

# Much to Mourn or Much to Celebrate?

Historical Reckoning and  
the Legacy of Federation

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A significant anniversary is often a time of reckoning. This is no less true for the commemorative events of a nation than for an individual. In Australia, the 2001 Centenary of Federation witnessed a flurry of historical soul-searching. The decade approaching this particular commemoration entailed extensive national reflection as to the role of Federation in Australia's backstory, and its contemporary legacy. From the early 1990s, leading interpretations reflected a marked difference in perspective. Debate ensued between those who regarded Federation as worthy of celebration, and those who declared it cause for national shame. The conflict raised questions about the way that historians presented the past, not only in terms of what they included, but more significantly in relation to what they omitted from their accounts.

The current paper examines some of the main ideas found in those divergent historical interpretations. The works referred to here date from the period of the early 1990s and continue until several years after the Centenary. For reasons of brevity, they are a sample only of the publishing boom that took place in conjunction with the Centenary of Federation. The writer explores the ongoing absence of Federation in the national psyche, and its marked lack of emotional resonance for most contemporary Australians. The chief emphasis, however, is on some of the new perspectives that emerged during this period. Of particular interest are arguments about the dire consequences of Federation for Aboriginal Australians, and the omission of women from the historical record. The writer strives to provide an impartial review rather than aligning with any individual stance. Readers are encouraged to contemplate the meaning of Federation in terms of its personal as well as national significance.

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In December of 2001, prominent Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey addressed the National Press Club in Canberra as Chairman of the National Council for the Centenary of Federation. He outlined his reasons for believing that Federation deserved celebration. To Blainey, the creation of the Commonwealth was a miracle, given the many obstacles that faced nationhood and the long process of debate and negotiation involved. He went on, however, to bemoan the search for a sensible balance when it came to praising or lamenting the past. This referred to the conflicting points of view and debate that had characterized Australian national history during the Centenary year.<sup>1</sup>

Given the significance of a centenary for the nation's taking of stock, it is not surprising that such notions of praise and lament surfaced repeatedly in the way that many historians approached Federation. Reflecting international trends in historiography, the national history that Blainey was talking about strongly emphasized the relationship between past and present. It probed questions of national identity and indeed national honour in its efforts to tell the story of the nation. It approached the past in terms of how it could shed light on contemporary integrity and morality.<sup>2</sup>

Some historical enquiry at the time included an open questioning as to the integrity of those involved in Federation, and reflected on what their actions had to say about – and to – contemporary Australia. Not surprisingly, this generated significant argument within the historical profession. Such historical reckoning was not limited to the Australian context. Other post-colonial nations, including the United States and Canada, produced similarly critical national histories in the late twentieth-century, no doubt reflecting the same need to confront their nation's past in order to settle its present.<sup>3</sup> The historical debate that occurred in Australia around the time of the Centenary of Federation was an important and perhaps inevitable part of Australia's post-colonial journey.

While the arguments put forward by historians related chiefly to the moral legacy of Federation, also at issue was the way that contemporary historians told its story. Following some twenty years or so in which studies of Federation were notably absent, the historical profession came out in full force before the Centenary. Some condemned Federation histories written before the 1970s as narrow and dreary in their purely economic and political depiction of how the Australian nation came into being.<sup>4</sup> Many had portrayed the Commonwealth's beginnings as a matter of political convenience, rather than national definition.<sup>5</sup>

Others, particularly feminist historians, pointed out that previous histories had omitted any mention of how Australian women contributed to Federation.<sup>6</sup> Those taking a celebratory stance opposed such objections because in their view critical accounts obscured past achievements, and

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1 Geoffrey Blainey, 'A Nation for a Continent,' *The New Federalist: The Journal of Australian Federation History* 8, 2001, 13.

2 Ann Curthoys, 'Disputing National Histories: Some Recent Australian Debates,' *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, Vol. 1 No. 1 March 2006, 6.

