

Wattle, Place and Feeling For Country in an Australian Republic

Mark McKenna

November 07

For the last couple of months, although it feels much longer, I have been working my way through the public lectures and writings of Manning Clark from 1953 to 1991. The volume of Clark's public activities travels along at a steady pace until about 1967 or 1968. At that point, the folders of lectures and newspaper articles suddenly become more voluminous. From the late 60s on, Clark is writing more and more on what many commentators referred to at the time as 'the new nationalism'. And Manning Clark, with one eye on the historical shift away from Britain, and the other on his own place in articulating this new national spirit, seems to pull off something quite miraculous. He observes the change that is taking place, realises there is a vacuum now that the old myths of Britishness have subsided, and then proceeds to fill the vacuum himself — writing columns giving speeches, addressing Australians from every from every media stump and street corner.

A week or two after Terry's first email regarding Wattle Day, I suddenly stumbled upon quite a few references to wattle in many of Manning Clark's speeches from this period. This was the kind of serendipity I couldn't let pass, and so today I want to begin by looking at the way Manning Clark referred to wattle as a symbol of place in Australia, especially because I want to argue the case for wattle as a powerful symbol of place for the coming republic. And who better to lead me to the importance of place for the republic than the very historian who opened our eyes to the 'fragile beauty' of the ancient continent — Manning Clark.

Clark built many of his most prophetic statements about Australia around one recurring image — Henry Lawson's famous image of blood staining the wattle

After the dismissal of Gough Whitlam in 1975, Clark often hinted at the possibility of revolution, usually through apocalyptic and biblical images — the great cleansing fire which he warned would one day sweep the continent and return us to the age of the barbarians. Many people misunderstood Clark’s prophecies as the pessimistic ranting of a deluded preacher. But Clark never once wished for blood to be spilt. As he tried to explain at the end of his last volume, vol 6, he shared that dream which was central to Australian mythology, that the old world feuds and blood lust would be left behind here, and that blood would never stain the wattle.

Like Lawson, he understood wattle as a metaphor for innocence and hope, the constant promise of rebirth, that simple and powerful beauty of the wattle flower, indigenous, Australian, unsullied by the memory of war and destruction.

Clark began to embrace wattle as a symbol of Australia’s future independence sometime in the early 1980s. In September 1981, he was asked by the editor of the SMH to write on the subject of spring. He wrote

‘I love the spring. It means the wattle comes out again. It is a symbol of everything one loves about Australia and the ideal of the uniqueness of Australia. To me every spring holds out the hope that it won’t be long before Australia is completely independent[but I also] share Henry Lawson’s view that blood should never stain the wattle’.

In other words, independence of course, but peacefully attained. Two years later, on Australia Day 1983, Clark was in Townsville delivering the Australia Day Address. The Townsville Daily Bulletin reported that Clark had called for a different national day and a new national flag.

While conservatives often berate Clark for being anti-British, he warned his audience that because the Eureka flag was seen by many Australians as anti British, it would not be suitable as a new flag for Australia. Perhaps, he said, Australia could follow the Canadian example of using the maple leaf — ‘On that model’ he insisted, I think the wattle is right for the Australian flag’. Unlike the Union Jack, the wattle did not represent the nationalism of one dominant ethnic group. It is hard to imagine the beer-fuelled rioters at Cronulla in 2005, for example, waving the wattle as a symbol of their hatred of Moslem Australians. Manning Clark believed that the symbol of

the wattle had the potential to unite and represent the European, the ethnic, and the Aboriginal people of Australia. Like the Southern Cross, its appeal was not first and foremost to the idea of the nation but to the idea of place.

In August 1984, Clark was asked to address a forum in Canberra, much like this one today. It was the 'Week of the Wattle'. He began by reflecting on the history of the Wattle Day League in the early 20th century, when groups such as the ANA had advanced the idea of using the wattle to help promote all things home grown, all things Australian. He then argued that at the end of the second world war, the case for Wattle Day had almost evaporated, or at least in terms of the arguments put forward in the early twentieth century, Australian culture and products had advanced to a more mature stage, he said.

'So Wattle Day seemed to become irrelevant — a survivor, rather like Empire Day, from a time when it touched people on things that mattered in their lives. It was in danger of becoming an anachronism. . . Now the Canberra Australia Day Council and Greening Committee have come forward with a new meaning for wattle blossom day for them the miracle of wattle blossom, it's fragrance and its beauty, should be something more than an occasion of pride in being Australian, and love for the Australian landscape, the Australian people and their achievements in work, play and artistic creation. They hope to encourage Australians to treat the Week of the Wattle as a commemoration, as a time of thanksgiving for the great good fortune of living in country where there is at least an approximation to equality of opportunity and the absence of violence for the settlement of disputes between the classes and groups in a community. For so far, blood has not stained the wattle in a civil war.

I hope the prime movers for the Week of the Wattle will also help Australians to remove the BLINKERS from their eyes about their past and present role in the world. I hope the children will learn that the history of this continent did not begin with the Dutch navigators, Captain Cook and the colony of thieves at Botany Bay. To begin at least thirty thousand years earlier[and to remember that] Australia has a chance to be the place for the reconciliation of Europe and Asia, and between communism and capitalism. So the Week of the Wattle should be, I believe, an occasion for all of

us to think of our destiny, to lift u our minds from the concerns of the political and cultural CHAUVINIST, and to make our own contribution to the great human debate, the never ending human uproar’.

