

PETER McNEIL

Domestic Environments

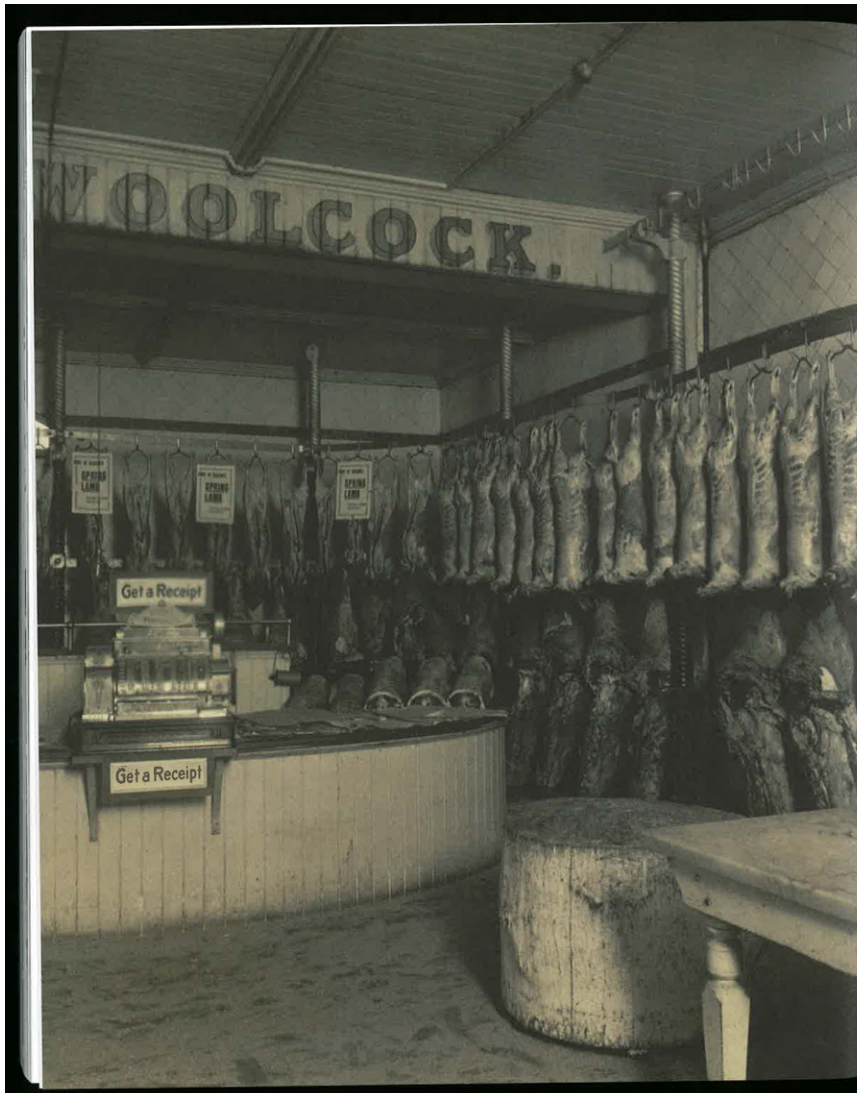
2013 | *Glorious Days: Australia 1913*, National Museum of Australia Press

1913 Glorious Days! was a major exhibition held at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, in 2013. It marked the 100-year anniversary of the development of Canberra as the new capital, the establishment of the Australian navy, and the hopes and aspirations of Australians in a progressive society before the outbreak of the Great War. McNeil was invited to write for the accompanying catalogue, *Glorious Days: Australia 1913*. An intensive planning day for this task with seventeen historians was conducted at the Museum in mid 2012, chaired by Professor Stuart McIntyre and attended by prominent Australian historians including Humphrey McQueen.

The invitation to McNeil was based on his expertise in the area of Australian material culture, architectural history and domestic life. His contribution emphasises that the domestic environment was not simply reflective of the political economy; it actively shaped that sphere too. Weather, health and morality were connected to new ideas concerning the modern consumer and householder. The development immediately before the War of the first working and middle-class garden suburbs with the model of low-density housing in detached or semi-detached 'California' style brick or wood bungalows suggested an ideal for family life that would transform the appearance of Australian towns and cities. The research therefore has implications for understanding the propensity for low density housing in contemporary Australia and matters of sustainability and urban planning today.

