On the edge, settler colonialism on the Cumberland Plain

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Abstract
Walking the Cowpastures and beyond A personal reflection of a visit to Baragil Lagoon at Menangle and the ground that Governor Macquarie walked on in 1810. The historian is advised to walk the ground of their studies and subject matter. When it happens it can be a real eyeopener. It challenged my view of these colonial stories and myths when I visited Baragil Lagoon in 2015 (see Blog post). The visit to the locality was organised by John and Edwina Stanham to EMAI and Baragil Lagoon for the Camden Park Nursery Group. I was touched in 2015 by visiting the spot where Governor Macquarie camped above Baragil Lagoon. The camp site is very similar to 1810 on Macquarie’s visit and how he would have found the site.

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Walking the Cowpastures and beyond

A personal reflection of a visit to Baragil Lagoon at Menangle and the ground that Governor Macquarie walked on in 1810.

The historian is advised to walk the ground of their studies and subject matter. When it happens it can be a real eye-opener. It challenged my view of these colonial stories and myths when I visited Baragil Lagoon in 2015 (see Blog post).

The visit to the locality was organised by John and Edwina Stanham to EMAI and Baragil Lagoon for the Camden Park Nursery Group.

I was touched in 2015 by visiting the spot where Governor Macquarie camped above Baragil Lagoon. The camp site is very similar to 1810 on Macquarie’s visit and how he would have found the site.

The site is quite scenic, it is open Cumberland Woodland with broken dappled light coming through the tree canopy and bird calls in the background. The site is largely undisturbed and is as described in Macquarie’s journal (see blog). If you shut your eyes you could imagine the scene in 1810 with similar sounds, smells and sensations.
As a visitor was ‘walking on hallowed ground’ where the mighty and famous had gone before. There was ‘a spiritual experience and awakening’ to what others have written about before on these matters. The experience could be best described with words like ‘challenging’, ‘interesting’, and ‘enlightening’.

So what is the point of this pontificating?

It set me off on a journey involving my curiosity. It prompted me to ask questions about the colonial period on the Cowpastures and its meaning.

But how to enter the colonial world of the settlers and re-examine the stories and narratives that I had been brought up with.

One attempt at this has been Stokes work. She has attempted to examine the historical and archaeological evidence and looked at the pre-colonial movements of the Dharawal people in the Illawarra and Shoalhaven regions. She maintains that:

“Spatial mapping of these historical observations is informative in its own right. Spatially formatted incorporation of tangible and intangible evidence of associations and connections within Aboriginal communities has been demonstrated to be a particularly valuable and meaningful approach (p4[1])

Stokes looks further at the concept of cultural landscape, a fundamental concept in the use of heritage in Australia. She states:

“Country, for Aboriginal people, is organised and understood by people’s various and particular relationships with, and connections to it. Knowledge of the interrelationship of everything binds environmental, spiritual, aesthetic and economic categories of information and life (Wesson 2005:6). In contrast, European culture, at the time of colonisation at least, divided people, land and activities into discretely bordered classes and categories, organised hierarchically. European knowledge structures also involved separation of information into smaller and smaller parts (Wesson 2005:6) (p12)

She then states that a cultural exchange has shifted this binary view of the world.

“Understanding of plurality of meaning of things underpins both theory and practice in archaeology today (e.g. Hodder above and multivariate methods used later in this thesis). This shift in western thinking, as with all cultural change, is an outcome of exchange. (p12)

Questions and their validity?

This post is interested in the questions around settler colonialism and the opportunity it provides to reflect on the colonialism of the southern Cumberland Plain.

This post is just asking:

Is this an opportunity to pose a number of questions?

Examples might be:

- Is settler colonialism an appropriate lens to the view the events, myths and perceptions of the colonialism of the Cumberland Plain?
Colonialism and the popular imagination

So what are we talking about?

There are numerous myths and stories surrounding the colonial period on the southern Cumberland Plain. Some of these are part of the foundational story of the nation.

1. The cows of the Cowpastures
2. The Appin Massacre and Governor Macquarie – the Father of Australia
3. The legend of John Macarthur – the pioneering hero – the great founder of the Australian wool industry
4. Governor Macquarie and the Cowpastures
5. John Oxley and Kirkham (later Camelot)
6. Denbigh and the Galloping Parson Thomas Hassall
7. John Hawdon of Elderslie
8. Glenlee
9. Wivenhoe and Charles Cowper
10. Studley Park and Payne’s Folly
11. The legend of Hume and Hovell
12. The stories of Thomas Mitchell
13. And many others

Each of these in their own way are worthy of re-examination in the light of the debate around settler colonialism and its methodology.

An even more recent set of events might fit the mould created by settler colonialism with a new form of colonialism with its own stories and myths

- Sydney rural-urban fringe and the urban frontier

Global nature of frontiers and settler colonialism

The Cumberland Plain has been subjected to many new frontiers that are global in nature. These frontiers have been based on ideas, culture, social, technology, political, and a host of other areas.

