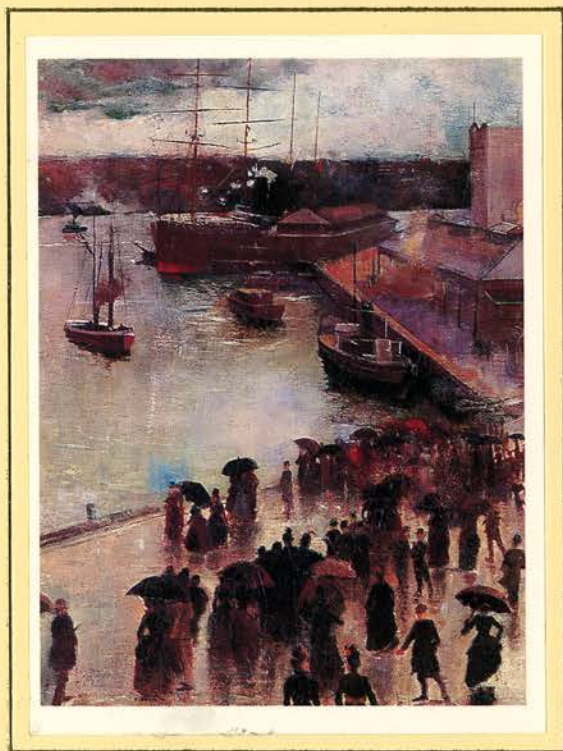


AUSTRALIANS



1888

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1888

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AUSTRALIANS: A HISTORICAL LIBRARY
AUSTRALIANS 1888

First published 1987 by
Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates
235 Jones Street, Broadway
New South Wales 2007, Australia

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National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Australians: a historical library
Includes bibliographies and index.

ISBN 0 949288 09 8 (set).

ISBN 0 949288 18 7 (set : deluxe).

ISBN 0 949288 19 5 (Australians 1888).

ISBN 0 949288 20 9 (Australians 1888 : deluxe).

1. Australia – History. I. Title: Australians to 1788.
II. Title: Australians 1838. III. Title: Australians
1888. IV. Title: Australians 1938. V. Title: Australians
from 1939. VI. Title: Australians, a historical atlas.
VII. Title: Australians, a guide to sources. VIII.
Title: Australians, events and places. IX. Title:
Australians, a historical dictionary. X. Title:
Australians, historical statistics.

994

Typeset and Printed by Griffin Press, Netley, South Australia, 5037, Australia.

Film Separations, Colour Scanners Pty Limited, Marrickville, New South Wales, 2204, Australia.

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Fairfax Syme & Weldon Associates is a partnership between John Fairfax & Sons Limited, David Syme & Co. Limited and Kevin Weldon & Associates Pty Ltd.

Published outside Australia by Cambridge University Press
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP 32 East 57th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA
ISBN 0 521 34073 X (set, Cambridge University Press).



COVER ILLUSTRATION

*Detail from Charles Conder, The departure of
the S.S. Orient, oil, 1888. The full illustration is
reproduced on page 415.*

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

FOREWORD

THIS BOOK and its ten companions have been ten years in the making. They have been created to mark the bicentenary of European settlement in this country, and they are the outcome of collaboration on a scale never before attempted in the writing of Australian history. Hundreds of people in and beyond universities have joined together to re-create the experience of people living in Australia since 1788 and to place that experience in the wider context of a human occupation that began tens of thousands of years ago.

The editors and contributors have worked in a variety of modes: from slicing into the past at fifty-year intervals (*Australians 1838, 1888 and 1938*) to laying out, in terse chronology, events as they happened year by year (*Events and places*), and from portraying processes and movements on maps of the country (*A historical atlas*) to briefing readers for explorations of their own (*A guide to sources*). The authors represent diverse approaches, in terms both of occupation—historian, economist, archaeologist, geographer, librarian, journalist—and of outlook. We have sought the best person for each part of the job, and not altered or muffled anybody's voice. We have also tried to make the work of scholars readily accessible to general readers.

In this aspiration we have been strengthened by a close working relationship with the publishers. From early days the project has benefited from continuous consultation with representatives of Fairfax, Syme & Weldon about its form and presentation. Their confidence in our enterprise has heartened us throughout the long journey.

Together, we and they present *Australians: a historical library* to the people of Australia as an offering for 1988 and beyond.

OLIVER MACDONAGH

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PREFACE

WHEN AUSTRALIANS commemorate the lengthening history of British settlement on this continent, they are adding to a tradition established by new societies and regimes. The French in 1889 proclaimed that their republican history was a century deep. Americans in 1876 celebrated the enduring success of what their founding fathers had begun by revolution in 1776, and late in the nineteenth century they coined the word 'bicentennial' to proclaim the even greater age of cities, churches and schools founded before the revolution. 'Sesquicentennial' was invented at the same time to honour American institutions only fifty years younger.

