Feeling Local, Feeling National: How Did Australians First Imagine Federation?

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Key-note address

There were a lot of ingenious men among Australia's public servants during the last decades of the nineteenth century. One of them was the South Australia school inspector, Alexander Clark – best known today as a founder and for many years the conductor of the "Thousand Voices Choir", a vast body of schoolchildren which gave concerts every year in Adelaide. It was one of the most extraordinary musical phenomena of the period, and an organisational extravaganza. Clark was wide awake to new methods of teaching. As a school inspector, his area included Crystal Brook, not far from Port Pirie, and there in 1885 he came across a true phenomenon of pedagogical method, which had nothing to do with singing but which was just as typical of the innovations of the day. Here, he said (at Crystal Brook West, to be precise), "I found an excellent map of South Australia, formed in relief, in the school-yard. It was thirty yards long [so that it must have taken up a good deal of playing space], and showed all the physical features directly. … The towns were represented by pegs driven into the ground; thin laths pegged down showed the course of the railways. The children took great pains in their map and kept it in repair," and, he said, it had a wonderful impact on their understanding of their own colony: "there was not a second class child but could pass with perfect ease in South Australian geography."[1]

During the second half of the nineteenth century, in every one of the Australian colonies, the elementary school system, the system designed to cater for the mass of the population up to the age of twelve or fourteen, was fundamentally reformed, and in ways which reshaped the thinking of children, and therefore of the grown-ups the children became. This map, and the Thousand Voices Choir, were parts of the result. The changes demanded of teachers, parents and children met two main needs. One was demographic. Schools were needed for populations much larger and more scattered than they had been in gold-rush days. But there were also new ideas about what teaching ought to do, which affected Australia as part of the European world. Schools were now designed to create universal literacy and a mass culture for the nation-state. But also the "art of teaching", the way teachers worked and got their message across, was fundamentally transformed.

It's not usual to link great political events with shifts of thinking at school level, but the connection should be obvious. With a little hunting, the roots of the

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1 Alexander Clark, inspector's report, April 1887, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1886, p. 25, *Parliamentary Papers of South Australia*, 1887, vol. 3.

federation movement itself can be found among children growing up in the 1870s and '80s. By that time the new methods were pretty well established, having been introduced in the 1860s and '70s. I am not talking here about what was called "the New Education", which began mainly in the 1890s, and whose echoes are to be found in the first decades of the twentieth century. It was the previous generation of teachers, who are important here. They too made a self-conscious effort to improve on their predecessors. And they and the school authorities were well pleased with the result. In 1883 a South Australian inspector spoke proudly of the wonderful changes he saw about him in the schools:

> Old ideas have been exploded, and a new departure has been taken which has led to improvements in various ways, lessened time, aroused the interest and developed the intelligence of pupils, lightened the labours of teachers and children, infused new life and fresh interest into the work of the schools, and made a pleasure of what used to be regarded as a harassing task.[2]

This was the intellectual revolution – as it seemed at the time – on which the federation movement, and much else, rested. From this great change (among other things) was born the continental nation.

Teachers were trying to do more than impart knowledge. They wanted to encourage independent reasoning. They knew that children's minds developed in complicated ways and they understood that certain types of ideas matched certain stages of growth. Their purpose was "the training of mental powers". And those mental powers were to show themselves in tangible ways. In theory good teaching involved the child as both a physical and intellectual being. Teachers, as the same inspector said, must "train the eye to see, the ear to hear, and the hands to execute what the mind conceives and wills".[3]

Today we know all about educational theory that stresses individual and independent expression. This was not a high priority in the late nineteenth century. Children were expected to speak out, but what they said was supposed to show the imprint of authority. They were to reason on their own, but according to pre-ordained patterns. The basic subjects of the elementary curriculum were Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, and Reading was always listed and ranked first. "No subject in our elementary school course", said Thomas Burgan, a South Australian inspector, "is perhaps more important than reading", and no-one seems to have disagreed with him.[4] Besides the three Rs, a range of other subjects was available, at least in the bigger schools and to older children. Of

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[2] Thomas Burgan, inspector's report, 17 February 1883, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1882, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1883-84, vol. 3, no. 44, p. 18.

