

**‘But Once in a History’: Canberra’s
Foundation Stones and Naming
Ceremonies, 12 March 1913***

David Headon

When King O’Malley, the ‘legendary’ King O’Malley, penned the introduction to a book he had commissioned, in late 1913, he searched for just the right sequence of characteristically lofty, even visionary phrases. After all, as the Minister of Home Affairs in the progressive Labor government of Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, he had responsibility for establishing the new Australian nation’s capital city. Vigorous promotion of the idea, he knew, was essential.

So, at the beginning of a book entitled *Canberra: Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia*, telling the story of the milestone ‘foundation stones’ and ‘naming’ ceremonies that took place in Canberra, on 12 March 1913, O’Malley declared for posterity that ‘Such an opportunity as this, the Commonwealth selecting a site for its national city in almost virgin country, comes to few nations, and comes but once in a history’.¹

This grand foundation narrative of Canberra—with its abundance of aspiration, ambition, high-mindedness, courage and curiosities—is still not well-enough known today. The city did not begin as a compromise between a feuding Sydney and Melbourne. Its roots comprise a far, far, better yarn than that. Unlike many major cities of the world, it was not created because of war, because of a revolution, disease, natural disaster or even to establish a convict settlement.

Rather, a nation lucky enough to be looking for a capital city at the beginning of a new century knuckled down to the task with creativity and diligence. The federation founders knew they had been blessed. Globally, the ‘science’ of town planning (as it was first called) had only recently emerged, and those directly involved in construction of the Australian capital wanted to take full advantage of the most sophisticated design and planning expertise on offer, from any source. It was a unique opportunity. Discussion soon focused on a city shaped organically, within the

* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House, Canberra, on 15 February 2013. An exhibition on Canberra’s foundation stones and naming ceremonies curated by Dr Headon was on display at Parliament House from 14 January to 3 April 2013.

¹ *Canberra: Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia*, Government Printer, Victoria, [1913], p. 13.

landscape, not one plonked down, in the words of the first Member for Eden–Monaro, Sir Austin Chapman, ‘like a tent’.²

Federation Australians wanted their future capital to be, as William Astley, an opium-addicted journalist and immensely skilled short story writer of the time so memorably described it, the ‘Treasure-house of the Nation’s Heart’.³ Only in this context can we make sense of the major moments in Canberra’s early history, from federation in 1901 to the beginning of the Great War in 1914: the absorbing if eccentric ‘Battle of the Sites’, 1902–08, to find a capital location; the erection of the first Commonwealth infrastructure on the plains, hills and mountains of the Monaro; the exhausting five-year survey of the Federal Capital Territory borders that took its protagonists deep and dangerously into the southern alps; and the extraordinary international design competition for ‘the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia’, won by an inspired husband-and-wife design team from Chicago who, in Walter Griffin’s resonant words, ‘planned a city not like any other city in the world ... an ideal city—a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future’.⁴ Walt and Marion Griffin produced by far the most expansive dream in an era given to such imaginings.

Not surprisingly, when Prime Minister Andrew Fisher and the Governor-General, Lord Thomas Denman, delivered their speeches in the luncheon tent on Kurrajong (now Capital) Hill a century ago, they responded not only to the historic significance of the occasion, but also to the prevailing set of political and cultural circumstances. Fisher anticipated a city where ‘the best thoughts of Australia’ would be expressed, a ‘seat of learning as well as of politics, and ... the home of art’.⁵ The Governor-General went one better, envisaging a city that reflected ‘all that is finest and noblest in the national life of the country ... a city bearing perhaps some resemblance to the city beautiful of our dreams’.⁶

In this paper, and the exhibition I have curated in the Presiding Officers’ Gallery of Parliament House (on display from 14 January–3 April 2013), I will focus attention on six aspects of what was, one hundred years ago, a great day out on the 12 March 1913, for all who participated. First, the build-up, the days and weeks immediately preceding 12 March, as it began to dawn on a panicking media in Victoria that their ‘marvellous Melbourne’ might soon be replaced by some remote, woebegone bush location in arch-rival New South Wales. Secondly, the sheer pageantry of the morning activities, and the formal ceremonies of the big day, as hundreds of mounted

² House of Representatives debates, 24 September 1908, p. 390.

³ Price Warung, *Bathurst, the Ideal Federal Capital*, Glyndwr Whalan, Bathurst, 1901, p. 3.

⁴ *New York Times*, 2 June 1912, <http://www.library.cornell.edu/Reps/DOCS/nytimes.htm>.

⁵ *Canberra*, op. cit., p. 23.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 31.

horsemen and other units supplied splashes of wild colour and an immensely satisfying display of military pomp and gravitas. Thirdly, I will provide a brief overview of, not one, but the three ceremonies on 12 March that made it such a distinctive, nationally significant suite. Fourthly, I will say a few things about the formidable cluster of individuals gathered on the deep crimson mat atop the newly laid foundation stones on that sunny autumn day on the Limestone Plains of the Monaro. Next, I will explore Raymond Longford's beautiful footage of the day's activities, the nineteen minutes of film which somehow has miraculously survived, when some 85 per cent of our silent film history has not. And finally, I will touch on the notable absentees on the day, individuals who we might reasonably have expected to be VIPs, but who were in fact 'no-shows' for a variety of reasons, reasons ranging from dementia, to the demands of other, important posts, to straight departmental stupidity and ignorance.

