
Seeking Sydney From the Ground Up: Foundations and Horizons in Sydney's Historiography

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S ometime in 1962, my father came home with some exciting news. I had been chosen to be part of a parade! I was to stand on the back of a float contributed by the Good Neighbour Council, Blacktown branch, of which Dad was an enthusiastic and active member, and later Vice President. It was a great honour! What parade? Why? I was four and can't remember. But one thing is still clear: I had to wear 'national costume'. I can imagine my thrilled Dad, grandly imparting this piece of information to my mother. And my mother being rather flummoxed. What on earth was our national costume? She had grown up in Indonesia. Dad was from Holland and his folks hadn't worn 'national costume' for perhaps a century. Both of them were, after all, striving to be modern people in a young, modern nation. But, like lots of housewives then, Mum was a great dressmaker, so soon she was busily

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creating her version of a suitably 'ethnic' outfit for me: a white skirt with coloured ribbons, sewn parallel all around the bottom, a black bolero, and bunches of coloured ribbons in my plaited hair. How proudly I stood in my ersatz national dress on the back of the float as it lumbered along Main Street, Blacktown, clutching my doll and waving to the assembled crowds!

Seen from the outside, my fuzzy memory fragment might represent the success, indeed the rightness, of assimilation policies – if you were conservatively inclined. Or, if you were of a more critical bent, it might be seen as evidence of the cruelty of assimilation policies, and the brainwashing agenda of the Good Neighbour Councils, with their patronising gestures to fake 'folklore'.¹ But what if it was read from 'from the ground up'? My father's determined attempts to become an Australian citizen, his excitement when I was picked for the float. My mother's obliging response: ah, the Australians wanted national dress, it was clearly important to *them*, so she would construct it. I can see her, mouth full of pins, absorbed in stitching the silky coloured ribbons to the fabric, the heavy Singer sewing machine whirring in the afternoon sunlight. To them, at that time, it did feel like inclusion – and who cared about folkloric authenticity!

The Good Neighbour Councils *were* assimilationist of course. But my point here is that we must also be attuned to what *people themselves* actually made of such organisations, policies and behaviours. We must not lose sight of these lived experiences in polarising analyses and models. Like so many hundreds of thousands of others, my parents were purposefully trying to move on from the shock of war, imprisonment, displacement and homesickness, working hard, forging new suburban lives on the outskirts of Sydney. Ordinary people like them were the enactors, the creators of new, dynamic, post war Sydney.

It was an essay by geographers Robyn Dowling and Kathy Mee on Western Sydney public housing estates in the 1950s and 1960s which prompted me to write that we need histories 'from the ground up'.² Dowling and Mee compared longstanding stereotypes of Western Sydney and public housing estates with real demographic profiles and the lived experiences of suburban people, stories that 'highlight the social promise and ordinariness embedded in the building of estates'.³ I wanted to cheer. Here was recognizable, human Sydney, full of 'people doing things', recovered from the condescension of almost everybody.

In this article I want to first explore what ‘from the ground up’ has meant in my own work, and look at its implications for urban history more generally. Then I will trace some key movements and breakthroughs in Sydney’s urban historiography over the past half century, noting particularly what happens when close-grained research is fused with larger conceptual and theoretical approaches and models. My own approach to urban history ‘from the ground up’ is urban ethnographic history. The aim is Annales-inspired *histoire total*, for I seek to ‘see things whole, to integrate the economic, the social, the political and the cultural into a “total” history’.⁴ The Annales emphasis on space, and the perception, co-existence and interaction of different historical timescales, have of course been germane to the emergence of urban history since the 1960s, while cross-disciplinary exchange and thinking (something in which we bowerbird historians excel!) also lies at the heart of urban studies.

But my interest is in the small-scale and intimate, and in the multiple meanings of real places over time. I work out from the particular, and ‘small things forgotten’, from glimpses of ‘people doing things’ and the ordinary rhythms and patterns of urban life. Like many ethnographic historians, I was originally inspired and guided by the work of Rhys Isaac, Greg Denning, Inga Clendinnen and Alan Atkinson, and by the concepts, approaches and models of material culturists and archaeologists such as Henry Glassie, James Deetz, Martin Hall and others.⁵

Thus ‘from the ground up’ for me is shorthand for the ethnographic observation of people, places, objects and events, read in tandem with broader critical methodologies, and, perhaps most importantly, within the *cultural context of the time*. It has radical and illuminating potential. It is radical because it is a way to recover not only the worlds of the poor and marginalised of the city on their own terms, rather than merely as the people ‘at the bottom’, but also other hidden communities and lost places, and even aspects of urban life so common that they pass unremarked, now and in the past. It is a way of moving beyond common stereotypes and long-accepted generalisations. And it illuminates the process of city-making through what I have elsewhere called ‘dialogues of townscape’.⁶ Urban development is more than a simple lineal progression and spatial expansion, measurable in architectural styles or suburban spread or the length of the steel rails. We must see it, too, as more than the hegemonic imposition of power by dominant groups alone. City-making is a *process* of action and reaction, it emerges from ‘dialogues’, negotiations, confluences and struggles between governors and governed, settlers and Aboriginal people, workers and bosses,

women and men, the old and the young. Often these are grossly unequal dialogues, of course. But it is vital to observe and explore the strategies and actions of the weak as well as the strong, to track the *responses* to policies and laws, to buildings, planning and technologies, to the struggle over spaces and places.

