
Imaginings on the Edge: Myth, Mourning and Memory in Sydney's Fringe Communities

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Sydney's urban sprawl has moved across the Cumberland Plain and swallowed up former rural communities and created new suburbs on the rural-urban fringe. Urban growth has precipitated new cultural landscapes and destroyed others as the metropolitan edge makes its way across the countryside. The outer metropolitan area is a theatre for the re-making of place in fringe communities that illustrate the dynamic nature of the rural-urban frontier and the contested forces that are unleashed by urban growth.

Place making on Sydney's rural-urban fringe is a space where the contested nature of stories, myths and narratives is built around difference. The meaning of place and identity is contested in terms of insiders or locals – those who own the dominant story – and outsiders

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who are not part of it; the notion of Otherness. Yet these perspectives are not mutually exclusive and can co-exist with each other.

Existing rural communities see the approaching urban sprawl as a threat to the status quo as it brings the possibility of increased crime, pollution, congestion, globalisation, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, capitalism and a host of other city-based evils. There is heightened insecurity around the loss of landscapes, traditions, icons, myths, stories and memories. Community resilience it tested as identity and sense of place are re-shaped by these external forces. Some seek the safety and familiarity of the past and create an idealised cultural landscape of their imagination.

Newcomers, or urbanites, are attracted to the rural fringe where they create myths around their own hopes and aspirations. The city's edge is perceived as a 'rural arcadia' of traditional simple values based on moral authenticity, honesty and friendliness of village life, along with community-mindedness and open spaces where 'the country still looks like the country'. The myths of rurality on the rural-urban fringe are perceptions of reality as opposed to reality itself.

The dynamics of myth-making are explored in a number of case studies on Sydney's rural-urban fringe where urban growth has overrun the small country town of Camden and newcomers are attracted to the new suburbs of Oran Park, Harrington Park and Mt Annan. Even within the new suburbs there is a dynamic process of myth-making as the new arrivals are confronted with perceptions and illusions of reality over water views.

Studies of urbanisation, urban growth and the rural-urban fringe, particularly in the south-west Cumberland plain, are rare. Geographers, sociologists and demographers have shown an interest in the outer metropolitan area, but it has not been common for historians to venture into these parts. Suburban and Western Sydney has received some attention and there have been urban studies of Liverpool, Campbelltown, Hammodville, Fairfield and colonial studies of Camden.¹ These works – a number of which are commissioned histories – have not made any attempt to examine the effects of urbanisation on community identity, sense of place and myth making in any serious fashion. This article makes a contribution to this area of research and hopefully shines a light into some of the dark corners of the communities of the south-western Cumberland Plain.

TEA CUPS AND A MUSICAL TUNE

The rural vistas and aesthetics of the small country town of Camden have been threatened by the arrival of Sydney's urban growth in recent decades. Locals have responded by retreating to the familiarity of the past and using history and heritage to re-create a mythical version of the past in the present. They have escaped the insecurities of the present by retreating to the imaginings of a past that they once occupied and have created an illusion of a country town.

Camden was a once small rural market town 41 miles (65 km) southwest of Sydney on the Hume Highway and the hub of a district of around 455 square miles with a population of over 5000. Community identity and sense of place were constructed around the town's colonial heritage and gentry estates, its farming economy and rural landscape, its Britishness and imperial linkages, its conservatism and the closed nature of its community.

Initially, Camden was a privately founded English-style village on the colonial gentry estate of Camden Park owned by James and William Macarthur. The village was dominated by the spire of the Macarthur-endowed St John's Church of England and had many parallels with the closed estate villages of nineteenth-century England. St John's church was the moral heart of the village and was symbolic of the hegemony of the surrounding colonial gentry estates, particularly the Macarthur family's Camden Park, along with Brownlow Hill, Kirkham, Elderslie and Macquarie Grove.

