

Wattle Day Forum 2007

Wattle — a Changing Symbol for a Changing Nation

Edwin Ride

10 years ago Dr Rod Panter prepared a parliamentary current issues briefing paper on wattle and wattle day, in which he explored briefly the history of wattle as our national emblem, and its potential, as he saw it, at that time. He stated then that ‘Wattle and Wattle Day can symbolise virtually anything we want’. I should point out now that I entirely agree with this sentiment, however what I would like to explore today is the way in which that statement has held true for the past 220 years. In confining myself to the period of European settlement of this land, I do not wish to diminish the importance of the Indigenous use of wattles either as an economic resource or of their symbolic role in Indigenous culture, but to focus instead on the way in which wattle was discovered anew by immigrants 2 centuries ago, just as it is discovered by new immigrants today, and became then, as it is now, incorporated in their lives, their society, their culture and their hearts.

It is a well accepted truism that, as Thomas Jefferson said at about the time the Europeans were settling in NSW, the first object of young societies is bread and covering, and that other things are secondary and subsequent. To follow the logic of this philosophy, the development of National Symbols is not high on the list of priorities, and in fact would naturally come at a far later stage in the development of a society, signalling when it did a certain maturity, a coming of age of the society. This held true in the case of Australia. Certain British symbols were imported with the first fleet, most notably the union jack, however it wasn’t long before the country began to offer its own natural resources as symbols for a new society, and the first of these was wattle.

It was in fact Jefferson’s first stated object, the need for bread and covering, that catapulted wattle into the consciousnesses of the First-Fleeters.

Wattle could have provided both, as it did for the Indigenous inhabitants , however it was only as a building material that it was used. It proved a suitable match for the mental template imported from England requiring thin whippy sticks to weave for wattle and daub housing. Very much a stop gap measure, wattle and daub in Australia was to be used and abused for the next hundred years, but only when driven to it by poverty. Even the meanest of the convicts had come from something, in their minds, better, and wattle and daub was a symbol of all that was wrong with their new land. In the first year of settlement a convict wrote home whingeing of the 'rude huts with windows filled with a lattice of thin twigs'. A few years later it was more of the same: 'Our cottages we live in are built of clods and clay' complained a convict poet from Hobart Town. I find it significant that whilst the wattle and daub convict dwellings were a common feature of the early townships, very little documentary evidence remains in the artistic record. Painters were commissioned to record the achievements of the colonies, not the ugly side of life. That was not all that was wrong with Australia of course- the seasons were reversed, the fauna was too weird for words, the trees were too hard to cut down- these were genuine concerns. This was a general view of Australia that lasted for the first 40 years or so, gradually to become replaced by a more accepting, less reactionary attitude.

The theme of early settlers finding nothing but fault with the Australian bush is one that has gained considerable support over the years, and it is true that complaining voices have tended to drown out those that expressed appreciation. There are enough contemporary accounts however for us to be able to read between the lines, to discover that some people, particularly those in privileged positions saw potential in the Australian landscape, that attitudes on the whole were perhaps ambivalent, rather than decidedly negative. Some writers compared the landscape favourably with English parklands, reminiscent of the sort one would expect to find surrounding a gentleman's residence. This was true from the earliest days of settlement, and wattle was one of the elements in that landscape which added a special touch. Clearly it was seen a tree which was suitable for closer acquaintance, which was naturally inviting, perhaps cheerful. When Lady Franklin visited Sydney in 1839 she commented favourably of the formal landscaping around the villa Tempe, built 3 years previously, and featuring neatly laid out paths crossing at right angles with Norfolk Island Pines at the intersections. Orange and lemon trees she noted, and some fine wattle trees.

One of the interesting aspects of wattle, apart from its floral display which made it suitable for landscape purposes, is the manner in which it springs

up after fire, forming thickets of same sized shoots. It was this habit which provided the settlers with their thin rods for wattling, but it also provided a visual connection to the hazel copses of the downs area of England from which traditional wattling was drawn. This connection is important, as it was one of the elements that had the potential to soften the former negative attitudes to the bush. In a funny sort of way, though so different in its flower, in its growth habit wattle may have provided a positive reminder of the Arcadian aspects of the Old Country: home.

