

One hundred years of 'Anglo-Saxondom' in the south: the Children's Demonstration Pageant of Empire, South Australia 1936

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Abstract

There is a universality to the sight of groups of children celebrating public events. These groups might be large or small but teachers and students put much time and effort into preparing performances for appreciative audiences. These events occur across cultures and countries, are commonplace and expected but also highly memorable to participants and spectators. Sometimes such events gain greater historical significance due to time, place and context. One such example occurred in the years preceding World War 2 in the small but staunchly patriotic State of South Australia. In 1936 13,000 school children gathered in Adelaide to perform a Pageant of Empire as part of the State centenary celebrations. Despite there being rumblings across the globe about the viability of the British Empire or its successor, the Commonwealth, Adelaide was overwhelmed by the spectacle. Miss Inspector Adelaide Meithke brought the production to fruition. The pageant presented choreographed musical displays representing England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. The Empire was represented by Indian rajahs, dancing girls, guards, and an elephant, followed by Canadian scenes, then Australian iconic images. The event concluded with the 'Family of Nations'. This article includes participant recollections and is framed by contemporary discussions of the place and role of the Empire. This South Australian celebration can be understood as a looking back to what had been, using visual icons, music, dance and a cast of thousands.

Key words: school festival, Pageant of Empire, Adelaide Meithke, celebrating public events

Australian Journal of Music Education 2014:2,159-83

On 28 December 1836 the first Governor, Captain John Hindmarsh proclaimed the Colony of South Australia. One hundred years later South Australia celebrated its centenary.¹ At that time the population of the state was close to 589,000.² The Australian colonies had federated in 1901 and by 1936 the nation of Australia was described as "a big slice of the world" in which 84% of its population were Australian-born but

97% of the total population of six and a half millions were of British stock.³ This article focuses on one of the events organised for the South Australian centenary celebrations, a massive Pageant of Empire by thousands of school children performed at the Adelaide Oval in the state capital, Adelaide. This was to be the last such single-purpose massed demonstration of

1. State Centenary Committee, *Centenary of South Australia 1836-1936 Programme*. (Adelaide: Government Printer, 1936).

2. Jan Lahmeyer, "populstat", <http://www.populstat.info/Oceania/australp.htm> accessed December 24 2012.

3. "With an area of 2,974,581 square miles, Australia is practically equivalent in size to the United States of America, twenty-five times greater than Great Britain and Ireland, three-quarters of the size of all Europe". *Rykstentoonstelling Johannesburg Sep 1936 - Jan 1937 Souvenir Catalogue Empire Exhibition*. (Johannesburg: n.p., 1936), 163.

school children and was, in some ways, the end of a tradition that had existed in South Australia for decades. The argument is made that South Australia was unique amongst the States due to its origins and its ongoing sense of place and position. This article contextualises the 1936 Centenary Pageant of Empire in the Australian political and social understandings of the years between the First and Second World Wars.

From its inception, South Australia was unique. It was founded by the South Australian Association of systematic colonizers who envisaged a “fresh colony” different to other colonies that were deemed unsuitable due to the transportation of convicts and existing land grants.⁴ Adelaide was to be the capital of this free settler state founded by “transplanted British stock”⁵ The early optimism of the first settlers was to be disappointed but the colony survived and gradually thrived. In 1894 the governor, Sir George Grey stated that, “the caliber of the early settlers in South Australia gave one trust in the new Anglo-Saxondom in the Southern Hemisphere”⁶ For most of its existence, Australian society has continued to enact this “Anglo-Saxondom” in “rituals of public patriotism”⁷ In the first half of the twentieth century, these rituals frequently enacted and celebrated membership of the British Empire.

Empire and dominions

By the beginning of the 20th century the British Empire was “a unique political, economic, and social community” that comprised almost a quarter of humanity and encompassed a fourth

of the earth’s surface.⁸ Different status was awarded to nations and peoples within the Empire, ranging through protectorates, colonies and dominions. Protectorates had no autonomy; colonies might have some while the Dominions had varying forms of self-government.⁹ Australia had been proclaimed an autonomous Dominion in 1911 but remained firmly part of the British Empire.¹⁰ Prime Minister Deakin believed in “colonial nationalism” in which self-governing Dominions could develop greater independence while maintaining “imperial unity” in which Dominions could make their own links and associations. This attitude was maintained during the interwar period.¹¹ This duality seems to have existed on two levels. There was an underlying and widely held belief that Australian traditions, interests, sympathies and “honour all combine to keep her within the British Commonwealth of Nations” but above that there was a recognition of Australia as “a free country, with unfettered rights of self-government, a national status recognized by foreign nations, and a distinct personality in International Law”¹² This dichotomy has continued to frame Australia’s sense of position and identity, and can be seen in public rituals that position nation within a wider imperial frame.

By the first decades of the 20th century the Empire had become a massive complex and problematic political, economic and social community. The Empire was trying to forge a new identity as a Commonwealth in which they were “creating a new climate in the world ... to help

4. Richard Charles Mills, *The Colonization of Australia (1829-42) The Wakefield Experiment in Empire Building*. (London: Dawson of Pall Mall, 1968), 218.

5. William Keith Hancock, *Australia* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), 37.

6. Richard Charles Mills, *The Colonization of Australia*, 258. Grey was Governor of South Australia from 1841 to 1845.

7. John Rickard, ‘Loyalties’, in *Out of Empire. The British Dominion of Australia*, ed. John Arnold, Peter Spearitt and David Walker (Port Melbourne: Reed Books, 1993), 35.

8. Basil Mathews, ‘Foreword’, in *How is the Empire?*, Percy F. Roe (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1936), viii.

9. Percy F. Roe, *How is the Empire?* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1936).

10. The other dominions were, at varying times, Canada, New Zealand, Newfoundland, the Union of South Africa and the Irish Free State.

11. *Ibid.*, 8. Alfred Deakin was Prime Minister on three occasions: 1903-1904, 1905-1908 and 1909-1910.

12. William Keith Hancock, *Australia* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), 256.

to lead the world toward a new equilibrium".¹³ In 1921 the first post-war Imperial Conference, a continuation of the wartime Imperial War Cabinet, was held to organize the defence of the Empire. It was hoped that this would become a regular event that would bring together the leaders of the Dominions and the Secretary of State for India. Its intended function was to maintain diplomatic, political and military communications.¹⁴ Regular meetings occurred and by the 1926 Imperial Conference the United Kingdom and the self-governing Dominions were considered to be equal in status and "in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown and freely associated as members of the British commonwealth of Nations".¹⁵ At this time the term Commonwealth began to replace the older term of Empire.¹⁶ The Commonwealth was to be a free association of autonomous states that owed allegiance to the British Crown. There was still a feeling that support should be given to Britain in times of crisis.¹⁷ The transition from Empire to Commonwealth was not without its challenges and risks as the peoples of the Empire tried to re-envision themselves as members of a Commonwealth.¹⁸

During the interwar years, Australia and New Zealand, were the "most loyal of all the dominions to the concept of the political and economic unity

of the British Empire".¹⁹ Successive Australian governments sought balance in pursuing the nation's interests but doing so within the frame of Empire or Commonwealth. Australians long held a dual loyalty to nation and to the Empire. In the 1920s Prime Ministers Bruce and Hughes shared the "conventional Australian thinking that loyalty to nation was compatible with loyalty to empire".²⁰ In 1930 Hancock pointed out that, "it is not impossible for Australians, nourished by a glorious literature and haunted by old memories, to be in love with two soils".²¹ In 1929 Bavin listed the levels of Australian citizenship as being to City, State, Federation and the British Empire. At that time Bavin considered the Empire as unlike any other form of political association, it was "the greatest experiment ever made in human organization, and is still in the experimental stage ... it embodies the two apparently opposing ideas of complete internal autonomy and a single policy in relation to the outside world".²² This belief has lasted a long time despite modern Australia's cultural diversity. In 2000 Prime Minister John Howard felt that there was no contradiction between Australian nationalism and loyalty to the British monarchy that was a legacy of Australia's imperial history.²³

Throughout the interwar period Australia was committed to co-operate with Britain as a "self-governing Dominion in the British Empire, rather than as either a totally independent nation or a mere dependency of the United Kingdom".²⁴ In the 1930s the "Australian government's position

13. Mathews, 'Foreword', viii.

14. David Simonelli, "[L]aughing nations of happy children who have never grown up': Race, the Concept of Commonwealth and the 1924-1925 British Empire Exhibition", *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 10, no.1 (2009), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/.

15. Peter Spearitt, 'The British Dominion of Australia,' in *Out of Empire. The British Dominion of Australia*, ed. John Arnold, Peter Spearitt and David Walker (Port Melbourne: Reed Books, 1993), 5.

16. David Simonelli, "[L]aughing nations of happy children who have never grown up': Race, the Concept of Commonwealth and the 1924-1925 British Empire Exhibition".

17. Martin Kitchen, *The British Empire and Commonwealth A Short History* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1996).

