

REPORT ON APRIL DINNER

Mr Geoff Brownrigg: Australian Federation.

Geoff gave us a vivid description of the forces that moulded the character and culture of the Australian States, leading up to the achievement of Federation in 1901, and of the political/cultural climate that evolved to make this possible.

Being a man of obvious musical talent, Geoff based many of his examples around the development of Australian poetry, folksong and music in general. He began with the suggestion that the best known citizen of Australia in the nineteenth century was Nellie Melba, who was famous not only throughout Australia but also around the world. Music was so large a part of the Australian culture that by 1888, the year in which Melba first sang at Covent Garden in London, there were 700,000 pianos in Australia. Later, the fame of Florrie Forde in the early twentieth century was mentioned as the successor to Melba.

Geoff traced the beginnings of many popular songs, singing a few bars of many of them to refresh our memories, but between bars there was plenty of content that was relevant to the cultural and political development. On the political side, he mentioned the first proposal for a federal system, which came in the 1840s from Irish political prisoner Smith O'Brien, and the influence of Irish editors in Tasmanian newspapers. Another Federation-minded editor, John West, made his name in Launceston and later moved to Sydney to edit the Sydney Morning Herald.

The mingling of races also had its effect. There was a mixture of races in the first fleet, so Australia was never totally British, but the first major injection of other races came with the goldrushes of the 1850s, to be swelled again after World War II, almost a hundred years later.

The movement for women's liberation eventually became a political force. Here again, Melba was one of the early prime-movers. Sectarianism was another factor, Australia resisting attempts to establish a state religion as in Britain. Eventually a feeling of nationalism was developed. Citizens became tired of state divisions and ridiculous customs duties, illustrated by the lady at Corowa carrying a leg of mutton across the bridge between her knees to avoid customs duty. These imposts were felt most keenly along the Murray River, so it was no surprise that the first convention was held in 1893 at Corowa. A Constitutional Convention in 1897

produced the first draft of a constitution, which was put to the people, marking a world first. After some jockeying between the States, it reached its final form and was approved in 1899. Along the way, Geoff gave interesting insights into the personalities of some of the politicians who moulded the constitution, such as Barton, Deakin, Duffy and Garran. He concluded with the statement that History is what people make, story rather than history as we were taught at school.