My earlier ethnographic study of the early convict and ex-convict community of Sydney's Rocks neighbourhood employed the historical-demographic methods of the new social history of the 1960s and 1970s. The study was built on the analysis of 1290 Rocks residents and almost 300 households from the original notebooks for the 1822 Muster. Each person was then followed up in the 1828 Census. Working 'from the ground up' in this way, I was able to recreate neighbourhood patterns and distribution, analyse household and family formation and their relationships to civil status and gender, as well as the rate at which people stayed on the Rocks or moved away between 1822 and 1828. Most striking was the fact that this was indeed a convict and ex-convict neighbourhood. In 1822, only a fifth of the Rocks' residents had arrived free, and half of those had followed a convict spouse to the colony and were therefore of the same social background. A third of the population were children. All – convicts, ex-convicts and their children – lived in the small houses shown in so many of the early paintings of Sydney town.⁷

Because I was working with the original notebooks for the Muster, which listed people in the order their houses stood in the streets, this work was enabling in more human and spatial ways. I knew roughly where everybody lived, who lived in each household, their relationships and their everyday landscapes. I knew how close people lived to pubs, shops and friends; the stealthy path taken by a thief intent on giving fabric he had stolen to a woman he admired; how far a father had to carry a stillborn baby to bury it secretly at the old graveyard in the dead of night. Thus, too, the endless cavalcade of names and sites mentioned in the court cases, coroner's inquests, petitions and reports became recognisable, and came into focus as real people in a real neighbourhood.⁸

These were the approaches that enabled me to rewrite the early history of Sydney. By working from 'the ground up', combining demographic research with close observation of human actions and interactions, movements and words, particularly those repeated over time, and by attending to small things, like artefacts and buildings from archaeological sites, early Sydney could be explored ethnographically, that is, on its own terms. The startling conclusion, confirming the work of earlier architectural, social and economic historians, was that Sydney

was never an 'urban jail'.⁹ In fact, as John Hirst had earlier argued, for convicts the period of increasing restrictions and rising severity occurred later, after 1822. Even then their lot was not one of automatic incarceration. The historiographical implications are significant. Not only did the early colony have to be re-read *as a colony*, not a gaol, but the so-called 'turning point' from 'prison' to 'free colony', so often invoked or assumed in Australian historiography, is a myth. There were great cultural and social shifts in nineteenth-century Sydney, but this was not one of them.¹⁰

The ethnographic approach also allowed the recovery of the strategic but also emotional and symbolic importance of certain key Sydney places. Places such as South Head, the first lookout and signal place, the point which connected the colonists to the rest of the world. Or, at the other end of the settlement, the old Green Hills on the Hawkesbury, founded by ex-convicts, which became Windsor with the wave of a vice-regal hand. Comparative on-the-ground research led to a eureka moment on the origins of Parramatta – this was Governor Phillip's 'startover' town, designed like one of the new model towns in England in an attempt to control the convicts and their frenetic land-grabbing, house-building, town-making ways. It was an attempt, too, to fulfil his orders to establish an *agricultural* colony. For a little while it was hoped that the rag-tag port town growing in Sydney Cove might fade out of importance.

By attending to structures, paths, actions and movements in the same urban space, we can observe convicts taking land and building their own town in Sydney, yet at the same time, see why the young Eora warriors of early Sydney acted as if *they* owned the place. We can understand, finally, that Sydney Harbour was the arena of Eora fisherwomen, and that Manly, named for the manly virtues of the Camaragal warriors, was the key focus of the earliest settler-Aboriginal relations. Manly was *the* place of early cross-cultural encounters, fascination, meetings, negotiations, kidnappings and retribution. Building on the rich body of existing work, the closely observed ethnographic approach allowed a rethinking and retelling of the relationships between settlers and Aboriginal people, relationships which counter the idea that urban space was exclusively 'white' space, and which came to be strangely and terribly entwined with the first frontier war, the war on the Cumberland Plain.¹¹

Here it is important to observe that *place* is more than simply noting a location, or describing a 'sense of place', though those are important too. Place is a methodological strategy in itself. By tracking people in and between their places, by re-envisioning the spatial dimensions and

relationships in those lost landscapes, we can recover the dynamic past, a human landscape of freedom and constraint, taking and defending, of deep commitment, of acclimatisation, of covetousness and exploitation. By actually visiting extant places we can sometimes recover histories from landscapes and material remains themselves, and also see what has been remembered, and what forgotten.¹² It is important to know these deep histories, because often these places are still with us, they are our places too.