In the days leading up to Wednesday, 12 March 1913, Canberra experienced one of its more extreme autumn storms. Indeed, had the politicians who selected the Canberra location in 1908 been exposed back then to the conditions that prevailed in early March 1913, they would surely have looked for a site elsewhere. It was pelting down.

The day before the much-anticipated public occasion, the lead journalist in the local newspaper, the *Queanbeyan Age*, nervously reported on the 'unabated fury' of the weather and its destructive impact on the temporary structures for accommodation and general amenity—'the persistent screaming of the wind, the creaking of tent poles, and straining of ropes ... It was bitterly cold, and men and horses both suffered severely'.⁷ The field hospital was flooded.

It was so cold and miserable that the men of the 28th Light Horse were unanimous in wanting to call the new city 'Antarctica' because of the sheer severity of the wind, 'with the force', one of them commented, 'almost of a blizzard'. The officers' mess tent, to the amusement of the lower ranks, was 'blown to ribbons'.⁸

While Canberra's Commonwealth officials were worried stiff, Victoria's newspapers predictably revelled in the prospect of a looming, country New South Wales public relations disaster, holding firm to the notion that Melbourne should remain Australia's capital forever. But they were destined to be disappointed. On the morning of Canberra's first ever significant national ceremonies, the sun rose brightly on the green-tinged Monaro plains. Locals, departmental staff, VIPs—everyone involved—beamed with delight. A relieved *Queanbeyan Age* reporter noted that 'Wednesday was beautifully fine, and even warm towards the finish of the affair ... thus it

⁷ *Queanbeyan Age*, 11 March 1913, p. 3.

⁸ *ibid.*

becomes a matter for special congratulation that such auspicious weather was enjoyed for this day of paramount importance'.⁹

Melbourne's *Age* newspaper grudgingly observed that 'Luck, as usual, has been kind to the Labor Party',¹⁰ while the *Sydney Morning Herald* was inclined to credit the 'pleasing change' to the presence of the Governor-General and his statuesque wife, Lady Denman.¹¹ The Minister for Home Affairs, the larger-than-life King O'Malley, was never in doubt, firm in the belief that (as reported in the *Argus*) 'the fates had always been kind to him'.¹²

For the team of government department staff, the big day began early. According to the formal program, after a 6.45 am breakfast the VIPs housed in Queanbeyan began making their way to Kurrajong Hill at 8.20 am for an 11.30 am start, hours later. Some 400–500 official guests had travelled on the Tuesday from Melbourne's Spencer Street Station and Sydney's Central, and all had to be transported to the ceremonial site. Trying to leave nothing to chance, departmental officials asked that the general public, mostly residents of nearby Queanbeyan, Goulburn, Bungendore and Yass, attempt to avoid 'the main road as far as practicable'.¹³

The locals, however, were never going to have any part of that sort of bureaucratic, risk management rubbish. The report of the *Queanbeyan Age*, under the heading 'The Great Trek', confirms that this was one request that was totally ignored. As the journalist playfully recorded:

Long lines of automobiles filed out of the town ... Fine four-horse drags swung along on the wake of the motors passing in clouds of red dust scores of less imposing equipages. There were old 'busses ... sulkies, buggies, waggonettes, wagons, lorries, cabs, sociables, carts, bicycles, and every conceivable form of vehicle [was] requisitioned and joined the procession. At the cross-roads the throng was reinforced by farmers' carts and buggies from the surrounding country. Scores of horsemen gave a true colonial flavour to the scene, while hundreds more, failing to find means of transport, tramped to the scene. It was a unique picture, the green undulating fields with thousands of sheep quietly feeding being disturbed from their solitude by the bustle of a great historic occasion.¹⁴

⁹ *Queanbeyan Age*, 14 March 1913, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Age* (Melbourne), 12 March 1913, p. 2.

¹¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 March 1913, p. 12.

¹² *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 March 1913, p. 13.

¹³ *Queanbeyan Age*, 11 March 1913, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Queanbeyan Age*, 14 March 1913, p. 2.

Since most guests, invited and uninvited, made their way to Kurrajong Hill with plenty of time to spare, all were looking for a little preliminary entertainment. The arrival by car of the Governor-General's wife, Lady Gertrude Denman—Trudie, Trude—well ahead of her husband, was just what they were looking for. A favourite with most Australians, including members of the governing Labor Party, Lady 'Trudie' was immediately presented with a bountiful bouquet of flowers by a local resident, six-year-old Stella Broinowski, daughter of one of the Commonwealth's senior draughtsmen resident in Canberra. The crowd loved it. Closer inspection of the car in which she was travelling would probably have revealed her dainty silk parasol and rather large make-up case. Both items are on show in the exhibition.