[3] Thomas Burgan, inspector's report, 1 February 1882, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1881, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1882, vol. 3, no. 44, p. 15.

[4] Thomas Burgan, inspector's report, 23 January 1877, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1876, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1877, vol. 2, no. 34, p. 21.

these, as I say later, the most widely and effectively taught was Geography, at least until about 1890. The mass teaching of Geography was deeply characteristic of the period. It was also basic to thoughts about Australia and Australian life, the local and the national.

Most of what I am saying here comes from the school inspectors' reports for New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Inspectors had to give an annual account of the schools within their districts, comparing results from year to year, commenting on the physical condition of schools, equipment and furniture, the competence of teachers and the general behaviour of children. They commented also, if they saw fit, on the curriculum and on teaching methods used from place to place. The length of reports varied, but they could be several closely printed pages each, and they were published as part the minister's annual report and bound with parliamentary papers. They are wonderful documents – inspectors gave vivid, sometimes whimsical accounts of their struggles to make the high aims of the school system match the realities they faced from day to day, including "the violent, boisterous talking-machine", as one of them put it, which was the typical colonial school-house.[5] So we find in 1884, Thomas Hepburn, inspector in Gippsland, walking side by side with a weeping four-year-old he had met on the way to a school which was up that day for assessment. "On inquiring the cause of distress", Hepburn wrote in his report, apropos of nothing much, "I received the following answer, choked with sobs, 'Oh! I don't want to go to school to-day, the *insect* is coming".'[6]

In this period, the incidence of literacy (that is, the ability to both read and write) was something like ninety percent of each colonial population. This looks like a literate culture. But there was something narrowly instrumental, as we would see it, about notions of literacy. Reading and Writing were both valued mainly as aspects of speech. They were tied to ordinary conversation, and it is hard to find much reference at all to reading for its own sake. Books were not usually part of daily life among the mass of the people. Parents themselves thought of them as something their children would meet with mainly at school. The number available had gone up by leaps and bounds in recent years. But still there was no sense that children might, through their reading, make for themselves a discreet world of knowledge and imagination, a kind of visionary alternative to their own narrow circumstances. The idea of children curling up alone with a book is not there in the inspectors' reports.

Of course, well educated people knew that reading could lead you into a world of fantasy and imagination. Thomas Jefferson, a century before, had said that when we read, "We never reflect whether the story … be truth or fiction." We

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5 D.M. Roche, inspector's report, 6 June 1889, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1888-89, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1889, vol. 4, no. 98, p. 167.

6 Thomas R. Hepburn, 9 April 1885, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1884-85, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1885, vol. 4, no. 74, p. 151 (original emphasis).

suspend disbelief, he said; "we are thrown into a reverie, from which if we awaken it is the fault of the writer."[7] The same thing happened, no doubt – at least, just a little – when children were read or read to about Australia at large. They imagined a type of reality far beyond their own experience. And yet, this was not an aspect of reading that seems to have been much thought of in late nineteenth century colonial schools.

Theories of reading, as I say, were tied to talking. According to one inspector, children should be taught that "in reading they are actually listening to wise and intelligent men and women they have never seen".[8] They were to get this idea by reading out loud, or in other words by listening to themselves. Reading out loud was still the usual method of reading, or so it seems. At the elementary level, it was most highly valued as a means of giving power and clarity to the voices of the children. John Kevin, inspector at Bega, on the New South Wales south coast, complained that "the children in our schools … [are] not taught to read at all". He meant that they were not taught to read properly out loud. They knew their letters, but that was not good enough. The main point was "intonation and inflection of voice", and that, he said, must be "natural, intelligent, and pleasing".[9]

