

A Capital Day

By Roslyn Hull

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Based on accounts printed in:

- The Sydney Morning Herald 15 January and 13 March 1913¹
- The Queanbeyan Age 14 March 1913
- The Chronicle (Adelaide) 15 March 1913

However, the actions are not factual but imagined.

¹ The full articles are all digitised on Trove: <http://trove.nla.gov.au>

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Cast²:

The special reporter for the Queanbeyan Age
Prime Minister Andrew Fisher
Lord Denman, Governor-General of Australia
Lady Denman, his wife
The Honourable King O'Malley, Minister for Home Affairs
Mr. Cook and
Mr. Hughes (Members of Parliament)
Mrs. Brassey and
Mrs. Kaye (locals)
Crowd

The action takes place on Kurrajong Hill, originally called Camp Hill (now known as Capital Hill, the site of the Australian Parliament House). When the play opens the stage is empty except for the foundation stone of the Commencement Column, which will form the focal point of activity. Three plaques lay evenly spaced around the stone, ready to be laid. A nearby table holds three ceremonial trowels and a 'golden casket' (it was actually a cigarette case).³

Separate from this, to one side on the stage there is a small desk/table and a single chair. The REPORTER sits there, pencil poised, ready to write in a notebook⁴ (or type on an antique typewriter)

² Costuming could be as complex as full period costume or as simple as individual hats:

The special reporter for the Queanbeyan Age – felt fedora
 Prime Minister Andrew Fisher – top hat
 Lord Denman, Governor-General of Australia – admiral's bicorne
 Lady Denman, his wife – feather boa wrapped around a hat
 The Honourable King O'Malley, Minister for Home Affairs – false beard
 Mr. Cook and Mr. Hughes – bowler hats
 Mrs. Brassey and Mrs. Kaye – large straw hats
 Crowd – picture hats for ladies, flat caps, bowlers and fedoras for men

³ The Foundation Stone could be a flat hexagonal shape on the floor (6 sides for the 6 States), or built out of fence paling, milk crates or whatever is available. The trowels could be gold cardboard covered cake servers or plain cement trowels. The plaques laid at the first presentation of this play were foamcore 'stones' 'laid' by pressing them to a velcro dot on a small acrylic display stand (the type used for books). Extra stage dressing: an Australian flag on a stand or red, white and blue bunting or streamers.

⁴ His lines could be printed in his notebook as a prompt - his words are based on the very purple prose written in the actual newspaper report.

REPORTER: Where to begin? Something grand to take the attention away from the advertisement for Dr. Sheldon's magnetic liniment for barked shins ... *He writes* With the dawn of the Twentieth Century of the Christian Era began the career of the Commonwealth of Australia - destined to become the brightest gem in the diadem of Great Britain's world-wide empire. But not until the new Commonwealth had entered upon the thirteenth year of its existence had its governing authorities irrevocably determined upon the site and name of its Capital. *He is still, in whatever pose he is in at the end of this dialogue.*

The CROWD (including MR COOK, MRS BRASSEY and MRS KAYE) move onstage chatting quietly, waving small Union Jack flags, as the REPORTER starts speaking again, ALL freeze where they are.

REPORTER: Every centre of population throughout the district, from long before early dawn, was astir in preparation for a trek to Kurrajong Hill. At the site their numbers swelled and swelled till somewhere between six and eight thousands were there in eager expectation of what was forthcoming.

The CROWD begins moving again and the REPORTER freezes. The CROWD chats with mounting excitement for a beat. ALL again freeze as the REPORTER speaks.

REPORTER: They had come in vehicles of every class and description, Amongst those modes of conveyance motor cars more than 100 in number could be counted.

The CROWD move again and the REPORTER freezes. They arrange themselves in an arc (broken up into small groups) around the rear of the stone. The CROWD freezes as the REPORTER begins again.

REPORTER: They gazed around to their hearts' content on the sublime panorama stretching away to the far horizon, astounded with the beauty of the sight commanding their admiration. There were the prepared arrangements to inspect also. Foremost amongst these stood the grandstand erected for the accommodation of the invited guests. It was capable of seating at least 1000.

The CROWD all looks offstage right as the REPORTER freezes.

CROWD: Ooooh.

The CROWD returns to chatting amongst themselves.

MR. COOK stands to one side of the Foundation Stone, shielding his eyes as he looks offstage left. MRS. BRASSEY and MRS. KAYE stand on the other side of the Stone, looking in the same direction as MR COOK.

