would later write that the 'main principle was that the cause should be advocated by the citizens and not merely the politicians.'<sup>15</sup> Federation would only be achieved, he said, 'by an organization of citizens owning no class distinction or party influence.' Edmund Barton put the issue more bluntly: 'Oh if the thing could be kept clear from dirty fingers.'<sup>16</sup> He was specifically alluding to politicians, for the popular image of politicians of the time was one replete with greed, corruption and connivance. Privately, however, Barton had another agenda entirely. Just four weeks before the Corowa gathering, he convened a meeting of federalists in Sydney with the intention of forming a central Federation League. There was a huge turn out, made the more lively by the presence of the Social Democratic League and numerous labour representatives. A republican motion, said by the conservative *Sydney Morning Herald* to have been carried by a 2-1 majority, was declared lost by the chairman, the Lord Mayor of Sydney. Chaos ensued and police eventually broke up the meeting. Robert Garran many years later would recall that the republicans were routed. Contemporary press reports suggest otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

In choosing Corowa, federalists were keen to ensure that there would be no repetition of the anarchic scenes in Sydney. No effort was spared to stop the emergence of levelling, labour resolutions. Corowa had to be very carefully stage-managed. And so it was, beginning with the agreement that the conference should be conducted 'free of party or political influences'. A number of observations can be made on the Official Report of the Conference (published in 1893 by James C. Leslie, of the 'Free Press' Office in Sanger Street, Corowa): first, the motions passed on the evening of 31 July and the morning of 1 August were of the kind intended by the organisers, routinely supporting 'the early federation' of the Australian colonies. Second, border town prejudices surfaced almost immediately as local League delegates sought to make their town the headquarters of a Border district of the League. The idea was eventually abandoned amidst competing interests. Third, when the spectre of the Sydney debacle only a few weeks earlier threatened to appear, courtesy of a speech by New South Wales MLA E.W. O'Sullivan in which he envisaged a 'wider and greater Federation of the English-speaking people' and, in Australia, 'a Republican form of government', it was summarily dealt with and dismissed.<sup>18</sup> Victorian MLA and socialist Dr. Maloney supported O'Sullivan with the claim that Australia was 'marching towards a republic', but he too was ruled out of order. Some of the 'fathers of Federation', it seems, were determined to exclude socialism and republicanism from their Commonwealth. Fourth, it was ironic that a politician, A.J. Peacock, set the tone of the proceedings when he demanded that federation

---

<sup>15</sup> Norris, *Emergent Commonwealth*, op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Albury Border Post and Wodonga Advertiser*, 8 August 1893.

<sup>17</sup> For further details, see Stuart Macintyre's contribution to this volume.

<sup>18</sup> Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit., pp. 20-1.

'be made a people's question'. Left to the politicians, Peacock suggested that federation would be a long, long wait. Fifth, Sydney Australian Natives Association representative Edward Dowling provided some insight into the nature of the struggle ahead when he compared the youth of the United States and Australia, much to the detriment of 'the Australian rising generation' who, he said, 'paid very little attention to the principles of self-government ...'<sup>19</sup> Sixth, the Corowa conference is significant because it was there that John Quick and Robert Garran met and formed a firm friendship that would become one of this country's most illustrious constitutional collaborations. Finally, and without doubt most significantly, late on day two of the conference, when the whole event appeared likely to be consigned to the dustbin of history as simply another federation talk-fest, Herbert Barrett, of the Melbourne Australian Natives Association, little realising the ultimate consequences of his impatience, jumped to his feet and demanded 'something practical'.<sup>20</sup> 'Words, words, words – can't we do something?' bellowed Mr. Barrett.<sup>21</sup>

Dr. John Quick, ably supported by Garran and some half-dozen others, used a short recess to produce a new resolution, outlining what would come to be called the 'Corowa Plan':

That in the opinion of this Conference the Legislature of each Australasian colony should *pass an Act* providing for the election of representatives to attend a statutory convention or congress to consider and adopt a bill to establish a Federal Constitution for Australia and upon the adoption of such a bill or measure it be submitted by some process of referendum to the verdict of each colony.<sup>22</sup>

It was, as Garran would recall, 'an inspired break-away' from the standard routine. This resolution was not on the carefully planned agenda of the conference. While the 1891 Bill had made no provision for the future, Quick's Corowa resolution necessitated a program of action leading logically to an end result. As Garran put it:

The Corowa proposal was to make a fresh start, with every step laid down beforehand by Acts of Parliament of each colony. These Acts would provide for the election by the people of a representative convention, the drafting of a Constitution by that convention, and finally its submission to the Parliament of Westminster to be passed into law. Thus, the people, when voting for representatives to a convention, would know that 'the gun was loaded' and that in due course they would be called upon to say yes or no to a Federal Constitution. That would bring the matter right into the field of immediate politics and create such public interest in federation as had never before been known.

---

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Randolph Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1958, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 103.

Neither from memory, nor from the records, have I been able to trace any such previous suggestion by anybody. It was not on the agenda of the Conference, it does not seem to have been mentioned by any member of the Conference or anybody else. It was the sudden explosion of protests, largely from younger members of the Conference, that they were only talking and doing nothing, that caused Dr Quick to suggest a short recess, and the result was the drafting of a resolution that was like the striking of flint with steel to produce this new spark of inspiration.<sup>23</sup>

Corowa was a catalyst for federation. Contrary to the sour sentiments of the *Albury Border Post*, the Corowa Conference, attended by some of the foremost 'founding fathers', had no heavily imbibing politicians. On the contrary, those present handled their drinking with marked restraint. The 31 July proceedings concluded with a toast to 'Her Majesty the Queen'; 1 August finished with three cheers for Her Majesty *and* three cheers for Federation.

It is, however, worth observing that not one of the leading three federalists of the period appeared at the Conference: Barton was overseas, Deakin legitimately called away for a court trial, while Henry Parkes appears to have been simply peeved at not being asked to lead the proceedings. None of these absences affected the conference result. Parkes eventually came to Corowa two weeks later and delivered a long speech, but his leadership days were effectively over. He was a spent force.

Corowa was undoubtedly a turning point in the fortunes of federation. The impetus provided by the border town gathering even forced the conservative *Sydney Morning Herald* to state, early in 1894, that 'For a "dead" subject, federation continues to exhibit frequent and telling proofs of activity.'<sup>24</sup> Critics, of course, continued to disparage the Commonwealth cause. One New South Wales politician, J.C. Neild, labelled the Corowa conference 'that distressingly funny Federation-cum-Protection function, at which Australian unity and long beers were discussed in one of the Murray hamlets.'<sup>25</sup> John Quick, however, immediately followed up his Corowa resolution with energy and action. Once he was able to sell the model to the new New South Wales Premier, George Reid, genuine federation momentum had been established. Robert Garran commenced his 1895 pamphlet, *The Urgency of Federation*, with the lines:

Better today than tomorrow; better at sunrise than noon;  
Let doing not wait on delaying, nor Now be the servant of Soon.<sup>26</sup>

At Corowa some of the young, or perhaps younger guns of federation had emerged to add their energy to the cause. It was a crucial development.

---

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> *The New Federation Movement*, *The Bendigo Independent*, Bendigo, 1894, p. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Neild, *Official Report*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

<sup>26</sup> See Garran, *Prosper the Commonwealth*, *op. cit.*, Appendix II, p. 426.

\* \* \* \* \*

During the late 1880s, Henry Parkes' aggressive yet self-centred leadership style reflected federation's profile in the community: full of hot air, ignoble aims and theatrical gestures. In the 1890s enthusiasts were needed, committed federalists willing to devote themselves to the cause. When John Quick was knighted for his federation work in February 1901 he accepted with the words: 'I do my duty without any attempt at political fireworks or brilliancy.' He talked of his 'ordinary, plodding' style.<sup>27</sup> Many years later a reporter observed of the ageing Quick: 'To-day he sits under the gold unicorn, a triumph of sober, steady, solemn application—the Industrious Apprentice in excelsis.'<sup>28</sup> The sun rose for this Industrious Apprentice at Corowa in 1893. He produced a plan for federation that was ultimately acted upon in 1897–8. The resulting Commonwealth would have its faults, but it was a vast improvement on the pre-1901 arrangement of bickering, parochial colonies—and, for that matter, jealous towns. Corowa's role in the process of federation is both a noble and central one.

---

<sup>27</sup> L.E. Fredman (ed.), *Sir John Quick's Notebook*, Reg. C. Pognoski, Newcastle, NSW, 1965, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Sun* (Melbourne), 1 October 1924, quoted by Fredman, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

---

## **Melba's Puddin': Corowa, Mulwala and Our Cultural Past**

*Jeff Brownrigg*

Let me begin by seeking your immediate approval. I grew up and was educated just a stone's throw down the Murray, at Mulwala, one of the river towns in the Shire of Corowa. Most of my fellows at primary school there did what was customary in the town and travelled to Corowa for a couple of days each week in what were, I think, called grades seven and eight. As it happened I did the traitorous thing and crossed the Murray to study at Yarrawonga High School.

It was over the Mulwala School gate that I first saw a real swagman. He was called 'Johnny Boy' and owned a blue heeler—whose name I cannot recall—which he picked up by the tail for the amusement of nine-year olds. 'Look! I can pick him up by the "shit stick"!' he would say and several kids hanging on the steel mesh of the gate would snigger and catch each other's eye with a look that registered some acknowledgement that this smelly, dishevelled adult was at the least naughty, but probably sinful.

In those days the word 'bloody' teetered on the edge of obscenity. The various ministers in the town (Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Church of England and the Catholic priest, serving a population of a few hundred—you had to go to Yarrawonga for the Methodists) described the dire consequences in store for those who used profane or indecent language. Although we knew that even our parents swore from time to time—at least we suspected as much—we recognized an important difference between them and this old bushman. There was no guarantee that he had broken horses or shorn sheep, but it seemed possible that he had been, once, what historians regularly called a pastoral worker. If he had been one of these at some time in the past, now he was reduced to cadging what he could. Had his time passed? Had he always been the same, only younger? Had the world rolled by and changed so much that he no longer had a logical place in it?

The kids of Mulwala had no doubt. 'Johnny Boy' did not fit into the ordered grid of Mulwala's streets. He came and went in no apparent pattern and for a time camped in a scruffy tin hut on a rough, sandy bit of paddock between what is now the multimillion dollar Services Club and the weekender/holiday houses springing up in places where, in my childhood, there were goannas, cicadas and dry, yellow grass. Today there is no trace of the corrugated iron walls which had kept out some of the frost, and the patch where his floor used to be has been tidied up by a heavy-duty mower on the back of a Shire of Corowa tractor.

Perhaps 'Johnny Boy' came to stand for more than he should. Like everybody else at school I was encouraged to form a picture of what a characteristic nineteenth-century Australian might have been. There was no doubt from those early accounts that the archetype was a man; a bearded, bowyanged wanderer who was straight-speaking, if he spoke at all, and who lived a sort of uncomplicated, pioneering existence somewhere in the bush. He shunned civilized values and came to be suspicious of the city with its characteristic money-men. Archetypal capitalists, the 'Fat Man' of the *Bulletin*, were portrayed in the same spirit in other journals, decked out in the dress suit which indicated financial success, power and social privilege. In comparison, the bushman wore the symbols of another social class, a costume that was sometimes tinged with bohemian radicalism. The literary bushman was a quite distant relative of 'Johnny Boy'.

But it was the literary bushman that was conjured up in Mulwala School in 1955, and Mulwala was probably quite characteristic of smaller inland settlements. The town was so much in the bush as to appear, at certain times, unpopulated. A shotgun fired on any midday in summer along Melbourne Road, from the Royal Mail Hotel towards the canal bridge and Corowa Road, would have caused no injury. It might have roused, perhaps, one sleepy red dog on the dusty verandah of Bowles' general store where the hurricane lanterns and rabbit traps, suspended from the ceiling, would have jingled in sympathy. Mulwala was sleepy and swagmen were rare enough to be a novelty, even in a town that seemed to embody those things that were not 'of the city'.

Everywhere there was evidence that some people lived in towns and others on farms. There was no middle ground. A symbiosis had evolved over time. The town serviced a sprawling rural community which in turn helped to make the town viable. The fairly simple pattern of mutual support continued until the poker machine and weekenders (who came every weekend and not just at Christmas) changed the town's character with a new energy and a new dynamic. But in the 1950s it squatted quietly on the Murray, unprovoked and unchallenged, measuring out its time against two yardsticks: the sirens that carved up the day for workers at the Government munitions factory and the broader, more flexible rhythms of the rural calendar. Mulwala saw very few swagmen in residence or just passing through, although there were other people about the town who had a background in itinerant rural work.

Pastoral workers—or bush workers as they were known locally—who had settled and who must have been like earlier manifestations of their type, were sometimes identifiable. They might have been links in a chain which stretched back in time from the rock 'n rolling, quarter-acre-blocked, Holden owners to the first convict shepherds. One of the bush workers, Ray Barr, who could lift a decent strainer-post or a heifer from a good paddock by himself, and who had about him many of the features of the larrikin, seemed to embody some characteristics of the legendary bushman. He had a dry sense of humour and, at times, an

---

unquenchable thirst. Both of these could be the source of problems for himself and for others. Once, late on a Friday afternoon, he was halfway through giving a friend at the munitions factory a haircut when the 'home-time' whistle blew. 'Okay!' he said, 'we'll finish that next week.' Somebody went lop-sided until Monday. This was characteristic mischief; a swaggering, self-confident larrikinism with a touch of wry disrespect for an individual's comfort and also for the organization of a working day.

While Mulwala school children were looking for local evidence of the characteristic Australian, wore linked Union Jacks and the Australian flag on Empire Day or were moved by the Recessional on Anzac Day, Russell Ward was building his extended examination of a 'national mystique'. Chapter eight of *The Australian Legend* (1958), entitled 'Apotheosis of the Nomad Tribe', identifies many of the influences that had given rise to the bushman myth and notes that the acceleration in the rate of change experienced as the nineteenth century drew to a close, helped to consolidate it.<sup>1</sup> By the time of federation, 'the "noble bushman" was already enshrined in both the popular and the literary imagination.' The 'discovery of the bush by literary men' was crucial to the consolidation of the myth.<sup>2</sup> I would argue, rather, for the idea of the relatively sudden emergence of 'the Bush', with its accretions of significance, some of them fabrications. It commanded a dominant position in the quest for a national identity to which it was not entitled.

The bushman 'type' had passed into legend earlier than the First World War even though it was in evidence in France and the Middle East. Perhaps it had already become the fixed expression of Australian character and, as such, a model for behaviour. Perhaps the 'bushman's bible', as the *Bulletin* was sometimes known, had helped to create an expectation, a standard form of Australianness built around a core of the *Bulletin's* values. It came as something of a surprise that almost twenty years after Mulwala Central School children discussed the idea of the 'bushman', reading bits of Furphy, Paterson and Lawson to fill out the picture, another of my teachers, the literary critic F. R. Leavis, reminiscing about his experiences during the Great War, commented on several occasions during seminars, that Australians were 'all big men who knew how to handle the army'. Whilst this cannot have been always true, it is interesting and curious that this perspicacious Cambridge don carried an impression which is so close to the generalization Australians have explored. The truth is, of course, much more complex than any of these single instances on which the generalizations have been built. Australians have long recognized that the myth has some basis in the evolution of white Australia but that it is by no means the whole picture.

Even in Grade Five at Mulwala Central School something like an alternative view was presented. In those days everybody recited selected verse as a part of the daily routine. As well as 'All the world's a stage' (which was, I think, in a Victorian *Reader* and also used in New South Wales), 'The Seven Ages of Man', 'The Modest Violet' and 'The Daffodils', we learned, by heart, George Essex Evans' 'The Women of the West'. It didn't add much to my sense of what the bushman was. In fact, because these women 'left the vine-wreathed cottage and the mansion on the hill' to face 'the wilderness' for the love of the pioneering men they followed, they were really like us; like the townies. We could imagine our own mothers

---

<sup>1</sup> See Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1966, pp. 180–206.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*



sacrificing comforts to follow their men. We might even have been able to invent visions of an imaginary wilderness which looked nothing like Mulwala would have appeared in the 1850s. Evans was surely thinking of bark huts, clearing scrub, hostile natives and distance from suburban services—of the genesis of our own town. School and daily life helped to build the mythical figure we have come to hold up as characteristically Australian. Later, this was reinforced for me in some literature and films and in the tendency to take the images promulgated by the *Bulletin* as typical, especially typical of the final decades of the last century and the first of the present one.

What I discovered as I grew up was that the whole historical and cultural record is a much richer and very much more complicated tapestry than we had been led to believe in the middle 1950s. If we look for those who, in some way, came to signify Australianness in their own time, then we would need to search where most people in Australia have lived since the 1788 invasion: the coastal cities and larger inland towns. This is where the common new Australian is still to be found in increasing numbers. The things that people did in Australian towns and cities were much as they were anywhere else; the same hierarchies, the same amenities and the same urban aspirations. The pattern of urban life, which had been established for more than a hundred years by the 1950s, was based on nostalgic recollections of another world. It was built on adaptations of Westminster-style government, adaptations of cottage gardens and adaptations of an Anglo-Celtic lifestyle often to harsher realities than those experienced in Europe. It has been argued that by 1900 Australia had more pianos per capita than any other country—perhaps as much as one piano for every fourth or fifth person in Australia at federation.<sup>3</sup> If this is true, then it lends considerable support to the contention that the piano is a better symbol of the Australian lifestyle at that time than the pint-pot billy, dangling somewhat precariously from a rolled and shouldered Wagga rug.

If we examine the broader picture by asking who were the most conspicuous Australians in the years immediately preceding federation, and especially in the 1890s, we will almost certainly need to settle for a model that the history books have failed to record adequately. Until recently we had been so attracted to the 'Australian Legend' myth that we frequently failed to notice any substantial figure not included in this mythology. Having excluded people from the textbooks, sometimes on the grounds of their race and more usually because of their gender, the lives and achievements of many worthwhile Australians have simply been lost. Subsequent acknowledgment cannot be made where no systematic record has been kept, regardless of the fact that the evidence is there in newspapers, manuscript collections and often recorded on cylinders and shellac discs. In addition, there is the lost legacy of those who left no record.

We have tended to focus, not unexpectedly perhaps, on the Anglo-Celtic mainstream, discovering in it a single line of tradition. While Britans might have thought of Australians as

---

<sup>3</sup> Discussions concerning the numbers of pianos in Australia in the nineteenth century are rarely supported with hard evidence, but I have heard figures like these reported in a number of conference papers. Roger Covell in *Australia's Music: Themes for a New Society*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1964, cites the evidence of Oscar Comettant, a French official at the Centennial Exhibition held in Melbourne in 1888, suggesting that by about 1888 over 700,000 pianos had been imported into Australia. Humphrey McQueen uses Covell's citation of Comettant in his chapter about a broader Australian musical sensibility in *A New Britannia: an Argument Concerning the Social Origins of Australian Radicalism and Nationalism*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 1978 (revised edn).

---

being cast in a British mould, there is evidence that they also noted that Australians were the product of a hot, distant, primitive colony. They had seen the anxious stirrings of Australia's 'bunyip aristocracy' as the first of the Australian-born generations of British travelled home, ready to accept or to clone, in the colonies, the institutions of government and society accepted by their fathers. They watched the effect of gold and the rapid change in the mix of nationalities which resulted—among them Chinese, Greek, Italian and American (even black American). The degree to which the cultural mainstream was affected by this migration is difficult to assess because neglect has rendered it largely invisible. The ascendant culture discovered that it was faced with a number of choices. Marginalizing sub-cultures was one alternative and could be applied, for example, to the 'heathen Chinamen'. Assimilation was another, and those of differing ethnicity but in the same social class might be absorbed, and thus lose their 'difference'. One of my own great-great-grandfathers, Georgios Morfesis, stayed on after the gold and married into the Irish. A goldfield Greek who came from Ithaca in 1851, he is occasionally mentioned in the newspapers of his time.<sup>4</sup> In one 1856 report from Castlemaine, he appeared before the Police Court after calling another miner (a coloured man, possibly a West Indian, with a colourful name, Napoleon de la Ray) a 'Bloody black nigger and other names of similar character'. This is no small tribute to the quickness with which he acquired English language skills, if rather lacking in sophistication in other respects. Morfesis' small contribution to civilization as we know it, was that he made enough as a digger to get himself started in a shop, becoming a contender for the title of Victoria's first Greek-born shop keeper. Hugh Gilchrist, in his magnificent work *Australians and Greeks* (1992),<sup>5</sup> devotes a whole chapter to Australian-Greek shop-keeping and its place in the evolution of Australian (and British) fast-food outlets, especially fish and chip shops, which expressed the transposition of the maritime culture of the Greeks. Much more could be claimed for the cultural contributions that accompanied the twentieth-century Greek migration and, of course, for the contributions of dozens of other cultures especially those from Europe and from Asia.

By the 1870s Australia was exporting the fruits of its goldrushes and these were not only material. What we discover, when we pursue this idea, is that the world at large saw a picture that was very different from the myth of the bushman we have, as a nation, created for ourselves. The society that craved and cosseted the parlour piano, and patronized fish and chip shops, has its roots in an urban culture which evolved and matured steadily during the nineteenth century and especially after the first goldrushes. On the land (and in the wilderness) the tendency to throw up protective barriers of deciduous trees, orchards and green lawns around country houses, to construct cushioning defences to block out the reality of the land (often flat, dry and inhospitable) is a part of this reflex. Within the compounds, inside the walls of trees, in darkened rooms behind wide verandahs, the parlour piano lurked, linking the domestic worlds of the city and the bush. The extent to which performance on the instrument was a female activity is not known. I would guess that more women developed the skill to perform, although it is difficult to substantiate outside the results of musical competitions, reports in the social pages of periodicals and the preponderance of female students under the wing of the Mercy Nuns.

---

<sup>4</sup> Tas Psarakis of the Australian Hellenic Historical Society has provided much of what I know about Georgios Morfesis. Hugh Gilchrist's important work (cited below) contains several references to Morfesis.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, Halstead, Sydney, 1992. Chapter 10, pp. 190–256, describes the shop-keeping phenomenon.

One of the most interesting and ultimately influential occurrences which began in the 1870s and 1880s was the ascendancy of the internationally celebrated Australian singer. Almost all were women and many of them were the products of the teaching of the ubiquitous Sisters of Mercy. We have always known that they were there, but we have been unable to assess and sometimes unwilling to acknowledge their significance. In order to establish the 'type', we need to begin with one who was not taught by the Mercies. This, of course, is Nellie Melba. Though she was not the first to win accolades abroad, Melba became the first really conspicuous Australian with a legitimately international profile and reputation. She went to Europe in 1886, determined to make something of her singing. She did not return to Australia until 1902. From the late 1880s onwards she was the brightest Australian star in the musical firmament and, more than this, she eclipsed the reputations of all other Australians from any profession who had made a place for themselves in the Old World before she got there.

Melba is rarely given much credit for her intelligence. Her wit, at times bawdy, has been rarely acknowledged. Everybody has a Melba story. Or rather, from the time she first returned to Australia in 1902 until forty years after her death, everybody had a Melba story. These were usually constructed according to rules which were set down at the turn of the century. A Melba story should portray the diva as a scheming prima donna, jealous of rivals (especially Australian sopranos) and disdainful of her audiences. It should show that she was a champagne guzzler or even a drug addict who had deserted her husband, abandoned her only child and become a whore amongst the crowned heads of Europe. It is hardly surprising that books, radio dramas, films and television mini-series have taken up her story. But, like the bushman, the Melba of the popularly imagined anecdote was a fabrication. The characteristic Melba yarn concocted during the middle years of the twentieth century when many people could still remember having heard her sing live and who understood the impact she had made in the world, are often without foundation. At its worst it was a tale designed to level the tall poppy. At its best it was a nod and wink about a larrikin. Melba understood what Australianness had come to mean. She might seek approval from the well-heeled supporters of Covent Garden, but the terms in which she chose to do it were often based on her own perception of being Australian. The Melba persona was as much the product of careful craft as it was an off-shoot of innate character. What we accept, today, is the result of an interaction of actual incident, Melba's posturing and the numerous Melba yarns.

It is still possible to trace the sources of much of the rumour and innuendo which gave rise to Melba's reputation at home. *The Freeman's Journal*, a Melbourne Catholic weekly, noted early in June 1899 when citing the first public appearances of Amy Castles, a 'young convent girl' and almost certainly 'the New Melba', that the old Melba's proposed first tour of Australia was the direct result of her noticing her 'rival'.<sup>6</sup> This was an absurd claim. Amy had

---

<sup>6</sup> *The Freeman's Journal* was in open conflict with the *Bulletin* regarding Amy Castles' value as a singer. The *Bulletin* first suggested that the 'Castles boom' was a Catholic plot.

---

*Dame Nellie Melba, 1899*

a wonderful natural voice but she was not a great singer. However, in 1899 it seemed that she could become the force required to dislodge Melba, the Protestant tart. The need for Catholic cultural weapons became obvious after 1884, and the arrival of Archbishop Moran, which initiated a sort of Irish Catholic imperialism. The great Irish mission in Australia had begun.<sup>7</sup> If the Church could find an alternative to the most obvious and successful Australian, and if this person was solid in her faith, then supplanting the greatest living Australian icon would be an extraordinary victory for Moran's Australian mission. Australian Catholics were encouraged to take the view that Melba's separation, divorce and her public appearances with the pretender to the French throne were serious moral errors. The snarling of the Catholic press helped to consolidate the view that she was vindictive and dangerous. There was a clear campaign to discredit her. On 15 July 1899, Sydney's *Catholic Press* announced, in the midst of Melba's international triumph, that 'all the Australian singers of note are Catholics'. It is unlikely that Melba would have read this, but the calculated effect, the dismissive sneer, is characteristic.

Another newspaper, John Norton's *Truth*, carried an open letter to Melba on 28 March 1903, accusing her of being a drunkard who let her audiences down by not being in a fit state to appear.<sup>8</sup> Norton, himself a notorious drunk, simply got his facts wrong and pumped up false generalisations based on a single incident when Melba was indisposed due to a raw throat after sea-sickness during a particularly rough crossing from Melbourne to Launceston. She was certainly not drunk. Guarding her main asset from the ravages of time, the atmosphere, germs, plonk and other hazards, was a lifelong preoccupation. It is impossible to see Melba in terms other than those suggested by the attention she devoted to her voice and her career.

Matters were not helped when, in 1932, the year after Melba died, one of her secretaries, Beverley Nichols, published a novel entitled *Evensong*.<sup>9</sup> Nichols drew a picture of an ageing prima donna, jealous of the rising generation. Readers immediately accepted the novel as an authoritative account of Melba's twilight years. This consolidated what the Catholic presses started and John Norton had embroidered. If all of these sources were taken together—some of them sectarian, others from the pens of journalists out to expose the crimes of the rich and famous and yet others in the words apparently from those who had been close to her—then what should Australians think of Melba? In effect, for a set of quite complex reasons, Australians set about dismantling the pedestal on which their first great internationally acknowledged compatriot had been placed. And this activity, first set in train as the century turned, has set the tone of almost everything that has since been written about Melba.

Under different circumstances Melba might have fared better. In a climate where the possibility of an endorsement of a degree of independent nationhood was being debated in important events like the Corowa Conference, the opportunity to value Melba and others like her might have presented itself. It could have occurred only if Australians had not been so

---

<sup>7</sup> See Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish In Australia*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1986, especially p. 236 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Norton's 'open letter' to Melba is reproduced in Michael Cannon, *That Damned Democrat: John Norton, an Australian Populist, 1858–1916*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Beverley Nichols' novel *Evensong* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1932) has been treated as a thinly disguised biography. It is a work of fiction.

---

attracted to the construction of the male-centred myth and so repelled by the fabrications they were invited to believe. Corowa came a little early to generate enthusiasm for Melba as a national symbol. The will of the people had not yet been consolidated into a collective reverence for Australianness, even Australianness that presented itself as operatic, awesome and, for many Australians, alien. Melba had enough nous to include popular ballads, especially the Scots and Irish standard parlour repertoire, in her concerts and on her recordings.

If we can agree that Melba was indeed very important, and if you are prepared to share my opinion that she was the first conspicuous Australian, what made her distinctively so? The answer can be found in Australian history and it is to do with the place of women and the shapes their lives might reasonably be expected to take. For most women in the late nineteenth century the answer was simple. For a time it seemed that Melba would be typical. She had given notice of her intention to sing before she met Charles Armstrong, the dashing, handsome, well-connected man she married. But almost straight away, and like many women of her time, she became pregnant. In addition, she found herself living on a failing sugar plantation in tropical Queensland. It must have become clear to her quite quickly that she did not wish to follow the pattern dictated for her biologically and, also, that Charles Armstrong was unlikely to be a reasonably secure provider. The decision to return to Melbourne and to pursue a career in singing is usually reported to have been mutually agreed, and it is what Melba did. Her success was neither sudden nor particularly miraculous, unless one counts the death of the European entrepreneur to whom she had been contracted to sing, causing the cancellation of a contract which she would have been obliged to complete. As it turned out, she was able to take up a superior offer in Brussels which brought her into the public eye and made it possible for her to become, quickly, the greatest singer of her time.<sup>10</sup>

Few of the concocted Melba stories are as valuable as those which demonstrate her assault on the bastions of male ignorance and indifference. She had been born into a wilderness of male prejudice. She recognised it as a threat from which she needed to liberate herself. The pastoral worker might have provided a model for an urban reverie about a bushman-Adam, but most men who thought about creating an Australian image were to be found in towns and cities. Men controlled finance and law, thought and custom. There were few women in powerful positions. Very few were seriously influential in public life. Most of them knew their place and were not encouraged to have aspirations above their gender.

In her biography *Melba, The Voice of Australia* (1986), Therese Radic cites a letter from Percy Grainger to his lover Karen Holten. This letter might have been a piece of disinterested reporting or Grainger might have been ‘dishing up’ an example of Australian folklore for her, as he ‘dished up’ pieces for the piano for paying audiences, often arranging well-known pieces scored for a piano and orchestra, into elaborate piano solos:

I am going to listen at Melba’s first reappearance this evening. My father was on the same ship with her. Think what she said, quite publicly, moreover at the table when someone offered her jelly which

---

<sup>10</sup> Therese Radic’s *Melba*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1986, is the most valuable of several accounts of the diva’s life. John Hetherington, who wrote *Melba: A Biography* (Faber, London, 1967) allows his own prejudices to get out of hand.

was a little unfirm. 'No thanks, there are two things I like stiff and jelly's one of them.'<sup>11</sup>

Now this might, at first sight and if the story is true, appear to be what others have cited as Melba's natural coarseness or the crude colonial portion of her character. But there is more to it than that. Melba chose to make a point about language and the subjects available to, and thought seemly for, women. She assaulted a register of sexual reference reserved for men in their own company. It was not, in my view, simply a matter of what Melba could get away with. She enjoyed confrontations with the prejudices she clearly recognized and abhorred.

There were other instances. Melba used her influence on behalf of imprisoned suffragettes and in 1909 tried to register racing colours with the AJC in the green, white and violet of the Women's Social and Political Union. Perhaps the most celebrated Melba story is the one related by Clara Butt, the English contralto, who asked Melba's opinion about repertoire suitable for an Australian tour. In Dame Clara's biography the English singer reports that Melba told her to 'Sing 'em muck. It's all they understand.' The pages which contained this report were removed from a special 'doctored' Australian edition. The offending lines were replaced in specially re-written, tipped-in replacement pages.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that Melba actually gave Dame Clara this advice and a perusal of touring concert programmes from the period supports Melba's view, although she respected her Australian audiences enough to instigate some damage control at home. There is another less well-known report about the same incident in the memoirs of the pianist and sometime Melba accompanist, Ivor Newton.<sup>13</sup> Not long before her death Newton asked Melba if she had, indeed, advised Dame Clara to 'sing 'em muck'. With no hesitation she replied: 'How could that be? Dame Clara didn't need to be told.' Melba's opinion, in this instance, also seems to be supported by the evidence. Melba had a lively wit. She was highly intelligent, well able to analyse the world about her, to form opinions and to respond to it. She managed her career, her voice and her money—as Therese Radic points out—with considerable skill, and they returned dividends all of her life.

Certainly Melba's career suggested a model for others who followed. The 'new Melba' never really eventuated although several singers like Amy Castles were set up to replace her. Stella Power, the 'little Melba', who was encouraged by her namesake, never scaled the heights. Regardless of her singing gift, Gertrude Johnson, who owed something to Melba and could be seen as another candidate, was distracted by other theatrical interests.<sup>14</sup> True to form, Australians have always blamed Melba for failing to produce a suitable vocal heir. There were other singers, like Florence Austral, Margherita Grandi, Marjorie Lawrence and Joan Hammond in the 1930s and '40s, but it was not until the 1950s, twenty years after Melba's death, that the next undisputed international Australian-born diva appeared. Joan Sutherland

---

<sup>11</sup> Therese Radic, *Melba*, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>12</sup> Clara Butt's biography, written by Winifred Ponder, was published as *Clara Butt: Her Life Story*, Harrap, London, 1928.

<sup>13</sup> See Ivor Newton, *At The Piano*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1966. The book is composed of autobiographical anecdotes.

<sup>14</sup> See Barbara McKenzie and Findlay McKenzie's *Singers of Australia: From Melba to Sutherland*, Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1967, and the Currency Press chronology *Entertaining Australia*, Currency, Sydney, 1992.

---

worked her way steadily towards the pinnacle of her career and projected an Australianness that was quite different from the variety that Melba chose to convey. Melba had little choice. Her lively reaction to her time, which included an assessment of what things in her own personality might be amplified to emphasize Australianness and her seizing upon what she saw as her right to independence and a career, established how she could and would relate to the world. *La Stupenda* did not have to establish and assert her right to the independence a career in singing might bring. Neither did she need to defend the proposition that the wealth and power that successful singing could bring were legitimate goals for women. She violated no expectation that women should be lesser mortals. In a very real sense, Melba had challenged that view and helped to change the way Australians thought about themselves.

Melba was not the only international Australian celebrity in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. There were other women. When Melba first went to Europe, journalists in Australia said that she was good, but that it seemed unlikely that she would ever become as famous as Amy Sherwin. Sherwin, the ‘Tasmanian Nightingale’, was discovered near Hobart by a touring Italian opera company. They heard her singing as they looked for somewhere to have a picnic. She had a distinguished career in opera and concert singing in Australia, Europe and America.<sup>15</sup> There are no known sound recordings of her singing. Judging from contemporary written reports, her voice was bigger than Melba’s but did not have the silvery brilliance. There were popular singers, too, who became celebrated in their field. Florrie Forde, from Richmond in Victoria, had developed a notable career in musicals and vaudeville before she left Australia in the late 1890s. She became a mainstay of the English music hall for almost forty years, universally valued for her generous spirit and her vivacious singing of chorus songs. She sang, recorded and made popular dozens of songs that have come to represent the music of the period between 1900 and 1940. ‘Its A Long Way To Tipperary’, ‘Pack Up Your Troubles’, ‘Hello, Hello, Who’s Your Lady Friend’, ‘Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly’, ‘Oh! Oh! Antonio’ and the music hall anthem ‘Down at the Old Bull and Bush’ were all Florrie Forde songs and there were dozens more. Before 1950 most Australians were word-perfect in these songs (especially the choruses), largely as a result of sound recordings and radio, but in spite of Florrie’s broad nasal vowels, few recognized that she was one of them.

