

Unfair Game: Queensland's Open Season on Koalas in 1927

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In May 1919, the Queensland government – as it had done two years previously – declared an open season on koalas, legalising the slaughter of more than a million “native bears” for the international fur trade. Six months later, amid great public outcry, the government promised to protect the marsupial and subsequently passed the *Animals and Birds Act* (1921). The reprieve, however, was short-lived and in 1927 – as the State slid prematurely into Depression – the Labor government declared another open season, resulting in a one-month massacre that netted nearly 600,000 koala pelts for overseas markets.¹ The koala was already a national icon and an endangered species – Queensland's was its last substantial population and the Minister for Agriculture and Stock, William Forgan Smith, had reiterated there would be no more koala hunting² – yet the decision was overturned and the koala faced politically-induced extinction.

Reasons for the government's turnaround remain largely unexamined. Biologists make only passing references to the fur trade as contributing to marsupial extermination, while various other writers touch on particular motives. N. L. Howlett, in the main body of work on the issue, suggests that the 1927 decision was driven by economic disaster and chronic unemployment,³ while historians Ross Fitzgerald and Harold Thornton cite gross political ineptitude.⁴ Studying the fate of koalas was in vogue in the 1970s and then the 1980s, perhaps due to extinction scares and a higher public profile of the species around the time of Australia's Bicentenary, but today, the open seasons that Queensland declared on the koala – especially that of 1927 – remain untrammelled. Most texts express moral outrage and rhetorically ask “how could this have happened?” but few – with the exception of Howlett's work (in a marginal journal which is now more than 20 years old) – actually answer the question in any

¹ The toll for 1927 was 597,985 koalas and 1,014,632 possums. Seasons had also been held in Queensland in 1915 and 1917. Bill Phillips. *Koalas: The little Australians we'd all hate to lose*. Canberra: AGPS, 1990. 22; *Queensland Parliamentary Debates* 132 (1919-20): 1064; *QPD* 150 (1927): 1720.

² George Barker, State Secretary, Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union. “Bears and Possums.” *Brisbane Courier* 13 Jul. 1927: 7; *Ibid.*

³ N. L. Howlett. “The Bear You Couldn't Buy: Shooting Koalas in Queensland, 1927.” *Bowyang: Work on Changing Australia*. 1.2 (1979): 9.

⁴ Ross Fitzgerald and Harold Thornton. *Labour in Queensland: From the 1880s to 1988*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press. 104-05.

depth. From this scant historiography, it would appear that the 1927 season, known as “the slaughter of the innocents”,⁵ is still a source of shame in Queensland.

This paper aims to piece together the complex picture of how the final massacre came to pass and how it almost exterminated the species, as well as the mighty backlash that helped unseat a firmly-established Labor government. Placed in its historical context, the 1927 open season represents the pinnacle of routinised slaughter of Australia’s marsupials. While it did not have the greatest toll, it illustrates the extractive and utilitarian mentality that most white Australians harboured towards the environment: that nature was simply a resource to be plundered or a useless backdrop to progress that required substantial modification.

The koala had existed alongside Aboriginal hunting and foraging practices for countless millennia. Some conjecture exists as to whether or not it was a regular food source for Aborigines. Ronald Strahan argues that the species was subjected to “heavy predation” by Aborigines (and the dingo, its only animal aggressor). However, other writers, including Howlett, maintain that the koala population coped with a range of factors: drought, disease, bushfires, and indigenous hunting.⁶ Never, however, was Aboriginal predation on the same scale that European science, technology and industry enabled. Rather, the koala – as some early colonial reports suggest – was not regarded by Aborigines as particularly good eating, especially when alternatives were readily available, and in several instances mythical, cultural and totemic significance was attached.⁷ Its various tribal names, including “kaola” (meaning “no drink”), indicate that this may have been the case as several legends describe it as either the giver or taker of water. Perhaps, more significantly, the Aborigines of Victoria’s Upper Yarra region believed that the “koob-borr” must not lose its *skin*.⁸

Because of its limited habitat of eucalyptus forests, the koala was not noticed for some time by Europeans, but once discovered, it was soon skinned. The first reference is said to be in 1798, from an expedition through the Blue Mountains.⁹

⁵ “Lover of animals.” Letter to the editor. *Brisbane Courier* 25 Jul. 1927: 15; “A Pet Teddy.” *Brisbane Courier* 3 Aug. 1927: 16.