Students of fashion in the audience might be interested to know that, according to the account of Adelaide's *The Register* newspaper, Lady Trudie wore 'a striking dress of green and white, and with a black hat trimmed with a white ostrich feather ... [and] a beautiful pearl necklace'.¹⁵

When Governor-General Lord Thomas Denman arrived—like his partner, immaculately dressed, sporting an imposing hat with feathered plumage (also in the exhibition)—he headed immediately to the foundation stones area, where he reviewed the cadets and troops, joined by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, Minister for Home Affairs King O'Malley and Senator George Pearce.

The few scattered citizens living on the Limestone Plains had never before seen its like. Not only a visit by the 'bright and glittering'¹⁶ Governor-General, his wife, the prime minister and so many VIPs from across the continent, but all sorts of added attractions. Sir Walter Barttelot and Major Arnold Quilter, aides-de-camp to the Governor-General, were striking in the uniforms of, respectively, the Coldstream Guards and the Grenadier Guards. The Australian Field Artillery was there, stationed on Camp Hill (a spot about 70–80 metres north of Old Parliament House on Federation Mall), to fire, first, a 19-gun salute, and then, after Lady Denman had named the new capital, a 21-gun salute—right on cue. The Mounted Rifles took part, along with the 7th, 9th, 11th and 27th Light Horse; then there were the dazzling plumes and scarlet sashes of the NSW Lancers. In all, over 700 troops participated in the ceremonial parade.

And on top of all of this pageantry, some of the 'honorary' local boys were involved as well. The guard of honour for Lord Denman comprised two Royal Military College (RMC), Duntroon, senior classes—about seventy fresh-faced cadets in their early twenties, known to the locals, including apparently the eligible younger women. The

¹⁵ *Register* (Adelaide), 13 March 1913, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1913, p. 9.

heads of the Limestone Plainers were spinning with excitement. They were used to the occasional exercise of the RMC boys, under Captain Smith, but nothing like this grand spectacle being acted out in front of them.

To digress for one moment, on the trail of a spot of gossip. A few of those present in the crowd on the day had reason to be titillated by more than simply the pageantry. You see, it was rumoured that Sir Walter Barttelot—the Coldstream Guard, who was in Australia with his wife, Lady Barttelot, herself the lady-in-waiting to Lady Denman—was involved in a dalliance, an illicit affair with the aforesaid Lady Trudie. The anecdotal evidence for this is strong, and we do know that, shortly after the Australian sojourn, the Denmans would amicably agree to live separate lives, for the rest of their life. They would die within three weeks of one another, in 1953, forty years later.

Sir Walter, however, was not so fortunate. He and his fellow aide-de-camp, Major Quilter, both of whom fought at Gallipoli, would be dead by 1918. But whereas Arnold Quilter was killed at Krithia, on the Gallipoli peninsula, walking stick in hand as he led a desperate attack on a fortified Turkish position, Sir Walter died rather less gallantly. As the British military attaché based in the Iranian capital of Tehran, he died on 23 October 1918, a bare three weeks before the armistice, killed in bed by a cuckolded husband. Sir Walter, it appears, was a serial offender.

And on that prurient note, back to the main narrative.

On the big 12 March day, Sir Walter and Major Quilter, ‘resplendent in scarlet and tall black bearskins’,¹⁷—were surrounded by what Bill Lawry might today describe as ‘a happy crowd’. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter observed that ‘People sat there in the hot sun possessing their souls in patience’,¹⁸ but they were delighted when the real action began, as scheduled, at precisely 11.30 am with the first ceremony in the official program: the ‘Laying of the Foundation Stones of the Commencement Column’. The column, designed to proclaim the new national capital as imperial, national and federal, would never be built, so it is just as well that the natural performer in the Minister for Home Affairs, King O’Malley, made sure he emphasised the theatrical elements of the day.

O’Malley presented Lord Denman with a ‘gold trowel’, personally inscribed as a keepsake of the occasion, and asked him to lay the first foundation stone. The *Queanbeyan Age* takes up the story:

¹⁷ Michael Hall, ‘A splendid destiny’, *Canberra History News*, no. 445, February/March 2013, p. 12. This is also the source for the biographical information about the philandering Sir Walter Barttelot.

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1913, p. 9.

A man went to the winch and turned the handle. The foundation stone, already half suspended in mid air, moved higher into the air, and a man at the stone itself governed its movements. When the stone was in its right position the man held his hand up; then he brought over some cement to Lord Denman.

