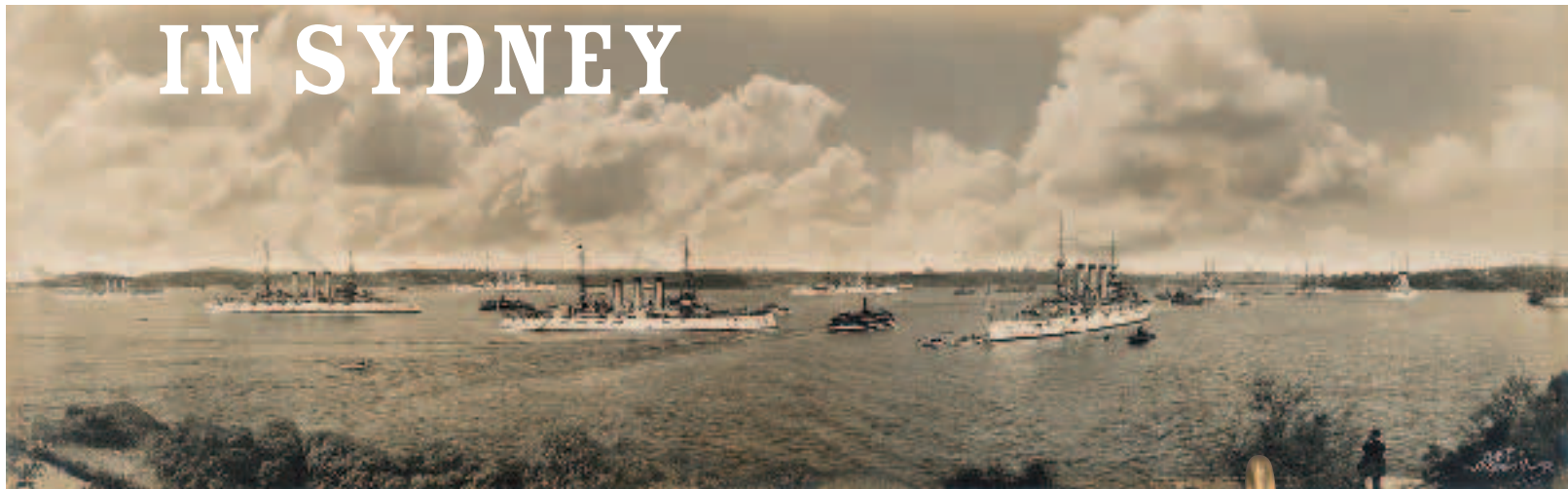


# THE GREAT WHITE FLEET IN SYDNEY



*'What a Time We Are Having!'*

Ian Warden tells the story of 'the greatest spectacle yet witnessed in the history of Australia', as the thrillingly anticipated Great White Fleet of 16 colossal American warships entered Sydney Heads 100 years ago.

On the morning of Thursday 20 August 1908, a fleet of 16 showy American warships resplendent in white paint (but carrying thousands of gallons of grey paint just in case war broke out and they had to dress appropriately in a hurry) swaggered into Sydney Harbour. The Great White Fleet, the pride and joy of navy-mad United States President Theodore Roosevelt, had left its port in Virginia on 16 December the previous year. It had sailed away to circumnavigate the world in a display of American might, diplomacy and technological virtuosity.

And because it was literally a *display*, the 16 behemoths (the largest were 140 metres long and weighed 16 000 tonnes) had been freshly painted in showy white and buff paint before sailing forth. Nor did they slither surreptitiously out to sea with wartime secrecy but, instead, they left with a fanfare, farewelled by the president, and, in a sense, kept up that fanfare for the 14 months of the voyage.

The flagship *USS Connecticut* even had a kind of press centre aboard, bombarding the local press everywhere with awe-inspiring statistics, such as the fleet carried 12 793 men and officers and bristled with 360 guns which, if they all fired a single salvo together, would use up ammunition worth \$50 000, an amount that was coincidentally the annual salary of President Roosevelt.

Why did the fleet visit Australia? It seems that Australia was not definitely on its itinerary as it left Virginia because, in late December of 1907 and then in early January of 1908, with the fleet already out on the mighty ocean deep, Prime Minister Alfred Deakin was still urgently pulling strings. He wrote fulsome letters to pivotal people (to the American consul general in Melbourne and to the American ambassador in London), urging them to ask the president to let the fleet come here. The National Library of Australia has some of this correspondence. Deakin wrote:

The appearance in the Pacific of such an Armada as the great American fleet is an event in the history not only of the US but of that Ocean. ... [We] are anxious to have some opportunity of expressing our sympathy with our kinsmen in their demonstration of naval power ... No other federation in the world possesses so many features of likeness to that of the US as does the Commonwealth of Australia.



