The Sydney Morning Herald and Representation of the 1988 Bicentennial

By Gary Foley
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Introduction

Print media is a relatively recent phenomenon, with the first English newspaper, The Oxford Gazette being published in 1665, and mass circulation newspapers not appearing until the 19th Century. But, as Clark notes, by the end of the reign of George II, "newspapers had become a vital element in the political, commercial and even literary life of England and her American colonies". He goes on to point out that,

> *English-language newspapers of the 18th Century, wherever they were printed, presented their readers with a remarkably coherent vision of the world. This consensual world view covered a range of perceptions and attitudes extending from matters as fundamental as space and time to virtually unquestioned assumptions about religion, nationality, and the natural world, not to mention that triune scholarly shibboleth of our own day, race, class and gender. It was the world view, by and large, of the upper-class, cultivated, ethnocentric and fiercely patriotic, Protestant English male.*

So that by 1831 when the Sydney Morning Herald was established, it could be said that the newspaper served the same function for the colony of NSW. Indeed, it was to continue that function for its first hundred years, reinforcing and maintaining the mythology of the valiant settler and Terra Nullius, and by 1938 and the Sesqui-centenary celebrations, the Sydney Morning Herald (hereafter SMH) was itself intricately interwoven into the greater part of the 'history' being celebrated.

By the 1988 Bicentennial, Australia itself had changed, as had the reliance in the earlier part of the century upon newspapers as a primary source of 'news' information for most Australians. The encroachment of television had threatened newspapers' hegemony on daily information, but even in the competitive British newspaper market a survey in the 1960's found that 'newspaper reading was the most stable variable apart from sex and

date of birth'.

Thus, in the lead up to the 1988 Australia Day celebrations, the SMH had not only come to regard itself as part of the Australian conservative establishment, but also, despite a relatively small market share, was still a significant voice being heard in Australian culture. I was interested therefore, in how the SMH represented the 1998 Bi-centennial celebrations to its readers, and how those representations (focussing on Indigenous contestations of the meaning of the day) were informed by the past, in this instance, the SMH's representation of the Sesquicentenary celebrations 50 years before. I was also intrigued by how history had apparently come back to haunt Australians during the Bicentennial, through the pages of the SMH.

Australia Day 1988 - the Bi-centennial Celebrations & the SMH

Peter Spearitt has said that 1988 was not a spontaneous celebration of Australia and what it means to be Australian. He pointed out that an army of 'bureaucrats, consultants, advertising agencies and governments' had planned the year for at least a decade, and that for the last six months before the big day the TV screens of the nation had been the stars of Fosters beer commercials and Aborigines, singing the Bicentennial theme song, 'Celebration of a Nation' to a backdrop of Uluru and the dead heart.

A vast range of activities to 'commemorate' the Bicentennial were planned all over the nation. Whilst the primary focus on the day was to be Sydney with its re-enactment of the landing of the First Fleet, it also included virtually every conceivable 'community project' imaginable, from a major corporate merchandising program to a 'plant an Australia flag in your local park' project.

In the final six days leading up to the 26th January, the SMH gave extensive coverage of the preparations for the celebrations. This consisted

of numerous reports of the progress of the Tall Ships that were re-enacting the First Fleet, extensive corporate advertising, 'historical features', and a wide range of assorted trivia. The normally staid and conservative pages of the SMH had earned the paper the affectionate nickname of 'Granny Herald' among Sydneysiders, but for this week before the Bicentennial, Granny certainly seemed to 'kick up her skirts' and join in the great 'Masturbation of the Nation', as unkind Indigenous activists had dubbed it. But lurking in the midst of the nationalistic notions and Australia Day promotions were ominous signs of challenge to the dominant society's hegemonic construction of Australia Day and what it represented. As Peter Cochrane and David Goodman said,

> *From the beginning, the Bicentenary has been contested ground, and its organiser, the ABA, has been steeped in controversy...The most profound challenge to the official construction of the event to be celebrated has come from Aboriginal groups. Perhaps not since the mid-nineteenth century has the basic question of right to occupy the continent been posed with such clarity, and received such mainstream attention.*

