

WAY 1979: WHOSE CELEBRATION?

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Unread, unreadable, the slim black-covered book had lain for eight years on a remote corner of my bookshelves: *Western Australia 1829-1979*¹ with a 6-point sub-title: 'Report on the celebrations to the Parliament of Western Australia by the 150th Anniversary Board'. Afterbirth of the publications spawned by the sesquicentennial celebrations, the Report seemed to qualify for the old Greek epithet, *biblia a-biblia*, books that are not books. One would like to say of it, as Sherlock Holmes observed of the railway timetable, that its vocabulary was 'nervous and terse, but limited'. But when, stimulated by a request to write an article on the 1979 celebrations for this publication, I took down the book as my first source of reference, I found that such praise would be excessive. The prose is remorselessly, if selectively, factual and — one must admit — useful; particularly since I contrived to spend the first two-thirds of 1979 overseas on study leave, and thus to miss many of the celebrations.

In fact the only mentions of WAY 1979 to reach the London media were unpremeditated accidents: the descent of the ruins of Skylab in the semi-desert east of Kalgoorlie, the collapse of the scaffolding at the Miss World contest. Whatever the 150th anniversary celebrations may have contributed to local pride, they did little to enhance Western Australia's image in the eyes of the outside world. Nor was there a spectacular increase in tourist interest. Although visitors increased in number the rate was not markedly greater than in any other year. The state manager for Parlorcars considered that potential visitors were discouraged in finding accommodation booked out for conventions.² Perhaps, though nobody said so, Western Australia rated no higher than Manitoba or Ecuador in the consciousness of the wider world. But 1979 was not the year for such thoughts.

Certainly the event was long prepared. Following the celebration when Western Australia's population passed a million in March 1971, the Perth Chamber of Commerce was inspired to start preliminary planning for 1979. Within a year 'nucleus of enthusiasm [was] implanted in the community'; but it was January 1974 before the State government was advised and the public invited to submit ideas to the Chamber. Then Sir Charles Court became premier. The State government took over, and the pace quickened. Ralph Doig, newly retired after long service as under-secretary to the Premier's Department, was invited to report on organisation. A cabinet sub-committee was convened under the minister for education, Graham Mackinnon. By April 1975 Doig was appointed chairman of the executive committee for the celebrations with two

colleagues, Slade Drake-Brockman of the Chamber of Commerce, state manager for the National Cash Register Company, and Neil Stewart, a senior official of the Education Department: a civil servant, a member of an old pioneer family, and an educationist. Sir Charles launched the WAY 1979 concept at a meeting of community representatives and announced that \$3 million would be earmarked for the celebrations, of which \$800,000 would go to educational projects. Air Commodore, S. W. Dallywater would be executive officer for the celebrations.

There were teething problems, although in pointed contrast to the subsequent Australian Bicentenary, very little appeared about them in the media. Dallywater resigned after two years. He felt that, like Sir John Forrest and Sir James Mitchell before him, Sir Charles Court was given to outlining grand plans and leaving others to carry them out without sufficiently explicit guidelines and authority.³ Slade Drake-Brockman, having recently retired, was pulled in to assume the executive role and found it acceptable, if strenuous. It would be fair to assume that Court and Drake-Brockman played the most significant roles in determining the character of WAY 1979.

This character was indicated at the inaugural event, a New Year's Eve concert on the Perth Esplanade. It was a warm evening, and an estimate of 60,000 attended. Rolf Harris was there with his wobbleboard; so were Western Australia's own contributions to television culture, Fat Cat and Percy Penguin. Although few took up an invitation to come in period costume or national dress, there was a multicultural tone to the proceedings: among the faces in the crowd Aborigines, Maoris and Vietnamese could be identified, as well as many more of continental European ancestry. Sir Charles Court's speech set the keynote:

Western Australians of all generations had done a mighty job in a short time.

We came to a very ancient land and made it young again.

We made the soil productive and unlocked minerals for a thousand uses.

We have got land, sea and air networks where once there were no charts at all.

We have built nearly 500 cities, suburbs, towns and settlements where none existed.