Melba and Florrie are easy to classify, both of them singing in recognizable genres. Melba is supposed to have enjoyed Florrie’s singing, going as far as saying that if the vaudevillian had taken a different path she might have found a place on the opera stage. But it is even possible to find an early international Australian who actually achieved an unusual blend of vaudeville and opera, as well as making an unexpected contribution to British trade unionism. During the 1890s, Ada Colley, a soprano from Parramatta, developed a singing career in Australia and subsequently travelled to Europe. Here she sang with considerable success in opera houses and theatres from Dublin to St Petersburg. After gradually becoming disenchanted with the elitist nature of opera presentations, she decided to take ‘high’ singing to the vaudeville stage. In January 1907, she was one of the leaders, together with Marie Lloyd and Albert Chevalier, of the strike which established the British actors trade union, the Variety Artists’ Federation (VAF).<sup>16</sup> Although the leaders of the strike were told that there would be

---

<sup>15</sup> See Judith A. Bowler, *Amy Sherwin*, Specialty Press, Hobart, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> See Jeff Brownrigg, ‘The imperishable radiance of Ada Colley’, *Australasian Sound Archive*, no. 13, March 1991, pp. 19–26.



no retribution from the owners of the music hall chains, Ada Colley soon disappeared from the reviews, but not before she had tried to set up a vaudeville theatre outside the established circuits.

At about the same time as Colley was learning to sing in Australia, Frances Saville, the daughter of Martin and Fanny Simonsen, who established an opera company in Melbourne in the mid-nineteenth century, built a significant career in Europe and America, but, most importantly, in Vienna.<sup>17</sup> In 1900, towards the end of her stage career and having developed a wide-ranging operatic repertoire which included Wagner, Puccini and Mozart, Saville presented to the enthusiastic Viennese an interpretation of Fiordiligi in Gustav Mahler's bench-mark production of Mozart's opera 'Cosi Fan Tutti'. She was also the first Australian to make commercial sound recordings, recording several tracks which were advertised for sale in 1896. Saville, like many of her talented musical contemporaries, has been almost totally lost to Australians. The hot and cold relationship which Australians have had with 'the arts' and with those Australian exponents who have excelled internationally, might be one reason. Another was Saville's expatriate status for most of her mature career. Yet another was the general expectation, commonly expressed in the nineteenth century, that the arts, and especially the theatrical arts, were seedy and suspect.

An array of successful  
Australian song-birds, with a  
clearly dominant Melba, is  
challenged for perching space by  
Amy Castles.

*Australasian*, July 1899

---

<sup>17</sup> See Jeff Brownrigg, 'Questions about Frances Saville', *Australasian Sound Archive*, no. 15, April 1992.

---

Another of these singing women, Ella Caspers, was, like Amy Castles, taught music by the Mercy Sisters. These teaching nuns arrived in Australia from Kilkenny in the 1860s. Some of them were sent, rather curiously, by a Dr Brownrigg—another distant relative—and they arrived with a clear sense of what they wished to do. However, the Mercies quickly discovered what they would be able to do. After altercations with several Catholic bishops in Western and South Australia, and a disastrous encounter with Bishop James Quinn in Brisbane, which almost saw them conclude their work in Queensland and return to Ireland, they settled into their mission. One way of funding it was to teach music. Mercy Convents, which sprang up in almost all large Australian towns, saw troops of piano, violin and vocal studies students filing through their music-room doors. Musical journals like the *Australian Musical News* report the examination successes of the pupils of the Yarrowonga Convent and many others. And the Sisters taught all comers, even Protestants, if they could pay the fees. The claim could be supported that these teaching nuns were the first large group of organized, professional Australian working women. Their music teaching became legendary and one result was the liberation of a number of talented female singers from the fate of most Catholic women of their time. It was not necessarily by their example that the Mercies liberated some Australians, but, rather, that they gave many women the option of building a career by providing them with what was slowly becoming a respectable means of earning large sums of money. Financial rewards available to singers could also mean personal independence.

In addition to these potential personal and material gains, there were important aesthetic and intellectual aspects to music and musical life. If the taciturn bushman can be characterised as grunting his way through life following thought patterns which matched the sparse landscape that he inhabited (regardless of the supposed archness of his wit), then these singing women present a serious challenge to the bushman mythology and establish a quite different national type. The tendency to support the universality of the bushman myth is probably evidence of insecurity amongst those who have been prepared to accept it as truth. Had the myth been constructed differently, or had it been more complex, multi-faceted and less gender-specific, it might have been more credible. It also ignores Australia's indigenous, pre-conquest heritage.

The national archetypes constructed in the 1890s are seriously flawed. When the children of the Corowa Shire in the middle of the next century discuss the past, they will be able to refer to databases where an accurate, comprehensive picture of the emergence of a truly tolerant and egalitarian society is available to them. But this will only be possible if we work today to fill in the gaps. Some of these have been created by time while others have resulted from our enthusiasm to build a national mythology based on limited information where women and non Anglo-Celtic males were thought not to matter. The foolishness of the denial of Australian aesthetic, emotional and intellectual experience which the 'bushman' ethos encourages, has lately been recognised. We now need to move on, to make the picture of the past as complete and as detailed as we can. Corowa's past, like that of many other Australian towns, is full of interest and richness. I can find no reference to a visit from Melba, though Peter Dawson performed in Corowa several times, doubtless striding up the hill from his hotel in Sanger Street to sing under the painted arch in Oddfellows Hall. That image of the stocky bass baritone, appropriately dressed for the occasion and with a Corowa audience eating out of his hand, is probably a fair reflection of Australia in 1912. It is a part of a tradition of touring artists about which we know very little.

We will inevitably construct a new paradigm. 'Johnny Boy' the swagman and his ilk will have an honourable but reduced place in it. The larrikin attitude towards authority embodied in the 'Digger' and evident in Melba's chosen public persona will need to be there. Amy Sherwin, Melba and Dawson, and the vibrant culture which they, and many others, generated—thousands of performances and millions of sound recordings—will be recognised as signalling those other substantial parts of Australia's heritage; of a broader, urban reality. We will then have a heritage which, once fully recovered, we can hardly fail to value.

---

## **From Little Things Big Things Grow— Thresholds of Citizenship (1893–1993)**

*James Warden*

### **Australia and the History of the World**

The jubilee was vastly more important than the centenary. Notable anniversaries and public celebrations in Australia were, once upon a time, centred on the monarch. If the 1988 bicentenary slogan was ‘Celebration of a Nation’, then the 1888 slogan would have been ‘Celebration of a Monarch’. As an anniversary, 1888 was wholly concerned with the jubilee of Queen Victoria and had nothing to do with the centenary of the arrival of the First Fleet.<sup>1</sup> Victoria Regina personified the colonial nation-state, whereas the detested convict streak was to be ignored and the stain expunged. Victoria was mother of the Empire. Her graven image gave postage stamps and banknotes their legitimacy as state instruments. Unalienated land was called ‘crown land’. She was gracious, long-lived and noble; she was victorious, happy and glorious, long to reign over us and God would save her. She was also cast in bronze. The colonial condition of Australia in the 1880s and 1890s was exemplified by the celebration of the golden and diamond jubilees of the Queen rather than the centenary of the colony of New South Wales. The possibility of celebrating the foundation of the prison-society probably did not even occur to those authorities who were responsible for such things. There was simply

---

<sup>1</sup> The fountain and statue in the Botanic Gardens in Sydney, dedicated to Captain Arthur Phillip and erected in the 1890s, recognised his contribution to Empire rather than the founding of the colony. The iconography is laden with classical images of virtue, achievement and high learning. There are several panels of bas-relief which depict Aborigines in postures which emphasise the contemporary interest in native anatomy and habits.

no anniversary to be recognised, no tradition to be upheld. There were, however, statues to be erected, and when the dying-time came, it would be for ‘Throne and Country’.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s the debate about the ignoble and savage origins of British-Australia turns on the vexed question of whether the arrival of the First Fleet was a settlement or an invasion. In the 1890s, the tradition of Australian nationhood was yet to be invented but the manufacture of the ancient tradition of the monarchy had been well underway for a couple of generations.<sup>3</sup> So the high points of imperial desire corresponded with the concentrated invention of tradition, as flags, uniforms and state ceremonies were the most visible symbols of Albion’s celestial destiny.<sup>4</sup> Celebration of the jubilee was more appropriate to the loyal sons of Empire in the 1890s than the recognition of the foundation of the colony. This was because, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the nation-builders of the Australian colonial bourgeoisie had the need to undertake an historic project. This was a project to recover Australia from its haunted origins and from a sense of its deep rejection from the civilised world. Australia had been the fatal shore to which convicts, colonists and administrators had all been condemned. Transportation was a psychological condition as well as a prison sentence. By the 1890s there was an urgency in the political, cultural and historic task of the rehabilitation of Australia. The task was to remake the idea of Australia, to turn a prison for a continent into a nation for a continent. This was apparent in the energies of the emergent Left (the *Hummer*, the young Henry Lawson and the Progressive Political League among others) and of the Right (the parliaments, the old Henry Parkes and the Chambers of Commerce among others).

The abolition of transportation had been the necessary condition for the re-creation of Australia as a welcome participant in the history of civilisation, whether that be as a rough-cut independent society or as a genteel fragment of Empire. The gold rushes provided uncommon wealth and the priceless prestige of material blessing. Self-government followed gold. Wool and wheat could also suggest milk and honey. The land was no longer damned but blessed. For Calvinists and Catholics, souls were to be redeemed and the place was too. Great buildings were built and instruments of national development like railways, telegraphs, ports and wharves were proof of collective aspiration, achievement and identity. New universities, in the ancient English style, were part of the restitution as were the National Gallery, the Royal Society, the State Library and the Royal Botanic Gardens.<sup>5</sup> The Australian colonies were set to join the history of culture and progress of civilisation. According to Sir Graham Berry in Corowa, ‘Whenever the Colonies really federated and spoke [as] the united voice of AUSTRALIA it would not only raise them in the eyes of the mother country but in

---

<sup>2</sup> As inscribed on the Boer War Memorial in City Park, Launceston. Above the inscription is a figure of a soldier who is clearly a forebear of the ubiquitous World War 1 statuesque Digger who copped it for ‘King and Country’.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Nairn says of Ernest Jones’ essay, ‘The Psychology of Constitutional Monarchy’, ‘This complacent study depicted constitutional monarchy as “an index of a highly civilised relation between ... rulers and ruled”, unobtainable save in “a state that has attained the highest levels of civilisation”’. Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy*, Radius, London, 1988. p. 394. Marilyn Lake makes the interesting observation that, at present (1993), more men than women favour an Australian republic because of their anxieties and fantasies about the constitutional monarchy being embodied as a woman. ‘A Republic for Women’, *Arena Magazine*, no. 9, February/March, 1994, pp. 32–33.

<sup>4</sup> E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Eng., 1983.

<sup>5</sup> G. Nadel, *Australia’s Colonial Culture: Men, Ideas and Institutions in Mid-Nineteenth Century Eastern Australia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1957.

---

the eyes of every nation of the world. (Applause)<sup>6</sup> The delegates then sat down to a cold collation on the balcony of the Globe Hotel and toasted ‘Her Majesty, the Queen’.

Apart from the small ideological imperatives of the British Empire, world history and western civilisation, the need to reform and renew the institutions of government was increasingly urgent for political and financial reasons. These were the imperatives of capitalism. Banking, public finance, private finance and debt-servicing arrangements, with all the attendant juridical implications, were creating an increasingly complex (and potentially disastrous) political-economic web. The existing institutions of separate colonial government were not sufficiently robust to manage either the politics or the economics of progress. So, while federation, at one level, was a clerical arrangement between the colonies, it was also a business arrangement between Australian and British financial institutions. On yet another level it was a great national project of legitimation. Federation was about financing state-debt and was also the last stage in the emergence from the deep, dark convict shadow and thus an attempt to take a place in world affairs within the Empire.

Australia, as a constitutional entity, was invented in the 1890s (after a few false starts in the preceding decades). With that invention came another stage in the evolution of active citizenship within the culture of Australian politics. Herein lies the significance of the events at Corowa in 1893. On one level the Corowa conference was a meeting of shop-keepers, cockies, political urgers and jumped-up provincial lawyers (then again, all constitution-making is, and later some get themselves called ‘statesmen’). On another level the conference was an act of citizenship, which was republican in nature, as it entailed a conscious act of political self-creation. The conference was about the formation of the nation, the consolidation of institutions, the invention of governing instruments; it was a deliberative act of state-formation. The argument proposed here is about the Corowa conference as a republican act and a moment of participatory citizenship. The delegates to the conference certainly denied republican sentiments and expressed their loyalty to the crown, but the symbol and the deed were the things. The obvious point of qualification is the *WASPish* self-selection of the event, but this notwithstanding, the origins of a more democratic political culture were prefigured in Corowa in 1893.

### **Incubating the Citizen**

The connections between federation and republicanism have not generally been drawn; indeed, they have been seen as antithetical ideas in Australia. Yet there are republican elements in the Australian Constitution. Its creation entailed perhaps some of the most important acts of republicanism and citizenship in Australian history.<sup>7</sup> Historians of the Left (old and new) have characterised federation as a bourgeois plot designed to keep the workers down. They say that the Constitution was, if not just a risible and glorified dog act, then a cuff’n collar fortification against democratic reform. The labor tradition has maintained this

---

<sup>6</sup> James C. Leslie, *Official Report of the Federation Conference, Proceedings and Debates*, Free Press Office, Corowa, 1893, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> James Warden, ‘The fettered republic: The Anglo-American commonwealth and the traditions of Australian political thought’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 28, 1993, pp. 83–99.

argument about the document and its framing for generations.<sup>8</sup> Feminist historians have made the incontestable point that men did it with each other. Without debating the burden of these well-established arguments, the story of the federation movement and the creation of the Constitution nevertheless contains other elements which can be recovered, involving acts of popular will, democratic participation and republican virtue. The context is important. In the 1890s the process of constitution-making was more advanced in Australia than any country had hitherto experienced, in terms of the participation of citizens in the selection of those who framed the document, and later in the positive ratification of the Constitution. In world-historic terms the process of making the Australian Constitution was probably an unequalled exercise in democratic participation.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that the federal movement, and all it entailed, was an untrammelled exercise in democratic politics and popular progress, but that the participation of the people in the creation of the document was deemed not only desirable but necessary; even conservatives recognised and supported popular involvement.<sup>10</sup> Conservatives at the time were also in favour of busting the unions, busting a few heads and shooting to kill if necessary.<sup>11</sup> The big strikes were ground-down in the depth of the Depression while democratic principles were finding their way into parliamentary processes. Even so, by the mid-1890s, under the looming presence of the labour movement, popular assent had become the only mode of legitimation for the Constitution. According to Manning Clark, federation was, for George Reid, a ‘bastion of bourgeois power’ yet he still called volume five of *A History of Australia*, ‘The people make the laws’.<sup>12</sup>

Even if the people do make the laws, the question must be asked: which people? The answer is, mostly propertied men. Feminism is contesting the 1890s, as exemplified by the collection *Debutante Nation* (1993)<sup>13</sup>. The opening chapter in the book is a republication of Marilyn

---

<sup>8</sup> The labor attack on federation began with *The Hummer* (Wagga Wagga) 19 March 1892, and was continued by *Tocsin* and *The Worker* (Sydney and Brisbane), especially in the response to the 1898 draft constitution bill. Also L. Rosa, *The Federal Conspiracy*, Sydney, 1898; H.V. Evatt, *Australian Labor Leader: the Story of W. A. Holman and the Labour Movement*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1942; E.G. Whitlam, *The Constitution versus Labor*, A.L.P. Club/Melbourne University, Carlton Vic., 1957, and all the literature from the Labor side of the 1975 debate. The ALP dropped its policy pledge to abolish federalism and the Senate in 1980. See Brian Galligan and David Mardiste, *Labor’s Reconciliation with Federalism*, Federalism Research Centre, Canberra, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> The Constitution is, of course, an act of the British Parliament. Joe Chamberlain and the Colonial Office had their way with the draft, especially regarding the question of the appellate jurisdiction of the Privy Council. I am not suggesting that the Australian Constitution is a blissful act of Australian sovereignty but that the process in the late 1890s was necessarily participatory.

<sup>10</sup> The Constitution of the United States was drafted and ratified indirectly, by delegates of the states and by the state congresses. The British Constitution was underwritten by the abstract notion of consent and run by rotten boroughs. The Swiss Constitution perhaps rivals the Australian Constitution in the allowance for popular participation.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Griffith’s reputation as a liberal is perhaps protected, as he was absent from Queensland in 1894 when the shearers were on strike and 1200 troops were mobilised by the government and the pastoralists. The deputy premier Horace Tozer issued the order ‘shoot to kill on suspicion’. See R.B. Joyce, *Samuel Walker Griffith*, UQP, St Lucia, Qld., 1984, pp. 166–67.

<sup>12</sup> C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, vol. 5, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1981, p. 166.

<sup>13</sup> S. Magarey, S. Rowley and S. Sheridan (eds), *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1993. Women are given greater visibility in Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath and Marian Quartly, *Creating a Nation 1788–1990*, McPhee Gribble, Ringwood, Vic., 1994. The book is

---

Lake's 1986 article, 'The politics of respectability: Identifying the masculinist context'. Lake's essay has been influential in showing that Australian political history has been written of men, by men, for men. Women have been rendered invisible. Feminism is also contesting citizenship. Ursula Vogel has given an account of the history and politics of citizenship which is similarly a critique of the masculinist conceit which falsely generates then celebrates a universal citizen.<sup>14</sup> The citizen is a world historic figure who becomes 'every-person'.<sup>15</sup> That universal figure is, however, a masked man of property and the interests of all are actually the interests of him. *His* class, ethnic and gender interests are posited as the universal interests and this purported universality becomes an ideological bastion against the interests of the rest. Deviance from the norm is punishable. Corowa was of course no exception to the politics of masculinist and bourgeois respectability and the identification of the republican and democratic elements in the event does not remove it from that context.<sup>16</sup> The *Argus* account of the Corowa conference typically conjured 'the men' into 'the people': 'There can be no constitution brought into force which is not the absolutely free choice of the people after full deliberation.'<sup>17</sup> The *Age* reported how there was to be provision for the Constitution to be submitted to 'the vote of the people' on 'the principle of one man one vote'.<sup>18</sup> This was standard practice, yet, in comparison with earlier versions of deliberative state-formation and constitution-making, both within the Empire and in western political history generally, the Corowa conference was participatory. Within the masculinist and bourgeois confines of colonial political respectability it was a democratic and republican exercise.

To pass such events off as irredeemably conservative and tainted is to lose much of the context of the emergence of a broader, more inclusive democratic politics in Australia.<sup>19</sup> The bearded blokes of the federation movement have been sniggered at by the Left for generations, but within their restricted colonial liberalism was an unwitting democratic dialectic. The trick for democratic politics, over the ensuing generations, was to sever the

---

subtitled 'A dramatic new history that challenges the conventional view of Australia's past as a creation of white men of British descent.'

<sup>14</sup> Ursula Vogel, 'Is Citizenship Gender-specific?' in U. Vogel and M. Moran (eds), *The Frontiers of Citizenship*, Macmillan, London, 1991, pp. 58–85.

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of liberal notions of contract, obligation and inclusion including citizenship see Carole Pateman, *The Problem of Political Obligation*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, and *The Disorder of Women*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> At Corowa, Mr Dowling said that he had travelled throughout the United States and he was impressed by the depth of understanding that children had of political matters. 'Even girls in schools were well up on matters of a constitutional nature.' James C. Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Argus*, 3 August 1893, pp. 5–6, reprinted in *The New Federation Movement: from the Corowa Conference, 1st August 1893, to the A. N. A. Conference, 27th March, 1894*, Bendigo League, Bendigo, Vic., 1894.

<sup>18</sup> 'The new federation movement', *Age*, 22 November 1893, pp. 6–7.

<sup>19</sup> Understanding the running battles and the sieges of Australian historiography is important here. Old left, new left and feminist accounts of the good, the bad and the ugly have mostly construed federation as bad and ugly; only wimpy liberals and mindless reactionaries have been the apologists for federation and its dead-white-bearded-men. Federation, on this basis, was a loss for labour and women especially, and to argue for a different version was to risk being branded a running-dog apologist for men of property.



nexus between property, gender, ethnicity and the right of political participation. Demolishing the myth of a universal citizen allows the emergence of an ideal of citizenship in which diversity rather than deviance is recognised. Thus feminism contests the 1990s, gay men in Tasmania contest their criminalisation, Aboriginal people contest title, and others contest the reduction of the national estate to woodchips in the national interest.

While the Corowa conference was an event which bespoke citizenship and republicanism, it was also deeply entrenched in the broader acres of colonial ideology. On the one side, in 1893, was the unconscious republican activity of the delegates to Corowa and on the other was the aggressive deliberate republicanism of Henry Lawson. With Corowa, there was a disguised republican act of popular constitution-making whereas with Lawson there was an alienated declamatory act of composition and rebellion. In June 1893, at the time that the Corowa delegates were preparing to assemble in the first people's convention, Lawson published in the *Sydney Worker* a fantasy of French revolutionary republicanism, 'The Waving of the Red':

Last night as I lay sleeping out a vision came to me:  
a girl with a face as fair and grand as ever a man might see.  
Her form was like the statues raised to Liberty in France,  
and in her hand a blood-red flag was wrapped about a lance.  
She shook the grand old colour loose, she smiled at me and said:  
'Go bid your brothers gather for the Waving of the Red'.<sup>20</sup>

Lawson's eroticised republicanism was explicit and, he hoped, offensive to the loyalists, monarchists and bosses. Lawson's version is identified as the radical republican strain in Australian political history and has usually been associated with arguments for socialism and democracy, yet this radicalism was also bound up with the racism of White Australia and misogyny of mateship.<sup>21</sup> In May 1892 he published 'The Old Rebel Flag in the Rear: A May-Day Song':

A king may be great in a country  
That cheers when a monarch is crowned,  
But still, in his capital city,  
the flag of the rebel is found.  
A people may boast a Republic,  
Where Liberty dies in a year;  
But close on their flag comes that stubborn old rag,  
the Old Rebel Flag in the Rear.

We sing of the Queen of England

---

<sup>20</sup> Henry Lawson *Collected Works*, ed. Colin Roderick, vol. 1, Angus and Robertson, London and Sydney, 1981, p. 235. Roderick notes that 'The Waving of the Red' was 'accompanied in *The Worker* by a prose article by Lawson, entitled, "A Leader of the Future", which reveals the historical origin of his ideas of revolution ... and the amorphous nature of his notions of government. Lawson's article was inspired by a poem of the same name by Arthur Desmond.' (p. 445). Lawson's French republican inspirations can also be seen in 'The Australian Marsaillaise: or, A Song for the Sydney Poor', p. 87.

<sup>21</sup> Kay Schaffer, 'Henry Lawson, the drover's wife and the critics', in *Debutante Nation: Feminism Contests the 1890s*, op. cit., pp. 199–210.

---

Her banner that flaunts in the van;  
Yet out from the slums of her capital comes  
That vengeful red banner of man!  
Lift up the proud Union of England,  
And bear it along with a cheer,  
But England! take care in your triumph, for there  
Is the Old Rebel Flag in the Rear.<sup>22</sup>

Lawson's strident republicanism was consistent with a radical nationalist politics, but there have been many forms of Australian republicanism and the Corowa events fall within that broad sweep. If the republicanism of Lawson was sharp and aggressive, then the republicanism of the Corowa conference was muted and disguised.<sup>23</sup> The delegates almost certainly did not see themselves engaging in republican activity nor in an act of nascent citizenship. The delegates probably did not recognise the similarity between the form of their meeting at Corowa and the form of the conventions which met to draft the Constitution of the United States in Philadelphia.

A defining quality of a democratic-republican constitution is, of course, the character of public office. Those offices are to be filled democratically rather than by patrilineal monarchical descent. More importantly, however, the republican constitution is defined in an act of self-creation and this is the nub of the issue; the authority of the state and its offices are derived from popular assent. Republicanism entails *vox populi* and *res publica*. The delegates to Corowa were certainly loyal to the crown but the structure and form of their act was republican in nature even if the conference terminated with three cheers for 'Her Majesty Queen Victoria'.<sup>24</sup> The expressed loyalty of the delegates does not alter the republican quality of their political act, but it remains subliminal. They did not identify themselves as republicans, but under this analysis that does not alter the import of the conference. Nor is the political orientation of the delegates in question, as they were from conventional and deeply respectable associations. The Report lists them: the several branches of the Australasian Federation League; several branches of the Australian Natives Association; the Cobram Progress Association; the Young Victorian Patriotic League; the Germantown Progress Committee; the Chamber of Commerce; the Imperial Federation League; the Protection, Federation and Liberal League; the Chamber of Manufactures; the Commercial Travellers Association; the United Shire of Beechworth; the Cootamundra Municipality; the Tooma Progress Committee and last (and probably least) the Progressive Political League. This was not a meeting of rebellious republicans, although E.W. O'Sullivan MLA was there and he had been a member of the short-lived Republican Union of 1887.<sup>25</sup> O'Sullivan told the Conference

---

<sup>22</sup> Henry Lawson, *Collected Works*, op. cit., p. 201. Also see 'A Song of the Republic', p. 1, 'The English Queen: A Birthday Ode', p. 204, and 'Republican Pioneers'.

<sup>23</sup> D. Headon, J. Warden and W. Gammage (eds), *Crown or Country: The Traditions of Australian Republicanism*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994.

<sup>24</sup> James C. Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> See Mark McKenna 'Tracking the Republic' in Headon, Warden and Gammage, *Crown or Country*, op. cit., pp. 17–18. Another republican, Andrew Inglis Clark, the Tasmanian Attorney General and largely unsung author of the first draft of the Australian Constitution, was eager to attend the Corowa Conference but could not coordinate travel arrangements. James C. Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit., p. 18. For an account of Clark's

he ‘preferred a Republican form of government, but he said he was quite prepared to work under any. (Applause)’<sup>26</sup> The other avowed republican at the conference was Dr William Maloney, representing the Protection, Liberal and Federation League of Melbourne. Maloney said ‘he believed that Australia was marching towards a republic.’ (Cries of ‘No, No’, ‘Question’ and ‘Chair’.) He was ruled out of order. O’Sullivan and Maloney, otherwise, seem to have been well behaved and when the cheering-time came they perhaps even joined in.

## **Republicanism and Citizenship in Australian History**

The dominant conception of republicanism in Australian historiography has been of a strident and stropy nationalism which was anti-British and anti-monarchical, as found in the rhymes of the young Henry Lawson. This caricature has prevented a full appreciation of the latent republicanism in Australian history. Popular participatory politics has generally been interpreted within the concepts of democracy and liberalism rather than republicanism.<sup>27</sup> An example is John Hirst’s fine book *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy* (1988). Hirst was the convenor in 1993 of the Australian Republican Movement in Victoria, a nominee to Paul Keating’s republican advisory committee in the early 1990s and a self-identified conservative. He wrote about the emergence of democratic politics in nineteenth century Australia without fully developing the relationship between democratic participation and republicanism. This is explicable given the lack of understanding we have had, until recently, about Australia’s republican heritage.<sup>28</sup> The federation conference at Corowa has not been identified as a republican moment nor has it been associated with citizenship. So, what has the concept of citizenship generally meant in Australian history?

Citizenship, in Australian political science and historiography, has generally been interpreted within the debate about ‘race’, empire and national identity rather than in the context of political acts of self-creation. These concepts need to be disentangled. On one hand the debate about citizenship, until very recently, has been reduced to a legislative definition.<sup>29</sup> On the other, self-creation has been celebrated as conquest of the land and the cultivation of national character in the wars and in the bush. Neither self-creation nor citizenship has generally been linked with republicanism. Citizenship has languished as a juridical concept while self-creation was a supposedly apolitical act of national development. As for self-creation, there are a number of contending myths about national identity which are entwined in this dream. Here dwells the Australian Legend and its corollary the Anzac Legend. In these legends there

---

contribution to the Constitution and his republicanism see M. Haward and J. Warden (eds), *An Australian Democrat: the Life and Legacy of Andrew Inglis Clark*, Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> James C. Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit., p. 20. O’Sullivan then warned the conference about the growing menace of the Chinese nation, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> See John Hirst, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1988.

<sup>28</sup> See *Australian Journal of Political Science*, special issue on Republicanism, 1993; Headon, Warden and Gammage, *Crown or Country*, op. cit.; G. Winterton (ed.), *We, the People*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994, and Alan Atkinson’s wonderfully entitled *The Muddle-Headed Republic*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, which has a less than wonderful argument.

<sup>29</sup> For an account of the scope of citizenship by an Australian author which deserves wider currency in the debate over the republic, see J.M. Barbalet, *Citizenship*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1988.

---

is a self-sufficient, inventive bloke who remakes his environment with a gun, a dog, a swag, a camp oven, a broad axe, a few wedges, a few mates from nearby, a waterbag, a couple of pounds of four-inch nails and eventually a chain-saw and a dozer. That bloke could do almost anything with a bit of fencing wire, a length of hemp rope and the back of the axe. His is the identity of the *Lone Hand* and the sacred rite of mateship. But in that social economy the citizen/soldier could not remake his political environment other than to get the vote and perhaps strike for wages and conditions if he sold his labour-power. He was not a political agent insofar as his readiness with his hands and his fists was not commensurate with a readiness to act in the polis. His acts of self-creation were restricted to transforming the landscape from which he then emerged, rough-hewn, as a mythic figure.

Cutting across this image of the self-created Australian, was W.K. Hancock's argument that the state was a vast public utility to serve the interests of the majority of the people. The provision of public utility led to a lack of initiative on the part of the people and, by extrapolation, diminished the scope for citizens to act in the polis. According to Hancock, Australians 'expect a public utility to be useful to their individual and particular interests.' He continued:

One thinks of Wentworth's description of Australian Governments—'indulgent nursing fathers'. Perhaps it is a fraud to assert that there is such a thing as Australian socialism. It would be truer to speak of Australian paternalism.<sup>30</sup>

The state would provide, especially if there was a railway line to be built somewhere. State socialism diminished the possibility of the self-created community and there could never be enough railway lines. More recently, since the early 1980s, the liberal individualists who drove the economic rationalist campaign have linked their own ascetic economic manias to a version of Hancock's dependency argument and ranted against the legacy of social and market protectionism. Australians, they argue, have been too closely nurtured by the state and have lost initiative in a market which has been saturated by state activity. 'The trouble with this country' say the money-men in suits 'is the lack of incentive.' It needed what John Howard called 'incentivation'. The liberal individualist line of argument was to rearm the individual by demolishing the welfare state and minimising taxation. There could never be too many railway lines to close down.<sup>31</sup>

So, this self-created Australian legend has not generally been linked with citizenship and republicanism, but with the state, progress and character (that is, blokes cutting down trees). The use of citizenship has been confined to a juridical definition, to the legacies of White Australia, racial discrimination, and 'selective migration' (*vide* the late 1980s immigration debate). Who is a citizen? Who is white? Who can pass the dictation test? What are they entitled to? Under what basis do some slip through the customs houses and quarantine

---

<sup>30</sup> W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, Ernest Benn, London, 1930, pp. 135, 140.

<sup>31</sup> The republican association with liberal capitalism has a pedigree. Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* is inimitably linked to the rise of liberal republicanism, as the year 1776 also produced Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*. Both the long tract and the short one were concerned with the monopoly power of the court and King and with the free expression of political and economic values as expressed by the emergent trading class. Republicanism, the market and self-creation have long been necessary playthings of the bourgeoisie.

stations of ethnic selectivity? Can subjects be citizens?<sup>32</sup> The notion of citizenship here has been one of characterisation or definition or classification, rather than of civic activity. Citizenship, in this conceptual lineage, was about legislative definition not the self-created political life directed at changing the law, changing the government or smashing the state. The demonstrator at the Moratorium rally in 1970, for example, was seen by legislators and interpreters to be engaging in an act of rebellion rather than an act of citizenship. The Franklin blockaders were universally regarded as greenies but never as republicans. Similarly the achievement of citizenship by Aboriginal people is seen as the Commonwealth parliamentary ‘Act’ of citizenship. The moments of citizenship are said to be in 1948, when citizenship status was granted; or in 1967 when the Constitution was amended to revoke section 127, thereby including Aboriginal people in the census; or in 1983 when voting was made compulsory for Aborigines in federal elections. This definition again obscures the real acts of citizenship which are then just footnoted and marginalised. The real moments of citizenship in the black history of Australia were not in Canberra in 1948 or 1967, when the Governor-General proclaimed the Acts, but in the strike at Wave Hill, in the protest in 1938 over the sesqui-centenary, in the freedom rides through New South Wales, in the formation of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship in 1956, and in countless other heroic moments of organised protest and private resistance.<sup>33</sup> There is a lingering racism and paternalism in conceiving of the citizenship of Aboriginal people as contained in the legislative act; an absurdity and hubris in seeing the achievement of citizenship in the technicality of the passage of the bill and the signature of the Governor-General in Government House. There can be no clearer instance of dictionaries and statutes as instruments of repression than in the characterisation of the citizenship status of Aboriginal people. The realisation of citizenship does not rest in a legislated status but in political action. Citizenship can be only granted by legislators insofar as our understanding of the concept lies in regulation and definition rather than in the political life of the nation. Citizenship is about acts of political self-creation, like the Gurindji reclamation at Wattie Creek, not about legislative or bureaucratic rules; it is about action not classification. As Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody wrote of Wattie Creek in ‘From Little Things Big Things Grow’:

The Gurindji were working for nothing but rations  
Where once they had gathered the wealth of the land  
Daily the pressure got tighter and tighter

---

<sup>32</sup> John Hirst, ‘Can Subjects be Citizens?’ in Headon, Warden and Gammage, *Crown or Country*, op. cit., pp. 118–123.

<sup>33</sup> The second reading debate over the 1967 referendum only drew seven speakers in the House of Representatives. According to Mr Katter (Kennedy): ‘We see in them a simple loyalty that is always beyond question ... If the white-Australia policy were applied to my town, we would be segregated. This is true. We, the white people would be segregated. So, in effect discrimination does not really exist’. *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, H. of R., 1 March 1967, pp. 286–87. For a somewhat different account see Faith Bandler and Len Fox (eds), *The Time was Ripe: A History of the Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship (1956–1969)*, Alternative Publishing Co-operative, 1983. Discrimination did actually exist in Western Australia. *The Natives (Citizenship Rights) Act 1944* (W.A.) allowed for a stipendiary magistrate to grant a certificate of citizenship to a ‘native’, which gave a right to vote under the WA *Electoral Act* if he was satisfied that the person had dissolved all tribal association, adopted the ‘manner and habits of civilised life’, could speak and understand English, was of good health, and was industrious. The certificate could be revoked if the holder was not adopting the ‘manner and habits of civilised life’, was convicted of two minor offences or contracted a specified contagious disease. The Act was repealed in 1971. See Beth Gaze and Melinda Jones, *Law, Liberty and Australian Democracy*, Law Book Company, North Ryde, NSW, 1990, pp. 90–91.

---

Gurindji decided they must make a stand

They picked up their swags and started off walking  
At Wattie Creek they sat themselves down  
Now it don't sound like much but it sure got tongues talking  
Back at the homestead and then in the town.

• • • • •  
Then Vincent Lingiari boarded an aeroplane  
Landed in Sydney, big city of lights  
And daily he went round softly speaking his story  
To all kinds of men from all walks of life

And Vincent sat down with big politicians  
This affair they told him is a matter of state  
Let us sort this out, your people are hungry  
Vincent said no thanks we know how to wait

• • • • •  
Eight years went by, eight long years of waiting  
Till one day a tall stranger appeared in the land  
And he came with lawyers and he came with great ceremony  
And through Vincent's fingers he poured an handful of sand.

