



above:
Unknown photographer
Killarney School, Empire Day
gelatin silver photograph
30.9 x 25.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an10998777-305
Courtesy Philippa Poole

opposite bottom:
One Flag, One Fleet
reproduced from the *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 26 May 1909
(Sydney: John Fairfax and Sons, 1909)
Newspapers and Microforms Collection
mfm NX 21

EMPIRE DAY

to Cracker Night revels

Ian Warden uses the Library's Newspaper Collection to trace Empire Day's fall from uplifting displays of imperial loyalty to larrikin 'Cracker Nights'

Australians who were children in the 1950s and 60s and only remember Empire Day—24 May—for its intoxicatingly irresponsible 'Cracker Night' may be surprised to learn that the day had once been meant to help them train themselves to be 'Polite, Diligent, Respectful, Obedient, Courageous, Temperate, Persevering, Unselfish and Self-sacrificing!'

In an undated (c.1930) Empire Day promotional booklet held in the Library's Ephemera Collection, the Empire Day

Movement insisted that children must cultivate that long list of virtues for the Empire's sake—only then would they 'become the right men and women to continue the Great Empire'.

By the 1950s however—with Empire Day (initiated in Australia in 1905) then in its twilight years—love of the day's punctuating bonfires and fireworks had eclipsed the day's original patriotic purposes. In their 1979 essay, 'From Empire Day to Cracker Night', historians Stewart Firth and Jeanette Hoorn argue that this widening, and by the 1950s unbridgeable, chasm between official and popular notions of what the day was for was an important reason for governments eventually allowing Empire Day to fizzle out and disappear in the 1960s. 'Released from school at lunchtime, children spent the half holiday on May 24 testing ... double

bungers ... Roman Candles and miniature home-made bombs for the real business of the day: Cracker Night.'

But why, to use an appropriately pyrotechnical metaphor, did Empire Day's commemoration go up like a star-showering rocket in 1905, only to come down like a burnt stick just a few decades later? Popular press reports of the day's commemorations, especially in its early years between 1905 and 1915, describe the commemorations as awesomely vast and popular. The day promises to be a bigger-and-better-every-year occasion of vital national importance.

Sydney's first Empire Day on 24 May 1905 (24 May was the birthday of the late, great, imperious, Empire-building monarch Queen Victoria) saw great gatherings of folk and serial unfurlings of the Union Jack. The weekly *Sydney Mail* reported that the New South Wales Governor, Sir Harry Rawson, 'was kept going at express speed all day from school to school and function to function'. There had been Empire Day goings-on throughout the state. In every town and hamlet the children had warbled patriotic songs, and every community had displayed fervour in some way unique to itself. In Nowra, 'an Empire Tree, a Norfolk pine was planted by the Mayor (Alderman Peak) who delivered a short address', while 'at Tamworth the Prime Minister [George



Reid] excelled himself in the eloquence of his panegyric on the Empire'.

The fervour had been at its height, the *Mail* reported (publishing large photographs to illustrate the point) in Sydney, where that 'oldest and greatest city of the Commonwealth ... rose nobly to the occasion'. The report continued:

In the city and on the shipping, bunting was flying everywhere. It floated high from each tall building ... the very banana man's stalls and carts had Union Jacks stuck over them. Of course the warships were illuminated, and in

above left:
Cyril Brinkley and Gerald M. Lewis
It's Grand to Have a Pal Like England!
(Australia: unknown publisher,
c.1914)
Music Collection
nla.mus-an10560546

above right:
Avide Téméraire
The Empire March
(Sydney: Albert & Son, 1913)
Music Collection
nla.mus-an20785628





Unknown artist
 Empire Day cartoon
 reproduced from the *Bulletin*,
 18 May 1905
 (Sydney: John Haynes and
 J.F. Archibald, 1905)
 Newspapers and Microforms
 Collection
 mfm NX 141

the evening the [vessel] *Euryalus* [had] ... all her outlines ... marked with electric lights. The decoration ... was participated in by all the ships of all nations that thronged the wharfs and bays of Port Jackson. The centre of interest was Queen Victoria's statue, in Queen's Square. That was decorated and embowered in greenery, and it was a centre of pilgrimage all day...

The *Mail*, with its illustrated section, loved the spectacularly photogenic, circulation-stimulating events of Empire Day, and in 1909 captured with enormous and still truly gasp-provoking photographs a Public Schools Children's Display held at the Sydney Cricket Ground, where 25 000 people watched 7100 children arrange themselves into 'a great living Union Jack'.

In fact, however, Empire Day was never the universally observed, nation-galvanising occasion that some of the Australian press reporting suggests. Its champions never did succeed in persuading state governments that the day should be made a public holiday. It was a conservative, Protestant

enthusiasm and invention. The Irish in Australia had strong historical recollections of British imperialism in Ireland, and the overwhelmingly Irish-orientated Roman Catholic church in Australia was hostile to, or at best lukewarm about, Empire Day. From 1911, it was Catholic policy to mark 24 May in its schools not as Empire Day but as Australia Day.