Miss Marcelle Boivin

Photograph by Sam Hood



Interior, TK Bennet & Woolcock, Family Butcher, Collingwood, about 1913
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DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENTS

PETER McNEIL



By 1913, more than one-third (37 per cent)¹ of Australia's population lived in cities and we can marshal much evidence – from material culture, oral histories, and submissions before commissions into the living wage and housing – to create a snapshot of domestic life at this time. In the preceding century, the connections between high rates of disease, poverty and crime, and inadequate, overcrowded housing had become clear. Town planning, improved domestic architecture and the provision of basic amenities were increasingly embraced for their role in social engineering and as solutions to medical problems. Home ownership was seen as a path out of poverty and into respectability, and the loan schemes that enabled the purchase of homes in all Australian states by the 1920s have their roots in the workers' housing Acts; for example, Western Australia's *Workers' Homes Act* of 1911.²

This was a dynamic period of social progress, marked by the professionalisation of housecraft, cookery and mothercraft within the domestic science movement that emerged in Australia and in the United States from the 1890s. New attitudes appeared at this time in Australian domestic architecture in terms of internal planning, the increased size of windows, ease of access to the outdoors and the management of light. The possibilities offered by living in a flat were promoted for the first time, and the impact of workers' housing on productivity and quality of life came under increasing scrutiny.

THE COST OF LIVING

In the years just before the First World War, Australian Labor governments investigated the life of the worker at home. Mr Justice Heydon, of the New South Wales Court of Industrial Arbitration, held the first inquiry into the living wage in that state in 1913 and delivered his findings in early 1914, considering, but modifying, the Commonwealth Harvester Judgement of 1907. Eighteen working-class households were selected from a larger sample of 657, who had been visited by female recorders and asked to document all of their household expenditure for one year. Justice Heydon was told that a quarter of the living wage of 48 shillings went on rent. Fourteen of the 18 women kept their husband's pay and allocated him an allowance; historian Robin Wilkie has noted that this division of responsibility between male breadwinner and female homemaker, a domestic matriarchy, has also been noted in respect of Richmond in Melbourne.²

The husbands of these 'matriarchs' worked as fitters, farriers, labourers, carters, horse drivers and the like, from which they earned about 50 to 66 shillings a week; they lived in suburbs such as Balmain, Ruffoon, Darlington and Alexandria.³ Their homes had water and sewerage, although generally neither bathroom nor laundry. People often bathed in the copper (used to wash clothes) in the yard, behind a modesty screen. Some men belonged to bars or 'holier clubs' where they paid an allowance and did not show at home. These clubs may also have been convenient locations for betting and smoking.

Much shopping was conducted on a Friday afternoon and researchers have been amazed at the amount of meat eaten by the working class. Balmain had 21 butchers in 1913. Many of the 18 families studied ate meat three times per day and it was quality muscle-meat; organ meat was largely despised by the workers. Many poor families could not afford enough milk and rationed it. The nutritional value of fruit and vegetables was poorly understood at this date – some qualified professionals, such as a 'Dr Arthur', even stated in the Heydon Commission that they had no food value⁴ – but the commission found that many working-class women believed (correctly) that cabbage was good for their children. A Polish biochemist named Casimir Funk had in fact isolated Vitamin B, and coined the term 'vitamine' in 1911, and Vitamin A was being tracked by European scientists in 1913.

Households were sustained by housewifery. Cooks in 1910 had access to a range of recipe books and could purchase the *Antipodian Cookery Book*, the *Protestant Cookery Book*, the *Goodwife Cookery Book*, *Colonial Everyday Cookery*, *Mrs Maclearen's Cookery Book*, *Cassell's Household Cookery* and *Mrs Benson's Cookery Book*.⁵ Nonetheless, the commissioner (who is unlikely to have done his own cooking, washing and cleaning), complained that working-class women spent too long gossiping on the front steps and reading 'comic cuts'.