The need to look positively on Australia as a potential destination increased in the 1830s, as a result of the increasing industrialization of Britain and its attendant unemployment. From 1832 various schemes of assisted passage were set up to lure migrants to NSW and Tasmania, and it was clearly necessary to adopt a modified approach to the environment. The published accounts of Australia, particularly the Immigrants Guides spoke glowingly of the climate and the countryside, yet there was no pretending that things were quite the same. Viscount Sherbrooke who lived in NSW in the 1840s begins his Song of the Squatter thus:

The gum has no shade, and the wattle no fruit,
The parrot don't warble in trolls like the flute
The cockatoo cooeth Not much like a dove
Yet fear not to ride To my station my love

So it would seem that despite various shortcomings, it was still worth giving it a go.

I mentioned Lady Franklin a couple of minutes ago, which to those who know me would come as no surprise. Lady Franklin, as wife of the Governor of Tasmania, was an extraordinary person, if for no other reason than her suggestion in 1838 that wattle be used as a National Symbol. The Franklins found they had inherited a deeply divided society and decided upon a plan of action to bring about unity. One of the elements in this plan was a regatta to celebrate the discovery of the Island by Abel Tasman nearly 200 years earlier. They reasoned that this was something all sides of local politics would have in common, as a dislike of the name Van Diemen's Land, and its reminders of penal settlement, was the only thing shared by a largely free settler Hobart society.

Lady Franklin suggested an emblem of Wattle Blossom tied with Navy Blue ribbon to be worn as a National Symbol on the occasion, and the idea

was adopted by all but the hard liners, who felt that Oak leaves should be good enough a symbol for an Englishman. Over the next few years Lady Franklin persevered with her support for the name Tasmania, and the emblem of wattle, and we are able to witness here too a very personal symbolism that soon became a product of her devotion. When Captain Sir James Ross, an old family friend, stopped in Hobart on his way to the Antarctic he soon became aware of her mission, and did her the honour of wearing a sprig in his buttonhole when ever he called. He also promised, as a gallant knight would, that should he succeed in **his** coming mission to locate the south magnetic pole, he would announce that success by flying branches of wattle from his mastheads on his way back up the Derwent estuary to Hobart town. Interestingly, there does not appear to have been any lasting legacy of the grand public attempt to establish wattle as a national symbol, for the attempts that followed 50 years later make no reference to this time. This is understandable if one considers that colonial societies were not yet thinking as a Nation does, they had not reached that maturity in their development, they saw not the need for such a symbol. Significantly, it was an intelligent outsider who had recognized the role a symbol could play in showing unity, and the importance of unity itself. But a symbol does not **create** unity, it can only express and engender that which already exists. As a personal symbol of friendship though, as exemplified by James Ross and Jane Franklin, wattle had no doubt been used before, and was certain to be used again.

By 1870 the population of Australia had reached the turning point of equal proportions of migrants to native born European Australians. With a steadily diminishing basis for comparisons of Australia with Britain the general population was increasingly ready to find genuine pleasure in their natural environment. This can be seen particularly in the needlework of the period, which drew heavily on Australian floral motifs. Graphic arts are another example. In 1881 a competition held for the design of Australia's first Christmas cards attracted 662 entries, with 19 of the top 20 entries featuring Australian flora and fauna, and 2 of those featuring wattle. The 20th was natives spearing cattle. Tempting though it is, it would probably be wrong to claim that all of this was clearly symbolic of an increasing acceptance of the bush. Much of the population, living in cities, was physically remote from the bush. For them it was an acceptance of the idea that the bush contained aspects of charm and beauty, but one didn't actually need to go there. After all, there were the natives still spearing cattle. In the end it was to be the poets and fiction writers who did most to establish wattle as a positive symbol in the minds of Australians. Following the lead set by Adam Lindsay Gordon in the late 1860s, poets penned verse to the beauty of the bush,

establishing it as the romantic ideal. Wattle, in those poems, was almost always golden, when it stood for sunlight, spring and memories of love-laden springs gone before. Wattle, but this time not golden, stood for loss, with numbers uncounted of lonely bush graves under a weeping wattle tree. So many in fact that Henry Lawson thought he needed to set the record straight in his story *The Union Buries Its Dead*, in which he describes a bush burial, and dryly points out the complete absence of clichs, including the wattle, and the broken-hearted old mate.