The Governor-General of Australia took up a quantity of cement with his gold trowel. There was a metallic ring as the trowel touched the granite, and, turning to the Prime Minister and the people, His Excellency said: 'I declare this first stone ... well and truly laid'. Loud cheering followed.¹⁹

Shortly after, Prime Minister Fisher followed suit with his personally inscribed golden trowel, declaring his stone 'well and truly laid'—amid cheers and, it was reported, a shout of 'Good boy, Andy'.²⁰

With typical showmanship, O'Malley just had to be different, so his stone was laid 'truly and permanently'.²¹

Onlookers could hardly fail to have noticed the stark contrast of accents featured: Denman, born to privilege, with his refined English accent; Fisher, down in the grim Scottish coalmines as a boy and still audibly connecting to his northern hemisphere roots; and O'Malley, unashamedly mid-western American, even though he had to maintain the farce that he was born in Canada in order to stand for election in a British Empire country.

I should note that, for the first time since 12 March 1913, two of these 'working' trowels, those of Fisher and O'Malley, are on show in the exhibition. I hope to have Lord Denman's trowel soon, to reunite the glittering triumvirate for the first time since 12 March 1913—but that will depend on the efficiency of application of the English export regulations pertaining to the small ivory handle.

Generally believed in Australia to have been lost for many decades, recent research by myself and historian Barbara Coe led to confirmation of the whereabouts of both the Denman and Fisher trowels. Fisher's is part of the private collection of Sydney businessman Trevor Kennedy, while the extended Denman family in England have made sure that Thomas' golden trowel has stayed safely in its keeping throughout the last century. O'Malley's trowel became part of the collection of the library of the 'Parliament of the Commonwealth' (and, later, the National Library of Australia) in

¹⁹ *Queanbeyan Age*, 14 March 1913, p. 2.

²⁰ *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 13 March 1913, p. 9.

²¹ *Queanbeyan Age*, 14 March 1913, p. 2.

1934 when the Parliamentary Librarian, Kenneth Binns, asked O'Malley to donate it to the Commonwealth. O'Malley was pleased to do so, as he informed 'Brother Binns'.

Despite vocal crowd interest in the laying of the new city's first three foundation stones, it is certain that the vast majority had come for one reason, and one reason only. They wanted to be among the first to hear the chosen name of the nation's fledgling capital.

So, with the stones well and truly laid, the Governor-General and Lady Denman, along with the prime minister, adjourned to a spot at the bottom of the temporary stand and, accompanied we are told by 'massed bands', led a rousing rendition of the hymn, 'All People That on Earth Do Dwell' (Psalm 100, often referred to as the 'Old Hundredth'). Then all three, with Minister O'Malley, moved down to a temporary platform on top of the stones.

The Adelaide *Advertiser* reporter present spoke for the multitude in titling his splendid coverage of the day's second ceremony, 'The Secret at Last':

When Lady Denman stepped to the centre of the column, which had been converted into a crimson-coloured platform, there was an almost breathless silence. Local residents grouped at the corner of the stand shifted nervously, since the whispered information that they were to be singularly honoured had been almost too good to be true. Lady Denman carried in her hand a small golden casket, between the covers of which was hidden a card bearing the mystic word that would be known all over the Empire a couple of hours later. A fanfare of trumpets sounded by buglers announced that the psychological moment had arrived. As the echoes of the last notes died away in the little valleys between the hills, Lady Denman looked around upon the circle of waiting spectators and smiled. 'I name the capital city of Australia, Canberra', she said. There was a frantic outburst of cheering from a group of local residents, who all along desired to have the original appellation retained. The infection was carried even into the ranks. Everybody cheered ... Another salute of 21 guns was fired. Cheers were given for all who took part in the proceedings, for the King, and for the Commonwealth.²²

Lady Denman's announcement finally put to rest months of speculation, as Australians across the country sent in a flood of suggestions—some serious, some not—for the political leaders and departmental staff to consider. There was no

²² *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 13 March 1913, p. 9.

competition, but this did not stop some 800 Australian and overseas aspirants from submitting their preference. The choice of a name for the new city was never going to be easy. Too many people were interested in the outcome. The response of the *Age* newspaper typified the carping Melbourne press in suggesting, on the day of Canberra's big event, that 'the people have been contumeliously ignored in the matter of choosing a name'.²³ But this was simply not true. Commonwealth records indicate that all the suggestions sent in by members of the public were carefully logged by departmental staff, as were the results of a poll of federal parliamentarians.

We know that the final choice was enormously popular with the many locals present, and generally popular across the country. It was a thankfully 'prosaic name', according to the *Launceston Examiner*, 'certainly an improvement on many of the freak names which were suggested'.²⁴

And there were, to be sure, a host of 'freak' names.

These included a broad mix of suggestions, creative, tongue-in-cheek and brain-dead—among them, those citizens keen on local fauna and birds, who favoured names such as Kangaemu, Cooeeoomoo, Blue Duck, Cookaburra and Marsupiala. Then there were those eager to express their cynicism about politics, who opted for pejoratives such as Bungtown, Bunkum, Pawnbroker, Thirstyville, Cackleton and Gonebroke. There were those seriously deficient in either imagination or the imperatives of nomenclature, who favoured the likes of Wheatwoolgold and Sydmeladeperbrisho. The utopians chipped in with Perfection, Climax, New Atlantis, Paradasia and Avalon. Then, of course, there was the humourist replete with obligatory race overtones, with his Too-muchee-white-fellah-sittee-down-longa-Molonglo-big-one-water-hole.

