

SEMAPHORE

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AUSTRALIA'S ABSENT MARITIME NATIONAL IDENTITY

The Australian national identity is immature when compared to most other nations. We are still a very young nation and struggle in all kinds of ways not only to understand our collective identity, but also what it is that we want that identity to be. This is exemplified in the changing concepts, ideas and values that Australian's have accepted as defining features of their culture over the years. These include the colonisation of Australia and the 'man versus nature' ethos, the notion of Australia as the 'child of Mother Britain', the bush myth, and the ANZAC legend, to mention only a few. A national identity is an important intertwining of past, present and future and comprises a myriad of images, feelings, collective and individual actions and responses, values, institutions, misconceptions and interactions with other nations. The confusion and ambivalence that is present in Australian society

unintentionally blur and distort the meaning and symbolisms of a nation's heritage, and thus its culture and definable identity.

Given that 'we', as in those who came in 1788 to colonise Australia, came by ship, and the greatest influence of our early beginnings came from the Royal Navy, one may be forgiven for assuming that Australia's national identity is largely supported by a significant attachment to, and affinity with, the sea. Moreover, all immigration came by sea until the late 1960s, and the focus of illegal immigration since the early 1970s has been on the arrival of 'boat people' from Vietnam and the Middle East. Since Federation almost seven million people have arrived in Australia, the majority by sea. The sea is a great deal more than a coastline and a beach for recreation, but a necessary part of life that supports trade, provides a variety of important resources and, for Australia, defines a unique strategic environment.

Take, for example, the mythology surrounding British penal colonisation, which has largely displaced a primary maritime strategic driver for the colony's creation. While the closing down of America as a penal destination as a result of the Revolutionary War (1776-1783) required a new focus for transportation, there were closer areas in the Empire to which convicts could be sent at far less cost. However, by the early 1780s Britain was also at war with France, Spain and Holland, all of which had a growing presence in the South Seas. 'Australia sat astride three great ocean basins – the Indian, Pacific and Southern – Australia was too large a land mass to ignore and would inevitably become of some strategic importance.'³ A port in Australia would provide a strategic location to replenish and refit Royal Navy ships operating against Britain's enemies in the south. Botany Bay presented a site protected by distance, and therefore relatively easily defended by a small naval and military presence. Convicts would provide a source of cheap labour to build the colony. Ancillary benefits of the new settlement would be the reduction of the overcrowded jails and hulks in Britain, and the opening of new sources of materials, such as timber and flax, on the southern continent.⁴

The early colonies had much to do with the sea, in particular for resources and trade. Stories of our early history are filled with evidence that the maritime and naval focus persisted, at least, within the more privileged members of the colony. Indeed, John Hunter, the second Governor of the Colony, began very early to build a 'Naval Department' and supplied the colony with many of its first vessels. However Phillip had left instructions that Hunter should under no circumstances allow any type of sea craft to be built for the use of individuals⁵. This might provide at least part of the puzzle as to why the majority of Australians even today understand very little about our maritime heritage and dependence, while the Government has focused to one degree or another since colonisation, on



The First Fleet 1788

today can possibly be attributed not only to our youth and relatively short history, but also to our incomplete understanding of the significance of our origins.

To adopt a truly meaningful and mature national identity for Australia, we must learn more from our unique heritage. Heritage is more than simply the preservation of the past (our 'official' history); it is 'profoundly symbolic: how and what we value in the past says something about how we see ourselves as a community today and how we project ourselves into the future'¹. That is, we are able to choose which aspects and lessons of our past we want to bring with us into the future. It is particularly important to note that while the notion of heritage is much more than a simple historical account, history provides a strong basis upon which our heritage is built. The collection of historical information itself, and the way it is conveyed (ie. the degree to which we suffer from 'historical amnesia'²), can