My moment of glory on the Good Neighbour Council float is a tiny story in a vast universe of others, a billion tales of the city, each sparkling with meaning. This of course leads us straight to the eternal and infernal paradox at the heart of writing city history: the fact that the city, as Italo Calvino tells us, is not one place, but many.¹³ Where, for example, can you say of Sydney 'I am here, I have arrived'? Where do you actually get to 'Sydney'? Visitors flock to the centre, the harbour and beaches, the great city icons of Bridge and Opera House, and yes, Centrepoint Tower too. The iconic structures and places have come to represent 'Sydney' both locally and internationally, as has occurred in major cities worldwide. And, in a bizarre associational process, cities, or rather their iconic symbols, also come to represent their entire nations. But recent immigrants from Vietnam might only arrive in 'Sydney' when they reach friends, family and familiar voices in Cabramatta. Young Aboriginal people leaving the rural areas of New South Wales for the Big Smoke may not feel the journey complete until they get to Redfern, the Aboriginal 'meeting place', or to Mt Druitt in the west.¹⁴ If we think about Sydney as it has been experienced by its people, as a 'lived place', it is better described as a networked city of islands, myriad, distinctive social, cultural and regional worlds. And, as the rate of urban change is always uneven, each of these islands may also represent different stages and times of the city's history and development.

Sydney *is* the regions – the northern peninsula (known locally as 'God's Country'), the Shire (also God's Country), the Central Coast (ditto) – each of which have their own histories and identities, allegiances, and chauvinisms. Sydney *is* the vast and endlessly varied mosaic of suburbs: once many of them were rather like discrete villages or country towns, now they stretch continuously from the shorelines over the plain to the rivers and mountains. It is scores of ethnic communities, people of divergent economic and social classes, people of

utterly opposed cultural outlooks, political persuasions, religious beliefs, tastes, dress, manners and demeanour.

Such diversity should not surprise us – most large cities boast of it, after all. But in Sydney these islands can be physically as well as culturally distant, because Sydney's size and demography compound its diversity. Its four million people occupy an area of just over 12,000 square kilometres. Tokyo-Yokohama, by comparison, houses 37 million people in an area only slightly larger. Rome has a comparable population in land-space roughly the size of Sydney's Eastern suburbs.¹⁵ So Sydney is characterised by this vast sprawl, and the ever-growing distance between the old centre and the peripheries has been a constant historical feature since at least the 1920s, but particularly in the post war period with the advent of motor transport. Distance, in terms of urban sprawl and low density, has profoundly altered natural environments, shaped cultural landscapes and local allegiances, and grossly affected the provision of infrastructure and services.¹⁶ It also means that citizens rarely if ever know and understand their city in its entirety, for although Sydneysiders move on average once every five years, they tend to stay in their own familiar zones.¹⁷ How often have you heard people say they have never in their lives been beyond Parramatta? Or even over the Bridge? This is one reason that regions and places are so readily known by stereotypical images and associations, by unshakeable fears, deep prejudices and envious aspirations. As we shall see, these powerful urban stereotypes are an important area of research and analysis in their own right. They are another reason history 'from the ground up' is so important.

How have historians and others dealt with the impossible and endless diversity of cities? Urban analysts and historians have been observing cities 'from the ground up' ever since the birth of urban studies. Think of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1891-1902) in which London was anatomised, carefully examined socially and spatially, and every street and group of people recorded and reassembled in 17 volumes which took eleven years to publish. Or Simon Bradley and Nikolaus Pevsner's *London: The City of London 1*, in which the authors attempt to pin London down on the page by giving detailed histories and descriptions of every historic building, in the order in which they appear in the street.¹⁸ At the other end of the spectrum, post-modernist scholars eschew the very idea of a city history and embrace diversity on its own terms. Urbanists Peter Murphy and Sophie Watson describe Sydney as a 'surface' city, made up of glitzy shiny surfaces and layer upon layer of representation. 'There is no one Sydney', they declare, 'just many surfaces reflecting different lives, different images

and different lenses'. Yet the essays in this slim book do go below the 'surfaces' to explore aspects of city people's lives and experiences.¹⁹

At the same time, Sydney's diversity and geographic spread, its myriad regional and local identities, spawned another particularly rich and lively literature – local history. Sydney is a beneficiary of this great and long-lived Australian tradition of local history writing. Beginning with reminiscences of ageing pioneers in the late nineteenth century, and moving through the proud and progressivist boosterism of twentieth century city, municipal and shire histories, local history engaged with more critical stances in the wake of the rise of social history from the 1960s, paying increasing attention to the ways class, race and gender divided as well as united local communities. But as Frank Bongiorno observes 'the most powerful impulses behind the writing of local history has been the desire to know one's own "place", to uncover its hidden stories, to gain a greater appreciation of what makes it distinctive'.²⁰ Thus history from the ground up in this sense naturally deals more with the local as place in its own right, and less with the history and processes of the city of which it is a part. If you metaphorically assembled them as mosaic, they would still tell a thousand overlapping local stories. City history is something more.

Sydney's modern historiography grew upon solid and inspiring foundations – most notably the work of the Sydney History Group in the 1970s and 1980s. Together with other seminal works in urban studies of the period, for example Hugh Stretton's *Ideas for Australian Cities*, the SHG's publications became foundational texts.²¹ They were marked by an overarching concern with urban affairs, with the future of the city, and with social and environmental justice, especially in that period of Sydney's rapid expansion as an emerging global city.²² This was history alive and connected to urgent contemporary issues.