18. William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co.).

19. David Lee, *Australia and the British Empire between the Wars (The Trevor Reese Memorial Lecture 2004)* (London: Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, King's College London and University of London, 2004), 40.

20. Ibid., 14-15. William Morris Hughes held office between 1915 and 1923 and Stanley Melbourne Bruce between 1923 and 1929.

21. William Keith Hancock, *Australia* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), 68.

22. T.R. Bavin, 'Empire Citizenship,' *Australian Quarterly* 1, no.3 (1929): 24.

23. David Goldsworthy, *Losing the Blanket. Australia and the End of Britain's Empire* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 1. John Howard was Prime Minister between 1996 and 2007.

24. David Lee, *Australia and the British Empire between the Wars*, 5.

was that to criticize British foreign policy was to divide the Empire; and the weakening of the empire meant the erosion of Australian security.²⁵ Although the British Empire was not an economic unit and Australia was “free to do her own business in the world”,²⁶ there remained constitutional ties with Great Britain so that “when the King is at war all his subjects are at war”.²⁷ The political and economic position for Australia in the interwar years was complex and frequently difficult.

Economically, Australia had been struggling. It was one of the first countries to experience the “depression and one of the last to recover from it”.²⁸ In 1928 London had shut Australia out of the loan market and by 1929 the Australian government was “so short of cash that it had to float a £10 million short-term loan, in London... As the loans dried up, Federal, State and municipal authorities ran out of money to pay for contracts to local manufacturers”.²⁹ In the 1930s unemployment “reached over forty per cent of the workforce, one of the highest rates in the world”.³⁰ During the depression the volume of Australian exports to Britain fell, thus debts grew considerably. Although this was resented in Australia most people “believed that the link with Britain was essential for economic survival” and this was coupled with a feeling of dependence, and ties of family and culture.³¹ In 1932 Britain finally abandoned free trade and accorded preferential tariffs to the Dominions but there were clear indications of “Britain’s declining economic power and the fact that it could no

longer support a large empire”.³² It was not until 1936-1937 that Australia’s gross domestic product recovered to the level that it held a decade earlier.³³

The depression had re-awakened global economic and political rivalries. There was a “gathering but inarticulate tension” in the relationship between Australia and Britain, particularly as the escalating crises in Europe made the vulnerability of the Empire increasingly apparent.³⁴ Not only was this tension economic, it was also diplomatic, political and strategic. The global depression had increased imperialist rivalries, for example Japan left the League of Nations in 1933 and by 1934 rumours had begun circulating that the Japanese were fortifying islands in the mid-Pacific ocean.³⁵ There was a bewildering multiplicity and tangled complexity in all corners of the Empire/Commonwealth engendered by the “ferments at work in this post-War world. Those ferments are racial, political, industrial, moral; they have their springs in Moscow, Rome, Johannesburg, and Vienna. They are creating a new climate in the world to which the British Commonwealth is called to adjust itself”.³⁶ In 1935 the Dominion Prime Ministers again gathered in London.³⁷

In 1936 contemporary writers raised concerns about the British Empire who saw the “startling and drastic transformations”³⁸ that were embodied in the challenges and menaces that centred on the pivot of Singapore where the Japanese asserted guardianship of Asia. It

25. *Ibid.*, 39.

26. William Keith Hancock, *Australia*, 259.

27. *Ibid.*, 262.

28. Michael Dunn, *Australia and the empire from 1788 to the present* (Sydney: Fontana/Collins, 1984), 116.

29. *Ibid.*, 117.

30. *Ibid.*, 118.

31. Martin Kitchen, *The British Empire and Commonwealth A Short History*, 79.

32. Michael Dunn, *Australia and the empire from 1788 to the present* (Sydney: Fontana/Collins, 1984), 123.

33. Brian Fitzpatrick, *The British Empire and Australia. An economic history 1834-1936*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

34. John Rickard, ‘Loyalties’, in *Out of Empire. The British Dominion of Australia*, ed. John Arnold, Peter Spearitt and David Walker (Port Melbourne: Reed Books, 1993), 53.

35. Michael Dunn, *Australia and the empire from 1788 to the present* (Sydney: Fontana/Collins, 1984).

36. Basil Mathews, ‘Foreword’, in *How is the Empire?*, Percy F. Roe (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1936), viii.

37. Percy F. Roe, *How is the Empire?*, 26.

38. Basil Mathews, ‘Foreword’, vii.

was pointed out that without the gateway of Singapore, India, Australia and New Zealand would be strategically at risk. Long before 1936 the plans for the defence of the "Far Eastern empire" had been questioned by sceptics in London, Australia and New Zealand.³⁹ With hindsight it seems evident that on the eve of World War 2 the Commonwealth "seems clearly to have been on the brink of collapse".⁴⁰ Since the economic collapse of 1929, there were repeated challenges to assumptions about the Commonwealth's commercial viability and its ability to meet defence commitments "especially when the British began seriously to plan for the possible war in the Eastern as well as in the Western Hemisphere".⁴¹ There were also strategic concerns driven by political unrest in India that preoccupied British officials but despite all this the British Empire/Commonwealth remained intact and appeared to have a permanency that seems based on little more than tradition and hope. The maintenance of the idea of an imperial commonwealth also relied increasingly on communication between its far-flung peoples to unite their "common efforts and ideas".⁴²

Maintaining links with England and the Empire

As Australians knew well, England was a long way off. By boat, Sydney is twelve thousand miles from London via the Panama Canal.⁴³ By air the 14,200 miles trip to Adelaide took fourteen hours.⁴⁴ Maintaining communication across the far-flung empire was both a challenge and a

necessity. Since its inauguration in late 1932 the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Empire Service radio broadcasts had shared bulletins and broadcasts of public events specially compiled for the overseas listeners.⁴⁵ Although at times difficult to hear,⁴⁶ these broadcasts purposefully maintained the ties across the empire and provided a sense of immediacy and belonging. Transmissions opened with the evocative chiming of Big Ben in the Clock Tower of the Houses of Parliament (London) and closed again with Big Ben and the National Anthem. Programs were compiled for the overseas audience and included news, current affairs, commercial and agricultural information, drama, light entertainment and music provided by the BBC Empire Orchestra. There was also a strong propagandist element to the broadcasts in the 1930s with international tensions building.⁴⁷ The BBC programs were well-received in Australia. In 1931 Prime Minister Joe Lyons urged Australians "to tune in with Britain, a slogan which neatly deployed the new language of radio in the Imperial cause".⁴⁸

Royalty was an ideal subject for these broadcasts. Australians were able to hear the voice of King George V on his accession and in Christmas messages. It was also the medium through which South Australians heard the news of the abdication of Edward VIII on 11 December 1936. He had made a favourable impression on Australians when he visited in 1920.⁴⁹ Royal visits to Australia had become more frequent:

39. William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co., 2006), 315.

40. Martin Kitchen, *The British Empire and Commonwealth*, 82.

41. William Roger Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism*, 974.

42. Percy F. Roe, *How is the Empire?*, 24.

43. Percy F. Roe, *How is the Empire?*, 24.

44. The Qantas Empire Airways had commenced operations in 1934 and by 1936 two services a week made the long trip to Australia. The Most Honourable The Marquess of Londonderry, *Airways of the Empire: their history and development*. Cust Foundation Lecture 1936. (Nottingham: University College, Nottingham, 1936).

45. *The Empire Broadcasting Service* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1936).

46. Kenneth Stanley Inglis, *London Calling: the empire of the airwaves* (London: Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, King's College London, 2000).

47. These broadcasts were designed to counter German and Italian programs. With the Munich crisis of 1938 the BBC's broadcasts became a rehearsal for the wartime programs that were soon to follow. Kenneth Stanley Inglis, *London Calling: the empire of the airwaves* (London: Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, King's College London, 2000).

48. John Rickard, "Loyalties", 51. Joe Lyons was the Prime Minister of Australia between 1932 and 1939.

49. Philip W. Pike, *The Royal Presence in Australia 1867-1986* (Adelaide: Royalty Publishing, 1986).

the young Prince of Wales in 1920, the Yorks in 1927 (when they inaugurated Canberra) and the Gloucesters in 1934. Such tours had become the focal point of large public celebration usually involving children and were epic presentations of the Imperial link.⁵⁰ Public celebrations could take a range of forms including massed concerts, tableaux and pageants.

