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History and heritage: change and adaptation

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History and heritage: change and adaptation

Abstract
Nestled at the base of the Illawarra Escarpment, in the shadow of Mount Keira and Bert Flugelman's winged monument to flight, the University of Wollongong central campus is constantly reminded of the power of nature and the unique sense of place which exists in this most picturesque part of Australia. Located at a geographical point of convergence between the mountains and the sea, nature is everywhere and obvious, despite the ever encroaching evidence of man and machine. As a seat of learning and focus for research and the implementation of new technologies in the 21st century, the University of Wollongong is ever mindful of the history and heritage of the region in which it operates and continues to flourish.

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VICE-CHANCELLOR’S FOREWORD

The University of Wollongong, renowned as a centre of excellence in research and education, as exemplified by our recent recognition as University of the Year, holds various collections of the material culture of the Illawarra region which document the historical and cultural memories of its people. "Illawarra Visions: Collections of the University of Wollongong" showcases selections of this material and exposes a range of unforgettable stories of the Illawarra. The University Collections cover a wide range and include those that are used everyday for the purpose of teaching, as well as archival collections that hold the material memory of the Illawarra community. Perhaps most significant is the art collection that must rank as one of the most substantial in the country. The exhibition also highlights the continuing partnership between the University and the Wollongong City Gallery.

The University of Wollongong is pleased to present "Illawarra Visions: Collections of the University of Wollongong" to the public and may it not only increase the region's awareness of the diverse roles of a contemporary university, but also reinforce the University's position as a key stakeholder in the continuing social, cultural and economical development of our region.

Professor Gerard Sutton
Vice Chancellor

WOLLONGONG CITY GALLERY
DIRECTOR’S FORWARD

By selecting examples from its comprehensive collections, and displaying them in a single venue, the University of Wollongong is inviting the people of the Illawarra to engage in a series of conversations, both between the individual and the community and between the community and its own pre-eminent seat of learning. Some conversations will arise through the viewer's private engagement with the objects on display, objects that tell stories about people, places and creative endeavour. Other conversations will focus on the nature of assembling a storehouse of cultural material, the meaning that we invest in objects and the way we harvest a return on these investments.

The University and the Gallery provide separate yet complementary core services to the community and both institutions value the social development roles that come with their respective territories. The social enterprise aspects of education and culture are becoming increasingly important in a world where material based systems dominate and where local values are fast becoming subsumed by global imperatives.

"Illawarra Visions: Collections of the University of Wollongong" is one of many projects that the Gallery has developed in partnership with the University over a quarter of a century, projects that require the energies and enthusiasm of employees and supporters of both institutions. The Gallery is grateful for the contribution the University of Wollongong has made to its public programs and, most particularly, to the Curator of the University Collection, Glenn Barkley, for his efforts in bringing this exhibition into the public arena.

Peter O'Neill
Director, Wollongong City Gallery
INTRODUCTION

This exhibition was originally conceived as a means of demonstrating to the community some of the breadth and depth of the University of Wollongong Art Collection, to show its importance regionally and nationally, and to make visible the fact that so many significant artists had produced work in the region. The fact that the exhibition has been broadened to encompass many other University Collections, scientific, historical, social and archival, is the brainchild of the curator Glenn Barkley. This collaborative approach gives an opportunity for all of us to see a much wider view of the Illawarra generally and allows all these collections to be seen, together with the Art Collection, as reflecting and servicing the University and the wider community.

University collections have traditionally, in Australia at least, been seen as adjuncts to research and teaching activities. They have often been compiled in an ad-hoc manner. We can be quite proud of the fact that at the University of Wollongong past and present archivists, curators and academics have assembled collections that are truly important on a national scale and in some cases holding material that is of international value. Often individual passions and collective need have shaped cohesive and dynamic groupings that are the envy of much larger collection based institutions. Parallel with this the University of Wollongong Art Collection has continued its policy of supporting young and emerging artists and other artists of the Illawarra region.

