

ANNETTE SOUMILAS

‘I was the State of Victoria’: Jessie Clarke’s 1934 Pageant of Nations costume

In 1998, Jessie Clarke donated to State Library Victoria the costume she wore as 20-year-old Jessie Brookes in the Pageant of Nations extravaganza during Victoria’s centenary celebrations of 1934 and 1935.¹ The donation included a hand-painted skirt, two hooped petticoats and a long, flowing, green velvet cloak veined with glittering silver overlay. She also gave to the Library a hand-coloured studio portrait depicting her wearing the costume, which showed that the skirt had been worn with a shimmering silver bodice, over which trailed the cloak, and the costume had been crowned by a headdress made from silver metallic materials.² Unfortunately, the headdress and bodice had been destroyed in the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983.³

Little was known about the costume when I first saw it at State Library Victoria in 2013. Who had designed it and why? What did the scenes painted around the skirt and the headdress represent? The story of the costume has been rediscovered through researching manuscripts, photographs and ephemera in the Library’s collection.

Victoria’s centenary celebrations

The centenary celebrations marked 100 years of white settlement of Victoria. Beginning in Portland, on the state’s southwest coast, in October 1934, they featured a visit by Prince Henry, Duke of Gloucester, and ran through to June

Jessie Brookes wearing the ‘State of Victoria’ gown for the Pageant of Nations gala events, Victorian Centenary Celebrations, c. 1934. Photograph by Broothorn Studios. Jessie Clarke Papers, MS 13268



of the following year. The official events, ranging from the humble to the spectacular, were organised by the Centenary Celebrations Council, headed by the lord mayor of Melbourne Sir Harold Gengoult Smith, and the extensive program of over 300 events was detailed in *The Official Centenary Guide and Souvenir*.⁴ Highlights included the MacRobertson's Centenary Air Race, funded by confectionery magnate Macpherson Robertson, and an elaborate historic pageant through Melbourne's streets, organised by Melbourne City Council, to celebrate the city's founding. The Duke of Gloucester's visit, during October and November, was undoubtedly the highlight of the centenary calendar. On his arrival in Melbourne, on 18 October 1934, he was welcomed by at least 250,000 people, who lined the streets from the bayside suburb of Port Melbourne to Parliament House, in the city centre's Spring Street, a distance of 3 kilometres, where he officially opened the centenary celebrations of Victoria.⁵ On 11 November, he dedicated the Shrine of Remembrance in front of a crowd of 300,000.⁶

International Club of Victoria

The Pageant of Nations was conceived after and because of the success of fundraising activities organised to support the League of Nations by Mrs Ivy Brookes, Jessie Clarke's mother. The idea for the International Club came to Ivy Brookes during a visit to the United States, when she visited International House in New York, a non-profit residence and program centre founded in 1924 to bring together graduate students from around the world to share experiences and life lessons in peace building and understanding. Starting such a club in Melbourne without funding became possible after Brookes became president of the women's auxiliary for the League of Nations Union (formed after World War I), whose principal mission was to maintain world peace. A successful series of balls and national parades and a small Pageant of Nations during 1931 and 1932 led to launching the club in 1933, with the assistance of Mrs Jane McMillan, a family friend who lived next door to the Brookeses and wanted to help Brookes in 'some international work for Peace'.⁷ Mrs McMillan became organising secretary of the pageant and organising secretary of the club. The club's purpose was

to provide a meeting place where residents of Melbourne may meet members of national groups who may be either living in, or visiting, Melbourne, where members of individual groups can meet one another, and where distinguished visitors to Victoria may be entertained. It is hoped by this means to promote that friendship and understanding which is vitally necessary to the peace of the world.⁸

In 1934, world peace was a concern for the larger and more politically active peace movement in Australia. The second All Australian Congress Against War, held from 10 to 12 November 1934, coincided with centenary celebrations and gained enormous publicity when the federal government tried unsuccessfully to stop the Czech writer and anti-war activist Egon Kisch from speaking. Melbourne became the focus for ideological conflict when both conservatives and socialists sought to use the centenary to promote their different agendas.⁹

The Pageant of Nations

Historical pageants were very popular in early-20th-century Britain. The power and ‘appeal of non-dramatic pageantry lies in coordinated visual spectacle’, linking the past with the present where ‘one individual may stand out ... as “royalty”’.¹⁰ Organisations as diverse as church groups and the Communist Party held pageants to promote their institutions and to celebrate their unique histories. The centenary Pageant of Nations was no exception.

