Chapter Six:
Newspaper Coverage of Australia Day in 1942 and 1955
1942

The main columns of Australia's newspapers on January 26, 1942 were dominated by the story of the Japanese invasion of Rabaul. The perceived national crisis triggered a re-appraisal of the role of Australia Day and exaggerated even further its vacant significance on the national calendar. Australians were encouraged - in many cases forced - to work on their national day of pleasure, and the argument over whether the new generation of Anzacs should be defending their nation or their Empire had soured the relationship with Britain. The allegiances to British kinship, radical nationalism and having a good time were at war in their own field of ideological conflict. The West Australian wrote that no previous Anniversary Day "has dawned so blackly overcast with dangers".1

While some 1932 editorials had even praised the "she'll be right, have a good time" attitude to Australia Day as a unique national characteristic, the 1942 editions heralded a panic-stricken call for an Anglo-Saxon work ethic. The Commonwealth Government issued a regulation compelling those involved in the war industries to work on the public holiday.2 The Australian Council of Trade Unions joined the Government in its call to workers in all other industries to voluntarily forsake their holiday "so that Australia's national day would be preserved in the future".3 The Prime Minister, John Curtin, used his Anniversary Day message to call on Australians to make a sacrifice for the nation "or become a complete sacrifice to the enemy".4 (It was significant that the names Australia Day and Anniversary Day were still

2. West Australian, January 24, 1942, p.4.
3. ibid.
being used interchangeably, partly fulfilling the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s prophesy of a decade earlier that the public would still call the day Anniversary Day for at least another generation.5) Curtin warned Australians against becoming "lax, self-indulgent and complacent". The *West Australian* asked those who chose to celebrate the holiday to reflect upon "the full value of their priceless heritage".6 On January 27, the same newspaper scolded holidaymakers for enjoying themselves while they faced "the greatest peril in their history", stating that those who had "the best time" on Australia Day were those working for the war effort.7 A letter writer to the *Mercury* argued that the holiday should have been cancelled for everyone. Mrs F. Adams wrote that it was a "shameful disgrace" to have a public holiday "while our sons and brothers in the fighting services are giving up their lives for our safety - a sacrifice we apparently do not deserve".8

Despite the united Government-ACTU appeal, 1200 moulders in Sydney who were supposed to be engaged in war work decided to take the day off.9 The *Sydney Morning Herald* said they were not worthy of the name "Australian"10, while the *Age* used it as an excuse for a broader political swipe at industrial action, describing such actions as "an excrescence on robust and loyal trade unionism".11

The Anniversary Day regatta in Sydney was postponed, with the chairman of the committee saying the regatta's primary purpose was to commemorate the most important day of the year for Australians rather than provide aquatic

Many other leisurely pursuits went on, including horse and greyhound racing, boxing, golf and bowling competitions. There were 7,000 fewer people at the Randwick races than the previous year, although bets on the totalisator were nearly 7,000 pounds more. Gamblers were seemingly ashamed to be seen enjoying themselves at the races, but were still eager to have a bet. The *Herald* reported there were fewer holiday-makers in the city and the streets were almost deserted at night.

The Hobart regatta was also cancelled, meaning the north and south of the island celebrated Australia Day simultaneously for the first time. The *Mercury* reported the secretary of the Australian Natives Association complaining that his organisation was the only group in the State which paid tribute to the nation’s pioneers each year. He lamented that it took the cancellation of the regatta to bring about the uniform observance of Australia Day. In Melbourne, the *Age* described Australia Day 1942 as a "hybrid holiday", with residents "half hearted" about its celebration: "Even the weather seemed in two minds about the holiday, and determined to complicate still further the holiday maker’s problem of just what to do with the day." The *Age* reported in its women’s section that many families still used Melbourne’s "picnic holiday" for reunions, "although the trenches scarring the grassy approaches to the Fitzroy Gardens were a grim reminder that Australia Day this year could not be celebrated with its customary festivities". The *Courier-Mail* targeted the guilt of the holiday-makers with this propaganda-style barb at the shortage of volunteers to dig shelter trenches:

