Three generations of the Perrin family stand outside their home east of Nambour, Queensland.
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CHAPTER 13

SEASONS OF LIFE

THROUGH THIS YEAR of national celebration, men, women and children pursued the rhythms of their working lives. In the country, work followed the sun and the seasons; in the cities, people observed the manmade timetables of railway, office and factory. Every weekday morning children walked or rode to school, to measure out their days by the school bell. All this energy and effort could be reckoned in terms of crops sown and harvested, goods made and sold, lawsuits won and lost, children promoted to the next grade. It was just such achievements that the centenary celebrated.

The festivities surrounding 26 January barely touched the busy lives of most Australians. Claude Whish, a Queensland road surveyor, noted the anniversary in passing, but he had more pressing things on his mind.

> This day 100 years ago Sydney as a colony (or penal settlement rather) came into existence. I stayed at home gardening and doing up the borders near the house preparatory to manuring them all.

The centennial party was for politicians, an event of momentary wonder much less relevant to most people than the regular cycles of the seasons or the phases of the moon, which every year brought around again those celebrations that directly touched their own lives.

These old rhythms cut across the steady routines of the workplace. Even people who did not go to church set Sunday aside for the family and observed Easter and Christmas, the festivals of life and death and rebirth. Minorities who followed other faiths observed their own celebrations of permanence and continuity. The religious calendar marked important events in the lives of all, and families would pause to celebrate or remember births and marriages, to mourn and remember deaths. Every family had a calendar of its own.

When Australians surveyed their national history, they often reached for metaphors of birth, growth and maturity, drawn from this most intimate sphere of their lives. People cherished home and family as bulwarks against disorder;

'Brittania: "Enjoy your centennial birthday, my dear, but put away those dolls now and in future behave like one who has arrived at years of discretion."'

Melbourne Punch, *26 Jan 1888.*

"YOU'RE GETTING A BIG GIRL NOW."

seeing the nation as a family was a balm for social discord. Human life was fragile and temporary, but national growth gave a sense of continuity from one generation to the next. Yet the centenary celebrated change as well as continuity, and family life was changing, more gradually perhaps but just as fundamentally as any other facet of colonial life. In public debate and private conversation, Australians were reappraising the nature of the marriage bond, the relations of parents and children, the mutual responsibilities of old and young.

One of the most contentious issues of the day was 'the woman question'. Women had been given only a lowly and largely decorative place in the January celebrations. They had been barred from the centennial banquet on the grounds that too many important men would have had to be denied an invitation and they were honoured by the assembled dignitaries only as an afterthought. Late in the centennial year, however, when almost everyone else had been honoured, the women of New South Wales put on an exhibition of their own.

While the Melbourne exhibition had been organised by men, devoted to men's pursuits and dedicated to the masculine virtues of energy, enterprise and mechanical ingenuity, Sydney women wanted to show the hidden but equally important part played by women in the progress of the nation. 'The lordlier sex', one observed, 'have too great an inclination to claim all the work of the world as their own'. This, she admitted, was to be expected from the character of the two sexes. 'The masculine nature is exacting and loud and desirous of publicity. That of women is ... secondary and contributory to the stronger.' Because women's work was repetitive and largely done at home, it was apt to be forgotten. 'Ours is not the building of the city', one woman remarked, 'but the keeping of it'.

These women hardly dented the veneer of social concord created by the centenary. They kept well within traditional boundaries, merely asking for more recognition for the work done within the woman's sphere. But other articulate women, and men, demanded greater changes in relations between the sexes. They noted that many women did not have the luxury of the 'keeping' of the city. Some women were forced to work at tiring, underpaid jobs when the male breadwinner was sick or unemployed, or when he died or deserted his family. Women worked beside their men on the poorer farms, taught the same lessons to children for less pay than men, toiled as domestic servants or in factories to help their parents. Women, they said, should be paid a living wage, allowed to vote, and be given equal access to education.

Discussion of women's rights centred on the effects of female independence on the family. What would be the outcome of married women having the right to retain their maiden names, no longer sustaining that 'badge of slavery', the husband's surname? Surely, said a Methodist paper, the children would receive the mother's name 'And thus women's rights bring us back to the customs of the lower savages—descent reckoned through females.' A few women were graduating from colonial universities. Could a man expect obedience from his wife if she had precisely the same letters after her name as he did? Was it right that women were now being trained as doctors? A male student judged it a sad mistake. Such women, in any case physically and mentally inferior to men, would marry and have children, and hence could not attend to a profession. 'Man's arena is the world', he declared, 'but woman's is the family'.

Centennial orators often pictured Australia as a young nation reaching maturity, taking her place in the world and untying the apron strings of mother Britain. Cartoons depicted young Australia at her birthday party, coming of age, growing up into freedom and independence. The poet 'Alpha Crusis' expressed a masculine version of this imagery in an ode published in January:

AUSTRALIAN CENTENNIAL ODE

A lustrum marks the life-growth of a man,
But peoples count by centuries for span
Of life and growth; and so our hundredth year
Rounds off, and puts our childhood in the rear.
And as we watch its last descending sun
We count our manhood's century, but begun,
And now fold back our infant history's page,
To write it larger, with our larger age.

