Chapter Five:
Newspaper Coverage of Australia Day in 1922 and 1932
1922

The 1922 anniversary of the first European settlement of Australia was remarkable for the diverse, yet hollow, nature of its celebration throughout the nation. Queensland and New South Wales celebrated Thursday, January 26 as a public holiday, while Western Australians, Victorians and South Australians were treated to a long weekend, with the public holiday gazetted for Monday, January 30. Tasmania was divided in its celebration, and would remain so until 1942. Southern Tasmanians celebrated a four-day weekend, with Monday, January 30 gazetted as Eight Hours Day and Tuesday, January 31, Hobart Cup Day. Northern Tasmanians celebrated the first settlement of New South Wales. Significantly, the Mercury made no mention of the historic event celebrated elsewhere. Just as varied as the timing of the celebrations was the title they were given. The states all called the public holiday Foundation Day, but used this interchangeably with other names, including Anniversary Day (NSW and Western Australia), A.N.A. Day (Victoria) and even Australia Day (Queensland).

Throughout the nation it was evident that the imperial connection and British kinship ties still held a firm grip on Australians’ national identity. The imperial connection was noticeable firstly through the prominent role the respective Governors played in each State’s celebrations. British loyalties were also evident in the reports of the London celebrations of Australia Day. All Australian capital city newspapers prominently reported the London celebrations of what was, significantly, called "Australia Day". The Duke of York was guest of honour at an Australia Day luncheon. The tables were
lavishly decorated with wattle bloom. The audience cheered when the Duke of York confirmed the kinship ties by announcing that "he felt he belonged as much to Australia and New Zealand as to the motherland". The Australian flag flew at the church of St Dunstan-in-the-East and was crowded with what the Age dubbed "Anglo-Australians". The expression indicates the depth of imperial loyalty still in effect at the time. Yet in addressing the service, Dean Inge noted an identifiable hedonistic, easy-going attitude of Australians, saying that he had heard the climate caused Sydney people to take life more easily and be less concerned with the pursuit of wealth than the people of other cities.

While 800 attended an Australia Day reception in Australia House in London, only 60 attended a dinner in New York, giving one index of the relative importance of the two countries to Australia at the time. Leader writers for the major newspapers evoked Australia’s links with Britain and the Empire in their editorials. The Sydney Morning Herald reminded Australians that they were British citizens and subjects:

It is in every way desirable, right and proper that the young Australian should be conscious and proud of his Australian nationality, but it is equally important for him to bear in mind the wider bond of British nationality which unites him to the other peoples within the Empire.

In an editorial attacking radical nationalists the Herald said the problem with the slogan "Australia for the Australians", was that those who believed in it

3. ibid.
should get out and leave Australia to the true Australians - the Aborigines. It continued:

If we say "Australia to the Australians" meaning the British-born descendants who are now called Australians, then we at once acknowledge the wonderful wealth of debt which we owe to our progenitors who made that voyage to Australia and founded it as a British colony in 1788.6

The Advertiser noted that, although the date was "blackened by memories of handcuffs and leg-irons", it was worthwhile celebrating because it "saw Australia brought under the unspeakable blessings of British rule".7

The Daily Mail latched on to the immigration debate and the celebration of kinship ties, saying it was not enough to have a White Australia - it should also be a British Australia:

All our interests are bound up with those of the Empire, and it would be a sorry day for us if we were to find ourselves suddenly left to our own resources, and deprived of the moral and material help which association with Great Britain affords.8

The West Australian was more concerned with playing down the significance of the convict "birthstain" and highlighting kinship ties. It argued that the "scars of the convict system were obliterated by the kindly touch of Time" and that the combination of bloodlines from all parts of the British Isles had "contributed to a stock which now manifests characteristics of its own differentiating it from any of the parent groups whilst maintaining strong likenesses to each".9

The post-war construction of Anzac was expressed by the Duke of York. He neatly put the conservative, imperialist line in praising the valour of the Anzacs, and evoked the image of the Coming Man:

When an Anzac soldier was seen walking our streets we liked to recognise in his lithe, stalwart figure the epitome of British breeding under a kindlier sun and freer air than was possible in these more crowded islands.\textsuperscript{10}

In Brisbane, the \textit{Daily Mail}'s editorialist sewed the crimson thread of kinship by glorifying the Britishness and racial purity of Australians, writing that "British enterprise and endurance vanquished other claimants and left us a continent unencumbered by any racial frontiers".\textsuperscript{11}