The pageant was formally opened by William Vanneck, 5th Baron Huntingfield, governor of Victoria, on 22 October 1934 at the Melbourne Town Hall. Performances were repeated during Women’s Week, on 19 and 20 November, and the following June. The spectacle ran for two and a half hours, opening with a musical overture and fanfare by a military vanguard. A herald announced expressions of congratulations to Victoria throughout the pageant. In the first scene, Jessie Brookes, representing Victoria, appeared surrounded by natural local products and accompanied by the figures of Peace and Prosperity. On the summons of the herald the symbolic figures of Britannia and Australia appeared, joined by the separate states and territories of Australia, then England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland followed by members of the empire: Canada, India, Irish Free State, Malta, New Zealand and South Africa. National groups in alphabetical order, as determined by the Consular Corps of Melbourne, followed, with the 1935 performances including additional nations not previously represented. The grand finale showed the nations ‘mingling in eternal friendship’.¹¹

The pageant was a huge success. The *Argus* enthusiastically described the event:

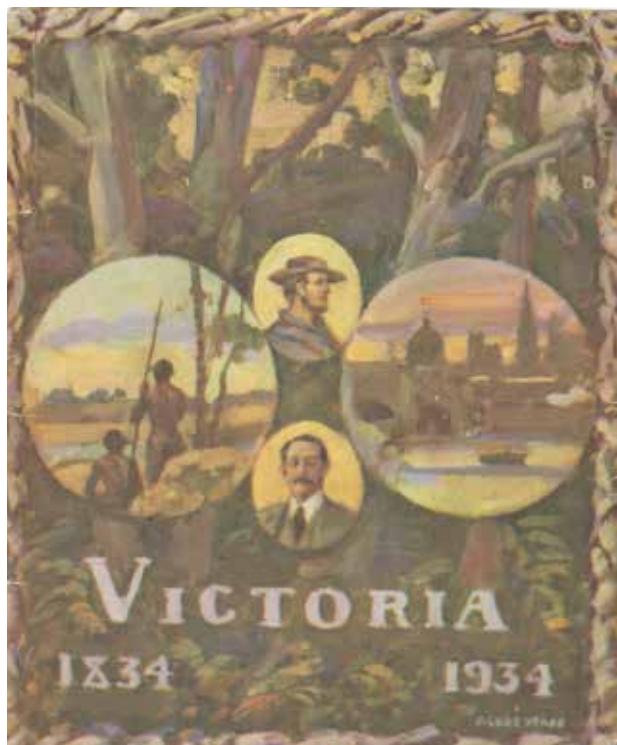
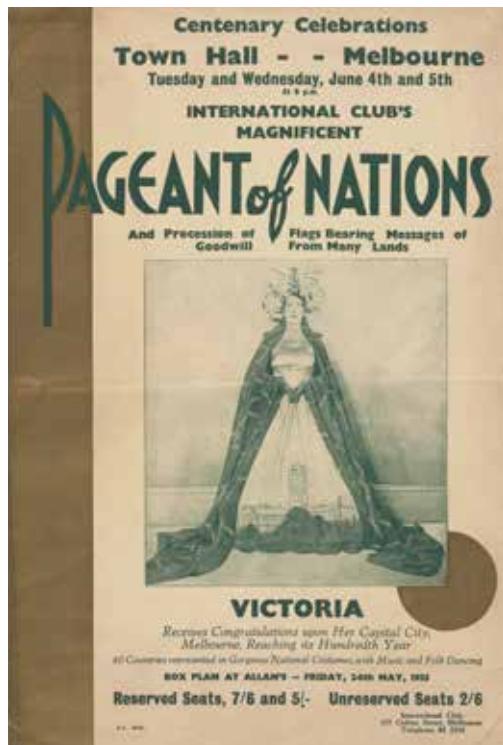
It was a remarkable achievement on the part of the International Club of Victoria to bring together the national communities resident in Melbourne to take part in this pageant as a gesture of friendliness and congratulation to the State of Victoria on the celebration of its 100th year. In addition to the group

representing the other States of the Commonwealth, and the other parts of the British Empire, 19 nations were represented in the pageant, the purpose of which, as well as the offering of felicitations to Victoria, was to further that spirit of friendship and understanding for which the International Club exists. The scene increased in beauty and splendour as nation followed nation and the groups were massed on the stage, presenting a kaleidoscope of colour and an impression of magnificence that were beyond description.