A young woman representing Victoria stands on top of the world, centennial plaque in hand. This stained glass window at the Melbourne Town Hall was presented by the Austrian Commissioner at the Melbourne Centennial Exhibition in 1888, and the plaque reads 'Centennial of the Colony of Victoria'. There was some confusion about whose centenary was being celebrated, but no doubt that a nation or state reaching the end of its first hundred years was still very young when judged by European standards.
BRUCE RIGBY

But while reaching maturity was an occasion for celebration, growing up was not always easy. Other cartoons showed Australia cast adrift in international waters, cutting the painter or perhaps the umbilical cord, severing close ties with Britain. Growing up brought insecurity as well as pride; with independence came fears that some of the old structures of authority would be broken down.

The national life might be counted by 'centuries for span', but a 'lustrum' or period of five years could make a big difference in the life of a child. Children were the future of the nation, and the fleeting innocence of childhood was celebrated by adults. When an *Argus* reporter visited the Melbourne exhibition, he found one of the prettiest sights to be the kindergarten class, where there was 'a happy blending of work and play', and much dancing and play-acting. The imagination and potential of children, however, were to be channelled in the right direction by parents and teachers. The prettiness of the class was increased by the fact that the children were 'marvellously drilled', clasping their hands behind their backs on command, and getting into line like clockwork, 'each child making simultaneous movements'. Society stressed discipline and obedience, and only a few advised greater freedom and less supervision for children. An adviser in *Weigal's journal of fashions* suggested:

> Try a little judicious letting alone. The danger is often in your own nervous fancies; the little quarrel will soon blow over like a summer cloud; the chickens will be chased, but not killed; ... a little fall from a tree will teach your boy caution more than fifty lectures. Let them learn wisdom for themselves.

Such advice was not common; people bemoaned the fact that young Australians enjoyed a freer and easier upbringing than their parents. Some older folk who had had to make do with rough wooden dolls worried that beautiful books and mechanical toys would destroy the younger generation's appreciation of simple pleasures and make them softer and more selfish. A British observer accustomed to nannies and nursery schools was appalled by the noisy familiarity of the Australian household.

> The children rule the roost completely, and even at the table scarcely allow their elders to get a word in edgeways, while holding forth in a drawling twang, they seem imbued with that spirit of lawless selfishness which will qualify them to be members of Parliament in the future.

When Australians pictured their emergent nation as a lusty youth or wilful maiden, they also hinted at the loosening family ties between a generation of hardy pioneers and their sometimes unruly children. In 1888 the gap between the immigrant gold-rush generation and their native-born offspring was at its widest. The centennial platforms were dominated by middle-aged and elderly gentlemen; their children and grandchildren were largely relegated to supporting roles as choristers, marchers, and presenters of bouquets. On 27 January, 3400 factory lads

Arthur Streeton, Impression for 'Golden summer'. *Streeton was 21 in the summer of 1888, camping with Tom Roberts and Charles Conder in an old weatherboard house at Eaglemont, on a hill overlooking the Yarra at Heidelberg. He remembered that summer as 'a large harmony, musical, rose', and the place as 'our hill of gold'. Oil, c1888.*
BENALLA ART GALLERY

and newsboys, representing the 'lower class' of New South Wales' youth, were treated to a centennial picnic in the National Park. After buns and ginger beer, Sir Henry Parkes served up some grandfatherly advice. There were some among them, he believed, who had the power to rise in life. It all depended on their 'honesty, truthfulness, and uprightness'. Three months later Melburnians attended a Juvenile Industrial Exhibition to show off the technical achievements of young Victoria. Opening the show, Governor Loch preached the 'obedience and discipline' that would make them into 'loyal and useful citizens'. A newspaper reviewer was disappointed by the standard of the mechanical and scientific exhibits, and thought that most drawings and paintings were 'poor productions'. The young ladies' needlework showed some of the meticulous care of their mothers', but the Australian miss was not prepared to spend endless hours stitching a sampler to hang on the living-room wall; she wanted something more immediately useful and ornamental.

The colonies' statesmen proclaimed the virtues of loyalty and discipline that would lead to wisdom and maturity for the coming nation. Compared with the ancient civilisations of Europe, Australians often felt themselves gauche and immature. Yet in individual life, age could denote decrepitude and impending death as well as maturity and wisdom. No one was immune; even those at the apex of society could be struck down without warning, as the death of Queensland's governor, Sir Anthony Musgrave, demonstrated in October. Now the generation of self-reliant fortune seekers, whose achievements the centenary celebrated, were facing the sickness and feebleness of their declining years. Men and women who had lived by a creed of hard work and independence were becoming too weak to fend for themselves. Believers in the idea of limitless progress were coming to contemplate their own earthly end.