

## **Federation: Destiny and Identity\***

*John Hirst*

Australians know little and care less about the origins of their nation. Historians have commonly encouraged them in this response by depicting federation as a business deal or a compact hammered out by hard headed politicians looking after their own colonies. They find little here to inspire later generations.

This is a strange outcome because the people who devoted themselves to the creation of the federation regarded it as a holy or noble or sacred cause which would carry the people to a higher form of life.

Federation would supplant the mutual suspicion and hostility between the colonies with brotherhood, a widening of human sympathy which was the hallmark of moral progress. The petty and provincial concerns of colonial politics—the struggle over roads and bridges, the endless deputations to ministers begging favours—would be replaced by a politics that dealt with a national life and the fate of a whole people.

Federation itself—the means by which Australia was to become a nation—wore a progressive air. It represented so clearly a stage in social evolution from simple to complex forms. It was by federation that men envisioned that the British Empire, the Anglo-Saxon race, the English-speaking peoples and finally the world, would be united. Tennyson, the poet laureate, sang of ‘the parliament of man, the Federation of the world’.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In ‘Locksley Hall’, line 128.

In looking for the motives for Australian federation, historians usually are far too instrumental in their thinking. The Commonwealth government was given power over various subjects and the puzzle of why federation occurred is reduced to ranking these in order of importance. Was federation chiefly to secure a customs union, or a united immigration policy, or a national defence? To federalists none of these things was sacred; the whole 42 powers given to the Commonwealth did not together make federation sacred. It was the making of the nation, apart from anything it might do, which was sacred.

Because federation was a sacred cause, poetry was considered the most appropriate medium to express its rationale and purposes. It was poetry's role to deal with what was noble, profound, and elevating. There are innumerable federation poems by hundreds of different hands.<sup>2</sup> The nation was born in a festival of poetry. Historians have noticed the poems, but haven't quite known what to do with them. Most of them are valueless as poetry. One leading scholar who produced a bibliography of federation sources decided that it would be kinder to his readers to leave it all out. He thus removed from consideration the best guide to the ideas and ideals which inspired the movement. You are not to be spared, but I will be very selective in my quotations.

The poets considered that God or destiny intended Australia to be a nation. The evidence for this was in the first place physical. They forgot Tasmania (which was inconsiderate since it was always keen about federation) and saw the nation-to-be as a single geographical unit, a whole continent with only natural boundaries. This was a special benediction. Other nations had man-made frontiers; Australia's were the sea. A common word for the sea in this role was 'girdle' and in its verbal form 'girdled' or 'girdling' or 'girt'. 'Advance Australia Fair', written by Peter McCormick in 1878 and now the national anthem, uses 'girt' and assumes the implications of the sea boundary do not have to be spelled out, recording merely 'our home is girt by sea'.

The social uniformity within the continent also marked out Australia for nationhood. The people were of one blood or stock or race; they spoke the same language; they shared a glorious heritage (Britain's), the most celebrated part of which was political freedom which had been extended in Australia to all men so that the country was the freest on earth.

The best federation poem, written very early (1877), does not argue that Australia should be one, but assumes it and deals instead with the ideal becoming real. It is the most powerful expression of the idea that union was Australia's destiny. The author was James Brunton Stephens, a headmaster at a Brisbane state school.

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<sup>2</sup> The poems are scattered through newspapers, periodicals and sheet music; collections are found in 'Federation Songs', an exercise book of newspaper cuttings, created by J. Plummer, in the Mitchell Library at QA 821.08/35; 'Literature on Federation', National Library MS 5911; Australasian Federation League of Victoria, *Songs of Union*, Melbourne, 1899, held in Deakin Papers in the National Library, MS 1540/11/172,178; for a listing of songs see Georgina M. Binns, 'Patriotic and nationalistic song in Australia to 1919: a study of the popular sheet music genre', Master of Music thesis, University of Melbourne, 1988.

His federation poem was called 'The Dominion of Australia: A Forecast':

*She is not yet; but he whose ear  
Thrills to that finer atmosphere  
Where footfalls of appointed things,  
Reverberant of days to be,  
Are heard in forecast echoings  
Like wave-beats from a viewless sea,  
Hears in the voiceful tremors of the sky  
Auroral heralds whispering, 'She is nigh'.*

The middle part of the poem develops an elaborate comparison between the silent force carrying Australia to its destiny and the underground rivers which some experts assumed must run under the parched lands of the outback and which one day might be released to make the desert bloom:

*So flows beneath our good and ill  
A viewless stream of Common Will,  
A gathering force, a present might,  
That from its silent depths of gloom  
At Wisdom's voice shall leap to light  
And hide our barren feuds in bloom,  
Till, all our sundering lines with love o'ergrown,  
Our bounds shall be the girdling seas alone.*

