THE BOER WAR:
ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE

BLOODING THE NATION:
THE BOER WAR AND FEDERATION
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On the way to federation, Australian federalists boasted that their nation was to be born in peace; when federation was achieved federalists were delighted that their nation was born in war. That is the change I want to trace. I plan to do it by looking at the poetry of federation. Federation and poetry! Was Australian federation ever poetic?

Many people think of federation as an unexciting, prosaic business. Some historians think of federation as not much more than a business agreement. But to those who worked for it, federation was a sacred cause. Hence poetry was the most appropriate medium to express its rationale and purposes. It was poetry's role to deal with what was noble, profound and elevating. There are innumerable federation poems by hundreds of different hands.[1] The nation was born in a festival of poetry. Historians have noticed the poems, but have not known quite what to do with them. Most of them are valueless as poetry. One leading scholar, introducing his bibliography of federation sources, declared 'It seemed kinder to spare us all any inventory of the poems, "poems" and verse'.[2] He thus removed from consideration the best guide to the ideas and ideals which inspired the movement. It is in the poetry that we can trace the effect of the Boer War on federation.

The poets were confident that God or destiny intended Australia to be a nation. The evidence was in the first place physical. They forgot Tasmania (which was inconsiderate since it was always keen about federation) and saw the nation-to-be as a single geographical unit, a whole continent with only natural boundaries. This was a special benediction. Other nations had man-made frontiers; Australia's were the sea. It was a land set apart from the rest of the world. A common word for the sea in this role was 'girdle' and in its verbal form 'girdled' or 'girdling' or 'girt'. 'Advance Australia Fair', written by Peter McCormick in 1878 and now the national anthem, uses 'girt' and assumes the implications of the sea boundary do not have to be spelled out, recording merely 'our home is girt by sea'.

The social uniformity within the continent also marked out Australia for nationhood. The people were of one blood or stock or race; they spoke the same language; they shared a glorious heritage (Britain's), the most celebrated part of which was political freedom which had been extended in Australia to all men so that the country was the freest on earth. This unity was also put down to God or destiny, overlooking the British Government, their undoubted instrument, which had claimed the whole continent and determined the composition of its population.

The best federation poem was written very early (1877) by James Brunton Stephens, a headmaster at a Brisbane state school. He had taught in the bush, which he hated, and got his transfer to Brisbane with the approval of Samuel Griffith, then Minister of Education.

'The Dominion of Australia: A Forecast' begins 'She is not yet' and asks ' How long "not yet"?' The poem develops an elaborate comparison between the silent force carrying Australia to its destiny and the underground rivers which some experts assumed must run under the parched lands of the outback and which one day might be released to make the desert bloom. This is the final verse:

> So flows beneath our good and ill
> A viewless stream of Common Will,
> A gathering force, a present might,
> That from its silent depths of gloom

At Wisdom's voice shall leap to light
And hide our barren feuds in bloom,
Till, all our sundering lines with love o'ergrown,
Our bounds shall be the girdling seas alone.

When Sir Henry Parkes opened his campaign for federation in his famous speech at Tenterfield in 1889, he quoted from this poem.[3] He did well to quote from Stephens' poetry rather than his own. At the time he launched his campaign he was revising the proofs of his next book of poems, *Fragmentary Thoughts*. In Brisbane a few days before his Tenterfield speech, he had refused to disclose his federal plans to the Courier's reporter but had been very willing to discuss poetry.[4] He passed the proofs of his poems to the journalist for his opinion. He declared Stephens to be the best poet in Australia, a compliment Stephens returned in his review of *Fragmentary Thoughts* which contrived to be favourable without pronouncing definitely on the quality of the poems.[5]

In his new collection Parkes rehearsed a standard theme in 'The Flag' and made peace one of the benefits of Australia's apartness:

God girdled our majestic isle
   With seas far-reaching east and west,
That man might live beneath this smile
   In peace and freedom ever blest.

He was a much better phrase-maker in his speeches.

According to the poets, the prospects for the new nation were unrivalled. Australia had no ancient feuds, no privileged caste, no bar to anyone making money from its abundant resources; a land of freedom and opportunity. Always imagined as female, Australia was young, pure, virginal. The themes are present in 'Advance Australia Fair', though again rather minimally. Australians are young and free; the land is rich in opportunities—golden soil—which are open to those ready to work: wealth for toil.

