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2015

Making Camden History

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Publication Details

I. C. Willis 2015 Making Camden History Camden History Notes/Ian Willis <https://camdenhistorynotes.wordpress.com/2015/11/20/making-camden-history/>

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Making Camden History

Abstract

The story of the construction of the history of the Camden area. There are many versions and they are all correct. They all put their own spin on the way they want to tell the Camden story. Some good, some indifferent, some just plain awful (Facebook, 23 November 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/CamdenHistoryNotes1433284970226274/>)

Keywords

history, camden, making

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

I. C. Willis 2015 Making Camden History Camden History Notes/Ian Willis
<https://camdenhistorynotes.wordpress.com/2015/11/20/making-camden-history/>

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camdenhistorynotes / November 20, 2015



View of the farm of J. Hassel [Hassall] Esqr. Cow Pastures, New South Wales by Augustus Earle, c. 1825. State Library of NSW PXD 265, f. 2

Making Camden History

A brief historiography of the local area

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The story of the construction of the history of the Camden area. There are many versions and they are all correct. They all put their own spin on the way they want to tell the Camden story. Some good, some indifferent, some just plain awful

(Facebook, 23 November 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/Camden-History-Notes-1433284970226274/>)

Tourist history of Camden

The official story of the township as told to tourists is shared in the brochure for an historic walk around the Camden town centre published by Camden Council. It is reflective of the pioneer legend that has pervaded the Camden story and the legitimising narrative that is part of the nation building story of a settler society. In many ways it hides as much as it reveals. It states:

“ The historic town of Camden, less than an hours drive south-west of Sydney, is the cultural heart of a region that enjoys a unique place in our nation's history.

The earliest developments of the Australian wool, wheat and wine industries are associated with the town following the original land grant from Lord Camden to John Macarthur in 1805.

The town is home to a large number of heritage listed attractions that reflect its strong links with the history of colonial settlement in Australia. Camden is rich in rural heritage with live stock sale yards, vineyards, Equestrian Park and dairy facilities.

The township reveals in its built heritage an interesting and varied range of architectural styles that reflect the town's evolution from the earliest days of European settlement through to the modern era.

The walking tour brochure portrays Camden's rich historical and cultural legacy and affords a valuable opportunity to both visitors and the local community to experience the town's unique character and charm and appreciate some of its history first hand.

[\(Camden Heritage Walking Tour Brochure\)](#)

A similar [heritage walking brochure exists for Narellan area](#), which tells the story of European settlement of a planned government village that pre-dates Camden. Here there is also a silence on many aspects of the past that are yet to be revealed to readers.

This short historiography is one of the few that has been attempted to illustrate the construction of the history of a rural community. One that has been recently published is included in the history of the [gold-mining community of Linton in Victoria](#) (2015). The author, Jill Wheeler, examines the broad range of influences that shaped the writing of that community's history.



This paper should be read in conjunction with the [Camden Bibliography](#), which is list of published and other sources on the Camden District. It was my first attempt at compiling an authoritative list of sources on the local area and it has been pleasing to note that a host of researchers have found it to be a useful start.

This construction of the story of Camden history can be divided into a number of identifiable stages. Each stage reflects the values and attitudes of those who created the writing of the period, and the social and cultural filters that shaped their version of the story.

The Cowpastures frontier

From the beginning of European settlement in Australia curiosity drew those with an interest in wider issues to the local area. The first expeditionaries were naval and military officers who were trained to observe the landform and surroundings and record the detail in their logs and diaries. While providing a detailed account of their journeys they also recorded their observations and contact with Indigenous people. They recorded their observations of a managed landscape that was regularly burnt by the local Indigenous people. Prominent amongst these were Englishmen Watkin Tench (1790), Governor John

Hunter (1795), David Collins (1795), George Bass (1796) and Lachlan Macquarie (1810, 1815, 1820), and Frenchmen Francis Louis Barrallier (1802) and Louis Antoine de Bougainville (1826).

Then there are the letters of settlers like John Hawdon of Elderslie in the 1820s who wrote back to England of his experiences in the Cowpastures and dealing with 'the government men'. [convicts]

Amongst other writings of there are the reminiscences of Barron Field (1825), Thomas Mitchell (1836) and William Pridden (1843), while there are the journals of colonial women such as those of Annabella Boswell (1848).

Naming landform features gave the new arrivals a legitimacy of possession. For example on Governor King's excursion to the area he named the locality the Cowpastures because of the escaped cattle.



