PIC POSTER Z156—
PRESENTING PROGRESS?

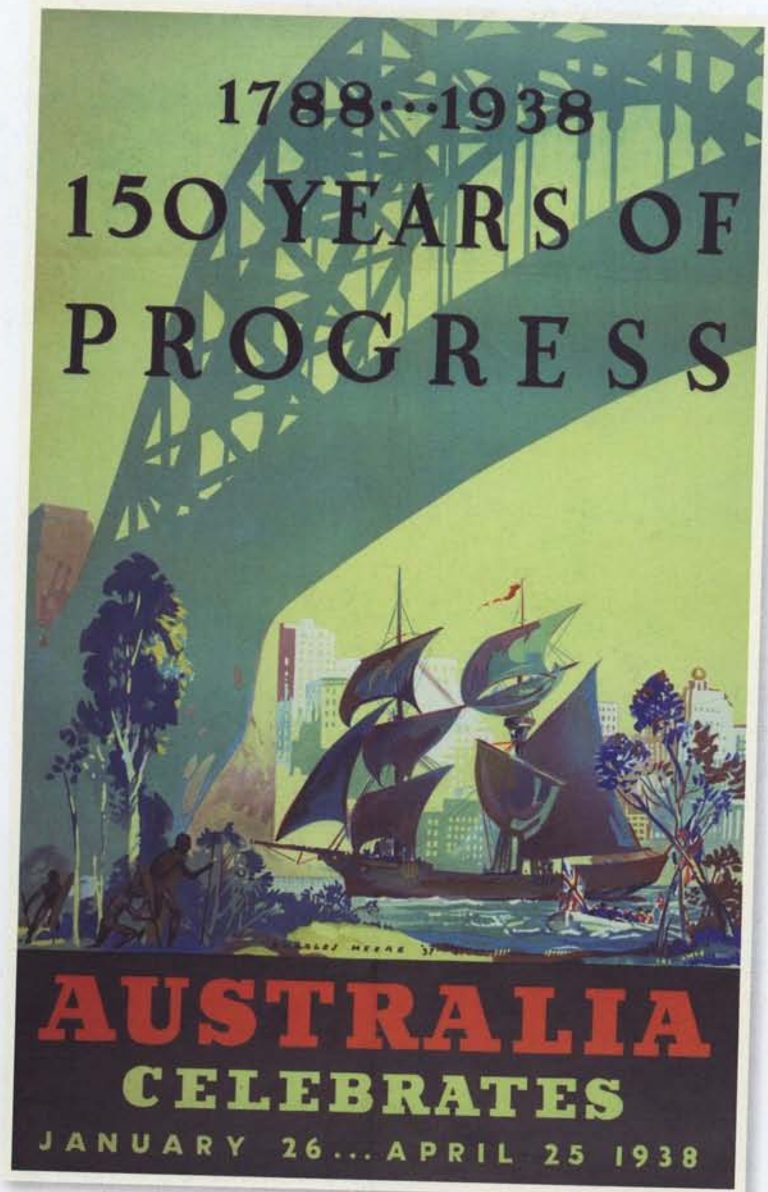
Joy Eadie uncovers a message from the past in Charles Meere's poster art

Among the posters in the National Library's Pictorial Collection is PIC Z156, Charles Meere's *150 Years of Progress*, produced for the 1938 celebration of the Sesquicentenary of Sydney. It was one of many posters commissioned by the 150th Anniversary Council and the Australian National Travel Association, to publicise the planned events and to encourage both domestic and foreign travellers to visit them. Meere also received a commission for a poster for the third British Empire Games held in Sydney under the sesquicentenary banner. Such commissions were valuable to artists in the hard times of the 1930s.

