Nationalism and Federation:

Creating the Commonwealth of Australia

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The Federation of the Australian colonies signified a major act of political self-assertion and independence with Australia formally becoming the first new nation of the twentieth century. Yet it was independence of a limited type, due to Britain retaining control of foreign relations and (though it was never used) the power to veto Australian legislation.[1] The Commonwealth's first Prime Minister Edmund Barton noted that another symbolic aspect of Federation was that (excluding Tasmania) it would be the first 'nation for a continent and continent for a nation'.[2] As we shall see, this idea of a 'fortress Australia' girt by sea would be but one of the powerful strands of thought that shaped Australian nationalism. This paper argues that Australian nationalism and its ideals were the chief inspirations and motives behind Federation. I will challenge some of the historiography on this topic – such as historian Ronald Norris's claim that Federation was for the most part a business merger with little public enthusiasm or affection – by exploring alternative explanations for Federation.[3]

This article will identify the primary motives behind Australian Federation. This will be by necessity a discussion about Federation as one of the great Australian controversies. Its capacity to fuel debates and contests, involving wildly varying stand points and interpretations in both its lead up and inception in 1901, and in present-day academic scholarship, is a testament to the fact. It might be tempting, as one of the chief Federal architects Alfred Deakin noted, for the future to look upon the 'miracle' of Australian Union as fated, its realisation destined from the start.[4]

1 John Hirst, 'Who Tugged the Forelock?: Australian Attitudes to Britain and Independence', *Quadrant*, Vol. 39, No. 11 (November 1995), 15.

2 Barton's speech at Ashfield cited in W. G. McMinn, *Nationalism and Federalism in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1.

3 Ronald Norris, *The Emergent Commonwealth: Australian Federation, Expectations and Fulfilment 1889-1910* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1975), 39.

4 Alfred Deakin, *'And Be One People': Alfred Deakin's Federal Story / with an Introduction by Stuart Macintyre* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 172-173.

However this would be to say nothing to the purpose, or indeed to the causes behind the Federation movement.[5]

The reasons for Federation were as multifaceted and complex as Australian identity at this time. They represented a host of competing interests in contest, none of which are meant to be understood in isolation.[6] However, this article argues that nationalism was very much a dominant driver of the federal movement. The Australian nation that came into being on 1 January 1901, while still fragile and somewhat malleable, was indeed fully formed; Australian Federation and the Constitution were the products of a process of imagining the Australian nation.[7] The aspiration to bring the real and the imagined together was the fundamental driver of the Federation movement.[8] Integral to this was the need to define a common national identity and ideals to work toward and protect.

While historian Stuart Macintyre is quite right in highlighting the 'inescapably political' aspect of Federation, it was also very much a popular movement with a social and cultural history.[9] This paper will focus on the popular motives behind Federation (rather than the political). That being said, the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of the federal process and its architects will be of only a glancing interest to this paper. Of more concern is the nation that emerged at Federation; what form did the nationalism that formed and shaped that nation, and propelled Federation take? And how have Federation and Australian nationalism more broadly been contested in modern academia?

Theorist of nationalism Benedict Anderson suggests, when speaking of an Australian nation we should consider an 'imagined political community…imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.[10] Furthermore, for political theorist Ernest Renan, the realisation of a nation must be forged by the sacrifices and sorrows of the past, as well as the pledge to sacrifice in the future for the sake of common goals; 'The existence of a nation is…a daily plebiscite'.[11] Thus, Australia the nation, the imagined political community, was the product of an Australian nationalism. While for better or worse, the sacrifice and sorrows of the Great War later in the century would come to dominate popular understandings of the nation being forged in the blood of battle; the imagining of the Australian community had already taken place with the realisation of Federation and the dissemination of a mythical Australian ethos in the decades before. Historian Russell Ward found this "Australian Legend" – the romanticised ideals that the Australian people liked to consider as emblematic of the nation and its people – in the Bushmen of the century before Federation; the same ideals and traits that were subsequently projected upon the Diggers by writers like C.E.W. Bean in constructing the Anzac legend.[12]

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5 Ibid., 173.

6 Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation: A Cultural History of Australia's Constitution*, updated ed. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

7 Ibid., 15-25.

8 Ibid., 25.

9 Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, third ed. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 140.