The need to link good reading to good speaking belonged to plans for creating in these colonies a truly democratic people. In Victoria it was argued that the United States, "a nation of ready public speakers", was the best model. In American schools, it was said, "Mere children are taught to speak out so that they may be heard by a large number in a large room". And again, "In a community like ours, where one may be called upon at any time to speak before his fellow-men, it is an immense advantage for a young man to have early become accustomed to the sound of his own voice". This is what they did in America.[10]

It makes sense. And yet, in other ways this emphasis on how people used their voices was slightly at odds with the business of building up nations. Nations, especially continental ones, are very big. Telephones had only just been invented and they were not a part of daily life, and radios were a long way off. Voices, all by themselves, don't reach any great distance. Voices, then, were not used much as a medium of nationhood. Australia could only be

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7 Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford 1993), p. 60.

8 C.L. Whitham, inspector's report, February 1880, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1879, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1880, vol. 3, no. 44, p. 15.

9 John Kevin, inspector's report, 11 January 1883, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1882, NSW legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1883-4, vol. 7, p. 718.

10 Charles H. Pearson, *Report on the State of Public Education in Victoria and Suggestions as to the Best Means of Improving It* (Melbourne 1878), p. 61; Alexander T. Lewis, inspector's report, n.d., Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1881-82, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1882-83, vol. 3, no. 67, p. 215.

understood through the printed page, in the kind of reveries Jefferson spoke of, and by the silent study of maps. If Reading meant speaking, children were being trained mainly for face-to-face citizenship and for local affairs. In fact, it could be said that only with the new education in the 1890s did silent reading – reading for its own sake – really take off in the schools, and children were given permission to cut themselves adrift from the her and now.

This brings me to Geography, the teaching of which, surprisingly perhaps, helps to explain the importance of voices in the schools. Geography was a discipline of enormous interest to this generation, and especially the reading of maps. Cartographic literacy was and is a skill in its own right – related to normal literacy and yet conveying a different kind of power and pleasure. It was a peculiarly fascinating skill at this time. Rolf Boldrewood gives a neat account of the uses of Geography for the individual in a story published in 1888-89, called "A Sydney-Side Saxon". The hero starts by telling of his origins in poverty in England. As a boy, he says, he had read Walter Scott's story *Ivanhoe*. He was intrigued with Scott's image of a Saxon serf wearing a brass collar inscribed with details of his bondage to one lord and one place. For the hero freedom from a metaphorical collar, from poverty and powerlessness, depended on knowledge, especially a knowledge of Geography. People of his rank in England, he says, "knew no more about Australia, or Canada, or New Zealand, than the man in the moon." And yet, "Any man or woman that can read and write, keep simple accounts, and understand a map, has got hold of the levers that move the world". "[I]t is his own fault", he says, "if he doesn't prise out a corner for himself somewhere." "I was sharp about geography," he goes on, "so I looked out Australia, and found that there were divisions or colonies with large cities and houses, just like other places." He came to this country, where he was taken up by a helpful squatter and shown a map of surrounding runs. There, concealed among lines that only the initiated could properly understand, was a sliver of uncharted territory, about seven miles by five, waiting to be taken up. On it the hero made his fortune.[11] In short, by reading maps we learn to make the world our own.

Two distinct approaches were used in teaching Geography. One started with a view of the world as a whole and worked down to fairly small places. This was the way things were done in Victoria, and to some extent in New South Wales. In South Australia, on the other hand, teachers were told to start with "local geography". This meant drawing diagrams of the classroom, school buildings and neighbourhood, and then moving on to maps on a larger scale. In first class South Australian children were taught "Cardinal points and local topography". In the second they went on to "The definitions of land and water and outlines of South Australia", and in the third class to "Australia in outline. South Australia in detail". In fourth class, it was Europe and in fifth class

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11 Rolf Boldrewood, *A Sydney-Side Saxon* (Sydney 1925), pp. 12, 18, 32, 140-1.

