

Vanished Thresholds

Colonial Gentry and the Shaping of One of Sydney's Earliest Suburbs

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Darling Point, one of Sydney's earliest suburbs, was described in 1857 as a small closed society, 'a strange nation'. These 'Darlingpointians', *The Month: A Literary and Critical Journal* declared, live in villas of which there were 'few finer in the world'.¹ Just over a century later, in 1965, Gavin Souter and George Molnar listed this inner-city suburb in Sydney's east as one of the city's 'preferred' suburbs, along with other suburbs such as Vacluse, Point Piper, Bellevue Hill and Pymble.² Around this time large tower blocks of apartments with views over the harbour began appearing above the trees in Darling Point in spaces created, for the most part, by the demolition of nineteenth-century 'villas' or by the subdivision of their land. A walk around the neighbourhood today provides an insight into how these proudly modernist buildings of the 1960s and 1970s sought to recruit the elite image of the suburb established in the mid-nineteenth century. Stone fences and gates from the older houses were often retained to persuade potential buyers these were 'prestige' apartments and that the reputation of the district as an enclave of the rich would continue.³ Now, however, they function more as melancholy reminders of what went

before. As the modernist towers themselves have aged and lost their glamour, the gates in particular look forlornly out of place, no longer clearly decipherable, providing only vague traces of the former status of the homes whose entrances they had once simultaneously announced and guarded.

The strange juxtaposition of the stone gates before the towers made of concrete, brick and glass provide sullen reminders of the history of the suburb as does the continuing presence of the few remaining grand old houses such as Lindesay, the first gothic house of Sydney, and Carthona, Bishops court and Swifts, similarly all made of stone. Such material objects in the mid nineteenth century contributed in important ways to the performance of the class standing of the colonial gentry who were the first white settlers in this area. But they also demonstrate how such objects can lose their original significance and have other effects, looking back at us now in the twenty-first century, producing, in Jane Bennett's terms, an experience of the uncanny.⁴

The difficulties today of physically maintaining the historic stone mansions of the area, reported from time to time in the contemporary press,⁵ also tell another story of the fragility of the social standing and wealth of the privileged classes of the district as much as of their continuing presence in the area. Only one, Lindesay, is managed today by the Historic Houses Trust of NSW. The other three remain in private hands but Carthona is the only one of these that receives no publicity about the difficulties of managing such grand estates. Visible to the public only from Double Bay in Sydney Harbour, Carthona appears quietly stoical on its small promontory, somehow left behind but indifferent to the world around it.⁶ As Jeremy Cohen has argued in his work on stone and affect, rocks 'are neither inert nor mute, but like all life are forever flowing, forever filled with stories'.⁷

In this article I explore the way a colonial gentry was constituting itself in the mid-nineteenth century through the shaping of a landscape and the material culture of suburbs such as Darling Point, seeking to create an 'infrastructure of certainty', in the challenging and volatile world of what was still predominantly a penal settlement.⁸ Important to this investigation is an understanding of the lack of stability of this social grouping, particularly in its earliest years, and how this was played out in the subdivisions of land and the building, ownership and furnishing of the early stone villas in this area. The article is part of a larger project in which I am

looking at the history of the built environment of this suburb, tracing the changes since the mid-nineteenth century in domestic architecture and the shaping of the urban and natural environment of the district. The theme of ‘vanished thresholds’, taken from the work of Anthony Vidler, will be a central one, here but also in the larger project, as I seek to contribute to the history of this place, to understand its broader role in the development of Sydney and what it suggests to us about the effectivity of material culture in the mobilisation and performance of class, gendered and racial identities in particular urban environments.⁹

—MISSING MONUMENTS

In her book *The Colony*, Grace Karskens discusses how Governor Phillip had sought to include Aborigines in the town of Sydney, to ‘incorporate them into settler society’.¹⁰ She describes early scenes as the Eora people became an increasing presence in the town during the first three years of settlement, incorporating places such as Government House into their daily itineraries. Underpinning Phillip’s approach was an assumption, Karskens says, that ‘the Eora would shed their savage culture and ways (fascinating as they were) and become like the British in thought and action, respecting British laws.’¹¹ But instead, by 1792 white townsfolk were becoming increasingly concerned about the free movement of Aboriginal people through the colony, complaining for example of problems with keeping the Aboriginal people out of their houses during the day time. As Karskens remarks, the Eora were acting ‘as if they owned the place’.

Some twenty years later, Governor Macquarie and his wife also set out to include Aboriginal people in the life of the town but in a more contained fashion. They did this in 1815 with the establishment of a farm at Elizabeth Bay, about one and half miles east from the centre of Sydney town, with neat rows of huts not very far from traditional Eora camping grounds at Woolloomooloo Bay and Rushcutters Bay. The Aborigines were reported to like this place and to use it frequently, but this was to be a brief pleasure as Governor Darling, soon after his arrival in 1825 started to show a strong interest in creating places that he saw as appropriate to a colonial gentry. His interest was matched by the increasingly frequent arrivals of young men, many of whom had served in the Napoleonic wars, looking for ways to secure a good livelihood for themselves and their families either as government officials or

entrepreneurs.¹² Once established these men began to seek out a style of living that contemporary commentators referred to as resembling 'life in England' and enjoy what was celebrated as the increasing availability of 'all the materials of what may be termed good middle-class society'.¹³

Governor Darling provided a 54-acre lot in Elizabeth Bay to his new Colonial Secretary, Alexander Macleay, in 1826 and by the 1840s gentlemen's villas and their gardens were to stud the shore of this peninsula and south-west along the ridge to Darlinghurst. As Karskens notes, Aboriginal people were thus dispossessed for a second time as their farm increasingly became the target of vandals and harassers.¹⁴ They could still be remembered by white commentators in the late nineteenth century as a very definite presence in places like Woolloomooloo and Rushcutters Bay in the early nineteenth century. Obed West, a 'resident of the locality', writing in 1882, claimed to recollect seventy years previously gatherings of '200 to 300 blacks' for their festive occasions in Woolloomooloo. Similarly, he recalled Rushcutters Bay on the other side of Elizabeth Bay (between this promontory and what was to become known at first as Mrs Darling's Point), being 'a great camping place for the blacks', a camping ground for which they retained, 'even to a very recent period', 'a lingering fondness'. Both men and women, he reported, could be observed in 'former days' fishing in the bay from their canoes. But he dismissed them as having no continuing presence or even claim to the land by 1882, pronouncing that the 'natural indolence' of the Aboriginal people and their 'taste for the fire-water of the whites' had led to a major deterioration in their conditions and to 'many dying'.¹⁵