Such extreme names, 'freak' names according to the *Launceston Examiner*, rubbed shoulders with a small group of genuine contenders—among them, Acacia, Eureka, Federata and Eucalypta. Minister O'Malley's choice was Shakespeare; the prime minister favoured the Aboriginal word 'Myola', until someone pointed out to him that his choice came perilously close to an anagram of O'Malley, with whom he had a professional, rather than a close relationship. Myola, the early favourite, was out!

It appears that the final decision on the name was made through a majority vote of the Labor caucus, who plumped for the local name 'Canberra'. This decision, however, produced immediate frustration concerning both the meaning of the name and its pronunciation.

²³ *Age* (Melbourne), 12 March 1913, p. 2.

²⁴ *Launceston Examiner*, 14 March 1913, p. 4.

Was ‘Canberra’ derived from the town of ‘Canbury’, in England? Did it come from an Aboriginal word meaning ‘meeting place’? A ‘woman’s breasts’ (Black Mountain and Mt Ainslie)? No one knew for sure. And then there was the matter of the word’s pronunciation. Three syllables or two? The final government decision—a triumph of pure pragmatism—was whatever pronunciation Lady Denman used on the day, that would be it. Perhaps because of her English origins, she opted for ‘Can-bra’. And so it was.

Like her male counterparts, Lady Denman had an ideal souvenir of the day: the gold case that she opened to reveal the city’s name. Personally inscribed like the trowels, but also with an engraving of the Denman crest, the object has remained in the Denman family since 1913, and is on show in the exhibition for the first time in a hundred years. It doubles as a serviceable cigarette case, and was put to constant use by chain-smoker Trudie for the rest of her life.

The third and last formal ceremony of a busy program involved a luncheon, the ‘official banquet’, for some 450 guests in a marquee situated not far from the foundation stones. While the menu and toasts might arouse some curiosity today amidst a television food show epidemic, it is the substance of the main speeches and toasts—by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, Lord Denman, Minister O’Malley and the Attorney-General William Morris (‘Billy’) Hughes—that rewards more intense scrutiny. All four speeches are reproduced in the volume King O’Malley commissioned in 1913, *Canberra: Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia*, mentioned earlier.

Fisher produced his usual solid effort, anticipating the coming capital as a home for higher learning, politics and art, but it was the Governor-General who soared with by far the best speech of the entire occasion, a ‘really eloquent’ peroration according to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the ‘best speech ... he has delivered since he came to Australia’.²⁵ The speech included some jokes about the suggested names of the capital, as the Governor-General wrestled with the pronunciation of the unlikely ‘Syd-Mel-Ad-Per-Bris-Ho’. There was also a compelling transition into the subject of ‘the creation of a national Australian spirit’, and a visionary conclusion which no doubt had an impact on everyone present:

The city that is to be should have a splendid destiny before it, but the making of that destiny lies in your hands, the hands of your children, and those who come after them. Remember that the traditions of this City will be the traditions of Australia. Let us hope that they will be traditions of freedom, of peace, of honor, and of prosperity; that here will be reflected

²⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1913, p. 9.

all that is finest and noblest in the national life of the country; that here a city may arise where those responsible for the government of this country in the future may seek and find inspiration in its noble buildings, its broad avenues, its shaded parks, and sheltered gardens—a city bearing perhaps some resemblance to the city beautiful of our dreams.²⁶

This was no easy act to follow, although O'Malley and Hughes acquitted themselves pretty well. O'Malley produced a speech that the *Argus* newspaper labelled grandiloquent,²⁷ and the *Sydney Morning Herald* suggested could 'only be described as O'Malleyan'.²⁸

Billy Hughes put his mischievous sense of humour to good use, interspersing personal anecdote with sharper comment. However, when he stated that the Limestone Plains were 'an ideal spot for a capital in every way',²⁹ it was clear to his audience that this tough-minded, uncompromising Sydney unionist had become a true Canberra convert. While Hughes was neither temperamentally attuned, nor indeed destined to play a leading role in the national capital's Big Picture, he is well worth reading on the finer grain detail. Several decades after the 'Battle of the Sites' to find a region to host the capital, Hughes lyrically captured the essence of earlier, more generous times in the autobiographical volumes he penned in his eighties, as he finally sat down to reflect on a turbulent life. A sentence from his *Policies and Potentates* (1950) captures the spirit of the enterprise:

The story of how the Parliament of the Commonwealth came to choose Canberra as the Seat of Government is a chapter of history about which lingers the fragrance of romance.³⁰

And there is certainly a 'fragrance of romance' attached to some of the key players on 12 March. Take, for instance, the 'legendary' King O'Malley. Formerly a slightly tainted insurance agent, real estate agent and banker in the United States, O'Malley reinvented himself as a colonial politician, Commonwealth politician, compelling orator, tall-tale teller, finance guru and, it seems, charmer of the gentler sex. He was a genuine one-off, defying easy description. At the age of, perhaps 30, in 1888 he came to Australia to stay, returning only once, briefly, to the country of his birth, and dying in Melbourne just before Christmas, 1953, the same year as the Denmans. He left a healthy estate. O'Malley was accorded a state funeral, as the last survivor of the

²⁶ *Canberra*, op. cit., p. 31.