"Generally of the world".[12] As an inspector explained, the child was first told "something about his own neighbourhood, the hills that surround it, the creeks which flow through it, the seas which wash its shores – … [a method] leading his mind forward from the known to the unknown".[13] The main challenge lay in the leap "from the geography of the neighbourhood to that of all South Australia", from the local to the provincial and from the concrete to the abstract – from the place you could hear, and hear about, every day to the places you could only read about and whose dimensions stretched a child's brain.[14] More than any other colonies, the South Australian system seems to have been built on this fundamental challenge to imagination.

South Australians were proud of being pioneers in local geography. John Hartley, the inspector-general, recalled how early opponents had pointed to the colony being out of step with both England and in Victoria. But then, in 1882, he said, England had followed our lead, and not long after that "the Victorian inspectors held a conference and recommended the adoption of a similar plan for that colony".[15] This spirit of innovation pervaded the system. It shows in the map Alexander Clark found in the schoolyard at Crystal Brook West. In fact, Clark told of his pleasure at seeing, "In many schoolyards maps … dug out, mountains built up, lakes hollowed out, the coast features plainly marked, and water laid on to mark the courses of rivers and the position of the ocean and its arms more realistic."[16] There is no evidence of anything like this in Victoria or New South Wales, the emphasis there being top-down.

Through most of the 1870s and '80s inspectors everywhere pushed the need for children master the geography of the colony in which they lived. As a New South Wales inspector put it, "I have endeavoured to impress upon teachers the idea that Australian boys and girls of twelve or thirteen years of age should be as thoroughly acquainted with the geography of their own country as European girls and boys are with theirs". He used the word "Australian", and yet what he meant was that a child in New South Wales should learn about New South Wales just as, say, a French child learnt about France.[17] Only towards the end of the 1880s do we find much interest in Australia for its own sake. In

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12 Standard of proficiency for scholars, Report of the Central Board of Education, 1873, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1874, vol. 2, no. 24, p. 24.

13 Emil Jung, inspector's report, n.d., Report of the Central Board of Education, 1874, p. 13, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1875, vol. 2.

14 Edward Dewhirst, n.d., Report of the Council of Education, 1876, p. 11, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1877, vol. 2; Edward Dewhirst, 19 February 1881, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1880, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1881, vol. 3, no. 44, p. 4.

15 John A. Hartley, inspector-general's report, n.d., Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1883, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1884, vol. 3, paper 44 , p. xix.

16 Alexander Clark, inspector's report, 16 March 1886, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1885, Proceedings *of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1886, vol. 2, paper 44, p. 16.

17 J.H. Murray, inspector's report, 31 January 1883, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1882, NSW legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1883-84, vol. 7, p. 711.

Victoria the syllabus was changed accordingly, so that now, as an inspector explained, “Victorian children are supposed to learn and to thoroughly know the leading features and the industrial resources of our own continent before they are taught much about the outside world”.[18] Even so, it followed for him that Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and so on should be studied one by one, not as a single phenomenon. “Maps of the colonies”, he said, “should be supplied to all schools in lieu of maps of Asia, Africa, and America”.[19]

This notion of “our own continent” set against “the outside world” was the essence of continental nationalism. Note how long it had taken for educators to reach this point. The South Australians might exclaim at the difficulty in moving children’s minds from the local to the provincial. For men in authority, except perhaps South Australians, it was just as hard for imagination to step with any kind of certainty from the province to the continent. A member of parliament in Western Australia, as late as 1897, described federation as “a subject that almost intoxicates one”.[20] The idea was so big, so dazzling, it pulled at the limits of the mind so much. It was the duty of teachers, then, to make the idea familiar. The Victorian Minister of Public Instruction called for books to meet what he described as “the particular needs of Australian children”.[21] His counterpart in new South Wales took the same approach. “To a large extent,” he said, “the subject matter of the lessons should be Australian”, or else it “should be dealt with, as far as practicable, from points of view interesting to Australians”.[22] In South Australia it could be said that the change was less sudden, because a continental perspective had long been implicit in lessons, though powerfully balanced by the local and provincial. It was a very fruitful balance, discounting neither the local nor the continental and opening the mind to both. Caroline Carleton’s “Song of Australia”, written not far from this place in 1859 and sung in South Australian schools from 1880, may well be a case in point.