No descriptions appear to exist of Aboriginal people in the Darling Point area from the time before or of white settlement but they are described as still a physical presence in neighbouring suburbs further east—in what were to become Double Bay and Rose Bay—in the early nineteenth century.¹⁶ More pertinently perhaps, for this account of the development of Darling Point as a white, middle-class enclave, a letter to the editor in *The Sydney Monitor* in 1837 tells the story of the writer being employed to work on the building of Lindesay, but how he resigned in 'terror' because of a 'corrobera' held by a 'parcel of black natives' one night in neighbouring Darlinghurst where he and his son had moved when he was offered the job on Darling Point.¹⁷ Such accounts would seem to suggest that the Aboriginal people of the area, the Cadigal people, were still at least moving around and possibly through

the Darling Point ridge in the 1820s and 1830s when white people began to encroach upon this land.¹⁸ Yet no memorials in the district between Woolloomooloo and Rose Bay remind us of this history, of what was known of their attachment to the place now called Darling Point. As Ken Inglis notes, monuments missing from the landscape can be as significant as those created.¹⁹ The names of a few of the streets and of the park below Darling Point, made out of the marshland of Rushcutters Bay, provide the only recognition today of the Aboriginal presence. Yarranabbe Park is a reference to the Aboriginal name through which white people first learnt of the Point, spelt various ways but initially, it seems, as 'Yaranbe'.

—THE FIRST SUBURBS

Grace Karskens observes that the establishment of the early suburbs east of Sydney was associated with the remaking in the 1830s and 1840s of Sydney as a white space.²⁰ As noted previously, the granting of land to Macleay by Governor Darling on the east side of Elizabeth Bay contributed to the eventual demise of the Aboriginal Farm established by Macquarie and the final disappearance of Aboriginal people from this peninsula. But Darling Point as a suburb was always imagined by government officials as a white, middle-class enclave and only the activities of entrepreneurial white men of the wrong classes—wood-cutters and a pushy merchant—appeared initially to pose any problems to government plans for its achievement. Aboriginal people were written out of the history of this suburb from its beginnings.

In 1832 Thomas Mitchell, Surveyor General of the new British colony, submitted a report on fencing to Governor Bourke, arguing that the peninsula between Rushcutters Bay and Double Bay be fenced off and guarded from rapacious wood-cutters. Their activities in the last three months, Mitchell claimed, had made what he referred to as 'Mrs Darling's ridge' 'almost bare'—'the white sand appearing on the sides of what was once a most picturesque feature in the scenery of the harbour'. Retaining 'ornamental vegetation' in such areas was essential, he argued, to retain the value of the land.²¹ A few months later, Governor Bourke was required to defend the retention of this same 'projecting point' to Under Secretary Hay as being 'reserved for public purposes' by the Acting Governor Lindesay and his own intention to 'dispose of all that Neighbourhood for Villas'. Lindesay had refused to

grant land on this point to an Arthur Kemmis who wished to establish a whaling station near Sydney. Kemmis sought to appeal this decision, with no success, once he had heard that sixteen acres of the land had been allocated to the Colonial Treasurer, Campbell Drummond Riddell. For the Governor, the 'public purposes' of establishing a new suburb for the middle classes clearly overrode the interests of supporting entrepreneurial commercial activity on the harbour's edge.²²

Governor Bourke described the ridge as 'beautifully situated and adjacent to Woolloomooloo [*sic*] and Rush Cutters Bay [*sic*], where handsome Villas are built and building'.²³ In approving the division of land to be sold on Darling Point in 1833, the 'villa conditions' that had been established by the colonial secretary for the grants of land on Woolloomooloo Hill in 1827 gave the lead as to the type of housing that was to be appropriate for this new suburb. These conditions specified that the buildings erected had to be of no less value than one thousand pounds and they spelt out requirements about the positioning of the only villa or residence allowed on each piece of the land allocated.²⁴ The size of the subdivisions, however, and the reference to 'villas' also indicated that these establishments were not expected to be of aristocratic proportion. Though they differed in their political orientations and in their attitudes towards the social acceptability of former convicts in the colony—known locally as the emancipists—Governor Bourke and, before him, Governor Darling, clearly had a specific vision of middle-class suburbs with the appropriate types of housing and gardens to provide for and encourage the emerging middle classes of the colony.²⁵ But unlike early settlement in Woolloomooloo or Elizabeth Bay, the land on Mrs Darling's Point was to be sold to prospective settlers rather than provided as a land grant, much to the annoyance of Riddell, who had expected to be given his land as a grant by the governor.²⁶ But Riddell nevertheless went on to build Lindesay, the first gothic house in Sydney, now, as previously mentioned, owned by the Historic Houses Trust.

The planned domestic landscapes were imagined as visible to both visitors and other members of the colony. And they demonstrated, according to observers of the time, that colonial life now resembled 'life in England' and that it was possible to lead a respectable middle-class life in this new colony just as governors Darling and Bourke had envisaged.²⁷ Various visitors' accounts of their first sight of Sydney Harbour seemed to confirm that this ambition had been fulfilled by the 1840s.

