Wattle: ‘symbol of this nation’s heart’

In the dark days of the Great War of 1914–18, the golden wattle was a patriotic symbol of nation. Images of Acacia pycnantha appeared on all kinds of ephemera – from badges to cards – which were sold to raise funds for the war effort.

Wartime poetry reminds us that wattle had other meanings in Australian culture. In the long-forgotten poems of Beatrice Bevan wattle signified place, healing and immortality. What do Bevan’s poems tell us about the golden wattle in wartime Australia?

Beatrice Bevan, nee Vale (1896–1945), was a prolific amateur poet whose verses were published in Adelaide newspapers and reprinted across the country. Her poems also appeared in the religious press at a time when women’s words were rarely heard in the church. As a young woman, Beatrice Vale pursued her passion for literature at a ‘poetry circle’ run by Louisa Bevan, and fell in love with Louisa’s son, the Reverend Willett Bevan. Beatrice and Willett married in Hong Kong in 1901 and worked with the London Missionary Society in Shanghai. After their only child contracted tuberculosis, they returned to pastoral ministry in Adelaide in 1913.

Wattle in wartime

For the first anniversary of the Australian troops’ landing at Gallipoli, Beatrice Bevan wrote a poem titled ‘Via Crucis’, published in the Victorian Independent (1 May 1916). It spoke of the cross of suffering borne by ‘Our sunny land of Southern Cross’ and it mourned that ‘No golden of our wattle bloom/Sheds light above that far-off tomb!’ Bodies of Australian soldiers killed
in the war were not repatriated, and grief was compounded by distance. An absence of wattle "above that far-off tomb" signified this separation from home.

Wattle was not more popular than cypress in Australian cemeteries at the time, but the idea of a grave beneath the wattle spoke of Australian belonging. In 1890 the poet Adam Lindsay Gordon famously wrote of a stockman's dying wish: "Let me slumber in the hollow where the wattle blossoms wave". The image was echoed in a popular wartime verse that was quoted in countless death notices for soldiers who died in foreign lands: "Only the grave of a hero, only a mound of earth; Far from the land of wattle, and the spot that marked his birth" ("M.C.", "Only A Name", Independent (Footscray), 21 August 1915). The various plans to plant wattle at Gallipoli and in the Imperial War Cemeteries of Europe were born of this same sense of distance and of the importance of place (Wattle Day Association, www.wattleday.asn.au/about-wattle-day/about-wattle-day).

A floral emblem begins

Enthusiasm for planting wattle and for wattle blossom as a national emblem grew in the early days of the Great War. Before Federation in 1901 there had been a push to have wattle formally recognised as Australia's floral emblem, and from 1 September 1910 an annual Wattle Day began to be observed in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney.

Some people, such as Beatrice Bevan's father-in-law, a prominent Congregationalist minister, were wary of the growth of nationalism and its potential to divide. When the Reverend Dr Llewellyn Bevan was invited to speak to the Wattle Day League in Adelaide in 1912, he chose as his topic 'Wattle blossom: its symbolical significance'. In his speech he took the opportunity to counter some of wattle's more divisive associations. Llewellyn Bevan reminded his audience that wattle was naturally occurring and not the product of centuries of carefully controlled breeding. He used this to argue against an exclusivist white Australia. Likewise, noting that the wattle flower is a "gathering" of blooms, he welcomed immigration from foreign lands and advocated living together in service 'for each other's good' (Register (Adelaide), 8 October 1912). Llewellyn Bevan sought to use the patriotic wattle to redefine patriotism. Symbolism is often contested.

Beatrice Bevan wrote two poems for Wattle Day in 1915. In 'Wattle Blossom and Southern Cross' (Register (Adelaide), 6 September 1915), she sought to redefine patriotism in gentle terms.

You see the symbol of this nation's heart.
As glows this golden blossom, so her heart
Shall glow with kindliness and sympathy:
And, as the scent which rises now to us,
So shall her honour be, strong, clean, and sweet.

