

## Introduction

All stories can be told in different ways. This is no less true for history than it is for fiction. The making of the Australian Commonwealth through the Federation of the Australian colonies is a story rich with alternative versions and different perspectives. It could be told with a focus solely on the formal processes of writing the Constitution, or concentrate on the popular involvement in Federation. It could stress economic arrangements, or imperial relations, or ask which particular interests were served by Federation. Each of the states has its own story too, as well as sharing in a common national history.

There are cultural, social, economic, technological and political tales to tell. All of these alternatives have their own important history. But this book is written with the conviction that none operated in isolation, that there was not a single cause of Federation, that the tales must be told together. It tries to understand the way the processes worked together at a particular time, creating a unique matrix, a distinctive political culture at the end of the nineteenth century out of which the Commonwealth could be imagined as a reality and then shaped.

The cultural side of the story has scarcely been told. There are accounts of the Constitution's writing, of the Federation movement, of individual states and of different political groups.<sup>1</sup> There are, in addition, studies of other things that happened in the Federation decades: the emergence of the Labor Party; the evolution of Australian literature and art; the activities of women; and the culture of the imagination.<sup>2</sup> The challenge has been to locate Federation within these movements, to make it a living part of people's lives and the cultural forces that shaped them, to see it as having a meaning that is more than simply instrumental.

There are also several 'orthodox' historical accounts of the Federation story, most of which appear in larger general histories of Australia.<sup>3</sup> These histories are mostly written around the events whose record can be found in official publications, in the records of the constitutional Conventions, in minute books and in parliamentary debates. While it is the

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central thesis of this book that such records do not tell the whole story, it is important nevertheless to be familiar with their history, to know the main, formal events and their progression.

The idea of joining the unwieldy Australian colonies together had been in the minds of officials for many decades before 1901 when Federation was achieved, even before the division of the colonies into the familiar areas of land that have since remained almost unchanged (with only the Northern Territory separating from South Australia in 1911) and which shaped the states of the Commonwealth after 1901. In the decade before the separation of Victoria (1851) and Queensland (1859) from New South Wales, which completed the colonial mapping of the nineteenth century, the federal 'idea was already in the air.'

Earl Grey, Britain's Colonial Secretary, took the first formal initiative in this direction, sketching among other things, in 1847, the idea of a General Assembly to act as a central authority within Australia itself. In doing so, he made a list of what he considered to be the common concerns and interests of all the colonies over which the Assembly might have jurisdiction: customs duties, postal services, roads and railways. This might seem an unobjectionable, even modest undertaking, but the colonists themselves reacted with outrage at Grey's lack of consultation in devising his plan. Only a year later, however, William Wentworth, while still protesting, moved a motion in the New South Wales Parliament in which he commended the idea of a General Assembly. But this too led to dispute, this time over the dominance of New South Wales in any such scheme, and both Grey's and Wentworth's proposals came to nothing.

Over the following decades, federal schemes appeared with regularity. Those coming from the British authorities were particularly concerned with solving the problem caused by the regime of varying import tariffs in the colonies. Home-grown schemes (such as the Federal Assembly proposed by Edward Deas Thomson in New South Wales in 1856) tended to embrace a broader range of federal concerns, including land management, postal services, lighthouses, and intercolonial railways and telegraphs. Select committees were formed in several colonies on the question and conferences proposed.

At an Intercolonial Conference, in 1867, discussion indeed got so far as to resolve that there should be a Federal Council, with powers over ocean mail subsidies. Henry Parkes, at that stage Colonial Secretary in the New South Wales Government, characteristically saw the matter in visionary terms, and spoke prophetically of 'a new constellation in the heavens, and the footprints of six young giants [the colonies] in the morning dew'. But the young giants still preferred their own patches to the common plot of 'morning dew'.

While, as one federal scheme succeeded another, almost everyone agreed in principle that some sort of union was a good idea (and most accepted that tariffs, postal and telegraphic services, transport and immigration, if nothing else, were matters of common concern), each successive proposal failed. British schemes invariably came up against Australian protests over failure to consult; proposals from New South Wales (which produced the majority) irritated the other colonies because New South Wales always seemed to allocate itself the pre-eminent place in its scheme. Victorian schemes were rejected by New South Wales because these did not sufficiently recognise that colony's pre-eminence. And so it went on.

