

INTRODUCTION

On 11 May 1861 James Brown died in a paddock on one of the land grants taken up in the early decades of settlement on and around the Limestone Plains. In 1834, aged 19, he had been convicted of assault and theft in Edinburgh. Sentenced to transportation and seven years' labour, he arrived in Sydney and was assigned to James Wright at Lanyon, now a heritage listed property from which the spread of Canberra's newer suburbs is kept only just out of sight. But at the time Brown arrived, Lanyon was at the further edges of pastoral expansion in New South Wales, and was described by an early visitor as 'one of the most picturesque places I have seen in the colony' even before 'art' contributed to its 'improvement'. That 'art' was essentially convict sweat, and Wright was for a time infamous for his fastidious attention to the punishments that kept his workers at their tasks. Enduring this regime, receiving a ticket of leave in 1839, and declared free in 1842, Brown stayed on as an overseer at Lanyon, which was sold amid drought and an economic slump. A Scottish banker, Andrew Cunningham, bought it in 1848, but it was on Cunningham's other, nearby choice of 'cold, wet and sour country' at Congwarra, that Brown was killed by a falling tree. His burial was the first recorded in the district after compulsory registration – but his grave remains unmarked in Lanyon's small cemetery. He was, Cunningham lamented, 'my oldest and most trusted employee'.¹

Down the line the Browns stayed in the district, first as pastoral workers before, in the third generation, gaining land for themselves



Map 1: Canberra, the Australian Capital Territory, and the main surrounding rivers, landforms, towns and cities (map by Peter Johnson)

at Bulga Creek, further down the Murrumbidgee River – and only then because the previous owners were not prepared to stay once their freehold was resumed for lease under the conditions of the new Federal Capital Territory, declared in 1911. It was on that property that my father, born in 1920, grew up. He proved bright at Canberra's first convent school, where the nuns pressed him to complete his leaving certificate and sit an exam to join the Commonwealth public service – a favoured path, then, of advancement for Catholic boys. In 1938, he became a clerk in the Department of the Interior, which controlled Canberra's development, although his section dealt with the alarming thinning of the life-blood of British migration to Australia. Following the outbreak of World War II, he fought with the 3rd Battalion of the militia, heavily recruited locally, in Papua and New Guinea before returning home and transferring

to the newly established Department of Immigration – that testament to the postwar surge in nation building.

There he met my mother, who had come from Hobart to work in the typing pools serving Canberra's expanding ranks of men in suits. They married and built a house on the graceful curve of a street that had survived relatively untouched from Walter Burley Griffin's final plan for the city, before he was effectively dismissed from the project. That street marked just one of the boundaries that came to matter so much in the allocation of status in Canberra's tight bureaucratic world. To live, as we did, on the high side in Griffith, named after a 'father of federation' was one thing; to be in Narrabundah (a name drawn from the Ngunawal language, and carried over from a colonial parish designation) was – the pun went – a social blunder.

This brief autobiographical diversion, I hope, is not too indulgent, but one way of viewing the history of Canberra, and one which inevitably shapes my narrative. Canberra – the planned capital, the city without a soul, the good sheep station spoiled – is often presented as without a past. But Paul Daley's concept of Canberra as a 'continuing city' is personified in the lineage of James Brown, the Scottish-born loyal convict servant, to Bill Brown, a proud public servant, posted in the late 1950s to Athens and then Rome to bring back 'New Australians'. It is easy to focus on the moments of Canberra's invention: the decision to build a new capital, to select a site, to choose a plan and to assemble the expertise, authority and interest needed to create the kind of city required, in itself and for the nation. But those moments – interventions from beyond the place – need also their local context, a host of lives, a landscape, patterns of impact and adaptability, that made that invention possible. My goal is to strike a balance between these two elements: the local continuities, in which the story of the Limestone Plains connects to broader aspects of Australian experiences of colonisation, settlement and development, and the ideals and interventions of personnel, policy and politics that produced a new city, a bold exercise in urban design and an attempt to symbolise a nation and its government.²