At the same time that wattle was growing as a symbol of the Australian version of Arcadia, it also began to emerge as an floral symbol of Australia in the titles of books from the 1880s onward: *Twixt heather and Wattle*, *the Wattle and the Rowan*, *Wild Briar and Wattle Blossom* all position wattle against a plant symbolic of another country, place and time. The last named book contains the poems of a homesick Irishman, and the line ‘Only the breath of a hawthorn flower and I am back in the old borean’. It wasn’t to be long before wattle was performing exactly the same function for Australians overseas. Australian wattles had been growing in South Africa, imported for the tanning industry, for 60 years before our troops arrived for the Boer War. Rudyard Kipling was there as a war correspondent, and observed an Australian soldier smelling the wattle. Kipling captured the moment in the poem *Lichtenburg*, which contains the lines:

‘It was all Australia to me,
all I had found or missed,
every face I was crazy to see,
and every woman I’d kissed.
All that I shouldn’t ha done God knows,
as he knows I’ll do it again,
That smell of the wattle round Lichtenburg,
riding in, in the rain’

Banjo Patterson was in South Africa too, but it was the Englishman Kipling who observed the importance of wattle to the Australian.

The moment of Federation came and went. In the first decade of the 20th century Australian postcards featured wattle more prominently than ever before, containing descriptions such as:

From the Land of the Golden Wattle
And the sentiments:
Wattle lot of Happiness
Wattle lot of health
Wattle lot of peace and joy
Wattle lot of wealth
Wattle lot of everything wherever you may be,
Wattle lot I wish you no one knows but me.

Clearly wattle had become a symbol of everything positive to a young nation, and it followed quite naturally, in many minds, that as it was found throughout the Commonwealth it should be recognized as the National Flower. It was popularly promoted as such, with National Wattle Day being observed as an occasion on which Australian National Sentiment could be linked to a love of our beautiful flora. Prime Minister Fisher responded to the public support for wattle by ensuring that it be included in a new Coat of Arms for the Commonwealth, a need for which existed if only because the original 1908 Arms contained a visual reference to those of NSW, but no other State. Similarly, Fisher ignored the call for the statuesque Waratah to become our floral emblem, because it too was limited in its representation by its restricted distribution. Fisher saw no need to declare wattle our national floral emblem, possibly because there was in fact no precedent at that time, within the British Empire or without, for such a declaration. National Flowers were, apparently, things that grew naturally from the land and into the hearts and minds of the population. They needed, it would seem, no greater endorsement.

With world war one wattle became more than ever a symbol of home, and all that represented. Soldiers went to war with sprigs of wattle in their hat bands, they found it in their letters from home, they wrote and received poems and songs about it. And finally they either returned to it, or were buried under it. By that point of course the symbol had shifted. Grave inscriptions which describe the dead as "A Soldier of Wattle Land" show that wattle had come to symbolize not only home to the homesick, but could also symbolize Australia to the world. For the wives and mothers of the dead, too, ribbons embroidered with the army rising sun emblem and sprigs

of Wattle came to symbolize their loss and sacrifice. In small churches and other public places across the country honour boards were erected to record the names of the volunteers from the district. Some of the most powerful of these used wattle both as a decorative element, and as a metaphor. Where the gum tree was used as a symbol of strength : ("Leaves from a strong branch; some of them have fallen"), the wattle symbolised the flower of Australian manhood

The war did nothing to harm the status of wattle. Wattle became an important aspect of war memorials from 1916 onwards, further cementing the complicated relationships between the flower and the senses of loss, honour and grieving that had sprung from the poetry of 50 years before. These emotions were a perfectly natural and honourable part of the cultural landscape, but only a part, and there was no way that they had exclusive claim upon the wattle. The Golden Wattle Cookery Book, Wattle Brand washers and wringers, Wattyl paints and other homely products emphasised wattle as a symbol of family, and the comfort and security that comes from such. Wattle continued to be associated with pre-war clean wholesome qualities too: When Beryll Mills won the 1926 Miss Australia contest the song dedicated to her, My Sweet Australian Wattle Girl, emphasized her qualities of beauty, fairness, sporting ability and social prowess. She was also, if one were to believe it, a "boost for Australian trade, She is Australian made, Boost her with all your might, She'll keep Australia white.

It would be hard to find a more succinct summary of the national agenda of the 1920s. Isolation was seen as our strength, foreign imports a threat to our economy, morals and racial purity. It was not until the 30s that this model began to be seriously questioned, brought on by the depression in the first place and a restless quest for increased sophistication as the decade wore on.

