Chapter Three:
National Days
The aspects of national identity explained in the last chapter find varied expression in national celebrations and rituals - particularly in national days. This century Australia has had two candidates for the position of "national day" besides Australia Day: Empire Day and Anzac Day. It is important to look at the background to each of these days because such analysis aids our understanding of the relationship between national identity and Australia Day. It also provides the opportunity to explore further the question of whether Australia Day, as an invented tradition in Eric Hobsbawm’s terms, has struck a chord of "genuine popular resonance". Taken simply at their level of historical origins, Australia Day celebrates the formal landing and the raising of the Union Jack in Sydney Cove on the afternoon of January 26, 1788, to mark the establishment of European settlement in Australia; when Empire Day was first celebrated in NSW in 1905 it marked the birthday of the late Queen Victoria, while in its modern diluted form it celebrates the occasion of Queen Elizabeth’s birthday; Anzac Day commemorates the landing of Australian troops in Gallipoli on April 25, 1915 and their subsequent military loss. Manning Clark writes that both Anzac Day and Empire Day "came from the secular religion of loyalty to King and Empire". He notes the vacant significance of Australia Day for much of this century by insisting that "except for Anzac Day, no day of special significance to Australia was the occasion for a holiday".

Before looking at Empire Day and Anzac Day, it is important to consider national days in a comparative context. Eric Hobsbawm argues that the

3. ibid.
innovation of the public ceremony was a major form of the invention of tradition in the 19th century. He rates the most important of these public ceremonies as Bastille Day, which can be dated to 1880. It combined official and unofficial demonstration with popular festivities such as fireworks and dancing in the streets in an annual celebration of France as the nation of 1789, in which every French man, woman and child could take part. Hobsbawm writes that "its general tendency was to transform the heritage of the Revolution into a combined expression of state pomp and power and the citizens’ pleasure". The French, unlike the Americans with their Independence Day celebrations, shied away from the cult of Founding Fathers:

It [France] preferred general symbols, abstaining even from the use of themes referring to the national past on its postage stamps until long after 1914, though most European states (other than Britain and Scandinavia) discovered their appeal from the mid-1890s onwards.5

Hobsbawm argues the Americans’ Independence Day was used as a political tool to help assimilate its heterogeneous mass of immigrants.

The invented traditions of the USA in this period were primarily designed to achieve this object. ...The immigrants were encouraged to accept rituals commemorating the history of the nation - the Revolution and its founding fathers (the 4th of July) and the Protestant Anglo-Saxon tradition (Thanksgiving Day) - as indeed they did, since these now became holidays and occasions for public and private festivity.6

Australia’s national days were not used successfully for such political purposes, although from the 1950s, and particularly during the 1980s,

Australia Day was linked with citizenship ceremonies and the multicultural flavour of society. Rather than assimilation, the tendency of Australia Day in the 1980s served more to emphasise differences between cultures by encouraging displays of ethnic folksongs and dances in national costumes. It will be seen that, despite the potentially divisive nature of this trend, it actually served to generate interest in the national day. Other questions can be raised about the degree to which Hobsbawm's theories of invented tradition can be applied to national days in Australia. In seeking possible answers to these questions we need to look at the case studies of newspaper reports of Australia Day's celebration this century. First, however, we need to examine the background to Australia's other two national days and their celebration.

**Empire Day**

While Australia Day is a contemporary celebration, little remains of the national day known as Empire Day which was launched in Australia on May 24, 1905. Here again was an event designed to celebrate (or to capitalise upon) a certain kind of national identity. The organisers of Empire Day sought to access and build upon the national self-image of Australians as citizens of the British Empire - in the tradition of white Anglo-Saxon kinship introduced in the preceding chapter. The theme of the day was made clear through both its name and through the fact that the date was chosen because it was the late Queen Victoria's birthday, an occasion which had been celebrated since the Queen's accession in 1837. However, Empire Day was full of contradictions. Rather than contribute to a sense of national unity or direction, the very creation of Empire Day served the political ends of its initiator, George Reid, the conservative Prime Minister and vice-president of the British Empire
League. Reid "saw the possibilities for linking nation and empire in an anti-labour campaign... Imperial loyalty was the servant of conservative political forces".7

Empire Day was constructed chiefly through the school system (especially public schools), combined with public processions, church services and gatherings. Officials spoke of the benefits and glories of the British Empire, and endeavoured to place the celebration of Australia as a nation in the context of the adoration of Empire.8 But all this was created and performed to the exclusion and disgust of those whose politics it was meant to combat - most notoriously the nation's Irish Catholics. It prompted the Catholic move to construct a different expression of identity on May 24. A Catholic alternative to Empire Day from 1911 was actually named "Australia Day" on the suggestion of Cardinal Moran.9 The major problem for the Catholic alternative was that it was a manufactured occasion, largely dependant upon the degree to which euphoria could be whipped up by its creators. For example, at the Catholic Educational Conference of New South Wales in 1911 the Cardinal said:

> those who were the champions of Imperialism and Empire Day were many of them avowed enemies of the Catholic Church ... and tried to impede the progress of the Catholic Church at home and abroad.10

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The Empire Day celebration was also used as a political platform to attack other opponents - the *Bulletin* and *Worker* which ridiculed it as "Vampire's Day", "St Jingo's Day" and "All Fools Day". Empire Day speakers called upon schoolchildren to take up the imperialist cry "Australia for the Empire" rather than the radical nationalist slogan of the *Bulletin*: "Australia for the Australians".