That was the story of Vincent Lingiari  
But this is the story of something much more  
How power and privilege can not move a people  
Who know where they stand and stand in the law.<sup>34</sup>

This is a story about big things like history, resistance and racism but it is also about citizenship. The 1967 referendum was not a source but a culmination of a citizenship claim by Aboriginal people in their own land. That strike and all the other incidents were the transcendent acts and the subsequent legislation was just the paper work.<sup>35</sup>

The prior characterisation of citizenship, as something granted by government through an act of parliament or the regulation of a minister, has been sustained by the older narrower conception of political history in Australia. Until Marxism and feminism contested the characterisation of political history, it was taken to be the notable words and deeds of great men like Sir Henry Parkes and Sir Edmund Barton, or of the pioneering men who opened up the hinterland. Such liberal historiography contributed to the confinement of events like the Corowa conference to the footnotes of the federation movement and the margins of republican-democratic politics. The intention of this argument, it must be stressed, is not to

---

<sup>34</sup> Paul Kelly and the Messengers, *Comedy*: Mushroom/Control, 1991. According to the disc notes: "From Little Things Big Things Grow" is dedicated to Vincent Lingiari, the Gurindji stockmen and their families who walked off Lord Vestey's cattle station in 1966, thus initiating a land claim that lasted eight years. The Whitlam government handed back much of the Gurindji country in 1974, Gough Whitlam himself pouring dirt into Vincent Lingiari's cupped hands in a ceremony symbolising the legal restoration of their lands. From this simple action of walking off in 1966 many consequences flowed.'

<sup>35</sup> The late Frank Hardy told the story in *The Unlucky Australians*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1968.

elevate the men of the Corowa conference to great-dead-White status but to identify the inherent process of political involvement as an act of citizenship. Again, the trick is to link citizenship with democratic participatory politics and with republicanism, whether pursued by the cuff'n collar push at Corowa or those, like Vincent Lingiari, who 'had no bank balance, hard dirt was his floor'.

### **Republicanism and Citizenship at the Corowa Conference**

There is a bonzer cartoon from the mid-1960s by Les Tanner of HMQUEII knighting a genuflecting chap. An onlooker, a Knight Commander-something-or-other with sash and gong, says to a similar chap, 'It's for service to the cause of Republicanism.'<sup>36</sup> The genuflecting chap could well be Dr/Sir John Quick, who was knighted in 1901 for his services to the cause of federation. Yet his actions at the Corowa conference, under this analysis, were about popular sovereignty, citizenship and republicanism. With Quick's motions the federal conference at Corowa was perhaps the first substantial and considered act of constitutional self-determination in Australia.<sup>37</sup> It was, therefore, a republican act. Quick moved:

That in the opinion of this Conference the legislature of each Australasian colony should pass an act providing for the election of representatives to attend a statutory convention or congress to consider and adopt a bill to establish a federal constitution for Australia, and upon the adoption of such bill or measure it be submitted by some process of referendum to the verdict of each colony.<sup>38</sup>

Provision for elected representatives at a convention to draft a Constitution for the people of the states of Australia can be nothing other than a republican act. Abraham Lincoln was a republican and had remarked at Gettysburg that the fight had been so that 'government of the people by the people and for the people shall not perish from this earth.' If the Corowa Convention is understood to be within this heritage then conclusions about citizenship and republicanism must follow, including its male character. The process of selecting delegates to a constitutional convention was democratic, but at that stage still flawed by the restriction to a male franchise. The adoption of the final document was to be by popular assent (again with the same flaw).<sup>39</sup> The democratic basis of constitution-making was here bound up with the question of voting rights. The adoption of the universal franchise in South Australia in 1894 became the lever in the fulcrum of federation. Without that lever it may have been easier to standardise the railway-gauge than the franchise. With federation and the consequential amendments to state electoral acts, the electoral roll was no longer a sex role.

---

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Dutton (ed.), *Australia and the Monarchy*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1966, p. 91.

<sup>37</sup> There are other contenders, especially surrounding the grant of self-government and the end of transportation, but public meetings and petitions are not the same as a conference of delegates expressly meeting to establish a constitutional framework.

<sup>38</sup> James C. Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> Audrey Oldfield, *Woman Suffrage in Australia: A Gift or a Struggle*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1992.

---

The idea of democratic republicanism is founded in popular sovereignty while the ancient republican constitution is founded in the balance of institutions to protect against tyranny. Classical republicanism would allow for a Prince or a Queen in the constitution as long as the state was balanced. The Australian constitutionalists were certainly within the lineage of classical republicanism (as is the English Constitution) but they were also within the line of democratic republicanism, if not overtly. While the loyal delegates still preferred a monarch in a balanced constitution there was also, crucially, to be a direct choice by the people of that constitution. In contemporary terms a constitution which places an English Queen in the Parliament of Australia cannot be republican, but that constitution can still be derived from within a republican heritage.

Dr Quick had earlier invoked the citizenry in stating the aims and objects of the Federation League:

To advance the cause of the Federation of the Australian colonies by an organisation of citizens owning no class distinctions or party influence, which shall use its best energies to assist Parliamentary action, from whatever source proceeding calculated to further the common aim Australian union.<sup>40</sup>

A vision splendid of the people, unencumbered by class distinctions and party affiliations, is just a liberal abstraction, as 'the people' cannot shed their class affiliations any more than they can shed their gender, their tastes or their parentage. Quick was, however, proposing a foundation for the republic in a social contract. Similar social contract theories of liberal constitutionalism are based on the rationality, neutrality and best interests of 'everyman' as espoused by the likes of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. The republics of the English Commonwealth and the United States were founded on the idea of the citizen pursuing a common aim of union. The republicanism of those commonwealths lay in the denial of tyranny, for tyranny was the opposite of the republic. Tyranny, in this case, was perpetuated in the whims and fancies of the monarch who sought to rule without the constraints of balancing forces, like parliament, courts of law and the people.<sup>41</sup> Modern republicanism is about the democratic participation of the people and it also embraces the classical Anglo/American constitutional notion of balance between institutions of the state. Corowa is the place in Australia where classical constitutional republicanism meets democratic republicanism.

The preface to the Official Report of the Corowa Conference states that it was 'the first popular gathering in favour of Australian Unity'.<sup>42</sup> Edward Wilson, the secretary of the conference, wrote in the preface that in December 1892 the Attorney-General of New South Wales, Edmund Barton, had paid a 'missionary visit to Corowa and Albury, and addressed public meetings'. Federation Leagues were formed in the border-land in the wake of Barton's visit and became affiliated under the banner of 'The Australian Federation League'. By the

---

<sup>40</sup> James C. Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> For elaboration of this argument in the Australian context see Warden, 'The fettered republic', op.cit. The source of the argument is J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1975.

<sup>42</sup> James C. Leslie, *Official Report*, op. cit. p. 3.



end of May 1893 there were fifteen branches in the valley of the Murray. In June, the Berrigan branch proposed a conference as a ‘means of ascertaining the views and wishes of the people and bringing the movement into prominence.’ There were 74 delegates at Corowa, of whom 43 were direct deputies from the branches of the League, and the remaining 31 attended as representatives of other bodies and associations.

On Monday night of the Conference a crowded public meeting was held, at which resolutions in favour of the immediate union of Australia were proposed and spoken to by the Ministerialists in attendance and other politicians, and carried unanimously amidst enthusiastic cheering. The recognised point of the Conference was to engage the people in all stages of the formation of the Constitution. Quick had earlier in the day supported his motion with the following argument:

Dr Quick believed all present would agree with him when he said the time had now arrived when it was necessary to devise ways and means for giving expression to what they all so much desired. (Hear, hear). This resolution, he considered, embraced the main business of the Convention. In subsection (a) reference was made to organisations of citizens, and this struck the keynote of the whole thing. The main principle was that the cause should be advocated by the citizens and not merely by politicians, and it was not merely a question for citizens in one place or one colony to deal with, but in every place throughout the whole of the Australasian colonies. (Applause).

Quick’s republicanism could hardly be clearer in his ‘keynote’ and ‘main principle’. He continued:

... steps would be taken immediately to bring about an Australian Congress of delegates, whose commission would be directly from the people to formulate a federal constitution. It went almost without saying that federation must be essentially a question for the people to deal with.

Dr Maloney had ruled himself out of order on the republic. He was howled down for using the dreaded word. Dr Quick, however, was applauded and unanimously supported for directing the future of the federation movement along republican lines. Those Corowa delegates who had cried out ‘No’ to Maloney were instilled with the cult of imperial loyalty and the fear of Fenianism. This was the basis of their anti-republicanism but they were republican in their attitude to the processes of drafting and legitimating the Constitution.

The argument of this paper has been with the nascence of democratic republicanism and participatory citizenship. While the conference was a limited exercise, carried along by the pretension and puffery of the colonial merchants and provincial solicitors who ran the federation movement, it was also the first formal meeting to direct constitutional development into the spheres of democratic republican politics. The essence of republicanism in its modern democratic form is in the self-creation of the polity. A modern republican constitution is founded in popular sovereignty. The colonial and monarchical features of the Australian Constitution are there, but the republican and democratic elements are also evident. The loyal sons of empire on the Murray in 1893 may well be dismayed to be called republicans, and

---

Australian historians and political scientists have not generally associated the federation movement with republicanism or citizenship. Yet the Corowa conference of 31 July and 1 August 1893 was deeply enmeshed with both of these concepts.

In driving into the township of Corowa, the road-signs read 'birthplace of federation'. This claim is a bit cheeky as Tenterfield has a prior claim on that title because Citizen Parkes (the Father of Federation) had made his 'oration' there in 1889 to a few locals and a drover's dog. The older moniker for Corowa was 'cradle of federation'. A cradle is a more elegant simile anyway, given that no-one knows the identity of the mother of federation. The good citizens of Corowa could well change the signs: 'Welcome to Corowa: Cradle of the Republic'.

## **The Prime Minister's Centenary Dinner Speech —Corowa, 31 July 1993**

*Paul Keating*

It is a great pleasure to be in this very beautiful, historic, classic Australian town. It is particularly good to be here to join in the commemoration of the moment a hundred years ago when Corowa was host to one of the more important gatherings in our nation's history: a meeting which, in a combination of national idealism and equally characteristic pragmatism, helped propel Australia towards nationhood. Enough of the Victorian architecture has been preserved, enough families have remained, enough memories handed down for Corowa to still speak eloquently of the past.

And then there is the river: the Murray tells a story of its own, including of course the part it played in the federation of the continent. For it was the dividing line between the two most populous and prosperous colonies and, in 1893, on the other side at Wahgunyah there was a customs shed, a real and symbolic manifestation of the divisions the people of Australia had to overcome. You don't have to look hard in towns like this to see the labour that has been done, and the aspirations of those who did it. Far more than in the cities and the suburbs, you can sense the traditions born here of work and leisure, of individual enterprise and community cooperation, of a common effort through good times and bad.

In one sense the story is all Corowa's own. In another it is a typically Australian story. The monuments to war, for instance, can be seen in every Australian town. They bear witness to the sacrifice of families in this region, but also to the common cause Australians *everywhere* recognised in times of crisis. There are other kinds of monuments: monuments to imagination and effort, monuments to belief in the region's future, and ultimately in *Australia's* future. I mean the farms, this township, the industries, the clubs. And it is useful to reflect on how they

---

came to be. What were the essential elements in their success? The answer is: private initiative, public cooperation, loyalty and commitment to the region, confidence, belief. In every Australian community you will see the same combination of elements, and over time, they form a collective national experience.

For all our disparity—including the great gulf between rural and urban—there is in the end a collective Australian experience which should unite us. Nationally, we have shared in triumphs—in sport, in the arts, in industry and science. But the greatest by far is the creation over the years of one of the world's great democracies, one of the great multicultural societies, and surely the very best place in the world to live. And we have done this substantially because our effort in the last century has generally been towards including all Australians in Australia's wealth. This is a loose federation on a vast and varied continent whose population is immensely diverse in origin and culture. These factors can encourage division or fragmentation—they can encourage jealousy and rivalry, between states, between cities, between the urban population and the people in the country. There is always that tendency, latent or real. But the great majority of Australians understand, as the founders of federation understood, that we work much better when we work as one nation. These individual and collective efforts, these successes and failures, constitute the unifying experience of our national life. Whether we live in Corowa or Darwin—or Wahgunyah—this is the story of us all, and the means by which we recognise each other as Australians. And this gives us strength.

This and future generations living here in Corowa will continue to draw their strength from these traditions and from their love of the country, and it will be this as much as anything else which carries the district through another century. But I daresay if the people of Corowa were asked what most concerns them today, it would not be the past but the future: What industries will employ them and their children? What businesses will grow to replace those in decline? How will the future of Corowa be secured? They are the same questions which Australians are asking everywhere—in every town and suburb, in every factory and farm. How will the future of Australia be secured? It is a question which every generation has asked, including the generation of 1893. They had every reason to ask: they were living through the worst depression in our history, the worst civil strife and the worst drought. The answer to the question in 1893 or 1933 or even 1963 tended to be—by secure British markets for our agricultural products, by the protection of local industry, by the exploitation of our minerals and energy. But by 1973 the secure British markets for Australian agriculture had gone. It was becoming plain that protection had left our industries hopelessly uncompetitive. And dependence on commodities left us still exposed to the uncertainties of world markets.

So if Britain would no longer secure our future, nor the United States or any other country, and our commodities alone would not alone secure it, and wholesale protection of our industries would not, how could it be secured? The answer was, and remains, by our own efforts, by our own imagination, by grasping the opportunities which our region provides, by confidence in ourselves and our best traditions, by belief. By those same familiar things which carry Corowa through. And I know we will secure the future. I know we can be prosperous as never before. We can find a place in the world as never before. We can find it primarily in our own region, in that part of the world which the Australians of a century ago looked at with a mixture of fear and disdain. We can secure our future in the huge and rapidly growing Asia-Pacific region. And in the rest of the world. And I'll tell you why I know this. Because of the success we have already had.

In 1993 we are losing industries but gaining new ones. We are replacing old markets with new ones. We are steadily growing less dependent on commodities. We are growing new companies—clever manufacturing companies, born entirely of the export culture created in the last decade. In the last five years they have boosted their exports to Asia by an average 20 per cent per annum. They are exporting elaborately transformed manufactures. High tech products. Last year exports of elaborately transformed manufactures to Europe rose by more than 20 per cent; to South East Asia by 17 per cent; to East Asia by more than 40 per cent. The opportunities for Australian companies in Asia and the Pacific are boundless, and as we continue to transform ourselves into a competitive and sophisticated manufacturing nation, and a leading supplier of services as well as agricultural products, minerals and energy, we will begin to see the huge rewards to be reaped from the changes we made in the eighties. And I might say the great agricultural regions of Australia, regions like this one, food-growing regions, will play a pre-eminent role in the future. That is why I believe we will succeed: because of the success we have already achieved. Because of the proven willingness of the Australian people to embrace change. Because when faced with necessity they were prepared to do what was necessary. So while the answer to the question has varied with time, one thing has not changed: the future of Australia, like the future of Corowa, will be made safe by the enterprise and work of the people. And by their faith in themselves, in their communities and in Australia. We will always need that faith. In this last decade of the twentieth century we have a chance the like of which the Australians of a century ago could not have imagined. There is the chance to succeed in the world's fastest growing region, and to do it by our own initiative, our own effort, our own genius. There is, as I have said before, the chance in this decade to set Australia up for the next century. I can tell you that that is my one great goal. It is the Government's goal. But reaching it, needless to say, will depend on it becoming the goal of all Australians.

Last week I made again the point that I have made many times in the past eighteen months: to meet the challenges we face we need a renewed sense of national unity. I quoted someone who I am sure retains more than a little respect in this district, Robert Gordon Menzies. It was Menzies who talked about the need to convert 'a mass of individuals into a great cohesive nation'. Menzies understood the power that a common national sentiment commands. And even if there is little else he said with which I would agree, I agree with him on this. Of course, he saw the British monarchy as the powerful unifying element. But these days, while the British monarch still has our affection and our regard, there is no question that the monarchy commands much less of both. In truth I think this decline has less to do with the problems the royal family has recently faced, than it has to do with changes in Australia, changes in the relationship between Australia and Great Britain, and an understanding in both countries of the different necessities we face. The monarchy has had family problems at other times in the past, but Australians did not draw the conclusion that the monarchy had lost its relevance. Today they draw that conclusion because the monarchy is remote from their lives and perceived as inappropriate to the sort of nation we must become. If the challenge is to enliven our spirit, to create a new unity of purpose, to make this a more inclusive Australia, or to use Menzies' words, to convert a 'mass of individuals into a great cohesive nation'—there is only one place it can come from. Australia. From faith in this democracy. Our shared values and hopes, shared understanding of our past and the necessities which confront us. That is why I believe Australian affairs should be managed by Australians. It is why I am for a republic. Not because I am against Britain—I like Britain very much. I was raised on her heritage and the exploits of British heroes and remain a grateful and, in many regards, a

---

passionate advocate of things British—from the parliament and law bequeathed us to the art and architecture and music. But Australia’s diverse heritage is uniquely our own. So in many respects is our democratic heritage: it includes not just the fabled spirit of the ‘fair go’ and the collective egalitarian tradition, but a number of constitutional innovations which were achieved here well in advance of Britain—among them the secret ballot, payment of MPs, universal male suffrage and votes for women. Nor am I against the British monarch—I count myself among her countless Australian admirers. But the Queen of Australia is not Australian and, however conscientiously and skilfully she performs the role of Australian Head of State, she cannot symbolise or express our Australianness. Nor am I against the British monarchy—the British monarchy works in Britain. But it is a hereditary British institution and in the multicultural post-imperial world in which we live and, with all the regional imperatives now facing us, it no longer constitutes an appropriate Australian Head of State. Nor am I against the British Commonwealth of Nations—Australia, so long as I am Prime Minister, will remain in the Commonwealth. Membership of the Commonwealth—comprised of more republics than any other category of government—is not part of the argument. Nor do I think the republican debate distracts from the economic problems which currently beset us—it is no more a distraction for Australians than federation was for those Australians of the 1890s whose economic problems make ours seem insignificant. And, as Barry Jones said the other day, we don’t hear people saying that we should give up all sport until the economy improves, though much more time is spent on sport than the Constitution. Nor am I for the republic because I am against the states—like many Australians I am conscious of the shortcomings of the federal system, and I would like to see regions like this one given a more dynamic political role. But I believe the states are an organic part of the Australian nation and quite possibly inseparable from it. I do not believe they could be easily abolished even if the nation thought it was worth doing.

Some say the republic will undermine our stability. I value stability and place the highest value on the social peace we enjoy in Australia. To the extent that British institutions have contributed to this—I appreciate that too. But Australian institutions also gave us these things. The idea of social justice, and government policies which gave that idea concrete expression, played a major part in our stability. We did not build this stable, sophisticated and harmonious multicultural society with British institutions half so much as we built it with Australian principles and policies. It is also said by opponents of the republic that it is primarily a manifestation of my ambition. Insofar as I have played a role in instigating the debate, they are right. I have an ambition for Australia and the republic forms part of it. If an ambition for Australia disqualifies the republic, then those who met here in 1893 should have been disqualified from federation, along with every one else who ever had an ambition for Australia and acted on it. I am for the republic not for what I am against, but what I am for: not for what a republic will throw away, but for what a republic can deliver.

It can deliver a new sense of unity and national pride in which Australians of this and future generations can share. It can deliver a re-cast Australian identity defined by the commitment of Australians to this land above all others, which will say unequivocally to the world who we are and what we stand for. Among them I would number democracy, fairness, tolerance, justice, invention, industry, pragmatism. They will all serve us well in the new world we have entered. I would go so far as to suggest that had we long enshrined the values of tolerance and fairness, and had we more faith in our own traditions and more commitment to them, more confidence and pride, the debate about the Mabo judgement would not have taken the shape it too often has in the past few months. Had those values become the basis of our national pride

we might have asked: what good would it do us as a people, what would it do for future generations of Australians, what would it do for our reputation in the world as a mature democracy, if we said the High Court was wrong—Australia was never occupied before 1788, there never was native title, injustice and dispossession did not occur—what good would it do us if we enshrined lies in preference to the truth? What would it say to future generations if in 1993 Australians could not face up to what the United States, Canada and New Zealand faced up to a century and more ago? What would it say about this generation of ours if, when we were offered the truth, we chose to perpetuate untruths? What would it say about us if, a hundred years after sixty men in Corowa had the wisdom to see the necessity for federation, the will to do it, and the wit to know how, we recoiled from the chance to find a national solution to our oldest problem? If we turned away from our responsibilities? If we failed to see the legal recognition of prior ownership and post-European dispossession as providing a basis for reconciliation? Our duty is to find a mature national solution. My hope is that in finding one we will relearn a little of the value of Australian democracy, the principles of tolerance and justice, and the necessity to find common cause as a people—that we will relearn it and pass the lesson on to future generations. Perhaps that will be the lesson of Mabo.

By their initiative the people who met here in 1893 served generations of Australians. I believe in this last decade of the twentieth century we need to look beyond the day-to-day and towards the next generations of Australians. If it is true, as I think it is, that this and future generations will be best served by revisiting the Constitution drawn up a century ago, then we can learn something from the approach taken at the Corowa Conference. In 1893 federation was, as one commentator observed ‘dead as Julius Caesar’. The Corowa Conference revived it. And it revived it by turning federation into a *popular* cause. The Conference itself was not a government initiative, but one promoted and paid for by private enterprise—by private industries. The decisive resolution which was passed here called on the colonial parliaments to pass legislation that would provide for the popular election of representatives to a national convention to draw up a federal Constitution. That Constitution would be submitted to referendum in each colony. The Corowa Conference gave the people of Australia the opportunity to claim their own destiny—to forge a new national entity from a far-flung colonial population. And the people grasped the opportunity. The Constitution was the foundation of the new national entity. Read in 1993, it is an uninspired and uninspiring document: complex, legalistic and virtually impossible to relate to contemporary Australian life. It was framed as a routine piece of nineteenth century British imperial legislation. It shows its age. A great many Australians don’t even know it exists. Very, very few have ever read it, let alone understood it. How many Australians could quote the opening words? Not half as many, I suspect, as could quote the opening of the US Constitution.

In the 1990s there exists the chance—and I think the need—to revisit our Constitution and reclaim it, not for the lawyers and the politicians, but for the people. In Australia, surely—in this most democratic of countries—we can have a Constitution vested in the people. It is hardly radical to suggest that our Constitution should be remade to reflect our national values and aspirations, evoke pride in our Australian heritage and confidence in our future, and help to unite us as a nation. It is hardly radical to suggest this, and hardly beyond us to do it. We want Australians to consider the strengths and weaknesses of their Constitution. We want them to debate the advantages and disadvantages of making our Constitution more closely reflect Australian reality, Australian values, Australian hopes. In the end we want an Australian Constitution in which Australians believe.

---

As I see it, the republic can be very much the precursor to enabling the people to reclaim the Constitution. Last April we established the Republic Advisory Committee to work on an options paper which will set out some of the ways Australia could become a republic and the consequent changes to our Constitution. The Committee has consulted widely over the past few months, and the debate—as you have probably noticed—is now flourishing in the community. Following the report of the Committee in September, the Government will consider ways to ensure that people have sufficient information about our system of government to participate fully in the decision-making process. In the end, as with federation, it will be the people of Australia who decide. After they have had time and information enough to consider the issues, the people will decide by referendum whether we move to a republic or remain a constitutional monarchy. No one should forget the fundamental point enshrined in the existing Constitution—the only way this or any other constitutional change can take place is by referendum. It can only occur if the people want it—if a majority of electors voting, and a majority of electors in the majority of the states, vote for change. Changed or unchanged, the Australian Constitution belongs to Australians and only they can decide how and when and if to change it.

By way of conclusion, let me go back to the Murray. The Murray says it better than I can. This is the river which divides New South Wales and Victoria, the river along which customs houses were erected in colonial days. Viewed one way it can be a real and symbolic obstacle to unity. Yet the Murray is both a national resource and a unifying national symbol. We hold it in common. The Murray did not dictate that customs houses be built along the banks. The Murray was not a border until Australians made it one. It was not the existence of the Murray which persuaded politicians to run a railway line south from Sydney in one gauge and north from Melbourne in a different one. Yet Australians also combined in the national interest to remove the customs and to standardise the rail line. They combined to harness the water for power and conserve it for irrigation. They are combining now to restore the environment of the Murray–Darling Basin and to rectify the great problem of salination and land degradation. I believe we can combine in future to make the Murray–Darling the basis of a hugely expanded Australian food-growing and food-processing industry. The choice is always ours: we can pursue local interests or sectional interests or state interests. We can always find in our landscape, our laws, and our history reasons for division. Or we can combine. We can pursue the national interest. We can do as the Australians of the 1890s voted to do and draw our strength from the Commonwealth.

The republic seeks closer identification with the nation, and a more spirited sense of national goals and purpose. It also seeks to bring our institutions and symbols into line with reality. The states are part of that reality, as the states are part of United States reality. The proper aim is to get all three tiers of government working for national ends. My argument is that in this era above all others the overriding loyalty must be to the nation.

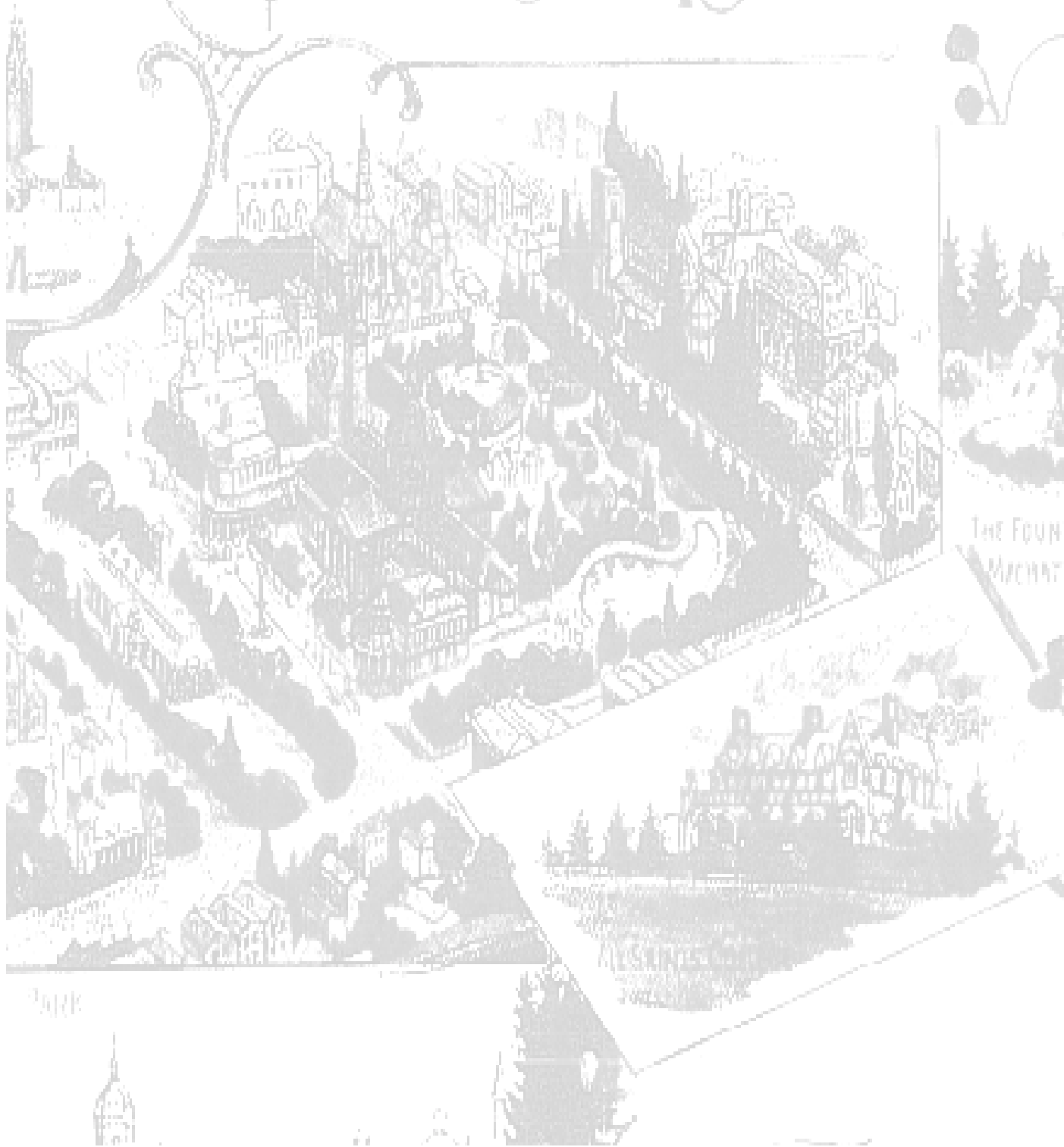
Let me conclude by addressing the most common argument against an Australian republic. The one which says ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’. It partly depends on your definition of broke. If it’s an anachronism is it broke? If it no longer inspires us, or fails to unite us, or offers us no belief, and therefore effectively doesn’t work, is it broke? If it does not coincide with contemporary reality, is it broke? And if we decide now that it’s not broke, and in twenty or thirty years time that Australians not only fail to identify with Britain but also with Australia, will we decide then that it was broke all along? Broke doesn’t really come into it.



We didn't throw out the horse and cart because they were broke. We abandoned them; we affectionately and gracefully retired them when they became obsolete. We took a considered decision to trade up to something that would serve us better. That is what the people who gathered here in 1893 did. They knew that federation would serve Australia better. They saw themselves as having a responsibility to their country and its future. Who would say to them now—why did you fix it when it wasn't broke?

Thank you for having me here tonight. It has been a great pleasure for me. Corowa was there in 1893 when a great national endeavour began in earnest. I hope that some of what I have said tonight has helped define to you what I believe is another great national endeavour. A hundred years ago when the colonies—soon to become states—were supreme, and their primacy was manifest in those customs houses along the river, the people who gathered here in Corowa stepped out of the orthodoxy and said, we need to be a nation. We need one government in charge of our national affairs. I should hope in the prevailing orthodoxy of today, having made the step to a national government almost a century ago, the people gathered in Corowa here tonight can see the sense again in stepping beyond the orthodoxy. I hope they can see the sense in that final assertion of nationhood—the confidence to elect one of our own to preside over our affairs. I notice today the *Sydney Morning Herald* writing off the people of Corowa as conservative; not blatantly but patronisingly, seeming to suggest that the people here tonight can't see as far as the people of Corowa one hundred years ago. Well I doubt that. I think, like an increasing number of Australians, they will see the need to put the seal on our nationhood. I think they will feel themselves very capable of taking the view that the affairs of Australia cannot forever be presided over by a British monarch. Tonight we are celebrating the vision which found expression here a century ago. I think no more fitting tribute could be paid to their memory than to complete the work that they began. In 1993, as in 1893, I think we must have the courage to see beyond what is to what can be.

# Federal Greetings from Balhurst



## **Return Tickets at Single Fares: the Bathurst Convention as a Representative National Gathering**

*John Bannon*

On Monday 16 November 1896 at 10.40 am, about 150 delegates, quite a few less than the predicted 250, assembled for the opening of what was to be known as the People's Federal Convention<sup>1</sup>. Held in the heart of New South Wales as an initiative of the local mayor, an impressive roll call had been attracted to what was presented as an intercolonial conference of the popular movement in support of federation.

In his inaugural presidential address, on the second day of the Convention, Dr Machattie, mayor of Bathurst, described those present as 'delegates from all parts of Australasia' and 'representatives of the Australian colonies'. This, he declared,

has resulted in a People's Convention national in character whose deliberations will be carefully watched by hundreds of thousands in these colonies, and millions of our own blood ... in the dear old Motherland.<sup>2</sup>

This was certainly at odds with W.M. Hughes's (then a Labor member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly) characterisation of the delegates as comprising the result of 'the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 17 November 1896; *Age* (Melbourne), 17 November 1896. The number enrolled would have been nearer the higher figure, but a number of listed delegates did not come until later.

<sup>2</sup> Address on morning of Tuesday 17 November, *Proceedings, People's Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, 1897, p. 78.

---

diligent scraping of parochial nobodies from all parts of the colonies',<sup>3</sup> or Haynes's description of them in the same debate as 'palpable schemers'.<sup>4</sup>

The organising committee clearly aimed to attract a large contingent from outside New South Wales. Dr Machattie, on its behalf, wrote to a number of newspapers in the colonies to publicise the event and encourage attendance.<sup>5</sup> For instance, his letter of 31 October was published in the *Adelaide Register*, thanking the press for their support in publicising the Convention and quoting Josiah Symon's endorsement of it as an 'educative and stimulating force'. 'The Committee', he said,

has done its best. If [people] don't rise to the present occasion their indifference proves that Bathurst has been more than right, for it will be an admission that they are generally in need of federal education.

Concessions for travel obtained from railways commissioners and the cheap living expenses provided incentives to attend, he concluded.<sup>6</sup>

Travel concessions had been a source of some dispute. When Victorian premier Turner anxiously sought South Australian premier Kingston's attitude to Bathurst, he was told that not only was the provincial government not sending any official delegates, but that rather than free passes, the railways commissioner was only prepared to provide 'return tickets at single fares on production of proper certificates' to accredited delegates.<sup>7</sup>

The press certainly gave support in South Australia. On the eve of the meeting the *Register* devoted an editorial to praising both the concept as 'the most important popular demonstration ever arranged in the colonies in support of federation', and the organisers for displaying 'splendid enterprise, liberality and tact'. Bathurst had 'set a remarkable example to other Australian centres by a practical self-sacrificing manifestation of the Federal spirit.' An important feature in its view was that a large majority of the delegates would not be members of Parliament but rather:

...men responsible only to themselves [and therefore] able to discuss federalism independently of any fear lest their opinions may affect political parties or personal relations with their constituents.<sup>8</sup>

There was awareness of the dispute in New South Wales over Bathurst's pretensions:

---

<sup>3</sup> *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates*, 11 November 1896, pp. 4986–7.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4989.

<sup>5</sup> These letters and many press releases and other material were all drafted for him by the indefatigable secretary William Astley. See David Headon's article on William Astley in this issue of *Papers on Parliament*.

<sup>6</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 7 November 1896, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Kingston to Turner, telegrams, 30 October & 31 October, 1896, State Records Office, South Australia, GRG 1896, 24, 28, 314, 317.

<sup>8</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 14 November 1896, p. 4. The reference to 'men' in the case of South Australia was inaccurate as women not only had the vote but had exercised it, without catastrophic effect, in the general election earlier in the year. They also had a right to stand for Parliament. Five months later Catherine Helen Spence was to be the only female candidate for election to the Constitutional Convention.

We ignore the petty insinuations that ever-enterprising Bathurst is merely advertising its claims to be chosen as the political capital of United Australia.

The official proceedings list 213 delegates as in attendance, while Quick and Garran list 209.<sup>9</sup> Many of them, including the New South Wales premier, George Reid, and a number of the colonial postal ministers only attended for a part of the Conference, and apart from set-piece addresses did not contribute to the decision making. There was a wide representation of organisations and interests, but almost half of the delegates were representing local government—and of those, 73 came from municipalities and town councils, and 21 from district or borough councils, making a total local government representation of 94. The next largest group was from the Federal Leagues (50). The Australian Natives Association (ANA) sent fifteen delegates, and there was multiple representation from the commercial travellers, chambers of commerce and of manufacturers, progress associations and the Australia National League. The Labor Electoral League, Republican Union, Single Tax League, Social Democratic League, Mechanics Institutes, Citizens Committees, and Australian Order of Industry each had one delegate.

