

Wattle Day – An Essential Part of the Australian Narrative

Written by Terry Fewtrell, President of the Wattle Day Association, and presented to the Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens, Canberra on Thursday 1 September 2011 – National Wattle Day.

Let the witness speak!

Thank you Warwick and Happy Wattle Day to you and to all.

As that great friend of the Friends and of the Wattle Day Association, Sir William Deane, said in these gardens on this day two years ago:

“Where better to celebrate both the day (*Wattle Day*) and our Nation’s floral emblem than here at our National Botanic Gardens which are so important and which contribute so much to our National environment and heritage”. And I note how much the work of the Friends adds to that contribution. All Australians are indebted to you.

We gather today in the tradition of custodianship - acknowledging the long and sacred linkage between the traditional custodians of the land and landscape, our aboriginal people and in these districts, the Ngunnawal people.

Our acacia or Wattle species sit comfortably within this tradition, and are part of what has been handed down to our care. And, as I hope will become evident in this talk, love of this land and a willingness to listen to and learn from it, are part of how the humble wattle and its beautiful flower enriches us.

We gather here in Australia’s capital, on National Wattle Day in the early part of the 21st century. For all that we, as citizens of the modern Australia, have and have built around us, our land reminds us that we are but current tenants - challenged to be attentive custodians.

Our history as a nation, in the modern western sense, extends back a mere 111 years. If we wish, we can track back the story of the building of that society and nation a further 130 years or so, being the period between Cook’s visit of European discovery in 1770 and the declaration of Federation in 1901. Beyond that the story of the great south land was once thought to be confined to the musings of European powers as they jostled for colonial and imperial ascendancy.

Fortunately this part of our history, is now more accurate and far richer - thanks to the traditional knowledge of our aboriginal communities and the scholarship of modern historians. Our thinking is now based on the established fact that people have lived and loved on this continent for thousands of years prior to the arrival of the boat people led by Cook and later Philip. In doing so we think differently about ourselves, our story and our direction. We are also more open to recognising that it is our interactions with this land and its characteristics that have shaped us and continue to form us into the people and nation that we are today.

It is in this context that I want to make the main propositions today:

- Wattle has been ever present and central to our history;
- Wattle has been a key part of our story as a land, a people and a nation;
- Wattle has been an elegant and patient witness and partner to the whole of the Australian story and perhaps one to which we should give far greater attention;
- Perhaps we should also give voice to Wattle as Principal Narrator of the great Australian story – our past and yes even our future.

But we can do this only if we are willing to listen and learn from Wattle and the land.

Let me tell you why. And I will invite a special guest to speak to us briefly in support of my proposition.

I like to say that Wattle is a symbol as broad and inclusive as its reach into history is long. Wattle grows in all parts of Australia, differing varieties flowering throughout the year. It links all our people, from our first to our newest at citizenship ceremonies, such as we witnessed this morning. It touches all levels of society, from very early pioneers and World War I diggers, buried with a customary sprig of wattle, to victims of the Bali bombings and to our nation's best, on who we bestow Order of Australia awards, the insignia of which is designed around the Wattle flower.

But if we think of the reach into history then Wattle is in a class of its own. Wattle has been here for at least 34 – 37 million years. As many of you plant lovers will know, Wattle is an immigrant taxon that established first in Western Australia and gradually moved eastward. So like the rest of us Wattle is an immigrant, but with a lineage in this land that dwarfs all others.

Indeed some contend that Wattle is a remnant Gondwanaland species, derived from that ancient land mass; from a time when it was still morphing into the shape and diverse ecosystems of the modern Australian continent. In that case we are talking about 200 million plus years ago. In terms of living species and organisms they don't go back much further than that!

In a modern idiom: Wattle has seen it all! It has lived through it all. It has welcomed us all - indigenous, colonial and modern day arrivals. What stories it could tell!

Wattle has helped us to learn to live in harmony with this land.

Its seeds and gum (and the insects, grubs and animals it sheltered) helped sustain our indigenous peoples as a food source. They fashioned its timber into hunting implements and weapons that helped add further to their diet. Wattle acted as a signpost for other major events, such as the coming of the whales on the coast, the bogong moths in the high country or the eels in the rivers. It added to the richness of indigenous culture by being the raw material for dyes, clap sticks and other

instruments. And, using knowledge acquired over the centuries, our indigenous peoples applied it in various ways as medicines.