⁶ Howlett. “The Bear You Couldn’t Buy.” 10. From studying outbreaks in 1887-89 and 1900-03, many scientists now believe that the main disease that affected koalas in the past was similar to the stress-induced chlamydia that troubles the species today. Phillips. *The little Australians we’d all hate to lose*. 25.

⁷ The koala (perhaps a printing error of “kaola”) was also known as cullawine, koolawong, colah, koolah, karbor, colo, coolbun, boorabee, burroor, bangaroo, pucawan, banjarah, and burrenbong – many of which mean “no drink”. Peter Watts, Jo Anne Pomfrett, and David Maberley, eds. *An Exquisite Eye: The Australian Flora and Fauna Drawings 1801-1820 of Ferdinand Bauer*. Glebe, NSW: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, c. 1997. 134; Phillips. *The little Australians we’d all hate to lose*. 9.

⁸ G. L. Walsh. *Didane the Koala*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1985; R. Brough Smyth. *The Aborigines of Victoria*. Vol. 1. Melbourne: John Currey, O’Neill. 1876. Both cited by Phillips. *The little Australians we’d all hate to lose*. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.* 15.

Then, in 1804, the koala was the only animal retrieved by a hunting party, as reported by the *Sydney Gazette*:

*Two men who some days since cross a part of the Mountains in quest of birds and native animals, were by chance presented with the appearance of a living substance on one of the extreme branches of a very lofty tree; which being inaccessible, reduced them to the necessity of shaking the creature off, and killed it by the fall. It proved to be a very large and handsome **koolah** (in appearance resembling the **sloth**) of which they preserved the skin. They were out about a fortnight and met with no other **prize** whatever.¹⁰*

The koala was immediately regarded as an object of curiosity and wonder; early colonists were not sure if it was a bear, a wombat or a monkey. Scientific interest also was considerable and ten years later, two European naturalists named it *Phascolarctos cinereus*, Greek and Latin words meaning ash-coloured, leather pouch and bear.¹¹ But, regardless of any unique appeal, early settlers regarded the koala – along with other fauna – as they did native trees: an obstacle to closer settlement and vast pastoral runs.¹² As William J. Lines observes:

The morality of development sanctioned virtually unlimited increases in the quantity of humans and tolerated virtually any decrease in the populations of other life forms – except animals directly useful to humans, such as sheep and cattle. Settlers and professional hunters therefore shot anything that moved in the bush.¹³

Consequently, by 1852, settlers were noting – as naturalist Charles Darwin had also remarked – that Australia's fauna levels had fallen.¹⁴ Pastoralists' attitudes towards the "greedy" kangaroo had been extended to involve "savagely butchering ... every koala, paddymelon, bilby and bustard".¹⁵

¹⁰ *Sydney Gazette* 2 Sep. 1804: 3. Thanks to Murray Johnson, Ph.D. student, University of Queensland, for this reference.

¹¹ The naturalists were H. M. de Blainville of France and his German colleague, Goldfuss. Two other sub-species' names have since been added: the south-east Queensland koala was named *adustus* in 1923 and Victoria's was named *victor* in 1935. Phillips. *The little Australians we'd all hate to lose*. 17.

¹² A. J. Marshall. *The Great Extermination: A guide to Anglo-Australian Cupidity, Wickedness and Waste*. London: Heinemann, 1966. 17.

¹³ William J. Lines. *Taming the Great South Land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia*. North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991. 170.

¹⁴ Marshall. *The Great Extermination*. 16; Vincent Serventy. "The conservation history of the koala with special reference to the work of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia and the state Gould Leagues." Daniel Lunney, Chris Ann Urquhart, and Philip Reed, eds. *Koala Summit: Managing Koalas in New South Wales*. Sydney: NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1990. 169.

¹⁵ Marshall. *The Great Extermination*. 17 and 21.

