

CELEBRATION OF THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE JOHN OXLEY EXPEDITION, AND EXPLORATION OF THE CAMDEN HAVEN IN OCTOBER 1818.

HARRY CREAMER – JOHN OXLEY 200 YEARS – LOOKING FORWARD AND LOOKING BACK

Harry Creamer is a retired NSW public servant living in Port Macquarie. In the 1970s and 1980s he was the anthropologist with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, recording Aboriginal sites across NSW. He has been a councillor on Armidale City, a member of the UNE Council and deputy chair of Tourism Armidale. He moved to the mid north coast in 2003 as part of his job and enjoys the quality of life and mild climate. In retirement, he works to secure a safe climate and more clean energy, but is also involved in a range of community and social pursuits.

I am delighted to be here, at the invitation of Diane Westerhuis and the Society. I hold historical societies in high regard, populated as they are in my experience, by fine people, intrigued by what history tells us. I am certainly hoping that the intellectual curiosity that drives members of your society also leads you to asking how the past may inform the present and how we can do better than we are currently doing in Australia, two hundred years after Oxley.

Having received the invitation, I had to find a topic, a story to tell. There seemed to be two possibilities. As the first anthropologist to work with the NPWS, from 1973 to 1987, and having researched Aboriginal sites of significance all across NSW, including this region, I would potentially be in a position to talk about Aboriginal heritage. I could, but it would be brief, for the sad truth is we know relatively little about our local Aboriginal culture. For example, was there ever a Pemulway or a Jandamarra resistance fighter in this area? Anyway I'm not a Koori and I'm no longer an expert. I once wrote an acknowledgement of country for this region which said:

The original custodians of this land were the Birpai people who lived here for thousands of years. When Port Macquarie was settled by the British in 1821, there were an estimated 6000 Birpai people here. Many died defending their country and from new diseases. Others were forced onto missions and reserves. The Birpai word *Coola*, is almost certainly the origin of the word koala.

(In parenthesis, this quintessentially Australian species is now in as much danger as the Birpai were two hundred years ago. Whether it will survive as the government-mandated destruction of its forest and woodland homes proceeds unabated is not clear, but we should be raising the alarm if we want to keep this iconic species living in our region).

Which leaves John Oxley. On this man of history I know little, certainly no more than his diaries tell us, and no more than many of you who have read those diaries know. Before moving to my central theme however, I do have two favourite quotes from Oxley, which I've known since my work on the Northern Tablelands interpreting the magnificent gorge country, and then having moved here in 2003, from my interest in the Hastings Valley. The first is Oxley's reaction to seeing Apsley Falls, 20 km east of Walcha, clearly then in full flood:

We had seen many fine and magnificent falls, each of which had excited our admiration in no small degree, but the present one so far surpassed anything we had previously conceived even to be possible that we were lost in astonishment at the sight of this wonderful natural sublimity, which perhaps is scarcely to be exceeded in any part of the eastern world.

Just over a week later came a pivotal moment in the expedition, when Oxley and Evans first see the Pacific Ocean from atop Mount Seaview:

We proceeded to ascend the mountain, (which)... in many places (was) extremely difficult and abrupt. Bilboa's ecstasy at the first sight of the South Sea could not have been greater than ours, when on gaining the summit of this mountain, we beheld Old Ocean at our feet. It inspired us with new life, every difficulty vanished, and in imagination we were already at home.

Why do we so enjoy reading journals like Oxley's? I suggest that our pleasure derives in part from our imagination of a pristine world before it was corrupted and much of it destroyed, or at least changed, by that same western civilisation explorers like Oxley brought to the new colony and to which, in truth, we owe our own current existence. Imagining the wilderness scenery, Aboriginal people still free to roam, clear air, clean water, the majestic forests of the Great Dividing Range and the lush brush of the coastal plain, brought to life by the famous quote from botanist surveyor Clement Hodgkinson in 1845:

Trees of almost endless variety, and very large dimensions... a rich umbrageous foliage of bright shining green. The luxuriant and vigorous character of the brush...in the northern part of the territory of New South Wales, cannot be surpassed in any tropical region.

But the past is a foreign country and I must move on. So I came to thinking, what if I pose a riff on the religious-philosophical question we sometimes hear, and one I've heard recently now we have a Pentecostal Prime Minister, 'What would Jesus do?' This time the question is, 'What would Oxley do?', or rather, 'What would Oxley make of what we are now, in Australia in 2018, if by some trick of time travel, he were to return today?' In posing this question, I'm not assuming any great intellectual or spiritual powers for the man, and I admit, this is intended as a segue, so I can do justice to the title of my talk – *'Looking forward and back - two hundred years since Oxley'*.

