

Advocating for Wattle and National Wattle Day - part of the journey of the Wattle Day Association

Terry Fewtrell, past President and Life Member of the Wattle Day Association, reflects on the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Association, 16 November 2023.

Cold calls are hard to make and difficult also for the receiver. In about 2005 I had such a call from Jack Fahy, founder and President of the Wattle Day Association Inc. (WDA). Jack was passionate about the Wattle as our floral emblem, its beauty and its impact as a symbol of the nation. The purpose of the call was clear: Jack was inviting me to get involved in the Association. He was aware of my involvement with the Republican movement in the ACT and figured that if I was a republican, the odds were good that I might be keen about Wattle, National Wattle Day (1 September), and the potential unifying power of their symbolism. He was right.

But Jack also had another agenda. He had a diagnosis of cancer that offered him only limited future opportunity to promote Wattle. We arranged to meet and chat over a coffee. He was very direct in stating that he was looking for someone who might want to take over from him the task of leading the Association that he had founded in 1998. I revealed that I had always been aware of Wattle as a key Australian symbol and having worked on the Parliament House project was highly tuned to the importance and power of symbolism that speaks of an authentic Australian identity. I agreed to go along to the next meeting where I could suss out this organisation, and Jack would probably make similar assessments of my interests and likely contribution.

Well later that year I found myself installed as Vice President and the member of a small committee that headed what was essentially a local Canberra based organisation. Notable among the committee was Dr Rod Panter, a staff member of the Parliamentary Library, who had written a Background Paper on Wattle and its acceptance and potential as a national symbol. Rod had compiled the paper in the hope that it would be a resource for parliamentarians and facilitate the wider recognition of Wattle as an expression of the nation and its identity.

I spent a few years as Jack's VP, observing and learning about Wattle and the work and aspirations of the committee. In that time, I saw first-hand the energy and passion that Jack brought to the task, always supported by his wife and fellow committee member, Florence. Jack had something of a remission from the cancer, but as so often happens it lurks, never far away. In 2009 Jack and I swapped roles and slowly, and I hope diplomatically, I outlined a somewhat more expansive agenda for WDA.

At the time it seemed to me that the Association should aim to increase its profile in the community, leverage its activities and energy to get more national visibility and be seen to contribute to the national discussion on identity and symbols. I also felt that there must be some ways that we could bring Wattle more into the national consciousness by enriching its

story and building its narrative. How that might be done was unclear, but it was work that I was interested to embark on.

Two things then came together which greatly enhanced the prospects of meeting those goals. Both came through Suzette Searle's contribution and input. The first was the development of the internet site for the Association, which Suzette was very keen and equipped to advance. It became clear soon after that we were able to reach Australians all around the country via the website. So, we should no longer think of ourselves as having principally a local Canberra/ACT focus and impact. We were now able to reach and invite input from people living all around the country and who were able and interested to tell their Wattle stories and learn from what quickly became a national resource. In fact the website provided not just national reach but importantly an accurate and reliable source of information on Wattle, its history and its many varieties, bringing the diverse local species under a unifying central focus.

The second significant development was the botanical and plant knowledge that Suzette Searle brought to the committee through her background in forestry and her increasing focus on science communication. Principal among that information from my perspective was the fact that science was able to tell us from samples of ancient soil deposits, that Wattle pollen had been detected in soils that dated back 30 million years. Here was an 'Ah Ha' moment from my perspective. If Wattle has been in this land for such a long time, it follows that its narrative is far richer and more profound than what could be derived from our earlier starting point of colonial times.

It was around this time, the early 20 teens that I had taken to reading myself into the growing bibliography of Australian history and archaeology that scholars and scientists of all sorts had been assembling. This body of scholarship, developed over the last 20 years of the 20th century and the first 20 years of the 21st century, had not just explored but documented in various ways the deep time and antiquity of this land. It tells its own truths of that long history into deep time and the clash of Aboriginal antiquity and culture with the ravages of colonialism, where a European culture usurped both land, lore and lifestyle from the original inhabitants and owners of this place. The scholarship produced a deposit of knowledge that does not impose guilt on subsequent generations but does call out for acknowledgement and an appropriate response from a self-proclaimed 'more enlightened' culture. It laid out the moral imperative of seeking reconciliation and, together, building a united future.

It seemed to me then, as it still does today, that Wattle was an extraordinary ally in this process and the re-imagining it required. So based on Wattle's deep history in this land, I suggested progressively that we could position Wattle as the great witness to the whole of the Australian story. Such a proposition then begged the question: What would the witness have to say to us as learned insights from such a long viewpoint? The answer might just be that two things are key to being able to survive and thrive in this land: Resilience and an ability to Adapt. Wattle had exemplified this lesson in the way it had adapted to the evolving geological, climatic, and environmental conditions over such a long period of time.

But there was more that we could say about our Wattle friend that had witnessed so much. The Wattle had preceded us all and had in fact Welcomed us All to this land, throughout successive waves of human arrival: Aboriginal, Colonial, Post World War II migrants and the multi-cultural migrants of today, who are so critical to the nation's growth and future. So now truly in the Wattle we have the most egalitarian and powerful symbol of national unity. Not only does it not have colonial baggage, it has unrivalled power and living energy as a unifying agent. It is on that basis that I call Wattle our pre-eminent national symbol.