The 'dairy revolution' of the 1890s ensured its prosperity supported by silver mining at Yerranderie and, later in the 1930s, coal mining in the Burragorang Valley. Modernity was celebrated in the town's civic progress and all its trapping. There were two weekly newspapers, telephone exchange (1910), reticulated gas (1912), electricity (1929), electric street lighting (1932) and a sewerage scheme (1932). By the 1930s there were a number of motor garages, a movie theatre, a private owned airfield, new bank buildings and renovated hotels catering to an emerging tourist industry.

Amid the progress and development the inter-war period saw the development of interest in the aesthetics of Camden's colonial past and its Englishness centred on St John's church. The inter-war period was characterised by the publication of images of charming colonial homesteads in William Hardy Wilson's *The Cow Pasture Road* (1920)² and English-style landscapes of gentry estates in articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald* such as 'The Beauty of Age' (1934).³ This was supported by whimsical descriptions of Camden's Englishness and picturesque

village landscapes including Ure Smith's water colours and etchings in his *Old Colonial By Ways* (1928)⁴ and Eldred Dyer's 'Camden, The Charm of an Old Town', where he wrote in 1926,

Camden is a quiet place; that may seem all it is necessary to say about it; and that is really the secret of the pleasant old place... Stoke Pogis [sic], Epworth, Sweet Auburn, Plymouth Rock, were quiet places; and Camden is also a quiet place... English parishes had their church towns. Step out into the streets of Camden, lift your eyes to the old church as it stands in beauty on the hill, and in a flash you are transported to some old English church town...⁵

Images of bucolic scenes encouraged Sydney day-tripper tourism and the sale of souvenir tea cups, ashtrays and postcards of historic icons and landmarks. This process was no-doubt assisted by the nineteenth-century English traditions of the rural/city divides as outlined in Raymond Williams' *The Country and The City*, Aitkins 'countrymindedness'⁶ and the arcadian-style ideas of the town planning movement in New South Wales.⁷

The release in 1973 of the 'Three Cities Plan' as part of the 1968 Sydney Regional Outline Plan triggered a wave of invaders from the city. Urban planners envisaged three regional centres on Sydney's outskirts at Camden, Campbelltown and Appin with the ambitious idea of stopping the city's urban sprawl.

These plans, which were never fulfilled, turned into a 'developers dream' and resulted in a number of unforeseen events in the local area. The Macarthur family sold the majority of the historic Camden Park Estate to land speculators, while in central Camden there was a proposal for medium density development around the iconic St John's Church and developers demolished the inter-war Royal Hotel. In response the Camden community formed the Camden Resident's Action Group (CRAG) and an angry outsider, Elizabeth Kernohan, entered local politics, initially as an alderman on Camden Council (1973), then mayor and eventually as Member for Camden (1991). She politicised Camden's rurality for the first time and used it as her mantra throughout her political career.

Sydney's urban sprawl threatened the loss of familiar rural landscapes and moved some in the community to retreat to the safety of an Arcadian notion of the past. Their romantic notions of the past were centred on the aesthetics of inter-war Camden and drew heavily on English-style rural traditions and notions of a rural idyll. The moral

heart of these idyllic representations was St John's church, which has acted as a metaphor for order, stability, conservatism and a continuity of values of Camden's Anglophile past. The Nepean River floodplain provided the 'moat' and supporters of these notions created an imagined country town in the present, 'a country town idyll'.

As the waves of newcomers grew after 1990 the representations of Camden's rurality and the imaginary town have increased in importance as part of the contemporary consciousness. The 'country town idyll' has become part of official council policy and used in local literature, publications, tourist and business promotions, websites, artwork, music, museum displays and a host of other places. One local songwriter, 17-year-old Jessie Fairweather, wrote 'Still My Country Home' in 2007. The lyrics were in part:

When I wake up, I find myself at ease.
As I walk outside I hear the birds,
Their singing in the trees.
And it maybe just another day.
But to me I can't have it any other way.
Cos no matter where I roam,
I know that Camden's still my country home.