Colonial societies tended to place a high premium on health and investment in hospitals.⁶ Assisted emigrants were subject to medical examination and the healthier tended to emigrate. Food was plentiful and water was clean in colonial Australia. Australia was in the top 10 in the world for average life expectancy by 1900. The *Pure Food Act* (New South Wales) was passed in 1908 and the Commonwealth *Maternity Allowance Act* in October 1912. By 1911, systematic infant health welfare provisions saw 20 per cent of all babies born in Sydney visited by health experts.⁷ A study of 'respectable' low-paid workers in London in 1913 found that their incomes were half that of Sydney people.⁸ Many more Australians escaped disease and what has been called the 'epidemiological transition' of European modernising societies. As demographer WD Borrie has argued, infant mortality rates in Australia and also New Zealand in the first two decades of the 20th century 'stamped it as amongst the healthiest regions in the world'.⁹ This was not the case, however, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, whose population was put at 93,300 in the 1911 census; their life expectancy (at birth) in the mid-30s.¹⁰

THE IDEAL HOME

In 1913 the 'ideal home' projected by architects and tastemakers was a modest but charming site, on a freestanding lot, with a garden space ready for planting.¹¹ The bungalow was presented as the ideal housing type, suited to the Australian lifestyle and leisure, climate and conditions; and its building parts – bricks, terracotta decorations, doors, windows and internal wooden fireplace surrounds – were rapidly standardised and retailed by large emigrant stores, as Wilsenrich and Danks, yet made to appear as if handcrafted. Such modern and detached dwellings were beyond the reach of many Australians at this time, living in homes of earlier building stock, much of which was constructed in the boom of the 1860s to 1880s, including the small and poorly built speculative terraces of Sydney and Melbourne. Councils in inner-Sydney had banned very narrow one-room terraces by 1913, but nonetheless terraces of under six metres in width were common.

TASTE AND THE HOME

In 1913, civic and domestic architecture, such as the early designs for Canberra housing and the upper-middle class Sydney and Melbourne market, were

heavily influenced by a group of architects closely associated with Professor Leslie Wilkinson, John D Moore and W Hardy Wilson. Wilson's interest in the colonial period architecture of Australia reflected a broader hostility held in the collecting circles of connoisseurs and tastemakers towards both the architecture and design of the second half of the nineteenth century: 'the blank of the Victorian period' as Wilson described it.¹² A nascent colonial revival was underway at this time; Sydney Ure Smith illustrated CH Bertie's *Old Sydney* (1911) and *Stories of Old Sydney* (1912) and, in 1914, published his drawings as *Relics of Old Colonial Days*. Although they contributed to the destruction of much of our Victorian built environment, the group of tastemakers associated with Ure Smith's publications, including *Art in Australia*, had many practical ideas for the new century. Moore promoted a vision of the Australian dwelling that included arcades and breezeways, and acknowledged the changing nature of domestic life, in which the availability of paid help was decreasing and the demands on the housewife were accordingly greater. To this end, he sought to integrate the kitchen with the living areas of middle class homes. Deep porches, built-in cupboards, deeping porches and deeply gabled roofs characterised the new housing type, adding attractive and functional elements to the existing design vocabulary. Drainage, refrigeration at public markets, 'electrical progress' and 'electrical illumination', 'hygienic conveniences', 'ideal cooling demonstrations', 'vacuum processes' and new materials such as pyrex glass featured in the editorials and advertisements of the Australian architectural journal *The Salon* in 1913–14. Then, as now, Australians were eager early-adopters of new technology for household living.

HOUSING INNOVATIONS

One of the exciting developments that residents of Australian cities would have noticed in 1913 was the erection of 'flats'. From 1887 in Australia the architectural community debated as to whether flatted houses were superior to terraced houses. In some cases, existing terraces were converted to flats with the addition of stairs and connecting balconies facing the street and/or rear; a good example in Melbourne is that of 'Maffi Place', 3 The Esplanade, St Kilda, which was renovated in about 1910. Inventors owned the whole building containing the flats; stairs did not exist. Rents were relatively high and, therefore, flats did not cater to the needs of most workers, but there was a great deal of discussion regarding economical working-class housing, generally focused on the planning rather than the fit-out of the housing.



Advertisement in *The Salon*, 2 September 1913, p. 19
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

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Suffering from an association with crowded tenements, flats were seen by some, including the building industry, as the obverse of the 'healthy' house on a freestanding lot, and therefore likely to contribute to, rather than solve, the problems associated with cheap accommodation. At the heart of this lay issues of class and race; the Australian middle class was expected to have something better. This view continued to echo for decades: flats were condemned by one Australian architect as 'not in the best interests of the race... The flat is no place for the rearing of a family, more particularly a middle-class family.'