The Sydney History Group's work was partly transnational in approach – as Jill Roe and Garry Wotherspoon observe in this volume, they drew inspiration from British urban and social historians Asa Briggs and H. J. Dyos, and from US urbanist Jane Jacobs and the Chicago School. Urban networks, infrastructure and services – the housing, transport, water supply and sewerage that make up the physical city, make it work, hold it together – were particular focuses. At a broader level the SHG's approach emerged out of the new social history of the 1960s and 1970s, its roots in the *Annales* and the new labour and social

history of the Cambridge Group for the History of Populations and Social Structure, its emphasis on the lives and experiences of ordinary people, and its intoxicating promise of certainty and objectivity. It was powerfully shaped by questions of class and the relationships between class, urban morphology and urban equity, past and present.²³ Shirley Fitzgerald's landmark *Rising Damp: Sydney 1870-1890* implemented the historical demographic methodologies of the Cambridge Group, but also situated the statistical findings in the broader urban, social and political context. Fitzgerald had something radically new to say about the great labour struggles of the 1890s: they were born of urban decay and the disappointed hopes of the so-called 'workingman's paradise'.²⁴

The past forty years have also seen remarkable theoretical and conceptual breakthroughs in historical thinking more broadly: feminism and gender history; migration and ethnic histories; cultural and neo-Marxist approaches, particularly the study of modernity; Aboriginal and cross-cultural histories; and the burgeoning area of environmental history. Each of these offers analytical tools to explore the city in new ways, to track city processes, to better understand the mechanics and power of city discourses and representation. How have these been used in Sydney's history? How are they deployed to deal with diversity, the fact that the city is a different place to different people? What new tales of the city have been told? And how do the larger theoretical approaches relate to seeking the urban past 'from the ground up'?

Let us begin with city images and representations. From 1990, then Melbourne-based historian Alan Mayne published a series of works on what he called the 'imagined slum'. His book of that name used postmodernist textual analysis to anatomise a series of nineteenth century newspaper slum narratives, and revealed them to be, not a reflection of reality, but derivative constructs, comprised of stock images, figures and tropes, studded with 'trigger' words, all of which circulated as nineteenth century global discourse. As the creations of those in power, harnessed to the cause of clearing the city of working and poor people to make way for industry and commerce, these texts were not innocent, nor the direct reflections of historical reality that historians had hitherto assumed them to be, but deeply political.²⁵ Mayne's critique was vital in that it drew attention to the power of such images, narratives and words, and allowed a critical review of sources which until then had been taken literally. The work also opened the way for fresh explorations

of the lived world of the urban working poor and working class life on its own terms – from the ground up.²⁶

Mayne's analysis of text can be extended to city images, or what I call 'urban legends', more generally. So many Sydney places and landscapes *have* been invested with moral values: good places and bad, orderly, productive lands, disorderly wastelands, communities and later suburbs whose very names could inspire fear and loathing.²⁷ Some places, by contrast, were actively linked up to respectability, patriotism, citizenship and national identity, no less. Paul Ashton's article on progress and populism in Sydney's northern suburbs is a fine example of these intersections, and of the potency of moral values when ascribed to urban places. The North Shoreites, through their local newspaper *The Suburban Herald*, sought to promote and protect their own area as a precious, morally superior bastion against the evils of the corrupt, immoral, parasitic city.²⁸

But like Roland Barthes' myths, urban legends also hide the truth about places.²⁹ Western Sydney, for example, despite its social, ethnic, architectural and topographic diversity, is always portrayed as flat and monotonous, poor and strife-ridden, 'the ends of the earth', a physical and cultural desert where the social fabric unravels. Such words and phrases can easily imprison. Mark Peel, writing of Mt Druitt in Western Sydney in 2002, pointed out that these words 'come to be what is known' about a place, and they have real impact because they so easily 'enter into political language and into public commonsense'.³⁰

The same awareness and analysis of stereotypes and trigger words inform the history of Sydney's migrants and their communities. Here there was another great leap forward. Shirley Fitzgerald's *Red Tape Gold Scissors: The Story of Sydney's Chinese* not only broke with old racial stereotypes but also with the conceptual assumptions which had hitherto framed migrant histories: monolithic ethnic communities and their frozen, essentialising 'cultures'; binaries of racism and victimhood; the eternal gulf between 'them' and 'us'.³¹ All of these categories can blind us to what was happening on the ground, and, ironically, to those extraordinary human stories of migration and making new lives. Fitzgerald points out the vast complexity and variety of experience, allegiance and identity in the long history of Sydney's Chinese community, the ebb and flow of coming and going, the fluidity and exchange in the many ways the Chinese interacted with white

Australians – there were racist policies and hate-filled riots, but also gestures of loyalty and friendship. And the process of cultural exchange moved both ways: while Sydney places are deeply invested with Chinese meaning, in Chung Shan, in Kwangtung Province, in China, returning Chinese merchants built distinctly Sydney-style houses. Fitzgerald's work has inspired emerging scholars, for example, Melita Rogowsky's detailed ethnographic study of the large but little recognised Chinese community at Alexandria.³²