Indigenous culture did not formalise things in ways familiar to western cultures. While Wattle contributed much to indigenous life, it was but part of the land that was respected and cared for as a living environment, to ensure its ongoing sustainability and that of its species and the social groups it supported.

That approach of utilitarian respect also characterised, in a different but real way, the early white settlement approach to Wattle. Wattle in early colonial Australia was a source of material for shelter, industry and employment. The very word is a case of a noun triumphing over a verb. Wattle is basically derived from the verb 'to wattle', to interweave twigs with branches, as in wattle and daub. It is therefore a name relating to industry and work. At the same time its beauty was being hailed as a natural symbol of a new and vibrant nation.

Libby Robin in her 2007 book 'How a continent created a Nation', tells the story of how early white settlers struggled with the 'strange nature' of this continent and how the impact of landscape and nature first fashioned our sense of identity as a people. To use her term, "non human actors" have had significant roles in developing a distinctive national identity in Australia. Wattle is clearly one of Robin's "non human actors". But if only it could speak to us!

Wattle's part in the drama of early 19th century colonial life saw it stride confidently onto the stage, notably in Hobart in 1838. Some colonists, particularly those who were locally born, came to see beauty in the indigenous landscape and flora. They promoted that appreciation as a differentiator between themselves and those who thought and spoke about 'home' as elsewhere. They adopted the golden Wattle blossoms as their statement of home. Wattle became their symbol of identity and difference. In doing so they participated in an act of some defiance, as 1838 was officially a year for celebrating the 50th anniversary of British settlement in Sydney or the birth of the colony.

For much of the middle years of the 19th century Wattle's role involved contributing to Australia's economic growth and prosperity. Its properties as a tanning agent meant that the bark was much sought after, particularly that of certain species including the now official emblem *Acacia pycnantha*. As a forerunner to today's globalised economy, eventually Australia's tanning industry lost out to more favourable economic and harvesting practices from plantations in South Africa of Australian Wattles. Seen as a loss at the time, Wattle withdrew from centre stage, destined to be recast in a far more significant role.

It was late in the 19th century that nature study came to be the principal focus of those interested in what Libby Robin refers to as "the intersection between humans and the environment". Wattle was at the forefront of this movement as a natural expression of nature and beauty. This led on to a range of different emphases as Wattle was taken up by diverse groups and applied to a number of causes. In 1890 the Australian Natives Association Branch in Adelaide, morphed into the Wattle Blossom League of South Australia. *Acacia pycnantha* was soon conscripted in the cause of women's suffrage. William Sowden proclaimed that wattle stood for South Australia's

leadership in democracy and women's rights – a noble and honourable cause and one that had much success.

The linking of wattle with community aspirations and causes was a strong feature of early 20th century Australia. In the period leading to and following Federation, ardent Wattle advocates, such as JH Maiden and Archibald James Campbell, were instrumental in articulating the link between nature's beauty and a nation's aspirations. Especially in the years following Federation, the advocacy of Wattle as a symbol of a young, vibrant nation became especially powerful. This reflected the pride at the time in the creation of a new nation, built on hard work and natural wealth and fused with optimism, a sense of abundance and generosity. It also reflected the sense of real achievement in a vibrant democracy, stamped as a Commonwealth, which led the world in universal suffrage and what is captured beautifully in Banjo Patterson's words: 'the vagabonding love of change'.

The meaning and richness of that symbolism was clearly evident. So too was the engagement with the public as Wattle Leagues promoted their cause with badges, sold to the public to raise funds for worthy community causes. The wonderful display last year of Wattle memorabilia, owned and curated by Edwin Ride, at the Canberra Museum and Gallery, demonstrated the extent of this form of community engagement.

This tradition was invoked by the Wattle Day Association last year and again in 2011, with the production and sale of Wattle Day badges in the ACT to support ACT Volunteer Bushfire Brigades of the ACT Rural Fire Service. The linking of Australia's national floral emblem with our brave and resourceful bushfire fighters is powerful – promoted under the banner: Support an Aussie icon and help an Aussie mate.

The move to formalise Wattle celebrations across the states was given emphasis in 1909, leading to the first co-ordinated celebrations in 1910. Hence we had last year the centenary of nationally co-ordinated Wattle Day celebrations, and I know many of you joined in those celebrations.

