

## Australia's Rites of Passage

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Australia in the Twentieth Century was, as it continues to be, a place of culture, diversity and history; many of its traditions were adopted and developed from its original British and European heritage and from the influences of various cultural migrant groups. The same can be said for Australia's rites of passage. This can be seen through our implementation of celebrations such as the Bar Mitzvah; the Samskara, a series of Sacraments in Hinduism; and First Confession, First Eucharist and Confirmation from Catholicism. At immediate glance, it might not seem that our nation has any specifically Australian rites of passage; however, a longer look at secular practices reveals that several, although most likely shared with other countries, have taken on a form that has allowed them to become part of our national identity over the last 200 years. These include: the 'movement from Cubs to Boy Scouts'; 'being permitted to drive the parental/family car';<sup>1</sup> hens nights for engaged woman and stag parties for men; 'nomination to a professional club, the joining of the appropriate branch of the Rotary Movement, or, earlier, the Masonic Lodge'; and 'farewells for retiring couples *going to the coast*, making a *tree change*, or leaving the district'.<sup>2</sup> Many of our rites of passage, rightly so, perhaps, are based around the phases of adolescence and early adulthood, as this, especially in the twentieth century and onwards, is a time of much growth and change for Australians. The rites of this time are those such as: the Debutante Ball; the high school Graduation, Schoolies Week and, for some, beginning university; and the 18th birthday and the first night out at the pub. It is these adolescent rites of passage that this essay will focus on.

The Debutant Ball began as French tradition where young ladies from an upper class or aristocratic families, who had reached 'the age of maturity, were introduced to *proper society* by means of a formal presentation—their *debut*'.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, it was meant to act predominantly as a 'display' of women who were newly eligible for marriage to 'eligible bachelors and their families, within a select upper class circle'.<sup>4</sup> This tradition had long been outdated in Australia, where the Debutante Ball, colloquially the 'Deb', is held in Year 11 or 12

<sup>1</sup> J.S. Ryan, Lectures 2010 (Armidale, NSW: University of New England, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Cleveland Amory, *Who Killed Society?* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

through schools or organisations such as the Lions or Rotary Clubs, and is seen as more of 'a chance to dress up and learn to dance'<sup>5</sup> (Amory 1960) than anything else. These two aspects of the Deb are also perhaps the most important as far as the rite of passage elements of the event is concerned, as finding the perfect white dress and learning to dance with your Deb partner are both essential elements for most young girls; as is, of course, choosing the partner themselves. Helen O'Shea makes mention of several other important features of the Deb in her article 'Kylie Does Her Deb',<sup>6</sup> which include 'the guest of honour to whom young women will be presented'; 'the family coming to see'; and the all important naming of 'the Belle of the Debs'. O'Shea also reflects on how the Deb still has some rites of passage in Twentieth Century Australia akin to those of its traditional purpose, like 'the ritual of presentation, curtsy and acknowledgment' and 'learning how to conduct oneself, both socially and in a crowd'. In many ways, socially for young women, but also for the young men who accompany them, this is the first function they attend as proud, independent adolescents and becomes a part of their growth into young adults.

The next significant rite of passage after the Deb Ball is usually the high school graduation. This involves the high school formal, 'similar to the prom in America', although not as major, celebrating the final year of high school with an official awards ceremony and often a dance. Around this time, many young Australian students also celebrate finishing school by attending a Schoolies week—a tradition which 'first began at Broadbeach in the 1970s' and has been celebrated 'over the past four decades' by Australian high school graduates who attend 'a week-long party at a popular tourist destination'; and has become one of 'the most significant youth events on the national social calendar'.<sup>7</sup> Schoolies week is predominately considered as a cultural rite of passage in Australia, as it represents the phase or transition between time in terms of social status. The Schoolies website claims that 'after graduating high school, young people can emerge into the adult world, beyond regimented learning and into a life of their own design' and that 'schoolies Week is a celebration to mark this event or transition'.<sup>8</sup> The event itself holds the opportunity for several other rites of passage to be undertaken, such as getting a 'Schoolies tattoo'<sup>9</sup> a piercing, or drinking with friends; and the 'stories these post-study, still-students will take part in and take with

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Helen O' Shea, 'Kylie Does Her Deb', *Australian Folklore*, 8, 100-111.

<sup>7</sup> Various, *Schoolies History* <<http://www.schoolies.org.au/history-of-schoolies-week.htm>> [accessed 9 May 2010].

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Williams, P., *National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry: Alcohol, young persons and violence* (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2001) <<http://www.aic.gov.au/documents/0/9/E//7BO9EO8DOI-F508-4/FBI-85AB02A99OA17AE2%7DRPP35.pdf#pag~l~55>> [accessed 9 May 2010].

them into the next phase of their lives'.<sup>10</sup> After this, many young people will undergo the rites of passage involved with beginning university, or undertaking a gap year or entering the work force.

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Depending on one's personal circumstances—the state they studied in, when they began schooling, if they 'skipped a year', etc.—at any point during the time of finishing school and beginning university, a gap year or work, most people will celebrate their 18th birthday. The 18th birthday is significant as, with it, comes 'the legal right to drink and the first night out at the pub' or 'out on the town'<sup>11</sup> The ability to go out legally is a rite that allows us to know we are older, and is practically important for young Australian men, who no longer have traditional rites such as 'the key to the house' and being allowed to wear long trousers, rather than shorts and socks out. In other countries the rite of passage of going out is connected to the 21st birthday, which still holds significance as a rite of passage for Australians, although not for the same reasons. The traditions surrounding these birthdays are shared with friends and family—perhaps of the most important aspects of rites of passage, their witnessing by loved ones—who may tell stories and provide old photos that not only reminisce about the person's youth, but also signify how the person is growing beyond that and encourage whatever hopes they may have for their future.

In conclusion, Australia has many rites of passage for all ages and ethnicities, especially for adolescents. For the latter, there are rites of passage such as the Debutante Balls, which allow young women to combine tradition, beauty and the ritual of presentation, curtsy and acknowledgment to become more socially and self-aware; the high school Graduation, which combines events such as the formal and Schoolies week to allow students to express and enjoy their freedom before moving into the next, focused phase of their lives; and the 18th birthday, the first night out associated with it and the chance to reminisce on the past and share goals and hopes for the future with family and friends. Rites of passage were an important part of the twentieth century and continue to hold significance today as they provide a path for the celebration of change and growth.

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<sup>10</sup> Various, *Schoolies History*.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *op. cit.*

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