

## THE AUSTRALIAN FLAG

A publication by Frank Cayley entitled *Beneath the Southern Cross* gives a view of Australian history through the development of flags. Flags were designed for all manner of reasons and causes including political parties, unions, religious organizations, the armed forces and even businesses.

The first flag to be flown on Australian soil was in 1642 by the Dutchman, Abel Tasman, on the south east coast of Tasmania. He claimed the island for the Dutch and named it Van Diemen's Land. Prior to that, other Dutch explorers had sailed into Australian waters, William Jansz in 1606 and Dirck Hartog in 1616, but sailed away without planting a flag. William Dampier sighted the west coast in 1699 and the French had also shown some interest. Until Captain James Cook raised the Union Jack at Botany Bay in 1770, the mainland of our vast continent had remained unclaimed. It was perhaps fortunate that neither the French nor the Dutch pressed any claims or the ownership of Australia may have been fiercely disputed.

On 26<sup>th</sup> January 1788 Governor Arthur Philip and the first fleet raised the Union Jack at Sydney Cove and this flag remained the 'official' flag until Federation. The Colonies and the States each developed their own flags, incorporating the Union Jack and a distinctive badge. Other flags at various intervals during the next one hundred or so years since settlement represented movements such as the Anti Transportation League (1851), Murray River Flag for the paddle-steamers (c1853), Lambing Flat riots (1860) and the Federation Movement (1893).

When the Commonwealth of Australia was proclaimed on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1901 it was deemed appropriate that we should have our own distinctive flag. A national competition was announced with a prize of £200. A panel of judges was set up comprising mostly of current and ex members of the maritime services as well as an expert on heraldry. Designs came from all over Australia as well as overseas. The entries, over 32,000 of them, were put on display in Melbourne's Exhibition Building.

It took two months for the judges to make a decision and was unanimous in declaring five joint winners (4 men and 1 woman) as they had submitted almost identical designs. The judges had sought a design that incorporated a Union Jack, the Southern Cross and a clear indication that Australia had six states joined together in Federation. The latter being represented in the winning entries by a six-pointed star immediately below the Union Jack. (The addition of a seventh point in 1908 symbolises Australian Territories.) Almost 20,000 entries fitted the judges' criteria and this number was then reduced to 150 as being worthy of further consideration.

The Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, announced the winners at the opening of the exhibition on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1901. With only minor changes, the flag created from the winning designs is Australia's 'flag of stars' as we know it today and was first flown over the Exhibition Buildings on that September day almost one hundred years ago.

**Footnote:** The British flag or Union flag is made up of the red cross of St. George on a field of white, the white cross of St. Andrew on a field of blue and the red cross of St. Patrick. Strictly speaking, it only becomes a Union Jack when flown from the jackstaff at the bow of a ship of the Royal Navy.