Pageants, procession and celebrations in Sydney's grand boulevard

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Introduction

Macquarie Street will again come to life in celebratory fashion in 1988, the bicentennial year. The New South Wales Government has taken positive steps to rehabilitate the precinct from Bennelong Point to Whitlam Square; to recover cultural significance eroded by sometimes insensitive development on the western side in years past. The Government-owned historic buildings on the eastern side of Macquarie Street have been, or are now being, restored.

This study by Max Kelly, (1) written in the form of an historical analysis, brings to light many forgotten images of ephemeral past events such as the pageants and processions which are too numerous to cover here. The cameos which follow are but a sampling of the rich history of celebration in Macquarie Street.

Street of Celebration

Macquarie Street, the street of Triumph and the street of Tribute. Through time the galaxy of titles given to the street has been reinforced and consolidated by an array of celebratory and festive functions there.

Processional routes to mark important political events, to honour illustrious visitors, to welcome royalty, to pay tribute to allied forces, to recognise workers' triumphs, to mourn beloved heads of state, to pay homage to good governors, to celebrate both Centenary and Federation, to revel in the success of foreign battles and to receive those preparing to battle abroad - all have chosen the parliamentary street. Macquarie Street, and Queens Square and College Street, have been ordained historically as one of Sydney's few principal passages of honour.

Public sculpture has often been the outward sign of such events and has played a significant part in the rituals of the street. Not only have such sculptures been unveiled amid great ceremony and festivity, they have also been subsequently bedecked, regaled and illuminated; frequently to celebrate, sometimes to mourn.

The Waterloo Ball

In the Antipodes, the Battle of Waterloo was first celebrated in Macquarie Street. The victory news had been brought by Fanny which had arrived at the quarry on 18 January 1816, seven months after the event. As night fell the Waterloo Ball, in a ward of Macquarie's yet incomplete Hospital, was about to commence. With a fervour that comes only from moments of triumph or tragedy the assembled 120 had, as they say, a night out. Or as the Sydney Gazette reported it:

'Upwards of 120 Ladies and Gentlemen sat down to an elegant supper... until again summoned to resume the sprightly dance, which continued to a late hour in the morning.'

We are left with a fanciful description of the decor of the ball, all accomplished within a few hours by the colony's resident professional painter, John Lewin, a miniaturist and portrait painter of some renown. With a speed that can only be admired, Lewin painted the floor of the ward room with symbols of triumph and of martial glory. 'Pam' dominated the scene holding a trumpet in one hand, in the other a scroll which read 'Waterloo, Wellington, Victory'. The walls and supporting columns were bedecked, sometimes with the insignias of the Orders of Knighthood, and sometimes - to introduce a touching and truly colonial note
- with transparencies showing groups of aboriginaus with spears, holding celebratory corroborees. The Sydney Gazette, awash with patriotism and filial bravura, further noted that:

'Native shrubs, ever-greens, and flowers collected from the rich stores of abundant Nature being in graceful festoons around and formed upon the whole a scene almost rivalling those Arcadian bower as celebrated in the pages of poetry.'

The festoons, garlands, patriotic images, allegorical representations, heraldic motives, painted messages, and ferns, gum leaves, palms and flowers real and artificial, whipped together in a frenzy of pride for the Waterloo Ball would be similarly employed as the decades passed. Although elaborate, later decorations could hardly have been more artful, nor more ingenious.

The mid-century bronzes: Richard Bourke and Albert the Good

On 12 April 1842 a procession wound its way from the newly re-built Royal Hotel in George Street. It was headed by the military band of the 28th Regiment, followed by a 'detachment of forces' and accompanied by Sir Maurice O'Connell, the recently re-arrived Lieutenant-Governor and staff. They, in turn, were accompanied by the 'largest assemblage that up to date had ever congregated in Sydney'. (2) Turning into Macquarie Street the throng was met by Governor Gipps and family, at which point 'the guns at Dawes Battery fired a Royal Salute'. The object of all was the unveiling of what is still, perhaps, Sydney's finest sculpture, that to ex-Governor Sir Richard Bourke.

Prince Albert's death, at Windsor Castle on 14 December 1861, was announced to the Parliament (the fourth parliament of New South Wales) on 27 May 1862. Already a Prince Consort's Statue Association had been established. In 1866, the statue was unveiled with much pomp, at the entrance to Hyde Park, facing directly north down Macquarie Street and next to the tiny road that was named after him. On the occasion a ten-stanza poem 'Loyalty in Sydney and Lines on the Inauguration of the Statue of His Royal Highness the Late Prince Consort' by one George Wood was read to the assembled thousands. Although poetic licence has chemically converted bronze into stone, the sentiment of the first two stanzas is worth noting. The remaining eight repeat, and repeat, the theme:

'Sons of Albion - come - declare the generous sentiments ye bear Her Majesty the Queen; Come, and with loyal spirits, own the virtue of expressive stone which now unveiled is seen

Though cold the image we survey, In grief and gratitude, today, We gaze, and feel subdued. How feebly words convey the sense of that great worth it represents - "Albert the just and good".'

