

Happy Birthday Australian Hellenic community!

Last Friday marked the 201st birthday of the Hellenic presence in the Antipodes. On 27 August 1829, seven young men from the Aegean island of Hydra, convicted of piracy, arrived in Port Jackson aboard the Norfolk. The question for us today is: what does the next decade, the next century hold for the Australian Hellenic presence? The year was 1827. The Hellenic War of Independence was raging and anyone supplying the enemy was fair game. These sailors stopped and boarded the Alceste (a Maltese-owned British vessel) in the waters south of Krete. The ship had been transporting supplies to the Egyptian port of Alexandria, then in the hands of the Ottoman Turks. The Hellenes took some items they thought would be useful and sent the Alceste on its way. They were hunted down by the Royal Navy, arrested, convicted of piracy and sentenced to transportation. Antonis Manolis, Damianos Ninis, Ghikas Voulgaris, Georgios Vasilakis, Konstantinos Stroumboulis, Nikolaos Papandreou and Georgios Laritsos were pallikarria, freedom fighters. Setting the model for the hundreds of thousands of Hellenes who followed them, the Hydran sailors used the skills learnt in their island-home to develop and enhance what became their new home. Following their pardon in December 1836, five elected to return to a now independent Hellenic Kingdom. Gikas Voulgaris and his Irish-born wife, Mary Lyons, became pioneer settler-graziers in the Monaro district of south-eastern NSW. He lies in the Old Nimmitabel Cemetery, an alpine town near Cooma. His descendants bear names like Bulgary, Macfarlane, McDonald and Stewart and are scattered across the globe. His shipmate Antonis Manolis spent his remaining years in the Picton district of New South Wales, south-west of Sydney. Dying heirless, he lies in the town's Old Anglican Cemetery, overlooking the fields he had cultivated for decades. This anniversary is more than a moment in time. It provides the opportunity to all Australian Hellenes and philhellenes to take stock of 201 years of Australian Hellenic heritage. To look at the achievements of Australian Hellenism as well as to examine its future direction.

Achievements. The descendants of those early pioneers lacked the opportunity to cultivate the Hellenic side of their dual identity. Thanks to the efforts of those who came later, succeeding generations had this opportunity. Some took it up; others declined. Since the formation of the first association, the Greek Orthodox Community of New South Wales (GOC) in 1897, and the construction of the oldest Orthodox Church in the southern hemisphere Ayia Triada (Holy Trinity) in the inner Sydney suburb of Surry Hills, Australian Hellenes have sought to retain their Hellenism as well as develop their Australian personas. As the migrant generation ages and passes away, an increasing number of Hellenic community organisations are faced with dwindling membership and participation. In particular, organisations based around regional affiliations in the Hellenic World (islands, mountain districts, countries other than Hellas and Cyprus) are facing up to the fact that the Australian-born generations do not place a high priority on involvement in such groups. According to the 2006 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census, barely 20 per cent of the Australian Hellenic community today is of the migrant generation (55 years and over). Many existing community organisations are based on affiliations that are not a priority to their Australian-born children. Younger Australian Hellenes, most of whom have parents from different parts of the Hellenic World or have only one parent of Hellenic descent, either lose all contact with the community or associate



Soldier-artist Major James Taylor captured the spirit of 1821 Sydney: This painting is part of an exhibition about the Macquarie years at the State Library

with what may be described as 'Pan-Hellenic' organisations such as the Archdiocese, the Greek Orthodox Community of NSW, the Order of AHEPA Australia,

Sydney Olympic and other athletic organisations and similar groups. A number of professional bodies have also emerged such as the Sydney-based Australian Hellenic Educators' Association (AHEA) and the Greek Australian Professionals' Association (GAPA). The author believes that the Australian Hellenic community DOES have a future. While many existing organisations will pass into history, there are already others such as ALPHA (Australian Lawyers Phil-Hellenic Association Inc.) Our people have changed and regenerated countless times in our millennial history. In the words of a medieval Pontian lament, «Η Ρωμανία κι αν πέρασεν, η Ρωμανία κι αν πάρθεν, ανθεί και φέρει κι άλλο». (The Christian Hellenic Empire may have passed, the Christian Hellenic Empire may have been taken, it blooms and blossoms anew). So it is with Australian Hellenism: as one branch of our community passes, other ones grow in their place.

Prepared by Dr Panayiotis Diamadis for the Dictionary of Sydney, July 2009



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