There is no current single volume, general and concise history of Canberra. Nor is there any recent work on the city and its region

that offers the span in coverage and reflection on scholarship that I attempt here. This book is carried on the shoulders of many other studies and students of Australia's capital and what came before it. In relation to those works, my claims to originality must be thin, and my account far from comprehensive. But there is, I hope, in what follows, a synthesis with a value of its own, in making this survey and in seeking this balance. Of its nature, Canberra has never been lost for words, nor for people whose stories and achievements are important, intriguing and expansive. Perhaps the best claim I can make is that my synthesis, of course highly selective, seeks to listen to as many of them as possible, whether convict labourer or typist, public servant or prime minister, and not to take for granted any one idea of what frame 'Canberra' – such a loaded term, at least among Australians – puts around the meaning we might attach to their experience. If, inevitably, much of what follows has elements of familiarity for many readers, my intention has been to present it in ways that, if only for a moment, prompt a rethinking, a revisiting, a reflection both on Canberra as a subject and the uses – as capital, planned city, politics or paperwork – to which it has been put.

To enhance the coherence of this synthesis, I have adopted three guiding themes: environment, government and community. These themes arose from core questions which emerged through my research. How did the environment into which Canberra was placed, and which it also created, influence the history of the city? How was Canberra defined by, and how did it contribute to, the practices of government in Australia so closely associated with it? And for all the attention given to the making of a new *city*, what kinds of *communities* developed in Canberra, and what influence did they have over the capital project, and in terms of its significance for the rest of the nation?

Each theme, importantly, seeks to push beyond the perimeter of the city itself into the landscape, the institutions and the mobility and ingenuity of people which are vital to Canberra's story. 'Environment' includes the country surrounding the city, at once the setting (often idealised) for its urban forms and identity as well as being a resource transformed by it, and with an agency of its own. 'Community' reflects the patterns of life – in arrivals, settlement, suburbs, workplaces, conflicts, movements, associations, families and

friendships – that have evolved in the sometimes halting, sometimes rapid, transitions in Canberra's progress. And inevitably, as national capital, Canberra offers a sharp perspective on the practices and cultures of Australian 'government' as they, too, have evolved with the business of the national parliament, the functions of the national bureaucracy, the cultures of journalism, lobbying and political protest, and the role of many national agencies. Always, there is a dialectic between how the theme has defined Canberra, and how Canberra has defined the theme. And each theme has its continuing relevance, in terms of issues of sustainability, inclusiveness and political representation that find their focus in, and have their own meaning for, our purpose-built capital.

These themes are intended to function as points of reference in what remains a chronological narrative, to provide frameworks within which to balance a local and continuing history with interventions from beyond, and to suggest terms in which we might reflect on the historical significance of a place which, as eminent Australian architect Philip Cox declared, is 'inherently unnatural'. The narrative and the themes might together prompt answers to enduring questions. To what is Canberra accountable? Whose place is it? Former speechwriter for Paul Keating – Prime Minister of Australia from 1993 to 1996 – Don Watson, reflecting on the remark by his one-time employer that the capital was 'a great mistake', conceded that Canberra could seduce residents into complacency. But he also judged that it 'is like no other Australian town or city, yet no other Australian town or city is more Australian'. And as Jeanne MacKenzie noted before Watson, 'it is not like Australia and yet it could not be anywhere else'. This paradox drives what follows.³

I

Ngunawal country and the Limestone Plains

A GOOD SHEEP STATION SPOILED

For a city preoccupied by its own becoming – its destiny as a peerless national capital – Canberra sits in a landscape of layered, often lost histories. The future has always beckoned the city, even taunted it. ‘I have planned a city that is not like any other’, Walter Burley Griffin declared in 1912: ‘a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future’. That aspiration set the tone for visions of Canberra’s perennial making – laments at provisional structures, transient populations, or urban forms unravelling across the landscape (as novelist Tom Hungerford saw it) like ‘a mad woman’s knitting’. Over a hundred years on from the inauguration of the capital on 12 March 1913, a familiar story contains a wealth of gestures towards a time yet to come. But the perpetual ‘time will tell’ verdict too easily obscures a past on the Limestone Plains that has a significance of its own.¹

The derision of Canberra as a ‘good sheep station spoiled’ allows that it had first to be a sheep station, and a good one at that. Let the borders proclaimed in 1910, to mark the surrender of the Federal Capital Territory from New South Wales to the Australian Commonwealth, blur back into their mountain ridges, watersheds and train lines, and then the landscape reveals other meanings and purposes and displays a history connecting with wider patterns of experience. Throughout the 19th century, and long before, the site of the future capital was a microcosm of phases of adaptation to the environment, of work, movement, authority and community. Those

layers of endeavour and belonging never entirely disappeared beneath the experiment to come.