Pageants

Pageants are a universally popular form of public theatre that has been “rooted in the hearts of English speaking peoples from very early times.”⁵¹ Pageants are now understood to be an elaborate, colourful parades or displays that portray historical events and generally involve rich costuming. The tradition dates back to medieval England and the term originally referred to the stationary platforms arranged in a narrative sequence that presented biblical scenes or tableaux. The term came to be applied to the play itself that became part of English popular theatre. Often amateurs in villages or towns would create pageants of local and national theatre and these pageants were designed to be educative and enjoyable. In 1936 a local Adelaide newspaper informed the readers that, “in Horace’s phrase, the object of drama, of which pageantry is a branch, is to give instruction and pleasure. Part of the appeal of pageantry undoubtedly rests upon its practical value.”⁵²

The notion of a large historical pageant was not a new idea. One of the most spectacular and well-reported occurred in 1924 when there was a huge Pageant of Empire in London for the British Empire Exhibition (1924-1925) which was described in a South Australian newspaper as a “representation in miniature of the greatest political entity of our time ... the British Commonwealth of Nations.”⁵³ There was a

detailed description of the pageant which was be a visual representation of the Empire including “the activities of some of our great forefathers ... our great dominions overseas, and episodes of stirring interest in the history of our country.”⁵⁴ This cavalcade was performed between July 21 and August 30 1924 and had a cast of 15,000 people, 300 horses, 500 donkeys, 730 camels, 72 monkeys, 1000 doves, seven elephants, three bears and one macaw.⁵⁵ The pageant began with the Tudors and culminated in a “Pageant of Heroes” and “An Empire’s Thanksgiving” which celebrated the countries of the Empire, specifically South Africa, India, New Zealand and Australia.⁵⁶ The British Empire Exhibition that ran for two years “was intended to herald a great Imperial revival – in fact it was to prove an escapist delight from post-war gloom and retrenchment.”⁵⁷ The incredibly popular event was “a watershed of imperial propaganda” that presented the empire as a place of justice, progress and liberty.⁵⁸ Given the detailed reporting of this event in the local Adelaide papers, it is likely that this massive pageant influenced the designer of the Centenary Pageant of Empire. Further, staging a historical pageant was not in itself unusual in England or Australia, coming as they do from a long tradition of village fêtes and historical pageants that celebrated local and national history.⁵⁹

There had been large massed gatherings of school children to celebrate community

50. John Rickard, “Loyalties”, 49.

51. “A memorable spectacle,” *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

52. “A memorable spectacle,” *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

53. H.R.H. Prince Arthur of Connaught, “Pageant of Empire. Wembley’s Great Function”, *The Register* July 14 1924, 11.

54. Ibid.

55. Kenneth Walthew, “The British Empire Exhibition of 1924”, *History Today*, 31, no. 8, 1981, 34.

56. Pageant of Empire http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pageant_of_Empire accessed August 26 2012.

57. Kenneth Walthew, “The British Empire Exhibition of 1924”, 39.

58. David Simonelli, “[L]aughing nations of happy children who have never grown up”: Race, the Concept of Commonwealth and the 1924-1925 British Empire Exhibition”, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 10, no.1 (2009), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/.

59. Virginia Woolf set her novel *Between the Acts* in a small English village that was preparing and presenting an amateur historical pageant (Woolf, 1960). In June 2007 the author attended a local, amateur historical pageant that celebrated the centenary of the Hampstead Garden Suburb in London.

milestones in South Australia for many years. It was customary to greet visiting members of the British royal family with a demonstration, for example, in 1920 the Prince of Wales witnessed his symbol of three feathers created by hundreds of school children on the Adelaide Oval.⁶⁰ Smaller versions of pageants of empire were often produced by teachers and school children. These reflected the sentiments of the time, for example, one of the most inclusive of nations and peoples was *A Pageant of Empire. A Playlet for School or Home Performances* in which children of the Empire appear to British children George and Rosie at the behest of the Spirit of Empire.⁶¹ There is one song with verses for different children who include Kitty from Australia.⁶² Given the importance of trade within the empire, the text is all about what the people of the empire provide such as diamonds for Rosie's brooch and coffee for George. It is only at the end that Frank says that he is "jolly glad we've got to know some of our bothers and sisters from other lands aren't you?"⁶³ The Spirit of Empire then encourages all to cling together through good and ill, "Beneath one flag, one King"⁶⁴ This play for children embodied the messages of the 1924-1925 British Empire Exhibition.

Another pageant for schools *Motherland and Empire* includes such characters as Britannia, her court, heralds, King Alfred, Shakespeare, Sir Walter Raleigh and "Colonial Representatives – Canada,

Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand".⁶⁵ No evidence to date that this was performed in South Australia but tableaux of Britannia and her court had been a favourite performance item for Empire Day.

The South Australian Centenary and the Pageant of Empire

In South Australia most centenary celebrations were scheduled between June 1936 and March 1937. The official *Programme* did not claim to be encyclopaedic but contained more than two hundred events in both rural and metropolitan South Australia. Some were organised locally but others were national events hosted in South Australia such as the cricket Fourth Test Match England v. Australia and numerous conferences. Most towns held their own parades and pageants such as Mintaro, Angaston and Kangaroo Island. The events encompassed all sectors of society and social and sporting activities, such as an Amateur League Football Carnival, the S.A. Eisteddfod, and the Centennial Philatelic Exhibition). There were a range of pageants (for example, Air, Nautical, and Floral) and a number of events organised for children (for example, Centenary Boy Week, Girl Guides' Overseas and Interstate Camp, and a Boy Scouts' Corrobooree). In the initial programme there was advanced notice of a "School Children's Historical Pageant November 27" but this event grew in size and importance to become the Empire Pageant that was presented on two different days to accommodate demand.⁶⁶

The Education Department organised many events. All schools included centenary information in their curriculum and were supported by material in the *Education Gazette*. Large amounts of flowers were needed for the

60. Heather Bonin, *Hours to remember: Reflections of life in South Australia 1889-1292 from the Children's Hour* (Netley, South Australia: South Australian Government Printer, 1987).

61. Silvey A. Clarke and O.J. Janes, *A Pageant of Empire. A Playlet for School or Home Performances* (London: Samuel French, 1928).

62. The other children are Frank (New Zealand), Mafetari (New Zealand Maori), Dinah (West India), Lolya (Ceylon), Monya (Hindu), San Muan (Burma), Patrick (Ireland), Lullaway (Pacific Islands), Trapper (Canada) and unnamed protagonists identified as a Kaffir Chief, a Fisherman from Labrador, an Eskimo, and two boys (one from Borneo and the other from the Straits Settlements).

63. Silvey A. Clarke and O.J. Janes, *A Pageant of Empire. A Playlet for School or Home Performances* (London: Samuel French, 1928), 24.

64. Silvey A. Clarke and O.J. Janes, *A Pageant of Empire. A Playlet for School or Home Performance* (London: Samuel French, 1928), 24.

65. William John May and Orlando Augustine Mansfield, *Motherland and Empire. A pageant for schools* (London: W. Paxton, 1935).

66. State Centenary Committee, *Centenary of South Australia 1836-1936 Programme*.

Floral Pageant and children were enlisted to grow them.⁶⁷ There were tours and transport organised so that rural children could attend exhibitions in the city. The Education Department had a comprehensive display of school work as part of the South Australian Chamber of Manufacturers Centennial Exhibition.⁶⁸ It was not until June 1936 that the plans were announced for the Children's Centenary Demonstration to be held at the Adelaide Oval on 27 and 28 November. Ostensibly this delay was intended to give priority to other events but there had been some uncertainty about access to the Oval.⁶⁹ The Director of Education appointed Miss Inspector Adelaide L. Miethke, B.A., as the designer of the pageant "on the lines of that given in honour of the visit of H.R.H. the Duke of Gloucester". Her role expanded to be that designer, producer, director and organiser. Having appointed Miethke, the Director of Education left for an overseas trip.⁷⁰ The indomitable and indefatigable Adelaide Miethke (1881-1962) was a good choice. She was a feminist, social activist and peace activist. In 1924 she was appointed the first female inspector of high schools. Her stentorian voice was well known and considered to be ideal for rallying the 13,000 or more schoolchildren involved in the pageant.⁷¹

An extensive pageant organising committee was appointed that included the Superintendents

of Primary and Secondary Education, the Chief Inspector, and a number of other Inspectors. In addition there were sub-committees for the programme, the grounds, accommodation and so forth. Miethke also formed her own smaller organising committee to assist with the preparations.⁷² The members of this group were mostly ex-teachers who gave their services voluntarily.⁷³ Miethke and her inner circle of women established what was effectively a command centre in the basement of the Education Building. A journalist described it as:

*a cavern in which every conceivable color [sic] and shade glowed from specimen costumes hanging on the walls and huge rolls of material, paper and other substances used in the making of the costumes lying in profusion on long trestle tables. There was a disordered fairyland atmosphere about the basement. But in the midst of it all the work of preparing the pageant went on most efficiently. The telephone rang constantly, bringing with each ring a different inquiry which was given prompt attention. Mothers came in for more material, small boys approached rather shyly with a note from a teacher clutched tightly in a hand that one suspected the owner had been made to scrub for the occasion. Teacher wanted to know this, teacher wanted to know that, about the pageant. Teacher was told. In a day there was literally a thousand and one inquiries.*⁷⁴

The program

The Demonstration was to take the form of a symbolic Pageant of Empire, depicting development from the Tudor period to the present time. The special characteristics of the various scenes were to be enacted by "constantly changing masses of colour, dance and movement, the whole comprising a gigantic and

67 "Centenary Floral Festival, September 17-28, 1936", *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, February 15 1936, LII, no.595, 71.