The large proportion of local government representatives is not surprising since the Committee had made a major effort to attract them either in their own right or as the sponsors of federation leagues. Letters were sent to municipal and district councils in all the colonies pointing out the importance of the cause of federation and the significance of the Bathurst Convention in advancing that cause. This letter from Bathurst was given active consideration by a number of councils. For instance, in the northern South Australian railway town of Petersburg<sup>10</sup> residents held a meeting to decide whether a delegate should be sent. The Mayor, J.W.G. Alford, was a strong supporter of federation, believing that South Australia would be likely to benefit more than the other colonies, and his own town more than anywhere else in South Australia because of intercolonial free trade and uniform tariffs. In commending the Bathurst initiative, he said that he:

was not personally acquainted with the gentlemen whose names appeared on the subcommittee of the Bathurst League and had no idea what were their political opinions but he had no hesitation in saying he believed they were men of thought, learning, and intellect.<sup>11</sup>

The meeting carried a motion that Petersburg and districts should be represented and that the Mayor should be nominated—but that the expenses ‘should not come out of the funds of the Council’.<sup>12</sup> Mayor Alford did not attend. At the same time it was reported that the Mayor of Hobart, Mr Watchorn, would be attending—but like his northern country counterpart he did not make it. There may well have been many others who intended to go and for various

---

<sup>9</sup> See *Proceedings*, op. cit.; John Quick and Robert Randolph Garran, *The Annotated Constitution of the Australian Commonwealth*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1901, pp. 257–260.

<sup>10</sup> Its name was changed to the less germanic ‘Peterborough’ during the First World War.

<sup>11</sup> *Observer* (Adelaide), 31 October 1896, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

---

reasons did not. On the eve of the Convention, the *Register* attempted to explain such absences:

If attendance is down it is because it is not a good time. In South Australia's case some leading men who greatly desired to attend have been prevented by other engagements.<sup>13</sup>

The attempt to attract intercolonial delegates and the propaganda of the Bathurst Committee continued unabated until the opening of the Convention. The same edition of the *Adelaide Observer* which carried the report from Petersburg also carried the Committee's latest press release, issued following the granting of free passes by the New South Wales railways, and which predicted a large attendance, including seven ministers of the Crown from different colonies, the 'now definite' presence of the somewhat equivocal George Reid and a dinner party with the Bishop and a ladies' garden party, all making it 'the most distinguished social event in the country district'.<sup>14</sup> In his letter thanking the press for their promotion of the Convention, the Chairman added this last minute plea:

I think you will agree with me that there is absolutely no reason why any district throughout the colonies should remain unrepresented.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, as will be detailed below, this was actually not so clear to many districts in the smaller colonies.

The largest group, after local government and the Federal Leagues, included those individuals specially invited to attend. They were divided into nineteen invited 'members' and twelve invited 'guests'. It is not clear what the distinction was between them. Among this distinguished group there were a number of political heavyweights from the mother colony, New South Wales: Edmund Barton, Richard O'Connor, George Reid, William Lyne, Joseph Cook and John See. In total there were nineteen current members of Parliament in the gathering at some stage during the week. Other invitees included Cardinal Moran and the republican journalist John Norton. As well as Moran, there were thirteen other clergymen of various denominations. Ten of the delegates had been part of the much smaller, earlier 'People's Convention' at Corowa in 1893, including Robert Garran, John Quick and B.B. Nicoll, the New South Wales President of the Federation League.

So it was indeed a large and representative gathering, but the extent to which it was truly 'national in character', as claimed by the president, can only be judged by examining the presence and role of the delegates from colonies other than New South Wales.<sup>16</sup>

The representation from the other colonies comprised a meagre 31 delegates or about 15 per cent. Of them, 21, or nearly 70 per cent, were from Victoria. The rest was made up of three South Australians, three Queenslanders, three Western Australians, and one Tasmanian. There was no New Zealander to allow the broader description of 'Australasian' to be applied

---

<sup>13</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 14 November, 1896, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Register* (Adelaide), 7 November 1896, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> See Appendix for list of names and origins.

to the meeting. Twelve of them came from local government—in the case of Queensland, the whole representation. Victoria sent a significant group of ANA members, the seven of them making up a third of the Victorians and nearly half of the ANA representatives overall. The two non-ministerial delegates from Western Australia were both from the Federal League. In other words, there seems to be considerable imbalance in organisational representation from the various visiting colonial delegations.

But the most obvious imbalance is in the overall numbers. The 170 New South Welsh delegates clearly comprised the bulk of the conference. The Victorian group of 21 was significant enough, but geographical spread from Victoria was lacking. Six delegates were from greater Melbourne, five and four from Ballarat and Bendigo respectively, four from places on, or with a close connection to the Murray River border, leaving only Seymour and Warburton outside those three areas. The western districts and the south east had no one to speak for them. Consistent with their small numbers, the geographical representation from the other colonies left a lot to be desired, particularly in the case of Queensland.

To Quick and Garran, who were both present and actively participated in the Convention, there were two factors of more importance than the origin and numbers of the delegates. One was the widespread public interest in the People's Convention. 'It was', they claim, 'reported by the press and followed with interest throughout Australia.'<sup>17</sup> The other was the broad range of interests represented—all, of course, committed to the federal cause, but defining it in different ways. William Lyne, then Leader of the Opposition in New South Wales, had drawn attention to this in his address to the Convention, following Reid, on the fifth day, Friday 20 November. 'Conservatives, Liberals, ultra radicals, and even Republicans' had managed to conduct a 'credible debate', he said.<sup>18</sup> The fact that this disparate group had unanimously agreed to focus their discussion around the text of the 1891 Commonwealth Bill had, in the view of Quick and Garran:

helped to dissipate the atmosphere of suspicion which ... had always hung around the Commonwealth Bill. It was redolent of 'Toryism', 'Imperialism', 'Militarism', and other unpopular qualities.<sup>19</sup>

This may well be correct, but neither high public interest nor the range of organisations represented support the claim of a truly national gathering.

It must also be said that the coverage of the Convention outside New South Wales was not comprehensive. Most papers carried a daily summary from their Sydney correspondents but little in the way of extended recording of debate or editorial comment.<sup>20</sup>

It could be said that the actual numbers are not as important as the influence that the non-New South Wales delegates had in debate and on the outcome. Here the picture is slightly better. The sole Tasmanian delegate, J.G. Davies, as a member of the Tasmanian Assembly and its Chairman of Committees, was elected to be one of the seven Vice-Presidents and

---

<sup>17</sup> Quick & Garran, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>18</sup> *Proceedings*, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>19</sup> Quick & Garran, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>20</sup> For instance, the *Melbourne Age* and the *Adelaide Register* usually provided only a three-inch column.

---

subsequently to chair the Convention's committee sessions. Professor Gosman of Melbourne was also elected a Vice-President. John Quick of Bendigo was a member of the organising committee. This embrace of the out-of-staters was a little inconsistent, however, with action on the first day, when a motion to incorporate a letter from the Queensland Labor League's Provincial Council Secretary, Albert Hinchcliffe, into the proceedings was amended to simply 'receive' it. In the light of the many gubernatorial and judicial messages incorporated, the treatment of this missive apologising for being unable to send a delegate, but stressing the support of his 7000 members and rejection of the Queensland government's approach to federation, was pretty cursory.

A much greater weight and intercolonial significance was given to the Convention by the presence of three non-New South Wales cabinet ministers, John Gavan Duffy (Victoria), John Alexander Cockburn (South Australia), and Edward Charles Wittenoom (Western Australia), but a number of points need to be made:

- first, their presence was fortuitous in that they were in Sydney at that time to attend a pre-arranged meeting of postal ministers and officials from all the Australian colonies and New Zealand. The invitation to Bathurst was in effect an opportunist move by the organisers. Of them, only Cockburn of South Australia was much identified with the federal cause, and, as noted previously, his government had explicitly decided not to be officially represented.
- secondly, the Queensland and Tasmanian ministers were not with them. There is particular significance in the absence of their Queensland colleague because one of the most pressing issues at the time, as George Reid attested in his address later in the week, was whether Queensland was going to join a Federal Convention on the Hobart lines. The fact that a minister from that colony did not think it worthwhile to go to Bathurst highlighted the already very meagre Queensland representation which consisted of two members of a local government board in Gympie and another from Croydon Council. Andrew Joseph Thynne was the Queensland Postmaster-General, with an interest in federation stemming from his membership of the Queensland delegation to the 1891 Convention. He had also represented Queensland at the Ottawa Colonial Conference of 1894.<sup>21</sup> But on this occasion he could not be induced to go to Bathurst. Not only did he think that 'Federation is not a burning question in Queensland' but, more ominously, that 'ill-will has been created [there] by telegrams published to the effect that pressure was being put on Queensland by the other colonies.'<sup>22</sup>
- thirdly, they were only there for part of the afternoon and one of the evening sessions, so had little impact on the proceedings. On his return to Adelaide (he arrived home on the same day the conference wound up) Cockburn commented favourably on the 'sympathetic letters ... pouring in', and the banners 'presented by ladies interested in the cause', but confessed how limited his presence had been. He was lukewarm in his comments, saying that while 'it will result in a fresh awakening in the Federation question', nevertheless he was concerned about a danger arising 'from the fact that the representatives belonged to

---

<sup>21</sup> See *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 12, p. 228.

<sup>22</sup> *Observer* (Adelaide), 21 November 1896, p. 11.



the more largely populated colonies [and therefore] the safeguards necessary for the protection of the smaller populations may be somewhat overlooked.<sup>23</sup>

In any case, when the opportunity to emphasise the national nature of the gathering arose on the Tuesday, and it was proposed that the Convention adjourn that evening to allow ministerial delegates to the Postal Conference to address a public meeting, the motion failed. The Ministers did, however, address the Convention in session that evening by special leave. Their addresses prompted a motion desiring them to convey the Convention's wish 'for an early meeting of the Statutory Convention for the purpose of arranging a Federal Constitution.'<sup>24</sup>

Apart from these addresses, of the non-New South Wales group, only Quick, Turner of Prahran, Professor Gosman (whose motion incorporating a prayer in recognition of the Supreme Being was withdrawn) and Professor Morris had spoken by the time the Convention met for the third day's proceedings. It may have been frustration at this that caused Noel Augustin Webb, the Mayor of Port Augusta, to obtain leave to make a general address, as one who had travelled 1500 miles to get there, carrying messages of support from a number of South Australians including Josiah Symon and Charles Tucker, the Mayor of Adelaide. A young (he was just 30 years old) lawyer, who had been so successful in his first term as mayor that he was re-nominated unopposed in his absence at the Convention, Webb was one of only three South Australians who attended the Convention, the others being R.G. Thiselton from the metropolitan seaside council of Brighton and J.A. Cockburn, whose appearance with his fellow ministers from the Postal Conference, referred to above, was very brief.

N.A. Webb's presence makes a good case study. After his admission to the Bar in Adelaide, he moved to Port Augusta. By 1896 he had been in practice there for nearly ten years. The other leading lawyer in town during this time was Strickland (Pat) Kingston, the older brother of the South Australian Premier and leading federationist, Charles Cameron Kingston. Prominent Port Augusta citizens including Frank Kirwan, who had edited the local newspaper, had recently moved to the goldfields of Kalgoorlie and were playing a leading role in advocating the federal cause. They maintained links with their former town. In the tradition of Kirwan, federation was strongly supported by the local newspaper, the *Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch*, and Webb was highly praised for his advocacy of the cause and given access to the editorial columns on occasions. In particular, he was a strong advocate of the east-west railway, which he believed would only be built by a federal government. In May 1896, at a ceremony commissioning a new telegraph line, Webb had spoken of his hope of getting the railway built to Western Australia.<sup>25</sup>

Like the citizens of Bathurst, many in Port Augusta (located at the top of Spencer's Gulf) saw their town as the future capital of Australia. It had been proposed that the South Australian government donate country in the lower Flinders Ranges, including Port Augusta, as a 'Federal State'. Apart from the predictable claims about the climate and railway junctions, the defence argument was used:

---

<sup>23</sup> *Observer* (Adelaide), 28 November 1896, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> *Proceedings*, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> *Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch*, 1 May 1896, p. 4.

---

Being close to the land centre of Australia [it] is perfectly secure from sudden attack by sea or land ... Should a hostile fleet ever endeavour to conquer the continent it would have to come more than 1000 miles further after seizing Albany or Newcastle before it came within striking distance.<sup>26</sup>

The young mayor had a vision of his town as a major city in a united Australia, declaring:

Every development of the resources of Australia, every step that is taken towards the federation of the colonies only hastens the proud day when Port Augusta must become one of the queenliest cities of the south ... situated at the head of that waterway which reaches into the heart of Australia; the town which is the point at which the railways to and from WA, NT, Queensland New South Wales and Victoria must all meet, must become mighty, flourishing and important ... [it] is destined by nature to become the emporium of the vast interior.<sup>27</sup>

It was not surprising then that when Council finally considered the letter of invitation from Bathurst to a convention they said was ‘certain to be representative in constitution, influential in membership and educative in effect’, it decided to send the mayor.<sup>28</sup> Stopping in Adelaide on his way to the Convention, Webb was also appointed as their representative by the Federation League of South Australia.

Reports of their delegate’s speech drawn from the *Bathurst Daily Times* were prominently reprinted in South Australia. The community would have felt vindicated by the Bathurst judgement of Webb as:

an Australian of a good type mentally and physically of the men who, still young and vigorous in all their faculties, are coming to the front as leaders in public life ... we congratulate Port Augusta on the possession of such an intelligent and patriotic ‘chief magistrate’.<sup>29</sup>

Back in Port Augusta by December, Webb prepared a report for the Council on the Convention and the next month wrote a very favourable review of Robert Garran’s *The Coming Commonwealth*, in which he spoke of the friendships and contacts made in Bathurst.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately for his vision of Port Augusta’s destiny as the ‘queenliest city’, Webb left the town a few months later to take up the offer of a legal partnership in Adelaide.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> *Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch*, 28 February 1896, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Speech to welcome the Governor, *Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch*, 16 October 1896, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 30 October 1896, p. 4; 6 November 1896, p. 4; 13 November 1896, p. 4.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 27 November 1896, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, 22 January 1896, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Webb became Deputy President of the South Australian Industrial Court in 1916, and then in 1922 was appointed to the Federal Arbitration Court. At the time of this appointment he reminisced about the Bathurst Convention, mentioning Barton, Reid and O’Connor, Judge Roliny, who had become a judge of the NSW Arbitration Court, John Quick and Robert Garran. *Mail* (Adelaide), 15 July 1922, p. 2.

Webb at least made his speech. The other delegate from South Australia, Robert George Thiselton, apparently remained silent. Later to be mayor of Brighton and the owner of the Brighton tramway, he had been a member of the Council for four years at the time of the Bathurst gathering. Aged 35, his interest in federation probably stemmed from his early life farming and contracting in the north of South Australia, including spending some time looking at opportunities in the Northern Territory. He was at the inauguration of the railway to Port Augusta and contracted for railway sleeper supply in the north before moving to the Brighton district and taking up farming. His attendance as a delegate was important enough to be recorded in a biographical note a decade later, describing the Convention as having the object 'to educate the people of Australia, through their delegates, in the principles and ideals of Federation.'<sup>32</sup>

On the day following Webb's address, Quick again took an active part, and Stephen from Queensland moved an amendment on the Crown's right to refer matters to the Privy Council. The fifth day began with a motion tabled by Professor Morris of Melbourne, urging Queensland to pass the Enabling Bill. He must have left by this time, as it was moved by another delegate on his behalf, as was the case with another of his motions on the last day. Ironically, the motion referred to the Convention as comprising 'delegates from various colonies and places distant from each other', in that a set piece series of speeches was then delivered on states rights, the only speakers being from Sydney. Cardinal Moran was followed by Barton, R.E. O'Connor, Reid, Lyne, Jennings, John See and D. O'Connor, before the Convention adjourned to a garden party given by the Ladies' Committee. Later that evening it reconvened to debate the Finance report, the chief author of which was another Sydney delegate, J.T. Walker, who was to become, partly on the strength of his involvement at Bathurst, the only person without experience of parliamentary office to be elected as a delegate to the Convention of 1897/8.

The final day of the Convention began with the delegates spending 'much valuable time discussing how to expedite business'.<sup>33</sup> It then saw a flurry of motions put to the vote, again dominated by the New South Wales delegates. Peacock from Western Australia moved a motion demanding early union, which was carried. The motion of J.T. Hood, from the ANA in Melbourne, for reciprocal recognition of legislation among the colonies before federation, was defeated. Delegate Wilkinson from Sydney spoke on behalf of the people of Queensland (their delegates having already left) and it only remained for the vote of thanks, moved by Barton and seconded by O'Connor, to be carried to underline that, good intentions notwithstanding, the 'people' of the Bathurst People's Convention were really the people of New South Wales.

---

<sup>32</sup> H.T. Burgess ed., *The Cyclopaedia of South Australia*, Adelaide, 1909, Volume 2, pp. 85–6.

<sup>33</sup> *Age* (Melbourne), 23 November 1896, p. 6.

---

## Appendix

### List of Delegates from Colonies other than New South Wales

(drawn from the *Proceedings* list of all delegates)

#### *Victoria*

Bell, Alexander.	Ballarat	Town Council
Blyth, Chas.	Sebastopol	Borough Council
Brown, E. C.	Eaglehawk	Town council
Callander, Wm.	Cobram	ANA
Curnow, J.H.	Sandhurst (Bendigo)	ANA
Duffy, J. G.	Melbourne	Invited Member
Gosman, Prof.	Melbourne	FL
Hogg, H. R.	Melbourne	ANA
Hood, J. T.	Fitzroy	ANA
Howe, George	Seymour	Shire Council
Ingle, James	Sebastopol	ANA
James, William	Eaglehawk	Borough Council
Kitt, William	Warburton	Shire Council
Morris, Prof, E. E.	Melbourne	Invited Guest
Niven, W. F.	Ballarat	FL
Quick, John	Bendigo	Invited Guest
Rohner, William	Cobram	ANA
Ryan, James	Wodonga	FL
Sharpe, John	Sebastopol	ANA
Turner, John	Prahran	Municipal Council
West, John	Shepparton	Citizens Committee

#### *Queensland*

Chippendall, W.	Gympie	Widgee Divisional Board
Flood, J.	Gympie	Widgee Divisional Board
Stephen, Consett	Croydon	Municipal Council

#### *South Australia*

Cockburn, J. A.	Adelaide	Invited Member
Thiselton, R. G.	Brighton	Municipal Council
Webb, N. A.	Port Augusta	Municipal Council

#### *Western Australia*

Peacock, R. W.	Perth	FL
Wittenoom, E.H.	Perth	Invited Guest
Young, Rev. Canon	Perth	FL

#### *Tasmania*

Davies, Lieut. Col.	Hobart	Invited Member
---------------------	--------	----------------

**FL = Federal League**

**ANA = Australian Natives Association**

---

## The Idea of the People

*Stuart Macintyre*

The Bathurst People's Federal Convention assembled in November 1896. It had no official status, being called by the local branch of the Australasian Federal League. The delegates who attended were appointed from a miscellany of local government and other bodies. But it attracted a number of notables: the premier of New South Wales, George Reid, and the Leader of the Opposition, as well as leading politicians from other colonies. Edmund Barton, the unofficial leader of the federal movement, addressed it. Several colonial governors sent messages of support.

Along with an earlier unofficial gathering, that of Corowa in 1893, the Bathurst Convention stands in the received history of Australian federation as an expression of the popular movement for federation, episodes where the people overcame obstacles and gave fresh momentum to the goal of an Australian Commonwealth. The Constitution that was finally adopted invoked the people in its preamble:

Whereas the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and Tasmania [but not, initially, Western Australia], humbly relying on the blessings of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth ...

I want to challenge that received interpretation, and raise questions about the popular character of Australian federation. I shall first suggest how 'the idea of the people' was mobilised in the 1890s.

Let me revise the chronology. Representatives of the seven colonies, those of Australia and New Zealand, met in conference at Melbourne in 1890 in response to an initiative of Henry Parkes. The colonies then sent parliamentary delegations to a convention in Sydney in 1891 that drafted a federal constitution to be submitted to the various legislatures. That process had failed because of disagreement, opposition and apathy. The meeting at Corowa in 1893

therefore proposed an alternative procedure to revive the federal movement: direct election of delegates to prepare a new constitution, that would then be submitted directly to the voters. The procedure was adopted by four of the Australian premiers in Hobart early in 1895 and necessary enabling legislation was enacted by 1896; the new Federal Convention met in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne during 1897 and 1898; five of the six colonies carried the bill in 1899; Western Australia came in a year later and the British Parliament enacted the Constitution in 1900.

\* \* \* \* \*

In this summary narrative, Corowa has special significance because its device of direct election of delegates, and submission of their draft constitution to referenda, overcame the seeming inability of the politicians to carry forward the scheme they had devised earlier. The device was novel and broke with British custom as well as American precedent. In the opinion of John Hirst it initiated a particularly strong form of popular sovereignty as the very basis of the federal constitution: the people themselves elected its authors, the people themselves adopted it and the people themselves were inscribed in its preamble and included in the provisions for its amendment. This was a unique achievement, and the adoption of the scheme worked out at Corowa was in his opinion 'the greatest miracle of Australian political history'.<sup>1</sup>

My own interpretation of Corowa is rather different. I have suggested that Corowa provided the venue for a piece of political theatre whereby organised pressure groups mobilised popular support for the stalled federal cause. Like Bathurst, it was organised by the Australasian Federal League. The initiative for the League came from Sydney. At its initial meeting in the Sydney Town Hall, Edmund Barton suggested there were two aspects to any issue: 'one was the view of the politician, and the other was the view of the citizen'; hence his resolution defined the League as 'an organisation of citizens owning no class distinction or party influence'. For similar reasons, the rules he devised for the League restricted the proportion of its governing body who might be members of Parliament to two-fifths and made the introduction of political topics other than federation a ground for expulsion.<sup>2</sup>

'The main principle', insisted John Quick in moving his resolution at Corowa four weeks later, 'was that the cause should be advocated by the citizen and not merely by politicians.' The time had passed when it should be merely 'a political question.'<sup>3</sup> This was a calculated appeal to popular prejudice. The deprecation of politics and the validation of the popular, the juxtaposition of the self-serving dissembler and his long-suffering victims, are prejudices so deeply embedded in the public discourse that we seldom notice their historical formation. The forms of representative government that were established in nineteenth century Australia combined principles of popular sovereignty with the habits of utilitarian liberalism. The Australian colonists made the state serve their needs with roads and bridges, land grants and comfortable billets, and despised the patterns of flattery and jobbery that characterised their civic life. The politicians, having impugned their own calling, therefore called forth a voice

---

<sup>1</sup> John Hirst, *A Republican Manifesto*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1984, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> Rules of the League are in the Minutes of the Executive Committee, Dowling Papers; see D.I. Wright, 'The Australasian Federation League in New South Wales, 1893-1899', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 57, no. 1, March 1971, pp. 58-73.

<sup>3</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 1893.

---

that could restore its legitimacy: they reinstated the people as a disembodied presence capable of an altruism that they themselves could not achieve.<sup>4</sup>

George Reid took up Quick's scheme and carried it to Hobart, where at the beginning of 1895 he invited the colonial premiers to meet in conjunction with the regular gathering of the Federal Council. He, too, adopted Barton's popular legerdemain. Speaking in Melbourne on his way to Hobart, he explained that 'the vital defect of the efforts of the great men of Australia during the past five years in the direction of federation was that they never quite came home to the hearts of the masses of the people.' Lest his meaning be missed, he paid a backhanded compliment to Henry Parkes and delegates of the 1891 Convention delegates who had failed, he said, because they had pursued federation 'at almost any price' and omitted to consult the people.<sup>5</sup> Henry Parkes could not let the jibe pass. From his home in North Annandale in Sydney, he poured scorn on the idea of starting afresh with elected conventions and referenda: 'It is preposterous to talk of a mob of people making a constitution for the state.'<sup>6</sup> Reid, who had no intention of allowing that to happen, replied more in sorrow than in anger, that Parkes should allow personal vanity to take precedence over the sacred cause: so long as he had led it he had rendered great service; but once deprived of the leadership, then 'what a falling off is there'.<sup>7</sup>

With impressive political skill, he persuaded the Federal Council and a majority of premiers to adopt his proposed course. Queensland and Western Australia held out at Hobart, but Queensland would relent and it became clear, as the various colonial parliaments passed the necessary enabling legislation, that an elected convention would gather, early in 1897.

Unlike Corowa, therefore, the Bathurst gathering had no vital strategic significance. It occurred under the very shadow of the impending official convention. It began as a local initiative (closely tied to the ambition that Bathurst become the federal capital) and relied on the enthusiasm of its promoters. The central committee of the Federal League was by no means convinced of its utility. Its unofficial status was emphasised by an early proposed resolution that the proceedings at Bathurst should be 'purely educational' and not bind in any way delegates who might find themselves elected to the Adelaide Convention—the proposal was withdrawn as an insult to their 'manliness'.<sup>8</sup> The women at Bathurst were confined to the gallery, as they had been at Corowa and would be again in the elected conventions.

\* \* \* \* \*

That is one qualification to the popular version of federation. The boundaries of the popular were also closely policed for any suspicion of disloyalty. At Corowa the challenge had come

---

<sup>4</sup> Stuart Macintyre, 'Corowa and the voice of the people', *Canberra Historical Journal*, n.s. no. 33, March 1994, pp. 2–8.

<sup>5</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 24 January 1895. See also the commentary on this meeting in the *Bulletin*, 2 February 1895.

<sup>6</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 4 February 1895.

<sup>7</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 February 1895; G.H. Reid, 'The conference of premiers at Hobart', *Review of Reviews*, vol. 6, no. 2, 20 February 1895, pp. 149–53.

<sup>8</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 1896.

from the New South Wales radical E.W. O'Sullivan and the Victorian Socialist Dr William Maloney. They submitted the proposal:

That while approving of federation, this meeting desires to state that the only federation which would be acceptable to the people of Australia would be one of a democratic country, embodying one man one vote and the direct expression of the will of the people.

This was disconcertingly specific and both speakers were repeatedly interrupted as they spoke to their proposal. The Victorian premier deprecated its contentious nature and appealed to O'Sullivan and his 'dear little friend' to withdraw the motion. O'Sullivan obliged over the protests of Maloney.<sup>9</sup>

Then in response to the motion 'That in the opinion of this Conference the best interests and the present and future prosperity of the Australian colonies will be promoted by their early union under the Crown ... ', Maloney declared Australia was marching towards a republic. Amid cries of 'No, no', 'Question' and 'Chair', the chairman called him to order. 'If that sort of question ... was not allowable', Maloney persisted, 'he would say that he trusted the Federation of Australia would go forward and bring about a civilisation that would wipe out poverty from our midst.' One or two other delegates ventured to make remarks on the same lines but were not allowed to proceed. Another Labor man wanted the conference to endorse the principle of 'one man one vote', but he was ruled out of order. The original motion was put and carried.<sup>10</sup>

At Bathurst there was a new nuisance: John Norton. In 1888 he had published his Australian edition of the American compilation, *The History of Capital and Labour*. In 1896 he acquired the newspaper *Truth* and made it a byword for populist radicalism. Thus, when the Bathurst People's Convention began debating the 1891 draft constitution, Norton put down a motion on the order paper that 'the time had arrived when the Australian provinces should federate as the United States of Australia on an independent national basis', and further proposed that the Governor-General be appointed locally rather than in London. His motion was negatived on the voices and the members of the Convention rose and gave three cheers for the Queen.<sup>11</sup>

On the fourth day of the Convention Norton tried again with an amendment to the clause on royal assent to legislation with an amendment that the royal assent must be given to bills passed by the new Commonwealth Parliament within a year or the law would automatically come into force. The chairman of the session ruled the motion out of order on the grounds that it would be against the Constitution.<sup>12</sup> Since the whole purpose of the Convention was to debate the 1891 draft and devise a new constitution for a federal Commonwealth, this seems an odd ruling.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Age*, (Melbourne), *Argus* (Melbourne), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1893.

<sup>10</sup> *Age* (Melbourne), 2 August 1893; *Argus* (Melbourne), 3 August 1893; *Official Report of the Federation Conference held in the Courthouse Corowa on Monday 31 July and Tuesday 1 August*, James C. Leslie, Corowa, NSW, 1893.

<sup>11</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 1896.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*



---

At the end of the week the politicians came from Sydney to add their blessings to the work of the delegates. As premier, George Reid repeated his usual flattery: 'The gathering showed him he was not far wrong in the belief he entertained that the only way of restoring the federal movement to its proper place in Australia was to place it upon the basis of the personal advocacy of the people themselves.' He made little reference to the work of the Bathurst Convention, and the chief novelty of his address was the announcement that he would make a personal appeal to the premier of Queensland that the people there would have a voice in the federal process. 'Many had thought', he added, 'that it would be impossible to get the people to rise to the dignity of the part which the conference at Hobart had designated for them, but he looked upon [the] gathering as an answer to that view.'<sup>13</sup>

The people, then, figured in the federal movement both as a political force and as a rhetorical device. Without the resort to the popular politics of the election and the referendum, the plan for a Commonwealth could not have been created; but the degree of participation in these activities fell some way short of a common enthusiasm. Like federation itself, the activities were conceived and designed by the politicians, who invoked the people and were duly answered.

---

<sup>13</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 November 1896.

---

## **Federation and the People: a Response to Stuart Macintyre**

*John Hirst*

Let's agree that we will not be conned by the claims of the 'popular movement' about federation's history. We will not believe that it can be divided into two parts: a politicians' movement until 1893; a people's movement thereafter. Stuart Macintyre is right: the politicians helped to create the popular movement and they remained key players in the achievement of federation.

But let us be thoroughly sceptical about the historiography peddled by the 'popular movement'. The other notion we need to reject is that the politicians were the sole players before 1893. If we are looking for a federal movement controlled by the politicians where the people were kept at arm's length, we will not find it in Australia. Something like this did occur in Canada. An examination of its federal movement throws light on the vexed issue of the role of the people in the Australian movement.

The delegates who deliberated on Canadian union were appointed by the parliaments of the various colonies. They did not draw up a constitution; they agreed on the principles of union, which were then carried to London to be put into legislative form. The delegates met in secret. The press was excluded. There were no briefings for the press and no leaks to the press. Even after the conferences were over, details of what had been agreed were slow to emerge.

Only in one colony were the proposals put to the people at election. Those in charge of the process were desperate to avoid any such scrutiny of their work. They worked in haste so that everything would be sewn up before the various parliaments had to be dissolved. The opponents of union demanded that the issue be put to the people, but they were easily rebuffed. To suggest that the people must be consulted was republican, the sort of demand which would be made in the United States, the enemy over the border.

The maritime colonies were very reluctant to join Canada. The British government wanted them to join and it instructed their governors to see that they did. They achieved this by much more than warning and advising ministries. Unpopular ministries were sustained so long as they would support union.<sup>1</sup>

One of the historians of Canadian union characterised the movement in these terms: confederation was imposed on British North America 'by ingenuity, luck, courage and sheer force'.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the Australian movement from 1889 onwards was open, sought popular support and acknowledged that federation would not be achieved without it.

The movement to write a federal constitution began with an appeal to the people. When Parkes made his call for a constitutional convention late in 1889, he was told by the other premiers to arrange for New South Wales to join the Federal Council. It seemed sensible advice; the Council was federal machinery already in existence and with all the colonies as members it could expand its functions and achieve federation by degrees. Parkes wanted to achieve federation at a jump and was adamant that he would have nothing to do with the Federal Council. When the other premiers were equally adamant, Parkes told the governor of New South Wales that he would appeal from the politicians to the people.<sup>3</sup> He did this by a series of speeches and summoning to his support his wide network of supporters in other colonies and in England. The press carried his speeches and endorsement of his approach from a galaxy of worthies. The Victorian politicians were incensed at what their governor called Parkes's 'platforming' about the faults of the Federal Council.<sup>4</sup> But finally they could not resist it, and they agreed to meet Parkes to consider whether a convention should be summoned.

The delegates to the 1890 Australasian Federation Conference were aware that the press had been excluded from constitutional deliberations in both Canada and the United States. At previous intercolonial gatherings in Australia the press had been excluded. On this occasion the delegates deliberately chose the opposite course. They took their lead from Parkes, who argued that federation more directly interested the inhabitants of all the colonies than any other issue. So the thirteen delegates were surrounded by a press corps of over fifty, coming from every colony and including representatives of the overseas cable services. The telegraph operators at the Melbourne Post Office were sending out 50,000 words each day and 70,000 on the final day. The newspapers ran columns of reports on the debates. As the *Daily Telegraph* put it, the papers were the great sounding boards of the Conference, making the debates audible to the whole of Australia and giving a new spaciousness to Australian politics.<sup>5</sup>

When delegates met to draw up a constitution in 1891, they decided to let the press in, as they did again in 1897. There were arguments put against doing so. Delegates might oppose a particular measure in the Convention and then, having lost or compromised, they would still

---

<sup>1</sup> Donald Creighton, *The Road to Confederation; The Emergence of Canada 1863–1867*, Macmillan, Toronto, 1964.

<sup>2</sup> P.B. Waite, *The Life and Times of Confederation 1864–1867*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1962.

<sup>3</sup> 'Federation of Australia', Confidential Printed Paper, Colonial Secretary Special Bundle, NSW Archives 2/8095.3, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, (Sydney), 15, 17 February, 1890.

---

want to advocate a 'Yes' vote for the Bill when it was before the electors. If their speeches in the Convention were public knowledge, this would give an easy handle to opponents. Barton faced this problem in urging a 'Yes' vote in New South Wales in 1898. He was forcibly reminded that he was supporting provisions he had opposed in the Convention. But this consideration could not prevail against the great educational advantage of publicity.

When the Convention of 1891 had finished its work, it resolved to send the Constitution to the parliaments for the approval of the people. How that was to be obtained was not defined. Sir George Grey's proposal for a referendum was defeated. Griffith in Queensland and Inglis Clark in Tasmania drew up bills to provide for ratification by popularly-elected conventions in the American manner, but neither was proceeded with while the outcome in New South Wales was awaited.

From 1893 it was a commonplace that the first Constitution failed because the people were not involved, but the constitution-makers had assumed that only the people could sanction their work. The trouble was that the parliaments wanted to make amendments before the people were consulted. In the New South Wales Parliament, George Reid, later champion of the popular cause, complained that the Convention had downgraded the parliaments in expecting that they were to be mere messengers, carrying the Constitution to the people.<sup>6</sup> Of course, it was in the New South Wales Parliament that the bill met such a hostile reception that the whole movement stalled.

The people were more directly involved from 1897. They elected the delegates to the Convention and voted in referendum on the Constitution it produced. Here I part company with Stuart Macintyre. There is a difference between invoking the people in a speech, that is rhetorically, and actually consulting them, with all the trouble and risk which this entails. To involve the people so directly in constitution-making was a complete departure from the norms of a British polity.

If the referendum began as a device, it quickly became an article of faith. When the Constitution had to be amended after failing to secure sufficient support in New South Wales, it had to be submitted to the electors of that colony again. But it was also submitted to the electors of the other colonies who had accepted the Constitution in the first referendum. It was not enough for premiers or even parliaments to make some minor adjustments; the people had to give their consent.

When the Australian delegates in London were told that the Colonial Office wanted to make some alterations to their Constitution, they were incredulous. Not a line, not a word could be altered because it all had the sanction of the people. The Office and its minister thought this a quaint notion. An acceptance of the Constitution could not be taken as an endorsement of all its parts. Certainly very crude appeals had been made to the people to secure their endorsement, but the Constitution in all its parts had been before them. Copies of the Constitution were mailed at public expense to every elector.

Historians have been preoccupied with how popular the federal movement was. The level of participation in the voting for delegates and at the referendums has been taken as one measure of this. They have been less concerned to explain why voting of this sort was taking place. From first to last it was accepted that only a popular vote could give authority to the

---

<sup>6</sup> *New South Wales Parliamentary Debates*, 19 May 1891, p. 45.

Constitution. This was a polity very different from the one which had established the colonial constitutions in the 1850s; different too from Canada in the 1860s; different from the mother country of the 1890s. The sovereignty of the people was a living principle. In this sense the federal movement always had to be popular.