When Parkes opened his campaign for federation in his famous speech at Tenterfield, he quoted from this poem.<sup>3</sup> He did well to quote from Stephens' poetry rather than his own. At the time he launched his campaign he was revising the proofs of his next book of poems, *Fragmentary Thoughts*. In the preface he said with his usual mock humility that he would be happy to be judged no great poet, but lest anyone dare to make that judgement he reproduced a letter from his friend Lord Tennyson which praised his efforts, how guardedly Parkes probably did not notice. In Brisbane a few days before his Tenterfield speech, he had refused to disclose his federal plans to the *Courier's* reporter but had been very willing to discuss poetry.<sup>4</sup> He passed the proofs of his poems to the journalist for his opinion. He declared Stephens to be the best poet in Australia, a compliment Stephens returned in his review of *Fragmentary Thoughts* which contrived to be favourable without pronouncing definitely on the quality of the poems.<sup>5</sup>

In his new collection Parkes rehearsed a standard theme in 'The Flag':

*God girdled our majestic isle  
With seas far-reaching east and west,  
That man might live beneath this smile  
In peace and freedom ever blest.*

<sup>3</sup> Reproduced in C.M.H. Clark, *Select Documents in Australian History 1851–1900*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1955, pp. 467–470.

<sup>4</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 22 October 1889.

<sup>5</sup> *Queenslander*, 25 January 1890, p. 168.

He was a much better phrase-maker in his speeches.

As federation became a firm proposal, it met opposition as well as the old indifference. The poets identified the forces which frustrated it as selfishness, greed, and faction, by which they meant a sinister political combination. Men were damaging the union already created by God. The symbols of this divisiveness were the customs houses on the colonial borders, which were hated not as a commercial inconvenience, but as a moral outrage. So to reveal the Australian nation, men had to repent and return to God. In a Christian culture this was a powerful theme. It was best expressed by William Gay in his sonnet 'Federation' written in the early 1890s:

*From all division let our land be free,  
For God has made her one: complete she lies  
Within the unbroken circle of the skies,  
And round her indivisible the sea  
Breaks on her single shore; while only we,  
Her foster children, bound with sacred ties  
Of one dear blood, one storied enterprise,  
Are negligent of her integrity.—  
Her seamless garment, at great Mammon's nod,  
With hands unfilial we have basely rent,  
With petty variance our souls are spent,  
And ancient kinship under foot is trod:  
O let us rise, united, penitent,  
And be one people,—mighty, serving God!*

Deakin quoted Gay's sonnet to conclude his great speech that launched the 'Yes' case in Victoria in 1898.

According to the poets, the prospects for the new nation were unrivalled. Australia had no ancient feuds, no privileged caste, no bar to anyone making money from its abundant resources; a land of freedom and opportunity. Always imagined as female, Australia was young, pure, virginal. The themes are present in 'Advance Australia Fair', though again rather minimally. Australians are young and free; the land is rich in opportunities—golden soil—which are open to those ready to work: wealth for toil.

There was a constant insistence that no blood had been spilt in this land. This is a puzzle to us who are now so conscious of the violence done to the Aborigines. In part the claim could be made because the slaughter was simply being forgotten, though the forgetfulness was more complete in the early Twentieth Century than in the Nineteenth. It was possible to know well enough what had happened on the frontier and still see Australia as pure. In *Fragmentary Thoughts* Parkes wrote of the Australian flag:

*It bears no stain of blood and tears  
Its glory is its purity*

In the same volume is a poem that gives a chilling account of the murder of an Aboriginal boy by settlers on the Hawkesbury in 1794. He was tied hand and foot,

dragged through a fire until his back was horribly burnt, and then thrown into the river and shot:

*Loud talk ye of savages  
As they were beasts of prey!—  
But men of English birth have done  
More savage things than they*

The two thoughts remain unconnected. It was easy not to make the connection when Aborigines were not seen as part of the future nation since they were dying out and in any case unworthy of its citizenship. Furthermore, when they spoke of no blood spilt, the poets had in mind the European experience of warfare ravaging the land and being constantly renewed.<sup>6</sup>

The best poem on Australia as a new world free from all the ills of the old was written by John Farrell. He was a brewer turned journalist and poet.<sup>7</sup> In the late 1880s he was editor of and chief contributor to a radical Sydney newspaper which supported land nationalisation along the lines of Henry George's single tax:

*We have no records of a by-gone shame,  
No red-writ histories of woe to weep:  
God set our land in summer seas asleep  
Till His fair morning for her waking came.*

*He hid her where the rage of Old World wars  
Might never break upon her virgin rest:  
He sent His softest winds to fan her breast,  
And canopied her night with low-hung stars.*

*He wrought her perfect, in a happy clime,  
And held her worthiest, and bade her wait  
Serene on her lone couch inviolate  
The heightened manhood of a later time.*

The sexual theme was never more explicit. The men worthy to take Australia, the 'manful pioneers', only leave Europe when freedom has dawned there:

*They found a gracious amplitude of soil,  
Unsovn with memories, like poison weeds,  
Of far-forefathers wrongs and vengeful deeds,  
Where was no crown, save that of earnest toil.*

*They reared a sunnier England, where the pain  
Of bitter yesterdays might not arise:  
They said—'The past is past, and all its cries,  
Of time-long hatred are beyond the main ...*

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<sup>6</sup> See editorial in *Brisbane Courier*, 2 January 1901.