There was a constant insistence that no blood had been spilt in this land. This is a puzzle to us who are now so conscious of the violence done to the Aborigines. In part the claim could be made because the slaughter was simply being forgotten, though the forgetfulness was more complete in the early twentieth century than in the nineteenth. It was possible to know well enough what had happened on the frontier and still see Australia as pure. In *Fragmentary Thoughts* Parkes wrote of the Australian flag:

It bears no stain of blood and tears
   Its glory is its purity.

In the same volume is a poem that gives a chilling account of the murder of an Aboriginal boy by settlers on the Hawkesbury in 1794. He was tied hand and foot, dragged through a fire until his back was horribly burnt and then thrown into the river and shot.

Loud talk ye of savages
   As they were beasts of prey!—
But men of English birth have done
   More savage things than they.

The two thoughts remain unconnected. It was easy not to make the connection when Aborigines were not seen as part of the future nation since they were dying out and in any case unworthy of its citizenship. Also, when they spoke of no blood spilt, the poets had in mind the European experience of warfare ravaging the land that was being constantly renewed.[6]

The best poem on Australia as a new world free from all the ills of the old was written by John Farrell. He was a brewer turned journalist and poet.[7] In the late 1880s he was editor and chief contributor for a radical Sydney newspaper which supported land nationalisation along the lines of Henry George's single tax. Parkes admired his writing, though he did not support his politics, and helped him to a job as editor of the *Daily Telegraph*. Griffith corresponded with Farrell over his own plans for radical social reform, a phase in his career which soon passed.

We have no records of a by-gone shame,
   No red-writ histories of woe to weep;
   God set our land in summer seas asleep
Till His fair morning for her waking came.

He hid her where the rage of Old World wars
   Might never break upon her virgin rest:
   He sent His softest winds to fan her breast,
And canopied her night with low-hung stars.

He wrought her perfect, in a happy clime,
   And held her worthiest, and bade her wait
   Serene on her lone couch inviolate
The heightened manhood of a later time ...

The sexual theme was never more explicit. The men worthy to take Australia, this virgin on her couch, were the 'manful pioneers', who only leave Europe when freedom has dawned there.

They found a gracious amplitude of soil,
   Unsown with memories, like poison weeds,
   Of far-forefathers wrongs and vengeful deeds,
Where was no crown, save that of earnest toil.

They reared a sunnier England, where the pain
   Of bitter yesterdays might not arise:
   They said—The past is past, and all its cries
Of time-long hatred are beyond the main ...

'And, with fair peace's white, pure flag unfurled,
   Our children shall, upon this new-won shore—
   Warned by all sorrows that have gone before—
Build up the glory of a grand New World.

These poets are now almost entirely forgotten. The poets of the turn of the century who are remembered, honoured and read are Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson. They have helped to define the Australian nation. The nationalism of the federation poets was a civic nationalism, concerned with the state and the principles and values it should protect and advance; its symbol was female, a young virginal goddess in the classical tradition. The nationalism that grew from Paterson's verse was social and masculine, concerned to honour the bushmen of the outback and their values.

Paterson and Lawson were new-comers in the 1890s. The critics, while acknowledging the appeal of their work, regarded it as light, ephemeral verse. Paterson's poems had sold in the thousands, but would anyone keep the book on their shelves? He lacked the nobility, the profundity and moral elevation thought proper to poetry. Brunton Stephens, who had himself fled from the 'horse-horse-horse' talk in the bush, was generous about Paterson's achievement, but could not believe that poems about racecourses and backblocks life would endure. Of course no-one in the 1890s ever imagined that a whole nation could come to treasure a Paterson poem about a Snowy River horseman and a Paterson song about a sheep-stealing swagman. One of the faults of Russel Ward's classic study, *The Australian Legend*, 'is the claim that in the 1890s, the same decade in which Paterson and Lawson first became well known, the bushman was established as a national hero-figure. It took longer than that.

At the end of the decade the Australian bushman received a great boost from the official recognition afforded by the Boer War. After Black Week, the War Office called for more Australian troops, not for show, but to help win the war. It wanted Australian horsemen who had already shown they were a match for the mounted Boer farmers. Special contingents of bushmen were raised—squatters' sons, shearers, stockmen, boundary riders—who had not been trained as soldiers, but who could ride, shoot and look after themselves. A bushman serving Queen and country was by that act a national figure.

Russel Ward does not mention the Boer War. It would spoil his characterisation of the bush legend as radical to discuss the role of bushmen in an imperial war or to have an imperial war boost their reputation.