ALL freeze again

REPORTER: The troops, comprising the forces encamped a couple of miles away, were formed into a hollow square facing the grandstand, while a guard of

honour, comprising a body of the senior cadets from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, was drawn up immediately in front of the pile of massive masonry which marks the commencement of the actual work of city building. Away on the crown of Canberra Hill, the Artillery were in position and sounded a 19 gun salute to herald the vice-regal party.

REPORTER freezes and ALL relax - an artillery boom sounds offstage and they gasp in shock. ALL freeze.

REPORTER: The boom of these mighty field-pieces alarmed many little children and babes in arms brought thither by their mothers. Those seated all stood as the band struck up the National Anthem.

REPORTER freezes and scene continues.

MRS. BRASSEY: Goodness those guns were loud!

MRS. KAYE: I know Mrs Brassey but aren't the young light horsemen handsome?

MRS. BRASSEY: Yes, and it does my heart good whenever we sing 'God Save the King'. Reminds me of home.

MR. HUGHES enters from stage left.

MR. HUGHES: The Governor-General is reviewing the troops with the Prime Minister.

MR. COOK: Vice-regal dignitaries, persons of note and humble country folk all gathered together for our Federal Capital. What a day!

ALL freeze, REPORTER writes.

REPORTER: In building the Federal Capital the people of Australia have an opportunity such as has rarely fallen to the lot of any nation, and it behooves us to make the best use of it. We are building the capital of a continent, and have started with a clean slate.

REPORTER freezes as MR. O'MALLEY enters from stage left and goes to MR. COOK and MR. HUGHES.

MR. O'MALLEY: Is everything in readiness brothers?

ALL freeze as REPORTER writes.

REPORTER: We have been able to choose its site from an area as great as a European country; we have been able to enlist the services of the world to help us in our task, and to apply the latest teachings of science in town-planning. Hitherto everything points to an achievement worthy of the dignity of the

undertaking, but one thing remains to be done if our capital city is to do honour to the Commonwealth, and that is to choose a name.

REPORTER freezes as action continues.

MR. COOK: There is still the question of the correct pronunciation.

MR. HUGHES: I think it should be said ...

MR. O'MALLEY: *(cutting him off)* No sir, it is agreed, whichever way Lady Denman says it will be correct for all time.

MRS. BRASSEY: *(who may have overheard them)* As I said to your Mr. Kaye just last week, common sense will prevail. This place has a name, a perfectly good name and I am sure they will keep it.

MRS. KAYE: I know Mrs Brassey, it's just that everyone is so full of federal fervour – what if they choose something, well...

MRS. BRASSEY: Whimsical? Fanciful like those I saw in the Sydney paper?

MRS. KAYE: Yes, Kangaromu, Eucalyptia – or worse still, Myola. How will our Capital survive if it is the butt of jokes?

MRS. BRASSEY: Oh my dear, I believe it will be the butt of many jokes – it is the Australian way.

ALL freeze as the REPORTER takes up his writing again.

REPORTER: The naming of the capital is too important a thing to be left to the uncontrolled caprice of a few persons clothed with a little brief authority. Their power may be for a day, but the capital will, we hope, endure for ever, and once it is given a name, that name, if unsuitable, will be extremely difficult to alter.

The REPORTER freezes as the PRIME MINISTER, GOVERNOR-GENERAL and LADY DENMAN arrive, entering stage left.

PM FISHER: *(raising his top hat)* Greetings all on this glorious March morning. I would like to say this event is a very happy one. The weather is all one could desire and the company is fitting to the occasion *(the GOVERNOR-GENERAL and LADY DENMAN nod to him in acknowledgement ... but so does the CROWD)*. The wrangle about the home of government is over. The city is to be built and the Commonwealth is to build it. I believe all parties desire to make it worthy of our nation.⁵

The CROWD applauds enthusiastically

⁵ This remark is taken from the Prime Minister's speech at the reception that followed, as quoted in the Canberra and District Historical Society newsletter of April 1966

PM FISHER: Ladies and gentlemen! I now invite his Excellency the Governor-General to lay the foundation stone of this column on behalf of the people of Australia.

The CROWD cheers, then ALL freeze.

REPORTER: *(A little breathlessly)* The great ceremony of the day is to lay three stones in the base of what is to be a soaring column noting the commencement of work on the federal capital city of our Commonwealth. Each massive stone weighs 12 hundredweight and will be raised slightly from the two blocks of wood on which it rests by means of a huge crane, then ceremonially tapped into place by each dignitary.

The REPORTER freezes as the action continues. The GOVERNOR GENERAL collects a trowel and taps his plaque gently into place, then salutes the general direction of the foundation stone.

GOVERNOR GENERAL: I declare this first stone of the commencement column well and truly laid.

The CROWD cheers enthusiastically.