²⁷ *Argus* (Melbourne), 13 March 1913, p. 13.

²⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1913, p. 9.

²⁹ *Canberra*, op. cit., p. 41.

³⁰ W.M. Hughes, *Policies and Potentates*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1950, p. 54.

Commonwealth of Australia's first national parliament of May 1901, which included a galaxy of future prime ministerial stars—Edmund Barton, Alfred Deakin, Chris Watson, George Reid, Andrew Fisher, Joseph Cook and Billy Hughes.

O'Malley may have been 95 when he died, but we will never know because he had to claim, in Australia, that he had been born in a British Empire country, in order to stand for an Australian parliament. He told a lie—a 'beautiful lie', to use Mark Twain's apt phrase—a lie that everyone in Australia was in on, for all knew that King O'Malley had been born in the United States.

It was O'Malley's good fortune to be popular with enough members of the Labor caucus to see him appointed as Minister for Home Affairs in Andrew Fisher's second government, 1910–13, despite Fisher's dislike of O'Malley's brash American ways. The Home Affairs portfolio meant that he, O'Malley, had responsibility for the national capital's foundation years, and he certainly made a distinctive mark. Those he liked were routinely greeted as 'Brothers'; those he disapproved of were 'roosters', often 'gilt-spurred roosters'.

On 12 March 1913, O'Malley was in his element on the big stage. It is difficult to judge who depicted the extroverted O'Malley best that fine autumn day: official photographer Claude Vautin in his genuinely iconic images, or the *Queanbeyan Age* journalist who wrote that O'Malley 'stood by the side of the stone which he was to lay, planted his right foot on it, folded his arms and surveyed the beautiful sweep of country in front of him ... Mr King O'Malley stood there like a king—monarch of all he surveyed'.³¹

And what about the English visitors on the same podium, the Denmans, Tom and Trudie?

We know that Australia's fourth Governor-General, Lord Dudley, was a very poor fit for the job, a man who expected to be treated with deferential regard and to have the whims of his toffy lifestyle encouraged and funded by the locals. Federation Australians deplored his pomposity, spendthrift habits and carousing ways. The Australian press responded on occasion with venom, despite the aura of the viceregal office, John Norton's *Truth* newspaper exciting its readers with scurrilous reference to Dudley's 'concupiscent capers ... libidinous lecheries and lascivious lapses'.³²

³¹ *Queanbeyan Age*, 14 March 1913, p. 2.

³² Quoted in Christopher Cunneen, *Kings' Men: Australia's Governors-General from Hopetoun to Isaacs*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983, p. 86.

In stark contrast, the fifth Governor-General, Thomas Denman, the third Baron Denman, was a much more comfortable fit for the new job. Both he and his immensely talented, strong-willed partner shared an enthusiasm for the antipodean challenge, both wanting, as Gertrude put it, to 'work hard'. They understood Australia, and the locals responded with a great goodwill. The Denmans were popular.

Tom Denman was widely praised in Australia as one of our own, a true man of action. Coming through in the same Sandhurst class as Winston Churchill, he served with distinction in the Boer War, was wounded and, on returning to England, he entered politics as a young and progressive Liberal peer in the House of Lords. A keen 'sportsman' in sport-mad, post-colonial Australia, Denman played a handy game of billiards and golf, a good game of tennis, and he could ride with the best of them, making a name for himself in England as a steeplechaser.

With less opportunity because of the constraints placed on women at the time, Trudie Denman carved out a truly remarkable life. She refused to be merely a decoration of her husband. In 1912, when fishing off Sorrento in Victoria, she hooked a shark five feet long. When it was hauled on board, still very much alive and thrashing, Lady Denman calmly 'shot the monster', according to *Society* magazine, 'with her own revolver, one bullet doing the trick'.³³

Encouraged by her parents, Gertrude Pearson, Lady Denman, was a free, independent spirit, a keen golfer, tennis and hockey player, and lover of the outdoors. She was one of the first women to obtain a driver's licence in Britain; she almost single-handedly organised for tens of millions of cigarettes to be sent to the English soldiers fighting in France in the Great War; she was in charge of the Women's Land Army in World War Two; she once dug a great big hole in the lawns of Government House, in Melbourne, to practise her bunker shots; and she loved the theatre, passionately, becoming good friends with our own grand dame, Nellie Melba.

