

OUR CHILDREN AND ANZAC DAY

Melbourne Legacy accepted the responsibility in 1929 of providing speakers for schools in the metropolitan area, and our first committee was formed (which included L/Geo. Browne, John Barnes and Rex Hall). That activity was felt to be ineffective owing to the limited number of schools that could be provided for, and the difficulty in aligning uniform and appropriate presentation of the subject. That led to an approach being made in 1930 to the Director of Education, the late Mr. Frank Tate, and with his approval, and the co-operation of his department and the Returned Soldiers' League, Legacy organised the first Anzac Eve ceremony at the Cenotaph.

Encouraged by the response from schools represented at the first ceremony, it was decided in 1931 to organise a broadcast to all schools, and this was done through 3LO. L/Geo. Browne compered the ceremony, and addresses were given by the Director of Education and Sir Brudenell White. As a result of appreciative letters from all parts of the State, it was realised that the message of the day was reaching remote parts, from the lighthouse of Cape Otway to the far North West, with a known listening audience of 6,000. From that small beginning we will this year hold our 38th ceremony with representatives from some 250 schools attending at the Shrine, and an estimated 2,000 schools throughout the State actually using the A.B.C. broadcast.

That participation embraces from 200,000 to 300,000 children each year, according to the records of the Education Department Liaison Officers with the A.B.C.

It is of interest to quote a letter written in 1937 by the late Legatee E.W. Mylrea, M.A., Dip.Ed., a Past President RSS&AILA (Victoria) and one of Victoria's most distinguished head-masters, who died on 19th August, 1943 at the age of 72. In the letter to the late Legatee (Brig.) P.J. McGlynn, then Chairman of our Anzac Observance Committee, he wrote:-

"The development of the Children's Service in connection with Anzac Day came about through my knowledge that the adult observance of the Day with its march of returned men and ceremony following was, from the point of view of youth, becoming commonplace and losing its appeal. Boys and girls saw little in it beyond a march of men behind bands, the bands were good; the men just joined the bands together. Of course, Dad or Uncle or Brother might be seen in the march; but as they wear the same clothes as at ordinary times, it didn't matter much. The march passed by; the children went home; they had enjoyed a holiday from school anyway. That was the thing that counted. The spiritual meaning of the day was lacking. Children were getting no uplift from the occasion.

The usual school ceremony, too, was a deadly affair. In some schools, State and others, there was no acknowledgment of the special occasion at all. In others, perhaps a clergyman or the Head Master or one of the teachers would speak to the assembled children for a short time and when it was finished a sigh of relief would go up. Few speakers understand how to make their addresses short and pithy to keep the attention. Children would march back to the class rooms and the DAY would be put away for another year.

Knowing the dullness of treatment given in so many schools, it was suggested by me a better arrangement could be secured by grouping by grouping schools and holding a combined district ceremony. The suggestion was not accepted as it would have entailed much organisation and some expense.

However, from that first idea there sprang the conception of a greater plan. The Cenotaph was erected each year in front of Parliament House facing Bourke Street. It was the focus of all men's thoughts and the repository of their offerings. Why not invite all schools in the metropolitan area - Registered and State - Secondary and Primary - to send a group of children, preferably

those whose fathers had been at the War, to take part in a ceremony at the Cenotaph?

The imagination fired at the probable result! The noble building behind the assemblage of children (many of whose fathers had given their lives in the War) the Cenotaph with its severely simple lines; the crowded square in front; the vista of the city extending far!

When the suggestion was made to the Legacy Club whose special care is for the children of ex-soldiers, it appealed to them strongly, and a committee was appointed to explore the possibilities of the plan. Opinion was unanimous that it would be the means of bringing to the children that spirit of reverent understanding so inherent in the Day itself (but which was missed by the children in the adult observance) which would be the foundation for citizenship in the years ahead when they were carrying on the spirit of their fathers.

A committee met and drew up a form of ceremony in which all present were given an active part; instead of being passive spectators. Short addresses were planned, with a good deal of suitable music to afford every child an opportunity of expression so that he would feel the service was his own. Fortunately too, several schools had very efficient brass bands, and these were of great assistance in leading the singing and in playing the complementary music: Chopin's Funeral March and Handel's Largo. Trumpeters to play the Last Post and the Reveille were also available. To ensure success in the singing, words of selected hymns were sent to the schools. In the ceremony, too, an opportunity was provided for the schools to send floral tributes and perhaps the most striking feature of the ceremony was the hushed procession of the children in all the beauty of their youth and strength, as they slowly filed along reverently and laid at the foot of the Cenotaph their emblems of love and tokens of remembrance.

The community was thrilled with the proposal and many organisations wished to take part in the afternoon. The Legacy Club wisely decided to maintain the simplicity of the occasion. Some prominent citizens closely connected with Education, Legislation and Defence were invited. But it was definitely CHILDREN'S DAY, and it has remained so.

The Bands taking part in the first ceremony were those from Northcote, Coburg West, Ascot Vale West, Albert Park, Armadale, Footscray and Princes Hill. The singing was conducted by Mr. Lane of the Education Department.

And so was initiated a ceremony in 1931, the only one of its kind in the Empire, which makes the children continuous participators in the glory of the great baptism of Australia's nationhood. "

(sgd) E.W. Mylrea.