3 Mark McKenna, 'Different Perspectives on Black Armband History,' *Research Paper No. 5 1997-98*, 2.

4 Helen Irving, 'Celebrating Federation,' *The Sydney Papers*, Autumn 1998, 38.

5 Donald Horne, *Ideas for a Nation*, Sydney, Pan Books, 1989, 20.

6 E.g. Helen Irving, ed. *A Woman's Constitution? Gender and History in the Australian Commonwealth*, Marrickville, Hale & Remonger, 1996.

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conveyed a negative impression of the Australian identity.<sup>7</sup> The Centenary year saw within the Australian history community a widespread questioning of entrenched ideas and beliefs.<sup>8</sup>

While historians were reflecting on the moral validity of Federation and its historical legacy, Australia's political leaders were also buying into the fray. In 1996 Prime Minister John Howard declared that it was time to stop apologizing for long-forgotten misdeeds and instead to positively promote past achievements. Howard went so far as to describe the Australian past as heroic, courageous, and even humanitarian. This politicization of history was a new direction for Australia, and one that occurred in the context of a strong stance taken by the Federal government over threats to the nation's self-image y posed by so-called revisionist accounts of the past.<sup>9</sup> History was in the headlines.

For the Australian public, however, matters pertaining to Federation appeared to be of little interest. Before the 2001 Centenary, widespread polling as to general knowledge about Federation concluded found this to be woefully inadequate.<sup>10</sup> To this day, most Australians continue to assume that their country was born at Gallipoli in 1918, rather than on 1 January 1901.<sup>11</sup> Through a range of Commonwealth ministerial grants leading to a number of Centenary projects, both Keating and Howard governments set about educating the Australian public about their nation's beginnings.<sup>12</sup>

Further impetus came from a so-called Centenary 'boom' which shortly before 2001 made available a number of publishing grants intended to raise generally poor popular awareness.<sup>13</sup> Post-campaign polls went on to claim that the Centenary celebrations and associated educational campaign had raised public awareness from a mere twenty-five to a more impressive eighty-seven percent.<sup>14</sup> A range of materials produced in a variety of media portrayed Federation in ways intended to capture public interest. The net effect was restoration of humanity to a story structured previously by an economic and political framework. Henry Parkes made way for stories and images of ordinary people attending political meetings all over the country, or jostling alongside one another in horse-drawn wagons.<sup>15</sup>

No doubt in a further effort to appeal to the public, popular materials tended to emphasise the celebratory aspects of Federation rather than more confronting questions such as Aboriginal disenfranchisement. One such example, a nationally broadcast television commercial produced for the Centenary and entitled 'Ask Your Mother', featured a number of contemporary Australians being asked to name the first Prime Minister; none could. A laughing narrator asked rhetorically what sort of country would forget such an important detail – particularly when it was evident that those same individuals could easily name America's first President. The voice-over went on to

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7 Bob Birrell, *Federation the Secret Story*, Sydney, Duffy & Snellgrove, 2001, 2.

8 Blainey, 'A Nation for a Continent,' 13.

9 McKenna, 'Different Perspectives,' 9, 10.

10 Blainey, 'A Nation,' 13.

11 Rodney Cavalier, 'Celebrating Federation,' *The Sydney Papers*, Autumn 1998, 41.

12 John Waugh, 'New Federation History,' *Melbourne University Law Review* 24, 2001, 1038; Erin Ihde, 'Australia Federates, Australia Celebrates,' in Martin Crotty & David Andrew Roberts (eds) *Turning Points in Australian History*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2009, 87; Blainey 13.

13 Waugh, 'New Federation History,' 1031.

14 Ihde, 'Australia Federates,' 88; Blainey, 'A Nation,' 13.

15 See for example *Federation: A Three-Part Journey to Nationhood*, Film Australia 2001.

suggest that Australian citizens today perhaps take for granted their country's beginnings, because 'a vote rather than a bullet' created the nation.