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Men of Brisbane - you who took a three days’ holiday from Saturday to Monday and did not stir yourselves to wield a pick or shovel or wheel a load of earth for the sake of your children or your neighbours’ children, even for a few hours - remember this: More than 90,000,000 people of Japan are working as hard as they are fighting to break down the barriers that protect you and your homes; your ease and your comfort.17

The *Sydney Morning Herald* used photographs to add to the war effort propaganda. Two pictures of men working on munitions were captioned: "These men spent Anniversary Day in making planes and guns for Australia’s defence."18

While the hedonist ideal was under threat from a rally to work, the kinship allegiances to Britain were being fundamentally re-evaluated. Curtin had called for representation on the War Council in a bid to have troops sent from Europe to help in the Pacific. He used his Anniversary Day message to attack Churchill and Britain:

No single nation can afford to risk its future on the infallibility of one man, and no nation can afford to submerge its right of speaking for itself because of the assumed omniscience of another.19

The newspapers picked up the theme in their editorials, opting for the defence of nation over the defence of Empire, the first real indication of radical nationalism in the Australia Day coverage. The *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote that while Australia had faced relative security it had gladly sent its soldiers abroad to defend Britain, but now deserved to be represented on the War Cabinet.20 The *Canberra Times* was prophetic in its perception of the significance of the shift, writing in its Australia Day editorial that Britain was

not keeping its side of the bargain after so many Anzacs had died in service to
the Empire:

Other nations with us in this fight have sent greetings on this Australia Day
but from the United Kingdom there is silence in answer to our call ... Australia Day finds Australian nationalism surging to high spirited resolve
to defend Australia tinged with an indelible disappointment at the failure of
the United Kingdom. Every day that this dissatisfaction continues in
Australia, there will be an increasing resolve to alter future relations within
the British Commonwealth so that we shall never incur a similar risk again.
The new world order after the war will for Australia inevitably contain a
British Commonwealth very much different to the present. We have been
led to believe that we were in a partnership only to find that in a crisis we
are treated as small minority shareholders without a seat on the board of
directors. We shall not tolerate this for the rest of the war and we shall
never tolerate it in the peace.21

The writer detected the turn in the tide of Australia’s foreign allegiances. It
would not take long to realise that the United States was winning the
affections Britain had lost.

Nevertheless, there was some spark of the former imperial loyalty in the
Age, which wrote of the accomplishments in Australia of "British civilising
genius".22 The Age also called on Australians to reflect upon the "severe
privations and trials" of the British pioneers, echoing similar rhetoric during a
different crisis 10 years earlier. The leader writer wrote that "the traditions
that cluster round Australia Day are among our most cherished possessions",
again linking kinship loyalties to the national day.

Talk of kinship was, as so often before, blended with an espousal of white
Anglo-Saxon racial purity. The Japanese threat rekindled the racist White
Australia lines of previous decades. Curtin ended his Anniversary Day
message with the words: "This Australia is for Australians. It is a White

Australia, and with God's blessing we shall keep it so."\textsuperscript{23} The inherent racism of Curtin's remarks sits comfortably with Russel Ward's account of the radical nationalist tradition. Ward wrote: "It is true that the bushman carries in his cultural swag delusions of racial grandeur as well as mateship, but every tradition has its good and bad aspects."\textsuperscript{24}

The only Australians permitted to celebrate Australia Day in 1942 with a clear conscience were the soldiers themselves - the \textit{West Australian} reported that 400 guests were expected at the Australian Forces centre in London for a concert with famous radio and stage artists and a special tea.\textsuperscript{25} The \textit{Age} editorial evoked the Anzac legend in proclaiming that "our fighting forces are proving true to the Anzac breed".\textsuperscript{26} It was perhaps this pride in a radical nationalist ideal which motivated 88 young Queenslanders to sign up with the AIF on Australia Day, with the \textit{Courier-Mail} describing it as excellent recruiting for a holiday.\textsuperscript{27} As in 1922 and 1932, there was scant evidence of commercial attempts at exploitation of Australia Day, although this was to change in 1955.

