RESPONSE TO A LANDSCAPE: A *VERY* BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

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The Aboriginal People

In 1819 members of a French scientific expedition visiting Sydney crossed the Blue Mountains on their way to Bathurst. At Springwood, near the military depot where they spent the night, they came upon two "of the wretched inhabitants of those lofty regions … one was a sick old man, lying on kangaroo skins, near a fire, and receiving the attentions of a younger man." Their guide, none other than the explorer William Lawson, recognized the old man as *Karadra*, a 'king' or 'chief' of that region. The portrait the expedition's artist Alphonse Pellion drew, perhaps the earliest depiction of Blue Mountains Aborigines, bears witness to the swift decline of the region's original inhabitants in the face of European settlement.

The abundant water, plant and animal life made the Blue Mountains an eminently suitable environment for a hunter-gatherer society. The archaeological evidence shows that, as climatic conditions allowed, there were periods of both seasonal and permanent occupation of the Mountains in the distant past. Kings Tableland was occupied over 20,000 years ago and sites at Leura (Lyrebird Dell) and Blackheath (Walls Cave) provide evidence of human activity as far back as (and almost certainly in excess of) 12,000 years BP when conditions were far more arid and caves, now too damp for habitation, offered perfect shelter in close proximity to water.

In the lower Blue Mountains Aboriginal occupation was most likely continuous until European contact and along the Nepean River excavations have suggested that the human presence there may be over 40,000 years old.

There were two Aboriginal tribal groups – the Dharug and the Gundungurra – that occupied the geographic area we know today as the Blue Mountains. Though opinion regarding boundaries differs, it is generally considered that the Gundungurra inhabited the valleys and gorges of the south-west and upper Blue Mountains while the Dharug lived to the east in the lower Mountains and on the plains.

Land and animals had a spiritual as much as a utilitarian significance to the Aboriginal people whose long presence affirmed their place in the scheme of things. Rock art and engraving, wells and tool making sites abound in the Mountains and for an Australian of British or European descent, surrounded by the sounds and smells of the bush, to stumble upon a cave or rock overhang decorated with paintings or delicate hand stencils there is a powerful feeling of being at the heart of a great mystery.

An Aboriginal cave painting or rock engraving and an initial carved in a tree by a European explorer express very different outlooks. Their meeting, depicted in the sadness and loss of Pellion’s drawing, was not benign.

Exploration

When Governor Arthur Phillip rowed up the Hawkesbury, in June 1789, to the point where the Grose River completes its tumultuous journey from the heart of the Blue Mountains, he faced the truth of those ‘hills’ that from the east showed so softly blue on the horizon. The roar of the mountain stream was deafening and the abundant flood-wrack that littered the river flats testified to its power. But his gaze was uncomprehending and he did not doubt that the mysteries of the interior would soon be made clear.

With their misleadingly tame official names – Carmarthen, Richmond and Lansdowne – these ‘blue mountains’ (as they came to be colloquially known) would, however, define the limits of the colony’s westward expansion for more than two decades. This “rude peculiar world”, as the poet Charles Harpur described it, would frustrate, confound and defeat numerous attempts to find a passage through its unfamiliar terrain.

The young adventurer George Bass and his two companions (1796), with their scaling irons and ropes “escaladed horrible perpendicular mountains”, exhausted their provisions and “the barren mountains affording them no means of supply they were reduced to a state of the most devouring thirst”. Francis Barrallier (1802), also, was forced to turn back by “waterfalls and frightful precipices”, the boots of his men “all torn and our feet full of wounds”, while George Caley (1804) could only liken his own journey to “traveling over the tops of houses in a town”.

The principal expeditions and the names of those who lead them are generally well known and the details of their journeys have been chronicled and argued over at some length. However, when reflecting upon the saga of Blue Mountains exploration we mustn’t become blinded by ‘failure’. A practical passage through to the west might not have been discovered but, though a fundamental motivation, other interests and intentions were also evident and should not be overlooked when judging the success or failure of particular expeditions.

