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The Battle for Sydney Harbour

I was much surprised at the fortifications of Sydney Harbour. Fortifications, unless specially inspected, escape even a vigilant seer of sights, but I, luckily for myself, was enabled specially to inspect them. I had previously no idea that the people of New South Wales were either so suspicious of enemies, or so pugnacious in their nature.... But in viewing these fortifications, I was most especially struck by the loveliness of the sites chosen. One would almost wish to be a gunner for the sake of being at one of those forts.

—Anthony Trollope, *Australia*, 1873

The 2000 Olympics will bring unprecedented international attention to Sydney, the largest and oldest city in Australia. A key feature of the proposed creation and selling of Sydney's media image is an emphasis upon the harbour, even though it will only be a venue for yachting and the main Olympic venue will be some kilometres away. In preparing for this new level of scrutiny, great effort has been made by public agencies, state and local government, and corporations to present the best possible picture for visitors and international media viewers. By doing so they are making choices regarding what image they emphasise and what characteristics they downplay. This is not new, as the process of selection and emphasis has been going on for more than a century and remains a strong structuring principle for park management in its social and political context in Australia.

Former defence lands around Sydney have been taken into public ownership, notably incorporation into Sydney Harbour National Park. The defence lands form a significant proportion of the land surrounding the harbour and, because they have escaped development, are generally well-vegetated with native and exotic vegetation, standing out from suburban sprawl and industry. Since ac-

quisition, the National Parks and Wildlife Service of New South Wales (NPWS) has managed the land primarily for its natural values, but has been far more tentative in deciding how the major cultural sites within the park should be managed. This paper focuses upon one area within Sydney Harbour National Park, the headlands known as Middle and Georges Heads, and examines the

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management history of its cultural heritage, especially the defence heritage of the area.

This paper contends that, although the bulk of Sydney Harbour National Park is made up of former defence reserves and contains nationally significant historic coastal defences, this fact has been underplayed in the debates and decisions about the long-term management of the land at the expense of its natural heritage significance. The solution remains to be offered, but the role of NPWS in drawing attention to the greater significance of cultural heritage of the park through interpretation and education needs to be enhanced. Initial steps in that direction have been taken, but whether they are effective will only be revealed with time.

National Parks in Australia and Parks Around Sydney

National parks have a history in Australia almost equal to that of North America. In each continent, early national parks sought to achieve two goals: reserving outstanding scenic landscapes from development, and encouraging tourism and recreation as a social good. The first Australian national park was the Royal, to the south of Sydney, dedicated in 1879. It combined what was then undeveloped coastal forest and river valley land with heavily modified areas forming picnic grounds and artificial boating lakes, scenic

drives and picnic spots. There was no apparent ambiguity or uncertainty in presenting nature in both its untouched and completely artificial forms and representing that under the single heading of a "park." The creation and promotion of national parks in Australia at the end of the nineteenth century can best be understood as part of a Victorian ideology which held that nature existed both as a backdrop against which civilisation operated and developed and as a contrast to the degradation of city living which provided renewal and revitalisation (Ashley et al. 1991).

Around Sydney there were a number of similar parks established to provide an escape from the perceived congestion and pollution of the city. Trains and ferries allowed cheap and regular access to these sites. Formal recreation favoured picnics, fishing, boating, walks, and rides, while informal recreation included the establishment of artists' camps, surf and river bathing, and camping. The archaeology of early park planning consists of large "flats"—terraces defined by substantial retaining walls next to rivers where picnics and festivities could be held—kiosks and shelters, rockeries and gardens, pavilions and lookouts. Most tracks built were so robust they are still in regular use decades later (Ashley et al. 1991).

Within the broader ambit of recreation the reserved lands were also

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an important setting for escape from the city in other ways. During economic depressions many reserves were occupied by the unemployed, who built small shanty towns, such as “Happy Valley” at La Perouse, eking out a subsistence living from fishing or hunting rabbits and growing vegetables. When sea bathing was forbidden in daylight hours, secluded coves were important for recreational swimmers. Along with sea bathing, many of the locations became important as “beats” for homosexual men to meet with less fear of homophobic violence. These sorts of activities were only tolerated because they took place in remote settings and form one of the undercurrents of park management even today.