This demonising of marsupials culminated in the practice of what Bill Thorpe has called “fauna wars”, drives and hunts lasting up to a week. The most infamous was the “Waroo Battue” of 1877, when south-east Queensland grazier Harry Bracker enlisted 17 European “crackshots” and 13 Aboriginal “beaters”, and over three months – with 14 guns operating four to six beats a day – up to 20,000 animals were killed. That Bracker came to be regarded as a folk hero and inspired numerous other rampages illustrates the ecological mindset of the time. Significantly, as Thorpe concludes, the battues elevated and professionalised the bush trapper who had operated on a fairly small scale until the 1880s.¹⁶ However, by the turn of the century, “anything with marketable fur”¹⁷ was considered fair game and the routinised slaughter of fauna readily became an export industry for professionals or selectors wanting to supplement their income. As Howlett points out, Australia had no *coureur de bois* (huntsmen of the woods), but its ‘native born’ took to the pursuit with an almost maniacal enthusiasm.¹⁸ Correspondingly, furriers that had previously promoted their wares as exotic “colonial curios” to send back Home,¹⁹ now appealed to both the hunting instincts of the common man and the fashion aspirations of the (mainly overseas) bourgeois woman, as evidenced in an advertisement for a Rockhampton trader:

*We buy for cash kangaroo, wallaby, bear and possum skins; also wool, hides, tallow, sheepskins etc. Note:- by sending your skins or produce to us you secure equal to Sydney market value in Rockhampton and escape all the middlemen’s charges and profits, as we are buying direct for European, American and Japanese manufacturers.*²⁰

As a commodity, the koala proved to be an easy target. Not unlike seals that colonial capitalists clubbed or shot in the head, the marsupials were “ridiculously easy” to kill because of their renowned sleepiness.²¹ Hunters, however, were keen not to damage the pelts so they often preferred to use cyanide or wire snares, neither of

¹⁶ Bill Thorpe. “Aborigines, Settlers and the Fauna War in Colonial Queensland: the ‘Warroo Battue’ of 1877.” *Journal of Australian Studies* 19 (1986): 25 and 28-29.

¹⁷ Marshall. *The Great Extermination*. 24.

¹⁸ Howlett. “The Bear You Couldn’t Buy.” 11.

¹⁹ Advertisement for L. Wittgenstein, Furrier and Taxidermist, in *The Queensland Figaro*. 1 Sep. 1886: 306.

²⁰ Advertisement for William Moffin and Company in *Queensland at Home*. Cited by Bill Thorpe. *Colonial Queensland: Perspectives on a Frontier Society*. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1996. 80.

²¹ Lines. *Taming the Great South Land*. 21.

which was humane.²² Many animals died an agonising death or managed to escape, half-skinned, only to perish gradually or die of starvation or gangrene,²³ and – because the industry demanded thick furs – hunting occurred mainly in winter, coinciding with koala breeding season. Consequently, again like the seal-fur industry, koala trapping took a double toll, claiming adults and the young, which were routinely left to starve or were fed to dogs.²⁴ (Several bush folk have recounted how they adopted orphaned, severely wounded or *skinned* bears which they found “crying piteously”.)²⁵ Finally, not unlike the seal, the koala was hunted to near extinction.²⁶ In 1908, 60,000 koala pelts passed through the Sydney markets alone, and despite the threat to survival, the tally *increased* so that in 1924, the eastern States exported two-million koala skins, many under the name of wombat.²⁷ Subsequently, when the koala was almost extinct in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales,²⁸ Queensland – with the last remaining substantial colony – reneged on its promise, declaring an open season and sentencing the koala species to a fate from which it would never recover.²⁹

As furred-animal populations in the United States and Canada became depleted and protected, the international fur frontier moved towards Australia and, more specifically, Queensland. Koalas had been protected belatedly by laws in Victoria (1898), New South Wales (1903) and South Australia (1912),³⁰ yet Queensland continued with open seasons in 1915, 1917 and 1919. During World War I, some allowance was made for the industry; to many Australians the slaughter was insignificant compared to that occurring on the Western front and it could be rationalised as part of the war effort. But, in 1919, after a million koalas had been killed in Queensland, public outrage was so great that the koala was promised protection in the State. The press and city interests successfully campaigned against

²² In July 1927, the *Brisbane Courier* reported concerns voiced in *The Australian Pastoralist* (10 Jun. 1927) about koala hunting methods being “brutal”: “If it be by cyanide, a jam tin of water, with the cyanide in solution, is placed at the foot of a tree, and the morning shows the agony that was passed through before death gave the animal release. If they be killed by shooting, the acetylene search-light is brought to shine on the unfortunate animal in the tree; and if they be snared the animal is left to hang. All “joeys” are torn from the pouches and thrown to the dogs.” “Stock disturbed.” *Brisbane Courier*. 21 Jul. 1927: 9.