By the time of the inauguration of the Commonwealth there were bushman veterans back in Australia. The Duke of York who opened the first parliament issued them with their medals. But the iconography of the federation celebrations was still female. Bushmen appeared in the federation parade in Sydney as part of the trade union contingent. They rode behind a figure representing Australia who was, as tradition dictated, a young woman dressed in pure white.

Paterson was commissioned by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as its war correspondent in South Africa. This was the first time his writings appeared in that highly respectable paper. All his poems had appeared in the raffish, radical *Bulletin*. His despatches brought good news of the Australian troops. They fought well, though they were not as well disciplined as the English, and were superb as scouts and scavengers. When the Bushmen contingents arrived English commanders competed to get hold of them.[8]

In South Africa Paterson met Kipling for the first time.[9] He was a great admirer of Kipling, whose elevation of the common man as the one who did the real work of empire gave Paterson a warrant for writing of the ordinary bushman.[10] Paterson's work, however, is free of the social condescension which still marked Kipling's.

Kipling's verdict on Australian troops was similar to Paterson's. In 'The Parting of the Columns' he wrote of the colonial troops generally:

> You had no special call to come, and so you doubled out,
> And learned us how to camp and cook an' steal a horse and scout.

He described Australians through the eyes of an Indian in a short story, 'A Sahib's War':

> They said on all occasions, 'No fee-ah', which in our tongue means *Durro Mut* (Do not be afraid), so we called them the *Durro Muts*. Dark, tall men, most excellent horsemen, hot and angry, waging war as war, and drinking tea as a sandhill drinks water. Thieves? A little, Sahib. Sikandar Khan swore to me—and he comes from a horse-stealing clan for ten generations—he swore a Pathan was a babe beside a *Durro Mut* in regard to horse-lifting. The *Durro Muts* cannot walk on their feet at all. They are like hens on the high road. Therefore they must have horses.

One of Paterson's war poems has a distinctly Kiplingesque theme. It describes General French's column as it marched to the relief of Kimberley:[11]

> His column was five thousand strong—all mounted men and guns;
> There met beneath the world-wide flag, the world-wide Empire's sons;
> They came to prove to all the earth that kinship conquers space,
> And those who fight the British Isles must fight the British race!
> From far New Zealand's flax and fern, from cold Canadian snows,
> From Queensland plains, where hot as fire the summer sunshine glows;
> And in the front the Lancers rode that New South Wales had sent:
> With easy stride across the plain their long lean Walers went.
> Unknown, untried, those squadrons were, but proudly out they drew

> Beside the English regiments that fought at Waterloo.
> From every coast, from every clime, they met in proud array
> To go with French to Kimberley to drive the Boers away

This was a long way from 'The Man from Snowy River' which had appeared only five years before. It was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The *Bulletin* would not have wanted it.

The Boer War had a profound effect on Australia's attitude to empire and its understanding of its own union. Australians generally welcomed the new British interest in empire. They were flattered by the attention shown to their troops and premiers during the Jubilee of 1897. The premiers were however wary of Joseph Chamberlain's plans to create new institutions to bind the empire together. But two years later Chamberlain's use of the Boer War to bind the empire together was a complete success in Australia. The war gave empire unity a powerful new emotional charge. Once Britain was committed, the predominant feeling was that the colonies had to support Britain, no matter what the rights and wrongs of the war. Dependent on the empire, they wanted it strong and, anxious for approval, they were delighted to serve. To have their troops fighting alongside British troops, to have them praised by British authorities, was immensely satisfying to a colonial people. It gave them the self respect which the federalists had promised would follow the formation of a new nation. In one sense federation had become less necessary just as it was to be established.

Uniting British people and strengthening the empire had always been one of the appeals of federation; by the time of its consummation, it was central to its rationale. Its other meaning as a step towards full independence had receded. Parkes' slogan coined in 1891 had been open to the future: One People, One Destiny. By 1901 it had been added to and closed:[12]

> One Queen, One People, One Destiny
> or
> One People, One Destiny, One Flag
> or
> One People, One Empire, One Destiny.

The Boer War featured in nearly all the poems written to honour the inauguration of the Commonwealth. Australian troops by their valour and sacrifice had shown that Australia was worthy to be a nation. The war appeared in a very distinctive way in the poem Kipling wrote to honour the new Commonwealth. Its title was 'The Young Queen'. It was published first in the London *Times* where he placed poems about grand themes and great occasions, looking for no payment, acting the part of the unofficial poet laureate. When copies of *The Times* reached Western Australia the poem was telegraphed to the east and run prominently in the daily papers. The work was completely different from the local poems which were heavy with piety and abstract nouns. This was a simple ballad with two characters: the Old Queen and the Young Queen, Britannia and Australia. What was arresting in this conception was that Australia was not Britannia's daughter, but her equal. She is a queen too. When she arrives in the Old Queen's court requesting to be crowned, the Old Queen at first refuses:

> How can I crown thee further? I know whose standard flies
> Where the clean surge takes the Leeuwin or the coral barriers rise
> Blood of our foes on thy bridle, and speech of our friends in thy mouth—
> How can I crown thee further, O Queen of the Sovereign South?

