

# BIRTHS OF A NATION

## WOMEN, CHILDBIRTH AND FEDERATION



On 1 January 1901 the Commonwealth of Australia was born. So were more than 102 000 Australian babies.

In 2001 as we celebrate our country's centenary we are hearing a lot about 'the birth of the nation'. This exhibition explores women's experiences of childbirth in the year the nation was born.

*Births of a nation* has been developed by the Powerhouse Museum in collaboration with the following regional museums and libraries:

Orange City Library; Orange District Historical Society; Golden Memories Museum, Millthorpe; Carcoar Hospital Museum; Bathurst City Library; Bathurst Historical Society and Museum; Museum of the Riverina, Wagga Wagga; Temora Rural Museum; West Wyalong Museum; Adelong Alive Museum.

'Mrs Davy and her baby', photograph taken by Mark James Daniel on 13 October 1901. La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

*Births of a nation: women, childbirth and Federation* brings together an unusual and thought-provoking collection of objects, statistics and primary source materials from around the time of Federation. It offers a rich resource for primary and secondary students in the following areas:

### **Human society and its environment** (years K–6)

- Change and continuity
- Culture
- Roles, rights and responsibilities

### **Personal development, health and physical education** (years K–12)

- Growth and development
- Interpersonal relationships

### **General studies** (years 11–12)

- Society and the individual

### **Society and culture** (years 7–12)

- Social inequality, prejudice and discrimination

### **Modern history** (years 11–12)

- 20th century national study — Australia

### **Aboriginal studies** (years 7–12)

- social and political issues
- health and medicine
- social systems

The exhibition is structured into eight main themes:

1. Births of a nation: Federation and fertility
2. Getting ready for baby: pregnancy and preparation
3. Hard labour: birth stories
4. Indigenous birthing: women's business
5. Special delivery: helping at the birth
6. After birth: mother and baby
7. Welcome stranger: celebrating the new arrival
8. Federation babies: citizens of a century



(Above) In 1901 the birth of children and the symbolic birth of the nation were linked in cartoons such as this one depicting the nation as a new baby. Australia's first prime minister, Edmund Barton, is the 'nurse' of the new nation and exclaims, 'He ain't much now. But wait till he grows!' Cartoon by 'Hop' from *The Bulletin* 14 July 1900, reproduced from a copy held in the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

## BIRTHS OF A NATION

### Federation and fertility

*In whatever way the waning birth-rate is viewed ... it is ... a grave disorder sapping the vitals of a new people, dispelling its hopes, blighting its prospects, and threatening its continuance.\**

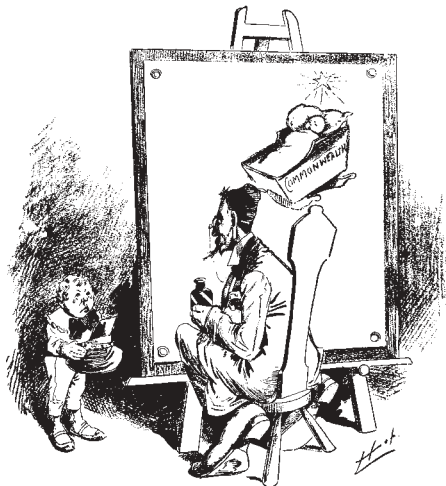
The mothers of 1901 lived in a society obsessed with birth. While cartoonists pictured the new nation as a small baby, in reality the birthrate was falling. Doctors and politicians feared that the choice of many parents to have smaller families threatened the growth of 'White Australia'.

Childbearing was seen as a national duty, and was used by feminists to claim women's right to vote and to a say in national affairs. Birth was not simply a private, personal event; it was a major social and political issue.

\* Report of the Royal Commission into the Decline of the Birth-Rate (NSW), 1904.

### KEY OBJECT

- Reproduction maternity corset



Before Federation, the 'Little Boy From Manly' symbolised New South Wales in cartoons. Here he anxiously enquires whether he'll be needed any longer, now the baby Commonwealth has arrived. 'Anxious about his billet', cartoon by 'Hop', from the *Bulletin*, 25 August 1900, taken from a copy held in the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.



The Snelson family of Cobar enjoying morning tea on the verandah, about 1905. Courtesy the Bicentennial Copying Project, State Library of NSW.