Central Camden c1930s (Camden Images)

Villages and beyond

The earliest records of settlement in the Cowpastures describe the conditions in the villages that were scattered across the area – Cawdor, Cobbitty, Elderslie, Narellan and then later Camden (1840)

The earliest accounts of Camden village its planning, its establishment and development are carried in the Sydney newspapers – particularly *The Sydney Morning Herald*. During the 1840s the Camden Clerk of Petty Sessions Charles Tompson was a regular correspondent to the newspaper.

Even by the 1880s the changing nature of the Camden village and the district prompted a nostalgia for the pioneering days of the early colonial period. The *Camden Times* and *Camden News* printed reminiscences of the town and district of JB Martin in the early 1880s and 1890s and RH Antill in the late 1890s, Richard Todd (1895 and 1896) as well as the stories from Obed West in the 1884 and 1885 in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. These

stressed the progress and development of the town. Martin, the Camden Clerk of Petty Sessions for a period, made the point in his 1883 (Camden Times) reminiscences that the history of several English counties had been written by local history associations and he felt that a similar venture was worthwhile in the Camden district.

Further reminiscences were Thomas Herbert (1909) in the *Town and Country Journal* and Samuel Hassall's (1902) *In Old Australia* and there are the unpublished reminiscences of Camden businessman Samuel Thompson (1905).

Wartime writing

The Boer War, then the First and later the Second World Wars provide a period of reflection for local folk who are away soldiering in foreign lands. They are amongst the first to write about the Camden District as home in nostalgic terms from far away places where they are under traumatic conditions.

These letters were published in the *Camden News* and during the Second World War the *Camden Advertiser*. Some have found their way into recent publications particularly on the centenary of the First World War.



John Kerry's view of St Johns Church in 1890s
(Camden Images)

Camden Aesthetic

An important theme in the Camden story is the development of a Camden aesthetic based on romantic notions surrounding the colonial properties of the landed gentry and the landscapes that were created by the Cowpasture patriarchs.

This first appeared in Andrew Garran's highly successful *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia* (1886) and portrayed an idyllic English village at Camden surrounded by an ordered farming landscape. The engraving was accompanied by GB Barton's account of the exploits of John Macarthur and the foundation of the colonial wool industry. This was a narrative that evolved into a local and national mythology and was further advanced by Sibella Macarthur Onslow's *Some Early Records of The Macarthurs of Camden* (1914), a collection of family papers.



1934 Australian Commemorative Postage Stamp

The legend of John Macarthur gained further momentum in the 1930s on the centenary of John Macarthur's death in 1934 when Australia was in search of national heroes. He was the subject of stories in *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* (1929) and biographies. His image appeared on a series of postage stamps and later on the new decimal currency in the 1960s. His character was the subject of a novel (1941) and a new Federal electorate of Macarthur (1949) was named after him. In 1960 the Camden community held a four-day celebration of the legend of the John Macarthur and 150th anniversary of wool production in Australia called the Festival of the Golden Fleece (22-30 October).

The early 20th century also witnessed a shift in history writing identified by Graeme Davison from 'pioneer' to 'patriarchal' history writing and the development of the Camden aesthetic was part of that agenda.

There was William Hardy Wilson's *The Cow Pasture Road* (1920) and Ure Smith's water colours and etchings in his *Old Colonial By Ways* (1928). Whimsical descriptions of Camden's Englishness were published in Eldrid Dyer's 'Camden, The Charm of an Old Town' (1926) and articles in *The Sydney Morning Herald* like 'The Beauty of Age' (1934).

The journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society published articles on the Camden District. The first appeared in 1928 on the Cowpastures, Cawdor and Cobbitty, which were followed by the Burragorang Valley (1934), Camden (1935), Narellan (1936), and the Cowpastures again in 1939.

Newcastle based journalist JJ Moloney, a former Menangle resident, published his reminiscences of Early Menangle in 1929. In Camden two local journalists, George Sidman and Arthur Gibson, each separately marked the golden jubilee of the foundation of the Municipality of Camden (1889). Sidman, owner of the Camden News, published the memoirs of J. B. Martin in a series of newspaper columns. While Gibson, owner of the Camden Advertiser, commissioned James Jervis from the RAHS to write The Story of Camden.

The end of the Second World War created an air of confidence in the Camden District, which by this stage was prospering from the wealth created by the Burratorang Valley coalfields. In 1948 the newly formed Rotary Club and Camden Community Centre commissioned the University of Sydney to conduct a sociological survey of the town to provide a foundation for 'future development'. This was followed up in 1952 by an American sociologist from the University of Kansas City, ML 'Jack' Mason and his wife Elizabeth 'Beth'. They surveyed the town and established that there was a five-tier social structure, which had its origins in the colonial period and the Cowpasture patriarchs. Both studies were suppressed from public gaze by vested interests until recent times.