I wonder was it Melba's sense of humour that Trudie especially enjoyed, the Australian diva's well-documented, rather risqué ways. On one occasion when on a ship between the hemispheres, Melba was served a rapidly melting jelly, promptly remarking to the waiter: 'There are two things I like stiff, my man, and jelly is one of them'. Perhaps it was a taste for the wicked that forged a bond between independent Nellie and independent Trudie.

³³ Cutting from *Society* magazine, 7 February 1912, included in the album of newspaper cuttings kept by Lady Denman's lady-in-waiting, Lady Barttelot, during the Denmans' years in Australia. The album is now in the private collection of Lady Margot Burrell.

Tom Denman had a peerage but little money, so the Pearson fortune of Gertrude's father, Lord Coudray, certainly assisted his career path. While the Denmans did bring to Australia their personal servants, two carriages and three motor cars, commensurate with their social position, they also brought a no-frills attitude. Both hated excessive formality, and this was quickly noted and admired by their hosts.

So tangible was this chemistry between the Denmans and the Labor men that, as I was told earlier this week by the Denmans' grandson, Mark Burrell, Lord Thomas Denman, 'D' as the family always affectionately called him, took it upon himself to write to the King suggesting that the Australian government should take charge of its own Australian navy. And this in 1913, as tension between Britain and Germany was rapidly escalating. The suggestion in the letter was never likely to be acted upon at that time; indeed, Lord Thomas Denman, it was felt by his aristocratic and political peers, had, to use Mark Burrell's phrase the other day, 'gone native'. Crossed over. He had committed the cardinal sin of choosing the periphery, Australia, over the metropolis, England—the colonies over the Empire. He was shunned. Hindsight, fortunately, enables Australians to elevate him to the ranks of our most progressive early Governors-General.

This close Denmans/Labor relationship was visibly on show on the 12 March 1913, as we can see in Claude Vautin's fine photographs—and, in particular, in the precious Raymond Longford/Ernest Higgins film footage of the day's events. This classic nineteen minutes of footage has its own distinctive story, its own set of small, yet significant miracles. When the firm of Spencer's Pictures decided to cover Canberra's 12 March ceremony, it just so happened that the most significant person on their books, actor and director Raymond Longford, in time acknowledged as the most important film-maker in the history of Australian silent film, was between pictures. Spencer's sent him down to direct their film, together with Ernest Higgins, a highly talented cinematographer.

Longford is best known today as the director of the one acknowledged classic of the thirty-year Australian silent film era, *The Sentimental Bloke*, of 1919, based on C.J. Dennis' popular literary work. The female star of 'The Bloke' was Lottie Lyell, Longford's professional, and life, partner. As film biographer William Drew has written: 'In their films, rich with humour and insightful observation, [Longford and Lyell] revealed to the world for the first time on screen the plucky, resourceful, democratic national character of the Australian ... [Longford and Lyell] belong not only to Australian, but also to world cinema'.³⁴

³⁴ William M. Drew, 'Raymond Longford (1878–1959) and Lottie Lyell (1890–1925)', <http://www.gildasattic.com/longford.html>.

Raymond Longford comes to Canberra for the 12 March 1913 festivities. His film survives against the odds. You could not have script-written it any better than that.

Finally, a few moments on one of the 'lost' narratives of the day. Numerous letters included in the bulging National Archives of Australia file throw light on individuals from many walks of life—former prime ministers, significant surveyors, journalists, members of parliament, departmental heads and staff, union officials and prominent Monaro residents, to name a few—who failed to make Minister O'Malley's invite list in the first round. The reasons appear to have ranged from bias, to oversight, to just plain human and departmental ignorance. Other 'no-shows' included invited individuals absent for reasons ranging from severe illness to necessary formal duties.

The most notable absence was, of course, the Griffins from Chicago, whose entry number 29 had, only nine months earlier, won the international competition to design the 'Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia'. The exhibition deals with the complex story of why this happened.

Three former prime ministers who had a hand in the early national capital story were also unable to attend. Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, could not be there due to High Court duties as Acting Chief Justice, though he was there in spirit. The *Sydney Morning Herald* report mentions the 'finely worded letter' sent by Barton, and read out on the day by Lord Denman, being 'loudly cheered' by the crowd.³⁵

Sadly, Australia's second prime minister, Alfred Deakin, missed the event due to the cruel onset of dementia which, as early as 1910 and in his own diary words, 'crippled' his memory and public speeches, making certain that his last decade of life (until his death in 1919) was a 'chaos' as he sat 'among the ruins or pick[ed] his way carefully across the debris to the haven of complete forgetfulness'.³⁶

George Reid, Australia's fourth prime minister and a key Canberra supporter in later 1908 when it counted, had to miss the ceremonial day because he was busy with official duties elsewhere, as the (first) High Commissioner to Great Britain. In this capacity, Reid had his own important symbolic event to worry about when the King laid the foundation stone for Australia House in London on 24 July 1913.

Perhaps the most heart-wrenching of all the absentee stories relating to the event was that of Arthur Lloyd. Chief Surveyor of the New South Wales Public Works Department in 1906 when all New South Wales site options were on the table for

³⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1913, p. 9.