In the early 1940s, with the entry of America into the war Australia became host to thousands of young US servicemen, bringing with them a modern, flash, vibrant culture. The often repeated criticism of the Americans that they were overpaid, oversexed and over here may have had its roots in jealousy and envy, but the collision of cultures went far deeper. Just as Australians had laughed for a generation or more at the Banjo Paterson and Lawson stories revolving around blokes from the bush out of depth in the city, Australians were now confronted by their own comparative lack of sophistication. Wattle was one of those elements which had comforted Australians, had made them feel Australian, but now it appeared too folksy, and,

they felt, made them appear countrified. Quite reasonably so. The bush was where the real Australia had always been located, and wattle was its symbol. Almost overnight it became a symbol to Australians of how backward Australia really was in the eyes of the world. Wattle, and the location of the true Australia had to change. A new expression came into being, the Australian Way of Life, which was centred on suburbia and consumer attitudes. One facet of wattle's symbolism was changed forever.

It was to be another 10 years before wattle re-emerged as a symbol of Australia, and this time there was nothing folksy about it at all. Queen Elizabeth chose to have the floral emblems of the Commonwealth countries embroidered on her coronation gown, and for Australia, of course, that was wattle. I don't know that anyone thought to ask the Australians what we would like, nor do I suppose that we would have chosen differently, but what really matters is that wattle was once again our symbol, but this time an unquestionably sophisticated, albeit conservative one. A couple of years later when Queen Elizabeth visited Australia her wardrobe of wattle hats, frocks and gowns emphasized her belief that wattle was our rightful emblem. We were more than ready to follow her lead, we waved flags and sprigs of artificial wattle as she passed us by, and had prepared in advance our gift- a diamond brooch in the form of a spray of wattle and tea tree, at that time the single most valuable piece of jewellery made in Australia. We are yours, said the ultra conservative Prime Minister, Menzies.

The period that followed, the next 40 years, was marked by an ambivalent attitude to wattle as a symbol. Yes, it was a symbol of Australia, and a mostly sophisticated one, but somehow we seemed to lack the opportunities, the ability, or the need to use it as such. No consistent thread runs through the isolated examples of its appearance, unless it is that the wattle accompanies efforts to position Australia on the world stage. In 1968 the Australian Olympic swimming team sported wattle pattern bathers in Mexico, a couple of years later the Australian Cricket team were being asked to leave the public bar at Lords, for their drunken rendering of 'Under the southern cross I stand, a sprig of wattle in my hand'. Later that decade 'the Monty Pythons hit back with their Bruces' sketch: " This here's the wattle, the emblem of our land - you can stick it in a bottle, or you can hold it in your hand. Amen."

Some of this was balanced by wattle becoming the major design element for the order of Australia insignia in 1975, but when wattle was finally proclaimed our floral emblem in our Bicentennial year it was almost without real

significance. Mrs Hazel Hawke planted a Golden Wattle in the Australian National Botanic Gardens on the occasion, but didn't consider the event worth recording in her autobiography.

In the late 1990s wattle was revitalised as a public symbol attending death by the actions of the Governor General Sir William Deane. He and his wife took wattle to Switzerland for a ceremony that honoured the loss of 14 young Australians in a canyoning tragedy, at that time the greatest accidental loss of Australian lives overseas. The gesture was appreciated by the Australian nation, and when 4 years later the Bali bombings claimed Australian lives wattle was used as the automatic symbol of a nation's shock, loss and respect.

Ladies and gentlemen, I draw close to the end of my presentation. There is so much more I could have said, however I have chosen to concentrate on the way in which wattle has grown and changed as a symbol of Australia, as Australia has grown and changed. That wattle has this ability, this enduring flexibility as a symbol is a testament to the fact that its roots are deep in this land, far deeper than our own occupation. Wattle is, however kept alive not by its official symbolism, but by us, as individuals, and how we bring it into our lives. Wattle has, in the future, the potential to become a symbol of new and changing aspects of Australian society. It may come to symbolise a republic, possibly even a reconciled republic at a national level, but the truly important thing is the symbolic meaning we give it as individuals, the past present and future hopes it holds for us, as we hold it in our hearts.

Thank you very much.