²³ “Wearing furs.” Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 27 Jul. 1927: 17.

²⁴ Phillips. 21. Marshall. *The Great Extermination*. 23.

²⁵ J. E. Mays. Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 25 Jul. 1927: 15.

²⁶ Lines. *Taming the Great South Land*. 30-33.

²⁷ Statistics do not indicate what portion of these koalas came from Queensland – where hunting was still legal – and how many were caught illegally in other States. *Ibid.* 171; Geoffrey Bolton. *Spoils and Spoilers: A History of Australians Shaping Their Environment*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992. 103;

²⁸ The koala became extinct in South Australia in the 1930s but has since been re-established. Phillips. *The little Australians we'd all hate to lose*. 22.

²⁹ Drew Hutton and Libby Connors. *A History of the Australian Environment Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 43.

³⁰ Phillips. *The little Australians we'd all hate to lose*. 22.

another season and, when the *Animals and Birds Act* was passed (1921), Queenslanders assumed the koala was safe, mainly because “there was little scope for further carnage”.³¹

Koala fur, however, was just too marketable to be left alone. It was not mink or beaver, but “well above rabbit ... in American demands”, it stretched to an oval of thick soft fur, it tanned well and, when sold under the name ‘wombat’, it was ideal for trimmings, “cheap and durable”.³² Consequently, when Queensland announced that it was reversing its decision after an eight-year ceasefire, the State had 10,000 registered trappers.³³ A considerable portion of these were ex-servicemen who had been relocated to small farms to stimulate rural production and help them readjust to civilian life.³⁴ By the 1920s, however – apart from banana farms that had been seized from Chinese immigrants – the Soldier Settler scheme, as it was known, was a dismal failure and men accustomed to hardship and disappointment were walking off the land,³⁵ adding to the State’s mounting unemployment and economic woes. Six-thousand veterans had been settled, but by the late 1920s, half had left and the government had lost nearly £2m.³⁶

The reasons were many and varied, but generally in Queensland they stemmed from Labor’s blind devotion to an agrarian agenda.³⁷ This was linked, in turn, with burgeoning demands for closer settlement in the postwar era. An aggressive form of boosterism – in which “boastful amateurs were replaced by more scientifically oriented professionals”³⁸ – propagated and gave authority to a belief in the unlimited potential of the Australian environment to support a vast population base. Yet this very over-reliance on primary production was, from the mid-1920s, beginning to signal crisis for the State’s economy. In 1925-26, growth was reversed, trade declined

³¹ Howlett. “The Bear You Couldn’t Buy.” 14.

³² R. Lydeckker. *A Handbook to the Marsupial and Monotremata*. London: W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd., 1894. Cited *ibid.* 13.

³³ Phillips. *The little Australians we’d all hate to lose*. 22.

³⁴ Elizabeth Milton. “Soldier Settlement in Queensland after World War One.” BA Hons thesis. University of Queensland, 1968. 1.

³⁵ In 1929, of 6031 soldiers settled on the land in Queensland, only 3617 remained, many in a “deplorable condition”. *Ibid.* 35-47.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 47.

³⁷ Milton cites abnormal conditions – persistent drought every year from 1918-27 except 1922, pestilence, and poor soils – along with veterans being inexperienced and suffering adverse personal conditions. The scheme itself was also inherently flawed: a review found it to be negligent, inefficient, hastily formulated, and of dubious motives. *The Pastoralists’ Review* (Mar.-Dec. 1916: 537) reported that the scheme favoured severely wounded soldiers because they were “steadier, ... married sooner, and were prepared to endure great hardship in an effort to be successful”. Cited *ibid.* 37, 43, 50 and 65. For a broader perspective on the soldier settlement issue, see also: Marilyn Lake. *The Limits of Hope: Soldier Settlement in Victoria, 1915-38*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1987.