Supporters of the 'idyll' talk about the 'country town atmosphere', the town is 'picturesque' or 'charming' and all the while they take ownership of 'my country town', while promising to 'keep Camden country'. Visitors, newcomers and locals alike immerse themselves in rural mythology at the Camden Show which has changed little in a century and regularly attracts over 30,000 visitors.

Camden's rurality has become a 'rural pull' factor, as geographers Digby Race and others have shown, where perceptions of community connectedness, healthy environments and rural culture are all attractive to city dwellers.⁸ The area's rurality has been commodified by land developers and sold to a new group of invaders, ex-urbanites, as a lifestyle choice. Developer spin has promised a 'contemporary rural lifestyle' that was not suburbia in a 'charming rural enclave... surrounded by the unique heritage and ambience of nineteenth-century farm buildings and homesteads... in a truly historical Australian setting'.⁹ Ex-urbanites have been encouraged to fulfil their dreams in a place where 'the country looks like the country' and in suburbs called Camden Park, Harrington Park and Oran Park.

MOTORING LEGENDS AND CONCRETE COWS

Oran Park is a new suburb where there has been a contest over the ownership of landscape identity between rural lifestyle choices, dreams of motoring legends and visions of concrete cows. It is a site where successive waves of invaders have dispossessed and displaced others, yet it is sometimes hard to identify the real winners because much has been lost.

Until recently Oran Park had largely retained a rural character with open pastures and rolling hills that characterised the landscape constructed by the first European settlers. They had created a picturesque landscape reminiscent of rural England and notions of a rural arcadia after evicting the Dharawal from their country. Oran Park house was a country seat for various members of the Sydney elite from the time of construction in 1840s. It became part of the network of gentry estates that made up the spatial pattern and economic structure of the western Cumberland Plain.

The next wave of invaders arrived when the first developer subdivisions occurred in the 1960s, which were small-scale hobby farms, and saw the appearance of stables, small-scale floriculture and horticulture. In the meantime others had dreamed of proposals for golf courses, trotting tracks and theme parks. One group of motoring enthusiasts did turn the quiet rural aesthetic on its head and created a site filled with reverberating exhausts and fumes for speed freaks and petrol heads. Racing aficionados from the Singer Car Club established a raceway in 1962. In the following years the track was developed and hosted many car racing championships drawing large crowds. Racing legends who appeared included Sir Jack Brabham, Sir Stirling Moss, Kevin Bartlett, Fred Gibson, Ian Luff, Bathurst legends Alan Moffat and Peter Brock and formula one driver Mark Weber. The track was always a crowd favourite as fans were always close to the action. But sadly for enthusiasts the circuit was silenced in January 2010 and is only a site of memories for the racing fraternity.

The current invasion by city-types is part of the state government's South West Growth Centre which is eventually planned to accommodate 295,000 people by 2031. Oran Park is expected to house 33,000 people.¹⁰ Aspirational ex-urbanites were attracted by the master planned estates in a rural setting on Sydney's outer fringe where they want to fulfil their dreams of a new beginning in a new suburb. Land developers have tried to construct a community identity and sense of place amongst newcomers through the use of local history and heritage and exercise

their imagination using a rural aesthetic and area's motoring racing heritage.

Land developers pitched their advertising and promotions to pull at the heartstrings of the hopes and dreams of those drawn to the countryside. New arrivals were attracted by the place's Arcadian aesthetic and its authentic rural traditions and old-fashioned moral values. The land developers claimed in 2009 that Oran Park was 'located in the historic and beautiful Camden district, combining the best of Camden country living'. Newcomers would have their homes 'set in rolling paddocks and bushland ridges and valleys in a beautiful rural environment'.¹¹ According to promotional material under the heading 'Brand New But Still a Touch of Country' one new resident, Lyn Butler, moved into Oran Park Town in July 2011. The reader is told that 'Lyn is enjoying living in a new community that still has the feel of a "countrified" town, as well as the future shops, restaurants and facilities that will complete Oran Park Town.' Lyn states that 'driving to and from work each day I love seeing the cows in the surrounding paddocks – its perfect'.¹² Yet paradoxically for Lyn, in time, her arrival and that of many other ex-urbanites just like her will convert the area into something that they are trying to escape – Sydney's urban sprawl.

