

Our Federation Journey

1901 - 2001

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Topic Two - A Young Nation

..remember longest the stirring historical events of the past few days. Many of you may by your lives and example influence the growth and development of the Commonwealth whose birth you have witnessed.

Duke of Cornwall and York
to school students, 14 May 1901

Australia becomes a Nation

Australia formally became a nation at a ceremony in Sydney on 1 January 1901. With the focus on Sydney the celebrations in Melbourne were restrained, but a number of Victorian towns and suburbs organised local events at which the younger members of the community often played a role.

Along the Victorian/NSW border, people celebrated Federation bringing an end to intercolonial customs duties. Processions from the border towns of Echuca and Moama met in the middle of the connecting bridge, symbolising the union of Australia. The Echuca procession included local cadets, and a "beautifully decorated wagon bearing six young girls representing the Federating States". In Wodonga, there was a procession of 300 "bright looking and well-dressed children [carrying banners with]...loyal and patriotic mottoes". The local newspaper called them "the men and women of the future".

Some communities, such as Port Fairy and Morea, gathered at their local school for a flag ceremony followed by a large picnic. Other towns gave their annual New Year's Day picnic or sports afternoon a Federation focus. In Wangaratta and Essendon local children were presented with commemorative certificates.



Viola Lake in fancy dress as "Australia", 1900. State Library of Victoria.

Infants, children and young women also appeared in cartoons, representing Australia as a new nation.

Victoria and the first Commonwealth Parliament

In May 1901 the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York (later King George V and Queen Mary) visited Melbourne to open the first Federal Parliament. To commemorate the occasion the Victorian Education Department presented 250,000 gilded bronze medals to schools students.

School holidays allowed students, including those visiting from regional areas, to join crowds in the city for the two weeks of celebrations. They watched the processions, listened to brass bands, and witnessed streets and buildings dressed with an impressive array of banners, flags, decorative lights and elaborate ceremonial arches.

The royal couple landed at St Kilda on 6 May. More than 30,000 Sunday-school students and teachers greeted them by singing the specially written "Australia's Welcome". It was "a sight not to be forgotten, the various colors worn and the waving of flags presented a handsome spectacle". Larry Brumley, a boy from the Omeo district, organised his own greeting. He sent a telegram saying, "Welcome to Australia; hope you will enjoy yourselves".

Isolated from Melbourne, Mildura held its own "Federal Day" celebrations on 9 May, the day Parliament opened. Five hundred 3-15 year olds marched through the streets waving small flags, sang the National Anthem and gave cheers for the Federal Parliament. At a picnic and sports afternoon they were given a small bag of lollies and a commemorative badge featuring the Governor-General, the Duke, the Duchess, or the late Queen Victoria.

The State Schools' Demonstration on 11 May was described as "one of the most interesting fixtures in the official program". 10,000 students from 57 Metropolitan schools participated, including a choir of over 5,000 students dressed in red, white and blue. Others created patriotic scenes and gave displays of physical exercises and military-style drills.

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Maypole dancing at the Schools Demonstration. May 1901 Museum Victoria Collection

Costumes added to the impact of maypole, flower and Highland dances. *The Age* called the performance "a work of art, a monument to discipline, and a living lesson as to the capacity of 'the nation of to-morrow'".

On 7 May the Chinese Procession included young girls riding ponies, and at the Royal Review on 10 May, 5000 Victorian cadets marched past the Duke. One of the royal escorts declared "everyone...voted that the best part of the review, the most novel, and the most impressive".

For some, all the excitement was too much. One boy was heard to say "Royalty! I'm sick of Royalty! Ain't seen nothing else the whole blessed week. I'm going to bed!"

When the Duke and Duchess travelled by train, crowds gathered at stations along the line to greet them. Well-wishers ranged from large crowds at elaborately decorated stations, to a mother and two small children at an isolated platform. Students formed guards of honour and sang the National Anthem. In Rosedale, cadets fired a salute which the Gippsland Farmers' Journal thought all the more worthy because it "arose from the spontaneous enthusiasm of the boys themselves".

Raising the flag

The largest event of the Federation celebrations involved around 650,000 students from 7,000 Australian schools. On 14 May, students throughout Victoria took part in the ceremony to simultaneously raise the Union Jack. (At this time Australia did not have its own flag).



Flag raising ceremony at Violet State School, Bendigo, 14 May 1901. La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria

At 12.50pm in the Exhibition Building, the Duchess pushed a button to send the telegraphic message "hoist" all over Australia and to London, New Zealand and Fiji. In some towns, gunshots or fire-bells were used to signal the school when the message was received.

Typically, each school chose a student to raise the Union Jack while others waved small flags. The local cadet corps fired a volley and the crowd joined in singing the National Anthem, "God Save the King".

Many Victorian towns and suburbs planned their local Federation event around the flag ceremony. Some schools distributed cakes, lollies and fruit to the students before granting a half-holiday. Others communities held luncheons, picnics and sports afternoons. In the evening, children and adults alike performed in concerts, took to the dance floor and marvelled at fireworks.

On 3 September 2001, to mark National Flag Day, schools will participate in another simultaneous flag-raising ceremony. This time the Australian Flag will be used, with the hoisting coordinated by e-mail.

The growing nation

The young people of 1901 experienced the introduction of Federation. As they grew into adulthood they participated in helping to shape Australia. Some fought in World War I, an event which is sometimes said to have "forged the nation".

During the Centenary of Federation in 2001, young people will participate in 'Our Nation on Parade', Indigenous Youth Football, family days, school activities and other events throughout Victoria. Youth Envoys have been selected to represent young Australians and to attend the key Centenary of Federation events as youth ambassadors.

Anna Wholley, Curator-Federation
Museum Victoria

Selected references:

Age, Argus, Weekly Times and local newspapers
The Royal Visit: State Schools' Demonstration", The School Paper for Classes V. and VI., Education Department, Melbourne, June 1901, Vol.III, No.32, p144.



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A Young Nation