This brings us to cultural history and cultural processes more generally. Cities are not simply physical entities – intricately arranged masses of brick, stone, iron and bitumen, concrete, steel, wires and glass. They are made through culture and cultural activities too, from the shared urban pleasures of popular culture and sports to the ever-jostling struggle over manners and behaviour; from specific shared cultural beliefs and practices, to culture in its broadest sense – a whole way of being, a world view. These things don't just happen *in* the city, as if on a stage; they *make* the city, they *are* the city. And, as US urban historian Roy Rosenzweig demonstrated in *Eight Hours For What We Will*, cultural behaviours and actions are powerful weapons and expressions in the dialogue of urban class struggle. The nineteenth-century American city was a cultural battleground where working people created and defended their own spaces and their own time against the middle classes and capitalism, not only in workplaces, but through sport and parades, in barrooms, parks and public spaces.³³

No-one has written an equivalent class/cultural history of Sydney as yet, though Lucy Taksa's fine-grained research on life and work at the giant Eveleigh Railway Workshops near inner city Redfern offers a valuable case-study. Though Taksa is more explicitly concerned with organised labour than Rosenzweig, she nevertheless draws labour politics, culture and community together, and in her studies urban space matters, as do the great gaunt workshop buildings, still standing on either side of Redfern railway station. By focusing on 'industrial and political meetings that were held in local streets, halls and hotels, as well as their workshops' she reveals the 'roots of labour's political culture in a specific urban context'.³⁴ Another study linking labour history to community and heritage in Sydney is Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann's *Green Bans, Red Union*. This book exhaustively tracks the dramatic story of the Builders' Labourers Federation, popular community protest and the 1970s Green Bans which so radically

challenged the *status quo* of development-at-all-costs and succeeded in shifting Sydney's course towards heritage awareness and conservation.³⁵

Cultural historians like Richard Waterhouse, Peter Kirkpatrick, Jill Matthews, Penny Russell and Melissa Bellanta have produced studies pitched at a broader level, vivid reconstructions of the class and gendered struggles for urban space and of the ways city people have wished to play, relax, or behave within it.³⁶ They explore parklands and street corners, pubs and pony tracks, picture theatres, amusement parks and dance halls. Sydney plays bit parts in most of these studies, but it takes a lead role in Kirkpatrick's wonderfully place-based history of Sydney's bohemians, *The Sea Coast of Bohemia*, and also in Matthews' *Dance Hall & Picture Palace*, which looks at the advent of early twentieth century modernity and machines and the way these played out in urban popular culture and places. Meanwhile Penny Russell points out that manners mattered a great deal in colonial Australia, especially in cities, and Melissa Bellanta reveals that in-your-face resistance to respectable behaviour among the young was also constant.

The 1960s and 1970s saw feminism and women's liberation erupt worldwide, too, exploding the myth that power and the construction of society are gender neutral. Feminist historians, planners, architects and sociologists soon revealed the city as an artefact of men's needs and ambitions, while it kept women trapped, silent, powerless and going slowly crazy in suburban homes.³⁷ In Australia, Anne Summers told us that convict women in early Sydney were merely the sexual slaves of the 'imperial whoremaster' and that Australian women were always forced into the fixed categories of the male gaze: damned whores or God's police.³⁸ The doctrine of separate spheres dominated this historiography – women had always been confined to the home, men had always ruled the city.

It took this revolution to open historians' eyes to the way gender constructs our worlds, to women's history and eventually to men's history too. And, as Beverley Kingston pointed out some years ago, Australian cities have always been women's places, far more than the bush and outback.³⁹ But here social historians revealed startling new histories which not only shift the way we think about the city, they challenge and qualify feminist historical models too. To begin with, Deborah Oxley, Monica Perrott, Portia Robinson and Paula Byrne revealed thorough fine-grained research that many convict women were

skilled, entrepreneurial businesswomen, mothers of families, women who made hard-headed decisions about who they would marry (or if they would marry at all).⁴⁰ Margo Beasley's fine study of the world of Sydney's waterfront families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries showed that men's work on the wharves was erratic and insufficient to support a family. In fact it was often the women who were the main breadwinners and financial managers, and so the domestic sphere was the key building block of waterfront life, at least as important as the workplaces and the unions.⁴¹ Catherine Bishop's research on the busy nineteenth-century businesswomen of Sydney also challenges the notion of the urban woman as passive, dependent and confined to the private sphere of the home, and seriously qualifies the idea of impermeable separate spheres. Jill Matthews observes the influx of a new generation of young women into Sydney in the 1920s, for whom the bright lights and new jobs in office and factories held out the promise of excitement, independence, of possibilities, of a new sense of self, and of 'heterosexual modernity'.⁴²

What these histories also suggest is that the models of dependent women and separate spheres, with their implications for city and suburban life and forms, are contingent upon other factors, and thus need to be historicised. I suspect women's restriction to the home ebbed and flowed, rising to intense levels in immediate post-war periods, with the enormous social and emotional pressure placed on women to be homemakers, wives and mothers – but provoking backlash in the next generations. And what, then, of masculinist histories of the city? How have the ideologies shaping men and manhood translated into the urban social and physical fabric, into organisations, campaigns and cultures? If waterside work was so low paid and erratic that men could not fulfil ideal roles as family breadwinners, what might this suggest about the role of the unions, the meeting rooms and the pubs for men and male sense of self?

