

Australia in The Twentieth Century

The twentieth century in Australia began with celebrations but dark days were on the horizon. This young nation would endure two world wars and a world Depression before fifty years had passed. The men of Australia would make the nation proud and as the Melbourne *Argus* put it in 1915, Australia had “in one moment stepped into the world of great manhood”. Because of the First World War Gallipoli campaign, Australia now had a national day – Anzac Day.

The Great Depression in Australia was characterised by the “*Swagmen*”; men who turned their back on the cities and took to the roads, travelling from town to town looking for work. They carried a rolled up blanket, containing their meagre possessions, on their back and it was generally known as a ‘*swag*’. Farmers would often take them in, give them a few days work and some hot meals and then send them on their way. Many of these swagmen were decent men prepared to work hard, but with the dearth of jobs in the city they were forced to leave their homes and pound the highways looking for work. Their families back in the city depended on them to send money home to keep the household going. *Swaggies*, as they were often called in the Australian vernacular, became a common sight on outback roads throughout the Depression. The Swagman was made famous in Australia’s favourite song “Waltzing Matilda” in which “Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong, under the shade of a Coolabah tree and he sang as he watched and waited till his billy boiled, you’ll come a waltzing matilda with me...”

In 1939 Australia entered its second World War of the century and again the cream of its youth put their lives on the line on the other side of the world. This war, however, changed and became more personal when, after Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, it invaded a number of Asian countries and Singapore and Hong Kong were attacked from the air. Now the war was in our own territory and we began fighting for our own land when Darwin was bombed and Japanese submarines were found in Sydney Harbour. Again Australians pulled together and matured as a nation.

Since the 1950’s there have been important social and political changes as well as technological advances in our nation and the country continues to move forward. It is no longer tied to the ‘apron strings’ of Britain but has become a multicultural nation, a colourful tapestry of people from many lands. Australia has come of age and established its own national identity in a world of change.

The mysterious ‘south land’ had been known about for centuries, but whether it was one vast land or a number of smaller lands was not apparent. Nothing was known of its people or of its potential wealth. It was only following Captain James Cook’s discovery of the eastern seaboard of the ‘south land’ that interest in its possibilities was created on the other side of the world.

Once a foothold had been established with the small colony of settlers in Sydney, little time was lost in investigating more and more of this unique country. Small communities sprang up along the coast. Then, as explorers moved further into the interior, new country was opened for the grazing of sheep and cattle. Navigators sailed around this new territory, mapping it for others to follow.

As time went on the convict workforce gave way to free settlers and as the country was more closely examined, gold and other mining ores were found, adding richly to the growing economy.

As Australia became more closely settled and cities began to grow, the need for a federal government led to the Commonwealth of Australia being formed and the birth of our nation.

As young as it is, this nation continues to grow and mature and it is steadily taking its place among the leading nations of the world.