The rural illusion created by Oran Park land developers does not stop there and is best illustrated by an attractive temporary parkland adjacent to the land sales office. The parkland has a number of strategically placed statues of concrete cows to amuse the children and re-enforce the message of a quaint rural environment. This imagery was embedded in the initial sales launch in March 2010 for the first land release when a herd of dairy cows appeared in the paddock adjacent to the temporary carpark. The dairy herd was owned by the Perich family, who are the principal developers of Oran park, and continue their dairy business on the farm adjacent to the development site. The cows, concrete and real, are a metaphor for a rural landscape that is fast disappearing and like the temporary parkland will eventually become residential. In the end even the concrete cows will disappear and be a distant memory.

Land developers have also encouraged newcomers to wrap themselves in the lost dreams of motoring enthusiasts in streets named after motoring greats. Advertisements promoting land sales proclaim 'Ready set go, Oran Park town Sydney's fastest growing town'. Developers encourage ex-urbanites to 'race into Oran Park Town and secure your place on the podium with a sought after block of land in Sydney's fastest growing town... To find out more, fasten your seatbelts

and race into the Sales Centre on Oran Park Drive'. The promotional material is supported by the imagery of an angelic small child in a boy racer peddling hard, kitted up with his helmet and goggles.¹³ Buyers are encouraged to immerse themselves in the heritage of the racing gods of the past by viewing an attractive sculpture located in the land sales office while signing their contracts with a sales representative.

Oran Park is a cultural landscape where the construction of place has carried different meanings for each group of invaders. Motoring enthusiasts have been displaced who in their turn bring their own hopes and dreams to Oran Park. The cycle of hope and loss is not new and the dreams of other suburban utopias at Mt Annan and Harrington Park have led to disappointment for some and hope for others.

WHAT'S IN A WATER VIEW?

Newcomers at Harrington Park and Mt Annan have discovered that a decade after they were enticed to move into master planned estates with water views the expectations of a suburban utopia has evaporated and failed to live up to the hype.

The culturally created landscapes in the new suburbs of Harrington Park and Mt Annan were developed around water storages and engineering works built as stormwater detention ponds to cope with urban runoff. Stormwater pondages were first used in Australia at Wollongong in 1975 and Ku-ring-gai in 1980 when detention basins were built to capture and empty stormwater at a controlled rate. These engineering works created picturesque lakes and ponds as well as improving water quality and acting as flood protection.

Land developers were quick to seize the potential of a water view and turned a liability, and an added cost, into a profit-making opportunity. Developers added to the amenity of the pondages by improving them with the addition of playgrounds and picnic amenities, supported by high levels of maintenance. At Harrington Park developer spin encouraged newcomers to believe that a lifetime investment in their new homes were protected in an estate that 'has been meticulously designed to provide the lifestyle you've been dreaming about'.¹⁴ Articles in the local press boasted about the developer's award winning estate, developer service teams that were available 7 days a week and that new residents could feel a 'sense of belonging' where they were 'buying a view to sunset gold'.¹⁵

The land developer-created-aesthetic was in reality quite fragile and unfortunately for newcomers their expectations were unlikely to be fulfilled in the long term. While developers might have failed to tell

buyers the whole story, many newcomers failed to conduct a complete a due diligence on their new land purchases. This meant that once the developers withdrew their support for these amenities their ongoing maintenance fell onto a very thin public purse. The public funding of the developer-created-aesthetic and the facilities that supported it by Camden Council were unsustainable in the long term.

