

A HISTORY OF CANBERRA

Designed as an ‘ideal city’ and emblem of the nation, Canberra has long been a source of ambivalence for many Australians. In this charming and concise book, Nicholas Brown challenges these ideas and looks beyond the clichés to illuminate the unique, layered and often colourful history of Australia’s capital.

Beginning with Aboriginal occupation and European settlement of the region, Brown covers Canberra’s selection as the site of the national capital, the turbulent path of Walter Burley Griffin’s plan for the city, and the many phases of its construction. He surveys citizens’ diverse experiences of the city and the impact of the Second World War on Canberra’s growth, and explores the city’s political history with insight and wit.

A History of Canberra is informed by the interplay of three themes central to Canberra’s identity: government, community and environment. Canberra’s distinctive social and cultural history as a centre for the public service and national institutions is vividly rendered. Brown analyses the city as a symbol of suburban modernity and highlights its emergence as a regional centre of influence.

Illustrated with maps and photographs, this book offers insight into the enduring dynamic between Canberra, its community and the country.

Nicholas Brown is Associate Professor in the School of History, Australian National University.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-107-64609-4 — A History of Canberra
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A History of Canberra

NICHOLAS BROWN



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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107646094

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First published 2014

Cover designed by Anne-Marie Reeves

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

*A Cataloguing-in-Publication entry is available from the catalogue
of the National Library of Australia at www.nla.gov.au*

ISBN 978-1-107-64609-4 Paperback

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are respectfully advised that images
of deceased persons appear in this book and may cause distress.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

By virtue of its particular status, Canberra has never lacked for historians, and a concise history such as this relies heavily, and all too selectively, on their work. A rich seam of local history, reflection and memoir already runs parallel to accounts of national government – politics and administration – and to another strand of commentary in which ‘Canberra’ figures as a cipher for all kinds of discontents often loosely associated with the place, its people and its functions. In preparing this book I have been conscious of this daunting span of experience, reflection and scholarship and of the need to balance the familiar with the little known in a story to which many readers will bring a version already close to their hearts. I have also wanted to place the city in the context of a land that has its own diverse narratives, and in relation to the patterns of a wider national story. I am indebted to all those who have explored Canberra and its significance before me. My hope is that I can contribute at least a fresh perspective to the conversation started by previous narratives about some classic themes in Australian history – among them, what does it mean to ‘make a place’, what should we seek from ‘nation building’, and what defines a sense of ‘community’?

I am grateful for the support provided through periods of research and writing by the Research Centre at the National Museum of Australia (NMA) – my thanks especially to Peter Stanley, Anne Faris and the NMA’s excellent library and librarians. I appreciate also the interest and curiosity shown for this project by my colleagues in the School of History, College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian

National University. The great resources of the National Library of Australia, and the facilities, staff and research culture of its Petherick Room, were vital to this project. Librarians at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the ACT Heritage Library were quick in response to my vague requests. I drew heavily on the wealth of the Canberra and District Historical Society, both in its archives and in the dedication of its officers, especially Helen Digan, Nick Swain, Marilyn Truscott and Kay Walsh. Alison Alder, Esther Davies, Val Emerton, Mary Hutchinson, Megan Kelly, Chris Monnox, Nicolas Peterson, Gina Pinkus, Gail Radford, Alan Roberts, Marian Sawyer, Biff Ward and Susan Mary Withycombe were among the many people who offered guidance and enthusiasm at many points. I am deeply thankful to Patrick Troy, Stuart Macintyre and anonymous referees for pointing out what more (or less) should be said; to Philippa Whishaw, Jessica Pearce, Jodie Fitzsimmons and Tara Peck at Cambridge University Press for patience beyond belief; and to Lily Keil, for closer attention than I deserved, as copy editor.

Canberra – and what came before it – is in my family's bones. My father, Bill, was of the place; my mother, Bet, embraced it. My brother and sisters were born there, as were their children and grandchildren. And so was my wife, Susan Boden, and our two children, Imogen and Naoise. Sometimes it has seemed foolish to seek the necessary distance to write about a city so much a part of our lives. Sometimes it has seemed a disqualification, when the image popularly held of Canberra is one of artificiality and impermanence. Clearly, that is not my experience. This book is a gesture of thanks to a nurturing place, and to those who continue to nurture me – especially Susan, Imogen and Naoise; and to generations past and present for what we can learn from them about making a better future.