

# THE 2012 LESLEY MUIR ADDRESS: CLEANING UP IN SYDNEY

Professor Peter Spearritt

It is an honour to give an address in memory of Dr Lesley Muir, who did so much to bring the environmental history of the Canterbury Bankstown region to the notice of both researchers and the local community. And what a tempting conference theme, 'saturated with filth and corruption'. It sounds so appropriate for the colony that subsumed a rum hospital into a Parliament House. In corruption-free Victoria they built their Parliament House from scratch, and relished the fact that they got to house the new federal parliament from 1901 to 1927.

There is nothing like a 19th century royal commission to come up with a good tag line, taking in both 'filth and corruption.' And just imagine what Wolli Creek was like at the time. Even in the 1920s, when the Cooks River Advancement League was trying to clean up the river, the water was none too savoury.

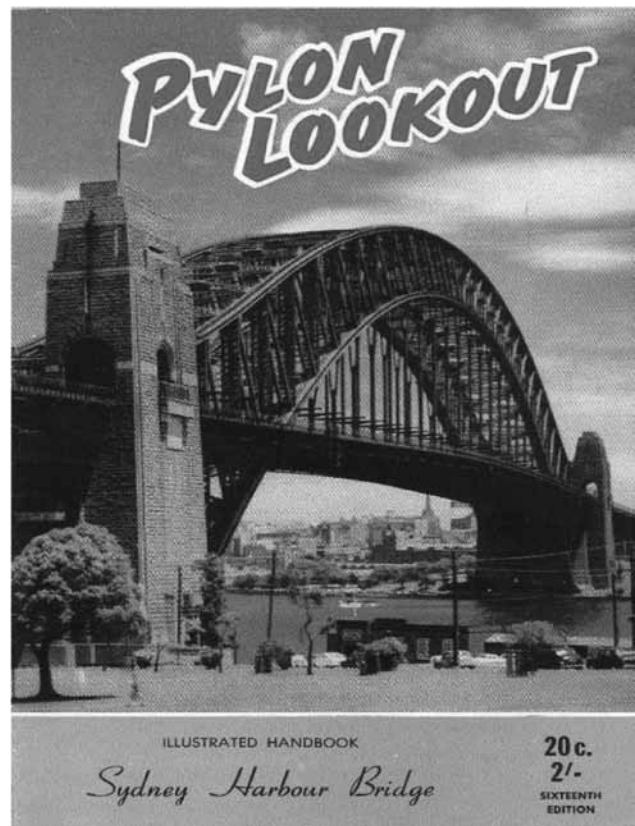
My topic today traverses many aspects of Sydney's history. We now have a substantial literature on Sydney's water supply, its natural environment, its beaches, and its bureaucratic and political culture. With the rise of social media and the web, even conventional historians are confronting not only the public's right to know, but what the public already knows.

At this point in my presentation I asked conference delegates a series of questions and discovered that most had been to view the Warragamba Dam in the 1960s, a few had visited the Burragarang Valley before the dam construction and subsequent flooding, all had been to Taronga Zoo, all had travelled on the Manly ferry, but two delegates had never been to Bondi Beach. So most conference attendees were indeed people who had experienced filth and corruption in Sydney. Many could remember the era when the Harbour Bridge pylons were filthy, before steam cleaning became a regular item on the maintenance schedule for the Moruya granite.

Corruption, we realise, is very much in the eye of the beholder. Two cardboard box manufacturers might meet up for a friendly chat, but that hardly constitutes price fixing. Insurance companies might change the definition of flood to avoid any mention of water, but that is because they want to be frank and transparent. Government ministers who become multi-millionaire property owners on their comparatively restrained salaries – at least compared to bankers and corporate CEOs – have simply read the real estate market correctly. Filth, on the other hand, is easier to define. Our society is full of it. We have waste products aplenty, from our manufacturing industries, our power stations, and despite miraculous advances in medical science, from our own bodies.

Sydneysiders, I find, often take their magnificent environments for granted. In south-east Queensland people pine for what many of you might be surprised to hear is the most generously provided metropolis for green space in Australia, Sydney. Some years back we studied the amount of guaranteed green space in south east Queensland – Noosa to the Tweed River and as far west as Gatton – and took exactly the same land mass around Sydney. We defined guaranteed green space as national parks, nature reserves and the like, and while 43 per cent of the greater Sydney region came up as guaranteed green space, only 17 per cent of south-east Queensland could claim the same level of protection. Sydney has been blessed by a long tradition of creating national parks, from the 1870s, taking in large swathes of the southern coast, to the Blue Mountains and more recently the vast Wollemi National Park.

In the 19th century and for much of the 20th century, both Sydney Harbour and the ocean seemed the perfect repository



*Pylon Lookout: Illustrated Handbook. Sixteenth Edition.*

to deposit unwanted liquids, whether from tanneries, paint manufacturers, gas plants or the expanding sewers, let alone the easiest destination for storm water. The Bondi ocean outfall sewer and the Manly ocean outfall seemed heaven sent options for getting rid of residential waste. We were fortunate that while the engineers were busily devising novel solutions to get rid of waste via the gravity disposal options offered by the landscape, that Neils Rasmus Nielsen, a Copenhagen born cabinet maker, who became the Minister for Lands in the Holman Labour Government, persuaded Parliament in 1910 to grant him sufficient funds to resume some harbour foreshore properties, and reinforce the Government's claim to 150 feet of foreshore above high water mark that had not already gone into private ownership. The foundations of the magnificent Sydney Harbour National Park can be traced back to Nielsen's early foresight.