top:  
Alfred Cutler  
*The Great White Fleet in Sydney Harbour as Seen from Cremorne Point, 1908*  
b&w photograph; 37.7 x 119.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an21287102

above:  
Souvenir medal to commemorate the visit of the American fleet to Australia in 1908  
brass medal; 2.4 cm diameter  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an7884481

right:  
 Alan M. Rattray and  
 L.L. Howarde  
*The Sons of Uncle Sam*  
 c.1908  
 coloured illustrated score  
 34 cm, 4 pp.  
 Music Collection  
 nla.mus-an6964576

far right:  
 Harry V. Ingham  
*Life with American Squadron*  
 c.1908  
 coloured illustrated score  
 36 cm, 7 pp.  
 Music Collection  
 nla.mus-an6964576

bottom left:  
 Alf Vincent  
*Fleet Week in Sydney*  
 reproduced from *The Bulletin*,  
 20 August 1908  
 (Sydney: John Haynes and  
 J.F. Archibald, 1908)  
 Newspapers and Microforms  
 Collection  
 NX 252

bottom right:  
 Unknown artist  
*What a Time We Are Having!*  
 reproduced from *The Bulletin*,  
 20 August 1908  
 (Sydney: John Haynes and  
 J.F. Archibald, 1908)  
 Newspapers and Microforms  
 Collection  
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Australia, genuinely fearful of Asian aggression, had no true navy of its own (*The Bulletin* spoke of the dozen Commonwealth hulks as 'these 12 venerables') and, in 1908, depended utterly on whatever naval defence Britain might provide for British reasons. Deakin's enthusiasm for a display of American naval might in Australian waters and for a chance to stress kinship with America was, in part, about trying to guarantee the defence of a vulnerable Australia.

But lots of the kinship was heartfelt and many verses, which we in 2008 might think

racist and jingoistic, were written to coincide with the fleet's visit. In his *Ode of Welcome*, Louis Esson wrote that the Americans, white like us and our 'Brothers of the Blood' that had gurgled through the veins of the Vikings and of Sir Francis Drake, would help us repel 'Asian arrogance' with the same 'lust of battle, joy of war' that had biffed the Spanish Armada to oblivion.

Hail to the Eagles! With strong beat  
 Their wings sweep over threatened seas.  
 Australia hails a kinsman Fleet.  
 That guards the future centuries.  
 The White Man's grip must never fail—  
 Sea-Eagles of Columbia, hail!

*The Bulletin*, in the form of editorials, verse and cartoons, argued that the American fleet was an advertisement for what a proud, self-reliant republic could achieve. One anonymous poem saw the visiting fleet as both a grand spectacle and an embarrassing wake-up call for the host.

You ... stream slow in grand procession,  
 And past the frowning Head.  
 You sweep in glory splendid  
 To mock our feeble powers  
 Till shame with glee is blended  
 O Fleet that is not ours!  
 Oh, wake us from our dreaming,  
 With vision of your pride,  
 Till on these waters gleaming,  
 Two fleets are side by side.



But, for most Australians, oblivious to the politics of it all, the visit of the fleet was an excuse for an orgy of sightseeing and social excitement. In New South Wales (and then a few days later in Victoria), special school holidays were called and the bush came to town.

Hoteliers and boarding house proprietors were among the many sorts of entrepreneurs to make hay while the sun of Fleet Week shone. One *Bulletin* cartoon had a smug landlady telling a traveller that, no, of course she didn't have a room or a bed left 'but there's still one of the pantry shelves not let'.

Cashing in, papers published special souvenir editions. *The Bulletin* had a *White Armada Supplement* featuring a new and seafaringly appropriate Henry Lawson poem, *Port o' Call*, as well as a front-page cartoon of the American eagle (smoking a cigar) dancing with the Australian kangaroo (smoking a pipe) and rejoicing together 'What a Time We Are Having!'.

Everywhere the Sydney crowds were enormous. The tyrannies of cost and distance meant that most Australians had no prospect of ever going to the fabled United States of America, but here was the once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon of the fabled United States coming to Australia. Estimates of the throng around the harbour, and especially at South Head, waiting for the fleet's arrival, were as high as 650 000 and, to the fleet's dashing, braid-encrusted commander Admiral Sperry, it looked like a million. *Town and Country Journal*, which had deployed 20 photographers around the Heads and the harbour, thought the host so impossible to measure in numbers that it was better to describe them by the 'acre' of humanity. No one wanted to miss the juxtaposition of the world's most beautiful harbour with the world's most fantastic flotilla.

Sydney not only spruced up its existing glories but also added ornamentations and festoonings galore. One alderman insisted on the cleaning of one soot-encrusted white marble bust of Queen Victoria 'to show the Americans that we have some white marble as well as white Australians'. In his memoir, *Around the World with the Battleships* (1909), Roman Miller (Chief Turret Captain aboard *USS Vermont*) rhapsodised about how:

[the city's] chief feature was the bunting in a perfect wealth of flags, drapings and hangings, banners, standards and signals, enswathing whole streets, half covering whole great blocks.