The New South Wales *Housing Act* was passed in 1912. It included provision for councils to create public housing, and Sydney Council immediately set out to remove slums or 'rookeries'. One of the most significant blocks of flats the council constructed on one of the resulting vacant sites, the Strickland Building, built between 1912 and 1914, is still prominent on the very busy Cleveland Street, Chippendale.¹⁷ Named after the Governor of New South Wales, Sir Gerald Strickland, it features recessed balconies, timber shingle details and a large protruding corner, which give a nice rhythm to the design. There are many lightwells, and Sydney Council noted proudly that 'every separate room and sanitary block communicates directly with light and air'. Strickland was fitted out with electric lighting, gas cookers in some flats, gas fire, and gas laundry boilers with separate meters. A toilet was integrated into the flat. There was, however, no place to cook other than the living room and there was little privacy, as bedrooms in the smaller flats opened onto each other. The living rooms were lit only by the lightwell. Forty per cent of the listed head of households in the Strickland

Figgle's no. 3 type, lot at 16c, per week, Daisy Garden Suburb, 1913
STATE ARCHIVES OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Building in 1914 were married women and widows. Half of them moved out within one year. Florence Taylor, part-owner of *Building* magazine and the first registered woman architect in New South Wales, was a vocal opponent of such flats. She wrote in 1915: 'The flat is the enemy of home life.'

The other solution for housing workers was to locate them in the suburbs, increasingly possible with the extension of railway networks. The New South Wales Labor government sent economist Professor R.F. Irvine to Europe and the United States of America in 1912-13 to study worker housing schemes. The October 1913 issue of the *Saturday Review* included the 'housing problem and the working man' as a topic for its readers, an indication of the currency of the debate. The building industry argued that workers should be housed not in flats but in cottages in the suburbs; this was the consistent view of their journal-mouthpiece, *Building*. A fine example of such dwellings are the 104 semi-detached fibro-concrete and brick bungalows at Gardens Road, Daisy Garden Suburb (Daceyville), Sydney, photographed newly built in January 1913. The *Housing Act*, introduced to alleviate the crisis of reasonable housing, was construed by some as a 'socialistic act'.¹⁸ Daceyville included a purpose-built picture theatre, the popular new entertainment across Australia in 1913, often held in lined halls. Such suburbs took their inhabitants well away from the stigma of the disreputable urban poor.¹⁹ Inside each house was a parlour that could hold a piano, dining table and corner fireplace.

Despite rhetoric on the virtues of the individual lot, flats were considered an exciting innovation for the well-off. In 1913 *Real Property Annual* noted that an investment in high-class flats in an area such as Macquarie Street, Sydney, provided a 10-14 per cent return.²⁰ Old building stock was increasingly marketed at this time as potential demolition sites suitable for building flats. Expensive inner-city flats represented a comfortable and cosmopolitan lifestyle; electricity enabled lifts, bells, delivery of goods, hot water, ventilation, vacuum and refrigeration. Servants and tradesmen worked in the basements and communal kitchens of the new luxury flats, and residents telephoned their requests down to them.²¹ Gas and electricity co-existed, but in the Grace Brothers' Broadway Store catalogue one can see the shift in fashion; gas fixtures feature in the 1910 examples by 1913 the word was 'electric'. The poor were given gas, and the well-off demanded electricity.

John Fingard, first chair of the New South Wales Housing Trust, noted in 1912 that 'human nature is in favour of the freehold'.²² Flat-living was not considered socially useful as a long-term ideal. We must remember today that flats were always rented in 1913 and that the residents moved on. For many workers, this was either to further temporary quarters, but, for others, to possible home-ownership if they qualified for the new loan schemes.

FURNISHING THE HOME

Australian interior design in 1913, both high-style and middle class, was dominated by an arts and crafts aesthetic. The popularisation of concepts of truth to materials and fitness of purpose witnessed a rejection of late Victorian or Edwardian styles of building and interior decoration, including that which we would now call 'Federation' (which was then often called 'Queen Anne'). Such dwellings made extensive use of painted wood rather than heavy timbers exposed and featured pictorial stained-glass windows and applied plasterwork. The 'California' bungalow type that replaced them made a virtue of rough textures and natural-looking materials such as cedar, stained shingles and rubble stone piers.

