

## Celebration of Anniversary Day to 1900

### **Anne Coote**

'Most countries and colonies have their peculiar annual rejoicings, but we know of none', declared the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1848, '... where a greater abandonment to pleasure and diversion is evinced than in Sydney on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January.'<sup>1</sup> However extravagant, this boast captured in essence the way Sydney's non-Aboriginal inhabitants celebrated Anniversary Day for most of the nineteenth century.

This annual summer holiday was the official anniversary of the foundation of European settlement at Sydney Cove – the 'birthday of their nation', as one Sydney newspaper put it in 1852.<sup>2</sup> But that beginning, as a penal settlement, was problematic. Sydney's newspapers on Anniversary Day sometimes invoked the convict past, but only to emphasise contemporary achievements. Celebrating Sydney crowds eschewed ritual re-enactments of their colony's murky birth for the sunlit possibilities of the holiday at hand.

### **Celebration in the early decades**

Anniversary commemoration had been relatively low key at first, an initiative of the colony's élite. In 1818, Governor Macquarie marked the colony's thirtieth anniversary with greater pomp. There was a 30-gun salute and military review, a dinner for civil and military officers, and, in the evening, a Government House ball. Convicts in government employ were granted a holiday and an extra ration of meat, but a much smaller circle of free colonists were actively involved in the festivities.<sup>3</sup> There emerged as well a counter mode of celebration. Affluent ex-convicts, with their offspring and supporters, organised annual Anniversary dinners to affirm their own attachment to the land in which they lived, and to voice their claims for civil and political rights.<sup>4</sup> This pattern of commemoration – private dinners and official receptions, flag-raising and military salutes, even charitable largesse – did little to encourage participation by the people at large.

### **The Anniversary Regatta**

In 1837, however, the first in a long series of Anniversary regattas was organised on Sydney Harbour. This too was an élite affair, but the spectacle attracted onlookers. Before long, the Anniversary holiday was being observed, not just by government departments, but by the large merchant houses and many city shops, freeing employees to join the harbourside throng.<sup>5</sup> As the *Herald* remarked in 1843, the regatta was an amusement for 'persons of all classes'.<sup>6</sup>

Fort Macquarie, Dawes Battery and Mrs Macquarie's Chair were key vantage points on Sydney Cove. Here victuallers dispensed food and drink from allocated booths, while pie-men hawked their wares among the general foreshore crowds and fraudsters spruiked their dubious games of chance.<sup>7</sup> Steam-packets plying the harbour provided food, music and a better regatta view, and as people re-imagined their Anniversary holiday, vessels also ferried passengers to new picnic

destinations.<sup>8</sup> Manly was an early and enduring favourite for people attracted less by boat races than by picnics and fishing on bay and beach.

This development in Anniversary Day celebration from the late 1830s reflected the fundamental change in colonial society since Macquarie's time. Increased free immigration from the 1820s had helped reduce the proportion of serving convicts in the population from about 46 per cent in 1821 to only 18 per cent by 1841.<sup>9</sup> In 1837 New South Wales was no longer a primarily penal settlement with a pre-industrial economy, and just as large numbers of Sydney's inhabitants were free to take advantage of the holiday, colonial commerce threw up entrepreneurs both large and small who could exploit the day for profit.

### **Other Anniversary activities**

In time, enterprising publicans and pleasure ground proprietors provided a wide range of Anniversary entertainment, incidental to the regatta.<sup>10</sup> Manly's Steyne hotel in 1865 offered foot-races and a variety of sports, a minstrel show, a trapeze artist and a German band. Its competitor at Watson's Bay promised a 'menagerie' of 'wild beasts'.<sup>11</sup> For decades, Clontarf Gardens, Balmoral, Cremorne, and the Athol pleasure grounds near Bradley's Head were popular locations for picnics, sports and dancing.<sup>12</sup> Aquariums at Bondi and Coogee were added attractions in the 1890s.<sup>13</sup> Picturesque spots along the Parramatta and Lane Cove rivers enticed holidaymakers too, while many flocked to pleasure grounds at Botany, Brighton or Sans Souci on Botany Bay.<sup>14</sup> More adventurous souls steamed up the coast to Pittwater.<sup>15</sup>

Group excursions were a feature.<sup>16</sup> In 1862 Phillip Street's United Presbyterian Sunday School picnicked at Cremorne. Congregational Sabbath Schools from Waterloo and Redfern went to Birkenhead in 1869. A 'Grand Catholic Excursion' to Balmoral in 1875 was countered by a 'Monster Protestant Picnic' at Chowder Bay the following year.<sup>17</sup> Increasingly, outings were also organised by secular groups whose character reflected broader societal change.<sup>18</sup> The German Association gathered regularly at the Botany Tea Gardens in the 1870s, various friendly societies held processions and sports in the 1890s, and in 1893 wharf labourers picnicked at Chowder Bay.<sup>19</sup>

Interclub cricket matches and organised athletic sports were popular too.<sup>20</sup> Thousands watched the hammer-throwing, and the foot, pony and velocipede [bicycle] races at the Albert Ground, Redfern, in January 1869.<sup>21</sup> In the 1880s and 1890s, Moore Park's Zoological Gardens also drew large Anniversary crowds.

