

History offers an identity to treasure

PUBLIC holidays, like most things, have a history. Though commercial and recreational aspects loom larger, we still celebrate ancient religious festivals at Christmas and Easter.

Since 1994 the anniversary of Captain Arthur Phillip's landing at Sydney Cove on January 26, 1788, has been kept as Australia Day throughout the land.

Anzac Day has always been on April 25, the date of the ill-fated landings at Gallipoli in 1915 by the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps.

But Proclamation Day is uniquely South Australian. Indeed, SA and WA are the only states which still mark their colonial origins with a public holiday.

Inertia may be part of the reason, plus the fact that the Proclamation Day holiday is conveniently observed on the closest working day to Christmas, rather than the actual anniversary which it commemorates. The "proclamation" printed and read out at Glenelg on December 28, 1836, was a decidedly low-key affair.

Sir John Hindmarsh, the newly arrived governor, merely called upon the colonists of South Australia to observe the law, work hard and respect the indigenous inhabitants whose lands they were already busily expropriating.

But without any more obvious milestone, this moment - imaginatively depicted more than 20 years afterwards by the artist Charles Hill - soon

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came to symbolise South Australia's birth. Early generations of South Australians took pride in the fact that, unlike Britain's other Australian settlements, their "province" was carefully designed on rational utilitarian principles, peopled by free men and women rather than transported convicts, and something of a haven for politico-religious dissenters.

Even after Federation, when the uniquely planned British colony became one of the less populous and powerful Australian states, a distinctly positive sense of South Australian exceptionalism prevailed. It was still apparent when this immigrant from Victoria arrived in Adelaide some 45 years ago.

More recently, however, South Australians - or our governments - have seemed less mindful of their singular history and heritage.

Thus the magnificent Mortlock Library of South Australia in the Jervis Wing of the State Library, once rivalling Sydney's famed Mitchell Library, is now an uninviting static

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exhibition space. The innovative Constitutional Museum which formerly occupied the Legislative Council building on North Terrace has been converted into parliamentary offices.

Unlike Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, we have no Museum of Adelaide presenting the distinctive history of our state's capital to locals and visitors alike.

In recent years we have lost many important 19th and 20th century buildings, irreplaceable components of a unique architectural heritage still under threat from unimaginative development and inadequate preservation regimes.

Yet some grounds for hope remain. Despite little better than token funding to mark 2011 as the 175th anniversary of European settlement, History SA (AKA the History Trust) built upon the cumulative success of previous History Weeks to stage a month-long History Festival attended by 95,000 people across the state.

Popular enthusiasm for our history also helped persuade Australia's National Archives to reverse the announced closure of its Adelaide office. These and other portents should surely encourage the new Weatherill Government to treasure our history and heritage as indispensable ingredients of South Australian identity.

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