### STATISTICS

- Population of Australia in 1901 = 3.8 million.
- Population of Australia in 2001 = 19 million.
- Birthrate 1901 = 27.2 per 1000 population.
- Birthrate 1998 = 13.3 per 1000 population.
- Number of babies born in 1901 (does not include Aboriginal births) = 102,945.
- Number of babies born in 1998 (does include Aboriginal births) = 249,616.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics website.

## GETTING READY FOR BABY

### pregnancy and preparation

*'[I] sat by the drawing room fire and sewed and dreamed sweet dreams over the tiny garment.'*\*

Mothers-to-be busied themselves with a ritual of set tasks to prepare themselves, their homes and families for baby's arrival ... sewing baby clothes, organising help for when the time came, and in most cases getting together some of the items necessary for the birth itself.

It was an emotional time. The pleasures of anticipating the arrival of the 'little stranger' were mixed with fears about the prospect of pain or even death in labour. Many also worried about how their family would cope with another child.

\* Ethel Turner, diary entry for 9 July 1897.

### KEY OBJECTS

- Baby's layette made for Ellen Ferguson, Cooma, 1900–1918
- Binder, shirt, petticoat and dress

### QUOTE

Constance Jane Ellis lived with her husband in outback Queensland from 1889 to 1904 and later wrote about her experiences in *I seek adventure* (Alternative Publishing Company, 1981). She recalled that when she was pregnant with her first child she had little idea about what she should make. Jane Ellis sent her husband to buy material for the baby's clothes:

*'He bought all there was to buy at Angledool's one store — 6 yards of Horrock's M.T. Calico (a*



Although department stores like Anthony Horderns in Sydney sold ready-made baby clothes, most women sewed their own as a special gift for the unborn child. 'The seamstress's reverie' by Arthur Loureiro 1887, courtesy National Gallery of Victoria

*stout make used for making men's shirts) and 6 yards of grey and black striped shirting flannel!!! Certainly the very articles to turn into a baby's trousseau! And I had only the very vaguest idea as to what was wanted. I had never had anything to do with a baby, beyond nursing one occasionally. But I had some of the garments I had made for a 'longclothes' baby doll. So I set to work and made nightgowns from the calico ... [she made shirts and a bonnet from one of her own baby dresses]. Then for flannels I cut up some of my own garments.'*

### STATISTICS

Approximate number of babies born to each woman of childbearing age (total fertility rate):

- 1901 = 3.5
- 1999 (most recent figure) = 1.75

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics

## HARD LABOUR

### birth stories

*Mark'st thou the strange, sweet radiance in  
her eye?  
She has been near to Heaven's portal.  
And there, while Death and Life stood  
watching by,  
Hath plucked, with trembling hand, a  
flow'r immortal.\**

In a flood, a bush hut, a city terrace or a hospital ward, every birth in 1901 was unique. We know only a few of the many thousand Federation-year birth stories. Front-room and back-fence re-tellings have vanished, but diaries, letters, literature, parish registers, coroner's inquests and family recollections allow us to glimpse some of the most intense moments in people's lives.

\* 'Motherhood', from the *Dawn*, October 1900.

### KEY OBJECT

- This section features an audiovisual of recollections and stories of births from 1901.



The spirit of 1901 hovers over prime minister-elect Edward Barton's head. By Ben Strange, from M Mahood, 'The loaded line', 1973



Babies could arrive at any time. In 1901 midwife Grannie Dollin delivered a baby in the Sydney suburb of St Marys with flood waters swirling around her feet. 'Flood sufferings' by Aby Alston 1890, courtesy National Gallery of Victoria

### QUOTE

*I sleep so peaceful in my grave  
With baby on my breast  
So dear husband do not mourn  
For we are at rest.*

This quote appears on the headstone of Catherine Burke, who was buried with her baby in Millthorpe Cemetery outside Orange in June 1912.

### STATISTICS

Maternal mortality rates in NSW:

- Number of women who died in childbirth in 1900 = 72.1 for every 1000 live births.
- In 1992 (most recent figures) = 3.4 for every 1000 live births.

Figures from the *Report of the Royal Commission into the Decline of the Birthrate (NSW) 1904* and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

## **INDIGENOUS BIRTHING**

### **women's business**

Before 1901 and as late as 1967, Aboriginal women's experiences of birth were shaped by restrictive government and non-government policies, such as in church-run missions. Aboriginal people were not classed as citizens of this country until 1967 and many births were not registered.