<sup>7</sup> There is a memoir of Farrell by Bertram Stevens in *My Sundowner and other poems*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1904.

*And, with fair peace's white, pure flag unfurled,  
Our children shall, upon this new-won shore—  
Warned by all sorrows that have gone before—  
Build up the glory of a grand New World.*

The new Commonwealth did not seem designed to build up a grand new world since it was to have limited powers. In the 1890s Australia was gaining a reputation for progressive social and economic legislation, but this was and would remain chiefly the responsibility of the states. Only at the last minute was the Commonwealth given power over old-age pensions and interstate industrial disputes.

It was in the name of the federation that the delegates most clearly expressed their sense that Australia represented a new dispensation.<sup>8</sup> The name 'Commonwealth' was suggested by Parkes at the 1891 convention and was taken up enthusiastically by Deakin who lobbied the delegates on its behalf. After being narrowly adopted by the convention's constitutional committee, it won general acceptance in the convention and outside it because it embodied an Australian view of the nature of government. The state existed not to aggrandise an elite or to embark on conquest, but to serve the common weal, the common good. It was this view of government which was to make the Commonwealth much larger than its formal powers implied.

The entry which won the New South Wales government prize for a poem celebrating the inauguration of the Commonwealth deals with its name. These are its best lines; the poet was George Essex Evans:

*Free-born of Nations, Virgin white,  
Not won by blood nor ringed with steel,  
Thy throne is on a loftier height,  
Deep-rooted in the Commonweal!*

On 1 January 1901, and for the days before and after, the newspapers gave over a large part of their space to poetry. There was Evans' prize-winning poem; a new poem by Brunton Stephens whose 1877 work was now very well known; and the words of the anthem sung at the inauguration which had been written by John Farrell who had celebrated Australia as a grand new world.

These poets are now almost entirely forgotten. The poets of the turn of the century who are remembered, honoured and read are Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson. They have helped to define the Australian nation. They were new-comers in the 1890s. The critics, while acknowledging the appeal of their work, regarded it as light, ephemeral verse. Paterson's poems had sold in the thousands, but would anyone keep the book on their shelves? He lacked the nobility, the profundity, and moral elevation thought proper to poetry. Brunton Stephens was generous about Paterson's achievement, but could not believe that poems about racecourses and backblocks life would endure. He

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<sup>8</sup> J.A. La Nauze, 'The Name of the Commonwealth of Australia', *Historical Studies*, vol. 15, no. 57, October 1971, pp. 59–71.

regarded William Gay as the true, new poet of the 1890s.<sup>9</sup> Evans conceded that Paterson was a master of the bush ballad, but thought Stephens would always be acknowledged as the founder of the national literature.<sup>10</sup> Of course, no-one in the 1890s ever imagined that a whole nation could come to treasure a Paterson poem about a Snowy River horseman and a Paterson song about a sheep-stealing swagman.

Historians examining what part nationalism played in the creation of federation find it hard to imagine the founding fathers reciting ‘The Man from Snowy River’ and assume that nationalism’s role was small.<sup>11</sup> They overlook the whole school of nationalist poetry which flourished from the 1870s, whose leading practitioners were in a double sense the established poets of their time. Their reputation stood high and they were encouraged and supported by leading colonial politicians who became founding fathers of the Commonwealth. When Griffith took to translating Dante he sent his efforts to Brunton Stephens and Essex Evans for their professional criticism.<sup>12</sup> The flier advertising Gay’s book of sonnets carried endorsements from Parkes, Barton, and Deakin.<sup>13</sup> When Gay produced a book of essays on federation he attracted contributions from Deakin, Inglis Clark, and Griffith.<sup>14</sup>

The nationalism of these poets was a civic nationalism, concerned with the state and the principles and values it should protect and advance; its symbol was female, a young virginal goddess in the classical tradition. The nationalism that grew from Paterson’s verse was social and masculine, concerned to honour men of the outback and their values. It was the civic nationalism, now lost to sight, which inspired the federation movement. It was dignified, earnest, Protestant, not raffish, Irish-Catholic or working-class.

I don’t think I can talk safely for much longer about the idealism that underlay the movement to federation. You hard-headed realistic Australians will want to know what was the true driving force of the movement. It can’t be poetry.