However, while editorialists and politicians espoused the links with the Empire on the national birthday, throughout the nation Australians voted for hedonism by simply going out and having a good time. The \textit{Sydney Morning Herald} reported that Sydney-siders attended the Anniversary Regatta on the harbour, the AJC Anniversary meeting at Randwick, the Sheffield Shield match at the Sydney Cricket Ground, the annual Freshwater surf carnival, picnics or the theatre.\textsuperscript{12} The spirit of hedonism in Sydney was summed up by the Adelaide \textit{Advertiser}'s Sydney correspondent with the sentence: "All the seaside resorts were in favour, and general good humour prevailed."\textsuperscript{13}

In Adelaide the leisurely pursuits included horse racing at Victoria Park, the Henley Beach and Grange annual regatta, gala dress at Seacliff, rifle shooting at Port Adelaide, cricket at the Adelaide Oval, tennis matches at the rear of the oval, while "hundreds of people made their way to the hills".\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Daily Mail}, January 26, 1922, p.6.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, January 25, 1922, p.9.
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Advertiser}, January 27, 1922, p.12.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Advertiser}, January 31, 1922, p.5.
The *West Australian* featured no news of that state's Anniversary Day celebrations on Monday, January 30, 1922 although an advertisement in the Amusements column on January 28 promoted the annual river picnic at Point Walter of the Australian Natives Association, featuring "sports for young and old". Members and their friends were requested to "look for the Australian flag, which will fly on the picnic ground". On the same page appeared an advertisement for the Children's Annual Gala on South Beach, Fremantle, featuring various events as well as a national dancing competition in the evening. Like the *Advertiser* the *West Australian* carried a report from a Sydney correspondent on that city's celebrations. The fact that both western newspapers reported the occasion as a Sydney event supports the view that they were reluctant to celebrate the day because it was perceived as essentially Sydney's birthday.

The *Daily Mail* in Brisbane reported the celebrations conducted by the Australian Natives Association. They included athletics at the Exhibition Grounds and a swimming carnival at the South Brisbane baths. The interchangeability of the name of the day - symptomatic of a lack of identity - was demonstrated by the preview of the events calling it "Foundation Day", while the review dubbed it "Australia Day". More than 700 Toowoomba residents visited the Lockyer Valley by train for picnics.

In Hobart, the national birthday was overshadowed by fervour for Hobart Cup Day - the Hobart Regatta - another hedonistic pursuit celebrating the

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discovery of Tasmania by Abel Tasman. Even the Administrator, Sir Herbert Nicholls, toasted the hedonism of the day, saying it was perhaps the most popular public holiday in Australia - the good old Hobart Regatta - (Hear, hear) - and he supposed that when the bi-centenary was reached, the same thing would be said. The regatta festival appeared to him as an orgie of wholesomeness, if he might so coin a phrase, with its rowing, sailing, swimming, aquatic sports, and so on, constituting every variety of aquatic sport, and drawing vast crowds of people from city and country.

The *Mercury*’s editorial writer became caught up in the Administrator’s enthusiasm, arguing in the following day’s leader that the Regatta offered a true “democratic holiday” - "a day’s pleasure which everybody can enjoy gratis!"

Thousands of Melburnians enjoyed themselves at the Albert Park Regatta, which even featured a tableau of the landing of Captain Cook (as opposed to Captain Phillip whose actions were the historical reason for the holiday). Others chose to attend the ANA carnival at Exhibition Building or go to picnics, the races, the beach or the theatre. The *Age* chose Australia Day to report that the Victorian Government intended to gazette Tuesday, April 25, as a public holiday for the observance of Anzac Day, following a Premiers’ Conference resolution the previous November calling for national uniformity in the celebration of the Anzac Day holiday. In 1990, the States were still quarrelling about whether to do the same for Australia Day.

In *Inventing Australia*, Richard White has written that images of Australian identity are exploited for political or commercial purposes. There

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22. *Age*, January 26, 1922, p.6
is evidence in the 1922 coverage of Australia Day of attempts to use the day to score political points. The Prime Minister, W.M. Hughes, exploited Australians' British kinship loyalties and used the occasion of the Australian Natives Association luncheon to sing the praises of a White Australia. Here, he said, the British race was seen at its best. It was important to populate the continent with good British stock. He said Australia should take care not to fall into the trap of importing cheap colored labour, as had been the case in the United States and South Africa. The Age reported: "America today had 20,000,000 of colored people. They could not be eradicated. They were there like a cancer on the body politic."

The newspaper coverage gave valuable insights into Australians' perceptions of their own national identity at the time. The imperial apron strings were truly in evidence. Australia's purported lack of self-confidence as a 21-year-old nation was criticised. The Prime Minister berated Australians for this characteristic, as the Age reported,

There was nothing like having a good conceit of ourselves; at present we did not have a good enough conceit of ourselves. (Laughter.) We had formed the habit of belittling things Australian.