... The figure of Victoria, impersonated by Miss Jessie Brookes was almost breath-taking in its beauty, the dignity and grace with which Miss Brookes invested the character throughout the pageant deserving complete praise. She was attired in a most beautiful robe, which in its design personified the progress of the State to its present stage of prosperity. Exquisite in its colouring was Victoria's gown. With a bodice of cloth of silver and a crinoline skirt of golden maize satin, the hem painted delicately in green to suggest the skyline of Melbourne, and a wonderful velvet cloak of burgeoning green, traced with silver to symbolize the fertility of the irrigated lands, the costume was completed by a marvellous headdress of scintillating silver ... The whole effect was superb.¹²

The Pageant of Nations would have been seen only by a select number of Melburnians. Due to the devastating effects of the Great Depression, many could not afford the entrance fees to centenary events, let alone the souvenir program. Nor is it likely many were invited to the official functions. The 1935 pageant, held on 4 and 5 June, advertised reserved seats at 7s 6d and 5s and unreserved seats at 2s 6d. The average weekly wage for a factory worker at the time was approximately £4 1s 7d for males and just over half that for females.¹³

The pageant program acknowledged in detail a cast of prominent Melburnians selected to appear in, or participate in organising, the event. Costumed figures were featured, representing notable historical characters such as Captain James Cook, pioneers John Batman and John Pascoe Fawkner and superintendent and lieutenant-governor Charles Joseph La Trobe. The celebrations had a 'strong imperial theme and a considerable emphasis on the triumphant possessions of the land'.¹⁴ Arguments and controversy over who was the actual founder of Melbourne, Batman or Fawkner, had to be reconciled by the centenary council to 'assert an authoritative historical narrative on the way in which the centenary of settlement would be represented'.¹⁵ Honorary historical advisors Miss ME Webster and Mr AW Greig of the Historical Society of Victoria were most likely appointed by the centenary council to oversee 'correct' representation of historic events.



Left: Flyer promoting the ‘magnificent’ Pageant of Nations at the Town Hall, Melbourne, 4–5 June 1935. Herbert and Ivy Brookes Papers, series 43, International Club of Victoria 1932–58, National Library of Australia, MS 1924. Reproduced courtesy National Library of Australia

Right: Pageant of Nations program, ‘Victoria 1834, 1934’, Melbourne: International Club of Victoria, 1934, cover. Illustration by John Longstaff. Private collection

The cover design for the pageant program, painted by the artist Sir John Longstaff,¹⁶ artistic advisor for the event, shows the ‘passing of a Hundred Years’.¹⁷ The *Argus* reported that copies of this souvenir program would be posted for Christmas to the rulers of each nation represented in the pageant, as a message of goodwill from Victoria.¹⁸ The cover insets feature medallion portraits of Batman and the Victorian governor Lord Huntingfield. Fawkner’s absence on the cover of the program was probably because historic advisor Greig was content to leave a large part of the Batman legend intact.¹⁹ The cover design also shows two Aboriginal Australian figures contemplating the landscape prior to its settlement, next to a medallion illustrating Melbourne’s skyline as it was in 1934. The image is similar to that on the souvenir centenary postage stamps, which depicted an Aboriginal Australian as the noble savage standing on the south bank of the Yarra, spear in hand, with the city of Melbourne in the background.



Pageant of Nations, Town Hall, Melbourne, 22 October or 19 or 20 November 1934.
Pictures Collection, H18047. Jessie Brookes, wearing the 'State of Victoria' gown, is seated at the centre, front row on the steps.

Representation of Australia's Indigenous people during Victoria's centenary celebrations has been well documented by historian Bain Attwood. In *Possession: Batman's treaty and the matter of history*, he states:

There was very little to show how the Aborigines and the white settlers had interacted in Victoria's first hundred years. The Aborigines were considered merely the occupants of the land, never its owners, and the British Crown held the title to it. By 1934 the 53 full-blood and 559 half caste Aborigines in Victoria were looked upon as the last remnants of a vanishing race.²⁰

There are two black-and-white photographs in State Library Victoria that show the pageant on the stage of Melbourne's town hall in 1934 and in 1935. The 1934 image shows two Aboriginal Australian protagonists standing near the central group. Although they are not credited or directly referred to in the program, the pair probably appeared on stage when the 'first curtain rose on a scene which represented Melbourne as it was 100 years ago'.²¹ Interestingly, they are absent from the photograph recording the 1935 pageant.