Perhaps still more startling is the breaking of the Great Australian Silence on urban Aboriginal history. Forty years ago, the long and continuous Aboriginal history of Sydney was scarcely acknowledged. Even when their presence and traditional ownership was recognised, they were still invariably placed firmly in the 'timeless' land, before the arrival of the First Fleet sadly but inevitably despatched them, and set 'history' in motion. The year 1788 was the neat line dividing black and

white stories, so Aboriginal people were simply not considered part of the city's history.⁴³

Seen from the perspective of Aboriginal history, Sydney certainly has a 'longue durée' – a continuous human presence reaching back at least 30,000 years, possibly fifty thousand years. As archaeologist Val Attenbrow's landmark book *Sydney's Aboriginal Past* shows, the evidence of those millennia of occupation is all around us.⁴⁴ Yet the historiographical gulf separating 'before' from 'after' 1788 effectively hid the fact that Aboriginal people were also in Sydney from the earliest years of the settlement, laying claim to urban spaces for their social gatherings, and initiation and legal rituals, selling fish and working in houses and pubs, mingling with settlers and sojourners in the polyglot town. Those Aboriginal people included in paintings of early Sydney were not merely allegorical, as is so often claimed, they represent actual Aboriginal presence. The Aboriginal geography of Sydney, familiar to everyone at the time, was subsequently lost, drowned out in the 'white noise of history making' and the rising stereotypes about 'real' and 'debased' Aboriginal people.⁴⁵

That vast tide has begun to turn. Heather Goodall and Alison Cadzow's *Rivers and Resilience* pieces together the continuous Aboriginal history of the Georges River. It is a history that mirrors that of the river itself: always present, flowing ever on, part of the expanding city's fabric, yet somehow invisible, absent in the city's consciousness and its official history.⁴⁶ In Stephen Gapps' local history *Cabrogal to Fairfield City*, the carefully gleaned Aboriginal history is not quarantined at the start, but told throughout, unfolding with other developments, as it did.⁴⁷ Gillian Cowlishaw wonders why anthropologists interested in Aboriginal culture and society hardly ever go to where most Aboriginal people actually live – the suburbs of large cities. Her book *The City's Outback* reflects on her work with the Aboriginal people of Mt Druitt and reframes fundamental questions about identity, culture and their relation with urban life. This is a disturbing and challenging study because it is fearless and deeply reflective.⁴⁸ Back in the inner city, Haidee Ireland has used an ethnographic approach to court records and related material to recover the history of poor and marginalised urban Aboriginal people in the 1920s and 1930s, and their struggle to survive racism and over-policing.⁴⁹ In all these works, once more, we see the remarkable potential and potency of history 'from the ground up' to re-envisage the city, to see it from a powerful new perspective: a city that was never merely 'white' space overwriting a long-lost Aboriginal place. Are we in a different city now? Or the same one?

In some ways the environmental history of Sydney has been a long time coming for similar conceptual reasons: 'city' and 'nature' were seen as mutually exclusive, opposing realms.⁵⁰ If the city was historic and cultural, the bush was its other: timeless and natural. Yet, as the pioneering works of the 1970s on the environmental fate of Botany Bay, and Sue Rosen's history of the Hawkesbury and Nepean Rivers reveal, Sydney is culturally, economically and ecologically entwined with its natural environments.⁵¹ Nature shaped Australian cities as much as cities transformed nature. How can we explain our cities without recognising their deep history – the underlying factors and forces of harbours and rivers, ridges and plains, good soils and poor, the enabling presence of clay, stone, timber and water? How can we track urban growth and progress without noting the concomitant impacts of environmental destruction and pollution, on both nature and people?

Several of the studies discussed already demonstrate the way that environmental sensibilities and ideas about nature have played a key role in the making of the city, and intersect constantly with ideas about class, gender, race and space. Ashton's North Shore suburbanites held up their leafy bushland as an unmistakable sign of the moral superiority of their place, the dialectic opposite of the dark, built up, corrupted city centre. It's no accident that many early bushland conservation pioneers came from the North Shore too.⁵² (In more recent times, of course, it's the suburbs which have been demonised as environmental villains.) Goodall and Cadzow's study demonstrates that an Aboriginal history of the city should properly be bioregional history, because it is the river and its immediate landscape that make sense of their experience. Given the regionalisation of Sydney generally, bioregional histories make sense as an approach to Sydney history as a whole.