The Old Queen relents because the Young Queen urgently requests to be crowned at her hands.

Kipling's second innovation was the creation of a new female image of Australia, no longer a virginal girl, but a young warrior sexually attractive in a different way. This is how the Young Queen is described in the first verse:

Her hand was still on her sword-hilt, the spur was still on her heel,
She had not cast her harness of grey, war-dinted steel;
High on her red-splashed charger, beautiful, bold, and browned,
Bright-eyed out of the battle, the Young Queen rode to be crowned.

This became a popular and highly acceptable image. Representations of the Young Queen decorated the Exchange in Sydney on 1 January 1901 and Parliament House in Melbourne in May. The image and the first verse of the poem were on the official invitations to the opening of the federal parliament.

The readiness with which blood and sacrifice were embraced reveals that patriots had not fully persuaded themselves of the sufficiency of the themes of peace and purity with which perforce they had previously to work. Those themes married well with the belief in progress and Australia as a new dispensation, but there was no escaping that other nations defined themselves by battles and heroic death. Australia could now be one of them, but the test which placed her in this rank had been performed not in the defence of the nation but in the service of empire.

The *Bulletin*, opposed to the war, produced a female image of Australia very different from Kipling's. This is from 'Red-Handed' by 'R':

We had a dream—it seems but yesterday—
That dream is dashed—to direst darkness hurled,
For where our Commonwealth, a virgin lay,
A Wanton fronts the world.

Think what we lost—the forward March of Man,
The ranks of Progress positioned us a place,
Not last, not last, but foremost in the van
With sun illumined face.

Were there no wrongs, no bitter deeds of night
About our Land to keep our hands atoil,
That we must rob poor farmers of their right,
And filch their hard-won soil?

The Young Queen had an easy victory over the Wanton. And as for the virgin, she faded away.

All this was as it was meant to be, according to Brunton Stephens, the doyen of the poets of union. His 1877 poem began 'She is not yet' and it asked ' How long "not yet"?' In his 1901 'Fulfilment' the answer was plain: Australia had been made to wait for the fiery ordeal of war 'that tries the claim to nationhood'. And in 1877 he had misread her destiny which was more than her own union:

O People of the onward will,
  Unit of Union greater still
Than that today hath made you great,
  Your true Fulfilment waiteth there,
Embraced within the larger fate
  Of Empire ye are born to share.

Endnotes

This paper forms part of a larger study on federation which will be published, with fuller references, as *The Sentimental Nation* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000).

1. The poems are scattered through newspapers, periodicals and sheet music; collections are found in 'Federation Songs', an exercise book of newspaper cuttings, created by J Plummer, ML QA 821.08/35; Literature on Federation, National Library MS 5911, Australasian Federation League of Victoria, Songs of Union, Melbourne 1899, held in Deakin Papers 1540/11/172,178, for a listing of songs see Georgina M Binns, 'Patriotic and nationalistic song in Australia to 1919: a study of the popular sheet music genre', unpub Master of Music thesis, University of Melbourne, 1988.
2. LF Crisp, *Federation Fathers* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1990), 370.
3. CMH Clark, *Select Documents in Australian History 1851-1900* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955), 467-70.
4. 22 October 1889.
5. *Queenslander*, 25 January 1890, 168.
6. See editorial in *Brisbane Courier*, 2 January 1901.
7. The poem is called 'NO' and was published in *How He Died* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1887). There is a memoir of Farrell by Bertram Stevens in *My Sundowner and other poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1904).
8. Rosamund Campbell and Philippa Harvie (eds), *Singer of the Bush, AB 'Banjo' Paterson; Complete Works 1885-1900* (Sydney: Lansdowne, 1983), 478, 554, 577.
9. Ibid, 582-86.
10. See Richard White, *Inventing Australia Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney George Allen & Unwin, 1981), chapter 5.
11. Paterson, *Singer of the Bush*, 689-90.
12. *Mercury*, 2 January 1901 (street decorations Sydney), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 May 1898 (design of federal badge); *Leader*, 22 December 1900 (cover).