A new idea is born and it creates a new concept. This then spreads out across the globe in a wave like formation.

The wave process challenges the status quo. The new idea might become the dominant narrative or story.
There is the process of making and re-making places, societies, cultures, lifestyles and other activities.

One of these new frontiers has been the movement of people across the globe. Waves of people at various times in the past. They came to colonies of New South Wales to make a new life in a new land.

They came the colonies with the intention of staying in their new locality. They invaded and took possession of territory. One way of interpreting this is settler colonialism.

Settler colonialism is an area of study looking at the occupation of space and the occupation of land, particularly indigenous territory.

The concept of settler colonialism has been particularly applied to New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and Canada, while more recently Israel, Algeria and other localities.

Patrick Wolf expressed settler colonialism in terms of race with the binary notion of blackness and whiteness. This certainly applied to the southern Cumberland Plain.

Sydney's Cumberland Plain has been the site of place making from late 18th century.

The landform has shaped the human response to the land, and humans have shaped the landform to suit their purposes.

From the later 18th century there have been a number of successive waves of invasion, succession, dispossession and displacement.

Each time a culture has attempted to create the dominant narrative, that is, form their own stories around the landscape.

There has been peace and conflict, hope and loss – all expressed in a binary context – good and evil, moral and immoral, black and white, outsider and insider.

When the colonial frontier arrived it was a movable locality where violence was part of the existence.

From the practice of naming landforms to taking ownership to outright conflict. The aim of the invaders was the possession of territory. They all intended to stay.

On the Cumberland Plain 18th century settlement of New South Wales can be expressed in these terms.

The new European arrivals were here to stay and took possession of the territory displacing and eventually dispossessing the indigenous people.

The New South Wales colonial authorities started making land grants and pushing Aborigines off their country. The Europeans named landform features and took ownership. They were re-making the existing landscape in their own vision of the world.

Granting land to Europeans by Europeans was structured dispossession of indigenous territory. This created conflict and violence, which has been well told by Grace Karskins' The Colony.
The British came with a form of capitalism that created a market structure or market economy, where there was none and forced the indigenous inhabitants to take part in it.

The act of dispossession removed the agency of the indigenous people and removed and diminished their sovereignty.

The new arrivals came with new hopes and aspirations for themselves, while the act of dispossession created a loss of hope for indigenous people.

These acts were all played out on the Cumberland Plain ending up in the violent conflict that took place in the Appin region in 1816 and the loss of life. It was not the first conflict on the Cumberland Plain. There were clashes between new white arrivals in the Hawkesbury and Aborigines before 1816.

The wave of new settlers onto the Cumberland Plain had parallels in other parts of the world. The new frontiers of settlement across North America – the Western Frontier of 19th century America.

**New Colonialism on the Cumberland Plain**

**Expansion of the urban frontier**

There is a 20th and 21st century parallel to the dispossession suffered by the Dharak, Dharawal and Gundungurra. That process is the movement of the urban frontier of Sydney’s rural-urban fringe across the Cumberland Plain from the 18th century.

The 18th century expansion of the British Empire and the settlement of New South Wales was an expansion of the urban frontier of metropolitan London and part of the British colonial enterprise.

The act of creating the urban settlement of Sydney was an in effect an act of expanding the urban frontier from the home country. One way to view the Great Britain in the late 18th century was as an urban market based economy.

As the British metropolitan project arrived from England in Sydney Cove it moved inland to Parramatta – Parramatta indigenous name, vs Sydney England name – and by 1810 into the Hawkesbury and the Nepean River.

This continued with new waves of arrivals.
The urban expansion of the 20th century was about taking possession of territory from settler farmers by new urban dwellers.

The new urban dwellers and the structured expansion of urban Sydney forcibly took possession of land. There was the resumption of land for roads and other infrastructure.

Sydney’s rural-urban fringe is the site of dispossession and displacement, hope and loss and parallels the early narrative of 19th century settler colonialism.

Sovereignty and the rural-urban fringe

The rural-urban frontier is a moving frontier that removes the sovereignty of existing land users and displaces them.

These processes have been studied by geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, urban historians, urban planners, architects and others interested in the construction of place.

The rural-urban frontier is a zone of conflict where there are winners and losers that creates conflict. There is the dispossession of territory of existing landholders.

The loss of European dreaming about a lost Arcadian view of a bucolic picturesque rural landscape and sites that have spiritual importance to those Europeans that inhabit those sites.

These sites have immense importance to those who have occupied these rural landscapes. Nostalgia is the primary process involved in the lost memories and stories of their lives.

Lost traditions, Lost memories, Lost landscape. Lost sacred sites. These people go through a grieving process that creates strong emotions of anger and frustration.