---

## Resurrecting the Federal Ideal: Mr Astley goes to Bathurst

*David Headon*

As it had done all week, the *Bathurst Daily Times* on Thursday 19 November 1896 comprehensively reported the previous day's proceedings of the Bathurst People's Convention. On this particular day, however, in the column immediately preceding the extensive convention coverage, the paper prominently placed a short, seemingly insignificant article headed 'Charge of False Pretences'. The court reporter took up the story in typical house style:

On Tuesday, before Mr. Burton Smith, J. P., William Astley was brought up charged with obtaining the sum of £15 from William Freeman Kitchner [sic], at Sydney, on the 15th August last, by means of false pretences. Senior-sergeant Morris deposed that about 11 o'clock that morning he arrested accused in a room at the School of Arts Bathurst; [and] read to him the warrant ... the accused said, 'I am taken by surprise; this matter is capable of explanation'.<sup>1</sup>

That the accused man, William Astley, was arrested and remanded immediately to Sydney, on the second day of the People's Convention, would not normally have caused even a ripple of publicity except for two pertinent facts: one, many Australians had cast a curious eye in Bathurst's direction at that time; and two, William Astley just happened to be the Organising Secretary of the very reason for that interest, the Bathurst Convention itself. While the arrest was an abrupt and ignominious end to Astley's active participation in the Convention, his political views and organising skill would continue to be felt throughout the week. This was because it was Astley who shaped the Convention's structure, its central concerns, motto, even its tone.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Bathurst Daily Times*, 19 November 1896. The charge against Astley was made by William Kitchen (a Sydney journalist), not William 'Kitchner', as reported in the *Bathurst Daily Times*.

Some of the biggest federation names were present in Bathurst in November 1896: among them Edmund Barton, George Reid, Robert Garran, Cardinal Moran and John Norton. None, however, influenced the Bathurst Convention as much as Astley; and none, with the exception of Barton, had laboured as long and as hard as Astley for the cause of federation in the seven or eight years before Bathurst—in the years when the idea of federating slowly, fitfully, took root in the colonial consciousness. Yet, in 1990s Australia, set to celebrate the centenary of its nationhood, William Astley is virtually unknown. If anyone now is aware of anything at all about him, it is not in his own name but as the *Bulletin* contributor, ‘Price Warung’. Citizens of the 1890s certainly knew Warung, both as an independent journalist and because of his prodigious output for J.F. Archibald in the periodical that became known as the ‘Bushman’s Bible’.<sup>2</sup> At the height of the *Bulletin*’s popularity, Astley (under his pseudonym) dominated its creative literature pages, supplying some eighty-four stories in the early 1890s, mostly on the theme of convictism. This represented more than a quarter of the *Bulletin*’s total output at that time. Prolific as he was with stories about the gulag Transportation System, Astley was nevertheless able, during precisely the same period, to confirm his reputation as a political journalist of talent, intellect, learning and, when the occasion in his opinion warranted it, of extraordinary vitriol.

Astley’s prominent role on the public stage of his era extends approximately from the centennial year 1888, until the publication, by John Norton in his controversial *Truth* magazine, of some thirteen new Warung short stories about Norfolk Island, ultimately collected as *Tales of the Isle of Death* and published by George Robertson in 1898. Astley would still have a role to play for his adopted town, Bathurst, into the new century, but by 1898 his energetic years were certainly behind him.

Astley’s arrest in Bathurst only adds to the numerous curiosities and incongruities surrounding him that Nettie Palmer and Barry Andrews, his two principal biographers, admirably contend with in their work. Both complain of the near absence of sources for most of his life, other than in the seminal decade from 1888 to 1898. Palmer’s husband, novelist and critic Vance Palmer, in his *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954), uses the assessment of Fred Bloomfield, an acquaintance of Astley’s, to summarise the man. It is a judgement radically different to what we normally associate with circumspect literary analysis in Australia: ‘He gave you by his manner the impression that he was the confidential agent of a mysterious and hidden personality of consummate power and resource—the keeper of dark and deadly secrets it would be death to reveal’.<sup>3</sup> Bloomfield enlarges on this Edgar Allen Poeish image of Astley by saying that ‘he was suspicious and secretive, and his temperament, as the phrenologists say, was “saturnine”’.<sup>4</sup> The parallel with Poe is a useful one, for Astley, too, suffered from a relatively early age with a ‘nervous illness’.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, for most of the last

---

<sup>2</sup> William Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews, eds, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (Second Edition), Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1954, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Barry Andrews, *Price Warung (William Astley)*, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1976, p. 19.

---

twenty years of his life (until his death in desperate circumstances in 1911) he was addicted, as Vance Palmer puts it, to ‘his Hag’,<sup>6</sup> to morphia, or opium, or both.

Despite these constant upheavals in his personal circumstances, Astley laboured as hard as virtually anyone in the country, throughout the later 1880s and 1890s, to make federation ‘*the question of the day*’.<sup>7</sup> He identified two parts to his role: firstly, to reflect the will of the people while educating them about the specifics of the federal question; and, secondly, to attack federation’s enemies, whether they be England’s representatives of imperialism, or local politicians such as Henry Parkes who let extraneous issues and ego cloud their judgement. To those people who, in 1888, were publicising the cause of ‘imperial’ federation—that is, Australia integrated into a global Empire federation—Astley responded with concern for their naivety: ‘A federation between such differing nations’, he wrote in a January 1888 *Bathurst Daily Times* editorial, ‘would be the sort that follows upon the absorption of the fly by the spider’.<sup>8</sup> During the years of his most prolific short-story and journalistic activity, Astley was a combative, highly informed and scholarly watchdog for federation. Supportive of the citizenry and suspicious of politicians and empires, it was only fitting that he should assume the principal organisational role in the formulation of the Bathurst People’s Convention. Indeed, all of the Convention’s concerns are anticipated by a series of Astley articles, in the *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, some five years before the Convention.<sup>9</sup>

In order to establish Astley’s important, though largely forgotten role in the history of Australian federation, it is necessary to supply brief biographical information to form a context for the discussion of his imposing output on federation issues between 1888 and 1893. This commitment to the issue would eventually shape Astley’s creative organisation of the Bathurst People’s Convention; but, as I will show, it also serves to emphasise the severe decline of his last fifteen years from the peak of his performance, on day one of the Convention (15 November 1896), when he realised his vision of a cross-section of the Australian population discussing a union to equal their destiny, until his death in pathetic circumstances in the Rookwood Benevolent Asylum, on 5 October 1911.

\* \* \* \* \*

William Astley was born in Liverpool, England, on 13 August 1855. His family migrated to Melbourne in 1859, and eventually settled in the Richmond area. Barry Andrews, biographer and author of the principal critical work on Astley, suggests that the person who early exerted the seminal influence on Astley’s moral and political education was one Henry Graham—a doctor who served, from 1839 to 1850, as the medical officer for a range of forbidding penal settlements including Port Macquarie, Norfolk Island and Port Arthur. Astley acknowledged that he knew Graham ‘in boyhood and ... early manhood’.<sup>10</sup> It seems that this experience, along with his befriending (when still a youngster) an old convict survivor of the ‘System’,

---

<sup>6</sup> Vance Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>7</sup> *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 20 August 1892.

<sup>8</sup> *Bathurst Daily Times*, 14 January 1888.

<sup>9</sup> *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 12 May 1891–9 June 1891.

<sup>10</sup> Barry Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 21.



determined the political and social stance that he would adopt for the rest of his life. As he put it in the preface to his first collection of short stories, *Tales of the Convict System* (1892):

It has been said by a distinguished Melbourne *littérateur* that the pages which record the penal chapters of Australian history ‘should be turned down’. We cannot turn them down if we would. The Transportation System has knitted itself into the fibres of our national being ... The convict past of Australia cannot be shut out of sight. No man can put his finger on the date it ended, for the reason that it glided imperceptibly into the vigorous and splendid, if imperfect, present.<sup>11</sup>

Like Marcus Clarke before him, Astley regarded convictism as the theme which any serious literary craftsman in Australia had a need, even a duty to confront.

Astley was an implacable opponent of English imperialism, colonial authorities and privilege in all its forms. He was a people’s man, a Thomas Paine and John Dunmore Lang man, a citizen who happened, through the good fortunes of his profession, to be able to state publicly his views on the important issues of the day. He committed himself early to the cause of Australian independence, Australian nationhood.

We have very little solid information about Astley in his twenties, his years as a cadet journalist, other than knowing that he became a self-confessed ‘scribbling globe-trotter’<sup>12</sup> who helped found the *Richmond Guardian* at the tender age of twenty, in 1875. He continued in the years that followed to gain invaluable experience at the coal-face of his trade, working for papers such as the *Australian Graphic*, *Warrnambool Standard*, *Sydney Globe*, *Tumut Independent*, *Sydney Storekeeper* and *Nhill Free Press*, along with the *Bathurst Daily Times*, *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* and the *Bulletin*. One of his earliest jobs had him working, in 1876, for the *Riverina Herald* at Echuca. Barry Andrews speculates, probably correctly, that the experience of working in the border country of the Murray River, the locus of federation sentiment because of the tariffs debacle, stimulated in Astley a keen awareness of the federation question.<sup>13</sup>

While Astley did not have his first story published in the *Bulletin* until May 1890,<sup>14</sup> he would have been very familiar with the journal’s strident nationalism and cultural chauvinism. Contributions such as Henry Lawson’s 1887 poem, ‘A Song of the Republic’, established the brash *Bulletin* line:

Sons of the South, awake! arise!  
Sons of the South, and do.  
Banish from under your bonny skies  
Those old-world errors and wrongs and lies.

---

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, Preface.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> ‘How Muster-Master Stoneman Earned His Breakfast’, *Bulletin*, 24 May 1890. See Barry Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

---

Making a hell in a Paradise  
That belongs to your sons and you.<sup>15</sup>

This first stanza of ‘Song of the Republic’ anticipates the substance of a cluster of Astley editorials in the *Bathurst Daily Times* in January 1888, in which he considers the prospects of the Australasian colonies in New South Wales’ centenary year.<sup>16</sup>

In the first of these editorials, on 14 January, he depicts the ‘nascent nations of the South’ as the ‘fly’ to imperialism’s ‘spider’:

The feeling which has prompted the late demonstration of British interest in us is pure and unadulterated Imperialism, and, barely defined, appears as the desire to enmesh these colonies in the gilded net of Imperial Federation.

An Australian democracy could be established only ‘if Australia is kept free from the paralysing influence of vicious old world institutions ... British Imperialism is not above strangling liberty itself in the interests of her aristocratic and commercial classes’. This is the language not only of the *Bulletin*, but of the old republican Titan of colonial politics a few decades earlier, the Rev. John Dunmore Lang. It is worth a mention in passing that Astley would, in 1891, commence a biography of Lang. It was never finished.

On the exact day of the centenary, 26 January 1888, Astley broadened his social agenda, warning his readers about the pitfalls of turning the anniversary into a party. The ‘chief lessons’, he cautioned, ‘will not be learnt through gaiety’, or through ‘national revels’. Here was an ideal, highly symbolic opportunity to scrutinise the progress of the political institutions of New South Wales—the upper and lower houses, executive administration and judiciary—along with religion, commerce and trade, and education. Such a course of action was necessary in a young community still in need of direction. Like so many of his scholarly contemporaries, Astley rued the baneful influence of sport, at the expense of higher pursuits:

A young Australian who plucks the highest honors conferrable by a British university, lands on his return modestly and unwelcomed, while a sculler, who propelled a piece of wood a few seconds sooner over a given distance than another man, is the recipient of a triumph such as they gave a Caesar in old Rome.

The conscious effort of Henry Parkes to use sport as a means of building his constituency is singled out by Astley for specific comment. As will shortly be shown, Astley considered Parkes a charlatan, a man motivated not by the well-being of the community but by self-gratification.

The third article in this group, of 28 January, responds to what is called ‘the most interesting—and the most important with respect to ultimate issues—of the Sydney Centennial celebrations’: namely, a gathering, organised by the *Evening News*, of

---

<sup>15</sup> Henry Lawson, ‘A Song of the Republic’, *A Camp-Fire Yarn – Complete Works 1885–1900*, (ed. Leonard Cronin), Lansdowne, Sydney, 1984, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> See also Lawson’s ‘A Neglected History’ (1888), *Complete Works*, op. cit., pp. 52–3.

intercolonial journalists. The editorial is a fascinating one, particularly as a gauge of Astley's lofty sense of his profession. Newspapers, he maintained, are critical to the community memory; they more accurately reflect 'national feelings' than any representative group of politicians. While the public, he asserted, does not give a 'brass farthing' for 'His Excellency THIS, or the Honorable MR THAT, and His Worship the Mayor OTHER', the people do identify with the newspaper reporter:

Thousands and tens of thousands reflect the hues of the journalist's mind.  
They think as he thinks, dream as he dreams, speculate as he speculates.  
He shares his notion of the present, and his conception of the future with  
countless scores to whom his individuality is a shadow and his name  
unknown.

It is a statement replete with the zeal and optimism of the moral high ground—a passionate if flawed exhortation of belief—and one which is typical of Astley's journalism in the forthcoming years. His political tenets are unmistakable: he distrusts politicians; he believes in the rights, responsibilities and capacity of the people; he rejects Lawson's 'old-world errors and wrongs and lies'; he stoutly defends the reformist mission of the journalist; and he advocates the importance, and ultimately the necessity, of what he would soon term 'the Federal Compact'.<sup>17</sup>

The year 1891 was William Astley's most prolific. He responded vigorously to the lament of his community and temper of the times. It was a period of protracted social upheaval. The shearers, for example, began a protracted strike in Queensland in January 1891, in opposition to the pastoralists' insistence on freedom of contract (Barcaldine ignited in May); the Labor Party entered Australian politics; the seventh Intercolonial Trade Union Congress met in Ballarat in March; while Henry Lawson published his poem 'Freedom on the Wallaby' in William Lane's Brisbane *Worker* in May, maintaining that Australians

... must fly a rebel flag,  
As others did before us,  
And we must sing a rebel song  
And join in rebel chorus.  
We'll make the tyrants feel the sting  
O' those that they would throttle;  
They needn't say the fault is ours  
If blood should stain the wattle!<sup>18</sup>

In order to add their voice to the rebel chorus, in October 1891 the members of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union began their weekly publication of the *Hummer* in Wagga Wagga.

Two other occurrences in this same year strongly contributed to the community ferment: the convening of the National Australasian Convention in Sydney in March and April, resulting in the draft 'Bill to constitute a Commonwealth of Australia', and the resignation of Sir Henry

---

<sup>17</sup> *Bathurst Free Press*, 20 May 1891.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Lawson, 'Freedom on the Wallaby' (1891), op. cit., p. 146.

---

Parkes as premier of New South Wales in October, to be succeeded by the pragmatic George Dibbs. For a journalist passionate about his country and determined to reflect faithfully or, when the occasion demanded, to mould the will of the people, the year 1891 was a veritable motherlode of activity. Astley responded to the challenge. The principal recipients of his energetic output were the people of Bathurst, where Astley regularly resided during the years from 1891 to 1894.

The bulk of his journalism appeared as leaders in the *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, but he did place one provocative article in the *Nhill Free Press* in January 1891, reacting to the creation in the Nhill area of a new municipality, to be called ‘the Shire of Hopetoun’ after the then Governor of Victoria, later to be first Governor-General of Australia.<sup>19</sup> Astley was disgusted with those who made the decision, declaring that ‘local great men’, such as Sir Thomas Mitchell or George Higinbotham should have been considered. Reminiscent of John Dunmore Lang’s dry, local humour some decades earlier, Astley questioned Hopetoun’s claims, suggesting several mock reasons for this recognition, the last one being that Hopetoun has

.... since his arrival here ... performed with accuracy certain functions which a wax figure with a phonograph in its interior could have performed with an equal grace and a corresponding dignity; he has made one or two able speeches which were very obviously written by his private secretary, and he has made several indifferent ones which were, as obviously, composed by himself ...

Astley was not impressed by the domestic achievements of the man variously designated ‘the Right Honourable JOHN ADRIAN LOUIS, Earl of Hopetoun, Viscount AITHRIE, Baron HOPE, and Baron NIDDRY, &c, &c.’—and he was incredulous that such qualifications were to be:

... honored by a race of hardy colonial pioneers—by men who are fighting bravely the rude forces of nature and consecrating their energies to the noble task of making the wilderness burst into blossom—by men who have apparently cut themselves adrift from the flunkeyisms and class-falsities of the old land ...

Stirring stuff, recalling the John Dunmore Lang of the 1850 *Coming Event* lectures and the polemical Lang of *Freedom and Independence for the Golden Lands of Australia* (1852).<sup>20</sup> Yet Astley’s comments resemble even more closely the visionary output, in the early 1850s, of Daniel Henry Deniehy, currency lad, democrat, republican, and yet another public figure who lists a Bathurst sojourn in his life story.<sup>21</sup> In Deniehy’s case, however, he died in Bathurst in desperate circumstances (in 1865), a hopeless alcoholic, only to be

---

<sup>19</sup> *Nhill Free Press*, 30 January 1891.

<sup>20</sup> For a selection, see Lang section in David Headon and Elizabeth Perkins (eds), *Our First Republicans—Selected Writings of John Dunmore Lang, Charles Harpur and Daniel Henry Deniehy 1840–60*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> See Deniehy section in David Headon and Elizabeth Perkins, op. cit.

exhumed in 1888 and sent to a prime location in Waverley Cemetery. But that is a story for another paper.<sup>22</sup>

Astley was apparently determined that the sins of the citizenry of Nhill would not be repeated by the nascent democrats of Bathurst. Having written an editorial leader in the *Bathurst Free Press*, on 3 March 1891, in praise of the high purpose of the imminent Federal Convention in Sydney and insisting on the need for ‘slow movement’, consultation and constant community discussion in the years building towards federation, Astley produced an erudite series of sixteen articles between 12 May and 9 June, in which he discussed the principal ideas relevant to a coming federation. In his recent book *Nationalism and Federation in Australia* (1994), W.G. McMinn argues that Australian federation would eventually be ‘the result, not of nationalist enthusiasms, but of a political process’.<sup>23</sup> Willam Astley’s articles in 1891 profoundly informed that political process, the first addressing the key issue of ‘State Rights’, three later ones expanding on the nature of the ‘Federal Compact’, three on the Senate, two on the franchise and one on the judiciary. Virtually all of the key federation questions are canvassed: ‘the doctrine of State Sovereignty’, the ‘basis of the Federal Compact’, the progress of the ‘colonies towards the coping-stone of a Federal Republic’, the need for a federation ‘with safety’ in order to ‘establish an Indestructible Union’, the necessity for the Senate to be ‘the House of Equal States’ with the ‘power to modify money bills’ and the need for ‘uniform Franchise’ in both Houses of the Federal Legislature, with ‘one vote and one vote only to every man’.<sup>24</sup> Several other miscellaneous contributions range more widely, with the Draft Bill, in particular, being closely analysed. It is journalism of the highest order. Indeed, Astley correctly asserts in his leader of 4 June 1891: ‘... no other paper in this colony has so precisely and definitely criticised the Bill—to expose the weaknesses of the measure. We have done this because we are Federalists, and look forward to the ultimate building up of a mighty nation’.<sup>25</sup>

The 1891 series of federation articles established the pattern of Astley’s journalism in the following years—notable principally for the quality and scrupulous detail of the political commentary on federation issues, and the unaccommodating, on occasion waspish analysis of the leading federal figures of the day. As the arduous year 1891 wore on, Astley detected, again correctly, the increasing tendency in New South Wales towards the party-politicising of the federation issue as the free-traders and protectionists strove for supremacy. On occasion, in the *Free Press* articles, impatience deteriorates into acerbity as Astley levels his attack primarily at Henry Parkes, George Reid and George Dibbs. His most severe criticisms are saved for Parkes because, in the weeks following the publication of the Draft Bill, Parkes set about labelling opponents of the Bill as ‘Anti-Federalists’. Astley maintains that Parkes:

---

<sup>22</sup> For Deniehy’s story, see, for example, Gerald Walsh, *Daniel Deniehy – a Portrait with Background*, Department of History (University College, University of New South Wales), Canberra, 1988; *Our First Republicans*, *op. cit.*; and David Headon, “‘Sons of the Morning’: Daniel Henry Deniehy’s Trustees of the Coming Republic”, in David Headon, et al. (eds), *Crown or Country: the Traditions of Australian Republicanism*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, pp. 53–68.

<sup>23</sup> W.G. McMinn, *Nationalism and Federalism in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p.136.

<sup>24</sup> *Bathurst Free Press*, 12 May 1891, 14 May 1891, 20 May 1891, 27 May 1891.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 4 June 1891.

---

... would have better shewn statesmanship by arguing people into the Bill, and by educating them to its characteristics, than by denunciation of opposition. There never was a measure before the colonies that demanded exacter, more intelligent scrutiny.<sup>26</sup>

In his editorial the next day Astley relished the task of questioning the tactics of Parkes and George Reid. Both men were intent on trying to outmanoeuvre or ‘dish’ the other in a spirit, not of ‘becoming patriotism’, but of that ‘which characterises the contestants in a low-class Sydney “boxing ken”—“Smash your opponent and let the principle of the game go to”’.<sup>27</sup> Astley was having none of Parkes’ adversarial, strong-arm tactics. Typically taking it upon himself to speak for the people, he ends a long polemic with a challenge to the politicians:

The Australian colonies will not have this Bill forced down their throats. Let it be put before them with every facility for amendment ... The greatest enemy to Federation, the strongest anti-Federalist, is the Federalist who wishes to hurry the formal settlement of the problem.

This last comment was aimed squarely at Parkes. Astley made it clear in the weeks that followed that he distrusted him and felt that he was ‘discrediting Federation by his antics’.<sup>28</sup>

By the early 1890s, Astley had been observing politicians in the public realm for well over fifteen years. He was no apprentice reporter. Thus empowered, he could state, in the penultimate article in this cluster—dated 8 June 1891—that:

In Democracies, as in States ruled by classes or autocrats, ‘the price of liberty is eternal vigilance’ ... The States which have been most marked by absence of great public scandals have been those where the eye of the public of the nation is most nearly situated to the focus, and where it is but a step from the Council Chamber and the Senate Hall to the homes of the humblest citizens.

In Astley’s *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* editorials of mid-1891 lie the foundations of the 1896 Convention—his insistence that the Draft Bill was at best faulty, at worst anti-democratic; his insistence on the necessity of debate, discussion and consultation; and his insistence on the necessity of the people being actively involved in the political processes leading to national union. For these reasons, in the coming years as the politicians fiddled while federation burned, his patience ran out. A despairing editorial, written in late 1891 at the end of what had been a turbulent year, is simply entitled: ‘Wanted—A New Party!’<sup>29</sup> Astley had had a gutful of free traders and protectionists searching for advantage at the expense of the national good and he was prepared to state it bluntly: ‘Party Government ... has infused into the veins of the body politic a subtle poison which degrades and

---

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 20 May 1891.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 21 May 1891.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 1 June 1891.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 16 January 1892.

demoralises the whole country'. His disenchantment with politics and politicians was almost palpable.

It got worse. In his biography of Alfred Deakin, J.A. La Nauze maintains that federation's prospects at the beginning of 1892 were 'gloomy'. By year's end federalists were reflecting on what La Nauze labels the 'lowest year' of their fortunes between 1889 and fruition a decade later.<sup>30</sup> Astley blamed the complicity of leading New South Wales politicians and he attacked them accordingly, disparaging George Reid as a political opportunist and George Dibbs as a 'blunderer'.<sup>31</sup> He even questioned Edmund Barton's commitment to the cause. We now know that the years 1892–3, when Barton became Attorney-General in the new George Dibbs protectionist ministry, severely tested him. In fact, one of Barton's biographers has called this period 'the most obscure and puzzling' of the politician's entire career. Astley was deeply disappointed with the apparent withering of Barton's federation commitment and he determined to re-focus him on of the great question of the day.

The result was an open letter to Barton, signed, it should be noted, by 'Price Warung' and published in the *Bulletin* on 11 February 1893. It was entitled 'The Fat Lord Justice of Federation'.<sup>32</sup> Liberated by the pseudonym, Astley produced an emotional torrent, reminding Barton about his 'glowing ... enthusiasm' for federation in 1891, when he was 'possessed of an exaltation of mind at being among the nation-makers'. He implores Barton once again to get immersed in 'the current of national feeling' rather than keep his eyes on the rewards of public office, like Parkes who, we are told, 'long ago sold himself to Imperialism', and Sir Samuel Griffith, who more recently had 'sold himself to Caste and Privilege and Monopoly'. Both these men, Warung declares, are now enrolled 'among the Iscariots of history'. The article, several newspaper columns in length, concludes with a challenge:

The public of Australia demand a Free Federation; and your one chance of enduring fame is to become the mouthpiece of that demand. Give yourself over to the Imperialists, and though you may hereafter, as the fat Lord Justice, enjoy the emoluments of treachery in the privilege of being addressed as 'My Learned Brother!' ... by his Honor the lean Lord Justice Chief Iscariot, you and your reward shall be like the brief lives of the insects of a summer moon, which are born, and breathe, and die.

There is considerable irony in this letter that subsequent scholarship enables a present-day reader fully to appreciate. Whether or not Warung's letter influenced Barton we do not know for sure; what we do know, however, through the information John Reynolds supplies in his biography *Edmund Barton* (1948), is that during the three years from 1893 to 1896 Barton spoke at nearly three hundred federation meetings in New South Wales alone. His inter-colonial visits swell that figure to over one thousand. By contrast, William Astley virtually drops out of public sight, probably because of his drug addiction. It has been suggested that in 1894 to 1895 Astley could manage a mere ten days' work.<sup>33</sup> J.F. Archibald and his business

---

<sup>30</sup> J.A. La Nauze, *Alfred Deakin: A Biography*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1979, p.157.

<sup>31</sup> *Bathurst Free Press*, 30 October 1891.

<sup>32</sup> 'Price Warung', 'The Fat Lord Justice of Federation', *Bulletin*, 11 February 1893.

<sup>33</sup> Barry Andrews, op. cit., p. 34.

---

manager at the *Bulletin*, William Macleod, were certainly shown to be correct when they suggested in 1893 that Astley could no longer cope with longer-term commitments.

Yet he bounces back in the years from 1896 to 1898, and it is the City of Plains, Bathurst, which provides the stimulus. Curiously, the announcement of the imminent resurgence is probably a piece Astley wrote for the *Bulletin*, published on 9 May 1896 and signed 'P.W.', written in response to the death of Henry Parkes. Entitled 'Within an Ace of Greatness', the article analyses Parkes's career, strengths and weaknesses, with characteristic insight. It begins: 'Henry Parkes is dead. For a generation past he has been a Problem: henceforth he will be a Legend'.<sup>34</sup> For Astley, there were two great divisions in Parkes' life: the period leading to 'Responsible Government in New South Wales' and the forty-odd years that followed. Up to 1856, Parkes, as editor of the *Empire* newspaper, was 'the fervent-spirited patriot, with the virile passion and sweeping imagination of a large-minded statesman'. But, we are told, in the later 1850s this man died, 'tortured to death under the weights, heavy and coercive, of debt and financial disaster'. The young democrat gives way to:

Parkes, the opportunist and historian; Parkes, who looked upon life as a fiction, humanity as a puppet, politics as a farce, patriotism and public spirit and freedom as terms with which to juggle away the senses of the people as conjurers juggle away the vision of their patrons; Parkes, the charlatan—was born.

Astley enlarges on Parkes' immoral role in the exploitation of the communal outrage prompted by the attempted assassination of Prince Alfred, the Duke of Edinburgh at Clontarf in 1868. For Astley, Parkes shamefully played the sectarian card in order to incite passions, gain publicity and ingratiate himself with those in positions of power. In the second division of his life, what assumed importance for Parkes were:

Titles, the company of titled personages, the glitter of imperialistic trumpery, of all that was symbolised by the laced coat and silken breeches of the Windsor uniform, and the ribbon and star of the Michael and George ...

It is fair comment. Deniehy, for the record, detected this tendency in Parkes as early as 1854.<sup>35</sup>

Despite his untimely arrest in the early stages of the historic Bathurst People's Convention, Astley used his position as Secretary to shape the style and mechanics of the event. Bathurst's convention did not cater solely for politicians but included a solid range of the colonial community; debate did not confirm the usual spread of motherhood motions but informatively probed fundamental federation questions; and delegates—all delegates—signed the one Convention register. With his hatred of titles and trumpery, it must have heartened Astley, in the aftermath of the Convention, to review the alphabetical register and find, right next to Edmund Barton, the name of J.B. Barclay, of Wickham; next to Robert Garran, one John Gillies of West Maitland; next to His Eminence Cardinal Moran, Ninian Melville of

---

<sup>34</sup> 'P.W.', 'Within an Ace of Greatness', *Bulletin*, 9 May 1896.

<sup>35</sup> David Headon and Elizabeth Perkins, eds, *Our First Republicans*, op. cit., p. 138.



Ashfield; and rubbing register shoulders with John Quick was the less illustrious but no less deserving E.A. Parnell, of Kelso. Astley would have been encouraged, too, by the fact that at his trial (charged by Sydney journalist William Kitchen with obtaining £15 by false pretences), held some three months after Bathurst, he was acquitted—clearly aided by a campaign against Kitchen waged by John Norton’s *Truth* newspaper. Apparently because of the disclosures about his private life, Kitchen took his own life.<sup>36</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

When called on several years later to promote Bathurst’s claim to being the national capital, in a booklet published in 1901, Astley proclaimed the city’s unique credentials based principally on its crucial role in 1896:

It was ... the energies, and the money, and the public spirit of Bathurst men that took the question of Federation when it was virtually a dead issue and gave it new and vigorous vitality by the People’s Federation Convention ... that Convention ... placed the Federal movement in such a position that the people of several provinces became the propelling and guiding agents, and not the politicians. The force of the impulse communicated by Bathurst has never been lost ... Before the People’s Convention, the movement was one for the politicians to juggle with ... That body made the issue the dominant one of Australasian politics, and to it, and to it alone, is ascribed, even by the very politicians whom it compelled to march along with it, the resurrection and the revivification of the Federal Ideal.<sup>37</sup>

In *Bathurst—the Ideal Federal Capital* (1901), ‘Price Warung’ makes a series of bold and largely credible claims about the town’s vital federation role. Certainly something happened between the malaise of the early 1890s and the momentum of 1897–9 that rescued what seemed a lost cause. Helen Irving argues convincingly, in *To Constitute a Nation* (1997), that during this period the people assumed a strong sense of ownership of, and commitment to, federation.<sup>38</sup> Credit an embattled journalist with an opium addiction for playing a significant role in that process. When Mr Astley went to Bathurst, he took a goodly bunch of the Australian people with him.

---

<sup>36</sup> Barry Andrews, op cit., p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Price Warung’ (William Astley), *Bathurst—the Ideal Federal Capital*, Glyndwr Whalan, Bathurst, NSW, 1901, pp. 16–17.

<sup>38</sup> Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation—A Cultural History of Australia’s Constitution*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 134–55.

---

## Cardinal Moran, Bathurst, and the Achievement of Federation

*A. E. Cahill*

Nothing did more to draw Australia-wide attention to the 1896 Bathurst People's Federal Convention than the presence of the Catholic Archbishop, Cardinal Moran. In the view of a contemporary political radical, his 'impassioned'<sup>1</sup> speech 'did more than anything else to lift the cause of Federation beyond the wrangle of party politics.'<sup>2</sup> His advocacy of federation in the mid-1890s drew a tribute from even a former religious antagonist, Sir Henry Parkes: 'We cannot underestimate the value of the Cardinal's utterances in favour of Federation. They reach thousands whom we can never hope to reach.'<sup>3</sup> A more dubious source, John Norton, linked Parkes himself with Moran, added Edmund Barton, and presented them as the three to whom the cause of federation owed most. Moran's 'persistent and consistent advocacy of Federation' had, Norton wrote, 'perhaps' done more than the efforts of anyone else to raise the cause 'out of the ruck of party politics and partisan strife into the purer region of a healthy national sentiment.'<sup>4</sup>

At the time of the Bathurst Convention, Moran had been in his Sydney archdiocese for only twelve years (and had been a member of the College of Cardinals for only eleven). But, as he later claimed, he had 'all along, since the question was mooted, looked on Federation as one

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Norris, *The Emergent Commonwealth: Australian Federation, Expectations and Fulfilment, 1889–1910*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton Vic., 1975, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> *Australian Workman* (Sydney), 16 January 1897.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in B.R. Wise, *The Making of the Australian Commonwealth, 1889–1900: a stage in the growth of the Empire*, Longmans Green, London, 1913, p. 221.

<sup>4</sup> John Norton, 'Open Letter to Cardinal Moran', *Truth*, 7 August 1898.

of vital importance to Australia.’<sup>5</sup> His interest in, and detailed knowledge of, developments had a much longer history. Among the more than 300,000 Irish who chose to go to the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century, Moran was an unusual migrant.<sup>6</sup> Between the ages of 12 and 36 he had lived outside the British Empire, in the Papal States, as student, priest, scholar and administrator. In a real sense, it was in Rome that Moran discovered Australia. His home was the Irish College, the centre of a nineteenth-century ‘Irish ecclesiastical empire’. There, and later back in Ireland, he enjoyed the patronage of his uncle, Cardinal Cullen. In dealing with Rome’s ‘Colonial Office’, the Propaganda Congregation, he became a skilled lobbyist, specialising in the problems of the Irish bishops and priests in the Australasian colonies and acting as their agent. At one stage of his career he was the (absentee) vicar-general of the diocese of Maitland in New South Wales and, more briefly, of the diocese of Auckland in New Zealand. He built up a large collection of maps, books and pamphlets dealing with the region Propaganda called ‘Oceania’, and presented it to the Congregation when he moved back to Ireland.

From his Roman years Moran thought of ‘Australia’ in unitary transcontinental, even trans-Tasman, terms. His church was federated long before this happened to his adopted state. His first big job in Sydney was to organise and preside (as the Pope’s representative) over a meeting of bishops which would determine the structures of Catholic life in the colonies, the First Australasian Plenary Council of 1885. He welcomed the inclusion of New Zealand and was dismayed when, against his and local bishops’ protests, Rome excluded New Zealand from its Second Plenary Council in 1895.<sup>7</sup> With a veteran’s grasp of Propaganda Congregation politics, he quickly accepted that a trans-Tasman *church* federation was a lost cause.

When Moran arrived in Sydney in 1884 he said that he had come as an Australian among Australians. Publicly and privately he spoke and acted as if a union of the colonies was both a necessity and a goal achievable in the immediate future. He often expressed impatience with intercolonial rivalries and pettiness. Within five years of his arrival in Sydney, he had travelled all over the colony of New South Wales, his ‘province’ as Archbishop—including two visits to Bathurst and a buggy journey through the Eden-Monaro region which gave him ideas about sites for a future federal capital. On church business, he had also made special visits to each of the other colonies, including one to both islands of New Zealand. By 1888 he was already well-known for his frequent references to contemporary public issues in the course of almost weekly speeches, when blessing foundation stones or opening churches and schools. He became a favourite source of ‘copy’ for journalists, in other colonies as well as in New South Wales; in the 1888 Chinese immigration debate he gave an extended interview in Adelaide, and during the 1890 Maritime Strike he made his first (of many) comments while travelling as far north as Rockhampton. A regular theme of his extempore remarks was that federation was ‘the great hope for the future of Australia’.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes, on more formal

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview, *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 18 February 1897.

<sup>6</sup> For an outline of his career, see my article in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 10, 1986, and Patrick O’Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community: an Australian History*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, NSW, 1985 (ch. 4 ‘The Reign of Cardinal Moran’).

<sup>7</sup> Moran to Cardinal Prefect Ledochowski, 2 April and 13 May 1895, *Rubrica*, vol. 216, pp. 331–2, 341, Archives of the Propaganda Congregation, Rome.

<sup>8</sup> As at an inner-Sydney school opening, Redfern, *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 6 February 1888.