³⁸ Selwyn K. Troen and Glen E. Holt, eds. *St. Louis*. New York: New Viewpoints, 1977. 137.

steeply, and Queensland slid into depression more quickly than the rest of the nation.³⁹ But the McCormack government was determined that Queensland would undergo an agrarian revolution; manufacturing performed relatively well yet – with the exception of mining (the “basket case of the economy”) – it was largely ignored. This emphasis on “crops and rocks”, to borrow David Cameron’s phrase, meant that Queensland was beholden to volatile international commodity markets⁴⁰ and what the market wanted in 1927 was *fur*.

Throughout the world, the rise of popular culture and mass consumerism was spawning new demands and new industries.⁴¹ As Julia Emberley observes, fur that had earlier been subject to sumptuary legislation was now controlled by discursive regimes in film, art, radio, and reading. It was not just protective clothing or a sign of social, economic and political powers, but a feminine fashion commodity, a luxury good and a sexual fetish in which the woman herself became an “identifiable object of exchange”.⁴² After seeing countless *femmes fatale* on the silver screen, the fashion-conscious woman sought “a touch of ‘mink’”.⁴³ At this point, St Louis, Missouri – a former fur-trading post and international transport hub – was the centre of activity, home to the American Fur Trading Company and some of the world’s biggest tanneries, factories, branch houses, and shoe and garment districts.⁴⁴ It was here that Queensland’s grey marsupial ended up.⁴⁵

Backed into a corner after the Loans Affair (1920-24), which effectively prevented economic diversification, the Queensland government took the path of least resistance and turned its economic gaze on to the koala. In this sense, it was easier to exploit the environment than invest capital, science and technology into manufacturing. Indeed, the backbencher who defended the decision, Thomas Foley, claimed that fur production could become a leading industry; it was, he said, already “more important ... than mining”.⁴⁶ Foley’s letter was one of only four attempts to

³⁹ The gross value of Queensland’s industrial production fell from £70m in 1924-25 to £54.4m in 1926-27 and exports fell from £26.3m in 1926 to £14.2m in 1927. “Production of Queensland Industries – Estimated Gross Value 1920-1931.” *ABC of Queensland Statistics*. Queensland Government publication. (1929): 199 and (1932): 234; “Summary – Imports and Exports.” *Statistics of the State of Queensland – QPP 1* (1931): 22-3k. Both cited by David Cameron. “A Historical Assessment of Economic Development, Manufacturing and the Political Economy in Queensland, 1900 to 1930.” Ph.D. thesis. University of Queensland, 1999. 266 and 273.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 266, 275 and 288.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 295.

⁴² Julia Emberley. *The Cultural Politics of Fur*. Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1997. 5.

⁴³ Regine Engelmeier and Peter Engelmeier. *Fashion in Film*. Munich: Prestel, 1990. 7.

⁴⁴ Troen and Holt. *St. Louis*. xxviii and 141.

⁴⁵ Phillips. *The little Australians we’d all hate to lose*. 23.

⁴⁶ Thomas Foley. “Open season defended.” Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 21 Jul. 1927: 9. Foley was the Member for Leichhardt.

defend the government's decision during an impassioned newspaper campaign – mainly played out in the *Brisbane Courier* – that peaked in July 1927, a month before the open season, and dropped off sharply in August, when the season opened and progressed, claiming 597,985 koalas worth £139,595.⁴⁷ The total revenue to the State's coffers was a paltry £6000.⁴⁸

On one hand, the government had been pestered by the powerful fur lobby (American traders, and shooters, trappers, traditional skin-hunters, and urban thrill seekers), regional chambers of commerce and councils, and the Queensland Producers' Association; and it was trying to provide freight for its ailing railways, to placate unions, and keep rural votes. Against this "clamour"⁴⁹ stood the contempt of other States, powerful pastoralists whose fences, livestock and stud animals were at risk,⁵⁰ and a massive groundswell of public support, arguably the first and biggest of its type in Australia's environment history. Certainly, the distinguished naturalist, Alec Chisholm, described the campaign as "the most notable demonstration of the kind that has ever occurred in Australia".⁵¹

Newspaper coverage of the time makes compelling reading. The campaign, led by the *Courier* and titled "Spare the Bear",⁵² occupied up to six columns a day. It also managed to unite Queensland's scientific organisations, professional and amateur (including the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union, Queensland Museum and the Queensland Naturalists' Club); various churches, Catholic and Protestant (including a protest led by Archbishop Sharp); art and literature (most notably, movie maker Charles Chauvel and writer Vance Palmer); Boy Scouts and Girl Guides; women's committees, ranging from the Labrador Progress Association to the 16,000-strong National Council of Women; major businesses (e.g. shipping line ANA); and, most significantly, city and bush folk.⁵³ It was bush residents who distanced themselves from Thomas Foley's "bush logic", exposing it as "tommy rot" and

⁴⁷ *QPD* 150 (1927): 1720.

