

CRACKING AWABA: STORIES OF MOSMAN AND NORTHERN BEACHES COMMUNITIES DURING THE DEPRESSION BY PAULA HAMILTON. MONA VALE, SYDNEY: SHOROC COUNCIL LIBRARIES, 2005; 160PP, PHOTOGRAPHS, NOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, INDEX; PAPERBOUND, \$15.00.

The introduction to this attractively produced book states:

Oral histories can sometimes give us information about events which have not been recorded in official publications but they are far more valuable for what would never otherwise be known to posterity, the intimacies and everydayness of people's lives and the feelings they had about life in this period from their own point of view.

Cracking Awaba does examine the 'everydayness of people's lives' but it does so for a specific group of people, those who lived in an area which at the time had its own distinct character. In the 1920s and 1930s Sydney's Northern Beaches were difficult to get to from the city and its inhabitants needed a certain amount of self reliance. The Sydney Harbour Bridge did not open until 1932. Internally, the suburbs were linked by the opening of the Spit Bridge in 1924. While Manly could be reached by ferry and was a popular day trip and even holiday location, large parts of other areas such as Clareville, Narrabeen, Avalon and Pittwater were mainly bush, with houses scattered miles apart.

There was variety however: Mosman and Manly were suburban, and had been so since the nineteenth century, while other areas were largely undeveloped. Pittwater featured farming properties, Clareville and Newport were popular for holiday cottages and Narrabeen had a camping area.

The first chapter of the book, suitably, focuses on how the landscape shaped the inhabitants' experiences. The interviewees recall their childhoods boating on the Narrabeen Lakes, stealing fruit, driving billy carts down Mosman's steep hills, picking flowers and blackberries, visiting the market gardens and just wandering in the bush. Many interviewees remember the delight of the views of the harbour:

I was right up on the very top and we could see way up the coast, north looking north, and of course, way looking south, the heads and everything else — it was really something...

And of course being so close to the ocean shaped their lives. This was a time when Sydney's beach culture and the cult of the lifesaver was at its height. In the 1930s the Port Jackson and Manly Steamship Company built a large bathing area in Manly Cove near the ferry wharf with water wheels, pontoons, diving towers and slippery dips which the Company described as the finest swimming pool in Australia. But the interviewees recall the community aspects of the culture

– learning to swim at the local rock pool, the camaraderie at the surf club, the administrative work involved in maintaining the club paperwork, the attractions of the celebrity swimmers who would visit the pools. Fishing and prawning supplemented the family income. Many children were at home in boats and went out on their own on the Lakes or Pittwater, where in the words of one interviewee: ‘if we capsized, well there we stayed until we were rescued’.

The book began as an oral history project on the 1930s for Sydney’s northern beaches suburban councils. As the book focuses on the Depression era, stories of hardship, making do, hard work and sacrifice feature among the tales of games, outdoor activities, social events and school lessons.

Because most of the memories are childhood to early adult, as the author notes, they are tinged with nostalgia or at least recall childhood as a golden era, where hardship was generally at one remove from their direct experience. The changes brought by the Depression were more fully realized by their parents. The realities of life did, however, hit home when individuals had to leave school because their parents couldn’t afford to send them to high school, or had to leave their home when the bank foreclosed on it.

Here the author skillfully juxtaposes the differing life experiences, avoiding what might be just another trite account of the Great Depression. Evidence of social and economic relationships are teased out through the eyes of the interviewees. Camps sprang up around the bays and beaches, even in the midst of the suburbs, forcing a realization of the scale of the disaster. Some found work labouring for the wealthy inhabitants of Palm Beach in their houses and gardens. Families sometimes had one member who was better off and was willing to support the others for a time. Children and teenagers of such families were expected to work somehow to support the family. One resourceful interviewee who lived in Warriewood during the Depression caught funnel web spiders for the Commonwealth laboratories at sixpence a spider, then turned his hand to catching red-bellied snakes to sell the skins. He must have had nine lives.

These memories are supplemented with numerous photographs of people and places, some supplied by the interviewees themselves. It is perhaps by looking at an image and then reading the story to which it relates that the value of oral history best comes across to the reader. Many such photographs would be meaningless or misleading without the commentary about the family and social relationships, economic situations and anecdotes behind them. In documenting the Northern Beaches at this time before they became fully suburbanized, the author has recorded memories of a part of Sydney’s past that is hard to imagine now. Land which is today just seen as real estate is rendered part of the landscape of memory, much of which now only lives on in memory and in this enlightening book.

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