This explanation may have been an attempt to soften the implication that Australians in general were disinterested in the story of their nation's origins.<sup>16</sup> A three-part documentary series produced in the Centenary year by Film Australian and broadcast on ABC Television similarly worked to overcome public ignorance via an entertaining format. 'Federation' painted the road to nationhood as a jolly adventure, a perception aided by lashings of folk music and the drawling, derisive voiceover of popular comedian John Doyle. While the documentary addressed injustice towards Aborigines by interviewing contemporary Aboriginal leaders and showing archival footage of Aborigines in chains, its predominant tone was patriotic and celebratory. It emphasized popular involvement in Federation and highlighted archival footage showing white Australians reveling in the celebrations of January 1. Its key message was the triumph of democracy in bringing about nationhood.

Other popular and scholarly materials continued the focus on democratic process, sometimes asking why such a crucial moment in Australia's past should strike so little chord with the general population. 'Ask Your Mother' implied that endless political and public debate and referenda pale beside the drama of battle.<sup>17</sup> While the ANZAC legend offered endless scope for public mythologizing, Federation seemed dreary and uninteresting in contrast.<sup>18</sup> There was no contest in terms of which event would be recognized by the ordinary man or woman in the street as engendering the qualities and spirit they chose to see associated with the national identity. However, while many celebratory materials focused on the peaceful origins of nationhood, public perceptions persisted of Federation as a practical and political union. As a result, it continued to excite very little public interest.<sup>19</sup>

Historians on the other hand approached the Centenary with enthusiasm. A proliferation of articles appeared with the word 'celebrate' in their titles, some with question mark attached. Many asked rhetorically what exactly the nation was celebrating. Some writers saw the scales weighted heavily towards the positive. They emphasized the creation of the Commonwealth as a significant political achievement that overcame years of lengthy opposition within and between separate and rival colonies. They cited the enduring success of the Constitution an Australian democracy as further evidence that Federation warranted celebration.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, subscribers to what has been termed the 'black armband' view emphasized the new nation's exclusive citizenship and harsh treatment of Aboriginal Australians. They contended that in celebrating Federation, historians were sweeping under the carpet the ugly truth about Australia's racist past. Constitutional historian Helen Irving revealed that when she launched the 1901 Committee in 1996, some of her colleagues admitted their reluctance to attend, because they

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16 John Hirst, 'Federation: Destiny and Identity,' in John Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History*, Victoria, Black Inc Agenda, 197.

17 Ihde, 'Australia Federates,' 89.

18 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds (eds), *What's Wrong with ANZAC?*, Sydney, 2010, 7.

19 David Malouf, 'The States of the Nation,' *The Monthly* August 2010, 31.

20 See for example Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation*, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

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were not sure that Federation was a morally acceptable subject.<sup>21</sup> Appearing on the documentary program 'Federation' and responding to a question as to whether Australia should remember Federation with pride, Aboriginal leader Mick Dodson stated simply that this question was neither fair nor reasonable, 'because in any fair and reasonable analysis the answer is no; it puts a cloud over what our nation has done.'

Dodson went on to explain the long-term ramifications of this denial of citizenship, which was in effect an entrenched colonial technique whereby invaders demonized the indigenous inhabitants as less than human and accordingly unworthy of belonging to the nation. Over time, those indigenous inhabitants absorb the sense of worthlessness conveyed by white society. The ultimate effect is an entrenched sense of inferiority and a belief that dispossession is inevitable and deserved. Couched in these terms, it is not difficult to understand why many argued that the new Commonwealth was devastating for Aboriginal Australians.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, important notions of guilt and responsibility abounded in the more critical materials. Some scholars blatantly condemned historical narratives that failed to ask deeper and more probing questions, in particular those that related to the denial of Aboriginal human and civil rights that accompanied Federation. Critics alleged that accounts focusing on the positive aspects of democratic process and Constitutional freedom – without also telling the truth about Aboriginal disenfranchisement and mistreatment – were merely recycling the same dreary clichés. By staying silent on controversial questions of race, such accounts failed to confront the past with any genuine honesty, or to deepen the nation's self-understanding.<sup>23</sup>