All this led to frustration in a number of quarters and for one Camden councillor 'enough was enough'. In 2012 Councillor David Funnell complained that 'developers and real estate agents couldn't be trusted to tell potential buyers all the possibilities'.¹⁶ More than this Camden Narellan Advertiser's editor, Kerrie Armstrong, wrote of newcomers and their illusions:

Many of them have come from areas where they are hemmed-in on all sides with developments that close in the sky and block out the view. So they have moved out to 'the country' where the pace is slower, the roads are slightly less congested (for the most part) and the sky stretches from horizon to horizon. Suddenly the dream is turning into a noisy nightmare just as bad, or worse, than the one they left.¹⁷

As these realities dawned on a group of Harrington Park residents their anger grew as they attempted to claw back the loss of their suburban amenity. Water features that residents thought were part of their suburban aesthetic were in fact part of a 'permanent linear wetland' system across the suburb that was made up of temporary lakes and detention basin. What residents imagined as walking paths were in fact fire access ways and what they imagined as overgrown weeds along watercourses was in fact wetland vegetation meant to filter nutrients from urban stormwater runoff before it entered Narellan Creek.

Camden Council was forced to publish a fact sheet it called 'Did you know your lake provides more than a lovely view?' It states:

Many people believe the water bodies in Camden suburbs exist merely as a water feature to beautify the area. While these waterbodies do provide an aesthetic feature, their main purpose is to provide water quality treatment services for the vast amounts of stormwater that is collected in the Camden Local Government Area.¹⁸

Camden Council spokesman Ian Gannell maintained 'that Harrington Park received the same standard of service as any other area'. He said

the 'council appreciates feedback about residents' expectations but the impact of any change to the service standard would have to be considered in the amount of resources available from rates, government grants and any other source of income'. Despite resident's misconceptions their agitation did produce some movement from Camden Council. The council agreed to revue its maintenance schedule for parks and gardens in Harrington Park including the replacement of a failed pump, originally installed by the developer, on an attractive water feature created by series of sediment ponds.¹⁹

Some residents' dreams of a suburban utopia have been shattered by the harsh reality of the limitations of public funding of developer-created facilities. Harrington Park resident Janina Learmont has admitted that 'the developer sold the dream and the dream shattered', while fellow resident Adam Ghaida stated that 'if I knew the estate would be like this in 13 years, I wouldn't have bought here'.²⁰ Elsewhere the suburban aesthetic was being destroyed by another type of invader.

FEATHERS FLY AT LAKE ANNAN

At Mt Annan an artificial wetland has been a contested site for a different type of invasion. Lake Annan was originally constructed in 1988 as part of a pilot stormwater management scheme and open space associated with the early suburban development of Mt Annan. The 2.7 hectare lake, which has an average depth of 2 metres, was constructed with a central island to disperse water flow along Narellan Creek. The island was covered in remnant bushland and provided a native wildlife refuge. Ongoing management of the lake has proved problematic and a 2003 report outlined a range of issues associated with the pondage, the most important being that the lake was undersized relative to its 270 hectare catchment. The lake has been under continual pressure and unable to completely fulfil its intended function as an artificial wetland that captured sediment and filtered nutrients from stormwater runoff.²¹

The story of the lake has been complicated by a number of actors who have ascribed additional meaning to the lake beyond its original engineering purpose. Local residents have been attracted to the lake by the aesthetics provided by a water view, recreational users sought the potential of the lake for walking and exercising their pets, environmentalists were interested in the island as a wildlife refuge and remnant Cumberland Woodland and land developers commodified the lake's scenic values. In addition the lake has required remedial engineering works, there has been safety concerns after the drowning of family pets, while there is increased soil salinity from raised

groundwater levels and problems with erosion, bank scalding (clay hardening), low water oxygen levels and other environmental issues.