---

occasions, the theme was given a wider context: the destiny of a united Australia was to be in this southern world a 'bulwark of civilisation and a home of freedom', and 'the centre of civilisation for all the races of the East'.<sup>9</sup>

In 1894 Moran agreed to give a special interview on the subject of federation to an Irish journalist then working for the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* and later to become editor of a new Catholic newspaper (the *Catholic Press*), J. Tighe Ryan, who had close links with pro-federation politicians such as Deakin, Barton, and Wise. In this interview, subsequently republished in pamphlet form, Moran emphasised that federation was now 'a matter of vital importance' and used provocative phrases to make his point:

Federation must come, and if not achieved by our political leaders, it will come as a matter of revolution ... I mean by revolution the determination of the people to assert their rights; and, of course, under such a republican constitution as we enjoy here, they must achieve these results.<sup>10</sup>

To soothe conservative alarm at the mention of the word 'republic' he went on to suggest that the colonies already had one form of republican government which gave colonists all the freedoms without the 'unpleasant influences' associated with the United States' presidential model. There was further balm for conservative sensibilities: fears that federation implied 'separation' from the Empire were allayed by emphasis on the importance of cooperation with the Royal Navy for defence of Australia in an increasingly dangerous international environment. Most importantly, while he mentioned economic development issues such as the need for 'great trunk railways to open up the resources of the interior' he kept well clear of protectionist-free trade squabbles in local politics which had split the new Labor Party, brought an early end to a protectionist government, and was about to produce a free trade one. In fact, the interview was published three days before a New South Wales election. It was, however, the transcending of these parochial politics that brought a tribute from barrister-politician B.R. Wise, whose own political career was suffering from his commitment to federation. He wrote to Moran to thank him for an impressive and well-tuned utterance on federation which 'sounds through the din of electioneering like the deep note of a cathedral bell'.<sup>11</sup>

When the organisers of the Bathurst People's Federal Convention were trying to provide new impetus for a flagging federal movement through the action of citizens rather than politicians, Moran was an obvious person from whom to seek support. On behalf of the committee, William Astley ('Price Warung' of the *Bulletin*) wrote as if aware of Disraeli's advice on how to deal with royalty ('Lay it on with a trowel'):

<sup>9</sup> Sermon in St Mary's Cathedral, and address at St John's College, University of Sydney. *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 4 February and 28 April 1888.

<sup>10</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 14 July 1894; J. Tighe Ryan, *Federation. The Attitude of the Catholic Church: A Special Interview With His Eminence Cardinal Moran*, George Robertson, Sydney, 1894.

<sup>11</sup> B.R. Wise to Moran, 17 July 1894, Moran Papers, Sydney Catholic Archdiocesan Archives [Hereafter SCAA].

The brilliant expositions of Federal principles which your Eminence has made on more than one occasion has linked the most distinguished and authoritative ecclesiastical station in Australasia to the magnificent cause of National Unity.<sup>12</sup>

The flattery was unnecessary. Moran replied with alacrity and enthusiasm. The president of the Bathurst Australasian Federation League, Dr Machattie, then wrote formally to invite Moran to attend and participate as a guest who would 'attach a peculiar distinction and interest to the Convention', and anticipated that his speech would be 'the most valued portion of the educative literature which is to be one of the permanent results of the Convention'.<sup>13</sup>

Moran was already committed to a busy schedule of church duties and he could take part in only one of the Convention's working sessions. He travelled up to Bathurst on 19 November with the New South Wales premier George Reid, whose attitude to the federation movement at this time was—in the phrase of a biographer who still wants to present Reid as the 'Father of Federation'—'cautious in the extreme',<sup>14</sup> and devoid of any vision for a united Australia's future such as inspired Moran. On the following day the major address of the morning session was given by Moran, preceding contributions from Reid and Edmund Barton.

---

<sup>12</sup> William Astley to Moran, 17 October 1896, SCAA; Letter Book of Federal Convention, Bathurst 1896, uncat.MSS 269, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>13</sup> Dr T.A. Machattie to Moran, 5 and 14 November 1896, SCAA.

<sup>14</sup> W.G. McMinn, *George Reid*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1989, p. 128. 'Father of Federation' is the title of ch. 17.

---

*Cardinal Patrick Francis Moran*

It was a very long speech in which he began by stressing the great benefits that federation had brought to the United States and to Canada, before turning to a theme that was a consistent part of his advocacy of federation before and after 1896: the defence of the continent.<sup>15</sup> Only united colonies could repel invasion—by implication, European rather than Asian (though he had become an early critic of Japanese expansion). He rejected the idea of a large standing army, but he did say that his personal view was that every male citizen should receive military training—he had given strong support to the establishment of an Irish Rifles militia regiment earlier that year. His defence theme stressed the importance of imperial naval cooperation, and he decried all talk of ‘separation’. He did use the phrase ‘our republican spirit’, but he said ‘republic’ had become an ambiguous word in modern usage and that he equated it with the exercise of a high level of civic responsibility rather than with rejection of the unifying role of Crown authority. Aware of the sensitivities, and the importance, of people such as Reid, he urged that the movement which had produced the People’s Convention should be seen not as a popular protest against politicians—if it were, he said, he would not have come to Bathurst—but as a movement to support and encourage their local legislators to work towards national union.

---

<sup>15</sup> Reported in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 November 1896; official text of Moran’s speech in *Proceedings, People’s Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney 1897, pp. 83–88.

In the last part of his speech there was a call which could be seen—and was seen then—to sit uneasily with an important part of his public activities before and after 1896: a call to keep the issue free from sectarian conflict. Catholics and Protestants, he said, should work together for unity. All through the 1890s he revelled in attacks on Protestant missionaries in the Pacific area, and he had only recently engaged willingly in fierce public exchanges on the legacy of the Reformation with Charles Camidge, the Anglican Bishop of Bathurst. Camidge had made a formal appearance on the first day of the Convention, but stayed away when Moran arrived. In his absence, Moran declared that those who sowed religious dissension among colonists were the enemies of both Christianity and Australia—as if the problem came onesidedly from ‘a small group of bigots’.<sup>16</sup> Yet, despite this seeming blind spot, what was distinctive about Moran’s speech in the context of what was said that day, especially by Reid, was his attempt to raise the federation issue above intercolonial rivalries to the moral high ground.<sup>17</sup> Moran had begun by telling his audience that ‘an invisible moral power will sustain you’; and he ended with variations on a theme from his 1894 interview: that the need for federation was such that it should override the interests of local politics.

At Bathurst, Moran performed the role of a national leader, using the status and authority of his church position to serve the cause of national unification—while seeming to deny the role in sectarian conflict that church position required. One side of his Bathurst performance was emphasised both by public tributes to a speech that had done more than anything else ‘to lift the cause of Federation beyond the wrangle of party politics’,<sup>18</sup> and by private messages such as that from a Supreme Court judge who commended his speech’s ‘noble teachings’.<sup>19</sup> Favourable responses showed the geographical spread of the impact. Moran later claimed that views he expressed in 1894–1896 had influenced ‘a large part of Queensland and especially Western Australia’,<sup>20</sup> and soon after his Bathurst speech he was told by the Catholic bishop of Perth that it had been published in Coolgardie and had aroused ‘enthusiastic’ interest among the mining communities.<sup>21</sup> Yet, another side of Moran’s impact was the renewal of sectarian conflict in the 1890s. As a Roman cardinal, in particular, he was seen by many colonial Protestants as the representative of a reactionary institution ‘whose object was to roll back the ocean of Protestantism, which was carrying everything in the world before it.’<sup>22</sup> His association with the federation movement was a threat and a challenge: ‘Protestants, beware! There is something dearer than Federation.’<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> The reassuring phrase used by the Catholic bishop of Bathurst, Joseph Byrne, to Moran, 12 November 1896, SCAA.

<sup>17</sup> A theme repeated at end-of-year prize givings at Sydney Catholic schools, for example, St Joseph’s College, Hunter’s Hill. *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 11 December 1896.

<sup>18</sup> *Australian Workman* (Sydney), 16 January 1897.

<sup>19</sup> Justice H.E. Cohen to Moran, 22 November 1896, SCAA.

<sup>20</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 18 February 1897.

<sup>21</sup> Bishop M. Gibney to Moran, 17 December 1896, SCAA.

<sup>22</sup> Rev. E.D. Madgwick, Protestant ministers meeting. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 February 1897.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. Edward Knapp, letter to *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 1897.

---

The catalyst for the outpouring of such feelings was Moran's decision to accept nomination for the 1897 Convention to draft a federal constitution.<sup>24</sup> When accepting nomination he had said that he considered it to be his 'patriotic duty' to continue the public advocacy of federation which had been so successful at Bathurst, especially in arousing interest from the 'aloof' colonies of Queensland and Western Australia.<sup>25</sup> When first approached—by what he stressed, to friend and foe, was a group of non-Catholics—he maintained that his position as a cardinal-archbishop would be no more of a hindrance to his participation than it had been in Bathurst.<sup>26</sup> This attitude represented a serious misunderstanding of the basic differences between the two 'conventions', and an even more serious misjudgement of the political realities. The delegates elected were likely to be—and almost all were—current or former parliamentarians. Yet he said he would not be a politician and would not 'contest' an election, and believed (or allowed himself to be persuaded) that an alternative arrangement was possible, for himself and for other non-politicians.

Moran's candidature was immediately challenged by Protestant critics, and his Bathurst appearance was now described by the chairman of a 'United Protestant' meeting as 'the first visible stage in a long conceived and secret plan for aggrandising the Church of Rome at the expense of Australia.'<sup>27</sup> Moran insisted that he was 'determined to stand to crush anti-Catholic bigotry'.<sup>28</sup> With a 'Stop Moran' campaign gathering force, he told his Roman agent that his candidature would 'go a long way towards breaking down the Orange bigotry which is at times very intense'.<sup>29</sup> Far from crushing 'anti-Catholic bigotry', his 1897 intervention greatly stimulated it in a society where the position of the Catholic quarter of the population had not yet been securely established. Looking back on the years before federation had been achieved, B.R. Wise could see how Moran's candidature had, on the one hand, aroused great public interest in a federation movement plagued by apathy and indifference but had, on the other hand, produced an outburst of the sectarianism which was 'never far beneath the surface of the politics of New South Wales'.<sup>30</sup> Sectarianism, part of the warp and woof of colonial, as of federated, Australian society, is not only a neglected factor in the historiography of federation but has been similarly neglected in explorations of contemporary senses of identity

and of meanings attached to the central concept of 'loyalty'.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> On Moran's candidature, see Mark James Mahon, 'Cardinal Moran's candidature', *Manna*, no. 6, 1963; on Protestant reactions, see Richard Ely, *Unto God and Caesar: Religious Issues in the Emerging Commonwealth, 1891–1906*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton Vic., 1976 (chapter 2 'The Cardinal Steps Out').

<sup>25</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 January 1897.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Rev. George M'Innes, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 1897.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 18 February 1897.

<sup>29</sup> Moran to Mgr M. Kelly, 8 February 1897, Irish College Archives, Rome.

<sup>30</sup> Wise, B.R., *op. cit.*, p. 221.

<sup>31</sup> The subject is now unfashionable, not only for the federation era but in Australian historiography generally. Michael Hogan, *The Sectarian Strand: Religion in Australian History*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic., 1987, provides a mainly political outline, but the topic needs much more detailed treatment of its social and cultural contexts.



At Bathurst, Moran had helped delegates experience a warm inner glow by assuring them that in the Australian colonies citizens enjoyed ‘perfect civil equality’<sup>32</sup>—a sweeping endorsement which, he knew, needed many qualifications. Only two weeks before the trip to Bathurst the veteran lawyer-politician Louis Heydon had written to him to remind him of one aspect of the colonial power structure. After going through a list of political, judicial and administrative offices, Heydon concluded: ‘no office of first, or even second, rate importance is held by a Catholic’.<sup>33</sup> Distrust of Catholics, as unfit for such offices because of their ‘disloyalty’ to the Empire and its political and religious values, deepened in the years preceding federation. In 1899, Bishop Camidge had dismissed ‘the arrogant demands of the Roman cardinal’ for an agreed system of recognition on state ceremonial occasions, and had reminded colonists that the Queen, as head of the Empire, had taken an oath to uphold ‘the Protestant Reformed Religion’.<sup>34</sup> It was a divisive reality of federated Australia—now almost written out of the story—that the new Governor-General, the Earl of Hopetoun, expressed when, in recommending an Australian lawyer-politician for a knighthood, he added that the intended recipient was ‘a loyal Catholic and a loyal Irishman’ and that ‘there are precious few of these in Australia’.<sup>35</sup>

In the circumstances of March 1897, with sectarian feelings fully aroused, it is hardly surprising that Moran failed to win one of the ten New South Wales positions and was placed fourteenth in the poll. As explanation for his defeat, he suggested to a Catholic bishop in another colony that ‘Government influence combined with the Bigotry of the majority won the day.’<sup>36</sup> He assured his Roman agent that his candidature had ‘brought out the strength of the Church in bold relief’ and added, unconvincingly: ‘I was particularly pleased to be defeated.’<sup>37</sup> Finding some comfort in an unintended martyr’s fate, he failed to note another unintended result of his candidature: the ‘Stop Moran’ campaign’s contribution to stirring up interest in the federal movement generally and the Convention elections specifically. New South Wales was the only colony in which a majority of qualified electors had bothered to vote.

After Moran’s triumph at Bathurst, defeat in the elections had been a humiliating experience for him. His absence from public prominence as a federation advocate was widely noticed, and regretted, in 1897–98. This was especially the case in New South Wales, where two well-known lawyer-politicians and prominent Catholics, Tom Slattery, a former Moran ‘adviser’ later described as ‘the stage manager of the anti-bilious circus’,<sup>38</sup> and Louis Heydon, were

---

<sup>32</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 November 1896.

<sup>33</sup> L.F. Heydon, MLC, to Moran, 4 November 1896, SCAA.

<sup>34</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 1899.

<sup>35</sup> Earl of Hopetoun to Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, 25 June 1902, Chamberlain Papers, University of Birmingham. The intended recipient was Richard O’Connor who asked Hopetoun to withdraw the recommendation as, before he had the security of a High Court appointment, he feared he would become bankrupt. Hopetoun’s ‘Irishman’ had been born in Sydney half a century before with only one parent Irish-born.

<sup>36</sup> Moran to Bishop M. Gibney, 9 March 1897, Perth Catholic Archdiocesan Archives.

<sup>37</sup> Moran to Mgr M. Kelly, 8 March 1897, Irish College Archives, Rome.

<sup>38</sup> J. Tighe Ryan, *Catholic Press* (Sydney), 1 April 1899.

---

vehement anti-federationists, and where one of Sydney's two Catholic newspapers, the *Freeman's Journal*, was equivocal when not openly hostile. When the Convention's draft constitution bill became the subject of a referendum, B.R. Wise wrote to Moran to express his concern that he had refused newspaper interviews on the bill and his fear that the silence of 'so known and earnest a champion of Union' might be misunderstood by voters.<sup>39</sup> Moran replied immediately, reproachfully:

When I took some part in the Bathurst proceedings in 1896 I hoped that the Federation question might be lifted up from the mire of political intrigue to the higher plane of genuine patriotism. My anticipations in this respect have not been realised.

It amused him, he wrote, to find that newspapers such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and 'some prominent champions of the cause' (from whom he excluded Wise) now complained because of the absence of the very intervention for which in 1897 'they abused me in every word and tense, in public and in private.'<sup>40</sup> The Catholic newspapers noted Moran's 'resolute silence', though Catholic gossip suggested that he privately supported the bill, quoting pragmatically 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.'<sup>41</sup> In the June referendum in New South Wales the bill failed to get the necessary minimum vote—increased by a Reid amendment—in a relatively low turnout of electors. In Richard Ely's (qualified) judgement: 'From the Billite point of view, Moran's participation possibly was indispensable.'<sup>42</sup>

Moran had not completely abandoned federation as a subject for extempore remarks at parish gatherings. Two months after the defeat of the 1898 bill he told a Sunday afternoon gathering that he hoped that premier Reid would take the necessary initiatives to produce a more generally acceptable bill.<sup>43</sup> A month later he told another parish audience that he was 'tempted' to speak out again in favour of federation because, in a threatening international context, 'There were great national interests at stake', and he urged support for the Irish Rifles and Light Horse regiments.<sup>44</sup>

His reluctance to speak out had almost disappeared by the end of the year, well before a new bill was put to a new referendum in 1899. In February 1899 he told the *Catholic Press* that federation would soon be achieved, as he had long 'prophesied'.<sup>45</sup> His occasional parish function comments on the issue usually stressed the defence aspect: only a united Australia could cope with German expansion in the Pacific, he told an inner-city audience.<sup>46</sup> In the same week in which one Catholic newspaper, the *Freeman's Journal*, editorialised against

---

<sup>39</sup> Wise to Moran, 13 April 1898, SCAA.

<sup>40</sup> Moran to Wise, 13 April 1898, Wise Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

<sup>41</sup> *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 11 June 1898.

<sup>42</sup> Ely, *Unto God and Caesar*, op. cit., p. 107.

<sup>43</sup> At Liverpool. *Daily Telegraph*, (Sydney) 1 August 1898.

<sup>44</sup> At Windsor. *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 24 September 1898.

<sup>45</sup> *Catholic Press*, 11 February 1899.

<sup>46</sup> At Erskineville. *Catholic Press* (Sydney), 13 May 1899.

the revised bill, on the same Sunday Moran assured two separate parish groups that he remained ‘an enthusiastic federationist’ and recommended that they should ‘disregard bogeys’ and support the present bill.<sup>47</sup> This was at a time when colonial-born Heydon was saying that nobody who supported Home Rule for Ireland could vote for the bill, and Irish-born Slattery was saying that federation meant cutting ‘the silken bonds’ of empire.<sup>48</sup> Moran still declined formal newspaper interviews on federation because it had become ‘a bitter party question’ but, as ‘an ardent federalist’, he left no doubt about his own endorsement of the revised bill.<sup>49</sup> In its last issue before the referendum, the *Catholic Press* printed a large photo of Moran with the caption ‘A Federationist Through Good Report And Ill’, and reported him as saying: ‘only blessings can follow acceptance of Federation on the present lines.’<sup>50</sup> On the day before the poll the *Sydney Morning Herald* reprinted part of his 1896 Bathurst speech under the heading: ‘An Eloquent Appeal for Union/“Guaranteed Freedom” ’.<sup>51</sup> When it became known that New South Wales had finally endorsed the bill, Moran expressed his delight: ‘I looked on Federation from the first as essential even to the existence of Australia.’<sup>52</sup>

External union, however, had hardly been achieved when internal disunion emerged to mark the way it would be celebrated. The old issue of ranking of denominational leaders at state ceremonies, which Moran had considered as settled by agreement during the governorship of Lord Jersey,<sup>53</sup> was reopened in an increasingly bitter sectarian atmosphere associated, in Sydney especially, with the Coningham Case. On, literally, the eve of the inauguration of the new Commonwealth, Moran told New South Wales premier Lyne that he could not take a position inferior to that of the Anglican archbishop of Sydney without compromising the civil rights of Catholics. On the day of the inaugural ceremony he took up a position outside his cathedral—with newly hung bells ringing in the new federal state in the ‘Cardinal’s Tower’ behind him—while the governor-general’s procession, including the Anglican primate, passed by on its way to Centennial Park.<sup>54</sup>

In hindsight, the lack of popular interest in the referenda, and the ‘inertia’ regarding federation generally, are striking features of the 1890s—in fact, ‘in no colony did more than 46.63 per cent of voters cast a vote.’<sup>55</sup> If Moran, as Tighe Ryan claimed, ‘had awakened voters in every hole and corner in the colony’, it was not only Catholics who were aroused, it was not only federal sentiment that ‘would still be dormant without him’, and it was not only

---

<sup>47</sup> At Elizabeth Bay, and at Chatswood. *Catholic Press* (Sydney), 8 April 1899.

<sup>48</sup> *Catholic Press* (Sydney), 10, 17 June 1899.

<sup>49</sup> *Evening News* (Sydney) 8 May 1899; *Catholic Press*, 13 May 1899.

<sup>50</sup> *Catholic Press* (Sydney), 17 June 1899.

<sup>51</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 June 1899.

<sup>52</sup> *Catholic Press* (Sydney), 24 June 1899.

<sup>53</sup> Earl of Jersey memorandum, 11 May 1892; Moran to Jersey, 13 May 1892, Jersey Papers, Australian National Library, Canberra.

<sup>54</sup> See Ely, *op. cit.*, chapter 14; and Gavin Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: the Initiation of Australia, 1901–1919*, Collins, Sydney, 1976, pp. 41–44.

<sup>55</sup> C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1981, vol. V, p. 167.

---

federal ideas that he ‘crooted in their minds’.<sup>56</sup> Richard Ely has suggested that ‘the eventual success of the federation movement probably owed more to Moran than to any other church leader.’<sup>57</sup> Considering both the intended national, and the unintended sectarian, consequences of his activities in the 1890s, it could be argued that Moran had done more to achieve federation than had any other leader, from church or state. To recommend the first bill to New South Wales voters, Moran was said to have quoted ‘A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.’ In a different context, he is said to have quoted ‘It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good.’ With federation becalmed by indifference, even a sectarian wind could be helpful.

---

<sup>56</sup> J. Tighe Ryan, *Catholic Press* (Sydney), 8 April 1899.

<sup>57</sup> Ely, *op. cit.*, p. x.

## **Barton At Bathurst: 'Front Stage/Backstage'**

*Tessa Milne*

Edmund Barton's role in the People's Federal Convention at Bathurst in November 1896 was two-fold: in public he stood front stage, interested but detached; behind the scenes, in private, his correspondence was pre-emptive and clandestine.

'This was Friday, the great day of the States right-question. The day of great guns and great speeches', wrote the *Sydney Mail*.<sup>1</sup> It was describing the fifth day of the People's Federal Convention. Cardinal Moran, premier George Reid and Edmund Barton had, one by one, taken front stage. *The Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, its readership the rural establishment of New South Wales and Victoria, wrote condescendingly that the 'big guns' of federation:

... had all been invited, but they all with one consent began to make excuses. It was not so much that they had married wives, or bought land or oxen, but Parliaments had not ceased to sit, and imperative duties of other description kept most of them away. Without exactly sending out for the halt, maim, poor and blind, the Bathurst committee filled up space with a considerable number of delegates unknown to fame, with young barristers and others, and in this manner got safely enough to work, the gathering making up in diligence and enthusiasm what it lacked in experience.<sup>2</sup>

It noted that the 'latter days of the gathering were made momentous by the presence of Cardinal Moran, Premier Reid, Messrs Barton, O'Connor, Lyne, Smith and others, the first three delivering excellent speeches upon the subject under discussion.'

---

<sup>1</sup> *Sydney Mail*, 28 November 1896, p. 1141.

<sup>2</sup> *The Australasian Pastoralists' Review*, 15 December 1896, p. 495.

---

While Moran, the leader of the Catholic Church in Australia, and George Reid, the premier of the mother colony of New South Wales, brought to the Convention, albeit on the fifth day, the sanction of church and state, the charismatic Edmund Barton added a scholarly air and, by his presence, a link with the ‘official’ federation movement, with the popular movement—and, as the heir apparent to the late Henry Parkes, a link with the legendary aura of the ‘Father of Federation’. As John Reynolds suggests in his biography of Barton, ‘we find Parkes consulting Barton on things both large and small’,<sup>3</sup> including the phrase ‘One People, One Destiny’, which became the motto of the popular federation movement.<sup>4</sup> Barton had also taken a leading role in both the official and popular federation campaigns. For example, in 1891 he had attended the National Australasian Convention, in Sydney, as one of the three elected representatives of the New South Wales Legislative Council; in 1892, he campaigned in the border districts of New South Wales and Victoria where he had encouraged the establishment of Federal Leagues, and the following year he was instrumental in establishing the Central Australasian Federation League in Sydney.

Thus it was fitting that Barton stood front stage in Bathurst to address the Convention on states’ rights in, according to the *Sydney Mail*, ‘a strong, clear voice’. In his speech he worked his audience well, first congratulating the organisers and then, with unsentimental rhetoric, belittling the Convention’s critics. In response to a comment of ‘Old Granny’ he replied: ‘Well it would be a very queer Convention indeed if it did not give some ground of criticism, and, indeed, did not provide some food for amusement among its own members. In all gatherings of this description there are certain to be some ill-advised persons whose proposals are open to criticism. But such things in this case serve only as the foils by which the gem of common sense of the generality of the delegates was shown to be of brighter lustre.’<sup>5</sup>

Barton’s speech had a clear tactical structure as it moved from the issue of states’ rights, the necessity of a two-house system and the American and Canadian experience, to focusing on the specific issues of the site of the federal capital and the 1897 Convention. ‘A few words now on another and a delicate matter, and I hope I won’t tread on anyone’s corns in touching upon it.’ The crowd laughed. Barton had placed his witticism well. ‘The question’, he continued, ‘is that of the Federal capital.’<sup>6</sup> This was a controversial subject indeed, as the *Australasian Pastoralists’ Review* later cynically observed: ‘the proposal [for the Convention] savoured somewhat of a desire to give the local storekeepers and hotels a little “boom” all to themselves, and also to push into prominent notice the extremely tenuous claims Bathurst is understood to cherish in the direction of the site of the Federal City.’<sup>7</sup> Barton was indeed touching upon a sensitive local issue. ‘We must be careful in framing the Constitution not to hamper the Federal State.’ He continued: ‘If we have to make a free people we must not start them with manacles on their wrists. We have no right to fetter the choice of the Federation in the matter of the choice of the capital.’<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> John Reynolds, *Edmund Barton*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1948, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> *Proceedings, People’s Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, 1897, p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *The Australasian Pastoralists’ Review*, 15 December, 1896, p. 495.

<sup>8</sup> *Proceedings*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

For Barton personally, and the federation movement, this had threatened to be a maverick convention, with the potential to confuse or even derail the federation campaign. It had been instigated by people outside the main federation movement, and had the potential to conflict with Dr. John Quick's Corowa resolution passed three years earlier for a legislated election of representatives to attend a statutory convention.<sup>9</sup> Nor did it adhere to such democratic aspirations, for although entitled the 'Bathurst People's Federal Convention', its delegates were invited, not elected by the general populace.

In concluding his speech, Barton looked to the future: 'What the colonies at the Convention, which I hope will meet next year, must strive for and what I have no doubt will be its outcome is a constitution of solid strength, of perfect justice and a tender humanity.' Cheers from the crowd. Barton, front stage, then concluded with the rousing lines of 'A Federal Sonnet', written for the occasion by P.J. Holdsworth, and ending 'In Union One—we claim one Destiny'.<sup>10</sup>

The *Sydney Morning Herald* editorialised that 'although it may be considered somewhat late in the day for federal eloquence, the speeches delivered at the Bathurst Convention yesterday were worthy alike of the speakers and their subjects.'<sup>11</sup> Although Barton's speech was inspiring, it was too late to have any real impact on the Convention's resolutions. However, a letter from Barton to William Astley, the Organising Secretary of the Convention, dated 4 October 1896, reveals that when Barton stood 'Front stage' he had every confidence in the outcome of the Convention.<sup>12</sup> He was already aware that it had been politically undermined, and converted instead into a useful propaganda instrument with which to arouse public interest, for he had himself played a key, albeit clandestine, 'backstage' role in its organisation.

This role is evidenced in his correspondence with Astley. The tone of his letters is both manipulative and collusive. It is clear that Barton was already in correspondence with Astley, for he acknowledges receipt of two letters from him, dated 2 October and 3 October 1896, and the proofs of documents to be issued to the press: an address to the *Federalist*, letters to editors and circulars to the mayors. In the letter of 4 October, Barton set about thwarting the political potential of the proposed convention in Bathurst: 'It is stated that your Convention is to be held "for the purposes of discussing the principles and details of Federalism, of issuing a series of definitions of Federal principles and of preparing a report to be issued as a manifesto to the Australasian people on a scheme of Federation based upon the 'Draft Bill to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia' as adopted by the Convention of 1891." ' He continued:

It is here that my doubts arise. We are to have, within at any rate of a few months an elected convention held under the Enabling Act already

---

<sup>9</sup> Reynolds, op. cit., pp. 98–99.

<sup>10</sup> *Proceedings*, op. cit., p. 188.

<sup>11</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 November 1896, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Barton to Astley, People's Federal Convention Bathurst papers, MSS 1163, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

---

passed by four of the colonies. Will it be wise, in view of this prospect, to anticipate the discussion which must take place at the Statutory Convention, with the probable result that prominent Federalists, having attended the earlier one at Bathurst, will take into the subsequent gathering, at which the *real* Constitution is to be framed, a set of opinions so rigidly moulded that discussion with the representatives of other colonies can scarcely be expected to progress in a spirit of mutual concession or 'give and take'; such as is surely essential to the evolution of a reasonable constitution: one which *each* Colony when voting at the Referendum will regard as fair to itself? The absence of any provision in the Enabling Act for some subsequent consultative gathering, such as a Parliamentary Convention, at which differences between the delegations, unsolved at this Convention, might be harmonised, has as you know always caused me to be very apprehensive that: some colony or colonies whose representatives have been overborne and outvoted may blackball the constitution at the Referendum, & so leave us with either an incomplete & feeble Federation, or without any at all. Now the probability—or possibility if you like—of such a result will increase in the proportion in which delegates enter the convention with a set of rigid & irrevocable views. The likelihood of their doing so—at any rate some of them, will increase if they have declared themselves definitely as to the 'details of Federalism' & committed themselves—say at Bathurst to 'a scheme of Federation', whether based upon the Commonwealth Bill or upon anything else.

He then turned to the issue of the site of the Federal capital. Firstly, Barton dissociates himself personally from such provincial aspirations:

As you see, it has no reference to the selection of Bathurst as a place in which to hold an important demonstration in favour of the union, and therefore you must not allow me to be thought an objector to the proposal your League is forging so far as *that* is its object. I saw that your letters to the Press, which led to the formation of a branch of the League in Bathurst, were strong in advocacy of the selection of that city for a Federal capital. I hope that if I am able to attend your convention I shall not be considered to have become thereby a supporter of that proposal. I am not one of those who consider that it matters much and it certainly does not matter much to any of the present provincial capitals—where the seat of federal government is to be. But I think it would be rather a grave mistake to endeavour to select a capital before we have a Federation. An interim selection must no doubt be made of some place in which the Parliament of the Commonwealth is to hold its first session. But it will be the duty of that Parliament to fix the capital: and we have no business to usurp the right of the federated Australians to choose their capital for themselves.

It is also clear from this letter that Barton used his influence in the choice of delegates to be invited. Having explained that he would not be able to attend the Convention before Saturday



due to a court matter, he noted: 'By the way the leading counsel in the matter are Bruce Smith and Mr. E. O'Connor. They are both strong Federalists, and if you have not sent them invitations I suggest that you should. Even if they cannot attend, their position with regard to the movement renders it proper to pay them this compliment. No doubt you have invited McMillan. His interest in matters Federal is as strong as ever; and I think he would try hard to attend.' Barton patronisingly added: 'I almost forgot to say that I have not any objection to the use to which you have put my three guineas.' He concluded in an effusive tone: 'You are so busy that you will be inclined to cry out upon me for having written you so long winded a letter. When I begin to talk about Federation—even with my pen—it is hard to leave off, I confess.' And there was manipulation by collusion: 'I have not written such a letter as you can read to your committee,—it is too unrestricted for that. But it will give you enough information to enable you to explain my opinions.'

When Barton stood front stage, to address the Bathurst Convention on state rights, he began in a manner befitting an outsider: 'You must allow me, before beginning, to congratulate those who have promoted this successful gathering ...' It can be argued that Barton had much to congratulate himself about. The Convention successfully drew together unlikely people from across the continent, and through them and through the press coverage, it provided wide publicity for the federation movement. It also provided Barton with a front stage platform on which to appear as a scholarly leader of the movement. Backstage, he sought to influence the organisation to ensure that this Convention did not pre-empt the 1897 Convention, and to stifle Bathurst's original aspirations of becoming the site of the federal capital. Barton, the astute political tactician, manipulated the Convention for his own ends. As John Reynolds observes in his biography of Barton (regarding the election of delegates for the 1897 Convention): 'Barton now reaped one of the rewards of his missionary work for the movement. The New South Wales electors placed him easily at the top of the poll of 49 candidates. The popular Premier, G.H. Reid, had to take second place, a situation that he admitted was distasteful to him. Barton's leadership of the movement was confirmed by the final political court of appeal in a parliamentary democracy.'<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>Reynolds, *op. cit.*, pp. 99–100.

---

## **John Napoleon Norton and the 1896 Bathurst Convention**

*Mark McKenna*

For those keen to find heroes for the republican hall of fame, John Norton has long been the ideal candidate for the waxworks—the radical labour nationalist and quick-witted pamphleteer with an eye for mischievous agitation and tabloid scandal. Norton had it all, so long as his brief was to fit the mould of the larrikin republican. But there was more to Norton’s political beliefs than anti-monarchism.

Like most of his contemporaries in the early labour movement, Norton was an unapologetic racist. His class-based hatred of the monarchy was surpassed only by the venom and spleen which he reserved for the ‘yellow hordes’ to Australia’s north. Although Norton spoke frequently of democratic republicanism in the 1880s and 1890s, by the time of his death he had lost all faith in the people, praying instead for a benevolent dictator who would lead the people to salvation. For most of his adult life, Norton struggled with alcohol addiction, debt, and a mouth which was seemingly immune to the laws of libel. He came to the Bathurst Convention trailed by his usual scent of scandal and intrigue, and he came as a republican—of sorts.<sup>1</sup>

Mention of republicanism at Bathurst in 1896 mirrored the wider debate that had been occurring in Australia since 1880. Various understandings of the ‘true’ republic could be

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Cannon, *That Damned Democrat: John Norton, an Australian Populist, 1856–1916*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 1981; Michael Cannon, ‘John Norton’ in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 11, 1891–1939, pp. 41–42.

found. When Cardinal Patrick Moran addressed the Convention he took issue with the notion of a republic being tied categorically to separation and independence:

A few days ago a telegram from London appeared in the daily *Press* to the effect that within a few years Australia would assert her independence and demand separation from the mother country. [laughter] ... There can be no doubt that there is a republican spirit abroad amongst us, but this is far from implying a tendency to separation from the Imperial Crown. Nothing is more ambiguous than the word Republic in modern times. It is generally supposed to be a synonym of liberty, and yet nowhere will you find Liberty so crushed and such vexatious tyranny exercised as in some of the so called republics. The Constitutional government which we enjoy in these colonies is in the truest sense a republic.<sup>2</sup>

Moran's remarks were consistent with the tradition of the disguised republic which could be traced to Henry Parkes (circa 1850) and beyond. This was that the essence of republican government was already embedded in the British model of responsible government, of balanced, constitutional government—Kings, Lords and Commons, freedom from arbitrary rule and freedom from interference. This classical notion of republicanism had been employed as a rhetorical strategy in England since the seventeenth century. It emerged with renewed vigour after the French revolution and the American War of Independence. Fear of rivers of blood—à la Jacobean Paris—and of Yankee republicanism, encouraged the British ruling class to portray British institutions as 'essentially' republican. This was one way of keeping the revolution at bay.<sup>3</sup> But although Cardinal Moran and the many delegates who nodded in approval agreed that the theoretical essence of republicanism was already theirs, they were not willing to embrace the republican label as one appropriate for their new federation. Theory was one thing, practice another. Declaration of an Australian republic would mean separation from mother, an act which George Reid reminded delegates would only increase Australia's vulnerability to invasion.<sup>4</sup>

In his final address to the Bathurst Convention, Thomas A. Machattie rejoiced that delegates had made no concessions to an untimely and 'ill advised republicanism'.<sup>5</sup> This of course was the republic of separation, the republic which both Reid and Moran admitted would come inevitably when Australia was mature enough to stand on its own. Tacitly at least, they acknowledged that the future Australian republic would be independent and free of ties with Great Britain. It was this (perhaps more immediate) vision of a republic which was held by John Norton, who appeared in the list of Convention delegates as a representative of the Sydney Republican Union.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> *Proceedings, People's Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, 1897, p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Mark McKenna, *The Captive Republic. A History of Republicanism in Australia 1788–1996*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings*, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup> *Proceedings*, op. cit., List of Delegates.