On the same day as the SMH featured its 'souvenir lift-out, the front page of the main part of the paper featured two major headline stories of Indigenous challenge to the status quo. The first was a story headlined 'Torres Strait Islanders back Independence Call" and was about the stirring's in the Torres Strait that eventually resulted in the High Court delivering the famous 'Mabo' decision. The second story was about an audacious plan by Koori activist Burnam Burnam who was in England planning to claim Britain by raising an Aboriginal flag at the same time as descendants of the British were planning their similar action of re-enactment in Sydney. The same report also said that 'hundreds of Aborigines' were en-route to Sydney to attend 'the long march for justice, freedom and hope'.

As the Aboriginal storm clouds gathered, it was apparent the major divisive issue on the virtual eve of Australia Day (Invasion Day) was to be the contest of spirit with the large numbers of Kooris expected in Sydney

from all over the country. The intensity of the battle of wills is reflected in the numerous reports of Aboriginal people gearing up for protest. The SMH's editorial of the 19th January was titled 'World focus on Aborigines' and said,

> *Scarcely a day of the Bicentenary has passed when issues involving Aborigines and their 'Year of Mourning' protests have not featured prominently.*

The newspaper had identified a feeling of unease in many in Australians that was encapsulated in one of the Indigenous protest slogans, White Australia has a Black History. Henry Reynolds has more recently described this unease as 'this whispering in our hearts', which he said stemmed in part from,

> *The fundamental contradiction between treating the Indigenes with 'amity and kindness'...whilst at the same time taking their land*

.But this unease was something that the SMH had not had to contend with a mere 50 years earlier, although it was during the 1938 Sesquicentenary celebrations that Australians had first been confronted with the issues that would ultimately divide the nation in 1988.

1938 Sesquicentenary, the SMH, and 'The Day of Mourning'

The Australia that the SMH spoke to in 1938 was a dramatically different country to that in 1988. In terms of what interests us here, race relations was a non-issue because the "White Australia" policy maintained racial purity, and as far as Aborigines were concerned, it had long been the assumption that they were in the process of 'dying out'. As Morris said, 'The colonial process had reduced the Aborigines to a residual minority, but they had not been eliminated. The problem was expected to resolve itself' .

Further evidence of the attitudes of the day can be found in the minutes of the first 'Aboriginal Welfare' conference between Commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities held in Canberra in April 1937. When the

Western Australian Commissioner of Native Affairs, Mr. A. O. Neville, stated, 'In my opinion, however, the problem is one which will eventually solve itself...no matter what we do they will die out' , he was referring to the 'full blood, wild, bush blacks' or 'primitive nomads'. The conference was most concerned that the remaining 'crossbreeds' ('half-castes', 'octoroons' and quadroons') be assimilated. The Victorian representative stated, 'We are all agreed that the most urgent problem is the absorption of the quadroons and octoroons into the white community', but the Queensland Chief Protector of Aborigines, the aptly named Mr. Bleakley was concerned, he felt,

> *The superior type of half-breed, with the necessary intelligence and ambition for higher civilized life, is entitled to the opportunity and help to make his place in the white community. But we must not be disappointed if what appears to be ambitions turns out to be a desire for freedom from supervision.*

The first of the final resolutions passed at this historic conference of Aboriginal 'protectors' was titled 'Destiny of the Race' and read,

> *That this Conference believes that the destiny of the natives of aboriginal origin, but not the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end.*

It is interesting that all I could find of the SMH representation of this important event (which was the beginning of the notorious 'stolen generations' policy) were less than 40 words merely noting the conference had occurred. In broader terms, as January 1938 arrived and the days began to tick down to the 150th anniversary celebrations, the newspaper reflected general concern about the generally unstable international political situation, with one edition featuring headlines such as 'Japan's Next Move Awaited', 'Chiang Rejects Japan's Terms', 'Many Towns Bombed' and 'Hitler on Peace - What Germany Wants'. Then, as Australia Day drew closer, the SMH began to pay attention to the impending events in Sydney, when, on 12th January an item stated,

> *The influx of visitors to the city for the 150th anniversary celebrations has already begun...indications are that, on January*

26th, Sydney will see the largest crowd in its history.