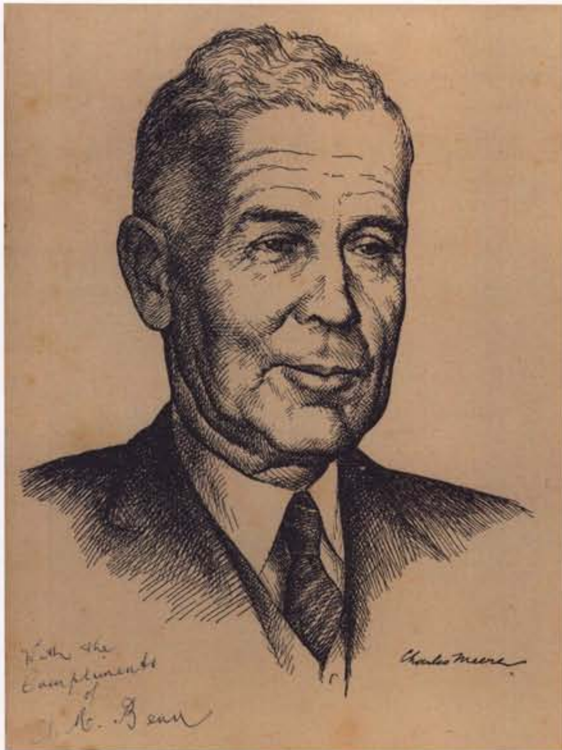
Charles Meere (1890–1961), an Englishman who settled in Australia in 1933, practised as a painter and art teacher while running a commercial art studio. His artistic oeuvre comprised mainly academic landscapes, still life and portraits—his pen and ink portrait of Ben Chifley is in the National Library Collection. Because his paintings are academic, and occasionally neo-classical, in style, critics have generally labelled him as politically reactionary. He is best known for his iconic painting of 1940, *Australian Beach Pattern*, in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and several Art Deco paintings—mural designs intended for cinema interiors but never commissioned—now held by the National Trust. Meere's *Empire Games* poster, in the National Gallery of Australia collection, is a straightforward promotion, rather jokily combining athletics and Sydney Harbour, carried out largely in patriotic red, white, and blue.

Among the books, posters and films publicising the sesquicentenary, Meere's *150 Years of Progress* is possibly unique in being problematic. The Library's collection and preservation of original materials allow a close analysis of the work, including details not apparent in smaller reproductions. Superficially unremarkable, nevertheless certain elements of its style and technique are designed to subvert as well as to celebrate the sesquicentenary story. To achieve this, Meere sacrificed the unity on which posters rely to deliver an unequivocal message, using instead contrasting graphic styles and palettes of colour to carry two quite different messages—the sesquicentenary authority's and his own.

The sesquicentenary celebration was to be all positive. Australia, still recovering



Charles Meere (1890–1961)
1788–1938, 150 Years of Progress: Australia Celebrates January 26 – April 25, 1938 1937
coloured poster; 101.5 x 63.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7944958



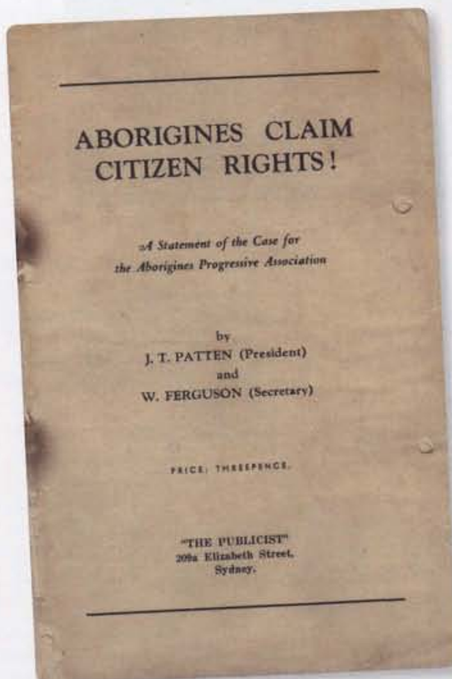
above:
Charles Meere (1890–1961)
Portrait of Ben Chifley c.1946
pen and ink drawing; 23.9 x 17.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an6077341

from the Great Depression, was to be presented as a sound place for investment, with a sophisticated and diverse economy producing pianos and fine fabrics as well as bales of wool and bushels of wheat, and as a tourist destination offering sunshine, beaches, skiing, and spectacular scenery. Sydney images were central to the publicity, with the harbour represented as the splendid site of initial settlement and the bridge as evidence of Australia's industrial achievements. The main celebration was supported by a miscellany of other events, from the Empire Games to hosting the World Convention of Radio Engineers—the latter affirming Australia's technologically advanced status.

Sesquicentenary planning was not without tensions. The decision to play down the convict contribution to the story of triumphant nation-building was challenged in the press in late 1937. Aboriginal people were to have only a minor, ignominious part in the official celebratory showpiece on 26 January 1938; this was to be a re-enactment on the harbour of Governor Phillip's landing during which an assembly of Aboriginal people was to flee in disarray. A group of Aboriginal people was brought in from western NSW for this role as the local urban Aboriginal community had other plans. The Aborigines Progressive Association, formed during 1937 to campaign for full citizenship rights for Aboriginal people, was organising its own event for 26 January—a Day of Mourning for lost land, lives and freedom.

As an immigrant from England who had lived in France for some years, Meere brought an outsider's perspective to the sesquicentenary. Analysis of his poster suggests that he saw this commission as an opportunity to protest against the Council's suppression of uncomfortable aspects of the history ostensibly being celebrated, in particular Aboriginal dispossession—while being paid for doing so.