The life of Empire Day serves as an example of how one construction of national identity can be used to serve changing political purposes. However, it also shows that such attempts at political manipulation are not thoroughly successful. At the beginning of World War I it was used as a motivation and a reason for Australians going to war. Maurice French writes:

Empire Day, with its emphasis on the Union Jack, imperial unity and loyalty, and the heroic mission and deeds of Empire, was a valuable instrument of propaganda and indoctrination. It is impossible to tell how many mothers' sons marched off to the Dardanelles, Ypres and Somme with the lessons of Empire Day firmly planted in their subconscious: virtuous Anglo-Saxonism contrasted sharply with the Germanic atrocities of Kaiser Bill's Huns.

However, the bitter conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917 tore apart any notion of united support for the celebration. The labour movement and the Catholic Church grew stronger in their opposition to the concept of Empire, and so the constructors of Empire Day turned the occasion into a different, more blatantly political platform: "The post-war Empire Day became an occasion for denouncing dissidents."

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A study of Empire Day serves to demonstrate that a construction of national identity through public ceremony cannot function as a fabrication alone. It needs to have enough substance and application to resonate with widespread concerns and so be adopted by a people. To use Eric Hobsbawm’s terminology, it needs to strike that chord of "genuine popular resonance".\textsuperscript{15} The gradual demise of Empire Day coincided with the demise of Australia’s dependence upon and identification with Britain demonstrated at the end of the preceding chapter. A changing ethnic base and the mere passage of time diminished the significance of personal and family ties with Britain. As Hancock’s "Australian Britons" became second and third generation Australians, and as immigrants from other European (and later Asian) countries changed the racial composition of the populace, British kinship ties were diminished and other kinship ties grew in significance. Empire Day became an anachronism. Time and historical circumstances took their toll on the relationship and upon the celebration. Bessant writes,

\begin{quote}
\noindent it is clear that by the late thirties the British Empire was getting a haggard look. The old shibboleths of imperial glory and racial superiority were being questioned more frequently...When war broke out again there was none of that patriotic enthusiasm and fervour associated with 1914.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Australia’s cultural apron strings remained, but the post-war apron belonged to the United States, with its enticing offerings of Hollywood, defence pacts and Coca-Cola. From the 1950s the name changes from Empire Day to British Commonwealth Day, Commonwealth Day and Commonwealth of Nations Day chronicled the erosion of the event. As Firth and Hoorn’s article records, the day’s final switch to the Queen’s Birthday weekend meant it literally

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{15} Hobsbawm, \textit{op.cit}, pp.263-4.
\end{thebibliography}
"went up in smoke" as Australian children and the press were allowed to forget the original meaning of the celebration amid the excitement and consequences of the annual Cracker Night.\textsuperscript{17} The later banning of fireworks relegated the Queen's Birthday weekend to just another Australian long weekend, celebrated on different dates throughout the nation. A celebration which had begun as a heartfelt rejoicing of one Queen's birthday (Victoria's) ended as a token holiday for another Queen's birthday (Elizabeth's). The only chord of "genuine popular resonance" it now strikes is the hedonistic chord associated with a long weekend.

**ANZAC DAY**

The first signs of Empire Day's diminishing popularity around 1920 coincided to a large degree with the development of a more powerful national celebration of Australian identity - Anzac Day. Some historians have hailed it as coming closest to representing a true Australian national day. Ronald Conway, for instance, writes that "what little national mystique Australia has been able to invoke is intimately bound up with it [Anzac Day]."\textsuperscript{18}

The 1915 Empire Day celebrations are hailed as "the high point for Empire Day, the only occasion on which it came close to uniting Australians to a common cause."\textsuperscript{19} The cause was the Australian imperial struggle in war. However, the May 24 celebration occurred too soon after the Gallipoli landing on April 15 for the consequences of that event to have effectively penetrated

\textsuperscript{17} Firth and Hoom, \textit{op.cit.}, p.37.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{ibid.}, p.30.
the Australian psyche and before Anzac Day had developed as a focus for war honours. The first Anzac Day was celebrated on April 25, 1916. From 1917, Anzac Day commemorations began to overshadow Empire Day celebrations and French notes that the 1919 Sydney Anzac Day attendance of 15,000-20,000, despite an influenza epidemic, was twice the size of pre-war Empire Day crowds. In 1922 Anzac Day was heralded as "the outstanding festival of our people".20