³⁶ Alfred Deakin penned these words in his (private) notebooks, quoted at length in Walter Murdoch, *Alfred Deakin*, Bookman Press, Melbourne, 1999 [1923], pp. 270, 278.

consideration, Lloyd was personally responsible for a superb map on display in the exhibition. Signed on 28 March 1906, the map records 14 sites that he surveyed, making it clear that he favoured sites ‘J & K’—sites coinciding almost exactly with today’s Belconnen and central Canberra. Overlooked in the first round of invites, poor old Lloyd endured the ignominy of having to request an invitation to the 12 March event. Sadly, it is by no means clear whether the man a journalist once described as the ‘Duke of Canberra’ was present on the day.

Our national capital has a rich and compelling foundation story, at once local, regional, national and international. It was Australia’s unique good fortune that, at a key moment in the evolution of global discussion and enlightened planning about cities, we went in search of a new capital city, to be built from the ground up.

The founders, a century ago—human, flawed, but aspirational, determined, unwilling to shy away from the big questions and big issues—methodically worked their way through the capital city discussion for well over a decade, in the first years of federation, inspired and refreshed by ‘City Beautiful’ and ‘Garden City’ considerations. The events of 12 March 1913 provide us with considerable insight into personalities and political issues. It was a day of high significance.

Australians should know more about their national capital. Let us hope that by the end of this special centenary year, laden with so much culture, history and heritage, we will have set about embracing the challenge.



Question — Can you tell us a bit about where the foundation stones were originally laid and the circumstances of them having been moved?

David Headon — Their present spot began, officially, on 12 March 1988. On that day there was a woman who was a special guest at the ceremony (I only learned a few weeks ago) called Mary Canberra Murray. There was quite a celebration that day when three additional plaques were laid by Prime Minister Bob Hawke, the Minister for Arts and Territories Gary Punch and the Governor-General Sir Ninian Stephens. Mary Canberra Murray, born on 12 March 1913, joined the celebrities, quite rightly, on the podium.

Now, when you are walking from the foundation stones straight back towards Parliament House on the left hand side of Michael Nelson Tjakamarra’s mosaic and

water feature, if you look down you will see a small plaque. That is where the original stones were sited. They went into disrepair. It does look as though King O'Malley's stone was pinched, and replaced. But the others are originals.

Question — I noticed that in Queanbeyan there is a statue of a chap named John Gale and he is described there as the father of Canberra. I have never heard that description being used within Canberra itself. What is the story there?

David Headon — John Gale has got a great story. He was the individual who worked so hard as a journalist and community leader in Queanbeyan from the 1890s to establish a capital city in this region. Ian Warden in the *Canberra Times* has written about him a bit. Chris Watson, the first Labor prime minister for a few months in 1904, and George Reid were the two other crucial advocates at a key time for Canberra. In 1906 Watson came here and Gale took him trout fishing to Uriarra. Greg Wood, who gave the Sir John Butters Oration in 2008, talked about the fact that a future capital had to be a place where white men could catch trout in the local rivers. Indeed, the primary pitch for Queanbeyan/Canberra was on the basis of sport, shooting, fishing etc.

Gale took Watson to Uriarra, but Watson was already pretty much 'on message', about the area. Of all the communities in New South Wales perhaps the most progressive in pushing the capital argument were the Queanbeyan people, and John Gale—especially in the pages of the various newspapers that he edited. Gale was very much a key player. In his book *Canberra: The Community That Was* Greg Wood talked about the dispossession story of whites as well—not the black dispossession story, but the white dispossession story. It dawned on some of the local property owners, quite late in proceedings that they were actually going to get only a small amount of money for their properties. They went into a bit of a panic. It becomes a more complex and contested story the closer you get to that land being taken back by the Commonwealth. There are a couple of quite good histories of Queanbeyan which recognise that.

Question — I understand the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) has done some amazing work on the Longford footage, and we will all get to see that between now and the 12 March 2013. Also, in the exhibition O'Malley looks a little dishevelled. I would have thought he would really look his spritely best on that occasion but not so.

David Headon — Absolutely. O'Malley was generally speaking a dapper dresser. In fact, in my exhibition there is a replica of O'Malley's original tie pin on loan from Peter Barclay, owner of King O'Malley's Irish Pub in Civic. Peter had that replica

made because O'Malley wore it often on fine suits. I read somewhere that on 12 March 1913, O'Malley managed to forget his suit, and therefore had to go with his 'C' grade or 'D' grade suit—the rather dishevelled suit that he wore on the day.

In terms of the Longford film and the National Film and Sound Archive, I am absolutely delighted to say that the NFSA has recognised the ultra-significance of that original nineteen minutes of superb film of the 12 March 1913 event, and has created a new, pristine print, which will be running on various screens around Canberra on 10 March 2013. It is a beautiful enough film, the old print, but we really look forward to seeing the refurbished version that will be shown for the first time around Canberra, and presumably around the country, in a matter of weeks.