Twenty two years later a statue of Albert's wife, Queen Victoria, similarly created, was hoisted ashore at Circular Quay and taken to her husband.

Captain Cook in College, 1879

During the 1868 visit of the Duke of Edinburgh, the specially built Hyde Park Pavilion was used for a Grand Promenade Concert, 'under royal patronage', its object to raise funds for a statue of Captain Cook. A decade later the statue, fashioned by the celebrated English sculptor, T. Woolner, and cast by London founders Cox and Sons, was on its way, replicating the voyage of its namesake but taking less than half the time.

The ceremonial unveiling took place on 25 February 1879. Governor Hercules Robinson undertook it as one of his last official duties. The processional route went from Government House, along Macquarie Street to the statue by way of College Street. The speeches were long and numerous. But the 7,500 people who had rolled up for the occasion were knowingly but certainly helping to build the historic flavour of the precinct. In 1908 a small metal tablet, decorated with waratahs and laurel, was affixed near Cook's statue by the Yorkshire
Society of New South Wales 'as their tribute to the Memory of Captain James Cook'.

1888

The great event for Macquarie Street to mark the Australian Centenary was undoubtedly the unveiling of the Queen's statue in Queen's (previously Chancery) Square. The Parliament of the Street had been intimately involved already in the arrangements for the proclamation of Centennial Park as a public space - 'emphatically a people's park' cried Henry Parkes from the dais. Centennial Park was dedicated on 26 January, Anniversary Day. The Queen had been unveiled two days earlier. The other principal events were the Grand Procession, the Centennial Regatta, the laying of the foundation stone for new Parliament Houses, a massive Government House reception, a State Banquet, the Illumination of the City, a Great Musical Contest and the Intercolonial Cricket Match.

For weeks before, workmen had cleaned, scraped, washed and polished. Before being decorated, public buildings were scrubbed and 'the Statues at the entrance to the Public Offices in Maqaurie, Bridge and Phillip Street were subjected to a brightening process'. For three weeks gas fitters had been working on the illumination of these 'grand offices'.(3)

The Government and the City Council, working together, had issued contracts amounting to over £12,000 to ensure that the bunting was bought, the processional canopies built, the Venetian masts erected, the garlands made, the Chinese lanterns hung and the triumphal arches inscribed. The following can give us some idea of the effect of one such triumphal arch:

'The triple triumphal arch appeared, with three spaces covering both the pavements and the road. The structure is most gorgeously draped in crimson, blue and gold. The portrait of Captain Cook appears in the middle and on either side are the legends "Alexander Conquered Countries", "Captain Cook founded an Empire". Below this a deep banner of blue, extending the whole width of the Street, with the motto in letters of gold "Advance Australia". The white ensign floats above the central arch, and on either side are the red and blue.'(4)

Surrounding the arch were 'the flags of all nations and colours fluttering from the lines attached to 200 Venetian masts, all draped in red, and each fronted by a quartered painted shield and a trophy of flags. Innumerable broad bannermes float and miles of Chinese lanterns and variegated lamps are suspended beneath the flags'.

Hyde Park was a treat:

'From bough to bough along the whole length of the avenue lines of variegated lamps had been hung and around about every flower bed coloured fires were fixed, while the great Statue of Captain Cook, that of the Prince Consort in the full front of the main avenue, and that of Her Majesty in the Square were covered with lines of Chinese lanterns and lamps. It was a fairyland scene, needing but a half-dozen illuminated fountains to make it perfect.'

From early in the morning the crowds had been gathering around Chancery Square, admiring the decorated trees of Hyde Park, and its 'rich parterres'. At 10.00 am the school children were marshalled. By midday the space was thronged to capacity. A vast concourse of human beings was massed round the veiled Statue of the Queen, which 'draped in the national standard, was within an hour about to be disclosed to the gaze of tens of thousands. As far as the eye of an observer from this dais could travel along Maqaurie Street, the broad strada was filled with a living mass... St James Road... Hyde Park on its northern side, and the broad space stretching to the Oriel of St Mary's Cathedral... over fifty thousand persons were present on the occasion'.(5)

The procession had carried the Carringtons from Government House by way of Hunter, Phillip and King Streets. Apart from the vice-regal carriage, dozens of distinguished...
Figure 1: Unveiling of Queen Victoria's statue on 24 January 1888.
visitors passed beneath the massings of evergreens and banners. Beneath a giant banner proclaiming 'God Save the Queen', Carrington gave a 'brief but pithy speech', his good woman pulled the golden cord, and the Queen was revealed. The bronze sculpture, not particularly remarkable, was by the sculptor J E Boehn. It certainly showed that Victoria, as the saying has it, was not easily amused. (Figure 1) Historically the statue is more important when it is realised that it was a replica of that which formed the focal point in the Garden Palace Exhibition. Eight years earlier, when that building burnt to the ground, the Queen had been reduced to a mass of molten metal. In 1888, Phoenix-like, Queen Victoria had risen from the ashes. The crowd cheered.