Australian historians who doubt the force of national feeling in federation have looked to economics to reveal the selfish motive behind it. They overlook the motive that is quintessentially selfish and integral to nationalism, the desire for identity and status.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> H.G. Turner and A. Sutherland, *The Development of Australian Literature*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1898, pp. 43–53; George Essex Evans, ‘The Poetry of Brunton Stephens’, *Lone Hand*, January 1908, pp. 340–3; Cecil Hadgraft, *James Brunton Stephens*, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, Qld, 1969, p. 58; Gay to Deakin, newspaper reviews, Deakin Papers NL MS 1540/4/724, 725.

<sup>10</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, 1 January 1901.

<sup>11</sup> McMinn judges the nationalism of politicians by how far they conform to the attitudes epitomised by the *Bulletin* school of writers, in *Nationalism and Federalism in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 113, 129.

<sup>12</sup> Brunton Stephens, Essex Evans to Griffith, 28 November, 14 December, 1898, Griffith Papers, Mitchell Library MS Q189/589,639.

<sup>13</sup> Gay to Deakin, 24 February 1896, Deakin Papers, National Library MS 1540/1/314.

<sup>14</sup> *The Commonwealth and the Empire*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1895.

<sup>15</sup> The first Australian study to highlight these forces is Robert Birrell, *A Nation of our Own*, Longman, Melbourne, 1995, a much underrated work which brings a sociologist’s insights to nation-building.

As the Italian patriot Mazzini declared: ‘... without a country you have no name, no identity, no voice, no rights, no membership in the brotherhood of nations.’<sup>16</sup>

The federalist who was most revealing about this was Samuel Griffith, the chief draftsman of the Constitution.

Griffith came to Australia as a boy of eight.<sup>17</sup> His father was a Congregational minister who gave his bright son a good education, hoping he would follow him into the ministry. But Griffith would not be bound by his parents’ narrow puritanism. His ambition was to become pre-eminent in the law, rich, and famous. There was no open rupture with his parents; the young man kept his exploits with women and drink secret and outwardly conformed. He took to drinking when he was at university in Sydney; at home in Brisbane during vacations he went with his parents to teetotal meetings. From the start there was something unruffled in his progress. Until his father died he attended the Congregational Church and then he switched to the Anglican. Religion did not mean much to him. He invested far more in the masonic lodge, whose codes he studied as assiduously as the law and where his advancement was equally rapid.

He was a man of principle, a legal philosopher in politics who could not rouse a crowd, but could argue a case from first principles. He pursued his personal ambition in politics with the same rectitude, as if he were taking only what was his due. As Premier he directed the government’s legal business to himself and brought his political career to an end in 1893 by getting himself appointed Chief Justice, but only after Parliament had increased the salary.

He liked the trappings as well as the substance of success. At 21 he designed the coat of arms that he hoped would be his; at 41 he secured it when he was made a Knight of the Order of St Michael and St George. One of the jobs of Queensland’s Agent-General in London was to lobby the Colonial Office for honours for Premier Griffith. After gaining his knighthood, Griffith wanted to be promoted to Knight of the Grand Cross. Once he was Chief Justice, he set his sights on being in addition Lieutenant Governor. On formal occasions he delighted in wearing all his badges and ribbons. He was always well dressed; a tall, spare, dignified figure.

On great occasions, when Griffith was called on to detail the advantages of federation, he spoke, quite uncharacteristically, in a personal and heartfelt way. He said, ‘I am tired of being treated as a colonial.’ Even when the English were being considerate, he continued, they could not hide their disparagement of the colonist. In the eyes of the world, Australians were nothing but children while they remained as colonies. As a nation, they would meet the rest of the world as equals and the status of every Australian would be raised.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ignazio Silone, *The Living Thoughts of Mazzini*, Cassell, London, 1939, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Joyce, *Samuel Walker Griffith*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 1984, was reduced from a much longer manuscript which I have also consulted at the National Library, MS 7691.

<sup>18</sup> This was the theme of his speeches to the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 9 July 1890, *Debates*, vol. 61, p. 193; at the Convention and inauguration banquets, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 1891, 2 January 1901; and of his article in the *Brisbane Courier*, 1 January 1901.

As Premier of Queensland, Griffith was well aware of the difficulties involved in inter-colonial co-operation and the advantages union would bring. He was a conscientious administrator. Yet at the deepest level, he wanted federation not so that public affairs might be handled differently, but so that he might be someone different. His assiduous application and lobbying for honours could not prevail against one barrier: there would have to be an Australian nation before Samuel Griffith ceased to be a colonial.

Griffith wanted to constitute an independent Australian nation which would remain in the Empire, but without being subordinate to Britain; the only link to Britain would be the crown. Britain would be an equal and an ally and all the people of the Empire would share a common citizenship. This was the arrangement not formally achieved until the passage of the Statute of Westminster in 1931. Legally, Griffith could not produce that outcome in 1901, but he had it in mind as he drew up the Constitution. When Australia became independent, the Constitution did not have to be changed.