We have done it by work and enterprise and by backing ourselves to win against great odds.⁴

It was a lapidary statement of the ethos of work and productivity, with its message of rejuvenation and its hint of a sporting metaphor at the close; but it at once provoked a rejoinder from a representative of the very ancient land. Ken Colbung, who had been brought to play his didgeridoo at the concert, handed a document to the State governor, Sir Wallace Kyle, on behalf of Western Australia's Aborigines. It was an assertion of prior land rights in the form of a notice to quit, served on the white people (said Colbung) in the same guise as the notices given to Aboriginal tenants by the State Housing Commission.

It looked as if WAY 1979 would be accompanied by a dark counterpoint reminding the celebrants of Aboriginal dispossession and victimisation. Court was furious at what he called 'a cheap and ill-conceived stunt to try and introduce a sour note into the 150th anniversary'.⁵ Three days later the Federal Commissioner for Community Relations, Al Grassby, arriving for the University of Western Australia Summer School, was confronted by fifty Aboriginal fringe-dwellers demanding that he should inspect their living conditions at Lockridge. He complied, and the *West Australian* ran front-page photographs of Aboriginal demonstrators with such slogans as 'Oppression, Poverty, Discrimination', '150 Years of Deprivation of Land Rights'.⁶ But Pharoah's heart was hardened, and the oppressed gained no relief. Within a day or two the

media's attention was diverted to the less troubling spectacle of the Australian Bottle Convention at the Claremont Showgrounds.

But if the spirit of Aboriginal protest failed to make much lasting impact, nor did Court's praise of the work ethic. Even *The West Australian*, editorialising on the significance of 1979, admitted the cynical thought that 'it would be good for business when things are a bit slack',⁷ though it also saw a pattern of development in which pioneers, attempting to impose the methods of British rural communities on a hostile environment, succeeded through luck and courageous leadership. WAY 1979 could produce 'a renewed sense of purpose in which we all can share'. These themes also dominated Dennis Hancock's commemorative history, *The Westerners*,⁸ aptly summarised in a *Sunday Times* review headlined 'How State became Lucky Country':

Naturally Dennis Hancock describes the important work of Sir James Stirling, J. S. Roe, Sir John and Alexander Forrest, C. Y. O'Connor and the Bussell family, and so many historical figures of the past who helped to frame our destiny. The settlement, too, was to have additional bonuses through the presence of pearl-shell, gold, iron-ore, nickel, oil and natural gases, and latterly, of course, uranium.⁹

Old-fashioned themes for an old-fashioned readership, who saw progress in terms of mineral development rather than social justice or environmental amenity, and great men who framed the destinies of others as the conscious architects of that progress.

Honourably, the academic profession presented alternative views. Arrangements had been made for a fourteen-volume series of publications on various aspects of the Western Australian experience ranging from Aboriginal life to modern commerce. Prepared under the guidance of a committee chaired by Dr Robert Vickery, the series achieved the unique feat of appearing completely on time and without censorship or the imposition of an interpretative orthodoxy.¹⁰ Admittedly the old unreflecting triumphalism was sometimes evident, as in the volume on agriculture, or in the judgment of two historians that Captain Stirling 'stands like a colossus among the first pages of the history of European settlement'.¹¹ But several contributors smuggled a good deal of ideological contraband into the publications. Marian Aveling in *Westralian Voices* included some of the first Australian examples of 'history from below', especially from a feminist perspective. R. M. and C. H. Berndt in *Aborigines of the West* provided a useful guide to the renaissance of local Aboriginal identity. Subsequently *A New History of Western Australia* appeared under the editorship of Tom Stannage, reinterpreting nearly every aspect of Western Australian history with a critical acuity which should have demolished for good the bland orotundities of the developmental pioneer myth.¹² But the myth survived and flourished, and not merely because it served the goals of Sir Charles Court and the developmental capitalists whom he encouraged. WAY 1979 may show us why this should be so.