In the twentieth century, national parks and nature and wildflower reserves were declared throughout the country, although most commonly in the economically marginal and rugged lands bordering the main east coast mountain range. In 1967, NPWS was established. Its formation was largely driven by politicians, senior bureaucrats and environmental campaigners who had been impressed by the successes of the U.S. National Park Service in developing natural areas as tourist attractions, and for the successful management of large land areas. The legislation establishing NPWS was strongly influenced by U.S. experience. The main reserve categories were national parks, nature reserves,

and historic sites. The latter could either be places of national historical significance, or places of importance for Aboriginal spiritual values. While it was recognised that national parks were likely to contain structures and other evidence of historic land use, they were primarily established for nature conservation and recreation, reflecting the reality of the past seventy years.

Sydney Harbour National Park and its Defence Heritage

Sydney Harbour National Park was developed as a result of transfers of Commonwealth (federal) land to the New South Wales government commencing in 1979. Military bases occupied the various locations until strategic changes in defence planning had made these uses redundant. It consists of discrete headland reservations, with some interconnection by narrow foreshore strips above the high-water mark.

The arrival of Europeans—first a sail-past by Captain Cook in the *Endeavour* in 1770, and then by Captain Arthur Phillip, at the head of the First Fleet, in 1788—marked the establishment of a major British colony at the farthest reaches of Empire. The development of fortifications to defend the harbour against enemy attack was rapid, the urgency prompted by the commencement of war against France, and exacerbated by the presence of Irish convicts with strong separatist politics.

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The pattern of defence from 1788 onwards follows several general themes (NPWS 1999; Gojak 1995; Gojak, forthcoming). The first is the gradual spread of defences further out from the main settlement. The short range of guns, requiring any attacker to close in on the settlement to pose any real threat, necessitated this. As gun ranges increased through the nineteenth century, and as Sydney grew, defences needed to be located farther outward in order to stop bombardment. This culminated with the development of the Sydney Fortress in the late 1920s and 1930s. This relied upon a decentralised layout of powerful gun batteries, supported by observation posts and command stations, that allowed the entire coast around Sydney to be protected (Fullford 1994).

The consequence of the gradual movement of defences farther and farther from the city is a pattern of defence lands and fortifications of different dates in a wide range of locations. While some locations have been built upon again and again, leaving a complex archaeological palimpsest to unravel, most only represent one or two phases of construction, followed by abandonment for active defence.

The second theme of importance in understanding Sydney's defences is the mentality of the "scare." Many Australians for a very long time thought of themselves as British people on the other side of the planet

from Home (meaning Britain, and always spelled with a capital "H"). While this was a satisfactory arrangement for a growing colony that was gradually maturing and discovering independence, whenever Britain got into a tense diplomatic situation with another imperial power, Australians always felt that they would be an early target for an attack. During the nineteenth century, therefore, a pattern of crises in defence preparedness took place, always in response to rising hostility between Britain and another power.

The usual colonial response in such a crisis was to hurriedly seek to complete previously unfinished gun batteries and defences or build new ones without plans or much thought. Soon enough the crisis would be over and the emergency funding would dry up. The archaeological legacy is a succession of poorly planned and hastily erected defences, some unfinished. Each marks a particular crisis and the response by the colonial authorities. An example is at Bradleys Head, where the arrival of two U.S. warships unannounced in the Harbour in 1839 provided sufficient demonstration of the vulnerability of the town from a sneak attack that a hurried round of gun battery construction took place over the next year (NPWS 1993). These constructions were unplanned and never finished, being sited more to provide reassurance for the citizens than to intimidate attackers.