⁴⁸ *QPD* 149 (1927): 543.

⁴⁹ George Barker. "Bears and Possums." Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 13 Jul. 1927: 7.

⁵⁰ Howlett. "The Bear You Couldn't Buy." 17.

⁵¹ "Dark Blot on Our History." *Brisbane Courier*, 5 Aug. 1927: 14.

⁵² "Spare the bear: Impending slaughter." *Brisbane Courier* 16 Jul. 1927: 14.

⁵³ In July 1927, the *Brisbane Courier* was flooded with letters to the editor, some of which it converted to feature articles. "Nature's artistry." Report. 19 Jul. 1927: 13; A. Roberts. Letter to the Editor. 21 Jul. 1927: 9; Archbishop Sharp. "Slaughter of bears." Letter to the Editor. 18 Jul. 1927: 13; Chas Chauvel, Managing Director, Australian Film Productions. Letter to the Editor. 25 Jul. 1927: 15; Vance Palmer. "Open season condemned." Letter to the Editor. 19 Jul. 1927: 15; Chas Snow, Boy Scouts Commissioner. Letter to the Editor. 21 Jul. 1927: 9; Girl Guides of North Queensland. Letter to the Editor. 28 Jul. 1927: 13; M. Mulley, Labrador Progress Association. Letter to the Editor. 25 Jul. 1927: 15; W. H. Symes. Letter to the Editor. 25 Jul. 1927: 15; W. M. Kuder, General Secretary, ANA. Letter to the Editor. 21 Jul. 1927: 9.

labelling him “a crawler”.⁵⁴ From small towns, in the south-east especially – the *Courier's* main circulation area – ‘bush’ residents wrote of their “astonishment”, “deep ... offence”, “disgust” and “horror” at the “wanton cruelty” and shortsightedness of destroying a “friendly, harmless and captivating creature” that was a national asset and of worldwide scientific interest.⁵⁵ Vance Palmer, in a letter to the editor, summarised the emerging environmental ethic. There had been days, he said:

*... when our flora and fauna were held in such low regard that the settler's first instinct was to shoot every strange animal and to sink his axe into every unfamiliar tree. ... [But] in the last few years we have seen the gradual awakening, in children, of a love for the trees and animals and their own country. It has been stimulated in the schools by enlightened teachers and also in the Press by a group of very able and observant nature writers. ... A delight in the movement of birds and animals is quite as culturally valuable as a delight in art or music and equally liberating to the imagination.*⁵⁶

Despite the potency and widespread nature of the campaign, and an eleventh-hour review of the decision, the season went ahead (in the absence of any “definite evidence”)⁵⁷ and was largely seen as the heartless slaughter of children's pets to pay the bills. Especially towards the end of the campaign, letters characterised koalas as children or part of the family. Correspondents had regarded them as “children of the woods ... entwined in household affection”; they had seen them “putting their arms around one's neck” when frightened, or crying like children when hurt. One enthusiast, Gwen Harrison of Coorparoo, provided a photograph of her pet, “Teddy”, who would “come

into the kitchen [each night] for (dinner)... a large slice of bread and jam and a saucer of tea”.⁵⁸ These images, however, rested on more than popular

⁵⁴ E. L. T. Boyce. Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 25 Jul. 1927: 15; Chas Chauvel, Managing Director, Australian Film Productions. Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 25 Jul. 1927: 15.