The new arrivals come with aspirations and hopes of a new beginning by taking possession of new territory. They have their own dreaming about the new urban landscape that they are about to create.

These processes and human reactions were experienced by the Indigenous people that were displaced in the late 18th and 19th century on the Cumberland Plain.

Settler colonialism creates a re-imaging of the landscape and the themes of hope and loss are embedded in the narrative and stories that are created in the re-imagined landscape.

There are winners and losers and they each have their own stories of hope and loss. The Cumberland Plain has been the stage that these actors played out their roles in this story.
**Appin and the urban frontier**

Appin is currently undergoing a type of new colonialism. A new process of invasion and succession by a new set of invaders.

These new arrivals are dispossessing the existing landholders and removing their sovereignty. The new arrivals are taking possession of the territory. Sydney’s urban expansion is taking place in the new suburbs and estates that are appearing in and around Appin.

There are parallels between the conflict on the urban frontier and the colonial frontier of the 19th century and the bicentenary of the 1816 Appin Massacre and the creation of a new landscape by the new urban settlers.

It is an interesting question to ask: Has this process heightened the sense of interest in the commemoration of the massacre in the popular imagination? There has been extensive coverage of the bicentenary of the massacre in the media – Channel 7, Daily Telegraph, SMH, ABC Radio and others.

Amongst current generations there is a strong a view and feeling about the site of the massacre at Broughton Pass.

Some claim that there is a bad spirit as you drive through the area. Local Aboriginal people will not go to the area. While others have commemorated the massacre at the Campbelltown Arts Centre, and in song writing.

The massacre has been an act of forgetting for nearly 200 years. Broughton Pass is a beautiful location with a dark past.

The question is: What has caught the popular imagination on the bicentenary of the massacre?

Broughton Pass is largely undisturbed woodland. As you approach from Appin you pass through farmland much as you would have in the 1810s and abruptly come upon the gorge. Just as the military would have confronted the local Aboriginal people 200 years ago. This is brought out the art exhibition at Campbelltown Art Centre 'With Secrecy and Despatch'.

What is the basis of the current interest?

Is it the possible acknowledgement of the past events and the violence of the colonial frontier on the Cumberland Plain?

There is a paradox in the act of remembering the massacre at Broughton Pass and the act of the forgetting and loss experienced in the resumption of rural farmland for housing.

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**On the edge, the making and re-making of place**

To sum up.

The Cowpastures and Cumberland Plain are sites where there has been the making and re-making of place.

Place is constructed on stories, memories, ceremonies, traditions, celebrations around the dominant narrative.

The Cowpastures is part of the southern Cumberland Plain where there have been waves of new ideas.

One of these new ideas could be a re-interpretation of the dominant narrative using the methodology of settler colonialism.

It could ask more questions?

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**Notes**


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**Read more**

Grace Karskins, Appin Massacre, Dictionary of Sydney [Click here]

Grace Karskins, The Colony, [Click here]

Ian Willis writes about localities on Sydney’s rural-urban fringe @ Dictionary of Sydney [Click here]
May 15, 2016 in Appin, Campbelltown, Colonial Camden, Governor Macquarie, Heritage, Local History, Settler colonialism, Sydney's rural-urban fringe. Tags: Camden aesthetics, country town idyll, cowpastures, Governor Macquarie, heritage, rural-urban fringe, sense of place, Settler Society, Sydney's fringe, Sydney's rural-urban fringe Edit

4 thoughts on “On the edge, settler colonialism on the Cumberland Plain”

Annemarie  June 2, 2016 at 2:10 pm Edit

Hi Ian, I enjoyed reading your reflections and the scope of your historical engagement. It made me think of Peter Read’s and his book ‘Belonging’. Perhaps you’ve come across it?

I’d love to hear more about what you raised at the end. Why the current upsurge in interest? And your own thoughts on what is being forgotten alongside it and what is at stake.

Reply

Annemarie  June 2, 2016 at 3:43 pm Edit

Annemarie

My interest was prompted initially by my book Pictorial History Camden & District (2015) and more recent explorations of the colonial period. I find the subjectivity of the early Europeans interesting and how they view their own presence on the frontier of the Cowpastures. The notion of the Cowpastures and it regional identity is an interesting concept to think about. What does it really mean? Why did it last well into the mid 19th century and spread well beyond the Government Reserve? How does the concept of the Cowpastures fit into the transnational story of the colonial frontier?

Reply

Annemarie  June 6, 2016 at 5:58 pm Edit

Mm… good questions! I also just read a post of yours from last year, which answers so many of my questions. The one on hope and loss… a great piece! I also loved the one on the Nepean river.

Reply
There is more at Academia.edu and a complete listing @ [https://ianwillis.wordpress.com/](https://ianwillis.wordpress.com/)

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