George Bennett, for example, reported some initial disappointment on his arrival in 1841 at the physical landscape around the harbour, with soils, he said, 'parched, arid and barren', foliage that was monotonous, and trees, such as gums and swamp oak, failing to resemble anything like 'our oak'. But he found pleasure in the way on every 'hill and vale' could be seen 'some pretty smiling villa with its garden and green verandah'.²⁸ Similarly, two brothers visiting Sydney in 1842, while not pleased with the rain and mosquitos, reported the harbour as having a 'most beautiful appearance' with 'plenty of gentlemen's seats peeping out'.²⁹

For these commentators, the land was inferior to the land left behind in England, but they were reassured by the sight of these villas that the colony was similar enough to set out to reproduce 'something like' the world left behind.³⁰ They utilised certain local adaptations such as the addition of verandahs or of kitchens set at some distance from the house to manage the difference of climate, but the focus was on whether or not an English way of life could be provided (with touches quite often of Scottishness, conceived in this context mainly as cultural embellishments). The presence of the villas and their gardens represented a bulwark against the high level of uncertainties experienced in this particular colonial project of the aspiring gentry, but so did the very look of the landscape of the harbour foreshore they were creating.³¹

—VILLAS

The land on Darling Point was subdivided and notices about 'Villa Allotments' for sale published in the Sydney press in 1833. All thirteen lots were sold by 1836 and by 1841 six households had been established with a total of forty-eight inhabitants.³² The villas constructed on the ridge over the first twenty years of white settlement were predominantly made of Sydney stone from the Balmain area but some local stone was also used. The emerging colonial gentry of Darling Point sought the solidity and distinction that stone appeared to offer them in this new colony as compared to the wooden or brick houses more often built in the socially diverse suburbs nearby, like Paddington, and to the housing of Sydney town itself.³³

The emerging gentry relied on pattern books and other books on domestic architecture from England to guide them towards the appropriate type of housing to which they should aspire. These publications often provided not just drawings of the

facade and lay-out of houses but minute detail about their positioning, the types of internal and external decorations to be used, the most suitable furniture, and more pragmatic details about kitchens, waste deposit areas, water features and so on. Very much like self-help books, these publications both reflected and were contributing to the formation of a new middle class in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—a class which was by no means a clearly identified social group at this time, but which was becoming increasingly unified, as Davidoff and Hall have argued, by a commitment to domesticity and a social life organised around its ideals.³⁴ Providing scrupulous instruction in how the middle class could achieve the required appearance, way of life, forms of taste and appropriate domestic patterns of intimacy and distance, these books made their way quickly to Australia. In Bruno Latour's terms, they provided 'supplementary tools' for the aspiring gentry of colonial Sydney to render their situation interpretable to themselves and those expected to look in on them (both those of the same social rank and those socially distant from them).³⁵

High-ranking government officials such as Riddell and Mitchell, and soon successful merchants like Thomas Mort and Thomas Smart, began to pursue their domestic ambitions as colonial gentry through establishing themselves in this area, making it clear that 'domesticity was integral to masculinity'³⁶ for this class in formation, a point made by Catherine Hall in talking of colonial subjectivity. These men were actively engaged in choosing the design of their new villas, designing the gardens and purchasing the furniture and internal decorations for their houses. They often bought whole households of furniture from England such as the oak furniture, bronzes, statutory and other art, relics of medieval warfare, and so on purchased by Thomas Mort from a dispersal sale in England of the collection of the late Earl of Shrewsbury.³⁷

One of the most influential publications on domestic architecture was J.C. Loudon's *Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture*, first published in 1833. Loudon depicted an ordered world where one's station in life was clearly demarcated by the type of housing one lived in. 'Villas' were for the gentry and their families; 'cottages' of different kinds were for 'Labourers and Mechanics' or for 'Gardeners, Foresters, Bailiffs, and other upper out-of-door Servants in the Country'.³⁸ Joan Kerr, author of the 'biography' of Lindesay, suggests that Riddell had

the house built to a design that drew on one of Loudon's, 'A Villa in the Old Scotch Style'.³⁹ As was typical in the colony, the design was simplified and modified with various decorations omitted, particularly to the interior. '[S]tylistic aspirations were skin deep', according to Kerr, concerned more with 'defining the building within the landscape.' Interiors, she suggests, were organised instead according to notions of 'modern comfort'.⁴⁰ The *Sydney Times* in 1836 commended Riddell for the magnificence of his new residence, which was close to completion, and declared that it would be a 'powerful stimulus of example, to introduce a better style of building, and a taste for architecture in the Colony'.⁴¹ Oriented to look over the harbour and to be seen by passing ships, it gave the appearance of good taste and of a man with his family well-established in life. 'The Picturesque Sydney Harbour', writes Joan Kerr, 'had in turn led to a Picturesque Villa embellished with a carefully contrived Picturesque garden, all designed to be seen from the harbour.'⁴²

The villas, such as Lindesay, usually occupied three floors with living areas for the family and for entertaining on the ground floor and, generally, a library mostly to be used by the father with ample room for scientific collections and books. Upstairs, as well as bedrooms for the family members, there was a morning room with a pleasant view over the harbour for the women of the family with plenty of light for embroidering and other feminine activities. As Catherine Hall notes this use of natural light was associated with an aesthetic and moral vision of the early Victorian period to be increasingly replaced with a greater emphasis on heavy furniture and furnishings in the mid to late Victorian period.⁴³ Household servants in Lindesay, most of whom would have been women, worked (but did not live) on the lower ground floor with a series of rooms for various tasks and a separate entrance for them to come and go from the house. A distinctive feature of Lindesay was the internal well off the main kitchen area where groundwater was collected. These service rooms, half submerged underground with little natural light and with their stone walls and floors, were no doubt cool in summer but despite several fireplaces would have been extremely cold in winter. The internal geography of the villa with light, space, and views of water, which Loudon specified as being of particularly desirable, were central to distinguishing the spaces of the middle-class family from those of the serving classes. And again J.C. Loudon and other self-appointed advisers to the middle class of the time were providing detailed notes about the types of

rooms and separation of activities they should install through the design of their houses to mark themselves out as gentry and to develop the appropriate mental, emotional and physical habits for themselves and their families.⁴⁴