In most Indigenous communities, birthing was seen as women's business; men were restricted from participating. Traditionally, when a woman was due, she left the main camp and went to a special place in preparation for the birth, assisted by her female Elders. The place of birth was important in connecting the child with his or her ancestral land.



An Aboriginal baby asleep in a coolamon. From the Gillen Album, courtesy the South Australian Museum.

### **KEY OBJECT**

- Coolamon

### **STATISTICS**

Note: Aboriginal people were not included in the 1901 census. Aboriginal people have only been fully included since 1971.

- Estimated Indigenous population in 1901 = 93 333 (2.46% of the total Australian population).
- Indigenous population in 2001 = 427 094 (2.1% of the total Australian population).

Figures are estimates from the Australian Bureau of Statistics

## SPECIAL DELIVERY

### helping at the birth

*'She walked very erect with great purpose, her cloak and scarf flying in the breeze, with the black bag so necessary to one who delivered the districts' babies.'*\*

In 1901 most non-Indigenous women chose to give birth in their own homes, attended by a local midwife with no formal training. But things were slowly changing. Doctors were arriving more frequently at the bedside, with forceps and chloroform at the ready. In both suburbs and country towns, midwives began setting up birthing rooms in their homes. The influence of newly founded women's hospitals was expanding, although in 1901 they mainly catered for poor women or single mothers. And a new breed of trained midwifery nurses spread the gospel of antiseptics from Surry Hills to Broken Hill.

\* Description of Mary Kirkpatrick, a midwife from Kempsey, in *With courage and devotion: a history of midwifery in NSW*, Sydney, 1984

### KEY OBJECTS

- Recreated doctor's bag with selection of instruments including forceps, Chloroform drop bottle and Skinner's mask
- Recreated midwife's bag with props including linen, powder, binder and towels.
- This section also features an audiovisual.



Many children thought that babies came in the doctor's or midwife's bag, as this card suggests. Postcards were a cheap new way to keep in touch in 1901, and charming infants proved a popular subject. From the collection of Martha Sear

### STATISTICS

- Number of practising midwives in New South Wales in 1901 = 2000.
- Number of practising midwives in New South Wales in 2001 = 19 498.

Figures from *With courage and devotion: a history of midwifery in New South Wales*, Sydney, 1984, p85, and the Nurses Registration Board of New South Wales.

## AFTER BIRTH

### mother and baby

*'Since yesterday, I am promoted to a chais lounge [sic] ... Your nephew ... is, as yet, a very good little chap & hardly ever crys tho' he is given to mistake night for day at times ... I am looking very beautiful at the present time my face being a mass of prickly heat & my nose resembling a boiled beet.'*\*

After the birth, mother's attention shifted to caring for the new baby. Feeding and keeping baby clean were her primary preoccupations.

Mothers' health was also the subject of concern. Mothers were often advised to stay in bed for long periods to prevent bleeding, infection and ongoing gynaecological problems, although few could afford such luxury.

\* Meta Murray Prior to her 'Aunt Longlegs', 18 January 1897.

### KEY OBJECTS

- Breast pump and nipple shield (*feeding*)
- Baby binder, pilchers, safety pins and feeding bottles (*pilchers and powder*)
- Pessaries for prolapsed wombs (*effects of birth on mothers*)

### QUOTE

Babies who were either stillborn or died shortly after birth were buried straight away, often without a funeral service. In October 1890, John Black wrote movingly of burying his stillborn son:

*'I made a coffin for the child, got a cab and drove out to the Cemetery and buried it there. We let Polly see her boy before taking it away.'*



Mrs F Gabriel bathes baby Evangeline, watched by her eldest daughter Marion. Photo by Francis Gabriel, 1907, courtesy State Library of South Australia

### STATISTICS

- Number of infants in Australia dying in the first year of life in 1901 = 103.6 for every 1000 babies born (ie, about 1 in 10).
- Number of infants in Australia dying in the first year of life in 1998 = 5 for every 1000 babies born (ie, 1 in every 200) Note: the mortality of Aboriginal infants today is 3 times higher than that of the rest of the Australian community.

Figures from *Australians: historical statistics*, Broadway, 1987, p58, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

## WELCOME STRANGER

celebrating the new arrival

*'What is a baby? That which makes home happier; love stronger; patience greater; hand busier; nights longer; days shorter; purses lighter; clothes shabbier; the past forgotten, the future brighter.'* \*

In churches, synagogues, temples and sacred places, Federation babies were welcomed into the community in many different ways. Registering the birth, and baby's appearance in Australia's first census (held in 1901), marked the white child's entry into citizenship of the new nation.