This leads me back to Reading, or rather speech. When inspectors talked about expression in reading they also talked about pronunciation. Up to about 1890, as with Geography, problems with pronunciation had always been understood as a colonial rather than a continent-wide phenomenon. Many inspectors were interested in the way English regional peculiarities echoed in colonial voices – but before the 1890s that usually meant the voices of their own particular colony. Victorians, for instance, were said to drop their “h’s”:

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18 F.C. Eddy, inspector’s report, 31 May 1889, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1888-89, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1889, vol. 4, no. 98, p. 169.

19 F.C. Eddy, inspector’s report, May 1888, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1887-88, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1888, vol. 3, no. 99, p. 168.

20 R.W. Pennefather, speech in parliament, 18 August 1897, *Western Australian Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 10, p. 12.

21 Charles H. Pearson, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1889-90, 2 October 1890, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1890, vol. 3, no. 90, p. xxi.

22 J.H. Carruthers, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 9 April 1891, NSW legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1891-92, vol. 3, pp. 42-3.

> From the Cockney and the Cornish [according to an inspector] the disease has spread to the Scotch and Irish. We [Victorians] are in a fair way of becoming a nation without an h in our vocabulary. From the average choir you will be pretty sure to hear ''eaven' and ''ell', and ''oly, 'oly, ''oly'. The average porter shouts out ''Awthorn' and ''Awksburn', and the average cabman 'Emerald 'ill'. There are other weak points in Victorian pronunciation; but this, I think, is the worst.[23]

Another backed him up, "Unless we have some decided improvement, the next generation must not be surprised if foreigners or neighbouring colonists are able to detect a Victorian rustic by his monotonous drawl."[24] In South Australia, some inspectors spoke in the same way about what they called a "provincial" accent, as if their neighbours to the east and west had no such problem.

And yet, on the whole, South Australians one again led the way in offering a larger view. South Australians were unusually willing to see themselves as part of a community of provinces. While they had their own way of doing things, they seem to have been particularly willing to look about, to make comparisons and to learn lessons from their neighbours. Alone among the smaller colonies, South Australia dealt on roughly similar terms with both Victoria and New South Wales, trafficking across their border with the backblocks of each, and creating a trinity, over and above the diarchy of the two giants. This impartiality was crucial as the colonies as a whole moved towards a sense of common interest.

Alexander Clark was typical of the best in this regard. So we find him in 1886, reporting on his own district in a way that brought the whole continent automatically within view. "Australians on the average", he said, "speak better English than the people of England themselves".[25] By better, he seems to have meant that the accent was more uniform from shore to shore. Here, he said, "the school children of Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, and Adelaide are much more nearly allied in speech than those of London, Plymouth, Leeds, and Newcastle." This was good because, in his view, and he was not alone, nation-building required the breaking down of regional and local boundaries. For the school teacher, that meant a duty to grind away at regional and local accents, and at the same time make sure that no new ones sprung up.[26] New peculiarities were

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[23] A.C. Curlewis, inspector's report, 18 April 1885, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1884-85, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1885, vol. 4, no. 74, p. 134; James Holland, inspector's report, 30 May 1887, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1886-87, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1887, vol. 3, no. 81, p. 142.

[24] Alfred Jackson, inspector's report, 22 February 1890, Report of the Minister of Public Instruction, 1889-90, p. 243, Victorian legislative assembly *Votes and Proceedings*, 1890, vol. 3.

