

Waratah or Wattle?

THE protagonists of the Wattle, as the heraldic flower emblem of the Commonwealth, have so far won their way as to procure that beautiful, yet drooping, bloom to be included on the Australian Coat of Arms, and they have also succeeded in establishing "Wattle Day" as an institution in the eastern States. The battle of flowers, however, is still merrily proceeding, and never a Spring passes that does not add greatly to the ranks of those who have maintained, since 1793, the superior claims of the Waratah to be universally accepted as our national flower. Of late years, Mr. R. T. Baker, Curator of the Technological Museum, has conducted the fight as commander-in-chief of the Waratah forces, and his exquisite book on the subject, published in 1915, provides ample demonstration that, at least in the field of Applied Art, the Waratah is carrying all before it and has already laid the foundations of a distinctly national form of decoration—an achievement that has no parallel in modern times.

In the ancient world, the Egyptians had the Lotus, the Greeks the Honeysuckle, the Romans the Acanthus. These beautiful forms have survived the ages to immortalise in architecture the race that adopted them, and they now suffuse the civilised globe as conventionalised inspirations of decoration and design. It is strange, indeed, that they should at length encounter a rival in Australia—a rival ultimately destined beyond a doubt to surpass and dominate them all. What is it that constitutes a national flower? Many factors count, but art has always the first and the last word to say on the matter, and the artist makes his selection according to the degree of any particular plant's adaptability to the essential requirements of design. The least fitting are eliminated. The fittest alone survive. We need not be told the reason why. The Iris, the Honeysuckle, the Lotus and the Acanthus finally excluded from the sphere of art all the other lovely plants and blooms of Europe and Asia. In form and grace of line they stand forth as pre-eminently suitable to supply the demands of the creative and initiative artist. The artists of the old world could find nothing more fitting for their purpose—nor the artists of modernity until Australia was discovered.

The Egyptians, the Hindus, the Greeks, the Romans, were never privileged to see a Waratah. They had to choose favourites from the loveliness at their disposal. Yet I dare to say that, had it been possible, say 400 years ago, for a company of the greatest representative artists of all the countries of Europe, Africa and Asia to meet in a hall filled with cut specimens of all the finest flowers growing anywhere on earth to select the one bloom superlatively adapted to design, they would have selected the Waratah, by an overwhelming majority. The prehistoric Australian Aborigine had but a crude appreciation of the beautiful. It is significant, however, that our black artists of the stone age were driven by the elements of spirituality within them to love the Waratah and to attempt its portrayal in their rude cave carvings and their painting on stone.

In 1793 the English Zoologist, Dr. Smith, was instinctively constrained to include in his work on the Zoology of New Holland a coloured picture of the flower, and to describe it thus:—"The most magnificent plant which the prolific soil of New Holland affords, is, by common consent both of Europeans and natives, the Waratah." The cultured botanists who first named and classified the plant were led by its extraordinary perfections to style it "*Telopea speciosissima*," which means "seen from afar," and the most beautiful of all." The Wattle, too, is "seen from afar," and it is very beautiful, but we have only to consider the two flowers in comparison for a moment to realise that the Wattle does not fulfil the requirements of a national flower.

We have seen that the Waratah is wonderfully adaptable to design (the first essential), and every artist knows that it is beginning to lend a distinctive character (by a process of purely instinctive selection) to the applied art of Australia. The Wattle is not. The Wattle can be pictured in colours with effect, but the world of form tries in vain to use it. We observe its delineation, on our Coat of Arms, and other heraldic devices with a shudder. We blame the designing artists, but quite unjustly. They did their best. They did not select the Wattle. It was forced upon them. Now let us ask ourselves—What are the other factors to constitute a national flower? A plant to serve properly the purpose of our national flower should be:—

1. A native of Australia and peculiar to Australia alone.
2. It should grow wild over a large part of the Australian Continent.
3. It should bloom in the Spring.
4. It should be capable of easy cultivation in any garden.
5. It should not be a weed or in any sense noxious to health.
6. It should bear a shapely and distinctive flower.
7. It should not be merely a foliage plant.
8. It should be so characteristic in its form that when conventionally used in design it may be recognised readily, independent of its colour.

As to factor 1, the Waratah belongs exclusively to Australia, and is found in no other country. In the Wattle, on the other hand, Australia enjoys no monopoly. It is found in America, the East and West Indies and the Islands, and it is the adopted national flower of South Africa, which country has more than 100 varieties of native Wattles.

Re factor 2, the Waratah grows wild, widely over New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, and is as easily capable of garden cultivation in any part of Australia as the Wattle. For the rest, the Waratah blooms in our Spring. It is not a weed; it is not in any way noxious to health (the Wattle, when in bloom, is a potent cause of hay fever); it bears a shapely and distinctive flower; it is not merely a foliage plant; and, finally, unlike the Wattle, the Waratah has so characteristic and beautiful a shape that even when used in the most confusing of conventionalised designs, it cannot be mistaken for any other flower—in short, it cannot be conventionalised out of recognition.

But that is not all. The Wattle, for all its sweet loveliness, is a drooping flower. There is naught about it to command respect or to inspire reverence. And surely Australia needs and deserves (I think of our Australian soldiers) an emblem that should have strength as well as beauty. Behold, then, the Waratah! It is not merely a beautiful flower. It is an expression of self-confidence, virility and conscious majesty. It stands on its slender stem, straightly and strongly; defiant as a spear, as well armed to repel attack as qualified with charms to win appreciation and affection. Moreover, its colouring is full of challenge and virility. A blazing emblem of health and firmness of independence and endurance, the Waratah symbolises, wherever it is found or seen, our pride of race and place, and all the strong and manly virtues we believe that we possess and aspire to incorporate permanently as the most distinctive features of our natural character.

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