At yet another conference on the tariff question, in 1881, Henry Parkes, by then New South Wales Premier, repeated his trade-mark theme that 'the time is now come'. A federal authority, he argued, would be the preparation for a full Federation; a Federal Council, with limited powers to legislate on matters of common concern, would do the job. For many reasons, explored throughout this book, the 1880s would prove the turning point at which the 'federal idea' (found in all the schemes of the previous forty years) would be transformed into the Federation movement.

Two years later, with Henry Parkes out of office and out of the country, a further Intercolonial Conference actually committed itself to creating such a body: it would be called the Federal Council of Australasia. Its members were to include New Zealand and Fiji, as well as the six Australian colonies. The Victorian and New South Wales representatives at the Conference fought with each other and accused each other of wanting to dominate but, astonishingly, this time the proposal proceeded. It was, we may note in anticipation of later argument, the same year the railway line was joined (albeit on different gauges) all the way from Sydney to Melbourne, and Britain shrugged its shoulders at the Australians' alarm over German designs upon New Guinea.

The Federal Council of Australasia Act was passed by the Imperial (that is, the British) Parliament in August 1885, and thereafter a body existed which, in theory, would permit all the colonies to confer every two years and to 'legislate' on all those 'matters of common Australasian interest, in respect to which united action is desirable, as can be dealt with without unduly interfering with the management of the internal affairs of the several colonies by their respective legislatures'.<sup>5</sup>

Four years later, Premier again, Henry Parkes failed to support the Federal Council, but found once more that the time had come for Federation, when a British War Office examination of the Australian colonies' defence capability in 1889 concluded with a highly critical report. Parkes met with the New South Wales Governor, Lord Carrington,

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and immediately took up his challenge to 'federate the colonies'. Returning from a Queensland meeting, Parkes spoke to a gathering in one of his former electorates, just across the New South Wales border. There, in what has become known as the 'Tenterfield Oration', Parkes pressed the urgency of the defence question and the desirability of holding a convention to devise a federal constitution. Then he wrote to the other Premiers and proposed such a meeting.

The meeting took place in Melbourne in 1890 and it was followed by a full National Australasian Convention in Sydney the following year. There, the first complete draft Bill for an Australian Constitution was written and adopted, and the Convention concluded with a commitment on the part of its representatives to put the Bill before their respective parliaments without delay.

Only Victoria, however, went any distance towards following the plan. As had happened many times before, with changes of government and in addition now with considerable change of fortune brought about by the severe Depression, inaction followed. The Bill was 'put by'.<sup>6</sup> It was six years before the second formal Convention would meet, this time over three sessions, in Adelaide and Sydney in 1897 and concluding in Melbourne in 1898.

But much had happened in the meantime. Federation Leagues had been established in the majority of colonies to promote the cause. In New South Wales, branches of these Leagues organised what were to become important meetings in the Federation story: one in Corowa<sup>7</sup> in 1893, and a People's Federal Convention in Bathurst in 1896.

In between, while all the while the Federal Council continued to meet, a Premiers' Conference was held in Hobart in January 1895. There the procedure to set in train a new Convention was agreed to, leading to the popular election in early 1897 of ten delegates in each of four colonies (with the West Australian Parliament choosing its delegates, and Queensland remaining unrepresented). These fifty men then met on 22 March that year and, during sessions lasting several weeks at a time, up to 17 March 1898, they debated and conferred and drafted, and finally came up with a new Constitution for the Commonwealth of Australia.

In the form of a Bill for an Act of Parliament, the Constitution was then submitted to the voters in four colonies in mid-1898, where it received approval in all but New South Wales. Then, following what its critics called the 'Secret' Premiers' Conference, held in January 1899, certain modifications were made to the Bill, and it was put again to a referendum (this time with Queensland joining in) and passed.

The Australians had now completed their task of constitution writing, and the means of federating the colonies had been determined. It took one more step to activate the process. Unlike in America, where inde-

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pendence had been achieved by declaration, followed by war, the Australian colonies pursued the alternative means of parliamentary enactment. A small delegation of colonial politicians took the Constitution Bill, completed and approved, to London in early 1900, and there, after a struggle with the Colonial Secretary over several provisions, they saw the Bill pass through the Imperial Parliament, and receive the signature of the Head of State, Queen Victoria.