The years around 1913 were marked by a significant rise in what was then called 'publicity', or advertising, that which Leticia Wilkinson, after taking up the position of Professor of Architecture at the University of Sydney in 1918, would call the 'Bolsheviks' of popular taste. Illustrated 'lifestyle' magazines burgeoned, many based on models coming out of the west coast of the United States. The 'colonial revival' style adopted in certain domestic houses and interiors was a reaction against the mass-produced furniture and densely cluttered environments of the late nineteenth century. The power of Edwardian aesthetic values, epitomised in this image of Queen Alexandra in the winter garden of her sister's villa 'Hvidske' near Copenhagen in 1913, was being eroded by a fascination with New World societies such as North America. Nonetheless, Australians might be surprised to see exactly the same type of wooden fretwork and informal bamboo furnishings that we associate with Federation taste appearing behind this regal figure on the other side of the globe.

Among the competing styles available at the time, furniture based upon American 'Craftsman' models was new, fashionable and heavily advertised in the 1910s and into the 1920s. The designs emulate the ethos of North American designer and social reformer Gustav Stickley, who aimed to suggest a new way of living, for a new world, in a new century. Such furnishings employ the craftsman vocabulary of pegged construction, were made of oak or grained in imitation, and have names such as the 'Mission dining suite' or 'craftsman couch'. Craftsman furniture suggested a family-oriented interior that valued pioneering honesty and simple but hard-won comfort. Seeking to encourage the use of local timbers in home furnishings and interior joinery, RT Baker's *Cabinet Makers of Australia* was published in 1913: the first of many such books to popularise Australian figured timbers such as Queensland silky oak. In contrast, many well-to-do interiors featured Moorish style occasional tables and Persian rugs. A great deal of sea grass and bamboo furniture were retailed at the time, and some of the most modern furniture available were the beerwood chairs and rockers that had been designed by Thonet back in



Queen Alexandra, 1913
photograph by Mary Somers
ROYAL COLLECTIONS TRUST © RCUK
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1859 and 1860. Beechwood chairs were functional and almost universal world products manufactured mainly in Austria, the United States and Canada. The equivalent of the Model T Ford, they were an example of modernity expressed through mass-production. They were modern still in the 1920s when architect Le Corbusier used them in his projects.

With the move to larger windows, bamboo blinds were the most economical method of dealing with the harsh Australian sun and would have been the most common fixture, judging from their low cost and frequency in catalogues. The comfortably-off could buy 'Klosterline' blinds in 1913, the name for a 'fixed Spanish' blind on the outside of the window, which was hauled at all sides and rose and fell on a pulley system.⁵² Most household goods being retailed at large emporia were produced in conservative styles and their amount of pressed, punched or stamped decoration was in proportion to their cost. The evidence of trade catalogues suggests there were few advanced designs for tableware imported at this time from Europe. The local ceramic designs of women artists such as Lucie Shorean, (designer of Doulton & Co.'s 'Wastal' tea service in about 1912), Flora Landells (the 'Surt's desert pea' teapot, about 1914) and Margaret Preston's collaborations with Gladys Reynell depicting native flowers and made during their time at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in London (1912) are, however, very striking.⁵³ China painting was a popular art form among women in Australia before the war, and was facilitated, as curator and art historian John McPhee notes, by the introduction of small electrical kilns.⁵⁴

Despite the rise in advertising, consumption was not universally lauded. In literature and political commentary there occurs a counter-view, such as that expressed by playwright and critic Louis Eason in a meditation on the Australian suburban home:

The drawing-room exists for the lady of the house. This is her salon, her sanctuary. It is here that she expresses herself, holds her court, wears curious costumes, dispenses gossip and afternoon tea. She is a good woman, intensely disagreeable, the bourgeois ideal of a wife and mother – the high priestess of the decadent cult of the purity of the home.⁵⁵

PERSONAL STYLE IN 1913

How did women dress in 1913? In a sign of the importance of home sewing for women's garments, the Grace Brothers catalogue for that year opens with elastic, wool, silk and cotton mendings, adjustable and sew-in dress



shields, brass and plated pins and dress bones.⁵⁶ Whalebone strips such as the 'Greenlander', and the 'poul white French horn', used as bunks to strengthen corsets, were prominent; underpinings mattered. There are several pages of ostrich feather trimmings, featured as feather *bandeau* trims for hats and upright mounts – very fashionable – for the head.

