

# **Some Australian Characteristics**

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A digital text sponsored by  
New South Wales Centenary of Federation Committee

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**2001**



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### Source Text:

Prepared from the article published in *Cosmos Magazine* January 31,  
1899 4pp.

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All quotation marks retained as data  
All unambiguous end-of-line hyphens have been removed, and the trailing  
part of a word has been joined to the preceding line.

First Published: 1899

*Australian Etexts 1890-1909 prose nonfiction federation*

2001

Creagh Cole Coordinator  
Final Checking and Parsing

## Some Australian Characteristics

**Cosmos Magazine**

**1899**

## Some Australian Characteristics

“O wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!”

WE are yet, as a nation, in our infancy. It is, therefore, perhaps premature to speak of a national character; though we may readily enough detect characteristics, tastes, and tendencies which form the nucleus of what will ultimately be the deep-rooted typical character of the Australian. And some of these characteristics are already of a sufficiently pronounced type to justify us in speaking of them in a national sense.

Of course we have inherited from our British progenitors many tastes and habits which are essentially old-world in their nature. But to them we have added, with each new generation, a multitude of new and hitherto unconsidered characteristics.

The conditions of life in this free and sunny land are, for one thing, so dissimilar—and that, in itself, is sufficient to account for the growth of new habits, and customs, and tastes.

There is no civilized country in the world whose inhabitants enjoy greater freedom from the restraints of conventionalism than we fortunate denizens of Australia. Our young folks roam about the streets or in the parks, at will, with little or no hindrance—and that brings us to the question as to the wisdom, or otherwise, of this absence of restraint.

Is there not too great a latitude vouchsafed to the younger people, and is not this fact of allowing such freedom of action, in itself, conducive to more evil than good? But the very nature of the environment is responsible for a loosening of that old-world restraint imposed upon our fathers in their youthful days. Climatic influence is as great a factor in moulding our habits, and customs, and tastes—perhaps a greater factor than anything else. It is essential to the bodily health and mental vigor that an abundance of open-air exercise should be accessible. For, without it, there is little room for doubt that both the mental and physical growth would suffer and become stunted.

We are distinctly a sport-loving people. Though, unlike our progenitors, who have been aptly described as “a nation of shopkeepers,” we are what might as aptly be called a nation of athletes. For we are nothing if not athletic and sport-loving. Whether it be the result of pure love of physical

exercise or the spirit of emulation that is responsible for this pronounced trait in the national character, is perhaps an open question. But the fact is irrefutable, and the cause is, after all, equally commendable whichever of the two it may be.

We are a grumbling people, too; and if we have any distinct choice it is in the direction of horse-racing. The gag about “improving the breed of horses” does not weigh very heavily in our calculations. We gamble from the pure, unadulterated love of the thing; for the love of the excitement it produces; and perhaps not the least powerful incentive is the hope of gaining unprecedented wealth without the pain of working for it. And that is, no doubt, to a greater or less extent, characteristic of most people.

There are few who do not indulge in race-course gambling to some extent; and its confirmed patrons are so numerous that one can rarely escape them. Get into conversation with your newsboy, butcher, lawyer, banker, and you will find with the least encouragement in the world the subject will be broached. So, also, whether you ride in the train or on a 'bus, or take your lunch beneath the watchful care of your favorite waitress, or indulge in a whiskey and soda in the snugest “lounge” you can locate, or, still further, if you take your sweetheart for a blow to Manly, you will find it impossible to effectually escape from its subtle influences. It seems to pervade the very tram-car and café lounge; the atmosphere seems pregnant with its insidious microbes; and the question of this horse's pedigree or that one's chances for the Melbourne Cup seems to obtrude itself into the most ordinary affairs of daily life. Thus it is, I say, we are essentially a sport-loving and gambling people.

So far as the healthier and more commendable features of this our strongest characteristic is concerned, viz., the love of sport and athletics, as such, and apart from any question of gambling, we score heavily. One need only take a ramble through any of our parks on a Saturday afternoon, or a trip down the harbor, to realise the truth of it. And I would go farther, and say one need merely traverse some of the more obscure suburban streets, and, wherever there is a vacant patch of land sufficiently large to admit of a football being “kicked” or “stumps” being “pitched,” there is sure to be seen a gathering of more or less ragged urchins playing, in the spirit of emulation, one or other of our great national games.

Then we are a music-loving people. No one can deny that after a most cursory glimpse of the home and outdoor life of our people. The humblest cottage can boast a piano, and where that is a luxury in the regions of the unattainable—what's the matter with the mouth organ and concertina? These latter, indeed, are indispensable on the occasion of a holiday outing; and who has ever, under such circumstances, elbowed his way on

steamboat or tramcar, or on 'bus-top, among the good-natured crowd, without undergoing a more or less prolonged and aggravated process of ear-torture as the immediate result of close proximity to one or other or both of these ubiquitous music-producing (?) abominations ?

But to take a somewhat higher standard. It is only necessary to announce something in the way of a continental—of which, by the way, there is a deplorable lack, having in view the special advantages in the way of climate and general facilities—it is only necessary to make such an announcement, I say, to ensure a vast concourse of appreciative listeners. So, also, in the case of operatic and kindred performances, or even that of a brass band, there is invariably an excellent audience. Indeed, whether it be a barrel-organ at the corner of our street, or a military band, the result is the same in a lesser degree. Therefore, we may clearly claim to be a music-loving people. It is in the blood—and the warm, generous sunshine of our comparatively cloudless skies keeps our hearts, too, warm, and sends us singing in concert with the locust and the bird throughout our most uncongenial labors.

