

WATTLE DAYS

FROM ADAM LINDSAY GORDON TO GINGER MICK

Edwin Ride tells of the blossoming recognition of Australia's national floral emblem

In 1996, the National Library acquired at auction in England a couple of autograph albums, originally the property of B.M. Williams, of Bristol. Miss Williams came by the first of these albums, probably a gift to her, in about 1909—however, the albums saw little use until she took up a position as a nurse in the Beaufort War Hospital in 1915. Here she tended to the needs of servicemen recuperating from wounds acquired across the Channel in France and Belgium, and the albums came into their own. By the end of the war, she had collected inscriptions from Australian, British and Canadian soldiers as they passed through her care.

Mementos of the men who she nursed to health—to be either repatriated or returned

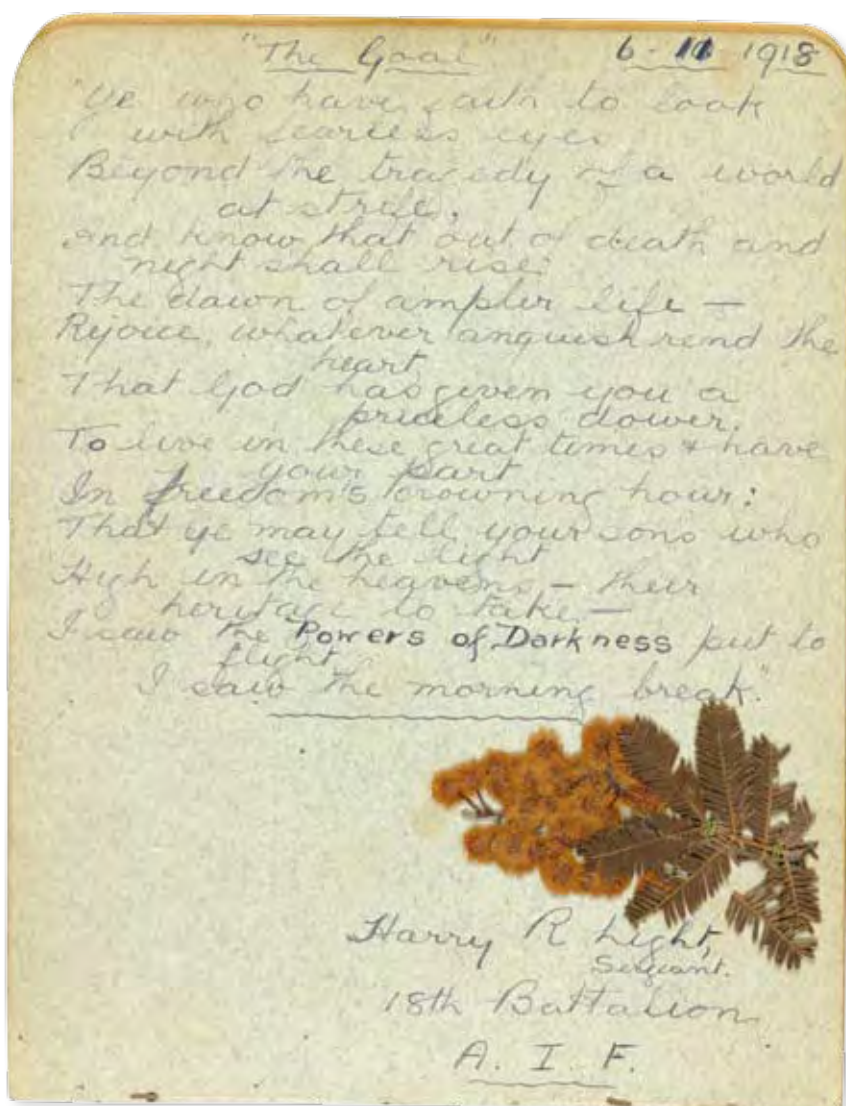
to the maelstrom of war—many entries are poetic expressions of the regard she had engendered in her charges. 'You ask me for something original, / something from inside my head, / because there's nothing inside my head / here's something from outside instead,' wrote one soldier, affixing a lock of his hair to the page.