But for Riddell and his family this life turned out to be very temporary as they only lived in Lindesay for two years. Joan Kerr speculates that Riddell may have found the place too isolated for his family, being the only house at the end of Darling Point at this time, or that he may have overstretched himself financially.⁴⁵ After a number of occupants over the next few years, the land was subdivided into eighteen allotments and put up for sale in 1841. Severe drought in the period from 1839 to 1841 and falling wool prices meant that the colony was in deep economic depression by the early 1840s. The suburb of Darling Point was to be reshaped for the second time by a number of major subdivisions of land in 1841, both at the far end of the point where Lindesay was located, and in the middle of the ridge where by the late 1840s Thomas Mort and Thomas Smart had become significant members of the Darling Point society. Newspaper advertisements for these subdivisions evoked romantic pictures of Darling Point as now an Arcadia where the 'eye is attracted' to 'picturesque' views of Garden Island and the north shore of the harbour, at the same time as offering 'united enjoyment of health or pleasure' with good supplies of fresh water, 'tasteful serpentine walks' and 'good society'.⁴⁶

Following the subdivision of the Lindesay estate, Thomas Mitchell purchased the house and stables but he appears to have also already acquired land nearby on the peninsula. Mitchell had applied in 1827 to be granted a plot of land at the edge of Sydney township. He wrote to the Colonial Secretary at that time that his current living arrangements in Pitt Street in the Sydney township were quite inappropriate for him and his growing family. In 1828 he wrote again that he wished for a house 'in a better or more retired situation' and complained that his children 'cannot breathe the open air without hearing the language of the most depraved part of the population'. He craved 'a little pure air without annoyance' for himself and his family.⁴⁷ As Chris Otter has written: 'Suburbia ... is essentially a mammoth apparatus of distantiation.'⁴⁸

In moving to the suburbs Mitchell first built and lived in Craighend in Darlinghurst and then moved into Lindesay and Darling Point in late 1841. But he too was to stay only a short time in this house. Selling it to his friend, Dr Charles

Nicholson, he and his family moved into the stables of the property in 1843, while waiting to take possession of Carthona, the house he was having built on the waterfront of the east side of Darling Point.⁴⁹ Mitchell moved into Carthona with his family in 1845 and remained there until his death in 1855. Carthona is also based on a design from Loudon's encyclopedia of architecture, but the siting of the house on its own small, flat peninsula off the eastern side of Darling Point, very close to the water's edge, is reputedly based on a 'marine villa' from Francis Goodwin's *Rural Architecture* published in 1835.⁵⁰ At the same time as he had been building this grand villa, and despite the economic depression of the time, Mitchell had also begun building a country home at Parkhall near Appin. Carthona was to be his family's town house, a not unusual arrangement for the new gentry taking up residence in Darling Point in the mid-nineteenth century. Mitchell employed a full-time gardener to take care of the lawns, trees and shrubs and he took a particular interest in the citrus trees and vineyard.⁵¹

On Mitchell's death one of his daughters, Alice, inherited Carthona and his wife and younger children, including Blanche, the youngest, were obliged to move out of this mansion into more modest housing closer to Sydney town. Mitchell was considerably overstretched financially with his houses and estates heavily mortgaged and his wife and younger children were to suffer the consequences. Born in 1843, Blanche kept a diary from the age of fifteen to eighteen when she was now living with her mother in comparative poverty. In lamenting the loss of her 'beloved' Carthona in this diary, she focused particularly on the joys of the games with her siblings on the land surrounding the house and the exposure of the house to refreshing southerly, summer breezes.⁵² A gothic design had delivered some benefits in terms of taking advantage of certain refreshing features of Sydney's summer weather.

Mitchell had achieved his ambition to create a home for his family, at least during his lifetime, distanced far enough from the rapidly growing township of Sydney and its noisy occupants to create a socially ordered world where his family could participate in 'good society'. Blanche Mitchell's diary provides a clear sense of how Darling Point had become a small, relatively enclosed world, which she continued to visit even when now excluded from living there because of her father's poor financial management. She is a reminder too of the inequities that could easily

undermine the financial security of a woman of this class at the time. Blanche continued to visit Darling Point throughout the period of her diary, catching the omnibus that was now available to take people to and from the suburb and Sydney town, visiting friends, visiting the church of St Mark's which, as we will see in the next section, played an important part in the formation of the 'good society' of Darling Point, and going on walks in areas deemed picturesque and appropriate for such perambulations in the locality.

—THE GENTRY AND THE SOCIETY OF DARLING POINT

The colonial stage, as Catherine Hall remarks, offered opportunities for white Englishmen to disrupt the traditional class relations of their own country.⁵³ In New South Wales, for some this meant opportunities to secure class identities potentially denied to them by their financial fortunes in England; for others it offered to overturn the circumstances into which they had been born or had been thrown by the legal system of the time. Tensions initially existed between these groups as they strove to create a stable social grouping wielding the power and influence of money and empire. This was played out in battles between what were referred to as 'emancipists' and 'pure merinos' (those who had not only migrated to the colony as free men but were not tainted by any relationship to those with convict pasts). In Governor Darling's time these distinctions were rigidly adhered to and emancipists were seen as a separate class. Governor Bourke did not share Darling's exclusive views on such matters and with the ending of transportation in 1840 these social divisions began to disappear. Richard Therry, a significant legal figure during his thirty years in the colony, was to report that by the time of his departure from New South Wales in 1859 these divisions were far less observed in 'good society'.⁵⁴

For some, it took some time to adjust to their new lives, to a physical landscape they found hostile or ugly and a climate they found oppressive. Mrs Charles Meredith had prided herself on being a great lover of nature in her home country and had written a farewell to English seasons and the 'romance of nature' before leaving to accompany her husband to New South Wales where he planned to enhance his fortunes through farming. Arriving in Sydney in 1839, she had found reassurance initially in the beauty of the harbour and the elegant villas of Woollomooloo but she soon took a dislike to the town's inhabitants and to the

nature that now surrounded her. She complained of the lack of taste among the middle classes, with no class bearing any resemblance to 'the higher middle classes at home', and of the hot winds, the mosquitos, the noise of the insects and of what she referred to as the dull, sapless-looking leaves of the gum trees.⁵⁵ Thomas Mitchell too had despaired at first of his isolation in Australia and longed for 'Britannia's happier shore'.⁵⁶ But his move to Darling Point after a period of leave in England from 1837 to 1841 seems to have been associated with a greater acceptance of his new home land and his embracing a mission in building Carthona that would declare him very visibly to be a man of taste, social standing and independence.