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A third theme that can be identified as being present throughout the entire history of the defences is the adoption and modification of designs and principles from British exemplars, and the purchase of British military equipment. This is itself unsurprising, but the two significant breaks from the pattern demonstrate how effectively it was enforced. The first was in the period from 1870, when British garrison troops were withdrawn from Australia, to 1877, when British military advisers were sent back in. The second instance was during the Second World War. At the same time as Australia's prime minister, John Curtin, was making his speech that Australia's destiny lay with the United States of America, the Army was for the first time buying bulk equipment from the USA and beginning to adopt and adapt American tactical doctrine in a range of military operations. In both of these cases the archaeology reflects a short horizon of technology and design that runs counter to the prevailing "Britishness" that is the norm from 1788 onwards.

Therefore the resulting legacy of the military defences of Sydney is more than a collection of interesting gun batteries, showing a gradual change from smooth bore to rifled barrels, and increasing gun size as the nineteenth century progressed. It represents a resource that demonstrates the gradual development of nineteenth- and twentieth-century

technology, both in the form of the defences and their patterning across the landscape. Similarly, there is a clear demonstration of the psyche of the colonial mind in the response to scares, and in the interplay between growing independence from Britain and the definite sense of being part of Britain's extended empire.

Management and Conservation History of Middle Head

Middle and Georges heads, as two contiguous headlands opposite the entrance to Port Jackson, and commanding the passage down Sydney Harbour towards the city centre, had a crucial role in the defence history of Sydney. The archaeology of the two headlands spans the period of Aboriginal occupation in the Holocene, subsequent significant attempts at establishing an Aboriginal farming community, and defences and military establishments spanning ca. 1800 to the 1960s. The defences dominate the headland, having shaped nearly all of the level areas with gun batteries, parade grounds, and clear fields of fire (NPWS 1999).

Prior to the transfer of Middle and Georges heads to NPWS, the Army demolished a large number of buildings and structures in both areas (Gojak 1985; NPWS 1997, 1999). Retained were the self-evidently historic buildings and gun emplacements, i.e., those more than seventy years old. Maintenance

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wound down from the mid-1970s, allowing the argument that the buildings removed were incapable of repair. Following transfer, NPWS did not undertake any substantial conservation works on any of the buildings, and only undertook minimal work that was needed for public safety and management, including mowing of the main grassed areas, repairing those buildings to be used as staff residences, and fencing some of potential danger spots. The regeneration of bushland was generally not checked, leading to a gradual loss of open space (Bourne 1999).

The first historical and archaeological survey to investigate the area took place in 1985 (Gojak 1985; Harvey 1985; Wilson 1985). This identified the complexity of the cultural remains that had been present and still survived. The survey supported the claim that the defence heritage was of national significance, and the themes that have been expounded above began to be articulated in support of the understanding of the site. From 1989, tours of the headlands—the “Tour de Forts”—have been run by NPWS on a regular basis, accessing tunnels and emplacements that are normally not made accessible to the public (Cunningham 1991).

Access to the Middle Head section of the park has always been difficult, as it required finding an unformed track that led around an active Army base. Despite this, visita-

tion has continued to increase as more people find out about the site and its scenic views. No interpretation has been installed on the site, making it difficult to understand what the concrete bunkers and pits represent. There is a general understanding that these are old gun emplacements and previous Russian and Japanese threats are involved. As well as visitors seeking either the harbour views, there has been a strong history of access by fishers, nude sunbathers, teenagers doing teenage things, squatters in vacant premises and rock shelters, and homosexual men at an established “beat.” Relatively few visitors have made the trek to see the defences, and many of these come with others who know the main access points (personal observation).

In the past ten years, the majority of management work has been constrained by lack of resources to tackle the substantial amount of work required to conserve cultural sites. The majority of work has been bushfire hazard reduction, continued grounds maintenance, basic drainage and other maintenance work, and further safety. Several large capital-intensive projects have taken place on significant defence sites, notably the 1880s armoured casemate at Georges Head, plus metals conservation (NPWS 1997; *NPWS Annual Reports* 1979–present). The funding for these has had to be found separately within the agency or from external

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sources, as it has not been able to be met from the available operating budget.