68 "Education Department's Centenary Exhibit. Centennial Exhibition, 1936", *Education Gazette, South Australia*, April 15 1936, LII, no.597, 118-122.

69. After intervention by the Premier (The Hon. R. L. Butler), and the State Organizing Director of the S.A. Centenary celebrations (Mr. Victor H. Ryan), and by the courtesy and generosity of the South Australian Cricket Association, the Adelaide Oval was made available. "Centenary Notices", *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.599, 163.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Suzanne Edgar and Helen Jones, "Miethke, Adelaide Laetitia (1881-1962)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.edu.au/biography/miethke-adelaide-laetitia-7571/text13215> accessed August 26 2012. John Healey, ed., *S.A.'s greats: the men and women of the North Terrace plaques* (Adelaide: Historical Society of South Australia).

72. Her chief assistants were Miss May Cleggett and Messrs. Rolf Simon and Jack Whitburn. "Youth Adds Quota to Centennial Pageantry", *The Mail*, November 21 1936, 15.

73. Misses L. Lamb, A. Espie, and M. E. Miethke, and Messrs. R. L. Bromley, J. I. Fairweather, S. L. Copley, and A. Gow.

74. "Youth Adds Quota to Centennial Pageantry", *The Mail*, November 21 1936, 15.

unique performance."⁷⁵ The Pageant was divided into five sections, preceded by the honour guard of Yeomen of the Guard and Grenadier Guards. The five acts represented the British Isles, Canada, India and Australia, followed by a tableau of Britannia and her people. The culmination had every child on the oval. Each scene had various elements with dances and dramatic episodes. The pageant was the culmination of months of work. Contemporary opinion recognised the size of the mammoth task. The report asked,

if one tries to estimate ... the number of girls needed to form a huge Scotch thistle and later a circle of a certain size around Britannia, multiplies it by the number of scenes, and adds the planning of position around the oval, one has some slight idea of the organization necessary for just one part of the display.⁷⁶

Designing and making the costumes

Miethke designed all the costumes and made prototypes to test colour effects and estimate the materials needed for each pattern. She then created patterns and illustrations, and purchased all the necessary fabric. This was then parcelled out to schools and parent committees were formed for sewing and making. Ultimately an estimated six hundred people were involved in the costumes committees, but the numbers actually making them would have been far higher.⁷⁷ A journalist reported that, "at least 700 mothers have been working in every spare minute – and in some they couldn't spare – for many months in making the dresses that adorn the natural good looks and physique of the children."⁷⁸ The costumes were made of fabric

and crêpe paper.⁷⁹ For example, the English Roses had green bodices with a rose pink petal skirt, the Welsh Daffodils were dressed in pale green with a yellow headdress, the Scottish Thistles had royal blue and purple skirts, green bodices and a thistle hat, and the Irish Shamrocks wore scarlet skirts with emerald green shamrock shaped overdresses and a shamrock hat (see Figure 1).⁸⁰

Helen Storer was cast as a Scotch thistle and recalled that:

*our Mothers were issued with a piece of purple cotton material – my mother thought it was to make a pair of bloomers, but fortunately hadn't touched it when she was invited to a meeting to receive instructions. It was to be either a skirt or a slip. I know it was under lots of purple and green strips of crêpe paper, but I have no memory of what covered our chests and can only feel it must have been also part of the material. Our hats were grand affairs almost scotch thistle flowers made of the same crêpe paper.*⁸¹

Molly Black was photographed in her costume as a thistle and remembered that the crêpe paper was awful (see Figure 2).

All the material for the costumes was supplied by the Education Department and, with the exception of the soldiers' uniforms, made by school committees, usually consisting of the parents of the children taking part. The number of hours of work that went into the making of the costumes is impossible to assess⁸² and the number required was staggering. For example there were 540 boy grenadiers wearing scarlet jackets and busbies, 100 yeomen of the guard,

75. "Centenary Notices", *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.599, 163.

76. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12.

77. "Centenary Notices", *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.599, 164.

78. "Youth Adds Quota to Centennial Pageantry", *The Mail*, November 21 1936, 15.

79. Crêpe paper is tissue paper that has been coated with sizing and then creased to create gathers. It has greater strength and can be stretched to create different shapes. It has long been a staple element in children's theatrical costumes.

80. South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 28.

81. Private communication, Helen Storer, October 15 2011.

82. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11.

Figure 1: Photographs of the costumes for the English rose, Welsh daffodil, Scottish thistle and Irish Shamrock from the Souvenir South Australian Education Department Pageant.



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 28.

200 Canadian 'Indians', an Indian Rajah and his attendants who were greeted by 640 Eastern dancing girls and the Centenary Message was accompanied by 900 Wattle Blossoms. After the pageant the costumes remained the property of the children, and it was anticipated that "mimic battles will continue to be waged throughout the school holidays, while the Red Indian outfits will be prized possessions for a long time to come"⁸³ The ornate costumes for the Yeomen included red braided jackets, knee breeches trimmed with rosettes, white gloves, black hats with a garland of roses, carrying a halberd and "extremely realistic" fake beards.⁸⁴

Figure 2: Molly Black dressed as a thistle.

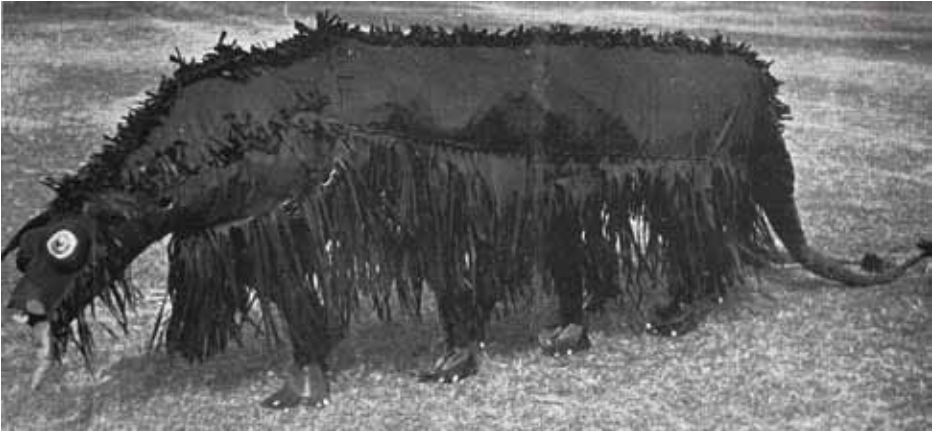


Photograph and personal communication from Di Barrie, the daughter of Molly Black.

83. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11.

84. "Children Magnificent in Pageant of Empire," *The Mail*, November 28 1936, 1. A halberd was a long handled spear with an axe blade, used as a weapon in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Figure 3: Photograph of the Bunyip.



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 18.

The props

As well as the costumes there were the properties and staging to be designed and constructed. Britannia called her people while seated on a dais on the back of a small truck that was draped in a large flag. Above her head was a flagpole with radiating arms from which flags could be unfurled. In her hands were a trident and a shield also decorated with the Union Jack. The audiences were intrigued by the ingenuity of the designs. In the Australian scene small clumps of gum trees (one child in each) were scattered across the oval. A large bunyip entered to disrupt the community.⁸⁵ The creature was described as “a ferocious black beast with a big red tongue”⁸⁶ and appears to have been created of crêpe paper over a frame. Inside were four children, evidenced by four pairs of feet (see Figure 3).

The most spectacular costume constructed was that of a full-size elephant (see Figure 4). One reporter asked, “How does one make an elephant,

strong enough to bear a canopy and a young Rajah?”⁸⁷ Evidently the elephant was a remarkably realistic cloth-covered frame in which two tall adults walked, one as the forelegs, the other the hind legs. Seated in the small howdah on its back was a small boy dressed as a rajah. Attendants walked beside the animal to guide and steady it.⁸⁸ The performers inside the elephant “Mr. T. S. Bennett and Mr. F. H. Harvie – two tall masters from the Thebarton Technical School, prayed for fresh air. They said afterwards that they were glad that their part was over. It was warm work.”⁸⁹ The elephant was described as “walking with a ponderously realistic stride and absurdly flicking tail, but when it halted in the middle of the arena it was assisted to remain stable by means of poles, placed by its attendants, while the wind played tricks with its contours.”⁹⁰

87. “The Children’s Pageant of Empire,” *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 13.