The album entries of most interest to me, however, were the two where Australian soldiers had signed off their entries with a small spray of wattle blossom held in place with stitches or gummed paper. Golden Wattle was only declared our national emblem in 1988 and so how it came to be used in such a deeply symbolic fashion 70 years earlier was clearly worth investigating. My conclusions surprised me.

In the very earliest days of European settlement in Australia, houses were constructed at Port Jackson using the age-old technique of wattle-and-daub. The local

above left:
Entry by Private Green (27th Battalion A.I.F.) in B.M. Williams' autograph book, and decorated with wattle sprig
Manuscript Collection
MS 9461

above:
Two Wattle Day badges from the C.S. Daley collection
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an21689922



Entry by Sergeant Light (18th Battalion A.I.F.) in B.M. Williams' autograph book, and decorated with wattle sprig
 Manuscripts Collection
 MS 9461

native plants which proved to have suitably supple branches and stems for this building method quickly came by the name 'wattle'. The immediate concerns of the settlers were practical and, for a long time, wattles were investigated almost exclusively for their utility: the value of their timber, gums and bark. Their aesthetic potential was also recognised by gardeners who sent seed back for propagation in Europe (where they became known as mimosa), and references to wattles began to appear in Australian poetry as early as the 1820s, though it wasn't until the 1860s that wattle really took off as a recurring poetic theme.

The ways in which wattle is used in the poetry of Victorian Australia range from the prosaic through to the varied symbolism of their golden blossom and their representing 'home' to Australians abroad. Significantly, from 1866 wattle also appears as a symbol of Australia in book titles—*Twixt Heather and Wattle*, *Shamrock and Wattle Bloom*,

Oak Bough and Wattle Blossom and *May Bloom and Wattle Blossoms* all tell stories of their own. One of the most popular of the early Australian poets, Adam Lindsay Gordon, was reviled for many years by the more literal of his readers as the fellow who described Australia as the land of 'scentless bright blossoms and songless bright birds'.

To be fair to Gordon, he had continued in the same poem with the lines, 'In the Spring, when the wattle gold trembles/Twixt shadow and shine'. When he died by his own hand in 1870, Gordon was buried (according to his wishes as interpreted from one of his most popular poems, 'The Sick Stockrider'), 'where the wattle blossoms wave'. Gordon had been highly respected in life as a sportsman, particularly as a rider, a respect which knew no class divide. Through the granting of this posthumous wish, it was as though the seal was set on the symbolic value of wattle, and simultaneously the floodgates were opened on the bottled-up poetry in the cities and bush.

It was the sheer volume of poetry produced, with wattle integral or incidental, which caused J.F. Archibald, the editor of the *Bulletin*, to comment to a new contributor:

'Your verses blew into the office like a whiff from the bush. It was a pleasure to read some lines which did not contain wattle and dead men'. Henry Lawson added a personal perspective:

Journalistic imitators are the meanest of
 mankind;
 And the grandest themes are hackneyed by the
 pens that come behind.
 If you strike a novel subject, write it up, and do
 not fail,
 They will rhyme and prose about it till your very
 own is stale,
 As they raved about the region that the wattle
 boughs perfume
 Till the reader cursed the bushman and the stink
 of wattle-bloom.

The reader may have cursed, but wattle had by now been firmly ensconced in the national consciousness for a generation or more. Not everyone read poetry of course,

but the influence had spread—there were Wattle waltzes and Wattle songs, and in the early years of the Commonwealth you could smoke Wattle branded cigarettes and drink Fosters' Wattle beer. All that was needed now was the right catalyst for this sentiment to find full expression. Attempts by the Australian Natives' Association in 1889, 1891 and 1896 to use wattle as an emblem were short lived in both Melbourne and Adelaide. In Melbourne, naturalist Archibald Campbell gave slide shows and organised wattle viewing expeditions every spring, but these led nowhere definite. (Actually, they generally ended with a pilgrimage to Gordon's grave.)

It was at an Empire Day celebration at the Girls High School in Sydney in 1906 that the germ of the successful idea was sown—the idea that became National Wattle Day. Joseph Maiden, director of the Botanic Gardens and a confirmed 'wattleophile' (he had his daughter christened *Acacia Dorothea*) suggested in his speech to the assembled girls that national sentiment should be associated with wattle as a national flower. Two of the mothers present, the poet Agnes Kettlewell and her friend Hannah Clunies-Ross, saw merit in the suggestion, and some time later approached Maiden to discuss how best to proceed.