Acknowledging both the good and the bad about Australia over the past 200 years, not all of which comes down to a subjective judgement, I am drawn to Donald Horne and his era-defining book *The Lucky Country*, first published in 1964. His insightfulness then, could with ease be applied today, leaving us to ask, what has changed?:

Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second-rate people... small nations usually have histories to sustain them or futures to enlighten them. Australia seems to have lost both its sense of a past and its sense of a future. (Australians') misfortune (is) that their affairs are controlled by second-rate men who cannot understand the practicality of change. It is not the people who are stupid but their masters, who cling to power but fail to lead.

Fifty-four years later (8/9/18) Peter Hartcher, political editor at the Sydney Morning Herald, writes of something very similar, proving the Australian political problem has not gone away in half a century. Lamenting the lack of stable leadership highlighted by the recent Liberal party crisis, the low level of female representation in the Liberal party, and stagnation on urgent issues such as the high cost of housing, high levels of debt, as well as the complete lack of a credible climate and energy policy (particularly their obsession with coal), he describes it as a 'consistent paradox of modern Australia' and poses the question:

How can Australia be one of the economic marvels of the world, yet its politics be so pathetically pointless? The longer it rolls on, the more inevitable the long (economic) boom seems. Liberated from electoral responsibility for the economy, the political class seems to feel liberated to indulge itself in the pettiest of personal and factional bickering. It's reminiscent of an episode of *Downton Abbey*' (and he describes Australia now as Down Under Abbey).

Historians interested in these matters point to Australia's hey-day at around the turn of last century. By the standards of the late nineteenth century, just two or three generations after Oxley, Australia was one of the world's most progressive societies. Our labour laws were seen as a world leader with paid holidays, paid sick leave and the eight-hour day. South Australia led the way with votes for women (thirty-six years before Great Britain, then our 'mother' country). Also a State bank, factory inspections, land taxes, progressive income tax and death duties. NSW brought in an age pension in 1901. Social scientists from other countries came here and to New Zealand to write books about our two beacons of progress.

Much has changed, and is now changing fast, but there are few major achievements we could point to since then to rival this high point in our history. And when politicians claim that our best days are ahead of us, I am not convinced. Maybe that makes me an historian! Factors working against this claim include the consequences of selfish and extreme neo-liberalism – a massive shift in power and wealth to big business, multi-national corporations and wealthy individuals; rising inequality; down-grading of a range of social and community services in the name of 'small government' and to pay for tax cuts to the rich; the rise of social media creating silos of sameness unwilling to see reason or face facts; more than 200 acts of parliament passed at federal and state level since the attack on NY in 2001, aimed at increasing surveillance and tightening the powers of the state; and the inevitable momentum, the ever-tightening grip, of climate change as we burn more and more fossil fuels and destroy more and more forests and woodlands. Prepare for hotter summers, more extreme heatwaves, longer and wilder bush fires, and more high intensity rainfall events leading to flooding and property damage.

However, we do still have one of the best national park systems in the world, at least in actual parks and reserves if not in budget and staff, down-graded as the Service now is in NSW by the Coalition government. Which is sad and ironic because it was the Askin Liberal government and Minister for Lands Tom Lewis, who created the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service in 1967. This brings me back to our region. Parks like Crowdy Bay, Limeburners Creek,

Werrikimbe, Barrington Tops and Washpool would not have existed without a professional public service able to go out and investigate these magnificent areas free from political interference, and a government willing to listen to reason and science, and act in the best interests of our collective commons, not just for sectoral interests, shock jocks and party donors.

It also took a strong campaign from environment activists, and conservation NGOs like the NPA and the ACF, to save our superb coastlines from further sand mining, and to save the truly magnificent rainforests to our west and north from more logging. It was the Wran Labor government which protected both these NSW gems - the coasts in the 1970s and the rainforests in 1983, now World Heritage areas, for us and our children, to use, treasure and enjoy for years to come.

Here in the Camden Haven, there is a lesser-known story of environment campaigns by far-sighted individuals and groups to save what is undeniably a very special part of the NSW coast. A more recent history that deserves as much attention as the colonial period, and people who deserve as much praise as those early pioneers. Some are still alive, others have died. I mention in no particular order – Alan and Sandra MacIntyre, Henry Williams, Harry and Jill Yates, Peter Sorensen, Trevor Corliss, Hugh Vaness, Norma and Ted Selton, Isabel Lee, Janet Cohen and Glenn Brewer, Frank Dennis, Susie Russell, Joan Staples, Jenny Kaberry, Alvena Ferguson, Glen O’Dea, and Sue Baker. And before them, Kylie Tennant who, writing in the 1940s, led us to appreciate the beauty of Diamond Head.