10 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

11 Ernest Renan, 'What Is a Nation?', in *World Politics*, ed. A. Lipjhart (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1968), 80-81.

12 Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1-2, 13, 228-235

Political journalist and historian Paul Kelly in his concept of the 'Australian Settlement' has argued that the implementation of the laws and political institutions established at Federation and in the decade following are the best representations of an Australian nationhood.[13] Working from this assumption, the forces that shaped Australian nationalism and identity towards this 'Settlement' will be discussed within the context of popular culture. Rather than focusing on Alfred Deakin, whom Kelly describes as 'the principal architect' of the 'Australian Settlement', our chief source of interest will be the 'bushman's bible' – the *Bulletin* newspaper, its professional submissions and cartoons, but also the content contributed by its readership in the period leading up to Federation.[14] Through an analysis of popular material culture displayed in the *Bulletin* – one of the most significant conduits of radical nationalism – we will see the way nationalistic imagining motivated national unity and a sense of common identity and purpose along the lines of Kelly's informal five pillars of 'Settlement': White Australia, Industry Protection, Wage Arbitration, State Paternalism and Imperial Benevolence.[15]

The idea of Federation came much earlier than its eventuality. As Alfred Deakin observed, the appeal of union fluttered in and out of favour repeatedly for a large part of the nineteenth-century, 'Again and again it was made the sport of Ministries and Parliaments'.[16] Early agitators such as the founder of the *Australian*, William Charles Wentworth, and events like the gold rushes, and opening of the land to free selection, were surely the early foundations of a growing national sentiment.[17] But there is no doubting that Federation was only possible because of the earlier failures and changes to the Federation movement, and because of the favourable political circumstances at hand when it was finally achieved.[18]

The Commonwealth's inception was very much a product of the 1870s-90s, when the Australian nation was being imagined and the concept of Australian Union was taking root.[19] Fostered in the public imagination in large part by nationalistic literature (such as *Boomerang*, the *Bulletin, Lone Hand, Worker)*, art (the Heidelberg school), the growth and establishment of patriotic bodies (such as the Australian Natives Association (ANA) and the Federal League), and not least, a 'distinctively Australian sporting culture'.[20] In addition to this, Australian Federation was fuelled by the fires of a strident and virulent racial nationalism, dynamic in its capacity for both negative and positive consequences.

The fear of invasion from Japan, no doubt contributed to the appeal of unification, just as the fear of Chinese workers lowering the high Australian standard of living contributed to the goals of wage arbitration and trade tariffs; however, decimation of the Aboriginal population and racist attitudes toward non-white European immigration were the flipside of the same coin.[21] The credo

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13 Paul Kelly, *The End of Certainty: The Story of the 1980s* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1992), 1-13.

14 Ibid., 1.

15 Ibid., 1-13.

16 Deakin, *'And Be One People'*, 173.

17 Not the present day *Australian* newspaper it should be noted.

18 A thorough account of the progression of the Federation movement can be found in Deakin, *'And Be One People'*, or W. G. McMinn, *Australian Foundation and Growth: From Penal Settlement to Modern State: A Text Book for Form III History Classes* (Melbourne: Macmillan & Co, 1965).

19 Irving, *To Constitute a Nation*, 13.

20 Ibid., 14.

21 See for example David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia, 1850-1939*, second ed. (New Delhi: SSS

of White Australia dominated Australian popular and political thinking. Deakin's attitude in 1901, that 'The unity of Australia is nothing, if that does not imply a united race', was simply a less crude and more formalised articulation of the Bulletin's sentiments leading up to Federation, 'No nigger, no Chinaman, no lascar, no Kanaka, no purveyor of cheap, coloured labour is an Australian'.[22]

The Australian community was imagined in the cities: in the verse of Lawson and Paterson, and by Streeton and Roberts in paint. Ironically, what they imagined was a bush ethos, or legend, which would become the central element in the Australian national 'mystique'.[23] This romanticised and imagined space – the 'bush' – was the preserve of lost possibilities; however, it could also be eternally contested and remade to contrive new meanings and desires.[24] The desires present at Federation are what led to the Australian Settlement. National sentiment was projected upon 'an imagined rural interior' in which the increasingly native born, urbanised Australian society could 'partake vicariously in the dream of an untrammelled masculine solidarity'.[25]