For most of the public 1979 was largely a pretext to have a good time. Perth was the venue for so many spectacles, ranging from the *Parmelia* yacht race to the City of Stirling pigeon race. The Miss Universe competition was for many the crowning event. With nearly a hundred competitors, forty hairdressers, eight makeup experts, a month of preliminary buildup, and a television coverage estimated at 700 million viewers in forty-eight countries, it was surely the apotheosis for which the Entertainment Centre was built. When a spokesperson for the Women's Electoral Lobby criticised the show as a 'modern slave market' she was refuted by Ms Gay Hodgson of Morley, who wrote to the paper to state that there was 'no insult to womanhood . . . there is nothing wrong in being young, beautiful, shapely, and single. It is natural for men to admire women

Sesquicentenary Celebrations Series

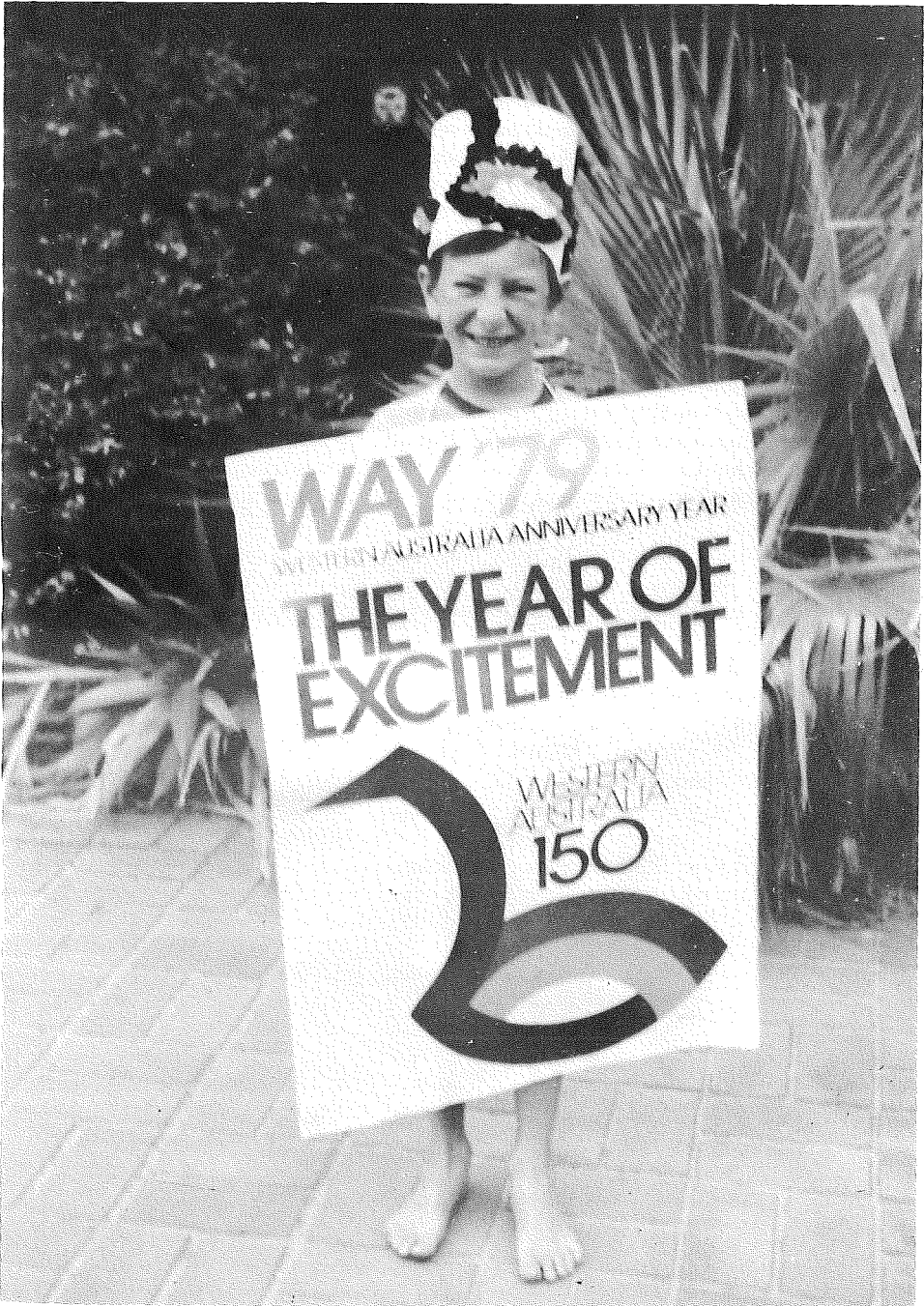


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and I certainly hope they continue to do so'.¹³ Venezuela's Maritza Sayalero, an eighteen-year-old architecture student in white evening dress with rhinestones, emerged as the winner. Then a plywood catwalk gave way, plunging eight of the contestants and two media representatives to the ground and provoking 'hysterical screams of fright'.¹⁴ Fortunately nobody was much hurt, and even more fortunately the mishap occurred only after the television cameras had ceased to roll. But today everyone remembers the collapsing catwalk, whereas who could name Maritza Sayalero or knows what has become of her?

Arguably it suited the Court government to foster images of consensus in a year when industrial relations were more than usually divisive. The Miss Universe competition coincided with a bitter and protracted strike among iron-ore workers in the Pilbara, and although nobody could have foreseen this coincidence the confrontation had been brewing ever since the Court government legislated in 1976 to restrict the right of assembly. Later in 1979 an Aboriginal teenager was given the mandatory sentence of death for murdering a police constable and allowed to spend several weeks in the shadow of this sentence before the State cabinet commuted it. Perhaps it was easier for the public to accept the fate of this delinquent young woman because they had recently been presented with the more admirable images ('it is natural for men to



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Seven-year-old Glenn Firkin dressed for the celebration parade at Karrinyup Primary School.
(Photograph: Mrs L. Firkin.)