In August 1909, a public meeting was held, the promotional leaflet for which stated:

With a view of stimulating Australian national sentiment, and connecting it with love of our beautiful flora, we suggest the desirableness of

setting apart throughout the Commonwealth a day on which the Australian national flower—the Wattle Blossom—might be worn.

The following year, Wattle Day was celebrated in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales, and over the next couple of years Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland joined in. Celebrations organised by the Wattle Day League generally took the form of tree plantings, school excursions and presentations; however, the idea of a national flower had significant commercial merit as well. It wasn't long before community groups started selling sprigs of wattle on the street to raise money for women's and children's charities.

Destruction to trees on public and private property was an unfortunate side effect of these activities, which saw, in response, the thoroughly upset anti-Wattle Day protestors of Heidelberg in complete accord with the deeply concerned tree planting conservationist Wattle Day League. Controversy is good for publicity too, and it must have been difficult to remain unaware of the place that wattle was taking in national affairs. On a formal level too, wattle was being elevated to great significance with its inclusion in the Commonwealth coat-of-arms. On 20 September 1910, three weeks after the first observance of National Wattle Day, Labor's Prime Minister Andrew Fisher announced in the press that he had asked that the 1908 arms be redrawn, and that wattle be included in the design.

below from left:

Cover of sheet music for 'Only a Spray of Wattle', by James Goodman (Sydney: William Brooks & Co., 1910s)
Music Collection
nla.mus-vn3069599

Cover of sheet music for 'My Sweet Australian Wattle Girl', by Herschel Henlere (Melbourne: Allans Music Publishers, 1925)
Music Collection
nla.mus-an23150699

Cover of sheet music for 'Wattle Time (Song Waltz)', by Ada Tullidge and Elizabeth Blair (Melbourne: Reginald Stoneham Music Publishing Co., 1922)
Music Collection
nla.mus-an6487667





above:
Unknown photographer
Wattle Day, Maggie Moore's
Stall, 1914
sepia toned b&w photograph
8.7 x 13.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23763252

below:
Wolfgang Sievers (b.1913)
*Australian Coat of Arms, ACT
Supreme Court, Canberra, 1963*
gelatin silver photograph
21.0 x 25.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an14052865-12



The new arms, those we have today, were gazetted in 1912.

In December 1913, the (Liberal) Post-Master General released the first of the King George V postage stamps, with wattle as an integral part of the design. The following year, Australia was at war and, for all its past poetic possibilities, wattle became now, most importantly, a symbol of home. Australian troops were deployed overseas, leaving Australia at the very time wattle fever was at its height—a fresh emblem for a young country. Wattle Days continued, with funds raised through sales of buttons for the Red Cross, for stretcher bearers and for repatriation hospitals. Sprigs of wattle were sent to loved ones overseas, and poetry was sent back home. Bombardier Arthur Scott from Gallipoli (*The Anzac Book*, 1916) wrote:

My mother's letter came to-day,
And now my thoughts are far away,
For in between its pages lay
A little sprig of wattle.

The same year saw C.J. Dennis' creation of Ginger Mick, a mate of the Sentimental Bloke: 'I 'ave written Mick a letter in reply to one uv 'is/Where 'e arsts 'ow things is goin' where the gums an' wattles is/'. Dennis' books were popular overseas, being

specially printed in a pocket edition for the troops, who learn how Mick doesn't make it through the Gallipoli campaign, in 'A long straight letter from a bloke called Trent'. C.J. Dennis knew his audience well—his finger was on the pulse of the day. He lived through the establishment of wattle as Australia's national emblem, and he unselfconsciously perpetuated the tradition of using wattle in verse to illustrate his national characters. I am content to give him, as a chronicler of the times, the final word.

'We buried 'im,' sez Trent, 'down by the beach.
We put mimosa on the mound uv sand
Above 'im. 'Twus the nearest thing in reach
To golden wattle uv 'is native land.
But never wus the fairest wattle wreath
More golden than the 'eart uv 'im beneath ...'

EDWIN RIDE is a writer and independent curator. He is currently championing the cause of a wattle exhibition to be held in 2010, to celebrate the centenary of Wattle Day