They alleged further that celebratory accounts of Federation would only perpetuate past injustices by portraying a skewed portrait of the society from which it emerged.<sup>24</sup> They disputed that Australian nationhood began in peace, when extensive documentary evidence confirmed an endless litany of violence perpetrated against Aborigines. Inaccurate and incomplete accounts depicting only some aspects of the whole story of nationhood would accordingly fail to provide a genuine basis for contemporary notions of national pride and identity. Some scholars accused the historical field in general of censoring historical truths because these shed an unpleasant cast on modern-day Australia's sense of itself.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, an accurate portrayal of what they contended was a sexist, racist society had the potential to cause more than a few ripples of discomfort when it came to contemplating the legacy of Federation.

Despite these differences, both positive and negative interpretations clearly tried to understand the significance of Federation for contemporary Australia. A key element of this was an effort to fathom the nature of the society from which it emerged. The issue of historical judgment was a crucial component of this process. It was certainly an important question considered by many historians during the period before and during the Centenary. Defending her opinion that

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21 Helen Irving, 'Celebrating Federation,' 38.

22 *Federation – A Three-Part Journey to Nationhood*, Episode 2, Film Australia 2001, broadcast on ABC TV 25/7/2001.

23 See for example Tony Birch, 'History is Never Bloodless: Getting it Wrong After One Hundred Years of Federation,' *Australian Historical Studies*, 118; Mary Kalantzis, 'Recognising Diversity,' *NSW Centenary of Federation Committee Barton Lectures Series 2001, Lecture no.7*.

24 Raymond Evans, 'White Citizenship: Nationhood and Race at Federation,' *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum, Cultural Heritage Series*, 2:2, 187.

25 Birch, 'History is Never Bloodless,' 52.

Federation was a remarkable achievement, Helen Irving maintained – quoting Edward Carr in her defence – that it was not the historian’s role to cast judgment. Irving further argued that history should not be a moral discipline, but must merely aim to understand the minds of those involved in the past.<sup>26</sup>

However, this is by no means the definitive view. More than forty years ago, British historian Arthur Marwick pointed out that the writing of history does not have to avoid moral judgment. Since a society can only achieve full self-knowledge and understanding by honestly examining its past conduct, this scrutiny must involve an open and frank contemplation of that past in its full truth, omitting nothing.<sup>27</sup> Others have equally suggested that leaving out unpleasant events from the collective national consciousness can do damage to that nation by preventing national healing and impairing future national decision-making.<sup>28</sup>

While historians may not set out to judge, they do so as mightily by what they leave out as by what they include in their accounts of the past. Those scholars who perceived Federation as cause for lament did so because they believed that there were shameful episodes in Australia’s past not fully addressed by prevailing historical accounts. They denounced those who omitted or played down Aboriginal dispossession and mistreatment, and who accordingly promoted positive judgments of White Australia. In the eyes of critics, half-truths would only perpetuate historical inaccuracies; this was a lost opportunity for the nation to learn from its past transgressions.<sup>29</sup>

This perspective argued that by emphasizing celebratory aspects of Federation such as democratic process, positive aspects of the Constitution and lavish public display, contemporary accounts would perpetuate and protect a mythological history. This mythologizing would stand in the way of honest national self-reckoning. Only when historians portrayed the full story of White Australia’s violence towards Aboriginal people would the Australian nation be truly able to confront its past and to move forward.<sup>30</sup> Violence and dispossession of Aborigines rendered meaningless those accounts of Federation depicting it as the outcome of peaceful and democratic action.<sup>31</sup>

Critical accounts of Federation revolved around violence towards Aborigines and the racial exclusivity of the new nation. Writers explored ways in which White Australia provided a rationale for including some as citizens of the new nation while excluding others. A frequent criticism was the extreme selectivity with which the Commonwealth bestowed the ‘gift’ of Australian citizenship. This was a citizenship based on notions of race linked inextricably to a sense of national pride and patriotism.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the exclusion of most women – apart from South Australia and Western Australia – from franchise meant that only half of the white population could access the benefits of citizenship. The benefits of citizenship were only available for white men.