In a Sam Hood photograph of Miss Marcelle Boivin outside a grand sandstone front door in Balmain, his fashionable subject wears an ostrich trim very similar to the *bandeau* bands available in the Grace Brothers catalogue of 1913. Her dress is the trim and slim 'Dinocoire' style that was chic just before the war. She wears a very large hat of the style made fashionable by the most photographed British actress in the world, Lily Elsie, in her title role in the *Merry Widow* (1907).⁵⁷

Ostrich feathers were generally sourced from South Africa and 'finished' in New York and London; they were a most expensive commodity. Due to the international 'anti-plumage movement' that drew attention to the impending extinction of various species of birds, there was a 'feather crash' in 1913-14

'Minnal', The JW Pagan residence, Hawthorn, Queensland, about 1913-15
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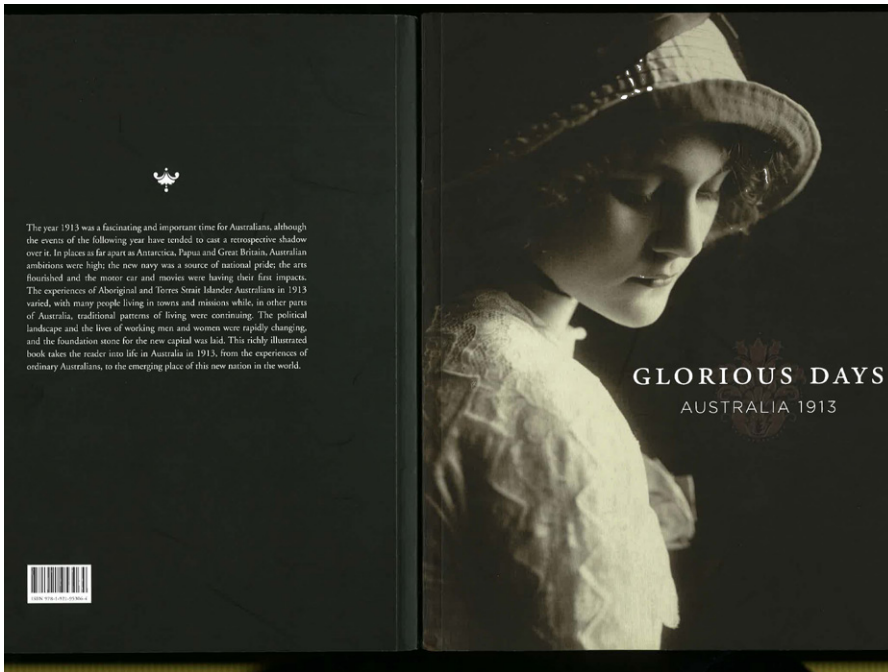


Miss Marcelle Boivin, daughter of the head chef at the Paris House, on the veranda of *Ilmorog*, Balmain, about 1912
photograph by Sam Hood
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and a material that was once worth its weight in gold became unfashionable – and unusable – overnight. The 1910 Grace Brothers catalogue has several pages of illustrations of whole bird-wings to garnish hats and bonnets; these went out of fashion by 1913 and did not appear again in their catalogue, an indication of how closely linked were world fashion trends and social mores.⁵⁸