88. South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936).

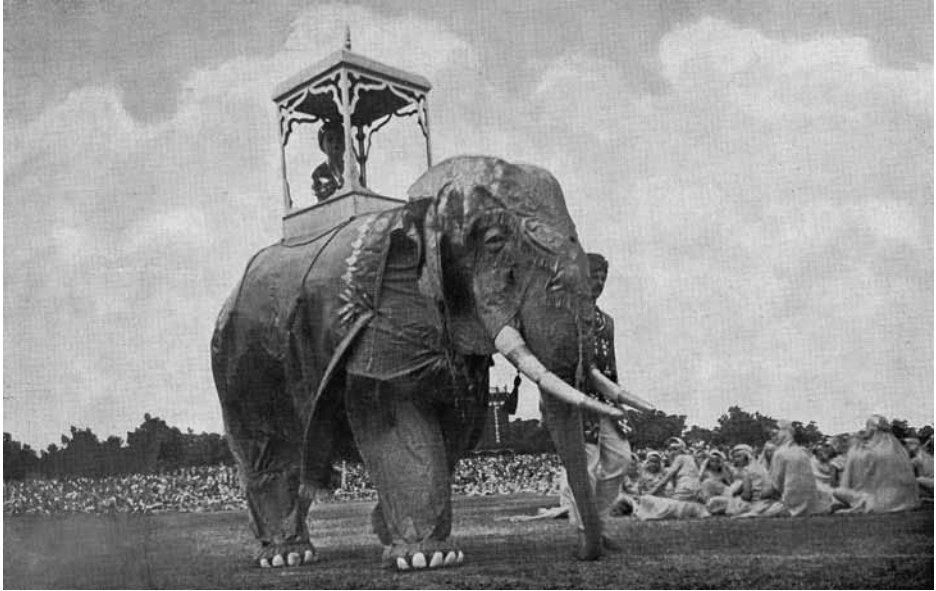
89. “Children Magnificent in Pageant of Empire,” *The Mail*, November 28 1936, 1.

90. “Children Magnificent in Pageant of Empire,” *The Mail*, November 28 1936, 1.

85. The bunyip is a large mythical creature from Aboriginal mythology.

86. “The Children’s Pageant of Empire,” *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12.

Figure 4: Photograph of the Elephant.



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 16.

The music

The Thebarton Municipal Band, under Mr. Dave Hopkins, supplied the music. Hopkins arranged much of the music and adapted some of it from phonograph records.⁹¹ He had been the conductor of the band since at least 1928.⁹² Miethke and Hopkins had worked together before on other civic events.⁹³ It has been difficult to identify which specific pieces of music were used. Only one work is mentioned by name. Accompanying the State's Centenary message was the hymn "Oh God, our Help in Ages Past".⁹⁴

91. "Final Plans for Children's Empire Pageant," *The Advertiser*, November 24, 1936, 23.

92. "Tanunda Band Competitions," *The Advertiser*, October 30 1928, 14.

93. For example the welcome to the Chief Guide in 1931. "Japanese Emperor Helps Flood Sufferers," *Advertiser and Register*, August 24 1931, 8.

94. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12. The hymn "Our God, our help in ages past" has words by Isaac Watts (1719) and the tune was St Anne by William Croft (1708).

It is not clear if the hymn was sung or by whom. There is no mention of a choir being present – it may be that the audience spontaneously joined in the singing of the well-known piece. There had been a large children's choir in the 1927 farewell to the Vice-Regal couple, the Governor-General and Lady Stonehaven. The choir's performance was reported in great detail in the press and it would be expected that, if such a choir had performed in the 1936 event, they would have been similarly reviewed.⁹⁵

It is possible to suggest some of the music that might have accompanied the dancing and the tableaux. The school children of South Australia were familiar with a repertoire that included many potentially suitable British songs. In 1937 F.L. Gratton, the Supervisor of Music

95. "Second Schools' Concert. Honours to Vice-Royalty. The Children's Welcome and Farewell," *The Register*, September 26 1927, 12.

published a revised edition of *School Music*⁹⁶ in which he recommended several texts, including *The Adelaide School Vocalist*,⁹⁷ *The Patriotic Song Book*,⁹⁸ Novello's *Pocket Sing-song Book*⁹⁹ and *The Oxford Song Book*.¹⁰⁰ Gratton also listed *Australian Bush Songs*.¹⁰¹ This repertoire included songs such as "The Dear Little Shamrock", an Irish Air, and "Scots, Wha Hae" that might have accompanied the dancing shamrocks and thistles respectively. Marches more appropriate for the militaristic sections were included in Gratton's locally produced music resources. For example, his *School Fife Tutor* included "Rule Britannia", "The Union Jack of Old England", "The Red, White and Blue", and "The British Grenadiers" that might have been used for the grenadiers and yeoman.¹⁰² Photographs show that both grenadiers and yeoman were led by uniformed drummers.¹⁰³ "God save the King" would have been sung and there was also the South Australian version of a national anthem "The Song of Australia" for the entry of the boys in Australian Khaki.¹⁰⁴ Gratton's earlier *School Band Primer* also included suitable songs such as "Australia will be there"¹⁰⁵ and the "Adelaide March".¹⁰⁶ Appropriate songs from

Australian Bush Songs might have been used to accompany the Australian scene, such as "Kangaroo Song" and "Corroboree".¹⁰⁷ Another source for possible repertoire choices is the annual massed public schools choir concert, known as the "Thousand Voices". Each year the program included songs that many children would have known and would have made suitable choices for different sections of the Pageant of Empire. In 1931 the songs included "The Yeomen of England", in 1932 there was "Up from Somerset (to see the Great Review)", and in 1935 "Comrades in Arms" and "The Floral Dance". All concerts ended with "God Save the King".¹⁰⁸ These suggestions remain conjecture but it is likely that such songs were used to accompany marching and dancing, and entrances and exits.

The choreography

All the costumes and scenes, except three dances, were the work of Miethke. Once arranged, teachers attended meetings at which the details of the drills and dances were explained so that they could train the children in their respective schools.¹⁰⁹ Some of the dances were traditional national dances such as those for England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales. Helen Storer performed as a Thistle in the Pageant and recalled that, "I was a student in grade 4 at Highgate Primary School where our class, girls, were taught to dance the Highland Fling to represent Scotland".¹¹⁰ After the Thistles came the Roses of England, the Daffodils of Wales, the Thistles of Scotland, and the Shamrocks of Ireland, all dancing with no less precision to national airs.¹¹¹

96. Francis Lymer Gratton, *School Music*, revised ed. (Adelaide: Education Department, South Australia, 1937).

97. Francis Lymer Gratton, *The Adelaide School Vocalist*, (Adelaide: E.S. Wigg & Son, n.d.)

98. Charles Villiers Stanford, *Patriotic songs for schools*, (London: National Society's Depository, 1980).

99. *Pocket Sing-song book for schools, homes, and community singing* (London: Novello and Co., n.d.).

100. Buck, Percy, *The Oxford Song Book* (London: Oxford University Press, 1919).

101. Annie R. Rentoul and Georgette Peterson, *Australian Bush Songs* (Melbourne: Allan & Co., 1936).

102. Francis Lymer Gratton, *School Fife Tutor* (Adelaide: Allans Music (Australia), n.d.)

103. "Memorable Centenary Display on Adelaide Oval by 13,000," *Chronicle*, December 3 1936, 35.

104. "The Song of Australia" was composed by Carl Linger to words by Mrs. Caroline Carleton in 1859 and, from that time, became a virtual national anthem for all South Australian public functions. H. Brewster Jones, "The Carl Linger Memorial," *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.596, 89.

105. Skipper Francis, *Australia will be there* (Melbourne: Allan and Co., 1927?).

106. Francis Lymer Gratton, *School Band Primer* (Adelaide: R. Correll, n.d.). "Adelaide. March in Eb (op. 27)" was composed by George Robertson, c1880.

107. Rentoul and Peterson, *Australian Bush Songs*, passim.

108. Decoration Society's Concerts Programme, 1931, 1932, and 1935, passim.

109. "Centenary Notices. Children's Centenary Demonstration," *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.600, 180.

110. Private communication, Helen Storer, October 15 2011..

111. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11.

Logistics

Occasional notices and updates for the event appeared in the *Education Gazette* and give an idea of the scope of the undertaking. A special holiday was announced for Friday 27 November for all metropolitan schools and those country schools who wished to attend the event and could do so without additional school time for travelling. It was pointed out that country schools would have to pay admission. An additional holiday was given to all participating schools on Monday November 28, presumably in lieu of the Saturday performance. Metropolitan schools were not to arrange any other special activities for the whole week as teachers and pupils “will be fully occupied with rehearsals and general pageant requirements”¹¹² An extensive organisational structure was put in place to work with Miethke.¹¹³ As the plans progressed the organization expanded to include a Transport Committee.¹¹⁴ Apparently all worked with enthusiasm on their various tasks. Initially the main concern was to organize and distribute materials for the costumes. The parents were hard at work making the costumes. At the same time, teachers were informed of what was required of their charges and began to drill the children in their parts. The Instructors reported that Heads of schools and departments were giving them all possible assistance.¹¹⁵

As the scope of the event grew, it was decided that, to avoid overcrowding the pageant would be performed twice. In addition it was decided to charge for admission to defray the expenses.

