

# 1901

# AUSTRALIA BECOMES A NATION

Australia officially became one nation on the first day of the 20th Century. After many years of wrangling and negotiation to overcome the fears and satisfy the demands of the six colonies, each jealously guarding its independence and promoting its own interests, the Commonwealth of Australia was officially inaugurated at a glittering ceremony in Sydney. It was, indeed, an historic day...

RAIN, thunder and lightning from the skies over Sydney dramatically farewelled the old century, but the clouds broke shortly before dawn on the morning of January 1, 1901. As the sun rose, it stirred to life the city considered by many the jewel of the southern hemisphere: decked out in all her finery, ablaze with colour from flowers, flags, military uniforms and brass bands, Sydney had never looked better.

It was a steamy day, but soon there were half a million people — 13 per cent

of all the Europeans making up the new nation — lining the four kilometres of streets used for the inauguration pageant, which started at the Domain and moved slowly to the Federation site in Centennial Park.

The line of the route was kept by 2000 police and thousands more troops. It took 55 minutes for the procession to pass any given point, but the crowd was in no hurry, waiting with good humour and admiring the lavish decorations which drew enthusiastic comment from even the most hard-bitten reporters.

‘Look down George Street ... bedecked in its gayest apparel as it may never be bedecked again,’ gushed one.

‘Near the General Post Office myriad banners flutter round dense thickets of poles, with flashing gilt tops... In Queen’s Place, where the marble statue of her Majesty the Queen has been crowned and wreathed and ribboned in all conceivable ways with stripes of many coloured incadescent lamps, lofty plaster pillars support artistic representations of her Majesty’s forces. The city was wreathed and bespangled with garlands as far as Centennial Park...’

Leading the pageant were the mounted troopers, great favourites with the crowds, who at the Domain ‘wound out from under a grand arch of coal, against which the white pennants and flowers glistened like snow’. They were followed by trade union leaders, their ‘working clothes’ in sharp contrast to the formal dress of the leading politicians from every colony who followed behind them in stylish carriages.

There were loud cheers for Edmund Barton, Prime Minister-elect, and for

his ministers as they passed proudly through the streets.

But, although the colonies had settled their rivalries for the occasion, the same could not be said for the churches. After various carriages conveying high-ranking intercolonial visitors, came the Primate of Australia, Archbishop Smith, dressed in brilliant robes.

But the head of the Roman Catholic Church, Archbishop Moran, was absent because he was offered only equal ranking with the Primate in the procession, and not given precedence as he insisted.

The crowd, however, did not pay much attention to this snub to the Commonwealth, for immediately behind the clergy came the most brilliant part of the pageant: the military.

‘All the enthusiasm the people could muster was shown now, and those who came in for most cheering were the returned South African (War) soldiers from New South Wales and Victoria,’ reported the *Australasian*.

But there were hearty cheers, too, for the Household Cavalry, the Highlanders, the Guards, the Royal Engineers, and troops from New Zealand, India and other parts of the Empire.

The people were proud to be Australian — and quick to enjoy a joke at the expense of ‘foreigners’. As the procession halted briefly at one place, a Sydney man perched on a barrier called out to the English troops: ‘Well, what do you think of sunny New South Wales?’

Noted one reporter: ‘The soldiers were too well drilled to reply, but the way

in which their helmets were lifted so that streams of perspiration may be allowed to run was eloquent testimony to the sarcasm of the adjective 'sunny.'

Opposite St Mary's Cathedral 2000 little girls waved colourful handkerchiefs, while from the packed grandstands along the route people waved flags, threw flowers, sang patriotic songs and cheered.

The procession marched proudly through scores of arches with greetings from around the world: 'United Germany Greet's United Australia'; 'The United States Welcomes United Australia'; 'We Welcome in Unity Our Comrades from Over the Seas'.

'There was so much of interest and of beauty along that triumphant pageant that human eyesight inevitably lost its range,' reporter George Cockerill enthusiastically telegraphed the *Melbourne Age*.

'A mile of waving plumes, of glittering lances, of giant bobbing busbies, of prancing horses, of stately plumed life guardsmen, with flashing helmets and breast plates; of swarthy Maoris, sitting on great lean horses like statues; of romantic looking Indians in gorgeous Oriental costumes; of thickets of swords and lances — these were the main features of the procession as a spectacle.

'The sight of those walls of stately troops in all the circumstances of glorious war stirred the hearts of people... They laughed and cheered and kept on cheering, while some of them wiped away tears which they could not explain, for there was no explanation other than the overwhelming excess of patriotism, of loyalty and of kindly feeling...'

When at last the procession passed under the huge arch of flowers and greenery at the entrance to Centennial Park, it was met by a crowd of around 150,000 people.

‘They rose tier upon tier on every hand, and to three of the main points of the compass,’ said one newspaper report. ‘It was impossible to see beyond them. On one hand was a vast natural gallery that looked from a distance like a field stocked to its utmost capacity with white flowering dahlias.

‘These apparent dahlias were 15,000 schoolchildren, 10,000 of them white muslin-clad, sweet-voiced little girls gathered to sing praises and Federal odes... To the right of the children were 1500 male choristers. On the outer ring were the great public.’

Soon the booming of a field gun announced that Lord Hopetoun, the first Governor-General, had entered the park. A salute of 19 guns followed, after which dignatories, both religious and civil, ranged themselves on either side of a covered walkway leading to the ornate pavilion, where Mr Barton alone awaited the arrival of the Queen’s representative.

Exactly at one o’clock Lord Hopetoun, in an imposing uniform adorned with all his stars, orders and medals, walked on to the pavilion. He shook hands with Mr Barton while the bands played ‘God Save the Queen’.

After a 400-voice choir sang the hymn, ‘O God, our help in ages past’, the Primate offered a prayer for the Commonwealth.

Then, on the same table on which Queen Victoria had signed her assent to the Commonwealth Bill, Lord Hopetoun signed the oath of allegiance as

Governor-General. The crowd cheered loudly as a 21-gun salute placed the seal on the vice-regal appointment.

After Mr Barton and his ministers were sworn in, Lord Hopetoun read a message of good wishes to the nation from the Queen, followed by one from the British Government:

*Her Majesty's Government sends cordial greetings to the Commonwealth of Australia.*

*They welcome her to her place among the nations, united under Her Majesty's sovereignty, and confidently anticipate for the new federation a future of ever-increasing prosperity and influence.*

*They recognise in the long-desired consummation of the hopes of patriotic Australians a further step in the direction of the permanent unity of the British Empire.*

*They are satisfied that the wider powers and responsibilities, henceforth the sphere of Australia, will give further opportunity for the display of that generous loyalty to the Throne and Empire which has characterised the action in the past of the several states.'*

Then, as a triumphant end to a memorable day, thousands of voices stirred the air with the noble 'Hallelujah Chorus'. Australia, at last, was one nation.