Griffith took great satisfaction from the fact that immediately the Commonwealth was established the colonies were to be reconstituted as its states. So the word *colony*, the badge of inferiority, would no longer be used by Australians talking of themselves, nor, Griffith hoped, by other people, particularly the English, in talking about Australia and its people. In England colonial meant second-rate or at least suspect.

Australians laboured under a double handicap because Australian colonist also suggested convict, or the descendant of convicts, or the associate of convicts and their descendants. The Australian rule was not to talk about the convicts—unless to insult New South Wales in inter-colonial feuding—but Australians knew that the world had not forgotten. They were very anxious to find and parade signs that the stock had not degenerated despite this taint. Victories over England at cricket were very comforting.

Australians were annoyed and sometimes angry at British disdain, but they could not easily reject or ignore Britain. Most of them admired Britain and its civilisation and wanted British interest and approval. By the late Nineteenth Century there was more British interest in the colonies than 30 or 40 years before when the colonies were widely viewed as an encumbrance, but old attitudes persisted. Simple ignorance abounded. People in Britain did not know the names of the various colonies or their location. Letters arrived with bizarre addresses: ‘Melbourne, near Sydney, Victoria’.<sup>19</sup> Visitors to England were asked where they learnt to speak English.

In the 1880s the leading colonial politicians, among them Samuel Griffith, were brought into a new relationship with British ministers and officials as they sought to influence the Empire’s defence and foreign policies. The men who were accustomed to govern their own societies were cast into the role of lobbyists and petitioners at the metropolis. Frequently they found it a frustrating and humiliating experience. They felt themselves very much the colonials. ‘We are children’, said Griffith, ‘dependent

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<sup>19</sup> *Victorian Parliamentary Debates*, 1884, p. 388; Frank Crowley, *Colonial Australia 1841–1874*, Nelson, Melbourne, 1980, pp. 633–34.

on a superior people.’<sup>20</sup> They thought the British did not care enough for them. If their submissions were rejected, their first response was to assume it was because they and the people they represented were mere colonists.

The leading politicians gave as one of the advantages of federation that the colonies would speak with one voice and more notice would be taken of them as a nation. Britain would no longer ignore them. Australians would benefit from this increased stature and strength, but so in a very particular way would they as their representatives and spokesmen. They would cease to be colonial politicians. They might be Australian statesmen. It was notable that the founding fathers, having declared that they must limit Commonwealth power and keep the states strong, immediately transferred to the Commonwealth on its inauguration.

The man who hoped to lead the new nation as prime minister was Henry Parkes, an intention clearly indicated by the frequency with which he disclaimed it. He was the best known politician in Australia and the only Australian politician well known in Britain, but he still knew the hurt of being colonial.<sup>21</sup> It was part of his success as a politician that he could fuse his own pursuit of a greater glory with the emancipation of a whole people. In the series of speeches with which he launched his campaign for federation he promised to remove humiliation and slight and bring dignity and pride:

Instead of a confusion of names and geographical divisions, which so perplexes many people at a distance, we shall be Australians, and a people with 7,000 miles of coast, more than 2,000,000 square miles of land, with 4,000,000 of population, and shall present ourselves to the world as ‘Australia’.

We shall at once rise to a higher level; we shall occupy a larger place in the contemplation of mankind, the sympathies of every part of the world will go out to us, and figuratively, they will hold out the right hand of fellowship. We can not doubt that the chord awakened by such a movement will be responded to in the noble old country where our forefathers graves are still. All England has awakened with sympathy to this movement through its press.

We shall have a higher stature before the world. We shall have a grander name.<sup>22</sup>

These are the desires that make nations.

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<sup>20</sup> *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 1890, vol. 61, p. 193; for the image of children see also Geoffrey Serle, ‘Victoria’s Campaign for Federation’, p. 17 in A.W. Martin (ed.), *Essays in Australian Federation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1969; K.S. Inglis, *The Rehearsal: Australians at War in the Sudan 1885*, Rigby, Sydney, 1985, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> Francis Adams, *The Australians*, Unwin, London, 1893, p. 60; Thomas Bavin, *Sir Henry Parkes*, Angus and Roberston, Sydney, 1941, pp. 32–33.

<sup>22</sup> *The Federal Government of Australasia: Speeches Delivered on Various Occasions*, Sydney, 1890, pp. 25–26.

The committed federalist leaders—Parkes, Deakin, Griffith, Barton, Inglis Clark and others—were pursuing a sacred ideal of nationhood. They can be thought of as both selfish and pure. Selfish, in that the chief force driving them was the new identity and greater stature they would enjoy—either as colonists or natives—from Australia’s nationhood. Pure, in that the benefit they sought did not depend on the particular form federation took. In a sense any federation would do. They knew of course that interests had to be conciliated and other ideals not outraged; they shared some of these themselves. But they were not mere managers or lobbyists; underneath all the negotiation and campaigning there was an emotional drive. Those who only considered economic and provincial interests when they contemplated federation understood this quality in the federalists. They called them federation-at-any-price men, enthusiasts, or sentimentalists.