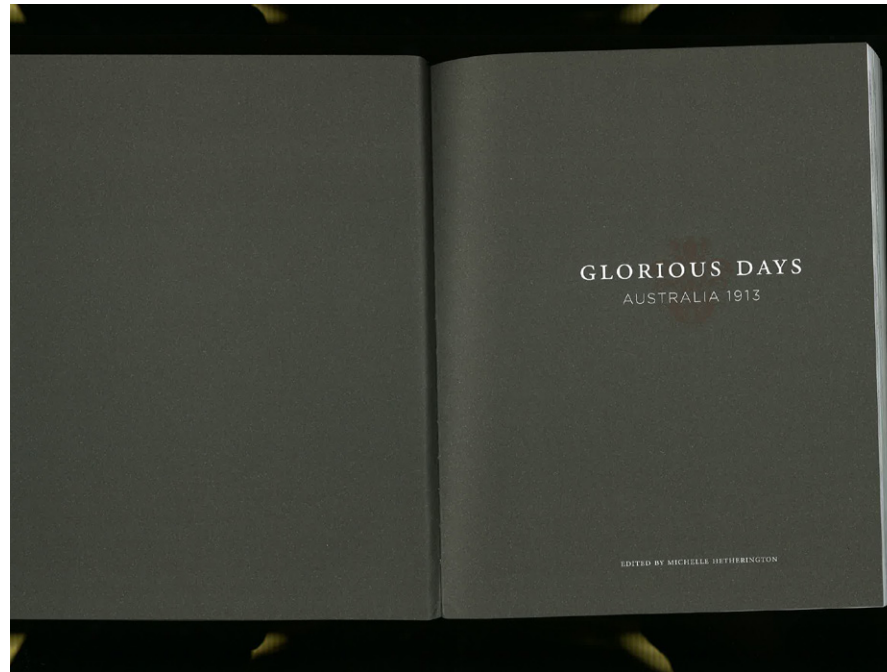
AN IDEAL FAMILY LIFE

Attitudes to domestic consumption were therefore open to rapid change before the First World War. Such attitudes were formed through a complex interrelationship of views concerning class, custom, respectability, occupation, health, taste and fashion. Although the innovation of the flat suggested a new way of living for the future, both sides of politics, as well as the building industry, favoured the model of the detached house for family life. This was a tenacious view that has only been seriously questioned in recent years and has been present as a part of a national 'psyche' for a century. For many Australians, however, the image of comfortable family life in catalogues and newspapers were not attainable. Working class families in the large cities frequently lived in inadequate and sub-standard housing; government commissions and investigations at this time began to consider how this 'housing problem' could be addressed. The development, immediately before the war, of working and middle-class garden suburbs based on a model of low-density housing in detached or semi-detached 'California' style brick or wood bungalows, suggested an ideal for family life that was to transform the appearance of Australian towns and cities.



The year 1913 was a fascinating and important time for Australians, although the events of the following year have tended to cast a retrospective shadow over it. In places as far apart as Antarctica, Papua and Great Britain, Australian ambitions were high: the new navy was a source of national pride; the arts flourished and the motor car and movies were having their first impacts. The experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in 1913 varied, with many people living in towns and missions while, in other parts of Australia, traditional patterns of living were continuing. The political landscape and the lives of working men and women were rapidly changing, and the foundation stone for the new capital was laid. This richly illustrated book takes the reader into life in Australia in 1913, from the experiences of ordinary Australians, to the emerging place of this new nation in the world.