For the men of Darling Point such as Mitchell, the shaping of this middle-class suburb enabled them to form themselves into colonial gentry and create a stage on which to perform as such. The reference to 'Darlingpointians' as a nation in *The Month*, some twenty years after the first villas were built, possibly gently mocks but also clearly celebrates their success in this endeavour. By moving out of Sydney town, they created the social distance they sought for bringing up their families and differentiated themselves as a social grouping, at the same time as they formed themselves into 'good society' and displayed their social standing through the material culture they established as characteristic of the area. And in performing these tasks and demonstrating their capacity to establish a good home for their family, they asserted their claim to the status of being men of good standing even though, as Catherine Hall notes, such an understanding of true manhood at this time rested on 'fragile foundations' with economic crises frequent. For 'many men', she notes, 'the activities of the marketplace brought not sturdy independence but fearful anxieties'.⁵⁷

For male commentators on the progress of the colony, women were considered important for the civilising work they performed in the home (and to some extent outside it) and as symbolic of a more civilised way of life. Indeed, Richard Therry described one of the striking differences between the colony in 1789 and 1859 as being 'the presence of ladies'. Such women, he claimed, could now be assured of having their families 'established in comfortable English-like houses'.⁵⁸ For 'ladies', he observed, it was far more important that they could be provided with 'all the materials of what may be termed good middle-class society' than for men who are

'less sensitive and more robust'.⁵⁹ These were precisely the materials identified by Penny Russell in her account of the genteel performance conducted by women in Melbourne in the 1860s and 1870s as they sought to project their 'good taste, good manners, refinement, education, morality, restraint and modesty'.⁶⁰

Women were recruited too by colonial painters, such as Joseph Lycett, to represent the colony, as Kasunic argues, as an ordered society with a tamed and familiar landscape.⁶¹ Commissioned to paint views of the estates of early colonial gentry, such painters drew on English traditions of landscape painting to represent the estates as parklands. Just as trees were placed carefully in these landscapes, so were women strolling in the grounds of the estates. Here again the point was being made that the colony was now a fit place for ladies who could enjoy the estates of their husbands in the leisure pursuits appropriate to their class. At the same time these representations of a gendered landscape asserted the standing of the gentry demonstrating they could provide adequately for their families. The picturesque conventions used in such landscape painting both cultivated and announced a way of looking that, as Paul Carter has remarked, 'heightened the observer's sense of possession' and 'his sensation of suddenly being at home in the world'.⁶²

The interest in picturesque domestic landscapes and gothic architecture demonstrate a colonial engagement with British Romanticism, characterised by nostalgic longing for a return to an idealised notion of the Middle Ages, 'replete' as Brian Andrews notes, 'with pageantry, chivalry and romance'.⁶³ But at the same time, Sydney's gentry constructed their colonial project as a modern one furthering, in particular, the spirit of scientific inquiry flourishing by then in Britain, America and Europe. It was as if the new settlement became a natural science laboratory as they collected plant and animal specimens, imported and grew plants from around the world, including the Asia Pacific area, and established horticultural societies and publications. Darling Point residents such as Thomas Mitchell and Thomas Mort pursued such interests, as did Charles Nicholson, Mitchell's friend, who followed him in 1843 as an occupant of Lindesay. Nicholson was to be a key mover in the establishment of the University of Sydney and his natural science collection eventually formed the basis of the University's museum, named after him. These colonial gentry were constituting themselves as rational, independent individuals, at home any where in the world with their scientific skills and interests, while they

were also forming themselves into a social grouping through their attachment to and creation of a particular style of urban environment and a form of housing and the private, domestic life that went with it.

The making of the 'good society' of Darling Point became an even clearer project with the building of St Mark's Church and the establishment of Anglicanism and churchgoing as central to their way of life. Church services were first held in a coach house in the grounds of Thomas Smart's Mona estate and Bishop Broughton laid the foundation stone for the church in September 1848 on land donated by Thomas Mort. Built to a design by Edmund Blackett, a dedicated proponent of Gothic architecture, St Mark's was completed, and the first divine service given, in November 1852. Various problems ensued with the appointment of suitable ministers and for some time the longest period for any minister to remain in this role was approximately two years. One was quickly dispensed with when he made what were considered inappropriate remarks in public (on the omnibus no less) about what he saw to be the popish tendencies of Bishop Broughton.⁶⁴ With a nice irony, it was only when Reverend Thomas Kemmis, son of Arthur Kemmis who had first sought to make Darling Point a site for his whaling station, was appointed in 1864 that the affairs of the church really settled down and the community became united in their support of him. Nevertheless, the church, described as a 'neat little gothic temple' by the article in *The Month*, was an important addition to the infrastructure of middle-class life on the peninsula early in its development, and attendance at Sunday service became a regular and key event in the lives of the local gentry and their families from 1852.⁶⁵

Four other pieces of infrastructure are examples of how building a particular urban, material culture supported and shaped the social lives of middle-class residents in the area around the same time. The first was the establishment of an Anglican school associated with St Mark's Church in 1849, which was to be the first of a number of schools, including young ladies' schools, to be established on the peninsula.⁶⁶ In 1848, as already mentioned, an omnibus service was introduced running four trips daily from the town. The third was said to have been prompted by the ambushing and robbing of Thomas Mitchell as he was driven home from dinner at Victoria Barracks in an open carriage along Darling Point Road late one night. Although residents such as Mitchell and Mort were taking a great deal of interest in

developing gardens on their private estates, the area remained isolated in the 1850s and the public landscape along Darling Point Road unkempt in places. Tangled undergrowth was blamed for robbery of Mitchell. The residents agreed to subsidise a watchman for the peninsula and Mitchell built a guardhouse for the use of police.⁶⁷