The Advertiser argued that confidence in itself was the first essential to the well-being of a nation and asked why Australia should not possess it.

Apart from advertisements for holiday entertainment, there was little commercial exploitation of Australia Day evident in the newspapers in 1922. Yet not all exploitation of the national day was politically or commercially motivated. The Citizens Health Committee in Brisbane took the opportunity

to use the holiday angle for its rat eradication campaign. The following article appeared under the heading "How to spend the holiday!" in the *Daily Mail*:

To-day is a holiday and the Citizens' Health Committee trust there are now numbers of householders who will be able to spend the day at the seaside, leaving behind them clean premises, which rats have no inducement to enter. Any whose conscience is not quite clear are strongly advised to take advantage of the opportunity and clean up.\(^{26}\)

Editorialists made their own suggestions on what spirit the day should evoke for Australians. The *Age* and the *Advertiser* both recorded the opinion that the day should be for looking into the future rather than retrospection,\(^{27}\) a suggestion which was to be taken up later in the century. The study of the reportage of Australia Day in 1922 offers insights into the way Australians viewed themselves at the time. However, no major news events appeared to influence the way the day was celebrated or reported. This provides a significant contrast with the reportage of the day a decade later.

1932

January 26, 1932 was the first time the day was officially celebrated under the name "Australia Day"\(^{28}\). However, the celebrations still varied on a functional basis between states in both name and timing and were dampened by the dire economic conditions of the time. New South Wales was the only state to celebrate the actual anniversary, Tuesday, January 26, as a public holiday.

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The rest of the nation was treated to a long weekend with the holiday gazetted in Queensland for Monday, January 25, and in Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria for Monday, February 1. Southern Tasmanians again ignored the national day and instead celebrated a public holiday on Tuesday, February 9, the occasion of the 94th Hobart Regatta.

The same newspaper issues reporting the holiday activities were also reporting Federal Cabinet’s rejection of NSW Premier Lang’s demand for 500,000 pounds to meet interest commitments in London and New York.29 The circumstances provide for a fruitful analysis of the roles of hedonism, kinship allegiances and radical nationalism on the national day during a period of economic crisis.

Despite the depressing economic climate (or because of it) Australians set about the pursuit of leisure and pleasure with at least as much fervour as they had in 1922. Most capital city newspapers reported the same types of festivities as they had in 1922, although the 10 years brought changes in the public’s method of transport and photographs added life to the newspapers’ coverage. Brisbane’s Anniversary Day Regatta was featured in half a page of photographs30, the Advertiser added a commercial tone by reporting that 5000 people attended the SAD-sponsored Sunshine Club picnic at Seacliff31, while the Mercury reported in a double-page spread of stories and photographs that Hobart’s Regatta was the most successful to date.32 The day had not, it seems, taken on any national significance. It had not begun to "resonate". In the Canberra Times the only mention of Australia Day in 1932 was the report of

the Anniversary Day race meeting in Sydney. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that city's regatta, racing, cricket, tennis, baseball, bowls, swimming and surf carnivals as well as the public's fascination with technology in motor cycling, Aero Club competitions and passenger flights from Mascot. The *Age* reported Melbourne's fetish for picnics, including 11,000 people attending reunions at Wattle Park at Burwood. The paper went so far as to dub the day the "picnic holiday", encapsulating an essentially Australian hedonism:

In a thousand spots, generally the sole possession of the kookaburra and seagull, holiday groups boiled their billies and put up more or less successful defensive actions against the depredations of ants and the attacks of flies. One of the attractions of the picnic holiday is its simplicity and freedom from restraint. All you are expected to do is eat hearty. Then you may sleep, sunbask, read, join in an impromptu game, play the fool to your heart's content, swim - anything but show your everyday, serious side.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reacted to the State Cabinet decision to change the day's name from Anniversary Day to Australia Day. It predicted the day would "undoubtedly be known for at least another generation, if not for all time, by the public generally, as Anniversary Day". It closed with the barb: "It takes more than an official edict to scuttle Australian tradition." It was a sign that some degree of resonance was required for an invented tradition to become accepted.

It was just that tradition that concerned the leader writer of the *West Australian*, who argued that it was not essential that a holiday should have a pretext.