admire women', wrote Ms Hodgden) of the Miss Universe contestants. Certainly the emphasis of the WAY 1979 celebrations offered a sanitised version of the past. Schools were given kits replicating the classrooms and markets of the 1830s. Sir Charles Court, Governor Kyle, and Mr Mackinnon dressed up in the costume of that era, looking like minor characters in a Barbara Cartland novel. Nobody tried to replicate the heat, the insects, the dysentery, the alcoholism, the boredom and the discomfort which were so intimate a part of daily life in the Swan River Colony.

When WAY 1979 ended its participants looked back in various moods. For Slade Drake-Brockman, created CMG for his hard work, it was a success: 'We've built such a huge steam-roller of public spirit and participation in these celebrations. I think it will roll on for quite some time'.¹⁵ He was right, because without WAY 1979 Western Australia would have been less ready for the America's Cup in 1983 and the easy acceptance of the State's future as a mecca for tourism and investment. Ken Colbung had also accepted an imperial honour, and it was left to Jack Davis in his play *Kullark* and Ric Walley of the New Era Aboriginal Fellowship to take up the theme of racial inequality. 'Aborigines have not been involved at all', he said, 'it was clear people were trying to forget the Aboriginal side of things'.¹⁶ If this was true, it would not be many months before the Aboriginal side of things came insistently before public notice as the Court government forced through the mineral exploration of the Aboriginal sacred sites of Noonkanbah, shattering Western Australia's image as land of consensus.

And yet there was much validity in that image. During WAY 1979 the authorities counted seventy-one family reunions and ninety-one communities organising 'Back to Woop Woop' days which brought together old acquaintances and neighbours to yarn about old times and spend a great amount of creative energy in putting on shows which expressed their pride and pleasure in local achievement. There must have been many more such occasions which never bothered with official patronage, as when the residents of Katherine Street, Helena Valley, invited the neighbouring streets to a New Year's party, with the notice: 'Bring your own tucker and drinks. We also have three backyard swimming pools in the street, so bring your bathers'.¹⁷ WAY 1979 may have promoted a false idea of consensus and an idealised view of the past. But it was also the pretext for a good deal of innocent enjoyment and perhaps stimulated a greater reaching out for human contact among many Western Australians, especially old people and children.

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