Formalising Wattle Day in this manner put a sharper focus on the role and importance of Wattle in the nation's narrative; it was a way of honouring this player in our story; a way of saying we are the way we are, in part because of the land and wattle is the symbol of that land.

It was the marketing effort of the day and it did serve the purpose of reaching out to the whole community. As a result of its success in 1910 Prime Minister Fisher began the process of revising the nation's Coat of Arms to incorporate Wattle. However Libby Robin is right when she points out that it is important not to focus simply on a centenary date, but to look at the longer and broader engagement and contribution of wattle to the narrative. No doubt the Wattle would agree.

Our story, in the comparable decade to this in the last century, took a dramatic turn with the tragedy of the Great War. Aside from valour and courage displayed by many in that conflict, the time was also significant in that it took the newly identifiable Australians to other parts of the globe. We came to realise that foreign places, such as

Gallipoli and Villers Bretonneux were very different to the home we hankered for. They were full of suffering and horror, the like of which we wish we had never known. Wattle was with us in all these places. It travelled in kitbags, pockets and letters from loved ones. It reminded us of home and our Australian identity. It filled our senses and warmed our hearts.

Why? Because it evoked the land that had formed us. It was a fragment of that land. It reminded us of what was important to us and about us.

Over the rest of the 20th century wattle continued to have a special part of our consciousness. It soothed our suffering and eased our memories. When Sir William Deane threw sprigs of Wattle into a Swiss canyon we took solace that those we had lost were joined again to the land and spirit that formed them. Similarly with the victims of the Bali atrocities and other moments of national pain and anguish, Wattle was the balm that helped soothe us.

Yet one troubling feature persists. That is our hesitancy to embrace Wattle for the true national symbol it is. I would argue that Wattle is our only authentic national symbol - totally, unambiguously of this land. It is not conflicted or qualified in its identity or loyalty. It is eloquently, elegantly and undoubtedly Australian. Yet it took until 1988 for Wattle, *Acacia pycnantha*, to be formally declared Australia's national floral emblem. And even longer, till 1992, for National Wattle Day to be gazetted formally as a national day, celebrated on 1 September. We have been late in recognising the true significance of Wattle.

We owe it more respect, if only because it has so much to offer us as a people. It is our companion and our guide throughout our stories. We know that Wattle evokes real meaning and significance – but in a real sense having engaged it we have allowed later generations to overlook it.

It is time that we made more of Wattle as individual Australians and the collective Australia. It is time that National Wattle Day assumed a more prominent place in our nation's conversation and celebrations. For example, why shouldn't we honour the Wattle by making its day the occasion each year for announcing those other Australians whom we wish to recognise with Order of Australia awards? We should wear, and encourage our fellow Australians to wear, wattle or at least the green and gold, on National Wattle Day.

It seems Wattle has always been in the wings. Ready to play the roles requested of it. The patience and persistence of wattle has been exemplary.

From Gondwanaland to now is a very long time. And all that time we have seen Wattle simply as some sort of silent servant. If only it could speak to us – what wisdom Wattle could impart.

If Wattle has been our silent witness then I think that needs to change and change as of now. So I would like, metaphorically, to invite Wattle to take centre stage and address us today. To give voice to its witness of all that has happened in the Australian story and all that we as indigenous, white and multicultural Australians have done.

I don't imagine for a moment that our elegant witness would demure. Rather I see our Wattle walking confidently on stage. I will give voice to the Wattle and allow it the final words:

*Welcome to the great south land.
We share a wonderful home.
Our story together in this land is one of adaption and resilience.
It has been always been so, for flora, fauna and human life.*

*Green and gold are the colours of this land. I am honoured to be their source,
Identifying with this land is the key to survival and prosperity in this place.
When we commit ourselves to that task we are united as Australians.
We are resourceful and resilient, because we understand the land.
We know and love our place.*

*Because we understand ourselves, we face the future with confidence
Working together, we know that we can succeed in our endeavours.
Each year we renew ourselves and welcome the spring and life's new challenges
with optimism and generosity.*

*Let us seek to engage all and to respect all
Let us ask that they make the contributions of which they are capable.
May we all blossom in gold, in humble abundance.
And when Wattle blooms gold in the landscape each year let it remind us to
continue to care for our great Australian land, so that it continues to sustain and
inspire us.*

That is our task together.

Thank You