

OXFORD AUSTRALIA
**WORD
OF THE
MONTH**

January 2011

Australia Day

– *noun*: A name given to the day, 26 January, on which the anniversary of the beginning of British settlement, at Sydney Cove in 1788, is celebrated.

*Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary
5th Edition*

The story behind the Word of the Month

The term **Australia Day** now seems obvious in its meaning, but when we look at the earliest records for its use, the present-day meaning is not there at all:

1911 But in arrogantly setting up an **Australia Day** of its own, with no historical or other reference to our universal **Australia Day**, January 26, that Church assumes a prerogative it has no right, human or divine, to exercise. The proper authority to proclaim an **Australia Day**, if one is wanted, is the Parliament of the Australian Commonwealth. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 May)

1911 Australia Day was celebrated by the Roman Catholic section of the community for the first time today. The Irish flag and the Australian ensign were flown from the central tower of St. Mary's Cathedral. (*Argus* (Melbourne) 25 May)

The first of these quotations indicates that while some people might have regarded 26 January as '**Australia Day**', it was certainly not officially recognised as such. In 1911, the date proclaimed as **Australia Day** by the Roman Catholic Church was 24 May, generally celebrated as Empire Day. The date, 24 May, was Queen Victoria's birthday, and after her death in 1901 this day was observed as a school holiday throughout the Empire in order to celebrate all things associated with the British Empire. Some might recall the rhyming chant used by schoolchildren: 'Empire Day, The twenty-fourth of May, If we don't get a holiday, We'll all run away'. To many Roman Catholics, however, Empire Day reeked of all things Protestant, and for a time, in protest at the term, Catholics called the day **Australia Day** instead. During the First World War, the term **Australia Day** was given to 30 July as a day of fundraising for the war effort, especially in association with the Australian Red Cross Society.

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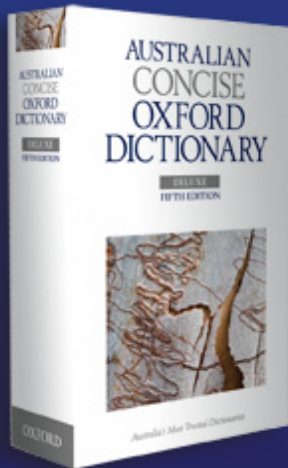
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The beginning of British settlement in Australia on 26 January 1788 had certainly been commemorated before this, but it was celebrated as *Anniversary Day* rather than as **Australia Day**:

1846 Celebration of the fifty-eighth anniversary of the foundation of the colony. The 'Anniversary Day', as it is pretty generally called, is now a regularly established holiday in Sydney. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January)

In Victoria the day was also known as *Foundation Day*. There was a gradual push during the first part of the twentieth century for 26 January to be called **Australia Day**, and this happened in New South Wales in 1932:

1932 Anniversary Day was celebrated under a new name yesterday. For more than 100 years the day has been commemorated as Anniversary Day, but the State Cabinet decided that it should be observed in future as **Australia Day**. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January)

It was not until 1935, however, that **Australia Day** was so called and celebrated throughout Australia.