A poster has to seize the viewer's eye and deliver its message in seconds. As poster art of the late-19th and early-20th centuries became more sophisticated, it increasingly integrated image and text, and simplified images for instant communication. Strong forms, particularly diagonals, conveyed such concepts as modernity, speed and power. Meere used these conventions: against a yellow sky a shadowy silhouette of the Sydney Harbour Bridge occupies the full diagonal from lower left to upper right of the picture area, thrusting forward towards the viewer, monopolising the attention. Below it rises the city skyline, in soft pastel



ABORIGINES CLAIM CITIZEN RIGHTS!

A Statement of the Case for the Aborigines Progressive Association

by
J. T. PATTEN (President)
and
W. FERGUSON (Secretary)

PRICE: THREEPENCE.

"THE PUBLICIST"
209a Elizabeth Street,
Sydney.

below:
Cover of *Aborigines Claim Citizen Rights! A Statement of the Case for the Aborigines Progressive Association*
J.T. Patten and W. Ferguson
(Sydney: The Publicist, c.1938)

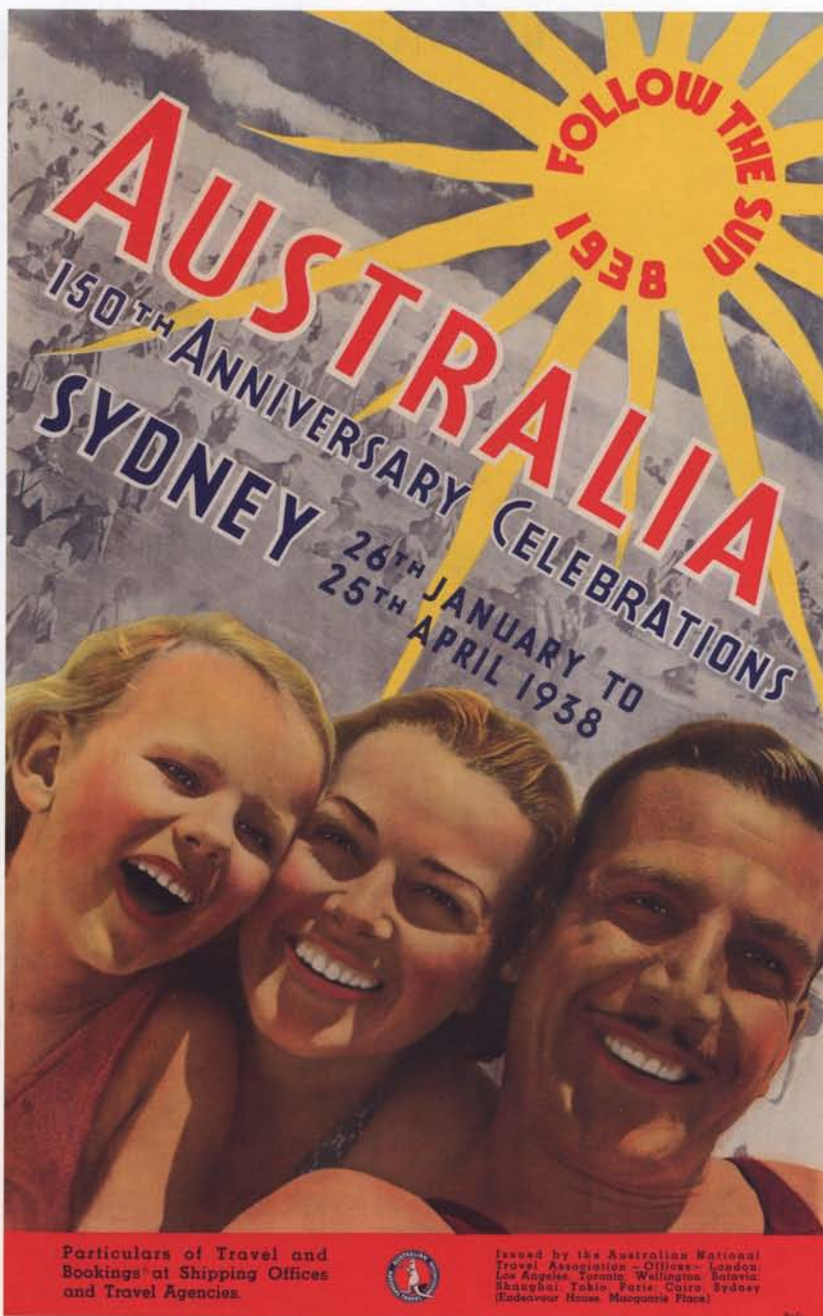
tones. This is the glorious present, embodying the latest technology and urban sophistication, the endpoint of 150 years of progress, presented in a stark modern style.