---

In the words of John Norton, he was born in Brighton, England, on 25 January 1858 to a stonemason father he never knew and a half mad mother.<sup>7</sup> The image of Norton as someone who suffered from inherited psychological handicaps was one of which he was particularly fond when asked in court to explain his appalling record of domestic violence and alcoholism. Norton arrived in Australia in 1884. The new chum quickly gained notoriety in the labour movement as publicist and agitator. In 1885 Norton wrote the introduction to the final report of the third Intercolonial Trade Union Congress held in Sydney, calling for the federation of labour in Australia.<sup>8</sup> His belief in collective bargaining and the union of labour organisations carried over into the sphere of inter-colonial politics. Three years later, Norton edited *The History of Capital and Labour*, by any measure an impressive survey of industry and labour in Australia and abroad. He called for Australian federation on a national and independent basis, as a first step towards Australia's manifest destiny—'control of the world's destinies in the Southern Seas for ages to come'.<sup>9</sup> Although Norton rejected the imperial connection, he was not afraid of projecting a few imperial fantasies onto his beloved republic.

After arrival in Sydney, it took only three years for Norton's reputation as a rabble-rousing republican to be established. His timing could not have been better. The twin celebratory occasions of Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 and the centenary of settlement in 1888 created the ideal circumstances for nationalist republicanism to emerge. Norton displayed his talent for duplicity in the republican riots of 1887. After he had led fellow republicans in the clever hijacking of an innocuous meeting called to organise festivities for the Jubilee, the authorities printed special invitations for a second meeting in an attempt to exclude yahoos of Norton's ilk. Norton countered by printing forged invitations, a tactic which proved successful—republicans disrupted the second meeting as well. Norton was involved in a similar strategy six years later at the inaugural meeting of the Australasian Federation League at Sydney Town Hall when, together with other Labor delegates, he managed to secure the passing of a motion calling for Australian federation on a 'democratic and republican basis'. As in 1887, this republican resolution was overturned, another meeting was called, the republicans were barred and any hint of disloyalty was erased from the public record.<sup>10</sup>

Open discussion of the separatist republican alternative during the conventions of the 1890s was either repressed, ridiculed or adroitly organised out of the framework of discussion. Although Norton and a few resilient nationalists tried to maintain the rage after the high point of republican sentiment in the late 1880s, by the time of the Bathurst Convention, Norton was one of the last vocal republicans in the Labor Party. He may well have been the only remaining member of the Sydney Republican Union. Many of Norton's former colleagues had given up on the dream of a white republic, preferring instead to concentrate on more practical and achievable labour reforms as members of parliament under the crown. In

---

<sup>7</sup> Cannon, *That Damned Democrat*, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Official Report of The Third Intercolonial Trades' Union Congress, October 1885*, Trades and Labour Council of New South Wales, Sydney, 1885, p. xii.

<sup>9</sup> John Norton, ed., *The History of Capital and Labour in all Lands and Ages*, Oceanic Publishing, Sydney, 1888, p. xi.

<sup>10</sup> McKenna, op. cit., pp. 138 and 198.

Norton's eyes they had sold out; the comfortable life of a parliamentary career had turned them into 'namby pamby and respectable republicans'. In short, they had become inevitablists—complete independence was too far fetched an idea to waste one's time and energy on.<sup>11</sup>

These pragmatic attitudes may have disappointed Norton, but he carried on throughout the 1890s as the republican editor of the *Truth*—a late nineteenth century precursor of *Who Weekly*, with a dash of the *National Enquirer* thrown in for good measure. The *Truth* was tabloid, slanderous, racist, muck-raking, gossipy, and popular. Under Norton's editorship, the *Truth* referred to Queen Victoria as 'flabby, fat and flatulent', and her son the Prince of Wales as 'a turf swindling, card sharpening, wife debauching rascal'.<sup>12</sup> Eight weeks before he graced the floor of the Bathurst Convention, Norton penned his most notorious editorial—'God Save The Queen'. Norton's Sex Pistols' anthem was written in haste, 'at midnight with a wet towel around my head'. From the colourful turn of phrase in the editorial, it seems more likely that the wet towel was several bottles of cheap plonk. Norton described the Queen as a 'semi senile old woman'. Other members of the Royal family were 'podgy faced lecherous bastards, bigamists and wife beating boozers'.

Ironically, these words were not dissimilar to those which would later be used to describe Norton towards the end of his life as he entered his decline into alcoholism. The editorial was vulgar farce. For his trouble, Norton was charged with 'wickedly vilifying and scandalising Queen Victoria' and 'holding her up to ridicule and contempt'. Norton conducted his own defence, declaring in court that he was a loyal Australian and republican, quoting impressively from Cobden, Bright, Spencer and Macaulay. After the jury was unable to reach a decision, the crown dropped the case.<sup>13</sup> Norton arrived in Bathurst surrounded by the publicity to which he was accustomed. Buoyed by his success, he saw himself with customary modesty as a 'champion of the people'.<sup>14</sup>

In the proceedings of the Convention Norton was far from idle. He was active in procedural matters and had obviously lost none of his persistence and courage. On several occasions he placed his two republican motions on the floor: popular election of the Governor-General and complete legislative autonomy for the new nation. They met with little success. The proposal to elect the Governor-General was greeted with a spontaneous and thunderous chorus of 'God Save the Queen'.<sup>15</sup> We might therefore set Norton's appeal for popular sovereignty against loyalty to Queen and Empire. Perhaps this is our chance to paint Norton as the people's champion, the brave crusader fighting a lone battle against the tide of Imperialism. But this analysis would be misleading.

Imperial loyalty and popular sovereignty were not mutually exclusive. Under the crown, a limited notion of democracy had developed in the Australian colonies. By international

---

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, chapter 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, p. 41.

<sup>13</sup> Cannon, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Proceedings*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–22.

---

standards it might be considered progressive. The people were included and consulted (at least partially) in the process of achieving federation. At Bathurst, John Norton stood and reminded delegates that ‘federation was the most exalted ideal which patriotism can dictate for the Australian people.’<sup>16</sup> Norton’s invocation of the people deserves close scrutiny.

He had a liking for rhetorical flourishes which reinforced his self-image as the champion of the people. There was much of the demagogue in Norton. He was fond of standing up for ‘the people’ and he possessed the necessary arrogance to think the people would listen to him. Like his fellow Labor colleagues and their opponents, he had learnt the lesson of modern democracy—every political campaign must be grounded in the rhetoric of popular sovereignty. While Norton sought to legitimise his campaign for a ‘White man’s republic’ by dressing it up in American paradigms of popular participation, as with most politicians of the day, his notion of the people was selective and patronising.

Shortly before his death in 1916, Norton wrote in a letter, which he marked ‘confidential’, that ‘the great deeds of history were not done by caucuses, Parliaments or meetings, but by single individuals.’ John Norton, the great democrat and republican, ‘the people’s champion’, had carried dreams of Napoleonic grandeur for most of his life.

When the auction of Norton’s estate was held at his Maroubra home, ‘St. Helena’ in 1916, among the list of valuable items for sale were many portraits of Cromwell, Caesar and Napoleon. One of them was the painting of Napoleon (or was it Norton?) in full coronation dress. It greeted Norton, for many years, as he entered the ‘grand gallery’ at ‘St. Helena’. And that was not all. There were also 36 statues and busts of Napoleon in bronze and 43 in marble. It seemed Norton’s contemporaries knew him well. They referred to him as John Norton—the Nortonian.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Catalogue of the Valuable Furniture, Works of Art, Collection of Pictures & Napoleonic Relics held at St. Helena Maroubra Bay, the Residence of John Norton, 1 and 2 August 1916, (Mitchell Library Sydney).*

## **A Foreign Agent Unmasked: Colonel Bell at Bathurst**

*Robin McLachlan*

At a little past 8:00 pm, on the evening of 18 November 1896, Colonel George William Bell addressed the Bathurst People's Federal Convention on the theme, 'Progressive Liberty'.<sup>1</sup> The School of Arts hall was crowded to capacity as the 200 official delegates were joined by Bathurst townsfolk, who in spite of a drenching summer storm, had turned out in strength to hear the Colonel's lecture. The audience overflowed from the public galleries down to the floor of the hall behind the delegates.

Colonel Bell, as he was popularly known in the colony, was the Sydney-based Consul for the United States of America, that nation's chief representative in New South Wales. Bell was also a highly regarded public speaker, billed as 'The Silver Tongued Orator of the Pacific'.

There was some debate, or discussion at least, earlier that afternoon about interrupting the work of the Convention for Bell's lecture.<sup>2</sup> The decision to break to hear Colonel Bell was virtually unanimous, such was the high regard of the delegates for their visiting speaker. At 9:45 pm, at the conclusion of his speech, delegates resumed their constitutional deliberations. Clearly, Colonel Bell was someone thought worthy of the interruption of proceedings and the inconvenience of a very late sitting.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings, People's Federal Convention, Bathurst, November, 1896*, Sydney, Gordon & Gotch, 1897, p.25.

<sup>2</sup> The day's proceedings are well documented in the Bathurst newspapers of the following day. For example, see the *National Advocate*, 19 November 1896.

---

The American consul's presence at the Bathurst Convention provides something of a mystery or a puzzle. Perhaps, it would be better to speak of three puzzles, each connected with the other. First, who was this Colonel Bell? Beyond being the American consul and a celebrity speaker, what do we know of this man? More importantly, what did the Bathurst organisers know about him? The enquiries of this writer about the identity of Colonel Bell remain incomplete. No doubt with more research further facts will be uncovered, but identifying Bell is not simply a question of more research and more facts. An appropriate metaphor to use in describing Colonel Bell might be that of the onion, an object composed layer upon layer. There was, as we shall see, more than one layer to the Colonel. On the surface, he was by all accounts a man of charm and bonhomie. His activities as Consul, however, suggest an unexpected shrewdness, even slyness, lying beneath the outer layer of geniality.

While this writer confesses a liking for the gentleman, there is also a suspicion that Colonel Bell had a touch of the 'flim flam man', or confidence man, about him. But I must disclose a cultural bias, that of the Canadian always on guard against the smooth-talking Sam Slick from south of the border.<sup>3</sup> There is an air of the Sam Slick about this Colonel Bell.

The second area of enquiry is to ask why Bell, a foreign official, was invited to attend and address a gathering so purposely Australian as the Bathurst Convention. For dignitaries to present a speech to the Convention was not in itself unusual. Several leading individuals of the day addressed the Bathurst Convention, including Cardinal Moran and premier George Reid. But Colonel Bell was the only foreigner invited to do so. Indeed, it appears that this was the only occasion when a representative of a foreign nation addressed a major federation convention or conference. Colonel Bell's address is, then, an unique event in the history of Australian federation.

The third question is to ask what influence might his presence in Bathurst have had on the Convention and its deliberations. To extend the question, did Colonel Bell have any influence in the shaping of our federation arrangements? What were his views on the proposed federation? Was he friend or foe? Some answers to these questions will be provided. The word, 'some', is a necessary qualification because the Colonel is an enigmatic character. It would be unfair to describe him as 'untruthful' or 'duplicitous' but his public utterances, always positive, are sometimes unlike the frank assessments provided in his despatches to the US State Department.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is more a measure of his skill as a diplomat than of dishonesty of character. On the surface, he presented himself as a good friend of federation; in his despatches, however, he expressed doubts that the shape it was taking would be in his country's best interests.

---

<sup>3</sup> Sam Slick was a smooth-talking Yankee pedlar in a series by the Canadian author, T.H. Halliburton (1796-1865). The person and character of King O'Malley, the populist politician, may provide a more familiar example of the type for Australian readers.

<sup>4</sup> Microfilm G273, G274 and G275. Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State. Despatches from United States Consuls in Sydney, NSW, 1893-1906. (National Archives, Washington). For sake of brevity, this material will be referred to by the microfilm reel (held by the National Library of Australia).



## Who was Colonel Bell?

This question is not answered with confidence. The researcher today soon discovers that most of what was publicly known about the Colonel at the time of the Bathurst Convention can be traced back to what Bell himself cared to reveal. A few carefully placed press articles provided his life story.<sup>5</sup> Whenever biographical information was called for, the press of the day recycled these accounts.

According to these sources, George Bell was born around 1840 in Virginia, and spent most of his adult life in the northern states. During the American Civil War it was stated that he served for three years in an Illinois (northern) regiment, 'Yates' Sharpshooters'.<sup>6</sup> The local assumption was that his Civil War service was the source of his becoming a colonel. However, the records of that regiment indicate that the highest rank Bell held was that of 2nd Lieutenant.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Bell's rank of colonel was an honorary rank bestowed on him by a state legislature, similar to that held by another famous American, from Kentucky. Whatever the source or authenticity of his rank, Colonel Bell encouraged its use by friends and the public. He did not, though, as a general practice at least, use this title in his consular correspondence with the State Department. The general unawareness of his given names, George William, was such that when he died in 1907, his obituary writer named him as George Washington Bell. The name perhaps reflects as well the degree to which Bell had come to personify America for Australians.

After the Civil War, Bell claimed to have earned his living as a lawyer and to have served in public office, but the details are vague. His residence in the United States prior to taking up the position of US Consul was in the state of Washington, in the logging and fishing town of South Bend. Information supplied by South Bend's museum shows that Bell came to South Bend from Indiana, during the early days of South Bend's land boom of the 1880s, to engage in real estate.<sup>8</sup> It is easy to imagine Bell as a land 'boomer'. He left his children behind in

---

<sup>5</sup> For example, an American-published article available in Australia, 'The Consular Service under Cleveland,' *The Illustrated American* (9 November 1895), p. 610, provided a brief biography for Bell. This information was repeated in the Australian press, for example, 'A Popular Consul,' *The Storekeeper*, 13 February 1896, p. 20. Other biographical fragments have been gleaned from other sources cited in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> This unit is the 64th Illinois Infantry Regiment. A search of the Illinois State Archives' Database of Illinois Civil War Veterans (URL <http://www.sos.state.il.us/depts/archives/daticivil.html>) shows a George W. Bell serving in this unit. Rank not given. Hometown is given as Princeton, Illinois.

<sup>7</sup> Information provided by Susan Potts of the Illinois Civil War Project (URL <http://www.rootsweb.com/~ilcivw>) from off-line sources. Susan's sources show George W. Bell enlisting in B Company of the 64th as a private on 1 November 1861; promoted to 1st Lieut. on 3 June 1862 and 2nd Lt. on 8 August 1862. He resigned from the army on 21 July 1864 with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. According to South Bend newspaper sources (see footnote 8), in that community in the early 1890s, Bell was known as 'Captain' Bell. Thus, his colonelcy appears only with his arrival in Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Information from local newspapers provided by Bruce Weilepp, Museum Director, Pacific County Historical Society, South Bend, WA, USA. The scale—and success—of Bell's real estate and property development

---

South Bend when he came to Sydney. He never revealed anything publicly about his family or his relationship with them. One wonders though why they were not with him in Sydney. He took leave on at least two occasions to visit his family and to attend to family affairs.<sup>9</sup> The brevity of the visits, however, and his lengthy periods of separation in Australia do not suggest a happy domestic life.

Bell was not a career diplomat; he had no previous diplomatic experience. An active Democrat, he campaigned in 1893 for the election of Grover Cleveland for president and was rewarded with the appointment in Sydney. His appointment was terminated with little warning in 1900 during the presidency of William McKinley, a Republican.<sup>10</sup> Initially, Bell managed to hold onto his position with the change of parties in 1897. His dismissal, when it did come, took him by surprise. The loss of his consular position was a serious blow.

For reasons that are not explained, Colonel Bell preferred not to return to his beloved America following his dismissal from the consular service.<sup>11</sup> Instead, he elected to remain in Australia after a short visit to England. Around this time, he took an Australian wife, presumably his American wife by then being either dead or divorced. He tried his hand at several business ventures on retirement; none appear to have been especially successful. One venture, the manufacturing of weighing scales, brought claims of patent infringement by an American company, Computing Scales Co. of Dayton, Ohio.<sup>12</sup> All information suggests Bell was not a man of wealth.<sup>13</sup> One of his main sources of income on retirement from the consular service appears to have been as a public speaker. The rising importance of China and Japan to Australia was a popular topic.

With separation from family and possible self-imposed exile from America, Bell's bare bones of a biography whisper mystery, perhaps even personal tragedy and inner unhappiness. Yet all published accounts show Bell to have been an accomplished public man, a gentleman of back-slapping bonhomie with boundless enthusiasm for whatever interested his hosts and constant praise for Australian achievements. To quote one of his admirers, 'He had the qualities which everywhere command attention—good sense, keen perception, extensive knowledge, great industry, devotion to duty, and polished manners. In him Americans soon felt they had a

---

activities are not known. The *South Bend Journal*, 2 December 1892 discusses Bell's efforts to induce eastern firms to locate major operations in the town, including a brewery, a gas plant and woollen mills. His efforts appear to be more verbal than fiscal. See R.C. Bailey, 'South Bend, Washington—Baltimore of the Pacific', *The Sou'wester*, Autumn 1994, pp. 3–18 for a brief history of the South Bend boom.

<sup>9</sup> G274 Consular Report (6 June 1899).

<sup>10</sup> G275 Consular Report (29 and 31 August 1900).

<sup>11</sup> 'Death of Colonel Bell' in Mitchell Library Newspaper Cuttings. Volume 153, p. 192. (1906-8).

<sup>12</sup> G275 Consular Report (24 January 1901).

<sup>13</sup> G275 Consular Report (31 August 1900).

“friend at Court”, and Australians felt complimented by his being sent amongst them to represent “the Great Republic.”<sup>14</sup>

One or two similar quotes from the many press and journal accounts of the popularity of the Colonel will provide a glimpse of Bell’s reception in colonial society. The 31 December 1895 issue of *Cosmos Magazine* devoted an entire article to the Colonel, noting that after only two years residence, the American Consul ‘... has so identified himself with our interests that he is no longer a stranger in our midst, but an ever-welcome guest at every notable gathering of citizens....’<sup>15</sup> The article concluded: ‘... among those who have taken up a temporary abode in our midst none has been more indefatigable in our service than the esteemed Consul of the United States.’ The *Storekeeper*, a Sydney commercial paper, claimed that Bell had won for himself ‘a position both commanding and unique’ in the eastern colonies.<sup>16</sup>

In appearance, Bell was described—on the occasion of his Bathurst lecture—as ‘a stalwart, fine-looking elderly man’.<sup>17</sup> The photograph accompanying the 1895 *Cosmos* article shows a slightly built gentleman of thoughtful but amiable countenance.<sup>18</sup> He sports an oversize, bushy moustache below a beaky nose and shows a hairline that has receded to all but a token remnant; his head thrusts turtle-like from the carapace of his evening dress. Overall, his appearance elicits sympathy and trust.

One of his best friends in the colony was George Reid, the premier of New South Wales, in whose company Bell attended many colonial social gatherings. One can imagine these two gentlemen, Laurel and Hardy in their appearance, working the crowd, a joke here and a word of wisdom there, handshakes and back slaps everywhere. And, always telling their listeners what they wanted to hear.

### **Colonel Bell as American Consul**

Another layer of Bell’s character is revealed in his consular activities.<sup>19</sup> At times he could act foolishly, but always from motives of patriotism. He took his position as America’s

---

<sup>14</sup> *Report of the Proceedings at the Banquet to Col. Geo W. Bell*, Sydney, 1896, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Colonel Geo. W. Bell,’ *The Cosmos Magazine*, 31 December 1895, pp. 154–158.

<sup>16</sup> ‘A Popular Consul,’ *The Storekeeper*, 13 February 1896, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Lecture by Colonel Bell’, *Bathurst Free Press*, 19 November 1896.

<sup>18</sup> Photograph by Kerry & Co, *The Cosmos Magazine*, 31 December 1895, p. 155. The photograph must have been a favourite of Bell’s for it appears in many publications.

<sup>19</sup> G274 Consular Report (16 July 1898).

---

representative very seriously. Advancing and defending America's interests in the colony was for Bell a work of total commitment. In this work, his public bonhomie, like the cloak of the thriller spy, disguised a measure of slyness and cunning.

A certain cunning can be seen in his handling of Independence Day activities. During Bell's term, the traditional open house at the American consulate in Sydney became a dry affair. This seems quite out of character for the ebullient, jolly Bell, but he was indeed a teetotaler in his personal habits. He happily attended functions where alcohol was served, even dinners held in his honour. But in the case of the 4 July open house, he broke with the well-established custom by not providing free alcohol and cigars to the well-wishers of the day. His argument was that only those who were genuine in their feelings would now attend the consulate on Independence Day rather than those who came only for the free grog and smokes. This decision may also reflect his understanding of Australian character. The event was still well attended, as Bell was able to prove with the press clippings accompanying his reports home. The names in the guest books, America's true friends in the colony, were kept on file, a list of friends to be cultivated.

Bell worked to ensure his country's strategic interests in the Pacific.<sup>20</sup> Concerned that Admiral Dewey's fleet operating off the Philippines might encounter coaling problems, Bell secretly—and on his own authority—instructed the Newcastle Vice-Consul to secure coal supplies for the American fleet at Newcastle, the colony's main coal supply port. The Vice-Consul advised an unknowing State Department of his progress in this task with the result that Colonel Bell was ordered to explain his actions to Washington and was duly chastised for this unwanted initiative.

The 1898 Spanish-American War offered Bell one of his greatest challenges as propagandist for America.<sup>21</sup> The war against Catholic Spain brought public criticism of America from Cardinal Moran, who unreservedly cautioned the Australian public against American jingoism and imperialism. Cardinal Moran warned of unbridled American expansion. In his view even the invasion of Canada and war with Britain was possible. This was a difficult time for Bell, who not only wished not to jeopardise his personal friendship with the Cardinal, but had to defend American policy without slandering the clergyman. The Cardinal's words risked the undoing of Bell's hard work in presenting America as the benign friend of the Australian colonies. Bell acquitted himself with alacrity in this task. Popular support for American policy continued undiminished, as did Bell's public friendship with the Cardinal. At the Consulate's Independence Day gathering that year, his good friend, premier George Reid, publicly expressed 'the most sincere wishes for an early success in the present unfortunate conflict with Spain.'<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> G274 Consular Report (21 May 1898).

<sup>21</sup> G274 Consular Report (5 May 1898).

<sup>22</sup> G274 Consular Report (16 July 1898).

As Consul, Colonel Bell mixed with the most powerful and influential of the colony's citizenry. He was generally well-liked and had the trust of many. The most graphic, and alarming, example of Bell's ability to gain confidence is perhaps the case of Major General Sir George French, commandant of the colony's defence forces.<sup>23</sup> An expert in coastal artillery, French had developed certain improvements for concentrating the fire of coastal batteries already adopted by the British but which he wanted to patent in the United States under his own name. Bell wrote:

as he is a personal friend I prevailed upon him to submit his specifications to my government, impressing upon him my opinion that his interests as an inventor would not be prejudiced by such action. Sharing the general sympathy of Australia to our cause at present (the Spanish war), he enthusiastically accepted my suggestion and placed the documents in my hands.

The documents may have included maps, charts and specifications relating to the colony's coastal defences.

A reading of Bell's consular reports suggest eccentric, even quixotic behaviour but also a practical intelligence and an amazing ability to convince and gain the trust not only of individuals but of whole sections of society. The motive for Bell's actions, however, was consistent. What he did was always, in his view at least, for the benefit of American interests in Australia.<sup>24</sup> Foremost of those American interests were matters of commerce and trade. Bell worked assiduously to advance American trade with Australia, promoting American products and trade links and cultivating relationships with colonial politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen. Bell's opinion, expressed within months of his arrival, was that Australia was 'a fine field for American enterprise—if properly cultivated'.<sup>25</sup> This was the man invited to the Bathurst Convention—Colonel Bell: the well-regarded American Consul, popular member of Sydney society and good friend of Premier Reid, and a leading public speaker of the day.<sup>26</sup> The Colonel was a celebrity of his times. Below the bon-vivant surface, however, there was Bell the tireless worker for American interests in Australia.

### **The Bathurst Invitation**

---

<sup>23</sup> G274 Consular Report (7 May 1898).

<sup>24</sup> G274 Consular Report (13 March 1896).

<sup>25</sup> G273 Consular Report (16 May 1894).

<sup>26</sup> Some published speeches: 'Anglo-Saxon Unity,' *The Storekeeper*, 19 July 1894; 'The Evolution of Commerce,' *The Storekeeper* 2 July 1896.

---

Dr George Hurst, a Bathurst medical practitioner and member of the Convention's General Committee, suggested the invitation of Colonel Bell to the Convention.<sup>27</sup> This was made at the meeting on the 22 October 1896. Colonel Bell was to be invited to deliver a lecture on the American Civil War on the Thursday evening of the Convention: 'It was resolved that the matter of illustrating the lecture with slides or delivering it without descriptive pictures be left to the Colonel to decide.' It was also decided separately at the same meeting that Bell would be invited to attend the Convention as a 'guest', the same invitational status given Cardinal Moran and other non-delegate participants.<sup>28</sup>

The invitation for Bell to speak, changed to the Wednesday (18 November) evening and to be 'with or without lime light illustrations', was sent out on 31 October by William Astley, the organising secretary.<sup>29</sup> This gave Colonel Bell less than three weeks notice. Astley apologised for the short notice of the request, 'shorter indeed than it should have been owing to a clerical error'. On the proposed topic, 'The American Civil War', Astley wrote:

The distinction, Sir, which you have readily earned as a lecturer and the familiarity with the suggested theme, which you must necessarily have both as a student and as a man who bore his part in the great conflict, have suggested to the Committee that the conjunction of time, and place, and lecturer, would be particularly interesting and noteworthy.

The suggestion of this particular topic, so out of place for a convention on federal unity, may have been out of consideration for the little time available to Bell to prepare a talk, especially given that he had just returned from furlough in America. A follow-up letter a few days later advised the Colonel of the availability for his lecture of the excellent lantern slide collection—'the finest in the colony'—at St Stanislaus College. It seems from the organising committee's minutes that Colonel Bell was the only outside speaker considered for the Convention. As a well-known speaker of the day, his presence would certainly attract interest especially among country delegates who may otherwise never have had a chance to hear him. Registrations were lagging at the time of the suggestion of a lecture by Bell and this may have had some bearing on his inclusion in the program.

There was also some anxiety in the early days of planning the Convention that the discussion of the draft constitution would not sufficiently occupy the time of the delegates. Diversions and entertainments must be provided, or so it was thought. As well as arrangements for

---

<sup>27</sup> Minutes of the General Committee of the Bathurst People's Federal Convention (22 October 1896), Mitchell Library MSS 269/2-3; 6-7 (mfm CY312).

<sup>28</sup> 'Invited Guest' and 'Invited Member' seem to be used indiscriminately in the published proceedings of the Convention. Colonel Bell and Edmund Barton are both described as 'invited members'; Cardinal Moran is an 'invited guest'.

<sup>29</sup> Letterbook (William Astley) of the Bathurst People's Federal Convention (October-November 1896), Mitchell Library MSS 269/1 (mfm CY3129).

impromptu activities, such as shooting matches between Bathurst marksmen and the visitors, a social program of organised activities at arranged times through the week was drawn up. Monday would see an inaugural public meeting. Lectures were planned for Tuesday and Thursday evenings. The illumination of Machattie Park was set down for Wednesday and a garden party, hosted by the Ladies' Committee, was planned for Friday afternoon. The intended lecturer for Tuesday was to have been Father Dowling, a local Catholic priest and keeper of the impressive lantern slide collection at St Stanislaus' College. However, it was soon discovered that the rules of his order prevented him from speaking at a political gathering.

As it turned out, Father Dowling's lecture time, along with much of the time set aside for socialising, was needed for the business of the Convention. To quote the *Sydney Mail*:

It was at first thought that to attract delegates to Bathurst, side-shows in the way of entertainments and lectures and so forth would be necessary to make the thing go; so garden parties, entertainments, and public meetings and lectures were arranged for, which in the end were superfluties as the delegates showed desire to stick to the convention, in spite of all the charms that might be offered them outside.<sup>30</sup>

The Convention resumed for evening sessions on all five available evenings (Monday to Friday). The Monday evening took the form of the planned public meeting, but was little more than a series of speeches by key delegates; the Wednesday evening session was preceded by Colonel Bell's speech. The Machattie Park illuminations took place, postponed a day by rain, but now more for the amusement of Bathurstians than their guests, who were busy at their discussions two blocks away. The Ladies' Committee garden party also went ahead on the Friday afternoon, but doubled as a dinner break between afternoon and evening sessions. It would have been a brave but foolish man who would have suggested its cancellation.

Colonel Bell, too, shared this view of dispensing with superfluties and entertainments. The organisers may have initially regarded his lecture as only an entertainment but this was never Bell's view. Bell immediately responded to Astley's invitation, expressing his willingness to come to Bathurst but not to speak on the subject of the Civil War. Bell's letter is not available, but its contents are reflected in Astley's reply of 4 November:

I appreciate the nature of the considerations which precluded your acceptance of our request. It is with great regret that I now recognise that our application must have revived very sad memories.

I have not had time to communicate with the Committee, as to your kind offer to give a lecture on the 'American Union', but by the direction of the President (Dr Machattie), I have now to intimate that we shall be grateful if you can favour us with a lecture on 'The

---

<sup>30</sup> *Sydney Mail*, 28 November 1896.

---

American Union; its constitution and practical working'. With the characteristic touches of vivacity that you could impart, we are satisfied that such a lecture from you would be most interesting and instructive.<sup>31</sup>

All was agreed. Bell would address the Bathurst People's Federal Convention on the evening of 18 November on the subject of American politics and government.

A few days before that engagement, on 13 November, further public evidence was given of Bell's high standing in the colony.<sup>32</sup> To welcome him back from his furlough in the United States, a banquet was got up at the Town Hall in Sydney. As recorded in the testimonial booklet prepared for the event, '95 persons of high ranking in the political, business and professional spheres sat down to welcome in true British style their honoured guest, the gifted and popular Consul for the United States.' The guests included George Reid and Sir George Dibbs, along with other members of government and opposition, as well as many well-known members of the business community, including Quong Tart. Several names on the banquet list are also to be found on the Bathurst Convention delegate and guest list. (This possibly included Edmund Barton for there is an 'Edward' Barton, QC, on the banquet list.)

### **Colonel Bell's Lecture at Bathurst**

According to the Proceedings of the Bathurst Convention, in the evening session of the third day of the Convention, Colonel Bell delivered an address on 'Progressive Liberty'. This was not the title or subject promised two weeks earlier. The subject was to have been the American political system, specifically the workings of the American Constitution. Bell touched on this theme but he did not offer a detailed discussion on the American political system as originally promised. The reason for altering his lecture topic may have to do with what the Convention had been discussing the previous day—a directly elected Governor-General. The debate on an elected Governor-General had been initiated by one of the few republicans at the Convention, John Norton, and inevitably led to a comparison of the relative merits of the British parliamentary and American republican systems. Echoes of republicanism continued with the debate that followed on a directly elected Senate. Bell would not have wished to be drawn into these discussions or to be seen to be offering partisan advice (which could happen if he offered a too detailed and glowing account of America's republican system of government).

It is possible that the change in topic occurred before the Norton republican debate but the same explanation of Bell not wanting to be drawn into an open contest between the two systems holds. When Bell accepted the invitation he had only just returned from two months in America. He may not have initially appreciated the nature of the Convention, especially if

---

<sup>31</sup> Letterbook, Mitchell Library MSS 269/1 (mfm CY3129).

<sup>32</sup> *Report of the Proceedings at the Banquet to Col. Geo W. Bell*, Sydney, 1896.



he had relied on the advice of friends such as George Reid. By mid-week, many initially dismissive of the Convention, including George Reid, were rethinking their positions.

What words of wisdom—noncontroversial and soothing for sure—did Colonel Bell offer his Bathurst audience? The speech, reported in detail in all three of Bathurst's daily newspapers, was standard Bell fare, if a little more rambling than usual.<sup>33</sup> Some portions are clearly from an earlier speech, delivered in July. He began by praising the work of the Convention and its connections with the 'priceless heritage' of liberty shared by Americans and Australians/Britons. After praising the place of liberty within the 'British nation' he shifted into a discussion of the advantages of increased trade between America and Australia. Bell informed his audience:

The people of Australia are the greatest commercial race in the world. Per capita they sold and bought more than any other nation on the face of the globe. (Applause) The four millions of people in Australia were as good in commercial dealings as 20,000,000 Americans. The people in this country didn't realise the true and important position they occupied in the commercial world.<sup>34</sup>

After making a comparison between Russia and Australia that favoured Australia as the nation both wealthier and more liberal, Bell spoke favourably of federation, which would lay 'the foundation stone of a grand future and mighty nation than was ever dreamt of. (Hear, hear)'. In comparing Australia's incipient nationhood with America's revolution, for Bell the difference was that the American people were British subjects, fellow Anglo-Saxons, forced to take up arms to regain their British liberty. He admitted his own republicanism, but 'pointed out that Great Britain, with its different system, was as free as any people on the face of the earth.' After a rambling discussion on American government and politics—during which he corrected some misunderstandings reported to him at the Convention, but offered nothing that would challenge the status quo sentiments of the Convention—Bell closed his address with final words of support for the union of the Australian colonies and the 'great advantages that must necessarily follow in the wake of Federation.'

Fulsome praise for Australia and its political aspirations, homage to British culture and a reminder of the Anglo-Saxon kinship of Australians and Americans are clearly presented in Bell's speech, along with promises of wealth-creating advantages to Australians with improved American-Australian trading relations. He does not elaborate on the 'great advantages' that will follow federation. There is no need. In the minds of his listeners, his answer has already been planted.

---

<sup>33</sup> *National Advocate* (Bathurst), *Bathurst Daily Times* and *Bathurst Free Press*, 19 November 1896. The articles in the *Daily Times* and the *Free Press* are identical.

<sup>34</sup> *National Advocate* (Bathurst), 19 November 1896.

---

The speech was well received. Appreciative laughter, applause and shouts of ‘Hear, Hear’ accompanied the speaker throughout and he resumed his seat ‘amidst rapturous applause’. Only one rude interjection was reported, from Mr John Norton, given as Bell began his concluding remarks by offering an apology for having imposed on the time of his listeners. Bell’s response to Norton’s interjection, that ‘there were some people who, no doubt, would like to have him [Bell] squelched altogether; men whose mouths were so near their ears that they loved to listen to their own voices at every possible moment’, was greeted with ‘uproarious laughter and loud applause’. Bell obviously knew John Norton.

### **He Came, He Spoke, But Did He Conquer?**

What influence did Colonel Bell and his speech have on the Bathurst People’s Federal Convention of 1896?<sup>35</sup> In the sense of influencing the course of discussions and decisions it is difficult to see any impact. As already suggested, his presence did nothing to advance the cause of republicanism. But, equally, the defeat at Bathurst of Norton’s republican efforts certainly did not require any assistance from the Colonel. The delegates, many of whom were men of commerce, would have appreciated his remarks on the wealth that would come with the improved economic arrangements of federation. However, no matter Bell’s presence, the decisions they made at the Bathurst Convention would have been the same.

Nonetheless, Colonel Bell’s presence at Bathurst was important. He was a celebrity of his time, the representative of the great and powerful American Republic. Many Australians aspired for their new country to be in many respects not unlike the United States, once a cluster of colonies and now a successful, populous nation. Bell’s presence, his words of support for federation, his assurances that the Australian colonies were on the correct path, could only contribute to the confidence of delegates to continue with the task of nation building.

