

Wattle Nationalism

Libby Robin responds to an earlier News article about our national blossom

Like patriotism, wattle can be approached in a number of ways. The idea of wattle symbolising a fair and equal Australia has underpinned most bids for its nomination as our 'national' flower. The plant is geographically inclusive, with over 1000 indigenous species distributed across the continent, including Tasmania. Wattles grow well in the tropics, the temperate zone and the arid interior. However, above all it was probably the fact that wattles were prominent and attractive in the damaged landscapes of central goldfields Victoria that gave them sentimental appeal at a crucial time in the late nineteenth century.

The Australian Natives Association (ANA), many of whose members had grown up in the Ballarat goldfields, was a strong proponent for federation of the Australian states. Established in 1871 as a mutual benefit or friendly society, the ANA quickly also became 'a mutual improvement and national association'. The heart of ANA membership was the children of gold-rush immigrants, who at the time had just reached their twenties. The rivers and springs of their childhood had been coloured golden with wattle blossom.

John Menedue, in his centenary history of the ANA, describes the active search in the 1880s for 'a national flower or emblem' for Australia—a flower which would serve like 'the rose for the Englishman, the thistle for the Scotlander and the shamrock for Old Ireland'. The wattle was a natural choice, because it symbolised the 'new life' of spring for the new nation of Australia. The wattle bloom was widespread and readily available, and this gave Wattle Day its purpose as a 'day of inclusiveness':

The wearing of the blossom ... by people of all classes and creeds and political parties ...



is meant to impress upon the mind and the imagination of Young Australia in particular that on the day of its exhibition everybody stands forth as an Australian.
(*South Australian Register*, 26 August 1912)

Ellis Rowan (1848–1922)
Blossom Time 190-?
watercolour on board
39.0 x 28.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an13008124

Wattle was more than just an emblem of nationhood; it represented the 'classless and fair' society that patriotic nationalists wanted to promote. Not just a young nation, but an abundant and generous one, in the rhetoric of Tullie Wollaston in his book *Our Wattles* (1916):

Is there anything quite so wonderful anywhere else? More gorgeous flowering trees there

may be ... but where on all the habitable globe will you find a 30-feet [10 m] tree seven years from seed which will yield you sprays ... packing 28 feet of it, and even much larger and finer sprays crowning the very top! ... And then in another five years your tree is 50 feet and finally 70 to 100, if you treat it fairly. Well, our bright Australia is like that. It is only a mere youngster still, and yet how soon it began to yield its treasure, and how generously to reward our labour and answer our settled trust! So that I venture to say that we have escaped the touch of niggardliness by the bounty of our country ... [O]ur chosen emblem is not only a true symbol of outward prosperity, but suggests a note of generosity in the people, or at least helps them to remember 'freely ye have received, freely give'.

Wollaston advocated wattle planting—not just wearing the blossom one day in the year, but watching the tree grow for seven and 12 years hence. The links between wattle and nation are apparent.

Edwin Ride's earlier *National Library of Australia News* article 'Wattle Days: From Adam Lindsay Gordon to Ginger Mick' (August 2007) entertained us with the story of J.H. Maiden's initiative for a 'national' Wattle Day to replace (the international) Empire Day. Maiden, like Wollaston, was an enthusiastic wattle planter, taking seeds of all varieties to various parts of his home state of New South Wales and also further afield, through his networks as government botanist. The spread of Cootamundra wattle—a very beautiful tree, but now regarded as an invasive species outside its original region—has been blamed on

Maiden. His wattle evangelism (he named his daughter *Acacia Dorothea*) has left a mixed legacy: the success of his experimental planting makes it difficult now to ascertain the original provenance of many *Acacia* species.

One of the fascinating things about wattle nationalism is how each researcher chooses a different focus. My own research began with an interest in Archibald James Campbell (1853–1929), who led groups on spring wattle walks in the bush and established a Wattle League in 1899. The National

Library holds Campbell's magnificent private collection of archives and photographs. His early lantern-slide shows celebrating Wattle Day are important to the history of photography, as well as recording the evolution of the national spirit. The Wattle League continued until superseded in 1957 by the Society for Growing Australian Plants, which over the past half-century has encouraged a trend away from European gardening towards planting Australian varieties more suitable to our local conditions.

In dismissing Campbell's wattle work as 'leading nowhere definite', I think Ride overlooked Campbell's indirect legacies. Inspired by the delightful albums of Miss B.M. Williams (also held in the Library's Collection), Ride's article chose to focus closely on the wattle in literature and Wattle Days in schools—events strongly supported by Maiden. Yet, while important in the first decades of the twentieth century, these events were increasingly rare by the 1930s and later. The truth is, wattles have been in and out of fashion ever since first being designated a 'promising colonial export' in 1802. Each new generation has re-invented its own form of 'wattle nationalism' for a different purpose.