This speech, I think, is probably one of the best examples I’ve found of the argument for wattle as a symbol of Australian independence. One of the great failings of the republican movement of the 1990s was that it projected no sense of feeling for place. Instead, it pinned all emotional connections to Australia on one idea — the idea of an Australian President. This was a republic embodied, literally, in one person. I believe that we now need to embody the spirit of the future republic not in the person of the President, but in place. Wattle captures something crucial to the success of the republic — feeling for country. If we asked our new citizens to simply contemplate the wattle, for example, rather than testing their knowledge of the school civics curriculum we might bring them come closer to understanding what it means to be Australian. The beauty of wattle as a symbol of the coming republic is its ambiguity, its resistance to tidy definition, its freedom from partisan historical or political baggage, its universality — it is after all, found in every state of Australia. Every political party and group can identify with wattle, and as a unifying symbol it can help all Australians, regardless of how they voted in the 1999 referendum, come on board.

Wattle is part of Aboriginal language culture and dreaming, just as it has become part of non—Aboriginal culture and folklore. On the south coast of NSW, the aboriginal people referred to the coming of the wattle flower as an indication that the whaling season was about to begin. ”when the sally wattle blooms whaling begins, when the big fly comes whaling ends”.

In many of the more than 500 Aboriginal languages that were spoken in Australia before the coming of the Europeans, the image of the wattle surely must have surfaced — as part of representing country, and particularly as part of the poetics of place. Aboriginal people recognised the same capacity of the wattle flower to represent feeling for place as many of us here do today. In our affection for wattle, we are only following in a tradition established for thousands of human generations. As always, like sleepwalkers, we often follow unknowingly in the footsteps of Aboriginal people. And there again is the unifying link of which Manning Clark spoke, the potential of wattle to express feeling for country for all of us, the unifying symbol.

I mentioned that wattle is free of historical baggage. What I meant by

this, as I'm sure the work of Edwin Ride will show, is that it has had many uses over time. We know, for example, that wattle has been an important ingredient in welcoming and representing the monarchy in Australia. In 1920, for example, when Prince Edward stepped from one train to another on the NSW/Queensland border, he walked on a carpet of wattle blossoms

When Princess Alexandra visited in 1959, The Herald in Melbourne trumpeted that 'Golden wattles were blooming for the first Wattle Welcome ever for a member of the Royal Family'. The headline of the column read 'And she wore Wattle' 'Tall Princess Alexandra wore a loose wattle-yellow wool topcoat over a matching slim dress for her arrival in Canberra'. But what were these royal watching Australians doing in the 1920s and 1950s? They were claiming the monarchy as their own, certainly, but first and foremost, they were using wattle as the most potent symbol that they knew of Australia. Not the Australia of state, party or nation, but the Australia as place like no other.

Sometimes, in the process of writing biography, I've come across letters from friends of Manning Clark which have stood out for their clarity of expression and depth of feeling. Clark surely had a talent for that — depth of expression, and so did many of his correspondents, who were drawn to him, as he wrote often, like the moth to the flame. In 1990, Clark sent a copy of the second volume of his autobiography to Graeme Hughes, a friend, like Clark, of Barry Humphries. Hughes then lived in Switzerland, working in some capacity for the Australian government. 'You write so beautifully about Australia', he replied to Clark. Wishing he could do the same, Hughes described his memories of growing up in the Victorian Mallee in the 1930s and 40s, looking back to the years of his childhood through the mist and cold of a Swiss winter.

'In my parents' car you never spoke a word in the nothingness that separated habitation from habitation. . . the Mallee dust is more of a dream now. [When I think of my travels in Europe I see] fabled Spain which houses some of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen. Have you ever been to Cordoba Manning? It is dream like the Mallee was not quite like Cordoba although the landscape could be exchanged I suppose. [Alas, there were] No Moors. . . in Sea Lake [the Mallee]. There was once Boronia, though, and dwarf wattle dispensing heady perfume into the air and an inch or two of sand, quite red, when you woke up'.

Hughes' image of the dwarf wattle's heady perfume is another example of the power of the wattle to evoke the feeling of belonging for place, all the more powerful in this instance, because of Hughes' distance from home.

Three years ago, I wrote a short book on the need for a reconciled republic in which I argued for the need for any future republic to address, as a matter of urgency, and in a process of negotiation, the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal people. A republic which failed this test, I suggested, would not be worth having. Those of you who saw a recent column in last weekend's Australian by Noel Pearson, will know that despite the trend of recent politics in Aboriginal affairs, the necessity for Aboriginal people to be explicitly included in any future constitutional arrangement has not disappeared. In the same book, I also tried to argue the importance of place for the republic.

In conclusion then, I would like to see the republic movement embrace wattle as a symbol. Not to claim it exclusively for ourselves, but to use it in the spirit of the olive branch, as a reconciler and as a positive symbol of the attachment we all feel towards this country. I would also like to see someone with the necessary artistic talent, create a flag which married the three great symbols of Australia — the southern cross, the wattle, and the colours of Aboriginal Australia — in a new Australian, republican flag. We have to be broader in our vision if any political change is to be worth pursuing. Wattle is waiting, patiently as always.