In order for Federation to succeed, a national ideal and common identity had to be forged. Russel Ward's *Australian Legend* drew on Frederick Jackson Turners ideas about the frontier legend inherent to all settler societies, and identified the Australian type that was created in the bush and propagated through publications like the *Bulletin*, *Boomerang, Worker* and *Lone Hand.*[26] The figure presented was a white male, a practical working man: stoic, irreverent, anti-authoritarian and the epitome of loyalty and mateship.[27] Its iconic figures were shearers and swagmen, bushrangers and drovers (the descendents of the diggers and convicts), and an idealised rural life and landscape. A *Bulletin* reader's poem, published in the 'Bards of the Backblocks' section is reflective of such imagining: 'For all your memories old, Your cattle-kings, your outlaw-band, Your wealth of virgin gold'.[28] From these stages of history, the Australian image had developed a strong egalitarian outlook that involved an intolerance of oppression, a penchant for the underdog, a need to exalt the meek and humble the mighty, and an affinity with the values of New-Protection.[29]

This is not to suggest that loyalty to the British Empire was incompatible with the emerging Australian identity. Deakin would continue to consider himself, even after Federation, an 'independent Australian Briton'.[30] Certainly federalists and nationalists with strong anti-British sentiments did exist; the *Bulletin* took this position numerous times in the lead up to and after Federation. Perhaps the most explicit treatise on such a view was penned by Robert Thomson. In

Publications, 2009).

22 *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, (12 September, 1901), 4807, Hansard, http:// parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number,doc_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr,hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221900s%22%20Year%3A%221901%22%20Month%3A%2209%22;rec= 7;resCount=Default, accessed on 2 August 2012. *The Bulletin*, 2 July 1887, cited in *100 Years: The Australian Story,*'Episode Two: The Rise and Fall of White Australia', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, transcript, http://www.abc.net.au/100years/EP2_1. htm, accessed on 2 August 2012.

23 Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 1-13.

24 Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia,* 133; a more detaile discussion of this idea as it was presented through art is offered by Jeanette Hoorn, *Australian Pastoral: The Making of a White Landscape.*(Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2007).

25 Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia,* 133

26 Ward, *The Australian Legend, 2-13.

27 Ibid., 238-258.

28 Bards of the Backblocks: A Queen of Yore, *The Bulletin*, 6 May 1899.

29 W. K. Hancock, *Australia* (London, Sydney: E. Benn limited Australasian publishing, 1945), 55-65.

30 Stuart Macintyre, 'Introduction', in Alfred Deakin, *'And Be One People',* xii.

1888, he urged Australians to rule their own lands, and fulfil their destiny as the next great Empire rather than remaining a small part of a declining British one.[31]

Yet despite radical nationalist and republican sentiments, the paradox of being both Australian and British was largely overcome by the necessary and traditional reliance on great and powerful friends in matters of national defence. One of the key factors in the federal movement's successes and failures, to borrow Blainey's phrase, was the 'tyranny of distance'. This refers, in one sense, to the distance between the colonies that, from the 1870's onwards, were rapidly overcome by the expansion of rail and telegraph networks across the continent.[32] Connecting the colonies by rail and telegraph did much to foster a common Australian consciousness. It also exemplified Kelly's suggestion of State Paternalism as a pillar of Settlement.

The private construction of railway and telephone networks established in Australia was followed closely by the institution of 'government instrumentalities'.[33] The first telephone exchange established in Melbourne in 1880 by the Victorian Telephone Exchange Co. for instance, was quickly bought out seven years later by the government which, acting in the public interest, reasoned that its actions would result in 'immeasurable advantage to the public...no injustice to the company...and, lastly, no loss, but rather a gain, to the taxpayers'.[34] This is but one example of a tradition that would define the State for Australian's as 'collective power at the service of individualistic rights'.[35]

Just as an Australian nationality could exist in conjunction with British Imperial sentiment, so too could individualism and reliance upon government. The State could be expected to grant the greatest good for the greatest number of people in its role as a 'vast public utility'.[36] State paternalism and its egalitarian ethos are inextricably tied to ideas of labour and unionism, and the ideals advocated by arbitration and conciliation, and New-Protection. In a second sense, the tyranny of distance can also be used to refer to the vulnerability and anxiety created by Australia's proximity to Asia and distance from Europe.