Since its inception in 1985, under the directorship of Dr John Eveleigh, the Art Collection of the University of Wollongong has been strongly supported by all levels of University administration and faculties, particularly the Vice-Chancellors Unit and Professor Sharon Bell and the staff of the Faculty of Creative Arts.

I congratulate Glenn Barkley for his vision and passion in mounting this exhibition and would like publicly to express my gratitude to both Professor Gerard Sutton, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wollongong, and to Peter O'Neill, Director of the Wollongong City Gallery, for their support. I would hope that this exhibition stands as testimony to the past, present and continuing relationships between the University and the Illawarra community.

Dr Guy Warren O.A.M.
Director, University of Wollongong
Art Collection
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History & Heritage: Change & Adaptation
Nestled at the base of the Illawarra Escarpment, in the shadow of Mount Keira and Bert Flugelman’s winged monument to flight, the University of Wollongong central campus is constantly reminded of the power of nature and the unique sense of place which exists in this most picturesque part of Australia. Located at a geographical point of convergence between the mountains and the sea, nature is everywhere and obvious, despite the ever encroaching evidence of man and machine. As a seat of learning and focus for research and the implementation of new technologies in the 21st century, the University of Wollongong is ever mindful of the history and heritage of the region in which it operates and continues to flourish.

Aboriginal Heritage
The precise date at which human-kind first set foot upon Illawarra’s golden sandy beaches or wandered amidst its lush sub-tropical rainforests is unknown. What is known, however, is the fact that Aboriginal people have inhabited the southern coastal region of New South Wales for at least 20,000 years. This knowledge arises from the oral testimony of descendents, and the abundant archeological and scientific evidence available in the form of extant middens, burial sites, and related artefacts. The period of 20,000 years may in fact extend out to beyond 60,000 years as more research is carried out.

Ancient rocks, stone tools, and artefacts collected from local coastal middens during the early 1940s feature in the current exhibition and are testament to the extended presence in the region of Aboriginal society. This society forms part of the oldest known surviving human culture – a culture which, we can assume, made substantial use of the region throughout the millennia. Illawarra offered a safe and sustainable environment in which Aboriginal society could grow and develop.

The area is geographically distinct - thin and snake-like, it is bordered to the west by bounteous forests and a lush, steep Escarpment which has physically isolated the region from the hinterland. Adjacent to this primeval forest is a once heavily-wooded coastal plain cut by fast flowing creeks and dotted with wetlands teeming with life. The oft placid waters of the Pacific Ocean lie along its eastern flank, providing a rich source of seafood and staple diet for the local people. A temperate climate caps off what must have been a veritable Garden of Eden - an environment which easily accommodated the development of a rich indigenous culture during the many thousands of years in which local Aboriginal people were the sole occupants.

In talking of the settlement of the Illawarra region we need to recognise the extensive period of time during which Aboriginal language, custom and lifestyle has been able to develop and adapt to the local environment. This unique and isolating geographical enclave was a deciding factor in the growth of that society. Its influence remains with us to this day, cutting coastal Illawarra off both physically and spiritually from the metropolis to the north and the ‘bush’ to the west.

Garden of Eden to Garden of New South Wales
The Garden of Eden analogy continued on following the so-called ‘discovery’ of Australian by Captain Cook in 1770, and the arrival of European settlers in large numbers after 1788. Over little more than a decade between 1815-25 the Illawarra region - or the Five Islands District as it was early known - became the ‘Garden of New South Wales’, and was proclaimed as such by the governor of the colony, Richard Bourke, in 1835. This label was freely given as a result of rich harvests from its soils, and the quality of a developing livestock industry.