We are, too, fond of flowers. The smallest child just learning to toddle has a rapidly developing taste in this direction. Of course, like many an older child, he has little thought beyond that of immediate possession, and is not in the least concerned about any ultimate results. He would as readily tear your lark-spurs up by the roots as he would scatter to the roving breezes the scented petals of a rose.

But beneath this veneer of attraction by the variety of color, there is a deep-rooted love of flowers, wild or cultivated. In the proper season one cannot escape the wild-flower-laden holiday-maker. He is as ubiquitous as his brother of the mouth-organ and concertina—and, indeed, is of both sexes, and is armed with music as well as adorned with wild-flowers.

Then, to come nearer home—to come to the cultivation of flowers—there is hardly a cot that has not its little bed of flowers; and there is hardly a porch, however old and humble, that has not its friendly woodbine or rose to shelter it from the rain and the piercing rays of the setting summer sun. And where such a result is unattainable by reason of the peculiar construction of the dwelling, the love of flowers is carried still further. In such instances there is always a windowsill conveniently situated enough to admit of a pot, or box, or tin, either painted red or green, or in its virgin nakedness, wherein mignonette, or fuchsia, or daffodil may bloom more or less abundantly.

Have you ever observed, too, how much a part of our daily lives the “button-hole” has become ? Run your eye over the crowds of youths and maidens and young men who daily wend their way citywards. You will

observe how deep-rooted is the custom of wearing flowers. Follow these flower-lovers into their offices and shops and warehouses, and you will observe still further how intense is their regard for the blossom or two they treasure. For no sooner do they reach the prosaic atmosphere wherein their daily labors are conducted, than out comes the button-hole to find a temporary resting place in a small bottle or jar of water. The result is, the blooms retain their freshness, and are still things of beauty at the lunch-hour, and hardly less presentable for the homeward journey.

We are a sensation-loving people—of that there can be no shadow of doubt. We crave for newness—new sensations, new crazes, new buildings, and, in fact, anything and everything that can lay claim to freshness. Old customs and traditions rapidly make way before the sturdy march of progress. For we are nothing if not progressive, and we sadly lack the bump of veneration. We are young, and that is probably the key-note to this lack of appreciation of things old and customs venerated by our fathers. We have no traditions to speak of—at least not of the kind to which we can point with any degree of pride; and such as we possess, in the way of old buildings and land-marks, are not of that character to provoke enthusiasm. We have, I fear, not only a want of veneration, but a contempt for age. It is the commonest thing to hear the opinions of “old grey-head”—straw-hatted though he be, like his boys—openly scouted and laughed to scorn by these same boys. And what time, he sagely wags his head and wonders, is to be the end of this *fin de siècle* civilization; his youthful friends jerk their thumbs over their shoulders with a pitying gesture, and, cigarette in hand, do the drawback in a manner calculated to make his few remaining hairs raise themselves upright in sheer wonderment.

It is at present difficult to determine whether or not we are a literary-loving people. That we are a reading people I grant. But what do we read? Mainly, I think, novels of the yellow-back variety, sporting papers, and publications of the “Ally Sloper” type. It is a good feature of the national character that we *do* read—something. For it is only a question of time when we shall develop a literature of our own, pregnant with local color, and, there is no reason to doubt the ultimate elevation of the literary tastes of our people to, at least, that level, if no higher.

But we are not a cultured people. We scorn the first principles of politeness and etiquette. And there is nothing bores your youthful know-all more than being compelled to be under the necessity of observing certain of the unwritten, though necessary, laws of polite society. He prefers to create a system and a code of manners for himself, and merely regards as food for ridicule many old-fashioned mannerisms and customs.

To his women-folk he is polite—in his own way. But it is not a way to be commended. There is a lack of reverence in it to which women have perhaps themselves assisted him. For he has a supreme contempt for anything in the nature of “woman's rights.” To the new woman he presents an impregnable front—though, if her “newism” takes the direction of sport-indulgence he is the first to applaud and encourage her. For his heart is in his sport, and he loves a woman who knows the charms of cycling and boating, and football and cricket. But he is not a dancing-man—not in fact, a drawing-room man at all, for choice. He is rather built for an outdoor life, and I think would have been supremely happy basking away the days beneath the foliage of a giant gum what time he was not hunting, or swimming, or fighting.

Out of this heterogeneous mass of habits and tastes and customs, it is not hard to determine what the national character will be when firmly established on its own basis and without the influences of old-world ideas; and the time is rapidly approaching when we shall have discarded the last chair which served to prop us in our earlier efforts to walk the earth's surface, and have evolved a distinct type of our own making.

And it will not be a disagreeable, nor yet an unintellectual, type. It will abound in self-reliance and resourcefulness. It will have a heart as warm and generous as the tropical sun which enters into its very being. It will be as gay and bright as the gorgeous-plumed birds which flit amid the sombre foliage of our forests, and rove in languid ease upon the sun-dried sward.

It will possess a note as sharp and boisterous as their unique cries—a note, too, that will have as much of music in it to them that can hear it.

It will be progressive, sensation-loving, and possess an insatiable craving for “newness.” It must be up-to-date—whether it be in the direction of the newest pattern of bicycle or the latest improvement in time-saving appliances of every description.

But it will scorn hot-house plants—and by that I mean any artificiality of life and manner other than what is actually forced upon it by reason of its environment. It will love everything that is strong and “straight”—without having an extremely high ideal of social and commercial morality. And, finally, it will be able to hold its own in its progress through the universe, whether it be in the Legislative Chamber, in the Court of Law, in commercial life, or on the field of sport.

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