Such was the orthodoxy in colonial New South Wales that it was to this spot that thousands came to mourn, when their Queen died. On that occasion the statue was draped in purple and black and hundreds of wreaths were banked upon the pedestal. We have no records of the messages inscribed upon them, but certainly here was the historical evidence for one of the more poignant phases of the declining Empire.

The greatest pageantry ever witnessed in the Southern Hemisphere - the iconography of a nation

Eight years later, in 1901, the City was being dressed again. Neither before nor since has it been so effectively, so imaginatively and so convincingly turned into a city of pageant. Never had so many turned out for a procession, and never had so many taken part. A quick but fairly accurate count of the procession shows that 3,890 persons (give or take a hundred and almost all male) comprised what must be considered Sydney's greatest Show. Macquarie Street, Queen's Square and College Street played a central role in these, the inaugural celebrations of the Commonwealth of Australia. It is perhaps worth spending some time in discussing the festive arrangements for this extraordinary event as they apply to the subject area of this study.

The day was 1 January 1901, the first day of the first year of the Federation. The processional route commenced from the Domain gates, near St Mary's Cathedral, passing through Queen's Square, Macquarie Street, Bridge and Pitt Streets, Martin Place, George, Park, College, Oxford Streets (Figure 2) and so into Centennial Park. In charge of the Decoration and Illumination Committee was W L Vernon, the Government Architect. In this capacity Vernon did his job well.

The first arch, beneath which the procession first moved, was the Coal Arch, made of a display of 135 tons of coal straddling the Prince Albert Road at its junction with Art Gallery Road, the entrance to the Domain. Thirty three feet wide, with a carriageway of 24 feet, the arch rose 23 feet above the ground. The superstructure, raised on two square pillars of coal, supported both a miniature pit-head frame with winding drum and scaffold and a model of a life-saving ventilating fan. Centred above all was the miner's coat of arms - mallet, pick, shovel and wedge - with the motto 'Labor umnia vincit'. Immediately beneath was inscribed 'Newcastle's Welcome to the Governor-General'. At night a number of miner's safety lamps lit by electricity illuminated the arch.

Adjacent to Coal Arch was the superbly decorated Queen's Square. (Figure 3) A tented colonnade of 18 white fluted marble columns on squared bases defined the outer perimeter of the 'Square' (that was, and always has been, more of a circle or a circus). Each of these columns supported the flag, held at an acute angle, of a foreign country - Germany, France, Switzerland, the United States, Russia, Prussia, Japan, Egypt, Sweden and Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Holland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Greece and Turkey. (The political history implicit in such a catholic congregation is immense.) Each outer column was joined to its neighbour by panels painted in the colours of the various visiting Imperial and Indian troops, bearing their names in gold and silver lettering.

The procession trailed through a Macquarie Street that was studded with close-set Venetian masts draped with tricolour banners and crested with silvered crowns.
Figure 2: German arch off College Street, erected for the Federation procession on 1 January 1901. It displays the message: 'United Germany Hails United Australia', a tribute to the fickle nature of international politics.

Figure 3: Queen's Square at the intersection of Macquarie and College Streets, 1901. Eighteen fluted white marble columns on squared bases fly foreign flags.
At the Bridge Street corner, by the entrance to Government House, was a floral arch 50 feet wide flanked by two smaller arches of foliage and flowers.

The Great White Fleet, 1908

The 1908 visit of the world-cruising American Fleet was an event of considerable importance. The American Fleet, welcomed and feted, was treated royally. Macquarie Street and College Street were again the focal points for demonstrations of honourable intent (Figure 4).

The Victory Marches and Jack's Day

War then peace. Macquarie Street celebrated both. It championed the Waratahs as they ended their 1915 recruiting march, as they strode into Sydney with those whose recent decisions had been to do battle with the Kaiser. Fifteen years earlier similar young men had marvelled at the splendid German arch at College Street, erected by the Germans to welcome the Federal unions. The fragility of such useful cross-national gestures was soon to be demonstrated by the massive 'hate Germans' campaigns in Sydney, and by the equally massive celebrations when the Kaiser and all his works were defeated in 1918.

Victoria Day, with its attendant march along Macquarie Street, was 12 November 1918. Before this, however, Jack's Day had occurred, on 1 November, centred on an appeal for funds for men of the Navy and the mercantile marines. 'Hundreds of thousands came into the city' wrote the Sydney Morning Herald next day,'with their purses wide open... the whole fete had a nautical flavour. Every stall was a ship. Sometimes it was only a flimsy thing of wood and calico... others were wonderfully good imitations.'

The official World War One victory celebrations occurred on Tuesday 12 November 1918. But throughout the weekend, Sydney had already been celebrating the result of rumour and the premature unofficial announcement of the armistice. Notwithstanding, Tuesday saw tens of thousands streaming through the city streets. Macquarie Street and Queens Square were focal points for the day.

1945. Victory Pacific Day. Peace. The official march to celebrate Allied victory in the second war to end all wars was held on 16 August 1945. It started in Macquarie Street. The war was over, and with it an epoch had passed. Yet again, Macquarie and College Streets had born witness to that mosaic of events which, taken as a whole, comprises a nation's history.
REFERENCES


2. G Forbes, Pioneers of the Australian Commonwealth, N D.