MR O'MALLEY: I am going to ask the Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia to lay the second foundation stone.

The CROWD cheers again, someone calls out 'Good boy Andy'. The PRIME MINISTER collects a trowel and taps his plaque into place.

PM FISHER: This second stone of the first column of the Federal city is well and truly laid.

The CROWD cheers again, MR. O'MALLEY steps forward, thumbs tucked into his waistcoat pockets, and beams at the crowd. Nothing happens. The CROWD look at one another, not sure what they should do – then ALL freeze.

REPORTER: The Minister for Home Affairs, that singular 'Canadian', Mr. King O'Malley was the third to lay a stone but did so in a suit that was less than elegant. The word within the politicians' camp was that he forgot to pack his decent togs.

The REPORTER freezes and the action continues.

MR. O'MALLEY: *(A little indignant)* I'm laying a stone too.

The CROWD, understanding what he wants obligingly cheers. MR. O'MALLEY taps his stone into place.

MR. O'MALLEY: I declare this stone well and permanently laid.

He looks expectantly at the CROWD. They look back, again quizzical, then realise what he is waiting for and cheer again. The gentlemen then step back from the stone and ALL freeze.

REPORTER: The massed bands commenced playing the 'Old Hundredth' Psalm. Printed copies of which had been distributed and all were invited to add their vocal music to the strains of the bands. When this hymn had ended, a fanfare of trumpets followed and LADY DENMAN, carrying a small golden case, stepped up to the stone.

PM FISHER: The moment has arrived. I now ask Lady Gertrude Denman, wife of our most excellent Governor-General to reveal to us all what our Federal Capital will for ever after be called.

MRS. BRASSEY and MRS. KAYE grasp each other's hands.

MRS. BRASSEY and MRS. KAYE together: This is it, this is it.

LORD DENMAN: *(leaning over to the gentleman next to him):* For weeks past ladies and gentlemen have been writing to the papers, to the Minister, the Prime Minister and even myself suggesting names of various kinds. Articles have appeared in the press discussing their chances with the same zest *(nudging his neighbour)* as if they are sporting writers weighing the chances of candidates for the Melbourne Cup.⁶

LADY DENMAN opens the box and takes out a slip of paper. The CROWD breathes in and leans forward, all together. LADY DENMAN clears her throat.

LADY DENMAN: I name the capital city of Australia Canberra.

ALL freeze

REPORTER: Canberra. Canberra it is after all said and done and the joy of the people knew no bounds! Her Excellency's announcement could not possibly reach the whole assemblage at first hand. Those within reach of her voice acclaimed approval of the decision and as the news was passed on to the most distant fringes of the vast crowd, the valley reverberated with the gladness of all hearts.

At a signal from an officer of the Artillery stationed on the great stand, the big guns on Canberra Hill again boomed forth a salvo of 21 guns.

ALL unfreeze and cheer very loudly. Hats may be thrown in the air. MRS. BRASSEY and MRS. KAYE bounce up and down whilst still trying to appear ladylike. Artillery noises off.

MRS. BRASSEY and MRS. KAYE together: Hooray! Hooray!

⁶ This remark is taken from the Governor-General's speech as quoted in the Canberra and District Historical Society newsletter of April 1966

PM FISHER: I call for a cheer for her Excellency Lady Denman for naming the capital city. Hip, hip -

CROWD: Hooray!

PM FISHER: I ask for a cheer for his Excellency the Governor General for coming to lay the first stone.

The CROWD starts to cheer but he interrupts.

PM FISHER: I ask for a cheer for the success and progress of Australia.

The CROWD starts to cheer but the GOVERNOR-GENERAL interrupts.

GOVERNOR GENERAL: I call for a cheer for the Prime Minister.

PM FISHER gestures to stop the crowd

PM FISHER: You will embarrass me your Excellency. *(raising his top hat)* God save the King!

CROWD: Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! *(more tossing of hats in the air)*

The GOVERNOR GENERAL bows graciously. MR. O'MALLEY starts to gently round the official guests up as military orders can be heard off stage.

MR. O'MALLEY: Just one more review of the troops to go – and it wouldn't do to keep General Bridges waiting. Oh, and the 21 gun salute!

LADY DENMAN: *(delicately covering her ears at the thought)* And then lunch I do believe?

MR. O'MALLEY: A fine lunch your Excellency, in the marquees just yonder.

The official party moves off stage, MR COOK and MR HUGHES pause a moment before leaving

MR. DEAKIN: What a splendid morning.

MR. COOK: A capital day! *(raises his hat, the crowd applauds once more and bursts into 'Advance Australia Fair')*

...../THE END