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26 Helen Irving, ‘Celebrating Federation,’ 38.

27 Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, London, Macmillan, 1970, 13-14.

28 Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, 52.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Tony Birch, ‘History is Never Bloodless,’ 44.

31 John Hirst, ‘Federation: Destiny and Identity,’ 201.

32 Raymond Evans *et al.* *1901- Our Future’s Past*, Sydney, Macmillan, 1997, 26, 179.

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For those white men, citizenship clearly bestowed a range of advanced civil, social, and political rights. Certainly, these surpassed advantages associated with citizenship in societies like England and the United States. However, the other side of the equation was an overwhelming Aboriginal disadvantage; Aboriginal deprivation and disenfranchisement mirrored the advanced social reforms enjoyed by white citizens. Scholars who emphasized racial concerns in Federation highlighted this dichotomy of advantage and disadvantage.<sup>33</sup> Others countered that it was important to judge the Australians of 1901 by the standards of their own time rather than those of contemporary Australia.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, the debate involved crucial and possibly unanswerable questions of relevance to the discipline of history.

Critics cited racist legislation passed by the new Commonwealth as further evidence that Federation did not warrant celebration. They condemned the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which constituted the world's most exclusionary migration legislation and reflected the new nation's obsessive preoccupation with race.<sup>35</sup> The Federal Constitution of 1901, the Commonwealth Franchise Act of 1902, and State legislation passed before and after these two events provided further evidence that nationhood officially eradicated citizenship rights for Aboriginal people. Writers asked what the nation should celebrate given this appalling litany. For many, placing Aboriginal civil and human rights at the centre of analysis cast a definite pall on celebratory histories.<sup>36</sup>

Further criticisms came from those who condemned the omission of women from previous accounts, alleging that this omission was ongoing. Appearing with sociologist-turned-historian Bob Birrell on ABC Television's *Lateline* program at the end of April in 2001, historian Marilyn Lake contended that Federation was 'a bloke's history'. She accused male historians of an intense resistance to acknowledging the valuable role that women played in Australia's social, economic, and political history. Lake cited her discovery that indexes in celebratory histories contained a paltry eight percent of references to women. Her chief argument was that by omitting women from history, male historians were simultaneously exaggerating the historical importance of men. She went on to further accuse those historians of portraying an extremely narrow conception of history.<sup>37</sup>

Lake and other feminist historians rejected the notion that a small number of elite, upper class white men could claim sole responsibility for bringing about Australian nationhood. Instead, they sought – and found – detailed evidence of women's involvement in the story of the Commonwealth. This led to a number of accounts showing women actively engaged in a range of political organisations, exerting political pressure through an activism that was not just related to suffrage, but to genuine political engagement.<sup>38</sup> The result was an energetic and vibrant picture showing the rapid expansion of women's independence, political consciousness and activity in Australia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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33 See for example Tony Birch, 'History is Never Bloodless,' Mary Kalantzis, 'Recognising Diversity'.

34 Paul Kelly, 'Introduction,' in Evans *et al.*, 1901, 10.

35 Evans *et al.*, 179.

36 Patricia Grimshaw, 'Federation as a Turning Point in Australian History,' *Australian Historical Studies* 33:118, 2008, 27-28.

