



The Call of the Wattle

Article by Terry Fewtrell, published in The Canberra Times in August 2006

This Friday 1 September is Wattle Day. Terry Fewtrell suggests it offers the chance to reflect on who we are and our place in the land

Motorways are a necessary part of modern life. Purely functional, sometimes they are so good they are boring - but never at this time of year, when plantings of wattle along many of our major highways turn them into rivers of gold.

When the wattle blooms we know that winter is nearly done and spring is in the air. We see that different species grow along our roadways and note that they flower at different times, their blossoms varying in form, shape and intensity of colour. What's more we tend to see the clusters that daub the hillsides and intersperse with the eucalypts. Yes wattles are a significant part of what we term 'the bush'. And it often takes the wattles to make us aware of features in our landscape that we tend to overlook for the other 11 months of the year.

So whatever else wattle does, it makes us aware of the land that sustains and nurtures our increasingly fragile environment. No bad thing if it helps us to listen and observe more closely the rhythms and cadences of our country. While wattle heralds the change of season and welcomes spring, the first Australians have had a far greater sensitivity to the land in that they observe and identify eight or more seasons in the year, depending on the region of the country. Perhaps when we see the wattle bloom in our part of south eastern Australia we need to realise that, although it is the colourful expression of nature's transition telling us that we have moved out of the grip of winter cold, we should not assume that warmth and good times automatically follow. We could take this as a metaphor for our nation being in transition and that the coming time of growth and change is a time of challenge and opportunity.

Not that wattle flowers only in the spring. The large number of Australian acacia varieties flower at different times throughout the year, depending upon region and location. Indeed that is part of the reason wattle is officially our national flower. It grows in all parts of the continent and when it flowers it produces the emblematic backdrop of green and gold. Early settlers and nationalists, such as the Australian Natives Associations, were quick to adopt the wattle as a distinguishing symbol of the Australian born. This differentiated them from more recent arrivals who still hankered for British and European landscapes and emblems. It was a sign of identification with a markedly different, but no less authentic, landscape and natural cycle. The custom of groups of settlers going into the bush to gather bunches of different

types of wattles gave rise to the term 'wattling' - a practice which showed real identification with and acceptance of a new land.

Wattle's widespread distribution and accessibility led it to be seen as the pre-eminent symbol of Australian democracy. The use of wattle as a symbol of Australia dates from 1838 in Hobart and has persisted in one form or another since then. In more recent years wattle has emerged as a national symbol of solemnity and unity in times of national tragedy, such as Bali.

But wattle is not just for serious and solemn occasions. Its colour is vibrant and energetic. It speaks of movement and life. It is part of the palette of strong colours that rise from the landscape and frame the deep blue skies that so characterise our land. As a nation we are in need of symbols that bind us together as a people, that speak with clarity and passion and link us unambiguously to the land. None of our public holidays celebrate our land. Australia Day and Anzac Day mark events and actions in the great story of endeavour following European arrival and progress in nation building. They do not however focus on the land, which is the very element that shapes and forms our identity as a people.

One Liberal Senator, Guy Barnett from Tasmania, has gone on record advocating that we should dispense with the Queen's Birthday holiday and institute a Wattle Day holiday in its place, as a more appropriate occasion for recognising Australian achievement and honours. As a people we would be well served by making more of the time of the wattle as a mark of respect for the land that provides for us so generously and for which we have custodial responsibility. It would speak to us much more than phoney birthdays of an absentee head of state.

Wattle has multiple uses and applications. From its use by indigenous Australians as wood for boomerangs and shelter to the boughs of flowers, the nutrition of the seeds and its use in tanning, wattle says something about the resourcefulness of our land and us as a people. It embraces all and is accessible to all. We could do well to use it as an expression of our identity and aspirations.

Wattle welcomes the spring and gives us hope. It reminds us that despite the winter cold, new life is about to burst forth. Indeed that is probably the strength of its symbolism when used on occasions of national pain and sorrow - that hope prevails, along with our resolve to right wrongs and defend the fair go and our increasingly fragile egalitarianism. On Wattle Day itself it will be used to welcome new citizens as they swear allegiance to a new land. It is an appropriate symbol of welcome and a commitment to shared values and common endeavours.

So next time you take the drive up the Hume Highway, or simply around the streets of our bush capital at this time of the year, as you sail along the river of gold that draws you on, think about the humble wattle tree, the pleasure its blossoms provide and the call it makes to all of us to protect the land and build a better nation. And to your fellow citizens: Say G'day on Wattle Day.