So many applications for complementary tickets were received from parents and helpers that those in charge felt it necessary to explain why. There were more than 13,000 children performing so that if every parent was given a ticket (assuming each child had two parents) that would total 26,000 tickets. It was not only parents who had helped make the costumes – other relatives and friends had contributed to the making including at least 600 official members of costume committees. Many teachers would also be entitled to complementary tickets, having given time and effort in teaching the children their parts. If all these tickets were given away, there would be few places for the general public. It was also pointed out that all the children were being given their costumes with no charge for the fabric and that this needed to be recouped in some way. Finally, the pageant was a public performance and the seating stands at the oval must be open to the general public according to the constitution of the South Australian Cricket Association.¹¹⁶ This decision was final and the explanation seemed to have settled the matter. Although all reserved seats (price 5 shillings) had been sold by November 24 it was anticipated that there would ample room for those who pay cash at the turnstiles. Admission to the ground was one shilling with an extra one shilling for the stands.¹¹⁷

Final rehearsals

Once the teachers had trained the children in their various schools, the final week was reserved for sectional and then full dress rehearsals on the oval. In the week of the performance there were rehearsals on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday that were scheduled with great precision – there were a lot of children and a lot of scenes. Given

112. “Centenary Notices. Children’s Centenary Demonstration”, *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.600, 180.

113. There were a number of committees and subcommittees including an Executive Committee, Instructors’ Committee, Consultative Programme Committee, Grounds Committee, Accommodation Committee, Treasurer and Minute Secretary. “Centenary Notices”, *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.599, 164.

114. “Centenary Notices. Children’s Centenary Demonstration”, *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.600, 180.

115. “Centenary Notices. Children’s Centenary Demonstration”, *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.600, 180.

116. “Centenary Notices. Children’s Centenary Demonstration. No reserves for parents and helpers”, *The Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.600, 240.

117. “Final Plans for Children’s Empire Pageant”, *The Advertiser*, November 24, 1936, 23.

the large numbers involved the Municipal Tramways Trust and the Railways Department were cooperating. On Tuesday the fourth and last sectional rehearsal was held on the Adelaide Oval. The schedule was: "Khaki lads (9.15am), Cross of Sacrifice (10.15am), Years 1836-1936 (11am), Australia's response to the Call of Empire (11.30am to noon), Yeoman of the Guard (1pm), and India (2.30pm)".¹¹⁸ These items formed about a quarter of the whole program that was to be rehearsed the next day. At this final rehearsal the timing of each segment was to be checked as it was hoped that the pageant would take three hours to perform in entirety. For each rehearsal and performance children were expected to bring their lunch.¹¹⁹ Water was available. Helen Storer recalled that they practised for months, it was very hot, and they took their own lunches.¹²⁰ The performances were scheduled to begin at 2pm on Friday and 2.30pm on Saturday. Children were to be at the oval at noon and were to assemble on the Neutral Ground behind the oval. This functioned as a back stage waiting area where they remained until their section of the pageant.¹²¹ My mother and her friends remember sitting around a lot.¹²² Once the children were on the oval they were to remain there for the finale in which everyone took part. For the purposes of supervision the children were divided into sixteen sectors each overseen by a team consisting of a headmaster, a headmistress and an infant mistress. It was reported that the "lighter side of the pageant was seen on the assembly grounds behind the Oval, where despite the heat... the irrepressible youngsters played cricket with their mimic rifles, bushrangers and Red Indians,

and stage realistic battles" which was seen as a demonstration of the "vitality of the Australian youngster".¹²³ A teacher amused a cluster of wattle blossoms occupied with a "fairy story to keep them quiet until their turn came to go on the oval".¹²⁴ Other children practised their steps and repaired costumes while they waited.¹²⁵

Amplifiers were installed so that the commentary of the pageant by the Superintendent of Primary Education could be heard.¹²⁶ The head of the medical branch of the Education Department (Dr. W. Christie) was in charge of the first aid work, cooperating with the St. John Ambulance Brigade.¹²⁷ This turned out to be very necessary. The day of the first performance the temperature was over 103 degrees. One interstate newspaper noted that while "the temperature soared ... the children worked through a gruelling programme with barely a hitch. Many collapsed, however, and ambulance officers, who were called on to treat 1,200 casualties, were rarely off the arena".¹²⁸ Helen Storer recalled her part in the performance: "we sat around the edge of the oval, I presume inside the picket fence, but don't remember seeing any of the other dances, but we sat on the lawn with no protection from the sun. I was rather badly sun burned so could not attend on the second day".¹²⁹ Probably the youngest child in the pageant played a Snowflake and, although she was too young to remember much about the performance she does remember that it was "very hot and I think we sat sometimes, [we were] not in action all the time ... I wouldn't be surprised if some children fainted in the heat ...

118. "Final Plans for Children's Empire Pageant," *The Advertiser*, November 24, 1936, 23.

119. "Final Plans for Children's Empire Pageant," *The Advertiser*, November 24, 1936, 23.

120. Private communication, Helen Storer, October 15 2011.

121. "Final Plans for Children's Empire Pageant," *The Advertiser*, November 24, 1936, 23.

122. Interview with Heather Joyce Southcott (née Miller), November 12 2011.

123. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December, 1936, 12.

124. "Behind The Scenes at Pageant," *The Mail*, November 28, 1936, 1.

125. *Ibid.*

126. "Final Plans for Children's Empire Pageant," *The Advertiser*, November 24, 1936, 23.

127. "Final Plans for Children's Empire Pageant," *The Advertiser*, November 24, 1936, 23.

128. "Children in Pageant," *The Argus*, November 28 1936, 20.

129. Private communication, Helen Storer, October 15 2011.

my nose bled ... we sat on the grass quite a lot of the time ... I think we must have got changed at the school and were transported by buses after that".¹³⁰ The second day was cooler so there were fewer collapses – about 130 children and spectators fainted as opposed to 950 on the first day. Only 200 children did not return for the second performance.¹³¹

The Pageant

The pageant began very formally with a Guard of Honor for His Excellency the Governor (Sir Winston Dugan) and Lady Dugan who were met at the eastern gate of the oval by the Premier (Mr. Butler), the Minister of Education (Mr. Jeffries), and the Director of Education (Mr. Adey). The men all wore morning suits and top hats. The 100 Yeomen of the Guard and the 560 Grenadier Guards, led by drummers,¹³² were described as a "well-drilled band of youngsters, marching and manoeuvring with true military precision".¹³³ The drilling included evolutions (military formations) such as a square that surrounded dummy guns and drummers.¹³⁴ The Grenadier Guards marched in a long column with "rifles precisely sloped and drew up in double rank across the arena, to form a guard of honour with the Yeomen."¹³⁵ They were formally inspected by the official party.¹³⁶

After the boys left the oval, the first section, the British Isles began. Within this there were four scenes that began with England represented by

1,100 English roses who formed large concentric circles surrounded by smaller circles of 24 girls. The roses were replaced by 642 daffodils in sixteen columns. These in turn were replaced with 1,140 Scotch thistles and the final group were 1,150 Irish shamrocks. Eventually all four flower groups returned to the oval and formed concentric circles of shamrocks, thistles, daffodils and, on the outside, roses.¹³⁷ Each flower group danced traditional dances to national airs.

Contemporary reports describe precise dancing with children "forming into flower beds, fluttering like a garden when the wind blows across it. The Daffodils, with their straight-hanging petalled frocks and their trumpet headdresses, were particularly effective, and one found it hard to realise that they really were children, and not suddenly animated flowers".¹³⁸

The second act presented iconic Canadian images. It began with 200 boys dressed as young native Canadians described as "Braves on the Trail, when Red Fox hunted Grey Wolf (see Figure 5 Canadian "brave"). It was just a gigantic game of Red Indians, with many war whoops, much running, falling down, and squirming along the ground, but all done in perfect unison to the steady beat of the drums".¹³⁹ Following the braves, "hundreds of girls with huge autumn leaves on their backs expressed the fall of the leaf. As a giant ballet, this scene was unequalled in the pageant – the wind-blown leaves scattering and falling to the ground, the covering of snowflakes, and the emergence of Spring and fluttering green leaves".¹⁴⁰ The red leaves sank to the ground and then "rose again in the green of bursting

130. Interview with Helen Byrne (née Cornish), November 12 2011.

Helen had been admitted to school early and was aged 4 years and 10 months.

131. "Children Magnificent in Pageant of Empire," *The Mail*, November 28 1936, 1.

132. "Memorable Centenary Display on Adelaide Oval by 13,000," *Chronicle*, December 3 1936, 35.

133. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11.

134. "Memorable Centenary Display on Adelaide Oval by 13,000," *Chronicle*, December 3 1936, 35.

135. "Children Magnificent in Pageant of Empire," *The Mail*, November 28 1936, 1.

136. "Final Plans for Children's Empire Pageant," *The Advertiser*, November 24, 1936, 23.

137. South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936).

138. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December, 1936, 11.

139. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11.

140. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11.

Figure 5: Photograph of Canadian braves running onto the oval.



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 12.

spring"¹⁴¹ In total there were 1,1000 Maple leaves and 1,500 snowflakes, the latter being portrayed by the youngest children dressed in lightweight white satin (see Figure 6). They were admired for their "wonderful sense of rhythm, and not even the youngest taking part in the pageant (the youngest was, I believe, a snowflake aged four) once lost the beat of the music"¹⁴²

The third act began with 640 Indian dancing girls entered in rows made a sixteen-rayed star with forty girls in each ray. South Australian music educator Patricia L. Holmes was in Grade 6 at Rose Park Primary School and was one of the Indian dancing girls who were apparently selected because they had some dancing skills.¹⁴³ The dancing girls, dressed in salmon pinks, blues, greens and mauves, heralded the arrival of the "gorgeously-attired" Rajahs and their attendants

Figure 6: Photograph of a Snowflake.