The major focus of SMH representation on the 1938 Sesquicentenary was an emphasis on the Anglo-saxon heritage of most Australians at the time, and, in particular, the re-enactment of the landing of the First Fleet that would take place on Australia Day. Unlike 1988 however, there were significant differences in the way in which the paper and its readers seemed to perceive the concept of Australia Day. For example, there seemed to be no corresponding huge advertising and publicity campaign as with the weeks leading into 1988, but rather the SMH restricted its enthusiasm to a single 'Sesquicentenary Supplement' published on the 2nd January. Compared to the 1988 Bicentennial coverage and 'Souvenir Lift-out', the 1938 version was very subdued indeed.

The 'Sesquicentenary Supplement' cover had a large graphic of Governor Philip with the symbol of Sydney's modernity at the time, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, in the background. Articles within talked of the 'English background of Australian settlers', and included a section on 'Bushrangers and Blackfellows'. This was the extent to which the SMH (and its consumers) seemed prepared to acknowledge Australia's Indigenous peoples then. This section talked of 'the vanishing Australians', (which mirrored the views expressed at the Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities the previous year) but which simultaneously seemed remarkably willing to concede past atrocities in a manner Australians seemed to have lost 50 years later. For example, an article by Percy S. Allen states,

> *...when we read in the old files of the 'Herald' from John Fairfax's day onwards, the protests against the barbarous treatment of the blacks we may be sure that the poor wretches were dealt with atrociously.*

Allen seemed to be positioning the SMH with those who objected to atrocities against the Aboriginal people, but in the context of other articles reaffirming that Kooris were now a dying race anyway, thus in part

absolving the 1938 reader from responsibility.

But, regardless of what position non-Aboriginal people were prepared to take in relation to the Sesquicentenary celebrations, (and as Julian Thomas has shown, there were many who contested the gender and class assumptions of the dominant reading of Australian history at that point), the situation in the Aboriginal communities of eastern Australia had changed. Heather Goodall has documented the history of NSW Aboriginal political activism in the early part of the century and has that the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA) had been very active during the 1920s in about 16 Aboriginal communities north and south of Sydney. Furthermore, just prior to the official celebrations, as Julian Thomas writes,

> *Two weeks before, Jack Patten and William Ferguson had released Aborigines Claim Citizens Rights!, a manifesto for the Aborigines Progressive Association. They wrote, 'This festival of 150 years' so-called "progress" in Australia commemorates also 150 years of misery and degradation imposed on the original inhabitants by the white invaders of this country.'*

In their manifesto called for a conference to be held in Sydney on the 26th January and dubbed the occasion as a 'Day of Mourning and Protest'. The SMH had responded to the call by Patten and Ferguson by publishing a report on 13th January stating that,

> *Mr David Uniapon, an educated aboriginal said today that the proposal for a 'day of mourning' to direct attention to the grievances of the Aborigines was a huge mistake...The movement, he said, was of a political character, and was largely emotional, sponsored by sympathetic white people and half-castes.*

This sounds remarkably similar to the tactics used and sentiments expressed in attempts by Australian newspapers to discredit Aboriginal political actions and activists ever since, and in 1938 it was the only real acknowledgment that the SMH gave to the claims of the Aborigines Progressive Association in the lead-up to Australia Day.

Finally, of the day itself in 1938, the SMH gave major coverage (for those

days) of the Sesquicentenary celebrations, with a major headline, 'Australia's Day of Rejoicing - Celebrations Open With Brilliant Pageantry - Symbolic Procession Depicts 150 Years of Progress - 1,000,000 People Watch in City Streets.' The only mention of Aboriginal protest was in the form of a small article headlined, 'Aborigines - "Day of Mourning" - Emphatic Protests.' Apart from this seven paragraph report, the SMH ignored Indigenous response to the celebrations. It was not to be in a position of such nonchalance in 1988, as I have already shown.