Consider, for example, the towering unseen presence of Sir Joseph Banks and his passionate desire to expand knowledge of the colony’s flora and fauna. William Paterson, who hauled his whaleboat up the Grose in 1793, was an enthusiastic botanist and a correspondent of Banks, while George Caley was one of Bank’s botanical collectors. Both brought back valuable descriptions and samples of new plants from their excursions. Following the expedition of renegade ex-convict John Wilson in 1798, Governor Hunter sent to Banks reports of the first lyrebird specimen to be collected and the first written accounts of the wombat and koala.

Nevertheless, for officialdom it was not until, driven by economic necessity, three gentlemen farmers took to the central ridge in 1813 that the crucial breakthrough was made in finding a practical route through the Blue Mountains.

William Lawson, reflecting upon the ‘new’ country they were passing through, wrote in his journal on Monday, 31st May 1813 that in his opinion there should be “no difficulty in making a road to it”.

The Road

The practicality of the route followed by the Blaxland, Wentworth & Lawson was confirmed by surveyor George Evans and, by the end of July 1814, the former Chief Magistrate at Windsor, William Cox, was on the Mountains with a gang of convicts and under instructions from Governor Macquarie to build a road “at least 12 feet wide, so as to permit two carts and other wheeled carriages to pass each other with ease”. Using only very basic methods and tools, a road was completed as far as the site of Bathurst by mid-January 1815, a remarkable achievement despite the very primitive results.

Before winter set in, Macquarie christened the new road with ceremony and ‘regal show’. Accompanied by his wife and a large entourage, he traveled over the mountains to see for himself the country that had been opened up and to proclaim the site of Bathurst. But he wasn’t about to allow a free-for-all rush. Movement to the west was closely regulated by a pass system enforced by military depots stationed along the road. Though gradually eased, government control over travel remained until the late 1820s.

For over fifty years the road was the conduit between the coastal settlement and the pasture lands of the west. It wound a precarious route along the top of a high ridge with deep, unexplored valleys on either side. While thousands traveled over the Mountains during this period, few chose to live here and the minimal settlement that took place was all in close association with the road. Inns, military depots & convict stockades, tollhouses, camps and mounted police stations grew barnacle-like along its edges while settlers, gold seekers, bullock and horse team drivers and all the restless, moving flotsam and jetsam of a growing colony drifted past.

Surveyors plotted and measured improvements in line and travelers often pioneered their own small alternatives. The eastern and western escarpments, particularly, saw numerous changes though once Major Thomas Mitchell assumed the office of Surveyor-General in 1828 the improvements he instituted in his desire to establish the lines of all the colony’s great roads tended to be of a more permanent nature.

Such improvements in direction, however, did not guarantee the condition of the road and the consequences of this for public safety and comfort. Over the years the material condition of the road was subject to the vagaries of weather, heavy use and irregular maintenance.

A writer in *The Bathurst Free Press & Mining Journal* of Saturday, 11th April 1857, described the road to the Western goldfields in the following terms: “The road itself is a succession of ponds and bogs over which a Galway steeplechaser would only wish to go once; and over which her Majesty’s mails are by the greatest of modern miracles carried daily”.

Convict transportation ended in 1840, drying up the supply of cheap labour, while the gold rushes that began in the early 1850s not only increased the road’s usage but diverted an available workforce. Despite these factors the government cannot be absolved of responsibility. When he resigned his position of Commissioner of Roads in 1860, a frustrated Captain Benjamin Martindale lamented that the funds available to him had permitted “only very partial improvements upon the mountain road”.

Traveling to Bathurst by whatever means – saddle horse, coach, bullock or horse dray, wagon or cart or by foot – was not a pleasant experience. Numerous contemporary travel accounts testify to the discomfort and danger.