It is quite impossible to prove any of this, of course. We have only the newspaper reports to guide us in assessing the impact of Bell’s speech on his audience. They suggest his audience went home, or back to the business of the convention, largely pleased with what they had heard from their American guest speaker. Onward to federation!

To extend the question to his possible influence on federation generally, we come up with much the same answer. His writings and speeches, his very interest, contributed to the chorus of pro-federation sentiment but it is a challenge to claim anything more on his behalf. His attempt to steer the Australians away from preferential treatment for British trade was ultimately unsuccessful. Following the example of the other British dominions, Australia adopted a trade preference policy for British goods in 1907.<sup>36</sup> Bell’s chances to achieve otherwise were probably never that strong, such were the pro-British sentiments of the

---

<sup>35</sup> There is no report in Bell’s consular files of his trip to Bathurst or of his speech. As he did send home reports on similar activities, it is possible that the Bathurst report is simply missing.

<sup>36</sup> R.S. Russell, *Imperial Preference*, 1947, p.17.

Australians. These sentiments swept away all other considerations and possibilities. Although his audiences cheered his suggestion of a closer relationship with America, Bell saw for himself how they rallied without hesitation to Britain's call in South Africa.

Although careful never to comment or advise directly, Bell did provide information on the American system through gifts of books, to the New South Wales Parliamentary Library for example. Books on government and constitutional subjects were also regularly lent from the consulate's own small library to politicians and public servants. In 1897, he reported home that:

... with the Federal Movement now fairly inaugurated there are more inquiries into the workings of our political system than ever before, and I have endeavoured to furnish such information as required by those giving form to the new order of things.<sup>37</sup>

Bell does not reveal who was calling at his consulate for such information. Further research just might reveal something of interest.

What did Bell really think of Australians? Were his private thoughts the same as his public pronouncements of praise? The lack of private papers makes this question difficult to answer, but his consular reports contain confidential comments not meant for Australian eyes.<sup>38</sup> He found the average Australian politically apathetic, and alarmingly so. Australian businessmen he thought to be overly conservative and lacking in entrepreneurial drive. There was too much involvement by government in the affairs of business. The ties with Britain were too strong. However, Bell had many positive comments to make, especially in the context of the environment of social equality and justice that he found to exist in Australia. His public statements about Australia and its people do seem to be based on an honest, if slightly qualified, private assessment. It was a place almost like home.

Because Colonel Bell's appointment ceased in August 1900, we do not have the advantage of his consular reports for the last months of the processes of federation and the birth of the Commonwealth of Australia. His successor, Orlando Baker from Iowa, did not share Bell's interest in the subject. His reports are less detailed, less informative.<sup>39</sup> Orlando Baker had other worries, mind you. The consulate had lost its one and only typewriter and the paper work of the consulate had ground to a halt. Claimed as private property, the machine had been spirited away by Colonel Bell on his departure.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> G274 Consular Report (22 March 1897).

<sup>38</sup> G275 Consular Report 'A Glimpse of New South Wales' (30 October 1899). This is a 16-page 'intelligence' report on the economic, political and social situation in the colony. It contains many interesting observations.

<sup>39</sup> G275 Consular Report (February 1901). In this report, Baker titles Prime Minister Barton as Premier General Barton.

<sup>40</sup> G275 Consular Report (10 September 1900).

---

*This cartoon was published in The Bulletin at the time of the Bathurst People's Federal Convention, November 1896. Colonel Bell, as Uncle Sam, offers praise to the Australian people; LBM (Little Boy from Manly) responds. Hop the cartoonist was an American.*



---

## Joseph Cook's Contribution

*Kevin Livingston*

When the People's Convention met in Bathurst, in November 1896, Joseph Cook—destined to become Australia's sixth prime minister from June 1913 to September 1914—was the member for the New South Wales Legislative Assembly seat of Hartley (based at Lithgow). He was over two years into his four-year term as the Postmaster-General in George Reid's government. This paper asks two questions. The first is: did Cook contribute in any significant way to the federation cause? The second is: what role, if any, did he play at the Bathurst Convention?

English-born Cook was twenty-four years of age and recently married when he migrated (on his own) in 1885 from the coal-mining town of Silverdale in Staffordshire to the coal-mining town of Lithgow in New South Wales. A religious man throughout his life (brought up as a Primitive Methodist), by the time Cook was joined by his wife, Mary, and the first of their nine children early in 1887, he had begun his self-education in book-keeping and shorthand which propelled him from his working class origins to positions in the early Labor Electoral League in Lithgow, and ultimately to the beginnings of his long career as a professional politician.

Cook's biographers—Bebbington, Crowley, and Murdoch—in writing about his personality, characterise him as dour, solemn, aloof and humourless (although Bebbington attempts to disclaim such a characterisation).<sup>1</sup> The major challenge facing Cook's biographers has been to explain the continual changes in his political views and the overturning of his earlier

---

<sup>1</sup> See G. Bebbington, *Pit Boy to Prime Minister: The Story of the Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Cook, P.C., G.C.M.G.*, University of Keele, n.d., pp. 91–3; F.K. Crowley, 'Cook, Sir Joseph (1860–1947)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 8, p. 96; and J. Murdoch, *Sir Joe: A Biographical Sketch of Sir Joseph Cook*, Silverdale Historical Publication, Stoke-on-Trent, 1979, pp. 1–2, and 8. Murdoch's fuller, more considered biography *Sir Joe: A Political Biography of Sir Joseph Cook*, Minerva Press, London, was published in 1996.

principles and allegiances. As his chief biographer notes, 'he occupies a distinguished place in left-wing hagiography as the first and one of the worst traitors to Labor'.<sup>2</sup> During his long parliamentary career, from 1891 to 1921, Cook changed from being a pro-republican, pro-trade unionist freetrader and Labor member to becoming a pro-monarchical, anti-Labor, protectionist politician in successive conservative governments. Can his remarkable survival and electoral success as a politician over so many years be explained simply by unprincipled opportunism, or—as Cook himself would explain—by his capacity to change his views as he matured?

Any claims that Cook was a political figure who contributed significantly to the federation movement would appear, at first sight, to be dubious. Influenced by Reid, whom he admired and tried to emulate, Cook spoke against the 'Yes' case and voted 'No' in the first referendum in New South Wales in 1898, although he later campaigned vigorously for the 'Yes' cause in 1899. It can be argued that for most of his political career Cook was renowned more as an oppositionist than an achiever in public and political life. During his last two years in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly before federation, and then for another eight years when he became the first member for Parramatta in the federal Parliament, Cook was in opposition. He made his name as a tenacious debater and ruthless parliamentary tactician, who later had difficulty initiating policies when in government.

His biographers give him credit principally for his major role in the Defence Act of 1909 (which introduced compulsory military training), for the double dissolution of 1914, and—in his last public act as prime minister in September 1914—for pledging Australian military forces to the defence of the British Empire on the eve of the European war.<sup>3</sup> Yet, Cook was a great political survivor, returning to ministerial positions in the Hughes Nationalist governments, after taking his Liberal colleagues into coalition late in 1916. Thereafter, Cook served as deputy prime minister and minister for the Navy until July 1920, when he became federal treasurer. In November 1921 Cook resigned from Parliament to become Australia's High Commissioner in London, a post that he relished filling until 1927, when he returned to Australia. He lived in Sydney until his death in 1947.

Against this background summary of Cook's life and political career, we can now turn to the two questions posed at the outset of this paper, and investigate Cook's contribution to federation in the year of the Bathurst People's Convention: 1896. From 17 to 21 January that year Cook, as the host postmaster-general, chaired an intercolonial Post and Telegraph (P&T) conference in Sydney which was to mark a major breakthrough in negotiations over the long-awaited Pacific cable scheme. This led to an agreement among the Australian colonies to collaborate with New Zealand, Canada and Britain to operate a government-owned submarine cable service across the Pacific to challenge the long established monopoly over the cable routes into Australia enjoyed by the private British Eastern Extension Company.<sup>4</sup> These intercolonial conferences of ministers and their departmental advisers responsible for

---

<sup>2</sup> J. Murdoch, *Sir Joe: A Political Biography*, p. xii, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Crowley, op. cit., pp. 98–9.

<sup>4</sup> 'Report of Postal and Telegraphic Conference ... held in Sydney [17–21] January 1896', *NSW Parliamentary Papers 1896*, vol. 4, pp. 925–46.

---

telegraph, cable and associated services, which had commenced in the 1860s, had become annual or biannual events by the 1890s.<sup>5</sup>

Cook displayed skill and tact in guiding his fellow colonial ministers, during the January 1896 P&T Conference, towards agreement on a series of resolutions which marked a turning point in the achievement of ‘practical Federation’—what I have called ‘technological federalism’.<sup>6</sup> In his opening address to the conference, Cook spoke of the ‘federal spirit which was animating most of our Australasian national endeavours at the present time’.<sup>7</sup> Among the most notable practical outcomes for federation emanating from the January 1896 P&T conference was the agreement by the colonial Postmasters-General that there should be equal financial contributions from each of the colonies towards subsidising the proposed Pacific cable (rather than contributions based on their respective populations). This agreement anticipated the federal principle underlying, for example, the equal representation of the states in the Senate, contained in the Constitution drafted just two years later. Another important factor which emerges from this and other intercolonial P&T conferences was the significant influence exerted by the peripheral colonies—Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia—when bargaining with the more populous metropolitan colonies of New South Wales and Victoria over international cable routes into Australia.

When the Bathurst People’s Convention met towards the end of the year, Cook was not able to attend during the first two days because he was hosting another intercolonial conference of postmasters-general in Sydney.<sup>8</sup> However, on the evening of Tuesday 17 November, Cook and several of his counterparts journeyed by train to Bathurst for a public meeting in the evening, at which four of them, including Cook himself, addressed the Bathurst delegates and citizens on the subject of federation. At the conclusion of the meeting, John Quick moved a vote of thanks to the Ministers of the Crown, requesting that they convey ‘to their respective governments a desire for an early meeting of the Statutory Convention for the purpose of arranging the Federal Constitution.’<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the year 1896 did indeed constitute a high point in Cook’s positive contribution to the cause of federation: notably, in his capacity as the host minister who chaired two significant intercolonial ministerial conferences—one of them coinciding with the Bathurst Convention. Cook continued to play a significant mediating role in fostering technological federalism at several subsequent P&T conferences in 1897 and 1898—that is, before he completed his term as postmaster-general in Reid’s New South Wales government in August 1898. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the series of important annual intercolonial P&T conferences held between 1891 and 1898 both anticipated and influenced the movement towards practical federation which culminated in the sessions of the 1897–98 Federal Convention at which the

---

<sup>5</sup> K.T. Livingston, ‘Anticipating federation: the federalising of telecommunications in Australia’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 102, April 1994, pp. 100–104.

<sup>6</sup> K.T. Livingston, *The Wired Nation Continent: The Communication Revolution and Federating Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Cook’s opening address in ‘Report of P&T Conference ... January 1896: Report of Proceedings’, p. 6 [internal pagination].

<sup>8</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 20 November 1896.

<sup>9</sup> *Proceedings, People’s Federal Convention, Bathurst, November 1896*, Gordon & Gotch, Sydney, 1897.



Australian Constitution subsequently endorsed by the vote of the people in the Australian colonies at the series of referenda between 1898 and 1900, was drafted.<sup>10</sup>

Joseph Cook certainly earned his reputation as an effective, intransigent oppositionist politician rather than as a policy-maker in government during the subsequent two decades of the federal Parliament. Nevertheless, he deserves to be recognised as having played an influential, mediating role in leading the Australian colonies towards technological federalism in the mid-1890s, in these crucial years which preceded Australia's political federalism in 1901.

---

<sup>10</sup> Livingston, *The Wired Nation Continent*, op. cit., pp. 129–159.

## **'The Sentiment of Nationality': Bathurst and Popular Support for Federation**

*Jeff Brownrigg*

From the earliest days of white settlement, Australia has marked its various notable events and red-letter days with appropriate celebrations. Fanfares, songs, flourishes, pot pourris of old favourite tunes, predictable speeches, sonnets, odes, laments, death marches from Saul, by Chopin and others, have all been summoned up to meet a need. We do not know precisely what was said or played as the weary leaders of the First Fleet gathered to perform their first official ceremony in Australia but their number included a small military band (drums and fife) which officiated at public occasions. Two days after the first flag-raising, it assisted with the drumming out of camp of an officer who had been caught in compromising circumstances amongst the women's tents. His disgrace was accompanied by the first piece of identifiable European ceremonial music played on Australian soil: the *Rogue's March*.<sup>1</sup> Military and civil music-making developed together, professional bandsmen serving the need at balls and other gala events as well as more practical formal functions. As the nineteenth century progressed, the scale of public ceremonies grew until they rivalled, in panoply and pomp, festivals of similar significance in Britain.

The range of material from which an organiser of a large-scale public event might draw had, after the 1850s, grown very considerably. Under cover there were operas and partial operas,

---

<sup>1</sup> See Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1965, in particular chapter two, 'Colonialism'.

---

vaudeville, recitals and concerts, recitations and dramas, juggling, acrobats, all manner of circus acts, magicians and, after 1896, the cinematograph. Outdoors festivals and celebrations could include parades, spectacles and fireworks to provide a useful augmentation to an event.

Less than one hundred years after Governor Arthur Phillip's band, and especially after the International Exhibition of 1880, Australia could boast a steady consolidation of musical and ceremonial confidence. This included high public expectations for what local and imported artists might offer to grand civic occasions. In 1888 the Centennial International Exhibition in Melbourne, one such occasion, saw what was certainly the largest forward step taken by transplanted western art music in the Australian colonies.<sup>2</sup> The events of that year suggest that the process of maturation had delivered Australia to the point where a significant number of its citizens understood and valued recent and contemporary European music, demonstrating an appetite for it on an unprecedented scale. Under the leadership of English conductor, Frederick Cowen, the Exhibition Building in Melbourne rang to the complete cycle of Beethoven symphonies. Ada Cambridge, the Australian novelist and essayist, who spent much of her time at the 263 concerts presented at the Exhibition that year, noted that she 'learned to be a Wagnerite ... after several unsuccessful attempts.'<sup>3</sup> Brahms, who was still alive, and whose music was presented by Cowen's large orchestra, must have sounded modern and jagged to contemporary audiences. But listeners were malleable and interested.

Building on these foundations, the 1890s was rich in musical events. Concerts, especially the Promenade Concerts organized by W.J. Turner, gave opportunities for emerging Australian musicians like pianist and composer Percy Grainger and the soprano Lalla Miranda. There had always been a mix of imported and local talent from the very beginning of the line that starts before the 1860s and arrives at a self-confident zenith about 1900. Australia was well-served with native born and overseas performers. Melba had demonstrated that musical accomplishment could lead to huge international fame and also that music was a commodity, like so much else that had been on display at the various exhibitions in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The emergence of Australian federation called for some public celebration to support the efforts of federationists and to temper their constitutional and ideological deliberations with acceptable diversions. These events evolved to include all sorts of cultural support which demonstrated both the richness and maturity of the colonies as well as their sophistication. The various federal conventions were generally fairly small, regardless of their tendency to focus attention in the place in which they were held and in spite of the usually spirited support offered by the local community. In Corowa and Bathurst, the sites of the two people's

---

<sup>2</sup> The most accessible account of these activities can be found in a group of essays edited by David Dunstan as *Victorian Icon: the Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne*, The Exhibition Trustees in association with Australian Scholarly Publishing, Kew, Vic., 1996. The contributions of Mimi Colligan are all valuable but her essay 'More Musical Entertainment', in chapter 5, is the most useful. There are other short pieces about the use of the Exhibition Building for concerts and celebrations, and for major events associated with Federation.

<sup>3</sup> See Dunstan, *op. cit.*, pp. 214–218.

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Comettant proposed at the time (1888) that 700,000 pianos had been already imported and had become a desirable addition to the homes of, perhaps, the majority of Australians. His assessment is cited in *A New Britannia* by Humphrey McQueen. Comettant's own book carries the title *In the Land of Kangaroos and Goldmines* in the translation by Judith Armstrong, published by Rigby (Australia) in 1980.

conventions, potential audiences were small and the economy of scale in mounting a presentation that might attract a large number of paying customers simply was not there. Corowa had put federation firmly back on the national agenda, in 1893. While the Corowa Peoples' Convention was not an event on a particularly large scale, the support of two groups was crucial. The Australasian Federation League participated, particularly its Sydney members, but also its regional representatives. The Australian Natives Association, too, helped to underpin Corowa's success. Regardless of the small attendance (72 delegates), the host town's local pride was quickly established and still flourishes. The citizens of Corowa contend, even today, that their town saw the birth of federation.

The need for celebrations in Corowa in 1893 appears to have been less clear than it would be in Hobart (for the 1895 'secret' premiers' meeting and a Federal Council meeting), Bathurst and Adelaide (for the first session of the Australasian Federal Convention in March 1897). What we can say with a fair degree of certainty is that the incremental growth in the desire for celebration ran parallel to the growing confidence exhibited in each federation gathering as Australians moved towards the final vote. And, of course, it also ran parallel to the emergence of the urban audiences whose patronage stimulated the development of concertising and the 263 Exhibition Building concerts in 1888. These forces are evident in the place accorded the various cultural events proposed by the organising committees of federation gatherings.

It was a matter of local pride to fill out the spare time of visiting delegates with a program of activities. It was also important for the organizing committee to underline the significance of the convention both as a local initiative and in the context of a national agenda for change and nationhood. The limitations were clear enough. A town could only do what a town could do. How would smaller hosting towns assemble a cultural program to satisfy convention delegates and local pride? How would a national movement meld with a regional group in activities that signalled the magnitude of the events that were unfolding?

### **Festivities and Social Events for the Bathurst Delegates**

Preparations for the People's Federal Convention in Bathurst saw a variety of jobs identified and given different degrees of priority. Planning went ahead under the resonant, galvanizing motto: 'By our union we are made equal to our destiny.' The special federal edition of the *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal* on 6 November noted the results of extended deliberation about appropriate recreational activities under the broad heading of 'Festivities and Social Events':

<i>During the week</i>	Art Show
<i>Sunday 15th</i>	Federal Sunday (special Services at all churches)
<i>Monday 16th</i>	Public meeting
<i>Tuesday 17th</i>	Illuminations, Fete at Machattie Park
<i>Wednesday 18th</i>	Proposed Concert (replaced by Colonel Bell's Oration)
<i>Thursday 19th</i>	Foundation Stone Laying of Technical College
<i>Friday 20th</i>	Party at Logan Brae Convention Dinner
<i>Saturday 21st</i>	Outdoors: Rifle-shooting, cricket, tennis, handball, golf and bowls. Indoor: Chess and drafts

---

Although they come last on this list, sporting activities seem to have been the highest group of diversions on the agenda. What was not obvious to planners was that delegates were unlikely to linger after the conclusion of their business and the closing of the final session.

As it happened, the rifle shooting proved to be less popular than expected and a regular newspaper report about the sport, on the Monday after the Convention, coolly noted where the failure might be sheeted home:

During the time the convention business was on, several delegates—who were distinguished rifle shots—thought that arrangements might be made with the reserves and Volunteers so that a friendly contest might take place on the Bathurst range. The secretary of the Reserves was waited on by a delegate, and arrangements were made for a match on Saturday afternoon, but only two of the ‘Federal Team’ put in an appearance. The Secretary of the rifle team informs us that he sent a letter to the officials of the convention, containing an invitation to the delegates for a friendly contest, but it appears that the letter was not read. Consequently the match fell through.<sup>5</sup>

The activities of the Ladies’ Committee were reasonably well-reported in the local presses before the opening of the Convention in anticipation of good support for what seems to have been its principal festivity: a garden party. Occurring on the final day, it provided a chance for an informal assessment of the meeting and a chance to relax before the Convention dinner, held on the same evening. The ladies of Bathurst took charge:

At a meeting of the Ladies’ Committee there was a large attendance ... Details in connection with the proposed Garden Party at ‘Logan Brae’, the use of which has been kindly granted by the Minister for Mines and Agriculture were discussed and dealt with. Mr Fullerton of South Bathurst offered to supply ferns for the purpose of decorating the convention hall during the federal week and Mrs Rutherford kindly undertook to supply materials for decoration.<sup>6</sup>

The garden party was a huge success and those who attended enjoyed the playing of a military band on the lawns of one of the grander local mansions, Logan Brae.

The need for entertainment (planned by the Ladies’ Committee) for Wednesday evening, designed to mark the mid-point of the Convention and to provide some light but edifying relief, was brought into question from the floor of the meeting chamber. The proposed program was to include local nightingales and the noted public speaker and American Consul to New South Wales, Colonel Bell. John Norton, editor of the *Truth*, made his thoughts known:

---

<sup>5</sup> *Bathurst Daily Times*, 23 November 1896.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 24 October 1896.

Mr John Norton, while fully appreciating the kindly offices of the ladies and others who desired to entertain the delegates, thought that there was important business for transaction. The Convention should not be interfered with. They would have ample opportunity of hearing the silver tongued orator of the Pacific slopes on other occasions.<sup>7</sup>

It was, however, agreed that after the day's proceedings had been concluded Colonel Bell should speak and that the delegates would re-convene after his lecture. This is not recorded in the published *Proceedings*. Indeed, there was no apparent opposition to Bell's speaking recorded in the formal report nor any suggestion that the Convention's time might be wasted or 'interfered with' should he be given the opportunity.

It is not clear if, as a result of the reorganization, local talent was no longer required to follow Colonel Bell. Indications are that the Ladies' Committee had some acts in reserve, particularly local songbirds and instrumentalists. John Norton moved an enthusiastic vote of thanks after Bell's speech, which dealt with union and liberty with considerable energy and which was calculated to stir popular passions. Bell focused upon the idea of unity and the people, keeping a weather eye on his own republican roots and the predominantly monarchist leanings of his auditors. Norton did not mention the contributions of local talent.

The venue for the Convention was the School of Arts. The *Bathurst Daily Times* (16 November) boasted that there 'is no town in Australia blessed with a more handsome and comfortable School of Arts than Bathurst'. Delegates, who were given 'privileged use of the reading room', occupied the ground floor level. Balcony spaces accommodated a gallery where young ladies could assist delegates in the organisation of correspondence and a public viewing gallery. There was free access to the gallery in the mornings and afternoons on a first-come basis for the first four days, but seats could be reserved for the Friday session at two shillings each. Local traders declared Friday a public holiday, indicating in the press that businesses would not open. The Convention itself became the centre of attention and, just as they might attend the School of Arts to take in Lottie Lyell and Raymond Longford in their latest penny-dreadful drama, local people were given an opportunity to see and hear delegates, some of whom were gathering considerable status.

### **Advertising Allegiance**

In addition to declaring the last day of the Convention a holiday, local traders were quick to capitalise on the language of federal endeavour. Some of their regular advertising spilled over into political exhortation and unambiguous support. They prove to have been opportunistic but also capable of a clear commitment:

John Hunter's 'Federal Boots' were 'Unequaled for Comfort, Durability and Appearance.' Under the banner 'Federation', John Hunter declares that 'The hope and desire of all patriotic Australia is

---

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 19 November 1896.

---

gradually emerging from the land of dreams, until it will burst forth into the bright sunshine of accomplishment.’<sup>8</sup>

E. Webb and Company, owners of one of Bathurst’s largest mixed businesses, were more cautious and restrained, preferring simply to play with the idea of unity and the language of consensus.

The Great Convention! The Wonderful Attractions Cause Confederation Without Debate! All Classes Meet Around E. Webb and Co. Charming Novelty Windows and Federation Follows Immediately.

Directly below this advertisement, butcher J.P. Ryan broadened his usual appeal:

Federationist and Others. J.P. Ryan Jun. is the cheapest butcher in Town for Prime Beef and Mutton. Call and see the new Federal Freezing Window! The only one of its kind in the west.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Bathurst Daily Times*, 24 October, 1896.

On the final Friday of the Convention, Webb and Co, with wind in their sails, announced that for many years 'they had imported direct from English, Continental and American markets. Commercially they are Federated with the World'. They also noted that they had six tons of ice 'ready for visitors', enough to accommodate large amounts of convivial and celebratory Scotch. Like the executive members of the rifle club, Webb's managers must have been disappointed by the quiet Saturday the 21st (especially having sacrificed Friday's trading in the cause) for they were left with a large stock of unused ice.



---

## Music

There is little conspicuous evidence of musical events that were directly linked to the Convention, apart from the Ladies' Committee Concert scheduled for Wednesday evening. This was carefully planned but not presented. The local band, which had numerous successes in competitions, does not seem to have participated in any formal sense. In a history of this group, *Fiftieth Anniversary Souvenir of the Bathurst and District Band and Its Only Bandmaster, Mr S. Lewins* (1935),<sup>9</sup> the year 1896 is, surprisingly, overlooked. It reports that:

There is nothing of great importance recorded in this period [1896-97] other than the usual park programs, hospital and poor relief benefits; Bathurst Show and races jobs as usual. The Band also played at the foundation stone laying of the Technical College.<sup>10</sup>

This seems an odd oversight given that on page five of the same publication, in a list of notable Bathurst events, 1896 is given as the year of 'Federal Convention at Bathurst'. Bathurst Mounted Rifles Band went on, the anonymous author contends, to lead the procession in 1901 in Sydney's most elaborate federation celebrations, culminating in the signing of documents and the Centennial Park military march past. The author of the *Fiftieth Anniversary Souvenir* rightly acknowledges the significance of these celebrations: 'This procession was probably the most historic in Australia.' The Band is not conspicuous in the filmed record of the event.<sup>11</sup>

The Band certainly played for E. Webb and Co. and might have been on stand-by to be a part of the Wednesday evening 'entertainment'. Foundation Stone Laying at the Technical College is listed as a performance for the Band, although its contribution is not reported. The ceremony certainly occurred during the Convention and shared some of the broadly altruistic and nationalistic rhetoric that was in good supply in Bathurst that week, but it does not seem to have been formally connected to the Convention program. Could the military band that certainly played on the lawns of Logan Brae have been some rival group?

## Bathurst and the Flowering of Federation Verse

A less conspicuous cultural activity which was neither a festival nor a social event in the conventional sense, as these were used by the organizers at Bathurst, was the flowering of incidental verse inspired by federation. A number of the major players who shepherded Australians towards federation had of course penned poems encouraging readers to share their zeal and determination. The Bathurst newspapers record those poems that were read during the formal Convention proceedings and others that were contributed rather as one

---

<sup>9</sup> This slim, illustrated volume was published by the Bathurst Band in 1935.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> The New South Wales Government commissioned the Salvation Army to record on film the event surrounding the creation of the Commonwealth. Much of the footage is of the street parade that preceded the formalities involving the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia. Of the state premiers, only Lyne (NSW) was filmed signing the official documents, as NSW was paying the bill. The Bathurst Band is not obvious in the surviving footage. See the video documentary *Federation Films*, produced by noted media historian Chris Long for the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra, 1989.

would send a letter to the editor. As early as 6 November the *Bathurst Daily Free Press and Mining Journal, Special Federal Edition* had carried a sonnet by William Gay, the consumptive Bendigo poet who was, as the Convention sat, in the last months of his short life. The poem was tabled on the morning of the third day of the Convention.

### **AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION**

From all division let our land be free  
For God has made her one: complete she lies  
Within the unbroken circle of the skies,  
And round her indivisible the sea  
Breaks on her single shore; while only we,  
Her foster-children, bound with sacred ties  
Of one dear blood, one storied enterprise  
Are negligent of her integrity—  
Her seamless garment, at great Mammon's nod  
With hands unfilial we have basely rent  
With petty variance our souls are spent  
And ancient kinship under foot is trod;  
O let us rise united penitent,  
And be one people—mighty, serving God!

The ideas of a 'single shore' and of Australia's 'foster children' suggest some depth of thought about the issues at hand and also the invisibility of Aboriginal people.

Professor Gosman, a member of the Federation League from Melbourne and a prominent figure in the record of discussion, was the author of a 'Federal Hymn' read at the Convention. It has the four square-ness of the genuine thing but appears to have had no formal musical setting. God willing, Federation would be achieved. Gosman's 'Hymn' is also a prayer. It was read on the morning of the fourth day and the delegates were impressed enough to order that it be included in the published *Proceedings*:

### **A FEDERAL HYMN**

Great God of Nations, throned on high  
And yet to us forever nigh,  
The Federal cause be pleased to bless  
And crown the movement with success.

The pilgrim fathers in their zeal  
For freedom and the church's weal  
By persecution sorely pressed  
For refuge sought the distant west,

But no such persecuting fires  
Drove from their home our pilgrim sires

---

And we their children hope to rear  
In time a greater Britain here.

The British flag floats o'er our land  
The British fleet our sons command,  
The love of freedom in the race  
Grows stronger here by ample space.

The wealth of British thought is ours  
Its life through every channel pours,  
The mother tongue in our discourse  
Maintains its purity and force.

Then let the Federal spirit rise  
To quicken all our energies  
The glorious mission to fulfil  
By virtue of the people's will.

There is very little room for Colonel Bell and his American countrymen amongst Gosman's protracted enthusiasm for a 'greater Britain here'. Perhaps the most important sentiments are those connected to the identification of a 'wealth of British thought' and the weight given to the idea expressed in the final line.

Another 'Federal Hymn' had been read in the opening session, the composition of Mrs Kearney of Orange. She selects an dactylic metre rather than the more traditional four-stressed iambic quatrains of Professor Gosman, and her spirited work canters along:

### A FEDERAL HYMN

God of the Universe, smile on our union;  
God of the mighty triumphant and free;  
Smiling and virginal, unstained by slaughter  
Thy last and thy brightest born, laughs up to thee.

Look down, O Father—O Father of Nations!  
Without whom the mightiest melt like the sand  
Gathered by children in mounds by the ocean  
Swept out to nothingness. Father, thy hand

Only can gather us up to the splendour  
Of empire majestic, to shine o'er the sea  
A diadem'd nation, serene and immortal  
Revered by her sisters, and cherished by Thee!

Set like a radiant gem on the forehead

Of ocean, Australia laughs in the dawn—  
Laughs in the dawn of a new day, whose splendour  
Shall leap to the light on the pinions of morn.

God of the Universe smile on our union,  
By union we grow to our strength, 'tis to Thee  
We turn to preserve it—O Lord of the Nations  
Serene and majestic—O, God 'tis to Thee.

God of the Universe, smile on our union,  
God of the mighty, triumphant and free  
Set like a gem on the forehead of ocean  
Thy last and thy brightest-born laughs up to Thee!

G. M. V. K.

Orange, 3rd Nov., 1896

Mrs Kearney, probably the wife of the Mayor of Orange, a Convention delegate, lifts her eyes to an authority even mightier than the 'British'.

Clearly poetry could assume an important place in the articulation of ideas, in the expression of feelings about issues of great moment. The God of the 'mighty, triumphant and free' would reward effort and watch over the infant Commonwealth. The sense of the future stirring in the present, and of Australia achieving maturity, is expressed by ordinary people such as Mrs Kearney, but also by the more exalted. Edmund Barton gilded his dull but urbane presentation with another 'Federal Sonnet'. It is a competent but unmemorable piece. Cardinal Moran, too, quoted at length from a poem by Sir William Jones, 'One with whose writings many of you are familiar', the Cardinal suggested. This enthusiasm for poetry is not unexpected eloquence in a society where, later in the Federation period, many poems articulating the pros and cons of union were received by newspaper editors. This tendency was especially evident during the referenda of 1897 and 1898.

Other Bathurst Convention poems spoke of the 'City of the Plains' much as Corowa's poem<sup>12</sup> speaks somewhat grandiosely of Corowa and Wagunyah as the 'twin cities' on the Murray. The messages are almost always the same, the appeal numbingly constant. God is urged to help achieve the desired union, regardless of the fact that delegates and even those federalists who could not attend, put a heavy emphasis on the need for the Convention to begin the move towards widespread and irresistible popular ownership of the idea of a federated Australia. Perhaps the most significant outcome at Bathurst was the emphasis it placed on the need for a conspicuous and irresistible surge of national feeling in favour of union. The case would be put at a referendum, so all forms of public utterance would be valuable in making the case. In the Conference *Proceedings* it is noted that in the closing session 'several sets of verses on the federation theme were reported to the Convention. They were taken as read.' The Bathurst delegates accepted the relevance and power of poetry.

---

<sup>12</sup> Randolph Bedford's poem 'Hymn of Federation' appeared in the *Corowa Free Press*, 1 August 1893 (see the introduction to this volume). It had been published in Melbourne the previous day. It is probably the most widely published piece of federation verse.

---

As federation enthusiasm increased, additional effort was put into setting words to music. Somewhere amongst the genuine piety and exhortation of the poems published in Bathurst in 1896 the germ of a truly national song might lurk. There were precedents. As early as 1859 Carl Linger had written a memorable tune to the words of Mrs Caroline Carlton. 'Song of Australia' carries some of the sentiments so common later: 'no shackled slave shall breathe the air'.<sup>13</sup> But like much of the Christian focus of Mrs Kearney (and others), and regardless of its rather naive energy, the verse begins to pall through repetition of the same similes and metaphors, the same sets of ideas. Australian society was more complex than Mrs Kearney's poem suggests. She proposes one context and a particular set of values that is conspicuously Irish Catholic. There were others, some of them still shadowy. The energy that informed their production seems to have issued from bland political roots and an educated middle class. It is verse that has some equivalence to the maudlin and predictable parlour ballad. These were not the spontaneous or even the heavily didactic effusions of red-ragging socialists, not even the relatively domesticated ones who are well-represented on the late Victorian bookshelf.

But poems and songs were, of course, not the only vehicles for public declamation and for rhetoric urging federation. In a letter read to the Bathurst Convention from Bernhard Wise, English-educated attendee at earlier federalist gatherings, the author delivers his opinion in powerful, stirring prose. A single line, 'Unity is Strength', runs through the various poems and the urgings of men like Wise (who, as it happened, went on to write even grander prose in *The Making of the Australian Commonwealth 1889 to 1900* (1913)). Unity is strength, if the people recognise and appropriate the ideology for which such sentiment is a catch cry:

The Bathurst Convention must remove all doubts of the timid and compel the secret enemies of union to declare themselves ... To my mind there is no other cause worth fighting for in public life when put beside the cause of Australian unity ... Men will write, and speak and work as members of a nation and not as provincials and the importance of this fact as a means of elevating civic life no student of history can ignore ... the impulse to all great movements is given by sentiment rather than reason, and no statesman who ignores the sentiment of Nationality can be regarded as practical.

The Bathurst Convention took up the challenge, moving early in its proceedings to ensure that it carried the title, 'Bathurst Peoples' Convention'. The need to educate and organise and, perhaps, to agitate were all articulated and to some degree lived out at Bathurst. There is an earnestness and urgency in its agenda and the manner in which it approached the debate. That is, perhaps, why so few of its deliberations appear trivial, even when they are delivered in language and, sometimes, in mannerisms that have seriously dated. As we approach the inevitable Republic it is likely that the underlying ideas and the primary motivation to change will be taken a step further. But we are, I think, unlikely to find popular poets rising to the occasion or butchers installing the republican equivalent of a 'federal freezing window'. The

---

<sup>13</sup> Caroline Carlton crafted the words of 'Song of Australia' and Carl Linger, German-Australian composer resident in South Australia, the music. Of all of the surrogate or substitute anthems with a national emphasis composed in Australia, 'Song of Australia', is in my opinion the best. The rising line of its melody has an inspirational effect like other successful national anthems. At the 1897 Adelaide Federal Convention efforts were made to create a profile for the piece. The promotion was not successful and the anthem failed in later competitions to be selected as a national song.

'sentiment of Nationality' has been buried in political correctness where popular versifying and patriotic cantatas seem both embarrassing and passé. It is difficult to see how modern republicanism will rally and focus popular support and achieve the same levels of energy and success as the Federation Leagues like the one at Bathurst were able to do.