Finally, 'serpentine walks' were a further example of how important the formation of a particular kind of material culture was to support and shape the colonial gentry of the time. Such walks were described in the subdivision advertisements of the 1840s as passing along the water front and leading to various beauty points such as a waterfall in nearby Paddington or Rushcutters valley as it was sometimes described. They provided a landscape for women, in particular, to promenade along and engage with nature shaped by fashionable ideas of the picturesque. Blanche Mitchell in her diary enthuses about walking with a friend to this 'splendid' waterfall with its 'cascades of water dashing down with silvery sound' over a 'carvernous [*sic*] tract of rock' surrounded by 'green luxurious ferns'⁶⁸. The very naming initially of this peninsula as 'Mrs Darling's Point' conjured up the whole area as a picturesque landscape for women to promenade along just as the walk to Mrs Macquarie's Chair on the peninsula that now forms part of the Botanical Gardens had become such a landscape several decades earlier.

The story of the ambushing of Thomas Mitchell, however, also reveals one of the tensions that lay at the heart of this project of creating a social world and identity as respected members of a colonial gentry. The fragility of the incipient gentry's efforts in this far away colony was underlined by their relative isolation from the township of Sydney and its more developed (albeit still limited) infrastructure of social order. Their distance from Sydney town enabled their social distancing from the rabble and the continuing edginess of the colonial town just as it reflected similar moves by the middle classes in England to the urban outskirts of London and regional cities. But the juxtaposition of English villas on a landscape that was still 'untamed', at least outside the fences surrounding them, would have also suggested a material uncertainty, a world over which they had as yet only flimsy control. The presence of 'loafers and vagabonds' undermining the security of the area pointed too to the instability of the residents' social world and highlighted that it was not the same as the world they may have at least imagined they had left behind in England.⁶⁹ But, most importantly, the financial difficulties of men such as

Riddell, Mitchell and Macleay in this colony that was still establishing itself was a dark shadow threatening to sabotage their collective efforts to create the Arcadia said to be theirs and their individual struggles to claim a middle-class status for themselves and their families. The trappings of a middle-class material culture was not necessarily protection against the anxieties that might have beset these men late at night when confronted with their own problems.

Perhaps too these men were haunted by the many stories Mrs Meredith claimed to know of, particularly relating to members of the emancipists class. Even though they may be the richest men in the colony, she warned, they find themselves socially unacceptable when they returned to England instead of being celebrated for their wealth. They quickly return to the colony, she claimed, 'with their dreams of grandeur and importance woefully [*sic*] disappointed'.⁷⁰ The colonial gentry of Darling Point may have considered themselves untainted by the prejudices against the emancipists by the time its 'society' had begun to form and be marked out by the material culture of this peninsula, but nevertheless they could not be confident that being a highly respected member of the colonial gentry in New South Wales would translate into a similar status in England.⁷¹ Thomas Mitchell was said to be considerably buoyed by the awards of a knighthip and honorary doctorate on his return to England between 1837 and 1840; perhaps it was this that made it possible for him to be so much more reconciled to his life in the colony on his return in 1841. Now he would surely have felt more secure in his social status in the colony with the obvious affirmations and awards from back home.⁷²

Anxieties about the extent to which achievements in the colony would be appropriately recognised 'back home' were explored at times through discussions of the villas and gardens of Sydney. J.C. Loudon had recommended that villa designs for suburban residences be adjusted to suit individual tastes just as he had noted they should be adapted to suit 'newly peopled, and thinly inhabited, countries, such as the back settlements of America or Australia'.⁷³ John Thompson, the Deputy Surveyor General, wrote to Loudon in 1840 to give an account of the difference between a 'villa in the neighbourhood of Sydney and one at Camberwell or Peckham'. His letter was published in Loudon's *The Gardener's Magazine*. 'There is not', he sought to persuade Loudon and his readers, 'to the best of my recollection, any great difference.' The laying out of the gardens was, according to Thompson,

similar even though English lawns and flowerbeds were not so suited to the climate so stonework, terraces and large shady trees were more common. His efforts to assert sameness between colony and mother country even went so far as to claim increasing similarities in the weather. Perhaps in a statement of the early recognition of anthropomorphic climate change, Thompson reported changes in the climate in Sydney as land was cleared so that his own home had fireplaces in every room just like houses in England. 'You seem to me to be labouring under an impression that we are much warmer here than is the fact.'⁷⁴

By the 1891 census Darling Point was made up of 114 households with a total population of 709 people, 263 males and 446 females. Whittaker observes that the number of female servants needed to keep the great houses of the district explains this gender imbalance.⁷⁵ Unlike nearby neighbourhoods such as Paddington, rows of workers cottages did not precede or appear alongside the terraces and mansions for the middle class. Darling Point remained a predominantly middle-class enclave throughout the nineteenth century, even though houses there began to be more diverse as two-storey terraces were built alongside the stone villas. Class differences between the middle and working classes were played out for the most part within the households of the district rather than between them.

The power and status of its gentry was demonstrated in the New South Wales Legislative Council where, for example, 18 of the 40 members in the 1877–78 session of parliament were from the eastern suburbs and six of these were from Darling Point. The gentry used this power to gain certain advantages for their small peninsula through local infrastructure projects such as the establishment of parklands and playing fields and the stabilisation of land along the southern and eastern waters' edge of Rushcutters Bay.⁷⁶ Slowly the suburban landscape took over and eliminated the tangled undergrowth that may well have only developed once Aboriginal people and their land management techniques had been displaced by white settlement in the district.

The colonial project of the gentry of Darling Point in the mid-nineteenth century engaged them in the building of an elaborate material culture through which both they and their families could perform their social distinction and distance from others and which in turn formed them into a distinct social grouping and social identity for a time. The development of Darling Point, not just as a

'society' but also as a physical landscape, shows how historically class groupings take shape over a period of time rather than pre-existing the emergence of such cultures of distinction. But it also shows that, while their formation can be supported by the development of a material culture, they can also be let down by this materiality. As Penny Russell noted of the culture of gentility in Melbourne a few decades later, the performance and building of a class identity for the gentry was 'dogged by fears and vulnerabilities'.⁷⁷ In Darling Point even the land on which they built became a source of and an indicator of insecurity. From quite early in the history of Darling Point subdivisions of land signalled the increasing commerce in land as New South Wales left behind its beginnings as a convict settlement. But the subdivisions and regular sales of the district's villas and their land throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century also indicate that, despite their search for an infrastructure of certainty through the creation of such an apparently middle-class enclave, the social standing of the colonial gentry and their families was by no means secure.