With the arrival in large numbers of farmers, convicts, soldiers and free settlers during 1830s, the Illawarra Aborigines were quickly displaced from their lands and forced to dwell on the fringes of a new society – largely European, or more specifically British – which alone saw itself as ‘civilised’. By the time of the 1850s goldrushes the remnants of the original tribes were already cast to the bottom rung of the social scale, below even those bearing the dreaded ‘convict stain’. As fringedwellers they were now no longer masters of all they surveyed. Individuals and families were cast out, forced to make their way unsupported by this new community. Where they formerly walked unimpeded, sheep and cattle now grazed and fences were erected. The horse and plough further radically transformed the landscape.

In Wollongong during the 1830s and 1840s Aborigines stood by and watched as errant convicts were flogged at the police compound adjacent to the harbour, or were placed in the stocks at Market Square for a period of public ridicule and humiliation. Records of this barbaric treatment are contained in the Bench of Magistrates books, revealing the gory details of life under the lash.

The local tribes were also powerless to stop the wholesale destruction of the wildlife which had sustained them over the centuries, and which were now falling victim to hunting parties armed with guns and traps. The once proud forests and bush likewise suffered destruction from the iron-bladed axe which accompanied such unsustainable practices as ring-barking and clear-felling.
Previous page:
SAMUEL COCKS, 'Bombo Quarry - Kiama' c. 1890's, plate glass negative. Cocks Collection, Archives, University of Wollongong Library.

Right:
SAMUEL ELYARD, 'Lake Illawarra', c. 1890's. Ink and wash on paper. University of Wollongong Art Collection.
The arrival of Europeans during the first half of the nineteenth century brought disease, death and dislocation to local Aboriginal society. This period also saw the first scientific recordings by those precious few interested visitors and settlers who cared to place some value upon indigenous society and culture.

A picturesque region such as the Illawarra naturally attracted travelling artists. Augustus Earle (1827), Conrad Martens (1835), John Skinner Prout (1843-4) and Eugene von Guerard (1859) all took sketches of the area during flying visits, and later worked them up in studios as watercolours or oils for sale. With the arrival of photography from the 1850s a new means of visual recording and expression was available to those who saw fit to visit the region or make it their home. In these early works nature was pre-eminent, whilst human figures were inserted as mere picturesque detail or to give scale to a work. With time the built environment began to feature more prominently.

John Skinner Prout’s picturesque views of the Illawarra Escarpment - Gully and Wollongong and Mount Keira – are based upon rough pencil sketches taken during a visit to the district with his young family in the summer of 1843-4. These ‘holiday snaps’ by a professional watercolourist show nature in all her splendour, as also do the watercolours by Samuel Elyard - Illawarra Lake and Woodbrook Farm. Apart from recording aspects of the local landscape - the most popular of all motifs during the first half of the nineteenth century - these artists and journeymen photographers also served as chroniclers of the effects of dislocation and assimilation on the Aboriginal population. We know very little of the day-to-day lifestyle and ceremony of these people throughout their long period of residence in the district. Our only direct source is oral tradition and scant physical remnants. Despite this, we can also glean a great deal of information from the records of the early settlers and travellers to the district. Their diaries, letters, newspaper reports, and pictorial representations are both ethnologically and culturally significant.

The present exhibition contains a smattering of such records. They include the highly detailed, black and white photographs of Samuel Cocks dating from the 1890s. Those on display feature the Aboriginal people of the Kiama region engaging in a corroboree spectacle, perhaps for the amusement of Europeans and visitors to the region. This so-called novelty event was, up until the arrival of Europeans earlier in the century, an integral part of Aboriginal ceremony and tradition.