Pageant of Nations, Town Hall, Melbourne, 4 or 5 June 1935, Pictures Collection, H18048

Costume designer: Thelma Thomas Afford

After a successful run of the play *Nebuchadnezzar* at the Garrick Theatre in Melbourne, Thelma Thomas, a young costume designer, actor and educator from Adelaide, was approached by the secretary of the International Club Mrs Jane McMillan to design principal symbolic costumes for the Pageant of Nations. Thomas's commission asked for designs that would represent the protagonist, Victoria, and secondary characters Peace, Prosperity, New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. The costume representing Australia was designed by the artist Helen Ogilvie, and her original designs are held by State Library Victoria.²²

When interpreting Victoria, Thomas utilised a combination of techniques and materials at once painterly and unconventional to create a startling effect. In an interview with oral history pioneer Hazel de Berg in 1982, she explained her inventive approach to creating visual effects using materials such as celluloids:

Back in the thirties, designers were not very venturesome in their use of out-of-the-way or out-of-the-ordinary materials, I loved to use unusual and unexpected ones to obtain certain effects, particularly with the symbolic costumes, and experimented with celluloids, oilcloths, plastic, wire, fishnet, rubber and canvas, then dipped some of them in wax, coated them with plaster or salts, dyed, painted with enamels and stencilled with oil paints, to create certain illusions and impressions of materials being patterned, figured, striped or brocaded.²³

Thomas was barely out of her teens and freshly out of art school in the early 1930s when chosen by Dr Charles Fenner, the director of technical education in South Australia, to undergo training as an art teacher. During this period in Adelaide, there was a diverse flowering of amateur theatres that were experimental, inventive and ahead of their time. While teaching at the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts, Thomas acted in productions at, and designed costumes for, the avant-garde studio theatre Ab-Intra (meaning 'from within'), which operated from 1931 to 1935.²⁴ In her book *Dreamers and Visionaries*, exploring the rise and fall of these little theatres, Thomas recalled that the Ab-Intra Studio Theatre was 'probably the most individual and sincerely creative of all Adelaide's Little Theatres between the 1920s and the 1940s, and perhaps throughout Australia'.²⁵ She referred to the theories promoted by the theatre's founders, Alan Harkness and Kester Berwick, making a 'singular and lasting impact on those who worked with them'.²⁶ At Ab-Intra Thomas also collaborated with eurhythmics pioneer Heather Gell, forging a professional relationship that would flourish in future collaborations, notably in the theatre production of *Heritage*, performed as part of South Australia's centenary celebrations in 1936.

In 1934, Fenner granted Thomas leave of absence to attend classes at another progressive centre for artistic expression in Melbourne, and a hub of conscious modernism, the Bourke Street studio of painter and teacher George Bell.²⁷ During this period, Thomas conceived and realised her designs for the Pageant of Nations. Never neglecting her love for painting, she understood that costuming a pageant of this scale involved 'balancing the lines and colour of the gowns according to their grouping' to highlight the protagonist – in this case, Jessie Brookes, portraying Victoria. Thomas used a slightly different approach to design costumes for the supporting characters. In an interview with the *Adelaide Mail* in 1935 she described the process of designing 'Victoria', which took her three weeks. "Planning this costume ... proved the most absorbing part of the work," Miss Thomas said. "It had to stand out among the 600 other costumes

which were on the stage at the same time, and I spent hours deciding on the colour scheme".²⁸

The International Club pageant committee, probably guided by advisors from the Centenary Celebrations Council, would have decided how Melbourne's and the state of Victoria's progressive achievements since settlement would be depicted. It was Thomas's task to interpret the brief to design a costume that would effectively incorporate selected buildings and landmarks to portray and record the state's progress and then to create a coherent and visually splendid effect on the stage of the Melbourne Town Hall.

Thomas painted the skirt as though painting a stage backdrop, but in miniature, to illustrate iconic landmark buildings designed by Melbourne's leading architects and engineers. She hand-painted Government House on the front central panel, the town hall on the back central panel, and Flinders Street railway station on the side panels. She later wrote:

I decided on a panel of material, shading from silver blue to sunset shades running down the front centre of the gown. This meant buying lemon-toned taffeta and tinting it myself with Batik dyes until I got the right effect. Government House, conventionalised and carried out in blues and greys, appeared at the bottom of the panel. I did this in oils.²⁹

Thomas exploited the effect that metallic materials and paint would produce with stage lighting when designing the headdress and cloak, to create a dramatic entrance and to render a striking and enduring presence on stage for the pageant's protagonist, positioned among so many elaborately costumed extras. The headdress, fashioned in silver metallic materials styled as bolts of power shooting from an electricity pylon, represented the Yallourn Power Station, the state's electricity system. The long, flowing cloak of velvet, with irregular markings of glittering silver, was hand-painted by Thomas to symbolise the irrigation of green pastures in Victoria's water supply.