The overlapping pillars of wage arbitration and industry protection are themselves inextricably tied to the most notorious Australian nationalistic ideal – 'white Australia'. The latter part of the 1800s was characterised by an increase in industrial disputes over pay and conditions, and debates about the role of immigrant workers in Australian society, which climaxed in the formation of the Australian Labor Party. The period witnessed protracted shearing and maritime strikes in which cheap foreign 'non-union' labour was attempted to be brought in, often erupting in violent confrontation.[37] A well known Banjo Paterson poem 'The Bushman's Song' published in the *Bulletin* contained the lines:

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31 Robert Thomson, *Australian Nationalism: An Earnest Appeal to the Sons of Australia in Favour of the Federation and Independence of the States of Our Country* (Burwood: Moss Brothers, 1888).

32 W.G. McMinn, *Australian Foundation and Growth,* 210-212.

33 Frank Crowley (ed)., *A Documentary History of Australia,* Vol. 3, (West Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia, 1980) 240.

34 Victoria, Parliamentary Debates, (Vol LV, 1887), in *A Documentary History of Australia.* Vol. 3, ed. Crowley, 241.

35 Hancock, *Australia,* 55-65.

36 Ibid. 55-65.

37 Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia, 121-134.*

> I asked a cove for shearin' once along the Marthaguy:
> 'We shear non- union here,' says he. 'I call it scab says I'.
> I looked along the shearin' floor before I turned to go –
> There were eight or ten dashed Chinamen a-shearin' in a row![38]

While historian W.G. McMinn has suggested that the nationalistic sentiment of the period is overblown,[39] and historian John Hirst would like us to focus on a sentimental civic nationalism (defined in the poetry of Brunton Stephens, and gauged by its effectiveness in inspiring the politics of the federal movement), it would be remiss to overlook the radical nationalism portrayed in the *Bulletin* and elsewhere as insignificant.[40] If we follow the lead of historians like Inga Clendinnen and apply our narrative imagination to the popular aspects of the federal movement – the common people's engagement with the federal movement's popular material culture – we can surely uncover equally important motivations that propelled the Australian colonies towards union.[41] The Federation process (and the referenda that consented to its creation) was by nature a model of democratic principles and power of the people.

Banjo Paterson's poem is also significant in that, like other popular verse of the period, it was soon appropriated and arranged as a song.[42] While it has been noted that public lectures and debates on Federation had been a popular source of entertainment during the lead up to 1901, music was an alternative and equally successful medium of entertainment and information. The vast and constant selection of musical instruments displayed in the advertising pages of the *Bulletin* throughout the period is perhaps an indication of the extent to which folk music can be understood as an influential public forum in which ideas about identity and national values could be contested.[43]

The six distinct colonies of Australia – despite the fierce inter-colonial rivalries that existed, and the differing views on protection and free trade – were already operating together on a national scale with regard to railways and telegraph, standardized time, contribution to national defence, and of course, uniform anti-Chinese immigration legislation.[44] This was aside from the proliferation of inter-colonial NGOs, societies, professional bodies, churches, businesses and unions in operation.[45] It follows that Federation, rather than equating to a mere business merger, or a solution to simple issues relating to customs tariffs, defence or immigration measures, was in fact 'the means by which Australia was to become a nation'.[46]

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38 A. B. Paterson, 'The Bushman's Song', *The Bulletin*, 10 February 1894, cited in Lionel Long and Graham Jenkin, *Favourite Australian Bush Songs* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1981), 52-54.

39 McMinn, *Nationalism and Federalism in Australia.*

40 Certainly Stephens' poem is significant, as is Advance Australia Fair also of this period; however both were likely to have held less currency than say Patterson or Lawson's work to common folk.

41 Inga Clendinnen, 'Incident on a Beach', in *The Boyer Collection: Highlights of the Boyer Lectures 1959-2000*, ed. Donald McDonald (Sydney: ABC Books for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2001), 523-527.