The West Australians acted at last, and held their referendum almost immediately, on 31 July. Its preparatory legal processes completed, the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed on 17 September, and inaugurated on 1 January 1901. But if good luck is best assured by 'breaking a leg', the Commonwealth was favoured in the weeks before, with a small hitch provided by its newly appointed Governor-General, Lord Hopetoun. It was Hopetoun's job to nominate the first prime minister, who would hold office, briefly, until the infrastructure existed for the first Commonwealth elections.

Hopetoun chose the wrong man. In what has become famous as the 'Hopetoun Blunder',<sup>7</sup> he picked William Lyne, the recently elected New South Wales Premier and prominent 'anti-Billite' (as opponents of Federation under the 1898/1899 Constitution Bill were called), thereby almost causing a mutiny among those colonial leaders who expected to serve in the interim Cabinet. But Lyne gave way and, acting this time on proper advice (one assumes), Hopetoun nominated the popular choice, Edmund Barton, the former New South Wales politician who had assumed the role of Federalist leader and acted as both spokesman and statesman of the movement for almost the entire preceding decade. With Barton in his rightful place, the Commonwealth Inauguration took place on the first day of the new year, the first day of the new century.

If the history of Federation seems thus to have progressed in a smooth, lineal direction, one process unfolding after another, it is because the processes are now finished and the story can be told that way. But it has to be borne in mind that a very great deal more than this happened and might have happened, that the processes were often complex and confused, that no one knew for certain at the conclusion of one meeting whether the following step to which they had committed themselves would in fact be taken.

These formal political steps are the skeleton of the larger, lived movement. In the chapters that follow, the flesh is put back, given shape, and ultimately clothed in—it is hoped—what comes as close as possible to the style of the day.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## Colonial Nuptials

On 1 January 1901, in Sydney, New South Wales, an event which was both a beginning and an end took place. The Australian Commonwealth was inaugurated, launched like a great machine, with the flick of a switch. Australia's Constitution started up, turning slowly, indeed almost inaudibly at first, then whirring more efficiently as the months and the years went by. Shaping the relations of the political units of the nation, touching the very routines of daily lives (although most people, after a short while, no longer recognised this), it has continued in motion from that moment to the present where its noise has grown increasingly loud as its centenary of service approaches.

Technically, what the Inauguration of the Commonwealth did was join what had been the Australian colonies into a Federation. A Federation is a political entity with both a central parliament, which is able to exercise limited (and specified) powers across the whole nation, and individual regional (state) parliaments exercising the rest of the powers over their own territories. But the Inauguration was much more than this.

It was a rite of passage performed on that January day, a threshold moment where the usual and the habitual stand still, and the transition from one state of existence to another is marked. Rituals of separation and reincorporation, of symbolic death and rebirth take place on such occasions: baptisms, coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, funerals. One historian, Gavin Souter, has described the events in Sydney on 1 January 1901 as an 'initiation', like the real tribal initiation that took place during the weeks between the Inauguration and the opening of the first Federal Parliament in Melbourne on 9 May 1901. The Aranda coming-of-age ceremony in Central Australia (witnessed in April that year by anthropologists, Walter Spencer and Francis Gillen) and the initiation of Australia were, Souter says, much like each other: 'a succession of shock-absorbing, status-confirming rites . . . associated with many totems'.<sup>1</sup> The analogy is a powerful reminder of the tribal nature of white society, of the existence of mutually uncomprehending worlds within the same territory, of the fragile links between them and of the power of social ritual.

But a different analogy works best to convey the atmosphere of the Inauguration and to capture its ambiguous nature. While the occasion was in many ways a coming-of-age, and the people at the time often spoke of Australia as the boy growing to manhood, or the daughter leaving her maternal home, this was not the main character of the ceremonial transformation on 1 January 1901. It was, in essence, a different type of ritual: more a marriage than an initiation.

A marriage, as distinct from a coming-of-age, is not a simple transformation, nor does it progress in a single, linear direction. Thus it was with the new nation. To begin with, there were several parties to the event, several 'sons' and 'daughters', already legally grown. Literally speaking, the colonies gained no greater legal independence, or adulthood, in federating than they would separately have achieved had they continued (as New Zealand did) with their own parliamentary systems. Full independence, or nation-statehood, came slowly to Australia, step by step (like real adulthood) over the decades to follow. But *nationhood*—the assumption of domestic independence, of cultural distinctiveness and of political and cultural 'destiny'—was achieved, if tentatively, and celebrated in the moment of federating. The six new states of the Commonwealth, legally but not yet socially mature, had decided to set up home together. On those ceremonial days throughout the first five months of the century, the decision was declared, reaffirmed and celebrated.