The remaining grand mansions, the villas, of the nineteenth century and their stone gates and fences in Darling Point today tell a story of the ambitions and lives of the early colonial gentry of the area. Similarly, the names of apartment blocks and streets that refer back to previous houses now destroyed and their residents and families long gone can be read as telling this story. These shadows, if attended to, might remind contemporary visitors to the suburb, as well as its current inhabitants, of the spaces of luxury and exclusivity that many have never experienced, of thresholds they can never cross. But the very fragmentary character of this remaining material culture of the mid nineteenth century and the traces of the grand homes long gone in the names of streets and apartment blocks in the area also tell a different story. They remind us of how the claims to power and social standing of those who built such suburbs were always potentially fragile, never guaranteed, despite the apparent solidity of the material presence of the stone mansions, churches, fences and gates they built for themselves.

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¹ *The Month: A Literary and Critical Journal*, vol. 1, no. II, 1857, p. 99.

² Gavin Souter and George Molnar, *Sydney Observed*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p. 115; Darling Point continues to attract such attention. For example, postcode 2027, which includes Darling Point, was recently reported as second to Point Piper among the highest earning suburbs in 2009/10, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 May 2012, p. 3.

³ Promotion Agent's brochure featuring a drawing of a pair of ornate gates, 'The Fashion of Glenhurst'. Sometimes these gates were used instead at the entrance to the subdivision of land from one of these estates—for example, the Lindesay gates are now at the entrance to the road that leads down to Carthona. See 'Glenhurst' file, Woollahra Local History Centre, Woollahra.

⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, p. 2. Bennett refers here to W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.

⁵ See, for example, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 2012, p. 4.

⁶ Carthona is reported to have last been traded in 1941 when it was purchased by the descendants of the Bushell tea merchant family.

⁷ Jeremy Cohen, 'Stories of Stone', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, nos 1– 2, 2010, p. 62.

⁸ Cornelius Castoriadas, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blaming, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1987, quoted in Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, 'Abstraction, Materiality and the "Science of the Concrete" in Engineering Practice', in *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History and the Material Turn*, eds Tony Bennett and Patrick Joyce, Routledge, Oxon, 2010, p. 138.

⁹ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1992, p. 184.

- ¹⁰ Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2010, p. 533.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 392.
- ¹² See Kirsten McKenzie, *The Swindler's Progress: Nobles and Convicts in the Age of Liberty*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2009, p. 182, p. 193ff for a discussion of what she refers to as the 'flight of the would-be gentry'.
- ¹³ R. Therry, *Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Residence in New South Wales and Victoria*, Facsimile edition, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1974, from the second edition originally published in 1863, pp. 51, 60.
- ¹⁴ Karskens, p. 526.
- ¹⁵ *Old and New Sydney*, published by Edward Hordens and Sons, Sydney, 1882, pp. 4, 32. Obed West was a son of a convict, Thomas West, who became a very successful entrepreneur and landowner and owned a large portion of land between Elizabeth Bay, Darlinghurst, Paddington and Rushcutters Bay.
- ¹⁶ Various names are references to the Aboriginal presence in these neighbouring suburbs: Rushcutters Bay has been claimed to be a reference to the supposed killing of convict rushcutters by Aborigines in this bay in 1788 (a claim now rejected, see Karskens, p. 17); Seven Shillings Beach that runs along the harbour shore of the suburb of Double Bay is a reference to the amount paid to an Aboriginal man for the fishing rights he held. A rock carving on the Royal Sydney Golf Course provides clear evidence too of the Aboriginal attachment to the region. By the late nineteenth century, the only Aboriginal people in the area were said to linger on the high ground overlooking the harbour in what is now known as Bellevue Hill. They were reduced to scrounging for food, begging and the occasional boomerang throwing exhibition, Susan Woolcock Withycombe, *Honourable Engagement: St Mark's Church Darling Point, the First 150 years*, St Mark's Anglican Church, Sydney, 2002, pp. 2–3.
- ¹⁷ *The Sydney Monitor*, letter to the editor, 'Warning to Scotch Emigrants', 2 August 1837, p. 2.
- ¹⁸ The Cadigal People were a group of the Eora whose land stretched along the south side of Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) from the south head to near today's Petersham in Sydney's inner west.
- ¹⁹ K.S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008, p. 20.
- ²⁰ Karskens, p. 533.
- ²¹ 'Report on the Limits of Sydney' April 1832, to Governor Bourke, A333, CY1156, Thomas Mitchell Papers, Mitchell Library (ML), Sydney.
- ²² Governor Bourke to Under Secretary Hay, 6 August 1832, *Historical Records of Australia*, The Library Committee of the Commonwealth of Australia, vol. XVI, 1831–32, p. 693.
- ²³ Bourke to Hay, p. 694.
- ²⁴ James Broadbent, *The Australian Colonial House: Architecture and Society in New South Wales 1788–1842*, Hordern House, Sydney, p. 164.
- ²⁵ As noted by Hazel King, Governor Darling was willing to encourage emancipists in their economic endeavours but would not associate with them socially whereas Governor Bourke, an alleged Liberal,

was far more open about who were to be regarded as legitimate members of the colonial gentry; see Hazel King, *Richard Bourke*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1971, pp. 146–7.

²⁶ The British Government abandoned its long-existing policy of land grants to settlers, Government officials and emancipists in 1831; see Max Waugh, *Forgotten Hero: Richard Bourke, Irish Governor of New South Wales 1831–1877*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2005, p. 93.

²⁷ Therry, p. 51.