⁵⁵ The following letters to the editor and news items all appeared in the *Brisbane Courier*: George Barker, RAOU, “Bears and Possums.” 13 Jul. 1927: 7; Archbishop Sharp. “Slaughter of bears.” 18 Jul. 1927: 13; Vance Palmer. “Open season condemned.” 19 Jul. 1927: 15; “Save the native bear.” Report. 21 Jul. 1927: 9; Anon. “Native bear slaughter.” 16 Jul. 1927: 15; K. Edmonstone. 13 Jul. 1927: 7; “Nature's artistry.” Report. 19 Jul. 1927: 13.

⁵⁶ Vance Palmer. “Open season condemned.” Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 15 Jul. 1927: 15.

⁵⁷ “Bears must die.” *Brisbane Courier* 28 Jul. 1927: 12.

⁵⁸ John Brandon. Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 21 Jul. 1927: 9; Francis Dickson. Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 25 Jul. 1927: 15; “Koala.” Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 25 Jul. 1927: 15; Gwen Harrison. “A silver-grey specimen.” Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 27 Jul. 1927: 17.

*sentimentality; as biologist Ernest Goddard remarked, the koala had become the “child’s emblem of Australia”.*⁵⁹

Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, anthropomorphism of the koala had evolved from the cartoons and pen drawings of Vance Palmer’s contemporary, Norman Lindsay, beginning with Billy Bluegum in 1904. Over subsequent decades, koalas in Lindsay’s cartoons came to represent the Australian “common man” (and woman) in the form of racegoers, storekeepers, suffragettes, clergymen, sportsmen and soldiers. Their faces were drawn to suggest humans’ “more endearing psychological qualities” and they were “unmistakably Australian” (see Appendices).⁶⁰ Lindsay’s *The Magic Pudding* (1918), May Gibbs’ Gumnut series (from 1924), and Dorothy Wall’s *Blinky Bill* (1924) (appended)⁶¹ – among other publications – helped fix these endearing images in the national mind, particularly that of its youngest generation. Since Federation, at least, the koala had been a national icon and its threatened destruction activated Australians’ fighting spirit.

Yet the koala’s main saviours were outside the nation; in fact, it took two US presidents to “save its skin”. First, Theodore Roosevelt (1901-09) had been, inadvertently, the creator of a twentieth century icon. In 1902, on a bear hunt along the Mississippi, Roosevelt – a campaigner for forest and wildlife protection – declined to shoot a defenceless bear. The tale became legendary and “teddy bears” became toys and the centre of children’s literature throughout the world.⁶² Thus, Australia’s “Billy Bluegum” was a peer of “Rupert” and “Winnie the Pooh”, but the *koala* – more than any other ‘bear’ – was thought to be the quintessential teddy bear.⁶³ This anthropomorphism, while delighting young and old alike, was indicative of a much deeper concern about animals; ascribing humanistic traits was the ultimate domination of culture over nature and represented nostalgia for disappearing wilderness.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ “Export committee’s action.” *Brisbane Courier* 19 Jul. 1927: 13.

⁶⁰ Keith Wingrove. *Norman Lindsay’s Bears*. South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1978. 22, 59, and vi. Koalas also were popularised by Norman Lindsay’s brother, Lionel, who published koala cartoons in *The Bulletin*; first as advertisements for boot polish, under the heading of “The Adventures of ‘Chunder Loo’”, but later incorporating Anzac lore and humour to create some of Australia’s most appealing political propaganda. The two brothers often stood in for each other in their illustration work. Robert Holden. *Through the Magic Door, A Collection of Australia’s Classic Fantasy Writing*. Pymble, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1992. 129.

⁶¹ Dorothy Wall’s depiction of koalas had begun earlier with *Tommy Bear and the Zookies* (1920) which was a forerunner to *Blinky Bill* and, like other characterisations of koalas at the time, had a robust Australian quality. Holden. *Through the Magic Door*. 146-49.

⁶² Adam Jezard. “How this ... became this.” *The Times Educational Supplement*. C12-13.

⁶³ Ellis Troughton. “The Koala.” *A Treasury of Australian Wildlife: Selected Studies from ‘Australian Natural History’*. Ed. D. F. McMichael. Sydney and London: Ure Smith, 1967. 59-60.

⁶⁴ Margaret J. King. “The audience in the wilderness: the Disney nature films.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 24.2 (1996): 60-69.

Roosevelt's later successor, Herbert Hoover (1929-33), had witnessed this domination for himself as a miner/engineer on the goldfields of Western Australia, and – as US Secretary of Commerce – put an end to the importation of Australian skins, labelled either “koala” or “wombat”,⁶⁵ and thereby helped save the species.