It might be objected that these enthusiasts were only a minority. Sometimes the test for the role of national feeling in federation has been how widespread it was. So relatively low turnouts for the choosing of convention delegates and at the referendums have been used to indicate that national feeling played a small part in federation. But the role of national feeling is not to be measured by taking the pulse of the community at large. Nationalism has always possessed one section of the population first—whether poets or intellectuals or a new middle class or local officials of an empire. They become passionate for the nation while the mass of the people remain attached to their chiefs, villages, or provinces and can see no benefit in creating a new government. Nationalism in its creative phase is a minority movement.

The practical people, the hard-headed men, saw no need for federation. If the colonies needed to take more joint action, let them co-operate more closely. If the border customs houses were a nuisance, let a customs union be formed. It was the nationalists who wanted a nation and it is to them we owe our federation.



**Question** — You mentioned in passing that the turnout for the referendums was less than wholehearted. Who were the kind of people, in your opinion, that voted ‘No’?

**John Hirst** — A very mixed bag of people voted or campaigned for ‘No’ in 1898–99 and 1900. There were those who thought that their provinces or colonies would be endangered by federation, either economically or as a political power. There were those who thought that their immediate economic interests—jobs in their locality—were being threatened; and there were also those who were in favour of union of some sort, but thought this was the wrong model. There were those—particularly democrats in New South Wales and Victoria—who wanted a more democratic union, by which they meant not a strong Senate, or certainly not a Senate with equally strong representation.

So they were a mixed bag, and among them of course were nationalists—genuine, true nationalists. But the majority were probably the sort of people I’ve mentioned. A lot of these were on the ‘Yes’ side too. People only looked at federation in an opportunistic way: ‘Will it benefit us? Is it a good thing?’ But if the whole thing had

been left to those people, my argument is that they might have found ways to cooperate more, but they weren't fussed about a nation. As I've tried to explain, there was a group of nationalists for whom 'the nation'—that notion, that thing—was of pre-eminent importance.

**Question** — There's an opportunity in what you've said to examine the role of women in the federal story. They miss out when we talk about 'federation fathers' and so on. Look at the record of poetry, starting with Mrs Caroline Carlton back in the 1850s and *Song of Australia*, then to people like Mrs Carney who submitted a poem, *Federation Hymn*, to the people's convention at Bathurst in 1896, and Joan Torrance in 1901, who wrote poems about 'the morning after'—the morning after, of course, the successful passage of the bill. That sort of verse seems reasonably common, but it doesn't seem to be comprehended as historians begin to look at the iconography of federation, in terms of art and music and so on. Would you comment on what you've discovered in your researches regarding the gender balance in poetry? It seems to be something that women could participate in reasonably fully, when they weren't allowed, for example, to be fully involved in the political discussions and debates.

**John Hirst** — I thought my gender awareness was pretty good, because I emphasise that, as a symbol, Australia was always female. But I can see that I am really lacking, because I haven't done a count of how many poetesses there were among the hundreds of people that wrote verse on federation. They would certainly rate higher than the proportion of women who participated in federation, though of course there was a presence of women, as campaigners and speakers, in federation. My guess would be that the number of these poems written by women might be thirty or forty percent. But as I say, I haven't counted.

**Question** — You referred to the general lack of interest and awareness of the founders of our Constitution, which of course is part of the explanation as to why people know so little about the Constitution and how it works. I wonder what your explanation for that might be, and also whether you see any possibility of this changing as we come to celebrate the centenary of federation?

**John Hirst** — One of the things I've done in my book is look at the celebrations in 1951, and they were amazing.<sup>23</sup> They managed to run month-long celebrations while scarcely ever mentioning the process of federation—that is, there was just absolute ignorance and lack of interest in the process by which Australia had become a nation.

We are now more aware, of course, that if we wanted to trumpet ourselves as a great democratic nation, that process would give us the opportunity to do so. The citizens at large voted for the delegates to the Convention, and also on whether they would accept the Constitution or not. It's an amazing democratic moment, and Australians aren't aware of it.

The explanation of that is complex. I hinted at it in my talk, that the nationalism that finally takes hold is not a civic nationalism. The nationalism that works, finally, is bushmen and diggers, the usual male symbols that we all know about so well. And

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<sup>23</sup> John Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: the Making of the Australian Commonwealth*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000.

that doesn't have a political element. It's almost determinedly outside the public respectable realm. As I said, this civic nationalism which I see as sustaining the federation movement was respectable, earnest, and mostly Protestant—not working class, not larrikin, not raffish, not the sort of things that finally became accepted as symbolising Australia.