\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, January 27, 1942, p.7
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{West Australian}, January 26, 1942, p.2.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Age}, January 26, 1942, p.2.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Courier-Mail}, January 27, 1942, p.5.
1955

A very different kind of Australia - and Australia Day - was in existence 13 years later, in 1955. While the 1942 Australia Day celebrations had been held during the crisis of war, the 1955 Australia Day was held in an atmosphere of national growth and prosperity. Prime Minister Menzies wrote in an Australia Day message that expansion, development and rising production were the "watchwords of 1955".28 The Korean War was over, although the perceived Asian Communist threat had taken a new turn with the build-up of Communist Chinese troops near Formosa. Editorialists were concerned with this development in international relations, but just as concerned with the meaning of Australia Day and its celebration.

Again, hedonism was the dominant theme of the coverage. Free of the troubles of Depression and war, Australians unashamedly set about using their summer long weekend for fun. The Advertiser ran a page of "Holiday Pictures" showing the range of Adelaide’s Australia Day activities, including cricket, tennis, processions, car rallies and beachgirl contests.29 In the Mercury a similar photo spread featured the Sandy Bay Regatta (and its regatta girl competition winner), life savers, wood choppers, cyclists and trotting.30 The Sydney Morning Herald featured photographs and stories of swimmers, racegoers and the Anniversary Regatta.31 The Age photographed the latest summer fashions at the Davey Bay regatta32, while reporting that

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32. Age, February 1, 1955, p.5.
holidaymakers favoured the beaches and the races over picnics in the hills.\textsuperscript{33} Perth people celebrated with water skiing, aerobatic displays and fireworks.\textsuperscript{34}

The hedonist and "she'll be right, mate" attitude to the national day once again came under attack, but for different reasons. Whereas in 1942 beachgoers and picnickers were accused of reneging upon their role in the war effort, in 1955 they were criticised for their casual approach to their national day as if it deserved more of an exhibition of patriotic fervour. The complaint about the changing date of the designated holiday began to gain momentum. The Acting Prime Minister, Sir Arthur Fadden, argued in his Australia Day message that the day "should not be just another movable feast with a public holiday attached to it."\textsuperscript{35} It had been just that throughout the nation since 1936. The Tasmanian Premier, Mr Cosgrove, argued that "calendar juggling" was robbing the day of its significance.\textsuperscript{36} He continued: "Who would dare make Christmas Day fall on a Monday every year no matter when the birthday of Christ fell?"\textsuperscript{37} A columnist for the \textit{Advertiser} wrote that you could never tell an American to celebrate Independence Day or a Frenchman Bastille Day on anything other than their actual days: "You'll get an indignant reminder that there are days in the story of a people which are sacred, because they stand for something etched into the people's soul."\textsuperscript{38} His metaphor is similar to Eric Hobsbawm's criterion that, to be successful, an invented tradition such as a national holiday needed to strike a chord of "genuine

\textsuperscript{33} Age, February 1, 1955, p.3.
\textsuperscript{34} West Australian, January 27, 1955, p.5.
\textsuperscript{35} Sydney Morning Herald, January 26, 1955, p.4.
\textsuperscript{36} Mercury, January 31, 1955, p.3.
\textsuperscript{37} ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Advertiser, January 26, 1955, p.2.
popular resonance". The *Mercury* said it would be a "sad mischance if suggestions that [Australia Day] be observed fittingly - on the day on which it falls - are forgotten for yet another year". The "sad mischance" persisted for another 34 years and was still being argued by politicians in 1990. The *Sydney Morning Herald* agreed by saying it was not enough to treat Australia Day as a mere midsummer public holiday, but that it was a time for reflection about national development. (One can see here that the newspaper itself is setting its own agenda for the national day by redefining its function.) The *Courier-Mail* summed up the debate succinctly, tying the date changes to the hedonist tradition,

> National pride should make us wish to mark this anniversary as Australia's own day on whatever day of the week it may fall, and to honour it then with everything that can express the spirit of Australia's people, including their zest for holidays.

Here, the *Courier-Mail* is arguing that Australians' "zest for holidays" is part of the spirit of the Australian people - effectively locating hedonism among a set of identifiable acceptable national characteristics. The *Advertiser* wrote that the day could best fulfil its purpose "by bringing together past and present tradition and what we made of tradition, a love of one's own country and friendship with others, and, in this period of rapid growth and development, old Australians and the new". The commanding officer at the Balcombe Army Apprentices' School, Lt-Col C. Ives, appealed to Australians to work harder and to produce more - evoking the work ethic rather than the

traditional hedonist one. A Presbyterian minister told his Canberra congregation that Australians were indifferent to their national day. The Canberra Times seemed to agree by example, in giving almost as much coverage to the January 26 Indian national day celebrations as the Australia Day ones.