More important than the mere popularity of the occasion was the fact that Anzac Day soon began to serve the ends of the same political players who had promoted the Empire Day icon. French writes "Anzac Day, the sacred symbol of the nation’s birth, was soon to replicate Empire Day as a mouthpiece for Australian conservatism."21 The NSW Director of Education, Mr Peter Board, went so far as to say that the commemoration of Anzac Day should replace Empire Day. He wrote,

For on 25th April 1915 Australia first took up the responsibilities of Empire by the active participation of her sons in the defence of the Empire against an enemy that had willed her humiliation. On 25th April 1915 Australia passed beyond a partnership resting on the mere sentiments of kinship into a partnership of national sacrifice in the interests of an Imperial cause, and in resistance to an Empire’s enemy.22

Anzac Day not only served conservative political ends, but in doing so addressed a much wider grassroots community base, capturing the respect of Catholics, trade unionists and the political Left.23 The preacher at an Anzac

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20. Sydney Morning Herald, 28 April, 1922, cited in Maurice French, op.cit., p.73.
Day Requiem Mass in St Mary’s Cathedral in 1922 told worshippers that the letters of ANZAC also stood for Australian Nationality, Zeal And Charity.24

The Anzac legend only captured this broad-based respect through its duality of construction mentioned in the last chapter.25 Conservative citizenry in Australia painted loyalty to the Empire (and to fallen comrades) as the driving force behind the Anzac legend, putting paid to the predominant radical idealism of the bush legend. This construction helped answer the criticism of the Irish Catholics and bush radicals who were opposed to the war effort. But among the soldiers, the identity constructed built upon that very bush ethos, well encapsulated by Gammage:

Like the bushmen, the Anzacs wanted to show how they were different. They made a distinctive tradition - brave and tough in battle, excelling at any task to which they set their hands, careless of authority, hostile to most convention, proud of their distinctiveness and their country.26

The post-war Anzac Day ceremonies provided an outlet for both the imperialist and the radical nationalist constructions. Ward wrote that the anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli had become more than just a day of mourning and remembrance for the war dead. It had also become a “national day above all others ... Solemn religious services are conducted and patriotic orations are delivered by prominent citizens, but the rank and file carry out also, different, unofficial ceremonies.”27

While the services and the orations carry on the myth perpetrated by the conservative civilians, the often drunken reunions of old comrades annually

24. Firth and Hoom, op.cit, p.36.
rekindle the bush ethos by reliving past glories and perpetuating their own myths and legends. Philip Kitley has shown that most of the rituals established on the first Anzac Day in 1916 remained part of the day in the late 1970s. Kitley took the case study of Toowoomba’s Anzac Day events to show that the services, reunions, involvement of school children and the closing of businesses could all be traced to the first Anzac Day. In a recent article Sylvia Lawson described Anzac Day as "Australia’s longest running, most grippingly successful popular theatre ... pure pageant, a sequence of stories whose ends are fully known but which must, imperatively, be retold over and over." 

The contradictions of Anzac Day are not restricted to the two myths of the Anzac legend. In the 1970s the day provided a forum for anti-war protests and in the 1980s it was the target of feminist demonstrations against rape in war. Apart from the fact that it commemorates a military struggle on behalf of the British Empire and that it celebrates a defeat rather than a victory, the great shortcoming of Anzac Day as a national event is that it is rooted in an historically male domain and masculine ceremonies. Inglis writes that although the names of nurses appear alongside men’s on the tablets of many Australian war memorials, there is only one effigy of a nurse on a local monument. He notes that while women often served on the design committees for war memorials, "the rituals enacted around the memorials on Anzac Day came to be controlled by organised returned soldiers". For example, Toowoomba in Queensland has the Mothers Memorial named after

31. ibid., p.54.
the women organisers of its erection, yet no women are featured as statues. Anzac Day was, and still is, a man’s day. Despite attempts to involve youth in the ceremonies, it has also become a day for the older generation of Australians. Thus it could never truly represent a complete nation. Its rituals mean most to the Anzacs themselves. Although other citizens and their groups (such as schools, boy scouts and emergency services) take part in the commemoration services, such services and the reunions have most meaning for the returned soldiers. Lee Sackett, in writing about Anzac Day celebrations in Adelaide, observed:

Individuals join in and recall precisely because the symbols and structures of the day are so meaningful to them. Others, lacking in firsthand war experience and the consequent memories this entails, cannot be emotionally touched or transported back in anything like the same manner. They simply do not have the past into which the performance is asking people to march.32

Thus, with time Anzac Day also has begun to seem outdated.