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 17.

(see Figure 7).¹⁴⁴ The scene was described as one of "spectacular splendour".¹⁴⁵ Ultimately the scene was formed by 1,488 children who were joined by a mahout leading a full size elephant with a small rajah sitting under a canopy on its back.¹⁴⁶

After the exit of the Indian performers, the Australian act began with the "cackle of kookaburras through loud speakers. Boys in brown cylindrical costumes and hats of gum-

141. "Children Magnificent in Pageant of Empire," *The Mail*, November 28 1936, 1.

142. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12.

143. Interview with Patricia L. Holmes, September 27 1990.

144. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11; "Children in Pageant," *The Argus*, November 28 1936, 20.

145. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11.

146. South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936).

Figure 7: Photograph of Indian dancing girls.



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 12.

Figure 8: Heather Miller as a gumnut in family photograph.



tipped foliage dotted the oval giving it the appearance if the appearance of the Australian bush”.¹⁴⁷ A large kangaroo hopped among the trees pursued by a “horde of painted aborigines” who tracked and speared the kangaroo.¹⁴⁸ The “aborigines” held a corroboree which was interrupted by the entrance of the “ferocious” bunyip that chased the aborigines and the trees from the field.¹⁴⁹ Next came 900 wattle blossoms in gold and an equivalent number of gum blossoms in scarlet. My mother was a gum blossom (see Figure 8). She remembers sitting down a lot.¹⁵⁰

After the departure of the flowers, lines of 1,600 boys entered wearing large hoods of blue who formed an outline of the map of Australia, with State boundaries marked in yellow and capitals in orange (see Figure 9). At the Call to

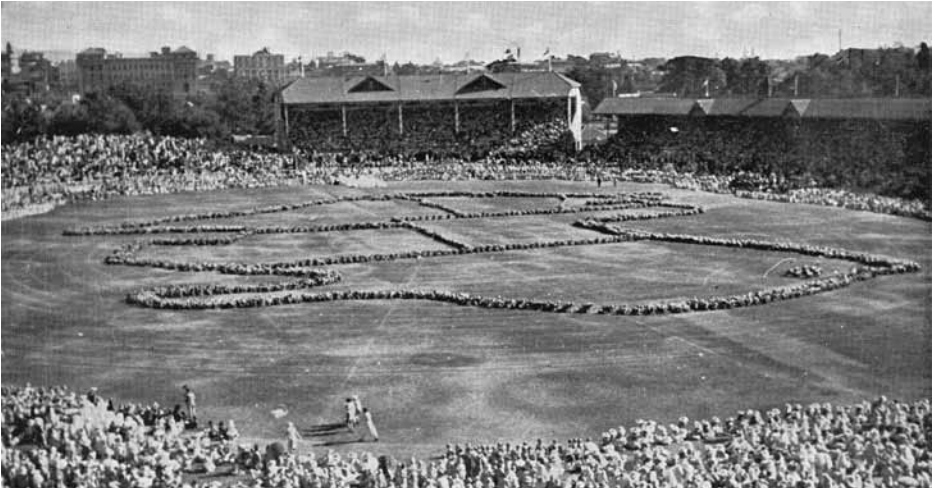
147. “Children in Pageant,” *The Argus*, November 28 1936, 20.

148. “Children in Pageant,” *The Argus*, November 28 1936, 20.

149. “The Children’s Pageant of Empire,” *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12.

150. Interview with Heather Joyce Southcott (née Miller), November 12 2011.

Figure 9: Photograph of Map of Australia formed by boys in Khaki.



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 22.

Arms (presumably a bugle call) the boys shed their hoods and revealed themselves in the khaki military uniforms of the A.I.F. [Australian Imperial Forces] as worn in 1914.¹⁵¹ Thus the boys represented the Anzac spirit which “was an unforgettable sight, but there was a prayer in many hearts that these lads would never be called upon to serve as did the men they honoured”¹⁵² The boys marched off and were replaced by 680 girls who formed a Cross of Sacrifice to represent the losses of the previous war. Next came the Centenary Message in which the girls formed the word “Peace”, the wattle

blossoms returned to form “1936” and the 1,100 roses formed “Goodwill”.¹⁵³

The final act, considered the most impressive and spectacular, began with the entrance of Britannia on the back of a truck draped in the Union Jack flag (see Figure 10). The truck was preceded by marching grenadiers. Britannia was seated and carried a shield emblazoned with the flag. In her other hand she carried a trident and wears a helmet on her head. Britannia was protected by an honour guard of four yeomen and the truck was flanked by marching lines of yeomen. Towering above her was a flagpole with five arms, each carrying a tightly rolled flag to be unfurled at the appropriate moment. Britannia then gestured to the diverse peoples of her Commonwealth of Nations. This scene was seen as best expressing the spirit of the pageant. Britannia called her people and in turn “England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, India, and Australia ... advanced and paid homage to the British flag. Last

151. “Children in Pageant,” *The Argus*, November 28 1936, 20. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was the name given to all-volunteer Australian Army forces dispatched to fight overseas during World War I and World War II.

152. “The Children’s Pageant of Empire,” *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12. ANZAC stood for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. In 1915 Australian and New Zealand soldiers formed part of an allied expedition that set out to capture the Gallipoli peninsula. The forces landed on Gallipoli on 25 April and met fierce resistance from the Ottoman Turkish defenders. Ultimately unsuccessful, the allied forces were evacuated at the end of 1915. Both sides sustained heavy casualties. The Gallipoli campaign became an important part of Australian and New Zealand identity.

153. South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936).

Figure 10: Photograph of Britannia.



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 25.

came the British and Australian soldiers, bearing Union Jacks – ‘To each its Flag: One Flag for All!’¹⁵⁴ The children in their groups formed concentric circles around Britannia that eventually filled the oval (see Figure 11). First came the English roses followed by different groups according to number with the larger groups towards the edge. The outside circle was formed by the boys in Australian army uniforms and the “Thin Red Line” of the Grenadiers.¹⁵⁵ Ultimately all 13,000 children “filled the sward with an ever moving mass of kaleidoscopic colour, which gyrated round a tableau of Britannia in the centre.”¹⁵⁶

154. “The Children’s Pageant of Empire,” *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12.

155. South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 27.

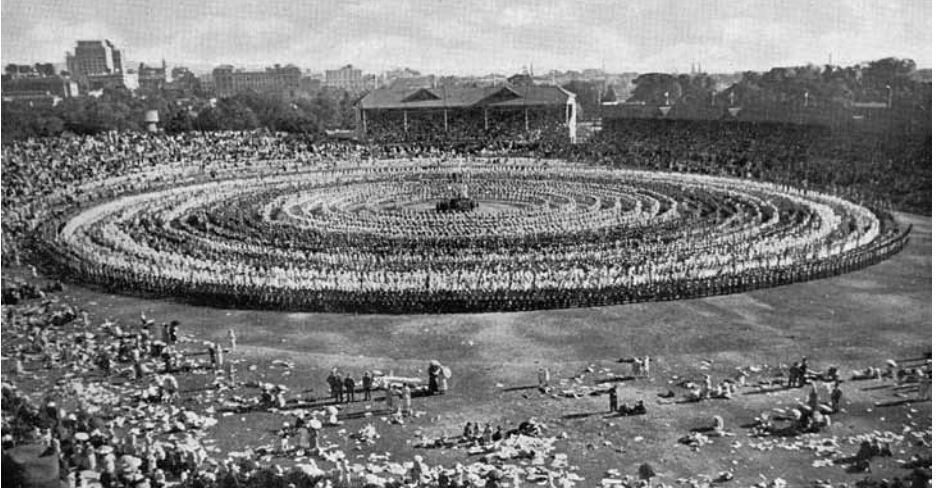
156. “Memorable Centenary Display on Adelaide Oval by 13,000,” *Chronicle*, December 3 1936, 34.

Responses to the pageant

Everyone was delighted and there was a lot of congratulating. Credit was given to all those who contributed beginning with Miethke. Her ability to oversee and envision the whole performance was lauded. It was asserted that, “no theme could have been more admirably suited to the occasion than that chosen by Miss Adelaide Miethke and it is difficult to imagine that any panorama of Empire could have been more artistically presented.”¹⁵⁷ Two months later Miethke was appointed as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (Civil) for her role as President of the South Australian Women’s Centenary Council,

157. “A memorable spectacle,” *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

Figure 11: Photograph of "One flag one nation".