In 'Wattle Blossom', published the following day in the same newspaper, she invoked the wattle's therapeutic power.

Sweet, tender memories awake,
When springtime brings again
The fragrance and the golden bloom –
My heart forgets its pain.

In Bevan's poetry, wattle is still the symbol of the 'nation's heart' but in 1915 it is a heavy heart, and mourners dare only hope for fleeting consolation.

Wattle's wartime association with healing was greatly aided by the fundraising activities of the Red Cross and hospital auxiliaries. Women and girls sold sprigs of wattle each spring. It was so popular and such supplies of wattle were required that country residents and Wattle Day organisers pleaded that wattle trees not be irreparably damaged in the cause of collecting blooms for Wattle Day. Fortunately for tree lovers and allergy sufferers, the 'wattle-button' also grew in popularity. With its "printed spray of golden wattle looking well on the dark-brown ground of the brooch button", these badges were sold for a shilling each. In 1919, after
extensive fundraising by the Wattle Day League and Red Cross, a wattle tree was ceremoniously planted by Matron Hancock at the opening of the Keswick Hospital’s Orthopaedic Wing in South Australia. Beatrice Bevan’s poetry tapped into wattle’s cultural associations with healing.

Everlasting wattle

Beyond distance and belonging, patriotism and healing, wattle also symbolised immortality. In one of Beatrice Bevan’s last poems, ‘A tribute to the ANZACS: the deathless army’ (Bunya (Gawler, SA), 21 April 1933), she describes wattle as a sign of those who live on in glory.

There is a book of vellum, silver-framed
Whereon, in golden letters, there are named
Men who have won their way to higher place
By virtue of their courage and God’s grace.

And in the book of vellum, see, embossed,
The golden wattle marks the men who ‘crossed’.

Wattle had a long association with life everlasting.
In the story of Moses the burning acacia bush was not consumed by fire, but lived on. Freemasonry, which was so very popular among men in the early 20th century, picked up on this and other myths around acacia. They made it an important symbol in their private system of knowledge and ritual. For the masons, a ‘sprig of acacia’ represented immortality, and they regularly placed acacia in the graves of their members.

Beatrice Bevan made knowing use of these traditions in her poetry; her late father had been a freemason (and her husband Willett later became chaplain to the Masonic Lodge in Gawler).

Immortality and Australian identity came together in wattle bloom. In 1919 sprigs of it were incorporated into the design for a badge that the Federal government issued to widows and mothers of fallen soldiers. In gold thread on black silk, ‘sprays of wattle-bloom, the words “for Australia”, and the rays’ combined to represent a nation in mourning.

Wattle was an ever-present symbol of Australian patriotism during the Great War. In the lives of the people, and the poetry of Beatrice Bevan, it was so much more. Wattle signified belonging and distant sorrow, fleeting moments of healing and the hope of life everlasting. Worn on a lapel, or planted in a garden, wattle was a tangible, fragrant reminder of the complexities of a ‘nation’s heart’.

Wattle blossom by Mrs Willett Bevan

Sweet tender memories awake,
When springtime brings again
The fragrance and the golden bloom–
My heart forgets its pain.

My thoughts leap back across the years:
I see your face again,
When, on the breeze, that fragrance comes,
My heart forgets its pain.

I see the glow within your eyes,
I hear your voice again;
You speak of noble thoughts and …
(My heart forgets its pain!)

I see the fluffy, golden balls
Fall in the stream again,
While on its bank we sit and dream –
(My heart forgets its pain!)

The wattle blooms each spring but you
Will never come again!
I sometimes think my heart will break
So great its weight of pain!

O! could I keep the golden blooms –
The fragrance keep alway –
My heart might then forget its pain,
For ever and a day!

References
6. ‘The green spire at funerals’, Queensland Figaro, 4 September 1913.

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