The American Alfred T. Agate’s engraved view of a Corroboree observed at Wollongong during 1839-40 gives us a glimpse of the mystery and intense ritual evident in this ancient ceremony. The deep scarring and ephemeral body markings of the dancers signifies not only their unique part in Australian Aboriginal society - every clan had its own distinct design - but also adds to the narrative then being presented. This print is an important record of one of the last such corroborees to be held in this part of the Illawarra. From another source we are told that the story being presented on the night through song and dance was nothing less than a re-enactment of the European invasion of 1788. A visiting parson recorded the following in his diary with regards to its significance:

"On inquiry I find the burden of the song to be: “that the white man came to Sydney in ships and landed
the horses in the saltwater." It is of such ridiculous subjects that the Blacks of New Holland make their songs - and any trifling event is celebrated by a song." (Rev. W.B. Clarke, 5 January 1840)

This comment from a learned gentleman makes obvious the wide gulf then existing between black and white (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) societies.

Garden Green to Steely Grey - the Plumes of Progress

The transformation of central Illawarra and Wollongong from idyllic Garden of Eden and pastoral Garden of New South Wales to the highly polluting industrial centre of the twentieth century occurred rapidly, and inevitably, as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Early attempts at industrialisation were hesitant and largely unsuccessful. A good example is the Jamberoo steam mill erected during the late 1830s and featured in Captain R.M. Westmacott's 1848 print Valley of Jamberoo. In such an idyllic setting as Jamberoo Valley, nature fought back against such intrusions and eventually won out, starving the machines of their lifeblood of water and wood. By the time Westmacott's print was issued the mill was no longer operational. However, in the northern part of Illawarra, nature struggled and lost, beaten by the abundant presence of one of her own riches - Coal.

Referred to locally as 'Black Diamonds', coal was present in large amounts within the sandy sedimentary rocks of the Illawarra Escarpment. Outcrops extended ribbon-like from Helensburgh in the north to Macquarie Pass in the south. The quality and ease of access of this precious mineral was responsible for the great change which occurred in the district after the first coal was shipped to Wollongong harbour in 1849. Slow to develop as an industry, the local coal mines burrowed away in the flanks of the mountain and eventually supported a new population of labourers and mechanics. The farmers suffered the fate of the Aborigines before them, and were quickly displaced to the fringes of a new industrial and urban society. With industry came the development of cliff-side mining villages and the township of Wollongong, growing around its small harbour. That great indicator of progress - curbing and guttering - was introduced during the 1850s, and this once small village was transformed into a regional centre of commerce and industry.

To the west smoking heaps of coal rose amidst tranquil rural scenes of cows and rich green pastures studded with tall, thin cabbage palms. This cosy arrangement lasted only until 1897, when a lead smelting complex was constructed on the shores of Lake Illawarra and other heavy industries began looking to the region. The coal mining disasters of 1881 (Bulli) and 1902 (Mount Kembla) added a bittersweet taste to the bounteous fruits of industrialisation, and brought home the darker side of this transformation from pastoral to urban. The opening up of the Port Kembla steel works in 1928 continued this process of relegating nature to a role subservient to man and machine.

The industrialisation of the 'Garden' continued unabated through to the 1980s. At this point a steel industry downturn had severe repercussions on local employment, and the University of Wollongong began to play a greater role within the local economy. Local coal mines closed and Sydney's urban sprawl continued its tenacious extension south, aided by rail electrification. The once impenetrable parapets of the Escarpment no longer protected Illawarra from the milling hordes of progress. During these 20,000 + 200 years of occupation, the image of Illawarra has changed, just as the physical landscape has been transformed. What we now see on the surface, between the mountains and the sea, are brown tile roofs and black tarmac, amidst a sprinkling of green. This surface is largely jagged and unnatural, hard and foreign. The towering, emerald green Escarpment and a golden, sandy beach zone remain on the flanks, however the prominence of nature has diminished. Closer observation of both these edifices reveals sickness and disease - pollution of the oceans and encroachment of residential development within the Escarpment. This process of change and evolving history is sometimes reflected in art, science, literature and letters. The current exhibition presents a mere scattering of these artifacts of record. Hopefully an impression will form from their viewing and reveal, in part, those unique qualities which characterise and distinguish this part of Australia known as the Illawarra.

References


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Michael Organ, BSc. University Archivist, University of Wollongong.