While politicians and concerned citizens bemoaned the lackadaisical approach to the day, there was evidence that many sections of society were starting to make a genuine effort to show their patriotism by inventing rituals and traditions to demonstrate their national feeling. It was as if, in this post-war period, Australians were trying to create a feeling of national pride to fill the gap left by the mid-war decline in dependence upon Britain. The Age commented that the speeches and pageants of Australia Day were greeted with greater enthusiasm than in previous years: "It appeared that while Australia was at play citizens had not overlooked the significance of the occasion." In the same issue the Age ran a front-page photograph of the flag held in the sunset by a Sea Ranger, while the re-enactment of Phillip’s landing took place in the background. The South Australian Symphony Orchestra gave an Australia Day lunch-hour concert while Melbourne for the first time commemorated the day with a flag-raising ceremony on the Town Hall steps, watched by 4000 people. Significantly, in a demonstration of the invention of a bush-based radical nationalism, the band played "The Road to Gundagai" as the Australian flag was hoisted to the top of a mast. Sydney’s public buildings and many shops and homes were dressed with flags and bunting for Australia

44. Age, February 1, 1955, p.3.
Day. The Acting Lord Mayor of Hobart asked that Tasmanians do likewise. (But a columnist expressed disappointment that the national day would be celebrated merely by "the flying of a few flags"). More flags flew after being presented to children at the Sandy Bay Regatta. The organisers of an Aquatic Carnival in Brisbane forgot to organise a flag to fly for the day. Luckily, a passing boy scout just happened to have one with him. The Sydney Morning Herald featured a front page photograph of Royal Australian Navy frigates "dressed" in honour of Australia Day. The Women’s Section of the same issue featured five photographs of social functions for Australia Day, including receptions held by the State Government, the Overseas League and the Women’s Pioneer Society. An historical feature in the January 26 issue questioned the historical event being celebrated, using journals of the First Fleeters as evidence that the day could be commemorating any of a number of historical events. The newspapers themselves took part in their own invention of Australia Day tradition. The Advertiser featured a photograph of Adelaide’s first Australia Day baby being presented with a silver spoon by the chairman of the Australia Day Council. The photograph of the first baby born on a particular occasion was becoming a time-honored newspaper tradition.

55. Sydney Morning Herald, January 27, 1955, p.3.
There was evidence of a surge of interest in things Australian, representing a drift from the kinship links with Britain to radical nationalism and its associated bush legend. The *Courier-Mail* looked at Australian cookery through the years, including a recipe Governor Phillip might have used to cook kangaroo soup.\(^58\) The ABC announced its first "Australia Week" featuring the work of Australian composers, artists, authors and actors.\(^59\) This was significant, considering the average Australian home had at least two radios and television was still in the planning stages. Part of this was a fascination with what had been recognised as "the Australian way of life". As if signalling the demise of British kinship allegiances, a correspondent for the *Advertiser* wrote that this way of life contains "the best and highest in British tradition" as well as so many wholly indigenous traits and characteristics for the "British" label to be inadequately descriptive.\(^60\) Yet there was reaction from some quarters to the glorification of things Australian. Wife of the Australian High Commissioner to London, Lady White, seemed to be suffering from Anglophobia, not having caught up with the trend away from Britain. She denied the Commission's Australia Day party was a "dinkum do", a "bonzer party" or a "beaut", claiming the ordinary Australian did not talk like that - "only our equivalent to your Cockneys". "Dinkum" was an expression used in the war which had since died out, she claimed.\(^61\) The *Mercury* was not happy with the expression "the Australian way of life" and asked what this way of life amounted to: "And is it so superior to other ways of life that it is worth teaching to other people?"\(^62\) Rather, the ideal

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Australians should be striving for was "the loftiest level of Christian citizenship". The *Courier-Mail* looked to our British roots for reason why Australians were reluctant to wave flags. It decided it was "the inheritance of British phlegm" which prevented Australians from putting on a public show of their patriotism. There were other examples of the lingering presence of the British connection. Pakistan's Finance Minister told Prime Minister Menzies in Karachi that "no country was more devoted to the ideal which held the Commonwealth together than Australia", while in London members of the Australian Club marked the occasion by sending Australian wildflowers to the Queen at Sandringham, a strange blend of the imperial and the nationalist. Yet the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s editorial writer used a turn of phrase to indicate that the US "Empire" had replaced the British in Australia's diplomatic priorities. In discussing the threat of war in the Formosa Strait, the leader writer argued "the real threat comes from Peking's reckless challenge to American authority in the Far East".