On 16th November 1865 a young man named George Gamble, with a team of six horses, was taking a load of two and a half tons of gunpowder across the Blue Mountains. That evening he camped about a mile to the west of The Weatherboard Inn. At 7 pm, reported *The Sydney Morning Herald*, "the gunpowder exploded, producing a tremendous report, which was stated to have been heard at Penrith, a distance of twenty-seven miles. The unfortunate driver, Gamble, was killed on the spot, and his remains were shortly afterwards discovered in a frightfully mutilated condition. A young man named Kegan who was driving another team, was also seriously injured. Three of the horses were killed, and one had two of its legs blown away; and scarcely a vestige of the dray was to be seen. The coach from Bathurst came up to the spot shortly after the disaster occurred. At that time several of the telegraph posts were on fire, the trees were blazing in all directions, these having been thrown a distance of four or five hundred yards."

Young Gamble had been taking his deadly cargo to William Watkins, the contractor preparing the earthworks and permanent way for the new western railway line in the vicinity of Hartley Vale and Clarence.

The Railway, Settlement and Tourism

A rail line from Sydney to Parramatta was opened in 1855. Soon after, survey work to extend the line further west began and serious thought was given to taking it across the Blue Mountains. Though the line was opened to Penrith by 1862, the railway did not cross the Nepean River for another five years. Debate over both the route that should be followed and the type of railway to be operated held things up and squandered both time and money.

Almost three years (1858-60) were wasted in a misguided and costly attempt to survey a route to the west through the Grose Valley before the decision was made to follow the road route across the ridge. Further energy was expended on an argument between the colony's Governor (Sir William Denison) and Engineer-in-Chief of the Railways (John Whitton) over the respective merits of a light horse tramway as opposed to a steam powered rail system.

Though Whitton and steam finally won the day, the budget he was allocated imposed severe restrictions. Tunnels had to be eliminated, maximum grades increased, tighter curves included and rail-side buildings reduced to a minimum. Whitton's imaginative and technical powers were taxed to the limit. Instead of tunnels he decided to employ a system of zig zags to raise and lower trains over the mountain terrain. Though he had no personal experience of this, he knew it had been successfully employed in both the USA and India.

Work began on the Lapstone Zig Zag in 1863 and by 1865 its seven-arch viaduct over Knapsack Creek was being hailed as a landmark in Australian engineering. "The finest piece of masonry in New South Wales", declared *The Empire*, while *The Illawarra Mercury* described its pale, slender, tapering piers as "exceedingly light and airy … a picture in stone".

By the middle of 1867 the line was completed as far as The Weatherboard (Wentworth Falls), where west-bound passengers transferred to coaches. A year later the terminus had moved to Mt. Victoria and work continued to take the line down the western escarpment. Here the 'Great Zig Zag' with its three viaducts eclipsed in size and spectacle its smaller sibling in the east. Over 700 men were employed on this section, working under dangerous and exposed conditions. The line opened to Bowenfels in October 1869.

The new railway encouraged a reassessment of attitudes to the Blue Mountains. In February 1868, not long after the line had reached The Weatherboard, a select party of ladies and gentlemen were invited to join HRH Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh, (the first royal visitor to Australia) on a rail excursion day-trip to the Blue Mountains to view the famous Weatherboard Falls.

The event was reported in the *Illustrated London News* (2nd May 1868): "A luncheon … was served in a large marquee, erected at a distance of about a mile from the station, at 2 o'clock, and after doing justice to the viands and wines the Prince and party visited the Falls. Owing to the late rains there was an unusually large quantity of water tumbling over. It is stated his Royal Highness expressed his admiration of the Falls and surrounding scenery."

The Prince's visit did much to popularize the Blue Mountains among Sydney's social elite. Still mysterious and at times forbidding, a more positive appreciation of its physical characteristics as worthy of contemplation and as a source of inspiration, health and recreation was beginning to evolve. This was further encouraged in the 1870s by civil servant and patron of the arts Eccleston Du Faur (1832-1915) whose enthusiastic promotion of the region as a creative and recreational space became known as ‘Du Faur’s Blue Mountains craze’. The artists’ camps he established in the Grose Valley attracted both painters and photographers, most notably the Tasmanian artist William Piguenit and the panoramic photographer Joseph Bischoff.