In Australia, New South Wales had patriots keen to designate 1838 as a year of jubilee. Half a century later, the idea of a centennial festivity was initiated in Sydney and taken up with more or less enthusiasm by people in other colonies who were unsure whether they wanted their shorter histories to be connected with that of the old penal colony. 'Sesquicentennial' became a word for Australians to get their mouths around in 1938, when organisers of the 150th anniversary commemoration did their best to engage citizens of other states in festivities centred on New South Wales. Readers of *Australians 1838*, *Australians 1888*, and *Australians 1938* will find these jubilee, centennial and sesquicentennial celebrations explored. Their occurrence, indeed, is a reason why we have picked those years as vehicles for one of the approaches employed in these books.

Historians are professionally interested in the passing of time, and in 1977 a few historians in Canberra began to think about 1988 as a year offering a special opportunity to their craft. That year, we guessed, would inspire a larger and more general commemoration than Australians had organised at the end of any previous half-century. The coming occasion was sure to be more *national* than those others, for advances in central government, transport and communication had accelerated the transformation of states that had once been separate colonies into provinces of a single polity, whose people travelled about as never before, talked to each other on STD, watched all over the continent the same prime ministerial news

conference and the same cricket match. Moreover, Australian history itself was gaining a new popularity, as Stuart Macintyre comments at the end of the first chapter in *Australians: a guide to sources*. The names of Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey were better known than those of any scholarly historian in earlier times; historical and genealogical societies were burgeoning, and tourists flocked to Ballarat to see goldrush days reconstructed at Sovereign Hill and to Old Sydney Town to see convict floggings re-enacted. Television viewers switched on to Australian costume dramas; and cinema audiences were offered, in 1977 alone, eight feature films based on life in the remote and recent Australian past.

All in all, it appeared likely that public and private enterprise would make 1988 a year for intense consciousness of Australian history. What might historians contribute? Individually, of course, whatever scholarly article or biography or general history an author was moved to attempt. Collectively? The Canberra group, consulting widely, found some antipathy towards the very idea of collaborative enterprise—‘history by committee’—and some particular doubts about proposed approaches. But it also found much interest and enthusiasm, and eventually enough support to embark on the project that has become *Australians: a historical library*.

The makers of these books do not see them as official history in any sense. The project has had no money from the Australian Bicentennial Authority. Money for general administration and for research on different volumes has been provided from universities (especially the Australian National University and the University of New South Wales), and from the Australian Research Grants Scheme. General and volume editors have taken on the job as part of their work in universities and colleges of advanced education. With few exceptions, contributors are also unpaid. Royalties will go into a fund to support Australian studies. Some advance royalties, paid years ahead of publication, have been ploughed into research for the books.

That was a source of funds unforeseen when we began. Some potential publishers told us that they would need a subsidy; Fairfax, Syme and Weldon asked for no subsidy, anticipated larger sales than any other publisher we approached, and encouraged us to plan without any inhibitions the size of the books and the quantity and quality of illustrations. The scale on which the publishers have been willing to undertake the project has helped us keep two early resolutions: to write for general readers, addressing them with respect but without assuming prior knowledge and to illustrate the books richly, not for mere decorative effect but to integrate visual material with text.

One half of our enterprise was quickly decided on. Anniversaries, like royal visits, can yield amenities that were needed anyway but required the special occasion to provoke someone into providing them. The celebrations of 1888 endowed Sydney with Centennial Park and the approach of 1988 induced politicians in Canberra to put up a new and permanent Parliament House. Historians had long lamented the absence of a set of reference books that would deliver essential information about Australian history to students, authors and browsers. Our series therefore includes *Australians: a historical atlas*, *Australians: events and places*, *Australians: a historical dictionary*, *Australians: historical statistics* and *Australians: a guide to sources*.

When we wondered about other ways of throwing new light on the past, we considered and set aside a number of approaches. In particular we decided not to add to the shelves one more general narrative history by many hands, which (it seemed to us) would merely elaborate our present understandings of the past without providing any fresh vision. We began to talk about an approach that invited and even required all authors to break new ground. Instead of inviting a

team of contributors to divide up history into chronological sections and have each fill in a stage in his or her own way, we thought of asking groups of writers to work together on a very short period; instead of inviting historians to pass the baton along a familiar track, we proposed a series of survey camps; instead of stringing events on a thread of narrative, we imagined cutting slices.

A book about Australia in a particular year would have at least some qualities in common with Sovereign Hill and Old Sydney Town—exhibitions built to show what our society was like at one moment in its past. Such a book would resemble Elie Halévy's *England in 1815* (1912), or the third chapter of Lord Macaulay's *History of England* (1848), which dealt with the nation in 1685. Both are works in which authors reconstruct a society in a particular year, and contrive perceptions of earlier events by means other than continuous narrative. Adopted by a group of writers, the approach would invite intimate collaboration between scholars with different skills. An economic historian working with a historical geographer, or a historian of medicine exchanging ideas with a social historian, would, we believed, win for readers a richer understanding of the lives Australians were living at a chosen time than any one scholar, working alone, could have achieved.