37 *Lateline* ABC TV, broadcast 30/4/2001 accessed 2/6/13, URL: <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/s286040.htm>

38 Helen Irving, 'Fair Federalists and Founding Mothers,' in *A Woman's Constitution*, 2.

Further examination of evidence relating to gender in the Australian Commonwealth suggests that by the 1890s, white women had reached a new stage of political involvement. Many participated in the move to federate. In Western and South Australia, where women were entitled to vote, they attended early Federation meetings in significant numbers. Many wrote letters to the press outlining their opinions. In addition, women canvassed for votes, escorted other voters to polling booths and demonstrated an enthusiastic interest in electoral matters. Many were tireless activists, the Women's Christian Temperance Union in particular working in strong support of Federation.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst women in most colonies had little direct opportunity to be a genuine force in shaping Federation, they nevertheless contributed in a number of ways to the building of the new nation. Feminist historians contended that the story of women's involvement in the nation's political evolution was well worth celebrating. More importantly, they contended that by omitting from historical record the true level of women's involvement, male historians continued to depict an inaccurate and incomplete story of the nation's beginnings. Once again, it appeared that the manner of telling resulted in false and misleading impressions of the Australian past.

The struggle of Australian women for suffrage also featured in pre-Centenary interpretations, providing further evidence of women's political involvement. However, white women fought for their own suffrage as opposed to that of Aboriginal women. Agitation for social reform by leading women like Vida Goldstein, Rose Scott and Louise Lawson did not include reform for Aboriginal women. Their actions provided further evidence as to the racist and exclusionary nature of Australian society at the turn of the century.<sup>40</sup>

Historical interpretations of Federation around the time of its Centenary did not all focus on past transgressions. Many accounts celebrated different aspects of nationhood. Given that much of the material published and produced around this time came from Commonwealth funding, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the key themes in positive interpretations of Federation was the victory of democratic process in the creation of the Commonwealth. The prevailing spirit characterising the long and drawn-out unification of the disparate colonies was 'democracy in action'.<sup>41</sup> This derived from the success of the federal councils and referenda within a spirited federation movement. In addition, observers noted that this was the first time in world history that the vote of 'the people' led to the creation of a new nation.<sup>42</sup> The longevity of Australian democracy offered further justification for celebrating the formation of the Commonwealth for its legacy to modern Australia.<sup>43</sup>

Popular materials also emphasised participation in democratic process. 'Ask Your Mother' described the 2001 Centenary as a time to celebrate the nation's peaceful origins, and to ask what kind of country contemporary Australians wanted for the future. By including a multicultural range of actors, among them laughing Aboriginal children splashing about in an idyllic Outback location, the commercial conveyed impressions of a peaceful and tolerant multi-racial society. By emphasising the peaceful origins of the Commonwealth – 'created in peace, not in war' – it suppressed any question of conflict or dissent within the society from which it arose.

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39 *Ibid.*, 6, 14.

40 Patricia Grimshaw, 'A White Woman's Suffrage,' in *A Woman's Constitution*, 79.

41 Geoffrey Blainey, 'A Nation for a Continent,' 10-11.

42 Bob Carr, 'Centenary of Federation,' [http://www.aspg.org.au/journal/2001autumn\\_16\\_1/2b%20Carr-CentFedspeech.pdf](http://www.aspg.org.au/journal/2001autumn_16_1/2b%20Carr-CentFedspeech.pdf), 11. Accessed 5.6.13.

43 Erin Ihde, 'Australia Federates,' 99.

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In conjunction with the emphasis on democratic process, some writers highlighted the positive features of the Australian Constitution and the fact that its construction involved lengthy discussion and debate. They attributed the social and political stability that has characterised Australian society since 1901 to the enduring and unchanging structure of the Australian Constitution.<sup>44</sup> Drafted for the people, by the people, the Constitution was thereby well worth celebrating. Constitutional lawyer Helen Irving, also one of the chief authors of materials commissioned by the National Council for the Centenary of Federation, argued that this framework had lasted for more than one hundred years. She contended that while not particularly radical, the Australian Constitution was one of the most democratic and progressive documents in existence at the time of its creation.<sup>45</sup>

