

TO THE MEMORY OF BERT WESTON

Many tributes have been paid to this remarkable man after his sad passing in 1996. We have received an extensively detailed written record of both his life and funeral service from Kathleen Hooke which will become part of the Society's records and which I hope can be published at a later date.

But it was only after a recent visit to the Museum of the Tongarra Heritage Society that I was able to see at first hand something which I feel will widely become to be regarded as Bert's greatest legacy to the history of Illawarra.

This legacy is none other than Bert's book - *Albion Park Saga*, published by The Tongarra Heritage Society in 1996 and costing only a very reasonable \$7.00.

Quite simply it's the finest record of rural life in Illawarra I have had the pleasure to read. In no other work have I been able to garner such an intimate feel for the life of the cow-cookies and their community.

Bert was always a captivating story-teller and I can still remember him telling me, on the single occasion when we had an extended conversation, of the night he squired the daughter of Wollongong's Mayor Howarth (widely known in the depression as the 'Mussolini of the South Coast') to a ball at the Town Hall on the back of his motorbike. I thought this must have been scandalous enough but Bert assured me that everyone in town thought that she would be the girl he would marry. When I asked him why he didn't, his devastating reply included the quip: "Well I couldn't really see a town girl like that milking the cows."

His book is full of similarly evocative stories. I was staggered, for example, to read of the medical services available to the ritziest of the Albion Park's bunyip aristocracy:

"On a couple of rare occasions, an operation on one of the more affluent residents was performed on the dining table in his home. A Sydney surgeon would arrive, accompanied by a couple of nursing sisters. A special train, composed of one passenger carriage, a locomotive and guard's van, which cost [75 pounds] \$150.00 for the charter, would wait in the local rail siding until the team was ready to return, mission completed and

cheque in hand.”

So evocative is Bert's book that it closes on the one note that every other history I've ever read lacks: the history of smell. Olfactory history is the essential ephemeral I almost always search for in vain in even the best of histories:

“if asked what among many recollections of boyhood and schooldays at the “Park” stands out in particular, I would say the day-long ring and music of hammer on anvil from the various Smithies, plus the acrid smell of their coal fires being bow up as one bicycled to the train on frosty mornings. Or, on wet mornings, the universal smell of jerosene burning that pervaded the village as it was poured over damp kindling wood in most kitchens.”

My only regret is that our own historical society was not the publisher of this splendid work. Apparently the manuscript had been available for publication since 1971. I am at a loss to explain why our Society did not jump at the chance of publishing it.

Congratulations to the Tongarra Heritage Society for ensuring that all who read Bert's words will think kindly of the immensely engaging personality behind them.

Joseph Davis