By writing about one year in people's lives, moreover, historians could avoid creating the most common illusion conveyed by narrative approaches: that history is a stream, carrying people towards a predetermined destination clearly visible to us, if not to them. Slicing through a year, we might hope to see and hear people living as we do, taking some things for granted—the sun rises and sets, the seasons pass, people grow older—but at the same time surrounded by choices and uncertainties. We might recognise people more easily as our own kind if we met them living out the daily, weekly, seasonal, annual and biological rhythms of their lives; and we would certainly understand them more fully by grasping the truth that the future that beckoned or alarmed them was not necessarily *our* past—what actually happened—but rather a hidden destiny, a precarious vision of probabilities, possibilities and uncertainties.

The slice approach could help us to recover the richness of everyday life. James Joyce, inspired to write fiction about what some people in Dublin were doing and thinking and feeling on one day in 1904, had made the discovery, his biographer Richard Ellmann suggests, 'that the ordinary is the extraordinary'. Great novelists make worlds of their own, but the historian can also seek the extraordinary in the ordinary. Indeed, that is one way of describing the kind of history newly attempted in the age of democracy, whose subject is not just public and powerful heroes and villains, but the myriad men and women who are their constituents, victims, contemporaries from womb to grave. The writers of *Australians 1838*, *Australians 1888* and *Australians 1938* have searched hard for sources giving access to the private, the domestic, the workaday, the realms of family and community, the lives of ordinary men, women and children. This is not, as G. M. Trevelyan said of his pioneering social history of England, history with the politics left out; politics is in, but placed in its social, economic and cultural contexts.

While charting the rhythms of existence, we have not ignored change and conflict. In 1838 an unprecedented overland movement of people and animals was under way across southeastern Australia. One consequence of that movement was intensified hostility between white settlers and Aborigines, and the killing of Aborigines by pastoral workers at Myall Creek is a central event in *Australians 1838*. In *Australians 1888* colonists celebrate a century of British settlement and politicians try their hardest to exclude the Chinese. *Australians 1938* records both the mild improvement in material conditions experienced by most people since the depression years, and the strike at Port Kembla about the export of pig iron to Japan.

The years 1838, 1888 and 1938 attracted us not only because they were times of commemoration, but also because they do not have historians' labels attached to them, as, say, does 1851 (gold), or 1914 (war) or 1929 (depression). Exploring years not already identified with familiar themes would serve well, we thought, our purpose of discovering things not yet in the history books about what life was like for earlier generations of Australians.

These are also years that are almost one person's lifetime apart. The slice approach does not ignore everything that happened in the intervening half-centuries. Like Australians today, the people of our chosen years were, in important ways, what their past made them, for every moment in time is at once the culmination of past events and the beginning of the future, and every generation is shaped by its own past—and by *its own* vision of the future. Slicing does not obliterate the long view backwards or forwards: instead, it tries to capture visions of the past and future as they seemed to earlier generations.

One book, we resolved, should examine the longest period of all in Australian history, the epoch in which Australia was occupied solely by Aboriginal people. The richest evidence about this ancient Aboriginal heritage often dates from initial contact with Europeans. For the people of the Sydney region, that took place in 1788; elsewhere, the experience of 1788 was re-enacted in various ways as European settlement spread. Where possible, archaeological, linguistic and other techniques of prehistory have been used in *Australians to 1788* to explore changes and continuities in Aboriginal society over thousands of years; nevertheless, the idea of '1788' as the point of contact rather than as a specific calendar year gives this first book something in common with the slice volumes. And if the concern to reconstruct Aboriginal society and culture at the coming of the European intruders involves a kind of slicing, the final chapter of *Australians to 1788* adopts the approach quite specifically. By exploring the first year of British settlement it enables the first four volumes of *Australians* to present a series of slices at half-century intervals. A twenty-year-old convict who knew the Sydney described in that chapter might, in old age, have known also the world of *Australians 1838*, just as a young woman immigrant of 1838 might, after fifty years in the colonies, have witnessed the centennial celebrations of 1888, or Aborigines alive in 1888 have watched their people incorporated into the sesquicentennial pageantry of 1938. Our slice years are thus linked by the living memories of several generations of Australians.

We decided to devote the fifth book—the last volume before the reference works—to the whole period from 1939, so that in the bicentennial year Australians old and new could read about the society they inhabited. In the pages of *Australians: a historical library*, as in all the other ways in which Australians will mark the significance of 1988, a future generation of historians may perhaps find evidence about the contemporary society. But as we write, that slice still lies in our future.