Federation was a matter of cementing alliances, 'entering the bonds of permanent matrimony', as future Prime Minister Alfred Deakin said in 1895.<sup>2</sup> Again and again, especially in the last years of the decade, the image of marriage was evoked, sometimes to reinforce the appeal of Federation, but just as often to warn that it was permanent and had to be entered into carefully. Anti-Billites also used the metaphor: New South Wales politician, George Dibbs, for example, said at a meeting during the first referendum campaign on the Constitution Bill, that this was not like an ordinary election, but more like 'a young man taking to himself a wife "for better or for worse"'. There were 'certain institutions', he added, implying that the same did not hold for Federation, 'which would allow a man to get rid of his wife if such a thing was expedient'. His audience laughed.<sup>3</sup>

But, whatever the anti-Billites thought, Federation was not entered into in haste. It had been a long and often stormy engagement. The colonies, said Victoria's Chief Justice five years before the event, 'were rather in the position of a young man and maiden. Each was anxious to have the other, but neither was anxious to begin'.<sup>4</sup> Western Australia in particular had to be wooed and cajoled before it was won, approval was sought from the family elders in Britain, the property settlement was written and rewritten several times, a decision had to be made about

which family home the newly-weds would occupy, temporarily, until a permanent home was built (Melbourne, it was agreed, because New South Wales would get the federal capital later).

When it came to concluding the federal union, inaugurating the Commonwealth, the affianced parties all publicly rejoiced. On the designated day, they dressed in their finest costumes, and travelled with their friends and family (even the hitherto grumpy old relatives, the anti-Billites) to the site of the formalities. A solemn and legally binding ceremony was performed by an official. Hymns were sung. And then the party began.

It was a party with something for everyone. If Federation involved property, as many historians insist,<sup>5</sup> it was celebrated as much more than a business merger. If it included a reaffirmation of Australia's British heritage, it was all the more a declaration of Australianness. If the celebrations were military and jingoistic,<sup>6</sup> they were also, even overwhelmingly, about popular culture, creative potential and the preservation of peace.

Less than four years earlier, Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee had set the pattern for an Australian *fin de siècle* celebration on a national scale. As much as the 'Record Reign' itself, the Jubilee was an opportunity for celebrating the vastness and power of the Empire and also, in particular, the pace of progress. Banquets, carnivals, concerts, church services, fireworks and, above all, illuminations: these were the signs of modernity. People 'flocked' into the city centres by train and bus, to look at the night-time lights. 'Those who witness the illuminations in Sydney tonight', said the *Sydney Morning Herald*, would be reminded of the Coronation sixty years before, in the age of oil lamps: 'Now the streets every night are brilliant with gas . . . When one thinks of these dingy illuminants . . . it helps to make real the advances of modern progress.'<sup>7</sup> The radical nationalist *Bulletin*, a recent convert to Federation, published a poem that ended: 'God Save the Queen/Who booms the gas consumption'.<sup>8</sup>

In London, Australia's Premiers (five of them 'on leave' between sessions of the 1897–98 Federal Convention) joined colonial leaders from around the Empire to watch the great Jubilee procession of royalty and Imperial troops (including 'the tallest man in the British army', standing at six feet, five inches<sup>9</sup>) as it wound its way from Buckingham Palace to St Paul's Cathedral. The symbols of this celebration spoke of imperial unity and might, of family and muscular Christian virtue, all captured in the small, stout figure of Victoria, by now almost nothing more than a totem held up by a far-flung tribe for veneration and worship. It was, essentially, a massive, military parade, something of a novelty in those days, the sort of thing the world would grow tired of over the next fifty years.

In some respects the Commonwealth celebrations three and a half years later were modelled on the Jubilee. The great parade of Imperial

troops was repeated, and images of the Queen were abundant. Although by 1901 gas was no longer a novelty and electric lighting had begun to take its place, the illuminations were still a central feature, with the visiting English journalist E. K. Knight finding Melbourne's lights so brilliant as to attract 'the attention of the Martians' and startle them.<sup>10</sup>

But the Inauguration was different from the Jubilee. As an act of union, a 'marriage' of the six Australian colonies, it involved a transformation, the performance of a ritual, a moment around which all the other festivities revolved. The people who would celebrate had personally given their consent to the act. It was not a matter of recognising the simple passage of years, of applauding what the *Bulletin* in 1897 called 'much continuous sitting'. The difference lay in the focus of the ritual, in the popular investment in the event. And in the arches.