In the foreground, for the narrative of the past, Meere reverted to an old-fashioned illustrative style with outlines, shading and modelling of forms, and more naturalistic colour; beneath the streamlined present lie the cluttered, messy details of history. The European ship in the harbour has despatched men in a rowing boat for the shore. The shoreline appears untouched by man, as natural as the Indigenous inhabitants waiting there, its trees and grassy bank contrasted with the urban scene opposite. The eye takes in the simple, powerful forms denoting progress, and skims over the history as mere background. But the devil is in the disregarded detail.

The bridge and the city skyline imply that the view is looking south. The European ship, its bow wave just visible, is therefore leaving—heading east, full sail, out of the harbour. Meanwhile, the small boat is proceeding to its epoch-making encounter with the group of Aboriginal people. They are depicted clearly, as tall, alert individuals, with shields and spears raised against the invaders, ready to defend their territory. The Europeans, by contrast, are no more than small red and blue blobs suggesting military and naval uniforms. The trees near the assembly of Aboriginal people are straight and graceful while those on the right, near the invading Europeans, are scraggy saplings. They form an elongated X, like a crossing-out, and what they cross out is the British flag flying from the stern of the ship. Obscured in small reproductions, this is clearly visible in the original posters.

Certain details of colour are also clearer in the originals: Meere not only switched styles in flicking from the present to the past but he also changed his palette. At the lower right he abandoned naturalistic colouring, and used a strong royal blue for the saplings, branches, foliage and all, and the grass beneath the trees. This colour, otherwise seen only in the flags and the uniforms of the Europeans, marks off this part of the poster, visually uniting the crossing-out form of the saplings with the flags and men—with the European arrival itself. The history Meere has depicted asserts the Aboriginal presence and resistance, and proposes the deletion of the British invaders.

The written text—*1788 ··· 1938: 150 Years of Progress*—placed across the dominating arch of the bridge, occupies important space. It forces the viewer's response, suppressing rather than encouraging attention to the total image. Yet, the moment of invasion depicted below implies that the celebratory words are ironic. The irony is emphasised by the letters having been printed in deep black, with its connotation of mourning. Scrutiny of the original posters reveals some effort to achieve this: the lettering of the title was



above:
Unknown attribution
Follow the sun 1938: Australia, 150th Anniversary Celebrations Sydney 26th January to 25th April 1938
colour poster: 101.2 x 62.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7649540
Courtesy Josef Lebovic Gallery

left:
Olive Cotton (1911–2003)
Sesquicentenary Procession, Sydney, 1938 1987
gelatin silver photograph on fibre-based paper; 38.1 x 30.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an9070741
Olive Cotton estate, courtesy Josef Lebovic Gallery

above left:
Reg Alder (1917–2003)
150 Year Celebration Sydney Town Hall, 1938
silver gelatin photograph on fibre-based paper;
16.4 x 21.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3585877

above right:
Medal Commemorating Australia's 150th Anniversary, 1938
bronze medal; diam. 5.7 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an8005274

printed first in the thin black ink used as background to the lower caption, but then reprinted to intensify the black.

The base panel of the poster is printed with a single layer of this ink, with the text 'Australia Celebrates' in red and yellow. These are the colours that some 30 years later would be chosen for the Aboriginal flag. Art curator Julie Ewington, writing on Margaret Preston, has suggested that the red, black and yellow combination was already associated with Aboriginal identity by the 1920s. Arguably, Meere's use of these colours for 'Australia Celebrates' was no accident but, like his choice of black to proclaim progress, deliberate and ironic.

The role of the commissioned poster designer is to spread the prescribed message, not to create his own. But Meere did both, ingeniously fulfilling his obligations as a commercial artist and, as an artist in the other sense, expressing his own vision. He was sufficiently skilled in commercial art to use its techniques and qualities to present diametrically opposed perspectives on a theme without appearing to do so, producing an image that would pass muster with the Anniversary Council, while covertly expressing a political critique. He was to take such playful ambiguity much further in his major painting, *Australian Beach Pattern*, a few years later. It seems that he enjoyed the challenge of seeing what he could get away with and that, far from being politically conservative, Meere used conventional art forms to question the status quo—in this case the treatment of Aboriginal people. His poster reinstates them as protagonists in the settlement story.

Posters, like other ephemera, are documents that incidentally recorded, and now reveal to new eyes, the attitudes, values and conditions of their day. In a context of white Australian nationalism, Meere left a teasing record of a dissenting voice, which survives and is available to us, thanks to the preservation of such documents in national collections.

JOY EADIE's analysis of Charles Meere's *Australian Beach Pattern* appeared in *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 186, December 2005 - February 2006.