In the meantime the picture had become further complicated after flocks of White Ibis were attracted to the lake, and the opportunity provided for scavenging at Jack's Gully landfill facility at Spring Farm, an adjacent suburb. By 2007 the Lake Annan Ibis breeding colony numbered 1700 birds. Traditionally White Ibis forage wetlands, freshwater swamps, wet pasture and mudflats in inland New South Wales, which have been subjected to an extended drought. The White Ibis are protected under the *New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Act* (1974) and are considered to be internationally significant under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in 1986. Their long term presence in the landscape is also represented in indigenous culture and heritage.²² Since the 1980s breeding colonies have been established in urban areas along the east coast of Australia and their appearance has proved problematic, most recently on the island in Lake Annan.

The presence of Ibis at Lake Annan raised the hackles of local residents and articles in the Camden press. Headlines have announced: 'Stench imprisons residents; can't they just flock off! Ditch ibis island'; and 'Mt Annan residents sick of ibis stink'.²³ Mt Annan resident Melanie Pearce stated that the Ibis have 'spoiled the lake, stripped away vegetation and created a strong smell... their poo is everywhere, they make a lot of noise, ruin antennas and fossick through people's garbage'. While resident Jill Smith said that the stench in summer is forcing residents to shut up their houses and stay indoors, and the Ibis have moved into nearby streets in search of food and nesting materials. Veronica Sheahan said they were glad they were selling their property as she found 'the smell was overbearing'.²⁴

Tensions over the ownership of landscape identity has led to the intervention Camden Council, the land developer Landcom, environmental consultants and the New South Wales Department of Climate Change and Environment, which governs the protected status of the Ibis as a native Australian bird. Camden Council spokesman, Ian Gannell, said there were no easy solutions to the problem. He maintained that relocating the birds would simply move the problem somewhere else. Councillor Cottrell of Camden Council stated that the 'only real solution' was to remove the island, which would cost the council between \$750,000 and \$1 million, while Gannell maintained that the island was the bird's home and there was no guarantee that the breeding colony would move on anyway. Some suggested solutions have included dismantling nests and spraying their eggs with corn oil to

prevent hatching, which has been practiced in the recent breeding season 'to reduce the impact the birds are having on residents and the environment'.²⁵

CONCLUSION

Sydney's rural-urban fringe is a dynamic cultural landscape that moves across the countryside, where there is a process creation and destruction of myths, narratives and identities. It is a transition zone of constant change which is contested between newcomers (outsiders) and locals where hopes and aspirations are sometimes met, but often not.

In established fringe communities such as Camden invasion and succession is not new. These threaten established traditions and re-make landscapes in a variety of ways. For some the past provides a safe haven where there is certainty and familiarity, and through the use of history and heritage they re-make place in the form of a rural arcadia and a 'country town idyll'. Their imaginings replace reality in the construction of place and identity. In the new suburbs city-dwellers seek a little piece of heaven in the countryside on Sydney's rural-urban fringe where their dreams will be fulfilled. When dreams are broken there is grief and loss. But there is also anger in new suburbs where developer spin has created illusions that fitted newcomers dreams and perceptions of reality. Developer-funded amenities in new land releases collapse after profit-seeking developers desert their culturally created landscapes of manicured parks and gardens in master planned estates. The public purse cannot meet resident's expectations and they feel the loss of their cultural aesthetic and lifestyle. Newcomers are left with their imaginings.

In other new suburbs a variety of actors ascribe cultural meaning to stormwater pondages and other engineering works well beyond their intended application. These become contested when urban wildlife invaders occupy the landscape and threaten the loss of place identity. Culturally constructed landscapes have proved popular for adaptable native wildlife which have broken down some of their amenity and aesthetic. It is ironic that the contested nature of place has created tensions between Ibis, which have part of the imaginings of indigenous Australians for countless generations, and Europeans who ancestors dispossessed the same people of their country. Sydney's fringe communities are subject to constant stories of hope and dreams of newcomers in new suburbs, and the loss and anxiety of locals in existing communities. The dynamism of the rural-fringe means that there is a

constant process of construction and re-construction of myths, place and identity in an ever changing landscape.

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ENDNOTES

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