But for some mothers, birth brought mourning, shame and ostracism instead of celebration. Maternal and infant death was common, and illegitimacy and desertion were still causes of disgrace.

\* From the *New Idea*, 1 October 1902.

### KEY OBJECTS

- Christening gown worn by Lesley Glover, Enmore, 1899
- Mourning handkerchief

### QUOTE

In Orange General Cemetery there are a number of babies' graves. Some have moving poems probably written by their parents. Baby Albert Keogh is remembered with the following poem:

*Though by some you are forgotten  
Never shall your memory fade  
Sweetest thought will ever linger  
Round our darling baby's grave*



In this cartoon, prime minister Barton christens the baby Commonwealth with the blood of Australian soldiers sent to the Boer War. 'The Prime Minister christens the baby', cartoon by A F Vincent, from the *Bulletin* 11 January 1902, taken from a copy held in the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW

### STATISTICS

- Most popular baby names in 1901:  
**Girls:** Dorothy, Jean, Mary, Winifred, Marjorie, Doris, Kathleen, Bridget, Elizabeth, Eileen, Lilian, Daisy, Vera, Margaret, Edna, Gladys, Florence, Doreen, Violet, May, Joyce, Phyllis, Erica, Olive, Ivy.  
**Boys:** John, William, George, James, Ronald, Robert, Kenneth, Frederick, Thomas, Keith, Eric, Alfred, Arthur, Charles, Leslie, Dennis, Joseph, Alan, Stanley, Ernest, Harold, Norman, Reginald, David, Francis

From Cecily Dynes, *The great Australian and New Zealand book of baby names*, Sydney, 1984.

- Most popular baby names in 2000:  
**Girls:** Charlotte, Georgia/Georgina, Isabel/Isabella, Emily, Rachel, Emma, Lily, Chloe, Olivia, Catherine, Grace, Caitlin, Jessica, Hannah, Mia, Amelia, Tara, Kate, Molly, Madeleine, Sophie, Elizabeth, Alexandra, Pia, Arabella.  
**Boys:** Jack, Thomas, Joshua, Lachlan, William, James, Alexander, Matthew, Nicholas, Hugh, Patrick, Harrison, Oliver, Luke, Samuel, Benjamin, Michael, Liam, Edward, Daniel, Jonathan, Nathan, Dominic, Charles, Hamish.

## FEDERATION BABIES

### citizens of a century

*'It's so exciting sharing my birthday with everybody this year. It makes me feel more important than the Queen of England!'*\*

**What happened to the babies of 1901? More than 10 000 died before the age of one. But those who survived experienced the Australian nations tumultuous early years.**

**Like twins, Federation babies and their Commonwealth grew up together, each influencing the other. The national narrative of war, depression and drought was interwoven with their own personal stories. A lucky few have lived to celebrate their own centenary, as well as their nation's.**

\* Lucy Williams, born 1 January 1901, interviewed in *The Sun-Herald* 31 December 2000.

### STATISTICS

Life expectancy:

- Australian male life expectancy at birth (1901-1910) = 55.2 years.
- Australian male life expectancy at birth (1997) = 75.6 years.
- Aboriginal Australian male life expectancy at birth (1998) = 57 years.
- Australian female life expectancy at birth (1901-1910) = 58.84 years.
- Australian female life expectancy at birth (1997) = 81.3 years.
- Aboriginal Australian female life expectancy at birth (1998) = 62 years.

Figures from *Australians: historical statistics*, Broadway, 1987, pp60-1, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.



'The enfranchisement of babies'. Cartoon from the *Worker* 23 November 1901, courtesy John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

- Famous Federation babies:

Kenneth Slessor, poet

Eleanor Dark, writer

Maurice Ashkanasy, barrister and Jewish leader

Ronald Aston, engineer and academic

'Fifi' Banvard, actress

Rochus Joseph John Bukowski, trade unionist

James Coates, 'confidence man'

Sir Warwick Fairfax, company director

Charles Melbourne Focken, physicist and museum director

Pearl Gibbs, political activist for the cause of Indigenous Australians

Gladys Gibson, feminist

Ken Hall, film director

John Hamilton, ophthalmologist

Xavier Herbert, writer

Sir Marcus Oliphant, nuclear physicist and governor of South Australia

## SOME SUGGESTED QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

### Births of a Nation: Federation and fertility

1. In Australia, the birth rate has more than halved in the last century. Think of three reasons why this might have happened.