Jessie Clarke

Jessie Brookes grew up in a household where creative and political ideas were exchanged and developed. Her maternal grandfather, Alfred Deakin, had been prime minister of Australia. Her father, Herbert Brookes, was a businessman, philanthropist and political activist. He had married musically gifted Ivy Deakin in 1905 and had later served as president of the Victorian Chamber of Manufactures. Besides founding the International Club of Victoria, Ivy was active with the national and international councils of women, the playgrounds

and housewives' associations of Victoria and Melbourne's Women's Hospital. The Brookeses were generous donors to the University of Melbourne, and Ivy served on the faculty of music, the board of physical education and the board of social studies, established to oversee the introduction of social work education.³⁰

Jessie Brookes, one of the early graduates in social work from the University of Melbourne, followed in her mother's footsteps. She was a social worker and a junior delegate to the League of Nations Union, in Geneva, Switzerland, before the outbreak of World War II. She was an activist on behalf of refugees, later becoming president of the Victorian International Refugee Emergency Council. She married William Anthony Francis Clarke, the son of Sir Frank Clarke, member of the Legislative Council, in 1939. The Clarkes founded the Nappy Wash delivery service in 1946 in response to the post-war baby boom.

In a 1996 interview, Jessie Clarke reflected on her role as Victoria in the centenary pageant:

I WAS the State of Victoria! ...

I had to be the State of Victoria with Yallourn on my head ... and the irrigation scheme on the back of the cloak. Then I had to come down 45 or 50 steps from the organ loft in the town hall. They were about eight inches to ten inches [20 to 25 centimetres] deep, the steps, with Yallourn on my head and this 11 foot [335-centimetre circumference] crinoline, and the cloak to pull down. It took some doing!

They had a lovely light and a screen behind me which showed the dawning of Victoria's beginning, or life, and then I sort of appeared out of the gloom and the lights came on me and so I flashed beautifully because I was all covered in this tinsel stuff. At least the irrigation and the headdress were.

Then I solemnly marched down the stairs while, as I came down, Miss [Stella] Palfrey, who was the magnificent figure of a woman ... she was dressed to a tee as Britannia and she strode up the aisle and up the stairs. Then, of course, she stood there, side on, while I had to manoeuvre the headdress and the crinoline down. So, I did a complete court curtsy and bowed my head right to the ground practically at her feet because we were being frightfully patriotic in those days ... Then we took up our position and then Peace, who was Miss Nancy Griffiths (one of the beauties of Melbourne), came in looking absolutely gorgeous dressed in sort of nun's robe of the early, oh, I suppose medieval times. Anyway, we got them settled and then we had Captain Cook and all the

others come in ... I may say, I can tell you that Captain Cook, who sat behind me – and it was a very hot night, one of the nights of the pageant, because I think we did it for several nights – he decided, the rascal, to see whether I'd jump, and emptied the entire ice bucket down my back in the middle of proceedings. But I had been brought up with many brothers and brothers' friends and I had learned never to turn a whisker to give them any satisfaction. So, I sat there and enjoyed the cool and told him thank you afterwards which spoiled his fun.³¹

Conclusion

Following the centenary Pageant of Nations, the International Club endeavoured to maintain its aim for international peace among nations, hosting a variety of events and opening a café in 1954. By the early 1950s, the club had over 400 members, 'half British and half representing nationals of 39 different countries'. The club's events showcased the cultures of countries near and far and included fetes, exhibitions, talks, concerts and cooking demonstrations. Ivy Brookes continued as president of the club until it closed, in 1958, partly because the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games 'did more to promote International good-will, and in their aftermath the Club's work seemed less important'.³²

Thelma Thomas Afford became a respected, prolific theatre designer, educator and author, leaving a legacy of original costume designs in museum and library collections Australia wide. Jessie Clarke lived to just short of her 100th birthday.³³ 'Victoria' is the only known surviving costume from the centenary Pageant of Nations and one of the few known surviving costumes representing Thelma Thomas's pageant designs.