As an environment, Canberra's landscape blends out into the undulating, open bushland of the New South Wales southern tablelands, up onto the spare plateau of the Monaro, and edges into the high country of the Australian Alps. Its geology is defined by three dominant north–south running fault lines dating back to major tectonic shifts between 480 and 360 million years ago, and marking the break between two topographical formations and vegetation associations. To the east is a network of plains, tilting away at between 900 and 600 metres above sea level, dominated by savannah woodlands and grasslands. Tussock and kangaroo grasses predominate, with Eucalyptus species – red gum, apple box, red and yellow box – spread among them. To the west the land abruptly grows mountainous, rising from 1500 to over 1900 metres, with denser forests and rugged terrain, sprawling south towards Australia's highest peak, Mount Kosciuszko (2228 metres). Scribbly gum, Argyle apples and wattles are prominent species, along with ribbon gums, alpine ash and snow gums and a scattered understorey of grasses and herbs. The plains offered prospects of a journey, but these ranges call a halt, or hesitation, as trees gather closer and the undergrowth thickens in cooler, higher air.

These two landscapes – the grasslands and the mountains – are each emblematic of aspects of Australian human settlement, framing cultures and identities. In deeper time, the Canberra region was once under the sea, covered in sediments washed from the continent then rising further to the west. An intense period of volcanic activity produced dominating rift systems as the land began to lift and the sea retreat. It has become almost ritual for journalists and school excursion leaders to note that evidence of those shifts – the violent 'unconformity' in rock profiles revealed in road cuttings of the 1970s – can be found in close proximity to the national parliament, with its own pattern of slips, twists and contortions. The parallel is neat, but scarcely comprehends the magnitude, or legacies, of these much earlier processes.²

Emerging in a sequence of uplifts and glaciation, this country was exposed from the start to sustained erosion. In 1929, geological advisor to the Commonwealth government W.G. Woolnough offered a dramatic account of the 'structure' of the region:

For hundreds and millions of years, this particular part of Australia existed as dry land. At intervals it became ridged up into higher mountains. These were worn down to their very roots by the gnawing tooth of time... they were raised up again, and worn down... twice, at least, thrice in all probability, they were covered in sheets of ice.

Debate still surrounds aspects of the region's geological sequence, but Woolnough's account retains a power of evocation. The 'beautifully rounded summits' that characterise Canberra – Majura, Ainslie, Black Mountain, Red Hill, Mugga Mugga and Stromlo – are the worn 'residuals' of those tumults. The valleys are the scars of related processes of attrition, as rivers cut deep into soft rock or proceeded in pools across the surface, depositing little sediment and leaving ridges further exposed to denudation. To the west, mountains offer more 'spectacular' evidence of such rifting, crushing processes. The landforms bequeathed are old, weathered and lean.³

What became, then, for Griffin and many others, a 'city beautiful', a landscape of trees – introduced to link and soften suburbs, infusing civic virtue and amenity – was laid over an environment that did not naturally support such a profusion or variety of vegetation. The microclimates of frost-hollows and thin, acid soils set the scene for an unusually close juxtaposition of mountain, woodland and grassland habitats, all at relatively high altitudes, often in rain shadows and with low rainfall relative to surrounding areas. The climate produced, naturalist Ian Fraser notes, was 'more markedly seasonal than much of the country', and to it a remarkable diversity of animals adapted in all their 'ancient, teeming and subtle life'. It would prove, however, testing for human habitation.⁴

Canberra's human story begins with the movement of Aboriginal people in from the west, as the waning of the Last Glacial Maximum around 21 000 years ago began to make the barren, cold and windy 'high plains', if not the ranges, marginally more attractive for at least seasonal occupation. To the east, the coastal strip still stretched to a far horizon, 'dry, sparsely vegetated and subject to widespread dust storms'. A gradually warming, wetter climate induced less sporadic excursions and then more permanent occupation. By around 5000 years ago expanding populations on the now more salubrious coast were causing some groups to move back inland. Analysis of the Birrigai rock shelter in Namadgi National Park, south of Canberra,

offers a rare perspective on this phase of mainland, highland Aboriginal prehistory. It suggests that at least by 3000 years ago there began a more constant, intense occupation of these high valleys.⁵