Nuisances and noxious industries, pollution and land degradation, bushland and biodiversity loss have been the focus of urban environmental history, and rightly so. Yet historians and archaeologists are also seeking something more: the deeper relationship between people and nature in Sydney, past and present. Denis Byrne and his co-authors explore the religious and spiritual significance of bushland to ethnic groups: Sydney's parklands are 'enchanted' by Vietnamese Buddhist forest monasteries, bush meditation, and geomancy. The flowing fresh waters of the Nepean River are made holy by Mandaean baptism. All reveal that migrants have discovered or invested spiritual power in the natural environments of the Sydney area, a spirituality that contrasts starkly with the 'disenchanted' tendencies of rationalising

western Christianity and modern scientific park management.⁵³ Such encounters might also be less formal, more fleeting. I think of a story an elderly immigrant Dutch couple told me: when they finally managed to secure a block of land in Guildford in the 1950s, the whole family knelt together in its long grass and asked God for 'approval for the purchase of this piece of land' and thanked Him for delivering them from Wallgrove hostel.⁵⁴ Can we recover different kinds of spirituality? How can we write histories of what Alan Atkinson calls the 'love of places' when so often emotional attachment was experienced physically, emotionally and through the senses, and expressed not so much in writing but in spoken words?⁵⁵

In his book *Returning to Nothing*, Peter Read used interviews and field visits to locate the deep emotional bonds between suburban people and their places, and asks why this aspect of cultural significance is never included on heritage assessment checklists.⁵⁶ Sometimes powerfully felt attachment to country made it onto the page in the past too. My current work on nineteenth and early twentieth century Castlereagh in Western Sydney suggests that, before the rise of scientific and managerial environmental thinking, the settler community there expressed a shared and deeply felt regard for the river, the fertile river flats and the great scarp of the Blue Mountains looming beyond. For when the local-born identity Michael Long died in 1926, his interviewer and friend, the historian William Freame, wrote this:

Today, as he always said, the river will continue its song...the sun its rising and setting...the dark shadows will fill the mountain gorges and creep to the river's edge...[and] the soul of Michael Long still goes on towards the hills of God.⁵⁷

Here we have perhaps the most promising avenue of all for urban writing – ethnographic studies of Australian place. Frank Bongiorno calls them an 'intensely personal, multi-layered kind of local history', which often have at their heart the encounters between Indigenous people and settlers and their relationships with real places. Thus the focus is local, but the questions and themes can be universal.⁵⁸

Of all the ways we need to understand our cities' history, environmental history is now the most urgent. Ecologists' predictions for Australia's urban futures are grim. There is little or no doubt that climate change is occurring and that its impacts on cities in particular will be catastrophic. As great powerhouses of consumption and production, or,

as geographer Phil MacManus calls them, ‘vortexes’, cities are deeply implicated in climate change, major contributors to greenhouse gases, but they are also highly vulnerable to the impacts.⁵⁹ Some of these impacts, expected to occur over the next decades, include temperature increase and heat islanding, as concrete and bitumen retain heat and make cities difficult to live in; faster wind speeds and more frequent severe weather events. Rising temperatures will result in more severe El Nino droughts and water shortages, as well as catastrophic biodiversity die out.⁶⁰

But what does urban history have to do with this apocalyptic scenario? Shouldn’t historians leave it to the policymakers, scientists and technocrats to sort out those problems while we get on with exploring and presenting the past? Here we need to keep faith with the Sydney History Group’s clarion call: the past and future are linked and historians have a role to play in this vital research. They can recover more holistic accounts of urban development which track the rates and processes of urban environmental change. They can provide long views which can clarify current concepts and bywords, like ‘wilderness’, ‘sustainability’ and ‘resilience’. Libby Robin suggests that history, with its ‘slower pace of story-telling’, can convey the ‘slow catastrophe’ of climate change more powerfully and effectively than the current polarised debate between scientists and climate change deniers.⁶¹

But perhaps more important is the recovery of that history of humans and nature in the city – a history that tracks environmental problems, but also moves beyond the paradigm of ‘spoilers’ and ‘spoils’, the impossible yardstick of wilderness, and the dismissal of cities as environmental wastelands. We need histories of the *cultural values* that drive resource- and land use, histories of the way community values and habits can and do change over time, for worse and for better, and what drives those changes. We need histories of the deep and often unacknowledged relationships people have with bushland, gardens, beaches, rivers, wildlife and weather. We need histories of the ways nature shaped the city and its culture, and of environmental activism which reaches back to Sydney’s earliest years. These are the stories with which we need to reconnect, because in the end, policies, laws and governments alone are not going to make our cities sustainable and secure – city people must be involved, connected and committed too.⁶²

In a 1978 essay renowned historian Russel Ward wrote derisively that surely no one could discern national identity and mystique in city folk,

like 'Henry Parkes...or even the latter-day, trendy, young business executive'.⁶³ Ward was revisiting his seminal work, *The Australian Legend*, published twenty years before, in which he famously identified the 'distinctive' Australian heroes – all of them male, all white and all rural workers – who bestowed upon Australians a national character, culture and mystique.⁶⁴ To Ward, Australian cities were too derivative to be nationally distinctive – and anyway, what nation found its 'folk' in the city?⁶⁵ Urban people were surely too dull, soft, money-minded and unromantic to fit the bill as national cult figures. They were surely also too female, and, in the 1950s, too increasingly multicultural.