Immediately adjacent to the NPWS-owned parts of Middle and Georges heads are other recently vacated defence establishments. The eventual fate of these lands has not been determined, but the current Commonwealth position is that the less developed, i.e., the more "natural," areas will be transferred to the state for addition to the park, and the remaining land which has defence housing or is developed will be made available for housing. Public debate on this position has been vigorous, and reveals that the land is still seen as being largely natural. Recognition of the importance of the cultural sites, especially the more recent defence heritage, is often absent or only developed as a minor issue (see Uren 1999 as one example of many letters to newspapers and minor editorials). At its most extreme, community arguments represent the position that the area should be returned to parkland and developed into a fully natural area, i.e., removing cultural evidence that may show that the area has not been coastal forest since the Pleistocene.

Progress in Interpretation and Management

For a park management agency which will eventually take over some of this land and be required to manage and conserve all the values, the

prevalence of the "nature first" argument, if it can be so termed, is a concern. Education of the community on the important values that are present on the existing part of the park is a priority, but because of the lack of previous development of interpretative, recreational, and educational opportunities, this has had to be planned almost from the beginning. The guided fort tours are currently the only program offered by NPWS, and there are no self-guided tours or signage.

Funding was received from the NPWS internal cultural heritage research grants program to prepare a model interpretation plan for Middle and Georges Heads (Bickford et al. 1999). Consultants were engaged to prepare the plan based upon recently developed best-practice guidelines for park interpretation (DNREV 1999).

The model interpretation plan, following the best-practice guidelines, took an integrative approach to significance assessment (Australia ICOMOS 1994, 1999). Existing research on natural values, Aboriginal and non-indigenous heritage significance, and contemporary social importance was supplemented where necessary with new research. The primary structure for the interpretation is the presentation of Middle and Georges Heads as representing different scales of time, with geological time scales, Aboriginal time and a long recent past / present. Aboriginal

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time, for example, is represented in relation to Aboriginal cosmological belief in the shape of the land representing spiritual activities from the Dreaming which still resonate in the present, thus tying in the geological time scale into a separate but parallel narrative based upon a different value system. The elaboration of the story of Aboriginal people on the site after European settlement also aims to ensure that it is incorporated into the historical narrative (Bickford et al. 1999, 31-34).

While the defence heritage management issues will dominate future management of the site, as the infrastructure is decaying and requires considerable conservation resources be directed to it, the interpretation aims to place it into context. The separation of conservation effort from interpretative effort is an important principle, even in such simple matters as making sure that when conservation works are being carried out they are explained and incorporated into the presentation of the site and what is being done to retain its heritage values. It also will reduce the disciplinary dominance of conservation practice, and allow community values greater scope for leading future research and management (see English and Veale 1998 for comparable issues in Aboriginal site management).

The interpretation plan, then, develops specific themes and requirements for making particular locations

safe and accessible to allow visitors to see a range of different attractions. Signage, publications, Web sites, and guided and self-guided tours are all identified as products to meet the demands of different possible users of the site. The interpretation plan offers the prospect of encouraging understanding of defence heritage in a way that gets away from a focus on guns and war to its wider context in Sydney's history (e.g., Uzzell 1989).

Conclusion

Trollope's quote at the head of this paper indicates that right from the start the defence lands were accessible to the public. The implementation of the interpretation plan will commence soon, although it will be too late for the Olympics. During the period of military occupation, gaining access to the land was far more difficult, but it remained an important place for many users.

During the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century clearing, military activity, and construction transformed this land. When the military moved away, it provided an opportunity for the bush and the weeds to grow back, making it superficially look like the military had never been there. With its incorporation into Sydney Harbour National Park, this process of transformation has been completed, creating a justification for perceiving the land as being primarily an important piece of bushland within the city.

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The problem for archaeologists, heritage managers, and site managers has been to begin to use the tools of conservation planning and interpretation to alter the public's perception and make them more aware how many other important things there are on Middle and Georges heads.

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