The notion of Empire Day also had some powerful and passionate secular opponents. On the eve of that first Empire Day in 1905, the opinionated and pugnacious weekly the *Sydney Bulletin* railed against the concept in words and pictures. 'To mark this official feast-day of Saint Jingo', it editorialised, 'the children in the public schools will gather together to sing hymns of blood and battle, in glory of a country [Britain] which is not their own.'

The *Bulletin* seethed that Empire Day was the invention of Australia's 'weak-minded snobs' who hoped they could get knighthoods by disparaging their own country and being sycophantic towards Britain. What was needed, the *Bulletin* evangelised, was a form of *Australian* nationalism. The front cover of this especially earnest edition was an illustration of a father pointing to a map of Australia and lecturing his four rapt children: 'An Empire Day, By All Means; But Let This [Australia] Be Your Empire!' Empire Day was un-Australian, the *Bulletin* raged, because 'there is everything hostile to Australia in the British Imperialism of today, with its ideals of war, conquest, pillage...' of which the *Bulletin* thought the Boer War had been a recent shameful example.

The *Bulletin* therefore, in all seriousness, urges those Australian parents who are Australians first ... to gather their children round them on May 24 and tell them of their own land ... washed by clear seas, purified by the breath of the gum forests ... where no man [is] landlord or master, and neither wood nor wood game [has] been divinely set apart for squire and parson, and hats [are] touched to none except in genuine chivalry and respect.

Enthusiasts for Empire Day really did often seem to demonstrate just the sorts of love of blood and battle and conquest on Britain's behalf that the *Bulletin* deplored. Pageants, speeches, songs and poems were full of martial activities and military metaphors.

Boys were encouraged to be ready for glorious self-sacrifice and to don uniform to answer the Empire's call.

Official recitations of the might and size of the Empire were often full of jingoistic braggadocio. For Empire Day 1907, the League of the Empire (South Australian Branch) produced an Empire Day Souvenir program of events and Collection of Imperial Facts And Poems For Sons And Daughters Of The Empire. The National Library has an eerily well-preserved copy of the Souvenir. 'The British Empire, if cut into a strip a mile wide, would reach around the world 450 times!', the Souvenir swaggers, as if its text was dictated by St Jingo. 'Half the ships in the world are British, and the best of them can be converted into ships of war in 48 hours! If any big misfortune were to happen to England 60 000 000 English-speaking people in other countries would leap to their feet.'

The aforementioned Empire Day Movement booklet from around 1930 also sounds like an essay by St Jingo: there is grisly bragging about how 'The Empire played the greatest part in the Greatest War the world has ever seen [the war of 1914-1918] ... The Empire's Dead in the Great War amounted to approximately 1 000 000—no Empire has ever put forth such gigantic Strength in the History of the World.'

But time and world events eventually eroded the power and purpose of Empire Day. Its importance in Australia peaked in 1915, before suffering the long, slow slither into oblivion, albeit punctuated by some sensational pageants and rallies, and then some nighttime bonfires and fireworks. Thenceforth, Anzac Day—an opportunity to express patriotic fervour about Australia and Australians instead of Empire and Protestantism—seriously usurped the sentimental patriotic usefulness of Empire Day. (See story in April 2007 edition of *National Library of Australia News*.) During the Second World War, it was often made clear by Winston Churchill's policies that Britain put the Empire's interests ahead of Australia's. By the late 1940s, Queen Victoria's Empire, which had once imparted such great pink swathes to the world map, began to shrink. India

became independent in 1947 and other colonies of the Empire bustled their way towards independent nationhood. Notions of unquestioning love of England and of Empire became increasingly quaint and unAustralian.

In 1905, the *Sydney Morning Herald's* enthusiasm for the then brand-new concept of Empire Day was expressed by festooning the Herald building's four-storey façade with Union Jacks. By the 1950s, though, the only truly newsworthy things about 24 May which the *Herald* was reporting were Cracker Night excitements: burns, injuries and larrikin atrocities. The morning after Empire Day 1955, the *Herald* ran a big front-page story on the brilliance and mayhem in a city 'lit by the glow of bonfires in every suburb'. Mention of the day's fading solemn purpose was relegated to page seven, which featured, with the caption 'Do you remember Mafeking?', a picture taken at the previous day's Veterans' Empire Day luncheon, showing two fading Boer War veterans nattering about days of long ago.

IAN WARDEN is a Canberra-based writer with a background in newspapers

Bonfires Blaze for Empire Night Revels
reproduced from *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 May 1955
(Sydney: Charles Kemp and John Fairfax, 1955)
Newspapers and Microforms Collection
NX 354