Occasionally there were fireworks and, more regularly, music and theatre.<sup>22</sup> In 1837 the Anniversary was commemorated at St Mary's chapel with a 'grand performance of sacred music', and the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts honoured the occasion in 1877 with a 'Grand Musical Festival'.<sup>23</sup> Theatre owners capitalised on the holiday spirit with advertisements highlighting their 'Anniversary Night' performances.<sup>24</sup> In 1850 the Royal Victoria Theatre claimed the patronage of the Regatta Committee and the evening's entertainment was preceded by a prize presentation for

best skiff. It was unusual, however, for theatre programs to be especially tailored to Anniversary celebration. The Lyceum Theatre's presentation of *The Australian Bunyip* in 1857 seems to have been a rare exception, as was the Victoria Theatre's opening number on Anniversary night in 1875: a rendition by Miss Lydia Howard of *The Southern Cross or 1788*, accompanied by 'an emblematic tableaux of Captain Cook'.<sup>25</sup> The spectacle of city buildings patterned by twinkling candles, lamps or gaslight was another tradition, especially honoured on landmark anniversaries such as the Centennial. Public offices glowed with Anniversary emblems in 1888 and 'lines of fire' stretched all the way to Redfern and beyond.<sup>26</sup>

### Further out

On Anniversary Day in 1861, St Benedict's Young Men's Society travelled by train to Haslem's Creek (now Lidcombe).<sup>27</sup> Railway development from the 1850s opened up new holiday destinations and new diversions for 'the cockneys of Sydney' for whom 'a trip along the line' was said to be 'a real treat'.<sup>28</sup> Excursion fares and special trains encouraged the trend and soon Parramatta and Penrith, Liverpool and Campbelltown, Blue Mountains towns and Illawarra suburbs all began 'to feel the effects of a Sydney holiday'.<sup>29</sup>

Anniversary Day horse races were held at Homebush in the 1840s, Parramatta people attended the regatta by boat and buildings were illuminated after dark.<sup>30</sup> But otherwise scant evidence exists before the 1880s for festivities organised locally in Sydney's hinterland. The deficit of suburban newspapers to report on such activities is probably not the only explanation. In 1885, for example, the *Nepean Times* lamented that '[a]s usual' there would be 'no [Anniversary] sports in Penrith'.<sup>31</sup>

Three years later, however, the Centennial celebrations inspired pedestrian races in Penrith and a quadrille party at the Temperance Hall.<sup>32</sup> Katoomba and Blackheath organised 'Athletic Sports' that year and in the 1890s concerts, roller-skating and sports amused both visitors and locals.<sup>33</sup> Anniversary horse races were run at Ingleburn in the 1890s, there were cricket matches at Liverpool and Camden, and in 1898 residents in the southern suburbs attended a charity concert at Moorefield racecourse near Kogarah.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, the pattern of Anniversary Day activities in Sydney merely reflected contemporary trends in recreation. The Sydney Turf Club had been founded as early as 1825, and racing, along with regattas, sports and picnics, were amusements by no means unique to Anniversary Day.<sup>35</sup> Publicans at Manly also drew large crowds on Boxing Day with their promises of pleasure grounds and cool refreshment, and there were fireworks to view at Manly on the Queen's Birthday holiday in May.<sup>36</sup>

### Whose national day?

Other 'colonial nations' celebrated the anniversaries of their own foundations on different dates and it was not unusual for Anniversary Day to be talked of in Sydney as the birthday – the

'national' day – of New South Wales alone.<sup>37</sup> The sense of national community often expressed on Anniversary Day, in other words, was colonial, not continental in scope.<sup>38</sup> Note too that the vision of colonial nationhood conjured by such rhetoric was, for the majority, quite compatible with British loyalty and with holiday observance of the monarch's birthday.<sup>39</sup> The latter celebration could also be dubbed 'a national holiday'.<sup>40</sup> Nations might exist within nations.<sup>41</sup> Special efforts made for intercolonial commemoration on 26 January 1888 reflected the parallel growth of a broader, continental sense of nationhood which, as recent scholarship has shown, was also quite compatible with Britishness.<sup>42</sup> It was, however, nearly half a century before Sydney's citizens were joined regularly by people in the other capital cities in celebration of Australian nationhood on 26 January.<sup>43</sup>

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## Endnotes

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