One further reason is that most of our history has been written by people on the left, who think that if middle-class people are doing things they must be wicked or oppressive or nasty in some way. Often for them, the fact that there were no working-class people at the conventions is sufficient to show that this is something that the good-hearted and the true believers should take no interest in, or spurn. So there's that handicap, as well.

The other thing that happened particularly in 1900–01 is that the whole project became subsumed in the bigger project of integrating the British Empire. That had always been part of the federation impulse—that we should unite, because we're all British people, as the poems say—but it was always open in the 1880s as to whether Australia would be in the Empire or not. By 1900 the separation option had really gone, and nearly everyone saw Australian federation as part of this larger, grander theme of the British Empire. So the details of our story were subsumed in that grander story of belonging to Britain and Britain's role in the world. In 1951 that was still very important. So in 1951 they celebrated progress, they celebrated their Britishness, they celebrated the British Empire and Commonwealth, and they didn't talk much—or at all—about what happened in the 1890s.

As to whether it's going to be different this time around—yes, I think it is going to be a bit different, but probably not by much. There is a lot more interest this time in knowing the details of the story, there are more books being written, and the official celebration outfit (the Council for the Centenary of Federation) is encouraging people in their local areas to find out how federation was fought out in their locality. There was none of that in 1951. The most exciting event in 1951 was the re-creation of Sturt's voyage down the Murray, which was thought appropriate for celebrating federation, and of course had absolutely nothing to do with the event they were meant to be celebrating. But it was 'progress', and he was a British explorer.

**Question** — Why did imperial nationalism take over?

**John Hirst** — Partly because Australians welcomed it. Part of the impulse for federation was this gaining of a higher stature being a nation, and usually that implies total independence. But at the time Australian nationalism was growing, Britain was changing course and wanting to take more interest in the colonies, partly because Britain was in decline, which the colonies weren't fully aware of. But because Britain was in decline, they wanted a stronger integrated Empire, and were taking an interest in the colonies. The colonies were flattered by this—this was what they'd always wanted. And so a federation under the Crown within the Empire gave them everything—it gave them national status, recognition from Britain, made them part of an Empire that would defend them and which was a grand thing in itself.

In my previous answer I forgot to mention that 1900–1901 were the years of the Boer War, and this captured the imagination of more people, probably far more, than the

federation movement did. Australian troops fighting in the Boer War were being recognised as good troops, which gave a great boost to Australian self-confidence and pride—more than the amazing achievement of creating, by peaceful and democratic means, their federation.

**Question** — Could you comment on the part played by nationalism? I cannot help remembering that John Downer, a delegate from South Australia, said in one of his speeches: ‘Although I am an Australian, at heart I am an Englishman.’ That sentiment was felt throughout their whole setup. And it would be hard to find anything less nationalistic than the Australian Constitution. I refer particularly to the overwhelming and supreme powers given to the British Crown over anything Australia did. Two words would sum up that Constitution: British colony. Regarding the poets you referred to, none of them were delegates nor were they involved in drawing up the Constitution. I find the emphasis on nationalism not terribly convincing.

**John Hirst** — Well put. If you run a hard line on nationalism, there have been very few Australian nationalists in our history. You quoted Downer, who said he was both an Australian and an Englishman. Most people who have called themselves Australian nationalists in our history have also thought of themselves as British. I can understand a definition that says nationalism has to be exclusive, and until we have people who are nationalists and are opposed to the British connection, we won’t call them nationalists. I can understand that definition, but it’s not going to work very well in Australian history, because I think we can identify a group of people who were very definitely Australian nationalists. They had all the usual signs of being nationalists. The problem with the definition is that they were nationalists within an empire which was happy for them to be nationalists.

The British Empire was an amazing thing—it was an empire prepared to let its colonies become fully self-governing, call themselves nations, have all the appurtenances of nationhood, and yet still remain in the larger empire. If we apply the usual rule, we would say, ‘Well, the people who made the Constitution weren’t nationalists.’ But if you think of them as being placed in that situation, then I think you have to adjust your meaning. Are we going to try and say that Deakin and Barton weren’t nationalists, because they supported the British connection? You’d make a nonsense of their whole view of what they were doing. They were breaking down the barriers between colonies and creating a new Australian identity and attachment, which would sit within the larger one, but was certainly different from what was there before—which was only attachment to province and empire.

On the Constitution itself, yes, the form of it is very British. It’s very misleading. Those who wrote it knew it wasn’t going to be practised in the terms that it was written—that is, that power would actually reside with ministers and parliament and not with the Governor-General and the Queen. Though you’re right, of course—and I regret this, and there were people at the time who regretted it too—that the Constitution features the Queen and the Governor-General prominently.

But here’s a contrast: in the 1860s when it confederated, Canada drew up its broad principles of confederation, then went to London and let the London official lawyers write their Constitution, which could only be amended by the British Parliament. In Australia, right from the jump, when they wrote the Constitution, they wrote it as a

British Act of Parliament, but *they* wrote it because they didn't want any Pom to have any influence over it at all. So they didn't write the Australian Constitution and then let the British have it in a British Act of Parliament, they wrote the British Act of Parliament as well.

