
“READING” A PHOTOGRAPH

A photograph of a crowded yard at Wollongong Railway Station, aroused my curiosity when it was printed on the 1919 page of the Illawarra Mercury's Commemorative Supplement on December 3, 1999. This curiosity compelled me to check the library's CD Rom in which this photograph is labelled: *Wollongong Railway, return of Soldiers, 1914-1919*, which to some extent may vindicate the Mercury's historian.

The photograph in question depicts a crowd of people outside Wollongong railway station, with a marquee in the station yard, a temporary stage or platform beside the marquee, lots of horse-drawn vehicles mixed up with the crowd, all being watched over by a pair of mounted policemen and a lone photographer with a large hooded camera on its tripod.

Every time I looked at this photo, I felt certain the caption did not fit: There wasn't a soldier in sight. Soldiers returning to country towns do not come in military units to warrant such a reception, but they return one or two at a time, just as Edward Acland Hargrave returned alone to Dapto railway station in 1917.¹ Also, even if this were a mass-return of soldiers in 1918 or 1919, at such an event the latest motor cars in Wollongong would have been there to transport the civic dignitaries, but in this instance the many vehicles in sight are all horse-drawn.

The ever-obliging staff at the library's Local Studies unit tracked down several copies of the photograph in question, each of which had the late Bill Bayley's² writing on the back, all with captions similar to the entry in the CD Rom, and stamped *Property of Illawarra Historical Society*. As these all looked much too new for a photo which I suspected belonged to one of the openings of the railway in the late 1880s, the staff then located the original, still on its ageing cardboard mount. This was a clear, sharp, slightly sepia-coloured print 5 inches by 4 inches (127 x 109mm) which showed more detail at the edges, proving it was a generation earlier than the copies which had all been cropped on the sides, a regular feature of photographic reproductions.

On the back of the mount are two stamps, the first: *Weber, Commonwealth Photo....., Harbour Street, Wollongong* in the top left-hand corner; and *Weber Collection* in the bottom left-hand corner, the latter being a library stamp

1 Anne Wood: *Tales from our Streets*, Illawarra Mercury, 5.11.1998

2 William A Bayley, FRAHS, who collected many photographs for the IHS.

as it occurs on other photos as well. In addition, somebody has scrawled in ink: *Governor came to Wollongong 1898?*

Suspecting that this suggestion of 1898 was a red herring, it still had to be either proved or disproved, so I went to Bill Bayley's newspaper index. There I found an entry for a Governor's visit to Wollongong in the Illawarra Mercury of 20th August, 1898, but this was definitely not the subject of the photo: no reception; no marquee; no crowd. The Governor, Lord Hampden (of Hampden Bridge, no doubt) had come to Wollongong in mufti for a quiet game of golf in his capacity as Patron of the newly-formed Wollongong Golf Club.¹ Hence the 1898 suggestion was quickly eliminated.

Meanwhile another smaller Weber collection photo from the CD Rom was checked out. Obviously taken on the same day, from a different position and perhaps later in the day, it showed more of the temporary platform, on which people were standing, and a good view of the hill over which Auburn Street now passes, then with only one house in the distance. Also it gives a better view of the track to the railway goods shed. The bareness of this hill and the primitive nature of the track combine to support the hypothesis that this is one of the openings of the railway. But if so, which one?

The first opening, that of the local section of the line from Clifton to Wollongong, took place on 21st June, 1887, which coincided with a public holiday for Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Called a *Jubilee Demonstration and Railway Opening*, this was a relatively low-key affair. The opening was performed by the local MP, Francis Woodward Esq., the banquet was held in the railway goods shed and a huge picnic was organized at Garden Hill where 2,000 children were each presented with a Jubilee Medal. There was a tent for the picnic at the Garden Hill Centennial Athletic Grounds but no marquee in the railway yard, no Governor, and no chance of this occasion fitting the still undated photograph.²

Having found the Wollongong Argus much less detailed than the Illawarra Mercury, I turned next to the latter. The second opening, the really significant one, took place on Wednesday, October 3, 1888, when the railway had finally been connected through to Sydney and south as far as Kiama North, or Bombo as we now know it. A Kiama newspaper called it *the line from Sydney to the Cemetery*.³

1 IHS Bulletin, Nov/Dec 2000. *The Mayor, the Governor and the Golf Club*.

2 Illawarra Mercury, June 22, 1887.

3 Bayley, W. A: *Blue Haven*, p 104, Kiama Municipal Council, 1976.

This second *Railway Demonstration* was a much more elaborate affair, as this time the State Governor, Lord Carrington, came on a special train from Sydney to perform the official opening. At the special request of the Governor, a miner's levee was held at Wollongong station, and for this purpose a temporary platform was erected in the station yard alongside a marquee which was possibly a form of insurance against bad weather. The main evidence for this is in three parts:

1. Illawarra Mercury, Tuesday September 25, 1888: *A pavilion for the miner's levee is to be erected near the railway station, and in such a way that the proceedings will be fairly visible to the public.*
2. Illawarra Mercury, Thursday, October 4, 1888: *Mr Wiley and the [demonstration] committee having escorted his Excellency to a temporary platform specially erected for the occasion, a large number of miners and the working classes generally were presented to him.*
3. Wollongong Argus, Saturday October 6, 1888: *The next part of the proceedings was the levee, which was held in a marquee specially fitted up for the occasion.*

There is of course a slight discrepancy between the two papers about just where the levee was held, on the platform or in the tent? My own guess is that the Governor met the miners, etc in the tent and later made his address to the public from the platform.

Also relevant to the photograph is another extract from the Mercury of October 4:

At Wollongong the distinguished visitors were met by Mr. Wiley, the energetic secretary of the demonstration movement, Mr. Poulter (Mayor of Wollongong), Mr. Biggar, and a full complement of committeemen. His Excellency having been escorted to Mr. MacCabe's drag,¹ he was there presented with the following address by the Mayor on behalf of the townspeople:-

Should one look carefully at the original photograph, one can see the official party standing on Mr MacCabe's drag, immediately to the left of the station building and above the crowd. Therefore this photograph can be dated not only to the day, but to within a few minutes, by using a little help from the Wollongong Argus of Saturday, October 6, 1888:

¹ Francis Peter MacCabe of Russell Vale. John Biggar, *the railway king*, was the driving force behind the 15 years of agitation for the railway. Webster's dictionary defines a drag as a large coach with seats on top.

According to the original programme, the Governor and the Ministerial party were to have arrived at 11.45 a.m., but it was quite 12.30 p.m. before the vice-regal train had arrived.

By the time the party had been greeted at the train before passing through two guards of honour to the drag, the welcome speeches would not have started until about 12.40pm. Therefore it is fairly safe to date this photo within a few minutes either side of 12.45pm Wednesday October 3, 1888.

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11.09.2000

Postscript: In the process of dating this photograph, an enormous amount of detail about the two Illawarra Railway openings has been gathered. To my knowledge this information has never been assembled in one document, so I may yet succumb to the temptation to do just that.

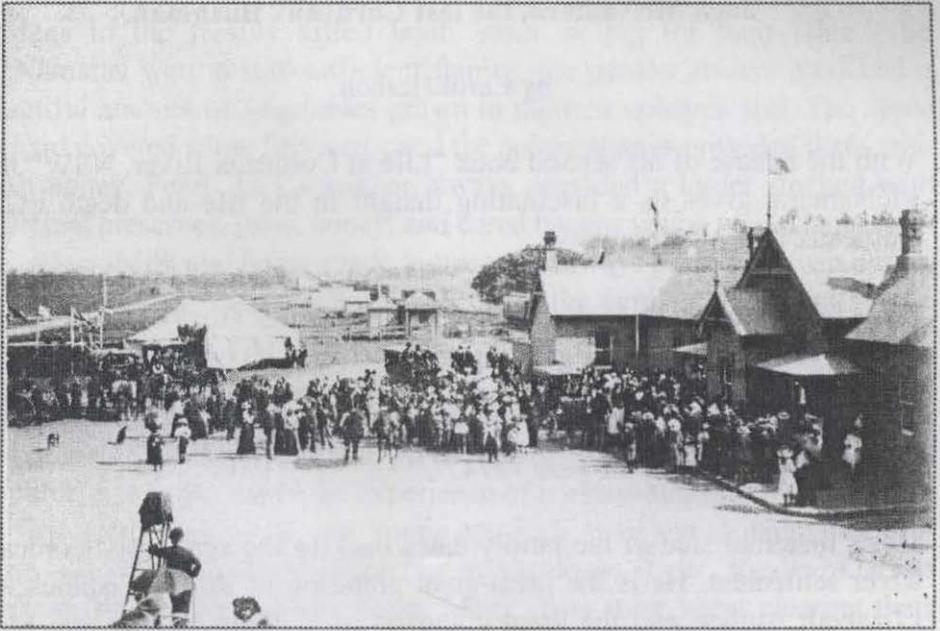


Photo No 1. The official party outside Wollongong Station.

Photo No 2. The official party on the platform next to the marquee.