The conservative version of the Anzac legend - with both its imperial and nationalist strands - was invoked by the Governor-General Sir William Slim (an Englishman and military leader) in his Australia Day broadcast. He called for a resurgence of the Anzac spirit, which he defined as a pride in honest work (as distinct from hedonism) and a willingness to "put something bigger before our own immediate advantage". The *Courier-Mail* suggested that Anzac Day still united people more than Australia Day, bringing them

together "to take part in national rites of gratitude and remembrance".\textsuperscript{68} That paper’s columnist asked whether it would be more appropriate to designate Anzac Day the true national day, because people overseas, particularly diplomats, took more notice of Australia Day than Australians did.\textsuperscript{69} The \textit{West Australian} also held Anzac Day in high esteem, editorialising that Australia Day might eventually mean "almost as much" as Anzac Day.\textsuperscript{70} Another hint at the Anzac tradition was in the Governor-General's call for military service in the interests of security.\textsuperscript{71}

While kinship links with Britain were diminishing, other kinds of ethnic kinship were becoming evident in the Australia Day celebrations - the result of post-war immigration. Despite the seemingly strong move towards an independent nationality, the ground had shifted. There was less talk of a "White Australia", although the policy was implied in the speeches of the Immigration Minister, Harold Holt. He wrote in the \textit{Advertiser} that the immigration drive would focus on the UK, Austria, Switzerland, Scandinavia and the United States. He noted that there had been "strong prejudices" against foreigners in Australia: "Our remoteness from the European world and our almost aggressively British outlook bred an intolerance for people whose manners, customs and speech did not conform with the local pattern."\textsuperscript{72} But this had changed, he claimed, and during 1955 about 15,000 European migrants would seek citizenship, "and we will welcome them to our national family gladly". The use of the expression "national family" was an interesting

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{Courier-Mail}, January 31, 1955, p.2.
\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Courier-Mail}, January 29, 1955, p.2.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{West Australian}, January 31, 1955, p.2.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Advertiser}, January 26, 1955, p.20
one, and politically astute. It could be interpreted as being either the family of Empire nations or the family of Australians.

Naturalisation ceremonies and the Australian Citizenship Convention were timed to coincide with Australia Day. The *Sydney Morning Herald’s* editorialist hinted at a future multiculturalist policy in arguing that immigration was contributing both to material and cultural development: “The infusion of New Australians has helped to promote the widespread appreciation of good music which has developed since the war.” The Lord Mayor of Brisbane said Australians were learning a great deal about the significance of Australia Day from New Australians, arguing that it was easy for those born to freedom to take it for granted. Picking up the theme of ethnic harmony, the *Age* featured a photograph of Polish immigrants dancing in national costume as part of the Melbourne celebrations. However, on the same page the newspaper reported the speech of black pastor Douglas Nicholls chastising Australians for neglecting Aborigines in their plans for national development. In Perth, the Prime Minister’s attempt to woo the migrant vote with a designated Immigration Sunday on the Sunday nearest Australia Day served to alienate Aborigines because it clashed with the church-designated Aboriginal Sunday. The new linking of Australia Day with migration would develop to the stage where, by 1989, it had become the lifeblood of the national day.

The newfound interest in Australia Day was exemplified by the fact that enough businesses saw commercial advantage in sponsoring a 20-page

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76. *Age*, February 1, 1955, p.3.
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Australia Day supplement in the Advertiser. Advertisers included banks, rural companies, industrial corporations and the ABC. There seemed to be almost too much coverage in the supplement, with the journalists grasping at State-oriented stories to fill the spaces. It was as if the growth of interest in the national day had outpaced the news associated with the day and its celebrations.