This search for national distinctiveness was of course standard in an era which, as Ian Tyrrell has observed, still 'emphasised the uniqueness of all national traditions'.⁶⁶ Ward's book certainly struck a chord with Australians and led to the earliest scholarly research on convicts. It also contributed to the emergence of a cultural 'rescue' history that excavated the past for examples of suitable 'genuine' national culture. But as Richard Waterhouse reminds us, culture is not some fixed and unchanging baggage we all carry around, but that continuous process of negotiation, importation, adaptation, merging and bifurcation. Australian cultures in particular are bricolage, by nature derivative, made up of elements imported and home grown, old and new. It is the way these elements are translated, rearranged, invested with new meaning and combined locally, in real places, that makes the whole distinctive.⁶⁷

We might say the same of cities. They are great, gleaming entrepôts for people, goods, ideas, designs and practices. So many key Sydney sites, for example, emerged from imported ideas and models, from Governor Phillip's Parramatta to the global-city glitz of the plans for Green Square Town Centre; from the magnificent fun pier at Coogee, based on English seaside resorts and lost in a howling storm in 1934, to Luna Park, imported from New York via Glenelg and St Kilda, still laughing at us across the harbour; from the great finger wharves of Walsh Bay, the likes of which you can also still see in San Francisco today, to the lost woodblock road pavements of the city streets, an example of the late 19th century world's best practice.⁶⁸ But in each case, the global and imported became local and distinctive through particular placing, use, meaning and history.

This is why the history of Sydney should also move outwards, from local to the global, and back again. Sydney is of course the product of imperial expansion and Indigenous dispossession, global migration, capitalism and modernity, so its story echoes that of many new world

cities. It was built on global migration and global economic ties from the beginning, and its boom and bust economic patterns testify to its dependence on global markets. Each of the historiographical approaches here discussed has transnational strands which reflect the fluidity and porosity of the city, its myriad links to distant places, and what is shared on a global scale – migrants arrive and return, and keep up links with home; cultures and ideas are in constant flux of transnational exchange and remaking; labour movements, civil and land right campaigns, feminism and women's liberation are all part of world-wide movements; environmental impacts are felt at local, regional and global levels. Yet at the same time Sydney, like all cities, tells a distinctive story, too, about landscape and environment, people and their places.

But, returning to Ward and his trendy young business executive, can it be true that city people have no *mythos*? Australia has always been a highly urbanised country, and since the early twentieth century still more so. What have been the ways of the city, the dreams and driving aspirations, the shared behaviours and cultural values, the survival tactics, the tales of wonder and hope, dignity and hubris, desire and avarice? What is the intangible allure, the exhilarating promise that has drawn so many to the port town, the big smoke, the bright lights, the 'good life'? In seeking Sydney from the ground up, we may well also stumble onto the heart and the soul of our cities.

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- ⁶² See Tim Bonyhady, *The colonial earth*, Melbourne, Miegunyah Press, 2000, introduction and chs 1 and 2; Kathleen McPhillips, *Local Heroes: Australian crusades from the environmental frontline*, Sydney, Pluto Press, 2002, chs 1 and 6; Gary Smith and Jennifer Scott, *Living Cities: An Urban Myth: Government and Sustainability In Australia*, Sydney, Rosenberg, 2006; Peggy James, *Cosmopolitan conservationists: greening modern Sydney*, Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013; Grace Karskens et al, 'Can environmental history save the world?', *History Australia*, vol 5, no 1, April 2008, pp3.1-3.32.
- ⁶³ Russel Ward, 'The Australian Legend Revisited', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol 18, no 71, pp171-86.
- ⁶⁴ Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1958.
- ⁶⁵ For recent discussion, see Graeme Davison, 'Rethinking the Australian Legend', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 43, no 3, pp429-51.
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- ⁶⁷ Richard Waterhouse, *Private pleasures, public leisure*, Introduction and *loc. cit.*
- ⁶⁸ Karskens, *The Colony*, pp79-82; Grace Karskens and Melita Rogowsky (eds), *Histories of Green Square*, Sydney, School of History, University of New South Wales and Sydney City Council, 2004, pp10-12, 118-19; Pauline Curby, *Randwick*, Sydney, Randwick City Council, 2009, pp.261-4; Lucy Hughes Turnbull, *Sydney: Biography of a City*, Sydney, Random House, 1999, p413; Sue Rosen, 'Luna Park: Fantasy, Fear and Public Fiction', *Public History Review*, vol 1, 1992, pp50-62; Shirley Fitzgerald and Chris Keating, *Millers Point: The Urban Village*, Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1991, pp85-96; Grace Karskens, 'Voices from the Harbour's Edge: Memory, Place and the Heritage of Modernity', *The Central Coast Geographer*, vol 8, 2000-2001, pp39-47; Grace Karskens, 'George Street North, The Rocks: Historical and Archaeological Study', unpublished report prepared for the Sydney Cove Authority, 1989.