[25] Alexander Clark, inspector's report, 16 March 1886, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1885, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1886, vol. 2, no. 44, p. 15.

[26] Ibid.

thought to be a real danger. "The Australias", Clark said in 1888 (and by that he meant the various colonies of Australia), "are at present devoid of the marked provincialisms of Yorkshire, Lancashire, or Somerset, and even of the less objectionable peculiarities of London or American speech". But only hard work would keep it that way.[27]

Sometimes the business seemed to be "two steps forward, one steps back". Clark's responsibilities stretched to the copper-mining towns in the north-east, and there were special problems there. "Teachers in the mining districts", he said, "assure me that lads who have by persistent training been led to drop the peculiarities of the Cornish pronunciation, and to write and speak really sound English, adopt *in toto* the *patois* of the miner as soon as they are employed underground."[28] He was optimistic all the same. Boys posed a bigger risk than girls, who were happier to conform, but whatever they did out of school, he said, in picking up bad habits, if they had been ell taught, "when they are wiser [they] will copy purer models, not only of grammar and style, but also pronunciation.'[29] They would realise, in other words, that local accents were a badge of narrowness. Patois, as he called it, proved ignorance and servitude. It was like the serf's brass collar in *Ivanhoe*, a sign of bondage which self-respecting citizens would throw off as soon as they grew into true and manly self-awareness.

By the 1890s, Clarke was typical in his clear preference for continental nationalism, and his belief in a continental type. Uniformity of speech was as important as uniformity of race. It might have been hard to agree what that speech should be like. Leading writers of fiction, such as Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy, might look to the language of the common man, to "vulgarisms" – as distinct from the "provincialisms" condemned by inspectors. Their interest in the subject was no less vivid than the inspectors'. They too used their ideas about Australians talking to explore the country, its uniformity and its diversity. In Furphy's great novel, *Such is Life*, the variety of accent is dazzling. So is the sense of belonging to particular places. His New South Welshmen talked about Victoria as "the cabbage garden". Later on, when he himself went to live in Fremantle he sent back to Melbourne descriptions of the people there which made them sound perfectly alien. The men, he said, were 'amiable, ignorant, extremely lazy, and – a curious combination – tall and bull-necked'. Strangely, the "Groper women" were not at all grotesque, but they were just as different from Victorians – "stately, self-contained, yet emotional", as he put it, even "remarkably handsome".[30] No one could have been keener than Furphy was on

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27 Alexander Clark, inspector's report, February 1888, Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1887, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1888, vol. 3, no. 44, p. 27.

28 Alexander Clark, inspector's report, n.d., Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1898, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1899, vol. 2, no. 44, p. 14.

29 Alexander Clark, inspector's report, n.d., Report of the Minister controlling Education, 1899, *Proceedings of the Parliament of South Australia*, 1900, vol. 3, no. 44, p. 13.

30 Joseph Furphy to Kate Baker, 27 March 1905, National Library MS 2022/1/27.

the idea of about Australians as a distinct people, sharing a single blessed corner of the world. But Furphy too, made sense of people first of all by saying where they lived and what their homes had done to them.

What we find then is a continental nation coming into existence at a time when there was a distinctive tension between feeling local and feeling national. I wonder how much this continued into World War One and what exactly was the "country" Australians fought for. Remember the lines by W.B. Yeats about an Irish airman in that war:

> I know that I shall meet my death
> Somewhere among the clouds above;
> Those that I fight I do not hate,
> Those that I guard I do not love;
> My country is Kiltartan Cross,
> My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
> No likely end can bring them loss
> Or leave them happier than before.[31]

Maybe Yeats goes too far, but he helps in stressing the fact that evidence of feeling local and of feeling national needs to be kept in balance. The way such feelings might have countered and at the same time fed on each other needs to be a moment for historians.

[31] W.B. Yeats, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death".