²⁸ Quoted in Barrie Dyster, *Servant and Master: Building and Running the Great Houses of Sydney 1788–1850*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1989, p.1.

²⁹ *Memoirs of Edward and Leonard Irby, 1841*, William Brookes and Co., Sydney, 1908, p. 29.

³⁰ I am grateful to Katrina Schlunke for her suggestion about this point and, more generally, for her assistance with this article.

³¹ Catherine Hall makes the point that in each colonial site of the British Empire there were different groups of colonisers engaged in different colonial projects: *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1876*, Polity, Cambridge, UK, 2002, p. 15.

³² A.H.C. Whitaker, 'Darling Point: The Mayfair of Australia', Master of Arts thesis, University of Sydney, 1983, pp. 10–11, 22.

³³ In Paddington, for example, villas were built for gentlemen in the 1830s but houses for the next rung down in the middle classes, including officers and middle-ranking government officials, were also being built by the mid nineteenth century alongside existing and new single-storey, working-class terraces. By the 1890s it was a very diverse suburb with a large number of builders who came into the suburb as speculators building for different social ranks. See Max Kelly, *Paddock Full of Houses: Paddington 1840–1890*, Doak Press, Sydney, 1978.

³⁴ Lenore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, Hutchinson, London, 1987, see p. 180ff on John Loudon and his contribution to the formation of this class in England in the nineteenth century.

³⁵ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. 209.

³⁶ C. Hall, p. 27.

³⁷ Thomas Mort papers, MLMSS/7 341 3 (13), Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.

³⁸ J.C. Loudon, *An Encyclopedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture*, Brown, Green and Longmans, London, 1846 (new edition with supplement; original published 1833), p. 1125ff. Linda Young discusses the proliferation of books on etiquette that were published in England, from the sixteenth century but particularly flourishing in the nineteenth century. In a sense these books by Loudon can be seen as part of this genre but, unlike the etiquette books, were written more for the gentry than for their wives and daughters; see Linda Young, *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century: America, Australia and Britain*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK, 2003, p. 133ff.

- ³⁹ Loudon, *An Encyclopedia*, p. 879; Joan Kerr, *Lindesay: A Biography of a House*, National Trust of Australia (New South Wales), Sydney, 1984, p. 14.
- ⁴⁰ Kerr, p. 17.
- ⁴¹ *Sydney Times*, 20 August 1836, quoted in Kerr, p. 21.
- ⁴² Kerr, p. 29.
- ⁴³ Davidoff and Hall, p. 375.
- ⁴⁴ J.C. Loudon, *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion*, Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, London, 1838, p. 138.
- ⁴⁵ Kerr, p. 27.
- ⁴⁶ *The Australian*, 5 August 1841, p. 4.
- ⁴⁷ Cited in William C. Foster, *Sir Thomas Livingston Mitchell and his World, 1792–1855. Surveyor General of New South Wales 1828–1855*, The Institution of Surveyors, Sydney, 1985, p. 126.
- ⁴⁸ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800–1910*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, p. 60.
- ⁴⁹ See Foster, pp. 361–6.
- ⁵⁰ Francis Goodwin, *Rural Architecture*, John Weale, London, 1835; see Broadbent, p. 288.
- ⁵¹ Foster, p. 445.
- ⁵² *Blanche: An Australian Diary 1858–1861*, The diary of Blanche Mitchell with notes by Edna Hickson and illustrated by Jill Francis, John Ferguson, Sydney, 1980, introduction to the diary, p. 113.
- ⁵³ See Hall, p. 65.
- ⁵⁴ Therry, pp. 62–3.
- ⁵⁵ Mrs Charles Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales during A Residence in that Colony from 1839 to 1844*, John Murray, London, 1844, pp. 40, 52, 115; see also Mrs Charles (Louisa) Meredith, *The Romance of Nature; or the Flower Seasons Illustrated*, Charles Tilt, London, 1839.
- ⁵⁶ Broadbent, p. 286.
- ⁵⁷ Hall, p. 27.
- ⁵⁸ Therry, p. 52.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- ⁶⁰ Penny Russell, *A Wish for Distinction: Colonial Gentility and Femininity*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 61.
- ⁶¹ Jacqueline Kasunic, 'Receding Visions of Pastoral Idyll: An Ethnographic and Photographic Study of Marginal Farming in the Maroono', PhD thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, (no date), pp. 61–3.
- ⁶² Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay. An Essay in Spatial History*, Faber and Faber, 1987, London, p. 243.
- ⁶³ Brian Andrews, *Australian Gothic: The Gothic Revival in Australian Architecture from the 1840s to the 1950s*, Miegunyah Press and Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2011, p. 7.
- ⁶⁴ Withycombe, p. 8.

⁶⁵ *The Month: A Literary and Critical Journal*, vol. 1, no. II, p. 99.

⁶⁶ The only remaining school on the Darling Point peninsula is the highly successful Ascham School, established at first in a terrace house in 1886 on the point as a school for young ladies; it moved to its present site on the Glenrock estate, incorporating the original mansion, in 1911.

⁶⁷ *A Pictorial History of the Eastern Suburbs*, Kingsclear Books, Alexandria, NSW, 2010, p. 4; James Arthur Dowling, 'Potts Point, Darling Point and Neighbourhood' in *The Royal Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, vol. 2, 1906, p. 66.

⁶⁸ Blanche Mitchell diary, p. 255.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁷⁰ Meredith, *Notes and Sketches*, p. 51.

⁷¹ Some of the early inhabitants of the suburb, such as Thomas Smart, came from an emancipist background (his father was a convict) but there does not seem to have been a division between 'emancipists' and 'merinos' in the area, perhaps because, according to Richard Therry, the issue was becoming less divisive generally in the colony by the time Darling Point society was being formed in the late 1840s and early 1850s.

⁷² See Broadbent, pp. 286–7.

⁷³ Loudon, *The Suburban Gardener*, p. 655.

⁷⁴ *The Gardener's Magazine*, vol. VI (XVI), 1840, p. 42.

⁷⁵ Whitaker, p. 66.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Russell, p. 61.