These and others belonged to organisations like the Dunbogan Advancement League, the Camden Haven Protection Society, and Save the Headland Action Group (commonly called the SHAGs).

In the time I have left, I’d like to tell you how close we came to losing what we treasure here in the Camden Haven, much of which still looks like it did when Oxley passed through. Camden Head, named by Oxley, with its spectacular Perpendicular Point, was saved from a sprawling sub-division proposed by the Department of Lands around 1980 which would have seen the Flower Bowl and the superb views blighted by housing. Opposed by the SHAGs and their supporters, the proposal was eventually defeated and this led to the dedication of Kattang Nature Reserve, one of the most popular parks and walking tracks in the area. A similar housing proposal for Diamond Head in Crowdy Bay National Park, created after the decision to end sand mining in the 1970s, was similarly defeated.

An even more alarming proposal would have threatened the lakes, lagoons and estuaries that make this place so special. At the time, this was to be the largest and most destructive canal housing development in NSW, Gold Coast style. Again it was local opposition that averted the disaster at the eleventh hour, first as the Dunbogan Advancement League, then, after a public meeting at Dunbogan Hall when 200 people turned out to voice their concerns, the Camden Haven Protection Society. At its peak, membership was over 500. After three state commissions of enquiry the proposal was over-ruled and this led to a ban on all canal sub-divisions in NSW by the Carr Labor government in the mid-1990s. We were spared the huge ugliness and self-interest before the environment that these developments represent.

Another madcap proposal (or was it an April Fools joke?), was to construct a cable car to the summit of North Brother Mountain with a restaurant and revolving searchlight beaming out rays of progress for all to see. Fortunately this plan too, never became a reality. A faint echo here of news this week, and the use of the World Heritage listed Opera House sails on which to beam laser-light promotion for a Sydney horse race at the urging of a Sydney shock jock, who bullied and threatened the female CEO with her job unless she gave in. In the end it was the Premier, another woman in power, who should have defended her gender against male bullying, who gave in, with the prime minister calling the Opera House sails the 'biggest billboard in Sydney'. The words *bogan*, and *Philistine* come to mind (*). *Plus ca change* - Oxley would have well understood the gambling and the alcohol!

(If there is a silver lining in this sorry episode it is to demonstrate the strength of opposition that a future Coalition government would encounter if it attempted to sell off the ABC. Know this for a fact, it is now official Liberal Party policy to privatise the ABC. It is our duty to make sure they never get the chance).

I'm sounding like a political commentator and that's a long way removed from a colonial historian but not so distant from the environmental historian I am, politics and the environment being so closely entwined. Back to my narrative of how the Camden Haven was saved. Delving into this other, more recent pioneering history, reveals how close we came to becoming another Gold Coast in all its concrete high-rise, wall-to-wall over-developed, in-your-face, 24 hour cycle of boosterism by day and night clubbing by night.

Back in the 1970s the development industry, with their eyes on profits before people, put up a plan for a four-lane highway to run along the coast from Crescent Head, crossing the Hastings River by concrete bridge at Settlement Point, all the way south through Lake Cathie and Bonny Hills to Laurieton and on to Harrington. Complete with a Club Med, high rise apartments, more canal developments, tourist facilities for Japanese package tours, and endless housing sub-divisions as far as the eye could see, that would make millionaires of a few at the expense of the many. Fortunately, local opposition and a sensible government response, put an end to these developers' dreams.

Other campaigns included putting a halt to sand mining which would have flattened Christmas Bell plains, a prison proposed for Kew, an industrial area next to Lakewood Village, North Haven transformed into suburban high density, a regional landfill facility in nearby Cowarra SF, an expansion of quarrying on North Brother Mountain, and in 2008, a proposal for a giant diesel peaking generator at Herons Creek. Diesel is second only to coal in its toxic pollution properties. No doubt some developers and others who unquestioningly accept the dominant narrative that what is good for business is good for communities, would still love to see this version of paradise, but to most of us it would mean paradise lost.