42 Long and Jenkin, *Favourite Australian Bush Songs*, 52.

43 For a very brief sample of the frequent advertising of this type, see, for example, *The Bulletin*, 25 December 1880, 11. *The Bulletin*, 17 June 1899, 21, 33. *The Bulletin*, 16 December 1899, 23.

44 J. B. Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation: The Making of the Australian Commonwealth* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-2.

45 Ibid., 1-2.

46 Ibid., 14.

There is no doubt that the Federation movement was served and in many ways fuelled by selfish interests. Deakin himself concedes that 'very few' of the federal fathers sacrificed willingly for the cause without the 'hope of gain'.[47] As John Hirst has contended, 'Self-governing communities' rarely relinquish their power in pursuit of a higher cause, yet that is exactly what the colonies of Australia did in fulfilling what many saw as the 'sacred' cause of Federation.[48] Federation is often cited as a union brought about by peace and brotherhood rather than by coercion or bloodshed. Yet this is perhaps telling of the dominance that White Australia has had upon Aboriginal Australia and the way in which such analyses ignore the way in which the indigenous population has suffered up to and beyond Federation. Social-Darwinian logic allowed one to repress or deny the treatment of the Aboriginals since European arrival, and relegate their future to one of eventual extinction.[49] Federation was undeniably a white man's affair, both in its imagining and its eventual creation. Indeed, the first acts of the parliament were to make formal the long held ideal and commitment to a white Australia.

Sporting prowess is another way in which Australian identity was forged. The *Times* in 1882, reflecting on the victorious Australian eleven's recent Ashes campaign, remarked that as a team 'they are probably the finest that has ever got together'.[50] Yet it was also another arena in which the superiority and anxiety of white Australia could be articulated. In the ever increasing space taken up by the sport section, the following section of verse submitted by a reader to the *Bulletin*'s Sporting Notions column seemed most poignant:

> When all were men of British breed
> All Hingland held their own
> In Cricket's cause they did not need
> To raise a foreign loan.
> They ne'er complained of 'awful luck,'
> Nor did their batsmen seem
> To suffer from a want of pluck
> Till the darkie joined the team[51]

White Australia was thus inherently tied to ideas of racial 'purity'. In 1901, W. G. Spence, unionist and politician, exemplified how such ideas permeated the ideals inherent to conciliation and protection, when he asserted that non-white immigration would 'degrade our national character' and 'lower the standard of the energy and capacity of our people'.[52] This is reinforced by the stereotypes of Chinese and Kanaka workers portrayed in the cartoons of periodicals like the *Bulletin*. As Hirst suggests, 'Federation was not needed to make the White Australia Policy, but that policy was the most popular expression of the national ideal that inspired federation'.[53]

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47 Deakin, *'And Be One People', 173.*

48 Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation, 1-2.*

49 Ibid. 19-21.

50 The Times, London 27 September 1882, ed. Crowley, *A Documentary History of Australia*, Vol. 3, 120.

51 'Sporting Notions: The Darkie in the Team', *The Bulletin*, 19 September 1889.

52 W. G. Spence, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 25 September 1901, Vol. 1, p. 5153, Hansard, http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=_fragment_number,doc_date-rev;query=Dataset%3Ahansardr,hansardr80%20Decade%3A%221900s%22%20Year%3A%221901%22%20Month%3A%2209%22;rec=2;resCount=Default, accessed 2 August 2012.

53 Hirst, *The Sentimental Nation : The Making of the Australian Commonwealth, 22.*

This article has highlighted Australian nationalism as highly influential in motivating Federation. This is not to overlook the multitude of factors and indeed timing in the eventual success of creating the Commonwealth. Furthermore, the radical and often republican form of nationalism represented so famously by the *Bulletin* is but one form of Australian nationalism that prevailed during the time of Federation. While less anti-British formulations may have indeed dominated, the *Bulletin* brand of nationalism we have discussed surely deserves proper recognition in the creation and motivation of a federated Australia. As we have seen with much of the historiography that has been touched on, Federation can be explained and accounted for in a number of different ways. In this tradition, this essay has dealt with popular cultural elements that played a part in disseminating an Australian imagining of the nation and particular style of nationalism.