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34. *Age*, February 2, 1932, p.8.
but being a conscientious as well as a holiday-loving people we usually contrive to find one. Having found it, however, we seldom let it overshadow the substance of a day’s freedom and so, apart from the Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter and the strongly felt and deeply personal commemoration of Anzac, our holidays pass without much demonstration of their significance.36

It is important to note here that as early as 1932 some commentators perceived the hedonistic way of celebrating Australia Day as a seemingly natural way for Australians to behave. The West Australian’s writer even argued:

There is something laconically Australian about the heedless and unexcited way in which the national birthday is observed and enjoyed. Given such an occasion, Americans might mangle each other with fireworks. In Germany Herr Hitler or the grim old President might make fiery speeches to massed parades in uniform ... In Australia, the national holiday means for many a little longer in bed in the morning, a day on the beach, and, probably, a sunburnt back on the morrow.37

The day after the holiday the newspaper reported that the general indifference to the day’s meaning was understandable because there had been no formal celebrations, and "the lure of the picnic out of doors was too strong for pondering on the past".38 The Sydney Morning Herald put the occasion to a political use in attempting to bolster the morale of a community in the grip of depression. It argued that the day was "a fitting occasion for something more than mere merrymaking". It tried to find some meaning in the day by suggesting people should look to the pioneers of the colony for inspiration during the current economic crisis.39

37. ibid.
38. West Australian, February 2, 1932, p.12.
The imperial link played an important role in the reportage of the 1932 Australia Day, but was not as dominant as it had been in 1922. Mentions of the Empire appeared in speeches to Australia Day gatherings and in the editorial columns of the newspapers. Organisations established to glorify the past particularly focussed on British kinship ties. The secretary of the Hobart branch of the Australian Natives Association told a function that Australians were proud of the fact that they belonged to "an integral part of the greatest Empire in the world". He went on to endorse the White Australia policy, saying Australians were proud of their racial purity.\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{Age} quoted the Governor-General, Sir Isaac Isaacs, telling the ANA in Melbourne that wherever he had been he had found "the most absolute and profound loyalty to King and Empire".\textsuperscript{41} The president of the Australian Pioneers Club in Sydney proposed a toast to "the sturdy men and women who, inspired by the spirit of enterprise, left the comfort of their homes in the desire to give greater service to the Empire by assisting in the development of its most distant possession."\textsuperscript{42} There was a conservationist lurking amidst the conservatives of the Pioneers Club. He said he could imagine Phillip's feelings when he entered the best harbour in the world, although "It must have been a more wonderful sight than that presented today, with the broken line of skyscrapers and even the wonderful bridge ... man could not improve much on nature."\textsuperscript{43}

The \textit{Herald} introduced an element of British kinship to its report on the regatta, saying it was associated with the day on which Captain Phillip unfurled the flag signalling the existence of a "British community which today

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Mercury}, January 27, 1932, p.8.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Age}, January 27, 1932, p.7.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, January 23, 1932, p.12.
\textsuperscript{43} ibid.
accepts proudly the responsibilities and privileges of nationhood's estate" - the implication being that it was still a "British community".\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{Age} noted in its editorial titled "Foundation Day Reflections" that amazing progress had been made toward the objective of "a new Britannia in another world". However, the same editorial made political capital out of the Australia Day event. The editorialist used the occasion to scold the "extremists of foreign extraction" who, at the Labor Conference sitting in Melbourne, were "striving to transplant to this country class hatreds bred in the tyrannies and miseries of Continental capitals".\textsuperscript{45}

There were few references to Anzac in the 1932 coverage, perhaps because its memory was not as fresh as it had been in 1922 or because there was now a clearer separation of the two days in the national calendar. (Anzac Day had been a relatively new institution in 1922, and not even a national one at that.) However, at the ANA social in Melbourne the former Commissioner for Australia in America, Mr Herbert Brookes, said he had found a profound reverence for Australians in America, "engendered chiefly by the accomplishments of the Anzacs during the great war".\textsuperscript{46} The comment attracted loud applause, but there was renewed applause for his announcement that "the Americans' reverence for the Australian soldier was as great, or even greater, than their reverence for their own soldiers".\textsuperscript{47} The only other mention of the Anzac legend was by the \textit{West Australian's} editorialist, who wrote that Anzac Day was the only other day Australians had to contemplate "strong nationhood". Although Anzac Day commemorated "the proving of a nation",

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, January 27, 1932, p.11.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Age}, February 1, 1932, p.6.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Age}, January 27, 1932, p.7.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{ibid.}
its meaning was "too deeply woven with personal sorrow and the more sacred feelings to be brought to serve political needs." Apart from Anzac, which by then had been taken up by the conservative elements, there there was no hint of the radical nationalist influence, adding credence to Roe’s observation of a shift in nationalism to the right in the inter-war period.

There were no notable attempts at commercial exploitation of Australia Day in 1932 apart from the usual entertainment advertisements. This might be explained by the economic situation of the time. After all, no level of patriotic advertising gimmickry can tempt a consumer to buy if he or she has no money.