In his article, Ride proposed 2010 as the appropriate year for celebrating the centenary of the 'first national wattle day'. I believe this raises several historical problems.

Apart from the fact that Western Australia and Queensland did not celebrate Wattle Day until 1912, in the early federation years Wattle Day was the 'harbinger of spring', following the tradition advocated by the ANA, and a notion promoted strongly by both Campbell and Maiden. The problem is that the dates of spring flowerings varied: the day was celebrated on 1 August in Sydney and 10 September in Hobart, and on several other dates in between, in the other states, according to seasonal differences. It was not until 1992 that a 'national date' was finally declared—1 September—which, while practical, was a move away from the best wattle blossoming time in many areas (and with future climate change, this may become even more pronounced).

To set a centenary celebration in 2010 would ignore the interesting Wattle Day events which had been held before 1910. The first Wattle Day in Hobart Town was

Melba Studios
Portrait of Archibald Campbell
c.1920s
sepia toned photograph
21.5 x 16.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24777671





in 1838. It was not an 'annual' event, but rather a celebration of the great industry of leather tanning. The importance of wattle bark in the tanning industry was celebrated, at the height of the 'barking' season (not the flowering season); and the 1838 celebration marked the occasion of the golden jubilee (50th anniversary) of British Settlement in Sydney, on 26 January 1788.

The specific choice of Golden Wattle, *Acacia pycnantha*, as the national floral emblem (finally made 'official' in 1988) was also linked historically to the tanning industry. In South Australia, where Golden Wattle was the useful tree native to Mt Lofty, the wattle iconography focused on the concept of democracy, not spring. The Wattle Blossom League of South Australia, established in 1890, came to represent women's suffrage, a cause in which South Australia led the world. On 13 March 1890, the ladies' committee of

the ANA No 1 Branch in Adelaide inaugurated a Wattle Blossom League. On 'Foundation Day' (26 January 1891) they publicly displayed their embroidered Wattle Blossom Banner. This event was not about live flowers (which were out of season), but about the important economics of the tanning industry, and the relationship between democracy and women's rights.

It can therefore be seen that wattle is the basis for a very complex nationalism, and I would argue that creating a 'centenary' date celebrating one particular moment, or aspect, of an evolving idea is a rather artificial exercise. Indeed, 1910 was the very year that Acacia was embroidered on the Coronation Stole to represent *South Africa*, not Australia. Moreover, the *waratah* was also a national Australian symbol at that time, with the battle for pre-eminence between wattle and waratah being most bitter in Maiden's home town of Sydney.

above left:
Archibald James Campbell
(1853–1929)
Coastal Wattle (Melbourne)
1903
albumen photograph
18.0 x 12.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24232018

above right:
Archibald James Campbell
(1853–1929)
Gathering Golden Wattle (Aspendale) 1896
albumen photograph
19.4 x 13.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24231689



above:
Benjamin Rushton
A Group of Australian Rugby Supporters ... East Circular Quay, November 2003
(showing wattle gold and green as national colours)
coloured photograph
25.3 x 37.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3111328

below:
Harry Beaumont Hammond
(1866–1951)
Wattle and Daub Hut at Sandy Creek, Maffra, Mr Scott Seated at Doorway 1932
gelatin silver photograph
15.4 x 20.0 cm
State Library of Victoria,
accession no H21059,
image no a14072
Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

The most recent spin on the complex relationship of wattle to Australian nationalism centred on the botanical splitting of the genus *Acacia*. In 2005, Australia successfully argued at the Seventeenth International Botanical Congress in Vienna that most of the many wattle species indigenous to Australia should retain the name *Acacia*, rather than take the alternative *Racosperma*—at least in part because of the patriotic significance of the name *Acacia* to Australians. This decision has upset South Africans, who argue that *Acacia*

is likewise a major symbol for them (they don't like *Senegalia* or *Vachellia*, the new names for African *Acacias*), and they use *Acacia* as a vernacular, not just a scientific name.

While there has never been doubt about the Australian national spirit attaching to wattle, it is harder to make a nationalistic case for the name *Acacia* in Australia. The name wattle fundamentally derives from the verb 'to wattle', i.e. to weave flexible branches together prior to daubing them with mud in the construction of a wall. (In England, it was often hazel branches that were so used.) In this sense, 'wattle' symbolism is not so much about nature as about national resourcefulness—using the newfound nature (Australian *Acacias*)

to create buildings in a traditional European style. And it is difficult to put a precise 'anniversary' date on the 'can-do' adaptability of a settler society that wattle evokes.

LIBBY ROBIN has written at length about Australian nationalism and Wattle Day in her book *How a Continent Created a Nation* (2007), winner of the 2007 NSW Premier's Australian History Award

