Editorial: Place, imagination and the texture of Australian pasts

The opening issue of 2026 brings together a set of studies that, at first glance, appear geographically and thematically dispersed: a parish in Gloucester, a coastal village in the Illawarra, desert imaginaries on the cinema screen, Tasmanian environmental filmmaking, and a photographic archive in Sydney. Yet read together, these contributions share a common concern. Each asks how Australians have inhabited, represented, and ultimately made meaning from place.

History, in this issue, is not merely situated in landscape. It is produced through it: through landholding and settlement, through aesthetic response, through visual culture, and through the fragile survival of images themselves. What emerges is a sustained meditation on how place becomes historical – how it is recorded, remembered, contested and, at times, quietly forgotten.

The issue opens with Dr Narelle Borrott's study of the Parish of Thalaba, a deceptively local history that reveals the broader institutional frameworks of colonial society. Through the lens of church and school estates, Borrott reconstructs a world in which land, faith, and governance were tightly interwoven. Her focus on lessees, tenants, and assisted immigrants shifts attention away from abstract policy to lived experience. These were not passive recipients of colonial design but active participants in its unfolding, building networks of support and opportunity within the constraints imposed upon them.

By drawing on social capital and network analysis, Borrott demonstrates how communities were formed not simply through proximity but through relationships of trust, obligation, and shared endeavour. In doing so, she invites a reconsideration of colonial society not as a rigid hierarchy imposed from above, but as a negotiated and evolving set of relationships shaped from below.

If Borrott's article examines the making of place through occupation, Dr Kerry Heckenberg's study of Stanwell Park interrogates how place is imagined and remembered. The enduring belief that Sir Thomas Mitchell built the 'first house' becomes, in her hands, less a question of fact than of historical desire. Why do certain figures come to dominate local memory? What aesthetic or cultural needs do such narratives serve? By returning to diaries, letters, and visual sources, Heckenberg reveals a far more complex history, one in which Mitchell's role is diminished and a wider cast of actors emerges.

Her work reminds us that historical landscapes are layered not only with physical traces but with stories that are continually reshaped. The 'first house' is thus both an object and a myth, its persistence reflecting the human impulse to

anchor place in singular acts of origin. In unsettling that impulse, Heckenberg restores contingency to the past and opens space for alternative narratives to emerge.

Professor Kathryn Hunter's exploration of sheik fantasy in 1920s Australia moves the discussion from physical landscapes to imaginative ones. In tracing the parallel appeal of Rudolph Valentino and T. E. Lawrence, Hunter situates Australian audiences within a global cultural moment shaped by war, cinema, and imperial encounter. The desert, as it appears here, is not a geographic reality but a symbolic space onto which desires, anxieties, and identities are projected.

Her analysis demonstrates how visual culture can transform distant conflicts into intimate fantasies, reshaping national consciousness in the process. In this sense, the Australian engagement with the 'sheik' is less about the Middle East than about Australia itself: its place in the world, its relationship to empire, and its appetite for romance and adventure in the aftermath of war. The cinema screen becomes a site where geography dissolves and identity is reimagined.

The interplay between representation and environment continues in Professor Benjamin Richardson's study of Tasmanian amateur naturalist filmmakers. Here, the camera becomes both a scientific instrument and a persuasive tool, capturing landscapes while simultaneously advocating for their preservation. Richardson's focus on figures such as Herbert King and Frederick Smithies reveals an early form of environmental consciousness, one that relied on visual media to communicate the value of nature to broader audiences.

Their lecture tours and films were acts of translation, rendering remote or overlooked environments visible and meaningful. In doing so, they helped to shape a public understanding of conservation that endures into the present. The natural world, in this account, is not simply observed but curated, framed through the lens of those who seek to protect it. What we see, Richardson suggests, is inseparable from what we are taught to value.

Geoff Barker's examination of Florence Milson's photography brings the issue to a more intimate scale, yet one no less significant. Working with a limited surviving corpus, Barker reconstructs the career of a photographer who was once highly regarded but is now largely forgotten. His article is, in part, an act of recovery, restoring Milson to the historical record. But it is also a meditation on the fragility of that record itself. Photographs, often assumed to be durable witnesses, are revealed here as contingent artefacts, subject to loss, neglect, and reinterpretation.

By situating Milson within the networks of the Sydney Camera Circle and international exhibitions, Barker highlights both her achievement and her marginalisation. His work underscores a central truth of historical practice: that what survives is never neutral, and that the historian's task is as much about uncovering absence as it is about analysing presence. To interpret an image, in this sense, is also

to confront the limits of what can be known.

Taken together, these contributions trace a movement from land to image, from settlement to representation, from material occupation to cultural imagination. Borrott's settlers, Heckenberg's landscapes, Hunter's cinematic deserts, Richardson's filmed wilderness and Barker's photographic archive each reveal different ways in which Australians have engaged with their environments.

Work that I have recently been completing for the Australian War Memorial, on the history of the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit, revolves around the operational reality of how Australians have engaged with 'the other'. The story of colonial and Indigenous engagements with the environment; military maneuvering around new environments; or the 'discovering' of an environment are all seen through the historical lens.

What unites the papers in this issue is an insistence that place is never merely physical. It is social, aesthetic and interpretive, shaped by the stories people tell about where they are and where they believe themselves to be. These stories, in turn, shape the archive itself, determining what is recorded, preserved, and ultimately remembered.

In bringing these works together, the *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society* continues its long-standing commitment to connecting detailed scholarship with broader questions of national identity and memory. As in earlier volumes, the strength of the *Journal* lies not simply in the quality of individual contributions, but in the dialogue that emerges between them.

The recent review of members' opinions, in-part looking at the *Journal*, raised interesting questions around scholarship and themes. A majority of the members wished to read of colonial history; and yet a majority of submissions this issue are around environmental history. The disconnect is interesting, but the diversity of topics and methods on display in this issue reflects the vitality of the field of history. From genealogical reconstruction to cultural analysis, from environmental history to visual studies, the contributors demonstrate that Australian historiography thrives precisely because it resists confinement to a single approach or narrative.

The collective message of this issue is that history is, at its core, an act of attention. To attend to land records is to uncover lives otherwise obscured. To attend to myths of origin is to reveal the desires that sustain them. To attend to films and photographs is to recognise the power of images in shaping understanding. And to attend to what has been forgotten is to restore complexity to the past. These are not merely scholarly exercises. They are practices that shape how Australians understand their relationship to place, to each other, and to the histories that continue to inform the present.

The lesson to be learnt from this issue, I would suggest, is that recognition of a place is never fixed. It is continually made and remade through occupation,

imagination and memory. The parish, the village, the desert, the wilderness and the photographic frame are all sites of historical production. To study them is to engage with the processes by which meaning is constructed and contested over time. In this sense, the issue speaks not only to historians but to a broader public audience. It invites readers to consider how their own environments – whether inherited, constructed or imagined – are embedded within longer histories of interpretation and change.

These are not simply studies of discrete subjects; they are reflections on the craft of history itself. Each contribution, in its own way, demonstrates that the past is neither static nor self-evident. It must be assembled from fragments, interpreted with care, and presented with an awareness of its provisional nature. The authority of history lies not in its certainty but in its method: in the willingness to question, to revise, and to remain open to new perspectives. In that sense, this issue continues a tradition that has defined the *Journal* since its founding – an enduring commitment to rigorous inquiry in the service of public understanding.

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