In the current era, we are fighting for a halt to the clear-fell logging which is trashing our state forests west of the highway and for a real koala protection plan, not a fake one. (If you want to see what I mean by clear-fell logging,

take a short trip west of here, through Kendall, onto the Swans Crossing Road, about another ten minutes turn right onto Cold Knob Road). Over-allocation of logging quotas in NSW state forests, and private native forestry, are leading to ever-more ingenious ways to make money out of cutting down trees, including burning entire trees to generate electricity, with three furnaces planned by the state government from Bulladelah to Grafton. To our west, land clearing that was greatly expanded in 2017 has already resulted in 5000 hectares of koala habitat being destroyed in the past year. Koalas don't stand a chance. To which we can add the relentless expansion of houses to meet the constant demand for growth. Growth always means environment destruction yet it doesn't have to do so much damage.

As I near the end of my talk, I return to the mix of sheer amazement and joy those early pioneers seemed to find in their discoveries of our natural home in NSW. We read that John Oxley was 'lost in astonishment at the sight of this wonderful natural sublimity, which perhaps is scarcely to be exceeded in any part of the eastern world'. Clement Hodgkinson wrote that the forests of north coast New South Wales, 'cannot be surpassed in any tropical region'. (Diane attributes this to Oxley's interest in the writings of Edmund Burke).

Following in this illustrious vein, Mayor Peta Pinson, writing in her weekly column recently, as mayors do, describes 'living the Port Macquarie-Hastings dream, in a safe, clean, pristine environment with a year-round temperate climate'. (I wouldn't be taking that one for granted). She says how lucky we are to live in such a beautiful area, how clean it is and how there seems to be a real sense of pride in looking after what we've got'. She goes on to raise the challenge of managing the massive growth across our region and asks us to think how we can do our bit to keep the Port Macquarie Hastings beautiful'.

As you can guess, I have a few suggestions, some of which I have already outlined. Regrettably, the old Hastings Municipal Council did not put sentiments like those of the current mayor into action. Now we must find ways to grow without destroying the environment, and we must be ever-vigilant on the proper protection for our living home, the natural environment. I think the present Port Macquarie Hastings Council is complacent about our environment west of the Pacific Highway, and ambivalent on the issue of population growth. We urgently need a growth strategy linked to a population policy for our region, to provide assurance that we will be able to hold onto what we value, as Noosa Shire has. In 1995, their council announced a population cap of 56,500 people. This figure is the expected population under the planning scheme if all available land is developed. Noosa Council performed the calculations and provided the results in strategic planning documents. Noosa was the first Council in Australia to do this. We should do the same.

In 1912, the Titanic set sail from Southampton on fire. That's it, literally on fire. The coal stored in giant holds several stories high next to boiler number 6 had caught fire even before departing from Belfast where the ship was constructed, and was still smouldering. A team of eleven men was assigned to put it out, by shovelling out the slowly burning coal, but they could not. The officers knew, and they told the crew to say nothing, so all the passengers were oblivious to the systemic structural problem happening below decks on the ship they were trusting to get them safely to New York.

By a cruel twist of fate, the iceberg struck at the exact same place on the front right outer hull made weaker by weeks of fire.

I tell this story because this moment in our shared British history, happening nearly 100 years after the Englishman John Oxley passed this way, is surely a metaphor for what is happening in our world today. We are passengers on a global Titanic being fed tendentious lines like, 'what's good for business is good for us all', 'private good / public bad', 'competition good / cooperation bad', free markets good / regulation bad (except for how the energy system operates, when if push comes to shove we will acquire your private coal power stations to keep them running well past their use-by dates)! We are being kept in the dark about a range of systemic and environment risks that extreme neo-liberalism poses and the only way left to make a democratic difference is to use our vote more wisely once every three or four years. Before we cast our vote though, we need to ask a simple question – which side am I on? Not just in the sham contest between two parties, but in the far wider and more consequential contest about what kind of Australia we want for the rest of our own lives, and the lives of our children and grand-children. The culture wars are on, and so are the environment wars. We must stand up and be counted, or lose our land and our way of life.

Australia is an enthusiastic *Me Too* partner in all this, when we could easily be a world leader in various ways. In Oxley's time, global warming was just starting. He used wind power and good old horse power. Today, we can use our number one natural advantage of abundant sunshine and wind to be the world's renewable energy superpower. We can insist on clear air and clean waters and oceans, put the protection of our national icons like the Great Barrier Reef and koalas as the highest priority, even before Indian billionaires and logging companies, and we can limit growth to what we have rationally determined within these priorities. We could even become a republic and have an Australian head of state. Now that would really surprise John Oxley!

ENDS

* A bogan is slang for a person whose speech, clothing, attitude and behaviour are considered unrefined or unsophisticated, and a Philistine is a person who is hostile or indifferent to culture and the arts.