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2. The picture below shows a typical family enjoying a morning together early last century.



- Sketch a picture of your family.
- How does it differ to the Snelson family?
- What kind of activities does your family do together?

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### Getting ready for baby: pregnancy and preparation

1. Here is a list of things to do to prepare for the birth of a child in 1901.

- Things to do*
1. Buy cotton cloth
  2. Sew clothes
  3. Buy safety pins
  4. Order bassinette
  5. Knit blanket

2. Talk to your parents. What things did they do to prepare for your birth?

- Things to do*
1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
  4. \_\_\_\_\_
  5. \_\_\_\_\_

3. Compare the lists. What are some of the differences?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Hard labour: birth stories

Giving birth was a frightening time for women. A big concern for new mothers was infection. As you can see, the mortality rate in 1901 was more than 20 times higher than it is today.

1. Can you think of some reasons why deaths due to infection have been reduced so dramatically?

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**Indigenous birthing: women’s business**

1. What do you think ‘secret women’s business’ means in Aboriginal communities?

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2. How is this term now used in the wider community?

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**Special delivery: helping at the birth**

In 1901, babies were usually delivered at home by a midwife. The father of the baby stayed well clear of the birthing room.

1. How has giving birth changed in the last 100 years? (Think about where most people go to have a baby, how the health of the baby is monitored prior to its birth, who is usually present at the birth etc)

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**After birth: mother and baby**

Infant death was a common occurrence in 1901. Most people knew someone whose baby had died at birth or even suffered the loss of their own child.

Today, due to improved medical practices and a better understanding of a mother and baby’s health needs, the infant mortality rate has dropped significantly.

1. Do you know anyone who has lost a child at birth?

2. Talk to your grandparents or an older person in your community.

- When they were children, do they remember anyone losing a child at birth?
- Do they think infant mortality is less of a concern today than it was for their parents?

- Why?

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**Welcome stranger: celebrating the new arrival**

*Group activity*

1. Think about the people in your class or school. What are the five most popular girls and boys names?

Girls

Boys

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<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>

2. Now write your five favourite girls and boys names.

Girls

Boys

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<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>

3. Compare your list with the other members of your group. Are there any common names?

4. Now compare with the other groups. What are your class's five favourite girls and boys names?

Girls

Boys

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Maybe these will become the most popular names in the future. Keep an eye out to see if they become favourites Australia-wide!

**Federation babies**

1. With most Federation babies living to the 1960s and onwards, what are some of the major social, cultural and technological changes that occurred in their lifetime?

*Social*

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*Cultural*

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*Technological*

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2. List five things that you like doing.

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3. Which of these wouldn't you have been able to do if you had been a Federation baby and why?

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## TEACHER RESOURCES

*The diaries of Ethel Turner*, compiled by Phillipa Poole, Collins Publishers Australia, 1987.

Constance Jane Ellis, *I seek adventure*, Alternative Publishing Cooperative, Sydney, 1981.

Elsie Shephard, *The midwives of Rosewood and other birth stories*, Pioneer Women's Hut, Glenroy, 1989.

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Nancy Keesing (ed), *The white chrysanthemum: changing images of Australian motherhood*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1977.

Henry Irving (ed), *A woman's constitution: gender and history in the Australian Commonwealth*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1996.

Jacqueline Kent, *In the half light: life as a child in Australia 1900–1970*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1988.

Janet McCalman, *Sex and suffering: women's health and a women's hospital*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998.

Patricia Grimshaw, Marilyn Lake, Ann McGrath, Marian Quartly, *Creating a nation: 1788–1990*, McPhee Gribble Publishers, Ringwood, 1994.

Pat Quiggin, *No rising generation: women and fertility in late nineteenth century Australia*, ANU, Canberra, 1988.

*With courage and devotion: a history of midwifery in NSW*, NSW Midwives Association, Sydney, 1984.

Ron Rathbone, *A very present help: caring for Australians since 1813 (a history of the Benevolent Society of NSW)*, Benevolent Society of NSW/State Library of NSW, Sydney, 1994.

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A touring exhibition from the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, developed with assistance from the Centenary of Federation Committee.



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