The backlash engendered by the great massacre of 1927 served as a high point in the development of Australia's first-wave environmentalism. It was the threat of mass slaughter of Australian fauna, to feed the Western world's insatiable demands for feather and furs from the 1880s, that encouraged the development of ornithological and bird-watching societies, movements to create national parks, and nature studies in schools. Furthermore, the threat brought together amateurs and professionals in an organised capacity to protect native game. While their political strategies were often limited to public meetings and traditional lobbying, they also pioneered methods that are still used today,⁶⁶ especially institutional alliances (with, for example, education, the Press, and the scientific fraternity). Although the 1927 mobilisation did not save the koala from massive culling, it did contribute significantly – along with nationwide voter disillusionment over the ensuing Depression – to the Labor government's downfall at the polls in 1929. In a neat reversal of fortunes, Labor fell from 43 to 27 seats, while the Country and Progressive National Party climbed from 28 to 43. The irony of this was underlined by the fact that part of Labor's commitment to the open season was to win a by-election in Balonne in August 1927; they retained the seat, but ultimately lost government.⁶⁷

As Karl Marx noted, history often repeats itself; first as tragedy, then as farce. In 1995, Queensland's Labor government again came to grief over koala protection, in its single-minded commitment to building a motorway in the Brisbane-Gold Coast corridor and through Australia's biggest remaining koala colony. The episode has startling parallels with the debacle of 1927: At a time when Queenslanders believed the koala was protected by the *Nature Conservation Act*, the species was downgraded to the same status as the suburban possum, using a conservation data system from the US and without any field research.⁶⁸ In both instances – 1927 and 1995 – Labor was caught reneging on a promise and adopted an autocratic style to force the issue through, fighting it out in the media and dismissing public sentiment. In 1995, as in

⁶⁵ Howlett. “The Bear You Couldn't Buy.” 12 and 22; Phillips. *The little Australian we'd all hate to lose*. 23.

⁶⁶ Hutton and Connors. *A History of the Australian Environment Movement*. 19.

⁶⁷ In the McCormack era (1925-29), one seat had been held by an independent. At the 1929 poll, Labor lost the key urban seats of Merthyr, Bulimba, Kelvin Grove and South Brisbane. Colin A. Hughes and B. D. Graham. *A Handbook of Australian Government and Politics 1890-1964*. Canberra: ANU Press, 1968. 520-21; Arthur Edward Moore, Opposition Leader. “Murder of helpless animals.” Letter to the Editor. *Brisbane Courier* 21 Jul. 1927: 9.

⁶⁸ Sue Arnold. “Motorway spells doom for valuable colony.” *The Courier-Mail* 5 Jun. 1995: 11.

1927, a large cross-community campaign developed, driven largely by people on the land, and in both instances Labor governments lost key seats and fell. And, although in 1927 the koala was almost obliterated, its national and international profile increased; a factor repeated four years ago.⁶⁹

The symmetry between these two events is worthy of further inquiry and consideration. While Queensland's 1927 open season on the koala obviously still causes some embarrassment and regret, it is a tribute to forward-thinking Queenslanders that they mobilised into such a nascent yet cohesive protest and that the koala eventually triumphed. Labor governments, however, have not been so fortunate; perhaps if a significant historiography had been developed on the opportunism and indifference of 1927, a valuable 'survival technique' might have been learnt.

⁶⁹ Intensive coverage from *The Courier-Mail*, again for the month of July but 68 years later, shows the depth of feeling. Brian Williams. "That's it for 'that damn road'." 17 Jul. 1995: 3; Williams. "Goss is back to his old tricks: tollway group." 27 Jul. 1995: 9; James Woods. "'Autocratic' style blamed for backlash." 17 Jul. 1995: 2; Cheryl Thurlow. "VETO vows to bury motorway: Group digs in for long fight." 19 Jul. 1995: 5; "Koala in grave danger: experts." 3 Jun. 1995: 9. The key seats that Labor lost in 1995 were Springwood (held by the Environment Minister, Molly Robson), Mansfield, Redlands and (as in 1927) Albert. Thurlow. *Ibid.*

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