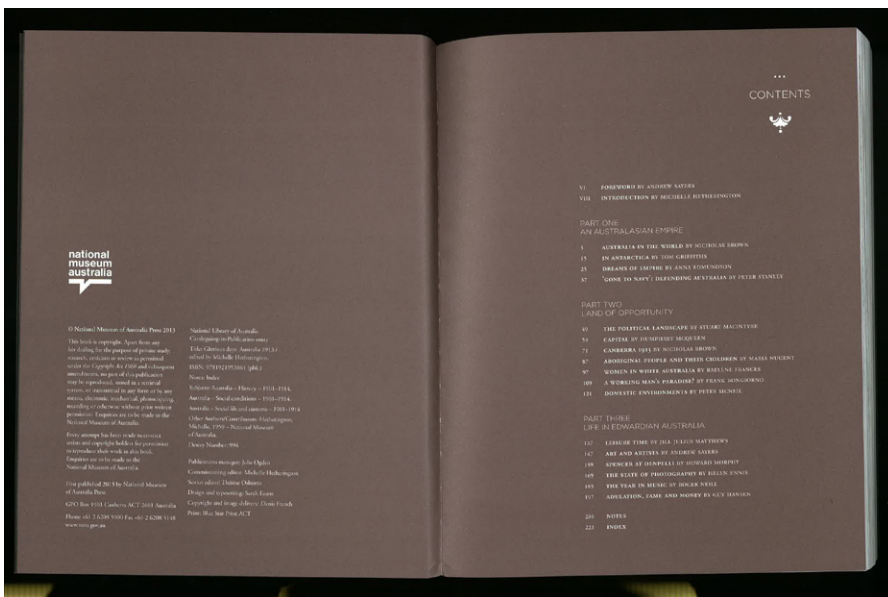
GLORIOUS DAYS
AUSTRALIA 1913



GLORIOUS DAYS
AUSTRALIA 1913

EDITED BY MICHELLE HETHERINGTON

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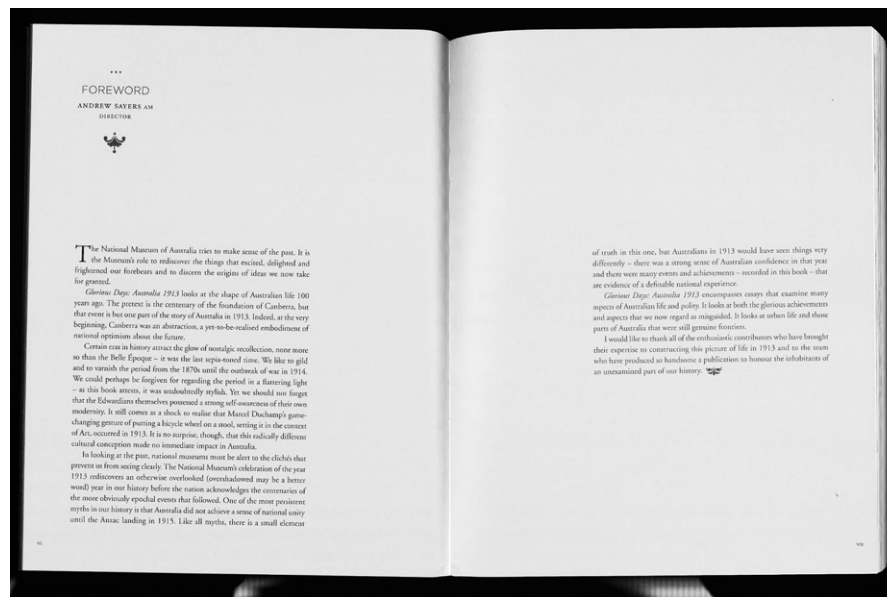
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FOREWORD
ANDREW SAYERS
DIRECTOR

The National Museum of Australia tries to make sense of the past. It is the Museum's role to rediscover the things that excited, delighted and frightened our forebears and to discern the origins of ideas we now take for granted.

Glorious Days: Australia 1913 looks at the shape of Australian life 100 years ago. The present is the anniversary of the foundation of Canberra, but that event is but one part of the story of Australia in 1913. Indeed, as the very beginning, Canberra was an abstraction, a yet-to-be-realised embodiment of national optimism about the future.

Canberra sits in history across the glow of nostalgia, recollection, none more so than the Belle Époque – it was the last septa-tioned state. We like to gild and to varnish the period from the 1870s until the outbreak of war in 1914. We could perhaps be forgiven for regarding the period in a dimming light – as this book attests, it was undoubtably stylish. Yet we should not forget that the Edwardians themselves possessed a strong self-awareness of their own modernity. It still comes as a shock to realise that Marcel Duchamp's game-changing gesture of putting a bicycle wheel on a stool, setting it in the context of Art, occurred in 1913. It is no surprise, though, that this radically different cultural conception made no immediate impact in Australia.

In looking at the past, national museums must be alert to the clichés that prevent us from seeing clearly. The National Museum's celebration of the year 1913 rediscovers an otherwise overlooked (or rationalised) may be a better word year in our history before the nation acknowledges the centenary of the more obviously epochal events that followed. One of the most poignant myths in our history is that Australia did not achieve a sense of national unity until the Anzac landing in 1915. Like all myths, there is a small element

of truth in this one, but Australians in 1913 would have seen things very differently – there was a strong sense of Australian confidence in that year and there were many events and achievements – recorded in this book – that are evidence of a definable national experience.

Glorious Days: Australia 1913 encompasses essays that examine many aspects of Australian life and policy. It looks at both the glorious achievements and aspects that we now regard as unimaged. It looks at urban life and those parts of Australia that were still genuine frontiers.

I would like to thank all of the enthusiastic contributors who have brought their expertise to constructing this picture of life in 1913 and to the team who have produced so handsome a publication to honour the inhabitants of an unexamined part of our history.

Weblink:
http://www.nma.gov.au/publications/pubs/glorious_days_australia_1913