The railway reduced the remoteness of the Mountains from Sydney and led within a very few years to the establishment of towns and villages. It also led to the exploitation of the region for coal and shale and while this was important for a while, except on the western fringes of the divide it proved of relatively short-term significance. The future gifted to the Blue Mountains by the reliability and speed of the railway was to be bound up primarily with recreation and especially with its commercial incarnation, tourism.

At first it was the wealthy and privileged who arrived by train to relax in their gracious country homes and hotels, contemplating the sublime from the edge of beetling cliffs or walking in fern-filled gullies, exchanging the heat and dirt of Sydney’s summers for the cooler, more tranquil environment of the Mountains. With the dawn of the 20th century, under the influence of wider economic and social changes, ‘the tourist’ evolved into the middle-class holiday maker and honeymooner of the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. This ‘new’ tourist toured the ‘sights’ in their charabancs, went roller skating or to the new moving pictures or, during the Great Depression, participated in bushwalking and the birth of the modern conservation movement. After World War II came the day-trippers in their new Holdens, gazing from the platform at Echo Point or plummeting to the floor of the Jamison Valley on the ‘Scenic Railway’, and more recently the bus loads of overseas tourists and the weekend urban runaways chilling out in small boutique guesthouses.

But it has not only been the pleasure-seeking tourist who has been attracted to the region. Ever since the first train fought its way up the fierce grades in 1867 the Blue Mountains has drawn a great variety of people into its ambit. Artists and writers, eccentrics and ‘lost souls’, TB sufferers, convalescents and other health seekers, conservationists, commuting businessmen and aged pensioners have all rubbed shoulders as they’ve sought their own particular Blue Mountains experience. And for most of these the natural environment, the beautiful scenery and clean air, has been the principal element in that experience.

From the very beginning, history here has been essentially an account of human response to landscape. Indeed, the ‘historical’ environment cannot really be separated from the ‘natural’ environment. With settlement and development, the delicate nature of this relationship became clear quite early. In 1880 petitioners to the government, concerned about a future of increasing population, argued for a reserve at Katoomba Falls to be urgently and “zealously preserved for the people”. Early tourist guides and postcards extolled the beauty of the Blue Mountains waterfalls. By 1916, however, considerable attention was being paid in the local press to the pollution of the waterfalls at Katoomba and Leura by the local gas company. In 1926 the papers were raging against “the ruthless operations of timber-getters” who were “destroying our hardwoods”, while timber was again the issue in 1932 when the Blue Gum Forest Campaign saved one of the most beautiful areas of the Grose Valley and launched the modern conservation movement.

To journey with awareness through the historical landscape of the Blue Mountains, its roadside inns, diminutive toll houses and railway gatehouses, its palatial tourist hotels, country residences and finely crafted lookouts and bush paths, is to discover their eloquent witness to our community's roots. A community's grasp of its history may well begin with what the art historian Bernard Smith described as "an awakened respect for the fabric of old buildings". And "fabric", I would argue, includes all their associated human stories and social history. It speaks of connection to place, linking 'now' with 'then' and encouraging, to quote Smith again, "an ability to see the past as one of the qualities of presently existing things." *

I have called this talk "Response to a Landscape" because the natural environment of the Blue Mountains is a central character in its history. In a place like the Mountains both the 'natural' and the 'historical' landscapes invariably intersect, forming a wider 'cultural' environment. The valuing and preservation of both can, indeed, be seen as part of the one heritage ideal and, dependent as the region is on tourism, this is more than just an issue of biological or historical concern. For, without its dramatic, inspiring landscape and the rich historical record of human presence here, the economic future too may well be a bleak one. The mystery of those ancient hand stencils on cave walls, expressing as they do another idea of man's place within the wider scheme of things, may well warrant renewed and serious reflection.

* These quotations come from: SMITH, Bernard. 'On Preserving the Australian Suburb', in M. Davis & G. Seddon (eds.) *Man and Landscape in Australia: Towards an Ecological Vision,* Canberra: AGPS, 1976, P.295.

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Brief Resume:

John Low has been a teacher and librarian for over 35 years and has been the Local Studies Librarian at the Blue Mountains City Library since 1982. He will be retiring in July this year.