Working with this environment, Aboriginal people usually lived in small groups or ‘bands’ within larger regional populations. Rivers provided a focus for camps, with durable and comfortable shelter, ample access to fish, birdlife, fruits, berries, tubers and rhizomes, honey, and proximity to stone quarries for tools. Several old trees still standing in Canberra show the scars of having large slabs of bark cut away for canoes, roofing or carrying utensils; other sites show grinding rocks; and several granite overhangs in Namadgi bear rock paintings. Kangaroo and possum skin cloaks, stitched with sinew, kept people warm in winter on the plains; in summer, small groups followed kangaroos and emus to higher ground. Each year there was a journey into the mountains to feast, over three to four months, on the Bogong moths that migrated from the heat of the north and the inland to aestivate, a low-energy existence similar to hibernation, in rock shelters until autumn. These feasts – not signs of nomadism, archaeologist Harry Lourandos insists, but of ‘more sedentary practice, organised settlement and behaviour, and complex inter-group relations’ – gathered well over one thousand people to harvest the protein-rich, nut-tasting moths for roasting or keeping in smoked cakes, for shared ceremonies, including initiation rites, cultural exchange and trade.⁶

Inter-group ties reached well beyond the immediate area, including the maintenance of close links to coastal groups, if less easy relationships with those further inland. (The ‘Yass blacks’, early white settlers noted, were particularly feared by Limestone and coastal people.) The boundaries and appropriate naming of local groups remains a matter of dispute, on account of the profound impact of the arrival of Europeans on the mobility of the Aboriginal groups, and the more recent pressures to resolve the claims of traditional ownership. But, in general, it is accepted that the area had a permanent population now most often identified as Ngunawal and Ngambri (or Kamberri), and, as a language group, most recently classified as Kurrmal. Many locations around Canberra still bear the traces of clan names: the Namwitch of the country rising to the south, now Namadgi; the Biyaligee of the river flats now known as

Pialligo; the Toogoranoongh of the Tuggeranong valley; the Cum-beyan of Queanbeyan.⁷

In the 1820s, another human narrative begins, part of those processes of white ‘mastery’ which, as environmental historian George Main describes, claimed an expansive country for white settlement and Empire. The first European sighting of the plains, at the end of 1820, was by a small party including an illiterate ex-convict, Joseph Wild, and a police constable, James Vaughan. Wild was employed by Charles Throsby, a surgeon turned settler who had been ‘discontented’ by the colony’s early political turmoil. Throsby was a ‘persistent’ defender of Aboriginal people from abuse. A proud, sensitive man, Throsby committed suicide in 1828 under the mounting strain of personal economic uncertainty. In the 1810s, however, he had been one of the first to move into the Illawarra, on the coast south of Sydney, and then urged the claims of land past Moss Vale and Marulan on the governor, Lachlan Macquarie. ‘The finest country as ever was’, Throsby reported, lay beyond the road he had been contracted to oversee in construction to the Goulburn Plains. It was land ‘fit for any purpose, either for grazing or agriculture’.⁸

Enticed – as much perhaps by the prospect of easing the already entrenched power of large landholders by offering small, usually ex-convict farmers a chance – the governor travelled as far as Lake George in October, was struck by the ‘beauty and fertility’ of the country, and allowed for ‘temporary expansion’ into ‘the new country’. Commissioner Bigge, sent out from London to check such flights of expansion, was a surly companion on this journey: the further he went from the coastal escarpment, the less he could see to warrant investment. Yet water as well as land remained irresistible, and when told that Aboriginal people spoke of a big river further south, Throsby’s nephew, Charles Throsby Smith, went in search with Wild and Vaughan. On 7 December, after travelling through ‘barren and scrubby country’, they descended onto ‘a very extensive plain’ with ‘plenty of grass’ and a ‘beautiful river’. This was the smaller Molonglo, not the Murrumbidgee mentioned by the Aboriginal people, but the party’s identification of what appeared to be ‘immense quantities of limestone’ near its banks locked the place into a new history.⁹