Nations once built arches to celebrate their military triumphs. Drawing together a victorious returning army, the triumphal arch framed the marching troops, lifting up the eye and the heart to symbolise and celebrate the nation's transcendence. In Sydney, on 1 January 1901 many thousands of Imperial troops marched through the streets and beneath a series of massive arches. The new nation had crowned itself with triumph. The victors, it might have seemed, marched in triumphant return. But, looked at closely, these structures tell a different story from the European arches of marble and stone. They were built by citizens' committees, not emperors. They shared something of the growing fascination with arches found in the 'City Beautiful' movement.<sup>11</sup> But they were assembled out of everyday materials, most were decorative and picturesque, rather than stern and classical, and none was permanent.

Reporting the Sydney procession the day after, Melbourne's *Argus* told of a little girl, hatless, shoeless, and stockingless, standing under a tree in the Domain where the waiting troops were marshalled (and supposedly out of bounds to the public). In the sentimental, allegorical style of the period, it related how the child, with her 'frank, open brow and fair curls . . . laughed and waved her hands towards the troops and called to the soldiers'. She seemed 'like the embodiment of young Australia welcoming the armies of the Empire'.<sup>12</sup>

Young Australia was not stiff and military. It was self-consciously informal, hatless and shoeless. Australian statesmen did not display their Imperial honours. Those who became pompous and official or took themselves too seriously were laughed at. Just before the Inauguration, Australia's French newspaper found this typical irreverence a matter for comment, worrying that the New South Wales Government was insufficiently concerned with the need for gravity and solemnity on the occasion. It warned that Australian crowds, while not violent, were not respectful of officials. Their tendency to ungovernability might lead to a disorderly

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ceremony, thought the editor. It would be reported all over the world, and would damage the dignity of the new nation.<sup>13</sup>

In the event, his fears proved unfounded. Although the odd hitch and one or two disputes did occur behind the scenes, the public itself was orderly and responsible, and no incident marred the nation's dignity. The *Argus* noted this as 'remarkable', since 'the police would take no instructions from the military, and the military would listen to no suggestions of the police'. The crowd amused itself while waiting, the newspaper recorded, 'making facetious remarks to stray individuals who broke out of line . . . Any important looking person who sought to cross [the road] by waving some coloured ticket was especially teased and the delight of the crowd knew no bounds when such a one was turned back'.<sup>14</sup>

The military parade on the day of the Inauguration (as well as for the opening of Parliament in May) included much that was formal and regimented. Along the streets marched the highly colourful spectacle of the Royal Horse Artillery, Lancers, Huzzars, Yeomanry and Royal Field Artillery, the Coldstream Guards, Royal Fusiliers, the Indian Mixed Contingent, members of the Soudan Force of 1885, Australasian Lancers, cadets, infantry, rangers and others. The Indians, especially, bore themselves with lofty detachment, some noted, while others thought that even they could not resist a smile.<sup>15</sup> The Australians freshly returned from the Boer War were greeted with immense enthusiasm. But it was not a display of weapons or closely serried ranks. Military and other bands played along the route. In Melbourne, where the parade was repeated, it was 'perhaps significant that more than one of the bands played the inspiring strains of There'll be a High Time in the Old Town Tonight'.<sup>16</sup>

The troops were greatly admired but the audience was not in awe. Australian soldiers were greeted with affection, all the more because they were simple and unadorned, their uniforms plain, unostentatious and 'workmanlike'. In fact, commented the *Sydney Mail*, the brilliance of the Imperial outfits 'rather decreased than increased when massed, while the effect of the khaki in the mass . . . was to throw up the men rather than the uniform'.<sup>17</sup> Ahead of them, the many dignitaries in the procession looked, so the *Courrier Australien* disapprovingly thought, as though they were mingling amiably at the end of a race-meeting.<sup>18</sup>

Travelling with the tour of the Duke and Duchess of York for the first Federal Parliament, Mr Knight found the decorations so splendid as to make the British 'attempts at the adornment of London on great occasions look sordid in comparison'. Even the Diamond Jubilee did not compare. Knight noted the stands for spectators built along the procession route, two or three storeys high against shop fronts: 'Most decidedly they do these things well in Australia'.<sup>19</sup> And he lauded those other ingenious structures, the arches. While arches had featured in various Australian parades and royal welcomes over the years before