Memorials of loss

As historians Graeme Davison and Gail Griffiths have noted loss of local icons and 'loved places' creates a deep sense of insecurity and a desire by some for the 'good old days'. The grieving process was triggered in the Camden District community from the loss of Burratorang Valley, after the state government decided to build a dam in the 1930s. In the early 1960s the New South Wales Government closed the Campbelltown to Camden rail link as part of a state-wide rationalisation process.



WW1 Memorial Gates at Macarthur Park (Camden Remembers)

There were five seminal events during this period, firstly, in 1957 the number of teachers from the newly established Camden High School formed the Camden Historical Society and held lectures, conducted field trips and outings.

Secondly there was the erection of civic monuments celebrating the Burratorang Valley. The first monument, erected in 1962, was the Camden Rotary mural at the southern entrance to the town. The mural has designs celebrating Indigenous culture as well as the area's farming and mining heritage. The stone for the wall came from the St Paulinos Catholic Church in 'the Valley'.

Thirdly, a wagon wheel was erected by the Camden Historical Society outside the council chambers in 1977 to celebrate the teamsters who brought silver ore from Yerranderie through 'the Valley' to the Camden railhead. A heavy horse-drawn farm wagon was located outside the council chambers in 1978 to memorialise farmer workers and the horse. Each of these monuments recalled the values of the frontier; tenacity, stoicism, ruggedness, individualism, adaptability and Britishness. An 1899 water trough was added to these civic monuments in 1979 celebrating the town's modernity when the town was connected to reticulated water; a sign of progress and development.



Camden Library Museum in John Street Camden

In 1970 the Camden Historical Society opened a folk museum in a room in the old council chambers encouraged by the RAHS. The museum used simple displays of local ephemera, artefacts and other collectables supplemented with rudimentary signage to tell the Camden story.

The memorials of loss across the district extended to the numerous war memorials scattered throughout the Camden District that mourned the loss of men who never came home after the Great War. These monuments were added to after the Second World War and in recent times with the centenary of the First World War, and have shaped and re-shaped the Camden story in ways that are still hard to identify. Their meaning is a

statement of collective memory that is expressed in April and November every year by local communities.

Elsewhere in the district The Oaks Historical Society was formed up in 1979. It has contributed much material to the story telling of the western part of the Camden District, particularly the Burragorang Valley and the silver mining fields of Yerranderie.

The rural-urban fringe and other threats

The role of loss in the Camden story acquired new meaning after 1973 when there was an identifiable shift in the interpretation and representation of ruralness in Camden. 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 events strengthened the role of the Camden aesthetic. There was the re-making of place centred on the decline of the country town of Camden as the hub of a thriving rural economy to an idealised country town, a country town of the imagination.

Romantic representations of Camden's rurality, especially St John's church, became an important part of the contemporary consciousness. They found their way into official council policy, and been used in literature, publications, tourist and business promotions, websites, artwork, music, museum displays and a host of other places. In 1999 Camden Council's strategic plan Camden 2025 adopted the language and imagery of Camden's rurality when it outlined 'the traditional qualities of a rural lifestyle', 'the historic nature' of the area and the 'unique rural landscapes and vistas' in a country town atmosphere.

There was also the influence of the national bicentennial celebrations in 1988 and the publication in the same year of Alan Atkinson's *Camden, Farm and Village Life in Early New South Wales* (1988) which examined the early decades of the township. The dust jacket used a romantic watercolour (1850s) attributed to Emily Macarthur which looks 'across Camden Park to the north-west, with St John's Church and the distant Blue Mountains closing the view', with the Nepean River flowing across the vista, similar to the 1886 Garran engraving.

This period also the emergence of the local histories of the area written by keen amateurs with the most notable example being John Wrigley, who has put together several publications the first published in 1980 called *A History of Camden*. The Camden Historical Society started a small journal in 2001 called *Camden History*, which the society continues to successfully published specialist local histories for a local audience.

The 21st century saw the evolution in the Camden story to a new generation of writers, most notable amongst them was this author. My work started with a local wartime study of a women's voluntary organisation and has extended across a range of local themes including the rural-urban fringe, urban history, place, identity, philanthropy, the wartime homefront and local government. Most recently I have told the Camden story in a publication of a pictorial history of the district.

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