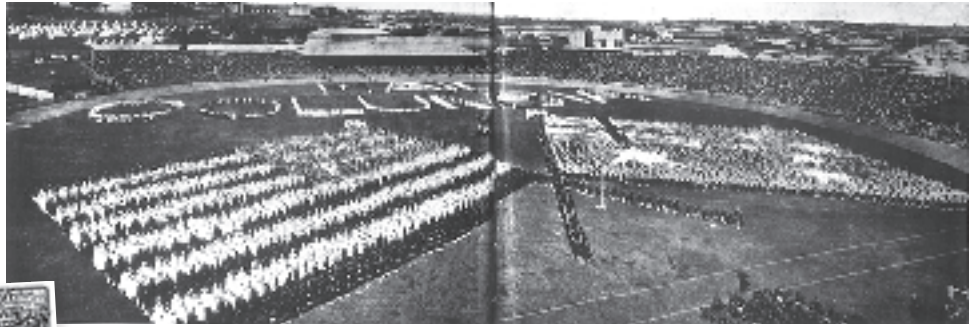
Looking down King Street one was surprised by a most realistic reproduction of our great Statue of Liberty ... It was in front of the office of the *Daily Telegraph*. It arose abrupt and bold against the night, flanked by the illuminated flags of the United States and Australia.

Sydney and Melbourne both seem, to the modern reader, to have tried far too hard to impress. In this new nation, every Australian city was a little unsure of itself and wanted to show that it was a world-class metropolis. The programs of formal events, banquets, concerts, church services, organ recitals, garden parties, receptions, military reviews, sporting contests, excursions and displays eventually ground the visitors down. In the most extravagant of the displays, 9000 schoolchildren in red and white formed, on the broad meadow of the Sydney Cricket Ground, the words 'Hail Columbia', as well as the two 'living flags' of the host and visitor.

The officers, in enormous social demand (the brilliant *Bulletin* gossip columnist 'Akenehi' mingled with them everywhere

Rose Stereographs  
*The American Fleet in Australia.*  
*Procession in Martin Place, Sydney.*  
*The Lord Mayor's Carriage* 1908  
gelatin silver stereograph  
9.0 x 14.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an13942954





above right:  
Unknown photographer  
*Children Forming the Words 'Hail Columbia' and the United States and Australian Flags*  
reproduced from *Town and Country Journal*, 2 September 1908  
(Sydney: Frank and Christopher Bennett, 1908)  
Newspapers and Microforms Collection  
mfm NX442

above:  
Mick Paul  
*Delilah and the Deserter*  
reproduced from *The Bulletin*, 27 August 1908  
(Sydney: John Haynes and J.F. Archibald, 1908)  
Newspapers and Microforms Collection  
NX 252

and, very impressed, described them as 'square-faced, pale and, for the most part, young men with accents like banjos'), were stoical and law-abiding but lots of the visiting rank-and-file staggered off the prescribed straight and narrow quite early in Fleet Week.

While at sea, the fleet was utterly 'dry' and of course utterly monastic, so the temptations ashore in Australia were extreme. *The Bulletin*, noting the phenomenon, ran a cartoon *Delilah and the Deserter*, in which a smirking Sydney Delilah (the biblical Delilah was the temptress who seduced Samson) frolicked with the American sailor she had tempted away from his vessel. In all, 91 American sailors did not

report back to their vessels in proper time for the departure from Sydney.

And it seems that a lot of the temptations for the boys of the fleet were provided by something more profound than the fleeting pleasures of the flesh and of the demon drink because, by one American historian's estimation, 'the total manpower loss [from the fleet] in Australia was 115 to 130 men'.

They stayed behind and melted into the community, if initially beguiled by a Delilah then also beguiled perhaps by affable, sunny, progressive, equalitarian Australia itself. Some of the majority who did their duty and who dutifully sailed for home envied the men who had deserted and stayed. 'If I were not in the Navy,' a wistful Midshipman Sauffley wrote home to his parents about the deserters and about the wrench of sailing away from Australia, 'I would settle here myself.' On Thursday 27 August, the fleet shimmered out of Sydney Harbour en route for what one Sydney writer was

sure would be the 'anti-climax' of its visit to inferior Melbourne.

Looking back on the helter-skelter week in Sydney, as the great effigy of Liberty was dismantled, the bunting taken down and Queen Victoria's white marble bust began to acquire another patina of grime, *Town and Country Journal* thought that the city and its folk had performed admirably and were entitled to 'a little purr of self-congratulation'.

The fleet's technological and diplomatic triumphs are relatively easy to measure. The 42 227-mile circumnavigation of the world in 14 months, and without a major breakdown, was a wonderful thing for the Americans. Roosevelt, who had already won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906 for mediating between Russia and Japan, was to reflect that his sending of his armada around the world 'was the most important service that I ever rendered to peace'.

But the fleet's subtle political, commercial, emotional, memory-etching impacts on its ports of call are a fascinating but neglected field of study. Was the fleet's Australian visit, pleaded for by Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, the extravagant start of the now familiar style of Australia's military alliance with the United States? And what became of the banjo-voiced deserters? How wonderful it would be to know their stories. Did they eventually come to pine for home after their necessarily hasty decisions to forsake it? Or did they, perhaps for a while masking the tell-tale banjo-ness of their voices to avoid detection, love their new country and marry their Delilahs and live happily ever after?

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