Many writers on this period of Aboriginal history have suggested that Patten, Ferguson and the Aborigines Progressive Association had not achieved much with their small protest in 1938. Julian Thomas points out that Jack Horner and Marcia Langton said the 'Day of Mourning' was powerfully symbolic but 'produced little change', and then he agrees with this by then posing the question, 'Why didn't the Day of Mourning have more impact?' I tend to disagree with this assessment of the 'Day of Mourning' action in 1938, as I believe that the work of Patten, Ferguson, Pearl Gibbs et al was to inspire a new generation of Aboriginal political activists who, despite not even having been born in 1938, were to take up the struggle and build on what the Aborigines Progressive Association had begun.

When 50 years later the SMH reported the Bicentennial, the activists involved in organising the 1988 'Day of Mourning' included the son of Jack Patten and other descendants of 1930s and 1940s activists. Furthermore, I would contend that there was an unbroken link between the political agitation in the '30s and that which burst forth in a series of consciousness-raising activities down the decades, including the 1972 'Aboriginal Embassy' protest, the actions at the 1982 Commonwealth Games and the 1988 anti-Bicentennial actions. In which case, the representation of Indigenous issues in the SMH in 1988 can be said to have been influenced by decades of Aboriginal political activism forcing Aboriginal issues onto the national political agenda.

Conclusion

Chris Healy has written, 'Aboriginal remembrance in this history is an antidote for white amnesia' , and I believe that this is borne out in the way in which the SMH represented the Bicentennial. Jack Patten, Bill Ferguson et al had initiated the first effective Aboriginal contestation of the power myths and symbols of Australia Day and it significance to Indigenous people. For five decades since there had been an ongoing campaign that had chipped away at the rock-solid notions that Australians had of their own history for the greater part of this century.

The SMH, whilst in both 1938 and 1988 had valiantly attempted to cling to the mainstream, dominant ideology about Australia Day, was ultimately forced to make significant concessions to Indigenous peoples in its representations throughout the 1988 celebrations. The fact that most Australians would today at least be aware that Aboriginal people regard Australia Day as 'Invasion Day' is, in itself, a quantum leap in awareness. But this awareness cannot be attributed to newspapers like the SMH consciously deciding 'off their own bat' to play a positive role in facilitating it, but rather because Indigenous peoples actions have directly challenged mainstream perceptions. Healy said that the invasion of Australia can be regarded as,

the story of Aboriginal people being made subjects by the twin forces of domination and documentation...the latter is possessing Indigenous people by 'knowing' them...documentation has been the means by which European knowledge was reproduced, depositing its residue in museums, archives, libraries and the mentality of racism.

It was a counter-attack on this documentation and 'knowing' of Indigenous people that has enabled Koori people today to occupy a different space in the Australian psyche. Ironically it could well be that some of the more notorious 'protection' policies of the States could well

have contributed to the Indigenous peoples psychological resistance, for example, Morris contends, ‘the main criticism of institutionalism was that it sustained

rather than removed a sense of collective identity among Aborigines.’

Whatever the reason, as I stated earlier in this essay, the SMH representation of Aborigines and the Bicentennial was clearly informed by the past in a manner in which the apparently powerless in Australian society exercised influence to an extent unimagined in 1938. That is why Henry Reynolds, writing recently was able to state,

> *...the situation of Aborigines and Islanders has been revolutionised...Their rights as a people are recognised in UN documents and international common law. Within, their public profile has changed dramatically since the erection of that embassy in Canberra in 1972. The Mabo judgement repudiated terra nullius and common assumptions generations old.*

It will be interesting to see the Sydney Morning Herald’s representation of the 250th anniversary of Australia Day, although I would be surprised if Australia is still celebrating the 26th January then.

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