Further evidence that Federation deserved celebration was a newly emphasised civic nationalism. Whilst Australian historians before the 1990s explained the causes of Federation in a number of different ways, none of these was definitive.<sup>46</sup> The ‘imagining’ of a nation must entail something more than political and economic phenomena. Materials published from the 1990s on widened their lens from the narrow economic gaze that had characterised earlier interpretations, perhaps searching for those additional elements that eventually bound the nation as one people, in the wake of Benedict Anderson’s seminal work of 1983.<sup>47</sup> While the search for definitive causative factors for Federation continued, scholars sought more complex explanations than economic rivalry or issues of defence. This certainly broadened the scope and scale of Federation studies.

In particular, work commissioned by the National Council for the Centenary of Federation provided a more probing and multi-dimensional explanation as to why Federation took place. The result was a broad social and cultural sweep, characterised by a more complex causal analysis than the previously limited focus on ‘tariffs, defence and immigration’.<sup>48</sup> These studies emphasised the development of Australian national feeling as a key factor in the success of the Federal movement following many years of vacillation on the part of politicians and various interest groups.

A decided emphasis on this sense of the nation characterised new explanations for how Federation eventually succeeded. Some emphasised the vital role of imagining a community, defining the outsider (non-whites) and identifying a national ‘type’. Such factors provided the crucial impetus to nationhood for a society without external pressure like the threat of invasion by another. Fostered by a corresponding growth in specifically Australian nationalist literature, along with a distinctive sporting culture, this ‘imagining’ ultimately led to a commitment to an Australian community rather than to colonial loyalties. These were positive national phenomena regarded as well worth celebrating.

The 2001 Centenary of Federation represented an important opportunity for national self-reckoning. A vigorous public awareness campaign set about educating the general populace in order to increase their understanding of the nation’s origins. Despite widespread polls claiming to have done so, Federation continues to strike little chord in the national consciousness, a phenomenon perhaps best explained by Australia’s emotional attachment to the ANZAC legend.

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Helen Irving, interviewed on *Federation – A Three-Part Journey to Nationhood*.

<sup>46</sup> John Manning Ward, *The State and the People*, Annandale, Federation Press, 2001, 49.

<sup>47</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London, Verso, 1983.

<sup>48</sup> Helen Irving, *To Constitute a Nation*, 81.

There seems to be little contest between an event still regarded as an economic and political achievement, and one involving the ultimate sacrifice.

Historical interpretations of Federation emerging at the time of the Centenary clearly reflected a concern with deciding whether the origins of Australian nationhood deserved celebration or mourning. Those scholars who concluded that Federation was cause for national shame focused on the exclusionary nature of Australian citizenship and in particular the racist treatment of Aboriginal Australians. They argued further that by continuing to portray the positive aspects of the Commonwealth's creation, and omitting details that cast past Australians in an unflattering light would only damage the potential for national self-understanding. Opponents of this view maintained that nothing good would arise from national self-flagellation and guilt mongering and that this was an occasion of national self-congratulation.

In addition, feminist historians restored women to the story of Federation and contended that the historiography continued to present an unbalanced image of the past in which white men enacted all notable achievements. They explored the full nature of women's political involvement in aspects of suffrage and Federation. However, they also pointed out that this was activism on the part of white women, not Aboriginal women, and that it did nothing to help the latter.

Those who argued that Federation was well worth celebrating focused on aspects such as the democratic process by which nationhood was ultimately achieved and the enduring nature of Australia's Constitution. They also highlighted the role of nationalism in bringing about nationhood. These focal points certainly contributed positively to previous studies of Federation that had emphasised its political and economic aspects. The result was an enriched historiography.

Ultimately, these arguments raise questions as to the role of history in national reflection and self-knowledge, questions not easily answered. Whatever the consensus, the need for honesty and openness stands in confronting the nation's past, whether we regard Federation as something to celebrate or something to mourn.

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