South Australian Education Department. *Souvenir South Australian Education Department Empire Pageant*. (Adelaide: E. Hosking, 1936), 27.

particularly in organising the Pageant of Empire on November 27-28 1936.¹⁵⁸

It was widely recognised that Miethke was supported by hundreds of teachers who gave "their time and energies in willing training of the children, carrying out her ideas".¹⁵⁹ Formal letters of congratulations from the Governor and the Minister of Education were quoted in full in the *Education Gazette*.¹⁶⁰ The Governor thanked Miethke, her assistants, the children and all who took part. He also made special mention of the parents of the children. The Minister of Education similarly congratulated all on the "organization, good feeling, and happiness, as well as the magnificence of the spectacle, [that] were far

beyond my most sanguine expectations".¹⁶¹ He particularly identified the fine spirit of co-operation between all involved in organizing the event.

Many reports focused on the "rare beauty" of the spectacle itself,¹⁶² particularly the colour and movement. The "patient teaching of a small army of teachers" had brought forth the grace and beauty of the children.¹⁶³ The event was described as "living patterns of vivid colour"¹⁶⁴ and "an empire pageant full of almost riotous color [sic] and movement of the grace and beauty that is to be found only in children".¹⁶⁵ The drama of the event was noted, both in the various sections and in the overall effect. Superlatives were used frequently, for example, the "dramatic

158. Miethke retired in 1941 but continued to work with a number of organizations including the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the Schools Patriotic Fund of South Australia. Suzanne Edgar and Helen Jones, "Miethke, Adelaide Laetitia (1881-1962)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.edu.au/biography/miethke-adelaide-laetitia-7571/text13215> accessed August 26 2012.

159. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22; "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12.

160. "Centenary Notice. Children's Centenary Demonstration," *Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.605, 278.

161. "Centenary Notice. Children's Centenary Demonstration," *Education Gazette, South Australia*, LII, no.605, 278.

162. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

163. "Youth Adds Quota to Centennial Pageantry," *The Mail*, November 21 1936, 15.

164. "Children in Pageant," *The Argus*, November 28 1936, 20.

165. "Youth Adds Quota to Centennial Pageantry," *The Mail*, November 21 1936, 15.

effectiveness, glory of color [*sic*], and beauty of ensemble ... excelled all previous efforts" in South Australia.¹⁶⁶ Each tableau was an entrancing work of art and, "as a whole, the pageant achieved a harmony of ideas, forms and color [*sic*], which left an indelible impression on the minds of those who saw it".¹⁶⁷ Ultimately, the empire pageant was deemed to have left spectators with more delightful memories than any other of the State's centenary celebrations and spectacles.¹⁶⁸ It was also thought that the pageant would "linger even when the participants are themselves growing old".¹⁶⁹ It was envisaged that taking part in the pageant would have developed "a feeling for beauty, both among the children who formed tableaux, and among the spectators who were inspired by them".¹⁷⁰ It is questionable how much the children would have gained – those that have recounted their memories do not focus on the overall beauty but on their individual actions and costumes.

The pageant was deemed to have bettered the already high standard of such events in South Australia¹⁷¹ and future such events were anticipated.¹⁷² The response from the public had been overwhelming. Nearly 30,000 had attended on the first day, and a further 23,767 on the second. It was announced that in total 53,000 people paid for admission which was approximately 9% of the population.¹⁷³ Only the takings of £975 from the second day were announced¹⁷⁴ but it can be assumed that the preceding day had reaped even greater

rewards.¹⁷⁵ In a rough estimate, the total number of paying audience and children exceeded 66,300, and this did not include the officials, other performers and supervising teachers. It could be argued that approximately 12% of the population attended and many more would have been involved.

The published reports ranked the South Australian pageant as equal to any of its kind in the world.¹⁷⁶ This was confirmed by the opinions of "several visitors from overseas".¹⁷⁷ The ultimate opinion was that the event was a triumph of imagination and organization: "There is one thing which Adelaide is able to do really well, and that is to stage a children's display".¹⁷⁸ One member of the public was so delighted with the whole event that he wrote a Letter to the Editor of a daily newspaper. He stated that, "it is evident that South Australia can produce a form of pageantry unknown to the other States, and, from all accounts, unsurpassed in any part of the world". The pageant was, in his opinion, unique and he suggested that it be reproduced every five years. In this way Adelaide would become like Oberammergau where "thousands of world travellers flock ... to see the Passion Play".¹⁷⁹ Presumably he was not on the organizing committee.

The pageant was meant to instruct as well as entertain. The lesson of co-operation was clearly demonstrated and acknowledged but more importantly the event was intended to inculcate "a wider outlook".¹⁸⁰ The pageant was deemed to symbolise "the greatness and the vast extent of the empire",¹⁸¹ offering a "spectacular pastiche of

166. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

167. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

168. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

169. "Youth Adds Quota to Centennial Pageantry," *The Mail*, November 21 1936, 15.

170. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

171. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

172. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

173. "Memorable Centenary Display on Adelaide Oval by 13,000." *Chronicle*, December 3 1936, 34.

174. "Children Magnificent in Pageant of Empire," *The Mail*, November 28 1936, 1.

175. £975 in 1936 is equivalent to AUD\$84,284 in 2013.

176. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

177. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

178. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 12.

179. J.T. Ellis, "Suggested five-yearly production," *The Advertiser*, December 3, 1936, 26.

180. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

181. "A memorable spectacle," *The Advertiser*, December 1 1936, 22.

the nations".¹⁸² The children marched, danced and formed tableaux that offered "the huge crowd of spectators an unforgettable picture of Empire. And for the children themselves it was no less instructive and it was asserted that "no better way could have been found to impress on them the unity of the Empire of which their own State is a part! For them the State Centenary will be indissolubly linked with a never fading interest in the other dominions beyond the seas".¹⁸³

Discussion and conclusion

The South Australian centenary Pageant of Empire was a massive event that simultaneously celebrated several different ideas and understandings. The first was the celebration of one hundred years of "Anglo-Saxondom" in the south. Up until that time the colony/state had seen varying economic conditions, the most recent being the difficult years of the depression. By the mid 1930s circumstances were improving and at the local level the future looked promising. This envisaged future was positioned within the "wider outlook" of the British empire. Although the rhetoric spoke of a commonwealth of equal status, the understood and enacted reality was that Britannia was the center and called her peoples to her. In this the dual loyalty of Australians to both country and empire was evident. Australia was represented by stereotypical images. The first scene presented portrayed Indigenous Australians in an iconic imagining of identity that did had little to do with everyday life in Adelaide. More immediate were the scenes with the boys wearing the World War I uniforms of the Australian Imperial Forces. By the end of the war few Australian families were "untouched by the loss or injury of a loved one".¹⁸⁴

The Cross of Sacrifice formed by the girls would have been a poignant reminder of past loss and the centenary message of peace and goodwill would have resonated optimistically with the spectators.

The wider outlook of empire was portrayed in historical and iconic images. The grenadiers and yeomen offered a sense of being part of a British history that pre-dated the founding of South Australia. The Indian tableau harked to the pomp and circumstance of the durbars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were frequently described in local newspapers as scenes of glittering splendor "in cloth of gold, silk, brocades of brilliant hues, and headdresses sparkling with jewels".¹⁸⁵ Canada was portrayed more as scenes from a travelogue or movie with idealized native peoples, and seasonal autumn leaves and snow. The dramatic portrayal evoked stage presentations of Canada – the operetta "Rose Marie", set in the Canadian Rockies had played to packed houses in Adelaide in 1927.¹⁸⁶ Given the challenges of distance and speed of travel, it is understandable that public images of the empire would be stereotypical and might reference contemporary theatre and film.

The centenary pageant of empire employed these iconic images to remind the audience just what South Australia was part of – a nation and an empire. The images of the empire or commonwealth were evocative of earlier times and distant imagined places. Realistically, contemporary Canada or India would not have made such good theatre or been within the powers of thousands of school children wearing crêpe paper costumes on an oval in broad daylight to represent. There seems to have been a remembering of the past, almost as a refuge from the recent economic difficulties or the gathering storms of international politics. The South Australian pageant reflected how the audience

182. "Children in Pageant," *The Argus*, November 28 1936, 20.

183. "The Children's Pageant of Empire," *Progress in Australia*, December 1936, 11.

184. Imagining Australia Museum Victoria http://museumvictoria.com.au/edu_ww1/ accessed January 1 2013. An Indian durbar was a mass assembly to mark a coronation.

185. "Dream city of India," *The Mail*, April 2 1927, 10.

186. "Rose Marie," *The Advertiser*, August 27 1927, 17. "Rose Marie" is an operetta by Rudolf Friml and Herbert Stothart, premiered on Broadway in 1924.

wanted to see themselves – happy future citizens of a secure and long-lasting community. This belief in imperial unity became increasingly difficult to sustain in subsequent years.¹⁸⁷ The reality was that this understanding was untenable and such a celebration could not occur again. The Centenary Pageant of Empire was the last of its kind. There were no further such single-purpose massed children's performances staged in Adelaide. Within three years Australians were again at war and on February 15 1942 Singapore did fall, effectively ending the defence of the "Far Eastern empire". The Centenary Pageant of Empire was a last celebration of the past in the face of an uncertain future.

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