ALAN D. GILBERT

K. S. INGLIS

INTRODUCTION

ALL HISTORIES are products of their time and display the insights and blind spots of their generation. Like the large picture books published in 1888 to mark the centenary of Australia, this is a commemorative history, and its writers share the ideals and illusions of their time, just as the writers of 1888 were limited by the outlook of their day. Many of the questions that perplexed the men and women of 1888 continue to perplex Australians: the dilemma of how to use or conserve our natural resources, the inheritance of bitterness between black and white Australians, the rival claims of capital and labour to a share in the country's wealth, the proper relations between men and women, the interplay of freedom and order in public life. But this bicentennial history is different from the centennial histories in one important way.

Through all the ceremonies and celebrations, all the speeches, sermons and histories of 1888, there runs a single refrain: the material and social progress of the nation. Confident that they stood on a pinnacle of enlightenment and civilisation, the public men of 1888 looked back on earlier times as a series of stepping stones towards an independent, prosperous and federated Australia. With the advantage of hindsight, they endowed past events with an inevitability that was invisible to those who took part in them. They forgot all the detours and setbacks, all the time-consuming and heartbreaking events of everyday life that did not fit the contours of the national success story.

This book is about the daily lives of ordinary people, rich and poor, old and young, country-bred and city-born, who lived in Australia in 1888. By devoting our book to the lives of these people during a single year, we are able to dwell on many aspects of late colonial society that escaped the statesmen and historians of the time, to show how society functioned, as well as how it changed. We can take account of the limitations under which people laboured, as well as how they overcame them. We can view life through the eyes of the people of the time, rather than through the eyes of posterity.

Australians 1888 aims to draw the eye of history away from the governors and politicians who dominated the centennial celebrations, focusing instead on the

anonymous men, women and children who made up the crowds. We view ceremonies at Sydney Cove and Centennial Park; we visit South Australian wheat farmers and Queensland plantation workers, Melbourne manufacturers and Sydney wharf labourers, widowed matriarchs and orphaned street arabs. Most of the people whose daily lives we describe would not have considered themselves a part of history. They would have been astonished to think that the everyday events chronicled in their diaries and letters would one day have a place in the national story.

These people were more aware of the ebb and flow of everyday life than of the tides of history. The ground rhythm of colonial life was set by the natural cycle of months and seasons. New knowledge and new tools were enabling European Australians to extend their control over the natural environment, but droughts, bushfires, floods and plagues reminded them that their mastery was still incomplete. This is the theme of part I, Land and People. As the land was settled, new industries, towns and cities grew up, creating a rich tapestry of human activity and movement. Part II, The Regional Mosaic, contrasts the seasonal routines of forestry, farming and station life with the mechanised rhythms of the mine, the factory and the railway. The days which diarists usually recorded most carefully were the birthdays, anniversaries, marriages and funerals which marked the private histories of their own families. Part III, Private Lives, describes the passage of the generations and the intimate lives of families. Finally, in part IV, The Public Domain, we re-enter the world of public events, dominated by the official calendars of churches, clubs, courts and parliaments.

A book about everyday life written collaboratively by several writers was bound to be more like a conversation among members of a crowd than a speech from a public platform. We hope that our readers will detect the different voices, not only of the men and women of 1888, but of the sixteen historians who wrote the chapters, people who come from five different states, who specialise in various branches of political, economic, social and cultural history and who hold diverse political convictions. At several conferences we planned a book that would be unified in theme and style while reflecting the diversity of the contributors' historical visions. The authors generously gave the editors considerable freedom to reshape their manuscripts in accordance with the agreed design.

The people of 1888 who heard, and sometimes applauded, the speeches of the centennial celebrations interpreted them in terms of their own diverse experiences. *Australians 1888* is a conversation, not only between the historians and the people of 1888, but also with the Australians of 1988. Many have already had a hand in the production of this book; they have attended our occasional conferences, contributed to our bulletin, *Australia 1888*, and allowed us to use their family letters, diaries and photographs. We offer the book to them, and to all our readers, in the confidence that they, like the people of 1888, will make their own judgments, based on experience.

GRAEME DAVISON

J. W. McCARTY

AILSA McLEARY

Australia confronts the world to-day with a record of 100 years, with a marvellous past, a prosperous present, and a future of boundless possibilities. It may be said of her that she is only now beginning to be known and to live.

Argus, 26 January 1888.

The fact that a hundred years have elapsed since the colonisation of Australia is itself a matter of no special importance . . . The roll of empty years contains little that is worthy of any better fate than oblivion, so New South Wales is reduced to the dire extremity of keeping holiday in commemoration of the first milestone on the long, slow road to an unhonoured old age. A more imbecile subject for rejoicing could not well be conceived . . .

Bulletin, 21 January 1888.