So their vision was—and this was certainly Griffiths' vision, who did the first draft, and Inglis Clark, from whom he copied—that we, the Australians, would draw up the Constitution. All the British would have to do was endorse it. That was their position, so that it could then be amended in every respect within Australia. So that's a clear advance on the Canadian position, and I see the impulse behind that as nationalistic.

**Question** — In regard to the previous question, I would like to confirm what you've been saying about Australian nationalism at the turn of the century and for much of the Twentieth Century. It didn't express itself in opposition to Britishness, or the association with Britain. When you look at the institutions that were established with federation, someone like Griffith—who of course didn't want to be called a colonial—nevertheless took pride in the availability of these British institutions to be emulated here in Australia. People tend to make the same assumption in relation to that other national moment at Gallipoli, and to somehow see that as Australians performing some feat in opposition to Britain, as if it's something Australian and anti-British. Australia, like any former colony, has this ambiguous relationship with its mother country, which is at once seeking to prove itself and to obtain the approval of the mother country, or not wanting to be thought of as inferior. I just want to stress that it was possible for people to want to affirm an Australian statehood and nationhood, without in any way departing from Britishness. I think it's a mistake to see, either at federation or at Gallipoli, the idea that somehow to be Australian was in opposition and was hostile to being British.

**John Hirst** — We still have the problem, don't we? I was one of those who said that republicans made a great mistake in the republican referendum by depicting their position as the nationalist one, and their opponents as un-Australian. And yet those who voted for the status quo, I'm sure, think of themselves very firmly as Australians. So the republicans were trying to run a hard line on nationalism—if you are an Australian nationalist, you must have nothing to do with Britain, even this minuscule connection with the Crown is an infringement on that full independence which usually goes with nationalism. That's what I believe myself. But there are clearly lots of Australians who think of themselves as Australian, who don't see the world that way.

**Question** — Why 1901? Why did these forces of nationalism come into play in that particular period? What is the economic context? There was a depression, there were strikes—was this an act of repair, an almost nostalgic act of trying to return to the civic confidence of the 1880s?

**John Hirst** — It is often said that what focused the minds of the colonists on the need for federation was the financial collapse of 1892–93. I had that very much in mind when I was writing my book. What is notable is that the immediate response to that is that federation is far too complicated a solution to the immediate problem which is, to use the modern parlance: 'the markets don't like us any more, and London will not take up our loans.' The response was that federation was far too long and drawn out a response to meet that immediate problem, because the 1891 experience had shown

that it was going to be a difficult business. So all sorts of other solutions were reached for to solve the economic crises, rather than federation. It happened that by the time federation was on the move again in 1896–98, colonial governments had their houses in order, they were borrowing again at very low rates, so that moment of crisis had passed. So I don't think that the specific circumstances of the 1890s were finally a spur.

Of course, for a long time there had been business interests who wanted to get rid of inter-colonial customs duties, but up to almost the last minute they wanted a customs union. They said, again, that federation was too complicated, the politicians were just toying with the problem by talking about federation, which they thought they would never get, and wouldn't it be much simpler just to have a customs union. There were various attempts to get one, which all failed. It turned out that the nationalists were right. In order to overcome the economic differences which always surfaced when talking about a customs union—was the new customs union to be protectionist against the world or free trade with the world?—you could never solve those difficulties. Parkes had the answer—you make the nation first, you use national authority to solve the customs differences. And that's how it panned out. So it's not the practical men who finally hit on the solution, it's the patriot politicians who gave us that answer to the problem.

**Question** — In 1901 school children were expected to celebrate federation, the Australian nation, with the Union Jack, which was distributed widely to state schools. Flags hadn't generally been used in schools before that time. In 1951 the federal government made a decision to give Australian flags to all state and private schools to celebrate the jubilee. It's an interesting comment on Australian nationalism and the way in which it was shaped both in 1901 and 1951.

**John Hirst** — Yes, there was that clearer move towards an Australian symbol in the flag in 1951. But it is amazing when you look at the material produced for children in 1951. They produced a little book for secondary school children, which was a very good description of the Constitution. But on the federation movement, it was just woeful—about four lines dealt with the 1890s. It doesn't mention the great democratic participation in the whole process. Menzies had the idea that what was wanted in this fiftieth federation year was to give everyone a good time. If you were a concert-goer, they would bring out the best symphony orchestra, if you were a lawyer, there would be a guest judge giving lectures. There was some opposition to that, and some thought that there should be Australians performing or writing books. So nationalism in that sense was a force against Menzies' inclination to bring out the best, which would usually be British. But there was still a lack of civic awareness of Australia having done something quite unusual in the 1890s in producing the federation. That civic nationalism was not there at all.