But there is more that we can say with confidence about Wattle. Throughout the long 60,000+ years of their sole occupation of this place diverse Aboriginal societies across the Australian landmass used Wattles in numerous ways. It was a food and medicinal source, a provider of hunting and musical instruments, and culturally a season marker for significant events, such as the coming of the whales or the presence of the eels. It had a significant role in many facets of Aboriginal life, and then in colonial society it was soon picked up as a symbol of 'home' for those born in the colonies. From there you can move through to the early 20th century when the burst of golden blossom soon became the talisman for the new and vigorous federated nation. Wattle's proclamation as the National Floral Emblem in 1992 was but a formal recognition of something that had long been in the mentality and heart of the nation. With this expansive background, we can say truly that Wattle has been in the lives of every Australian who has walked this land. This is something profound to contemplate.

Over my time as President, I sought out the views of many others who might have perspective or advice for those of us who act passionately on behalf of the Wattle. One was Warren Pearson, who at the time was CEO of the National Australia Day Council. I figured he would have an interesting view, given that in many ways Wattle Day could emerge as a contender for a different type of national celebratory day. His assessment was that Wattle Day had great meaning and power as a symbol of Australia, but what it didn't yet have and needed was a sense of engagement with and in the community. I figured this insight was quite perceptive and it pointed me to how we might build that engagement in the community.

Part of our response was the linkages we then developed with the volunteer rural fire brigades. We shared a common time window for raising our profiles in the community. Early in September each year the brigades were keen to get out into the community and raise awareness of the bushfire threat and the need to prepare homes and properties to minimise the risks. This coincided nicely with WDA's keen interest to grow awareness of National Wattle Day on 1 September. The transactional item of the partnership with the brigades was the sale of Wattle Day badges, marked for the ACT Rural Fire Service, with the funds raised going directly to them. The badges were either made manually by Association volunteers, or later as volumes grew, sourced from a commercial supplier.

This model was used for several years, firstly with ACT Rural Fire Service and then with NSW Rural Fire Brigades in areas adjacent to the ACT. Many thousands of dollars were raised for the brigades in this way and from the Association's point of view the operation could have been said to have reached a proof-of-concept stage. It was clear however that to roll out the

operation on a wider scale would ideally require a major sponsor who could underwrite the operation and allow it to be scaled appropriately. Identifying such a major sponsor has been and continues to be an unrealisable challenge for the WDA.

The Association however remains open to building its brand and raising its profile to be an organisation with genuine national aspirations. That is what drove the preparation of the Engagement Document in late 2022, formally adopted in early 2023. Clearly there remains a 'once only' opportunity to position Wattle and National Wattle Day as the logical successor to the National Day debate. The Engagement Document is subtitled....*for when the nation is ready...* a deliberate reference to an inevitable but unknown date in the future when Australians, individually and with their government, decide it is time to end the annual grinding of teeth that surrounds 26 January and settle on an alternate day of national celebration. Given the power and the reach of Wattle's symbolism there is no better option than 1 September, National Wattle Day.

My experience of working on the Parliament House project, in close proximity to the Principal Architect, Aldo Giurgola, and other senior members of the architectural team, taught me how major public buildings and national symbols can give powerful expression to the people and place from which they emanate. On this criterion I believe Wattle has no peer as an authentic symbol and it is mission of WDA to promote this to all Australians.

So, the Association must continue to think big, to dream big dreams for Wattle and the nation. Wattle is truly part of the Australian imagination. There is a reason the Wattle has been such a patient witness for so long a period. Perhaps it is because its ultimate place in our nation's story will be appropriately significant – and as a people and culture the nation is yet to realise and express its authentic identity. We need to be patient like the Wattle, but persistent, ever persistent. There is a special place for the Wattle that beckons from its long history. It is up to us to land that prize, for the Wattle and for the nation.

Historically it has been progressive governments that have taken tangible steps to progress and recognise the role that Wattle has in the nation's consciousness. It was then Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, who put Wattle into the Commonwealth coat of arms, building on the first co-ordinated Wattle Days across three states in 1910. It was the Hawke/Hayden axis that belatedly formalised the status of Wattle (1988) and National Wattle Day (1992) late in the last century. The interest that WDA has had from Minister Patrick Gorman in the current government has been a gift. Where it leads is hard to predict but it has given us unparalleled access to the thinking and promotions of the Prime Minister's Department, where the locus of national identity is administratively stored. We should nourish that connection in whatever ways we can.

Manning Clark, that provocative chronicler of the nation's story, categorised those who come to public life as either *Enlargers* or *Straighteners* – those who grow the consciousness and authenticity of the nation and those who don't have the vision to engage in the national discourse, other than to diminish and limit its imagination. The cause of Wattle means that we must always be and be seen to be *Enlargers*. The Wattle has enlarged the nation's story and its imagination. So must we.