Meanwhile, with its rugged hinterland, Sydney, including the landscapes west of Wollongong, offered great catchments for the city's growing number of dams. Unlike Brisbane or even Melbourne, Sydney didn't have nearly as much arable land within 100 kilometres of the city centre, and once earmarked for dam sites, much of this landscape became locked away from urban development. While Sydney has had occasional scares about its potable water supply over the course of the 20th century, during the great urban water crisis of 2006-09, water authorities in Sydney, like their counterparts in other states, persuaded nervous governments, facing increasingly hard to win elections, to build desalination plants, including at Kurnell. I argue that, with the possible exception of Perth, all these desalination plants were knee jerk reactions by governments wanting to be seen to make a grand gesture. All

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have cost more than was originally estimated, and some have since been mothballed or should be. The firms who have built these plants really did clean up at the taxpayers' expense and now we all have to pay for the maintenance of a technology that requires vast amounts of electricity. The Wivenhoe Dam in Brisbane started spilling in January 2011, with consequent flooding, and Warragamba started spilling in March 2012.

We know from the Brisbane experience that individuals facing a water crisis can readily get their daily consumption down from 300 litres per head to 120 litres per head, merely by flushing the toilet less, taking shorter showers, not watering lawns, and in many cases installing household tanks. Businesses likewise

can readily reduce their consumption and many have ample opportunity to collect rainwater, use recycled water and cease to use potable water for industrial activities.

Neither companies nor governments can be relied upon to protect the environment. More and more environmental decisions are being made by financiers and infrastructure companies in so called 'public private partnerships'. Companies and shareholders almost routinely put their monetary returns before environmental protection. In honouring the work of Dr Lesley Muir I end by remarking that there is no substitute for constant vigilance by local communities.

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## FROM THE FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

Helen Henderson, Hon. Secretary FAHS

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### Election of office bearers

The biennial election of office bearers was held at the AGM in Darwin in July. Dr Ruth Kerr (Royal Historical Society of Queensland), who was President from 2001 to 2004, was re-elected to that office. Two Royal Western Australian Historical Society delegates are on the Executive – Nick Drew as Hon. Treasurer and Dr Helen Henderson as Hon. Secretary. The Immediate Past President, Associate-Professor Don Garden (Royal Historical Society of Victoria), will continue to be actively involved and has taken on the special role of Advocacy Officer. Dr Judith Smart (Royal Historical Society of Victoria) and Esther Davies (Canberra and District Historical Society) are the two Vice-Presidents. The meeting coincided with the 150th anniversary celebrations of John McDouall Stuart's crossing of the continent.



Dr Ruth Kerr

### Promoting the interests of historical societies

During his presidency, Don Garden has worked hard to improve the image of historical societies, heritage and history in the eyes of federal politicians of all parties as well as relevant bureaucrats and you will be pleased to know that the Federation is now recognised by the federal government as one of the principal bodies representing and promoting cultural heritage in Australia. This has given us the opportunity to represent our constituents at the highest level, particularly with regard to promoting the importance of government support for movable heritage.

Unfortunately, this was not reflected in government funding. The Federation suffered a 23% reduction in its Grants for Voluntary Environmental Sustainable and Heritage Organisations Program grant which is making our ability to expand our activities very difficult since we are not in a position to extend our part-time Executive Officer's hours.

### Cultural Heritage Portal

The Federation has signed a contract with the Federal Government to participate in at least the early stage of the development and promotion of an online Australian Heritage Portal. This is to be an interactive program to which the government hopes heritage organisations, including historical societies, all over Australia will contribute

information about their local heritage. The website is in an advanced stage of development. You will be hearing more about this fairly soon.

### New guide for historical societies

The Federation will soon be publishing online through its website the Federation's latest guide for historical societies. This is on the identification and protection of heritage landscapes.

### Australian Historical Societies Support Group withdrawn

The Federation was disappointed to learn that the Victorian Government had withdrawn its financial support for its online *My Connected Community Program* which hosted the Australian Historical Societies Support Group. This was a national forum for the exchange of ideas and information gathering and had over eighty members when it was shut down. The Federation is considering other options for opening a similar forum. We will keep you informed as soon as it is up and running on our website.

### Submissions

A number of submissions have been made to government committees. Perhaps the most important was on the federal government's proposed Cultural Heritage Strategy. This submission stressed the importance of recognising and funding the important work of historical societies who are caring for so much of the nation's movable and built heritage.

### Constitution review

The Federation is currently reviewing its Constitution, which with only a few amendments has guided its activities since 1977.

### Accessing the Federation's services.

Please take some time to visit the Federation's website and consider accessing some of the services which have been specially developed to assist historical societies to meet their objectives. Also, if you don't receive the Federation's *Newsletter* or *e-Bulletin* please visit the website and follow the links to order them by email. The website URL is <http://www.history.org.au>

