

Ken Taylor

## Valuing the Ordinary— an Australian Perspective

*Barn at Lanyon,  
Canberra. Detail  
from photo, page  
48.*

Over the past 20 years or so there has been a remarkable shift in attitude by Australians to their history and linked with this the implications of a cultural heritage worth protecting and cherishing. Australians at large have discovered that we do have a history and national culture that promote a sense of identity and “Australianness.” This realization has been substantially a popular movement that has seen its outlet in an ever-growing enthusiasm for valuing things from the past.

A further notable aspect of the movement in Australia has been that the commonplace—the ordinary, everyday places of Australian history—have found a cherished position alongside the famous icons of national identity and great symbolic significance.<sup>1</sup> This recognition of the significance of the “history from below” approach and its heritage implications can be seen in conservation efforts as geographically far apart as Mugga Mugga Homestead, Canberra which dates from the 1830s, the Pioneer Women’s Hut Museum at Tumberumba in rural New South Wales, or the conservation plan for a brick factory at Maylands in Perth, Western Australia where the Hoffmann kiln is historically and technically an important artifact. Further, these places recognize the part played by ordinary people in history making and social history. Visiting such places promotes a feeling of participation: you could have been involved.

In this short article, heritage is taken to mean an inheritance from the past. In this connection, the growth in popular heritage consciousness relates to the values people put on knowing about the history of past events, places, and people. A notable phenomenon of this movement is that it is not centered solely on physical places or objects. It enthusiastically embraces the symbolism and meaning of places and associations that people have with place. Perhaps non-Aboriginal Australians are at last beginning to appreciate the Aboriginal association with places through the concept of sacred sites where sacredness applies to the ordinarily sacred.<sup>2</sup> Ordinarily sacred places are those which reflect our relationships with places that have meaning because we or our ancestors have connections with them. Place making and all it means to us promotes a powerful

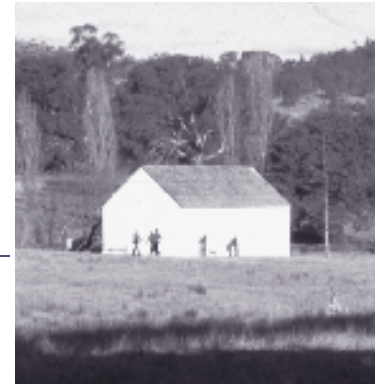
feeling of belonging and strong sense of place. It is con-

nected with the current nostalgia for the past and the search for identity and meaning from the past that underpin the heritage movement.

Whether the Australian heritage movement is simply nostalgia for the past or a genuine interest by people wanting to know more about what they increasingly see as *their* history, or a combination of both, is perhaps immaterial. People have clearly demonstrated that they want to have a sense of the stream of time and they are expecting Australian history and its connections to help them. They want to feel contact with what Henry James called the palpable, imaginable, visitable past ... the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries.

The past has become big business as the surge of nostalgia for bygone days and the concurrent interest and pride in Australian social history sweeps the country. Many factors have influenced the cultural heritage movement, including international interest in conservation; reaction to the 1960s/early-1970s architectural modernist destruction by redevelopment of cities where history played a secondary or non-existent role; the re-emergent idea of Australian nationalism espoused by the Whitlam government of the early 1970s; the development of heritage management as a profession and public recognition of its potential; and the acknowledgement that Australia does have a national culture in the widest application of the term “culture.”

Additional to these factors were the Bicentennial celebrations of 1988 which gave tremendous impetus and funding. The result now is that various levels of government—local, state, and federal—have awakened to the fact that cultural heritage is a matter of public concern as people not only want to know more about their history but are prepared to be vocal in cultural heritage conservation issues. We now have Heritage Councils advising government planning agencies; national and state heritage legislation; local and national museums where history and the making of a nation are on display. Public and private enterprise give us reconstructions of pioneer



villages and goldfields; presentation of Aboriginal culture and places; railway museums and historic railway trips; reconstructed museum farms; urban conservation areas; heritage trails; house museums; historic garden tours; historic urban trails and walks; television and film period pieces; fetes where people dress in period costume; cultural tourism; and we even have heritage motels. In fact, the word “heritage” appears increasingly in sales pitches for anything from paint to houses.



*East Maylands Brickworks, Perth, is significant because of its historic and social values. It is an important symbol of the social and economic history of the area.*

Clem Lloyd’s comment in 1977 that “The notion that Australia had a heritage worthy of protection and preservation is comparatively recent”<sup>3</sup> can be seen to be complemented by Michael Williams’s 1974 observation on the history of the making of the South Australian rural landscape that its “simplicity and obvious recency ... are not an impediment to its serious study.”<sup>4</sup> At some point in the past 20 years Australians have ceased to worry that in post-1788 terms they do not have the monuments of the Old World. There has been a realization that we do, however, have a history of human achievement and social history worthy of note and of study. Linked to this is what Ian Craven, for example, in the September 15, 1992, edition of *The Bulletin* (p. 28) called “Reversing the Cultural Cringe,” where he outlines the recognition in Britain of the significance of Australian popular culture—a dedication to the understanding of the ordinary and the everyday, and its serious academic study.

The intellectual roots of the current heritage consciousness undoubtedly go back to the last century when artists and writers, particularly in the latter quarter of the century, communicated what it meant to be Australian.<sup>5</sup> More recently, the movement can be seen to have evolved from within the community as a voluntary endeavor outside government. A prime mover and seminal

influence has been the National Trust of Australia which started in New South Wales 50 years ago. The Trust’s conservation efforts and attempts to raise public and governmental awareness of Australian cultural heritage places during the 1960s and 1970s were complemented by isolated resident groups and local history societies, often tackling specific issues, and others such as academics writing about heritage. A notable example of the grassroots interest was the residents’ action groups in the 1970s fighting to save their homes in the Glebe and at Woolloomooloo in Sydney. Up to then the government had seen these inner city 19th-century workers’ cottages as slums, notwithstanding Sali Hermann’s<sup>6</sup> and Lloyd Rees’ affectionate paintings of the inner parts of Sydney. To the residents they were homes where they had a deep sense of attachment to a place, and an ordinarily sacred place at that.

The early beginnings of the National Trust movement in Australia were characterized by conservation work concentrated on grand historic buildings of the rich and famous. This history from above approach should not, however, be allowed to obscure the vital community educational role of the Trust from its early days. One of the most important contributions of the National Trust to raising heritage awareness has been, and continues to be, its classification registers. In these are recorded places, sites, and buildings the Trust identifies as having heritage significance. These registers, available to the public and to government agencies, are a remarkable source of heritage data.<sup>7</sup> More recently among its heritage classification work, more everyday, ordinary places and buildings have found a place on Trust registers. There are currently about 21,000 places on Trust registers around Australia covering European and Aboriginal heritage and natural heritage.

It must be remembered that the Trust is not a government body. It is a voluntary organization receiving government grant aid. Much of its work is undertaken by volunteers guided by full-time professionals skilled and trained in heritage conservation. Its membership is about 75,000, making it the biggest community heritage organization in the country. The Trust undertakes studies, campaigns on heritage issues, and promotes public and political awareness of heritage places. As a result of its work, Clem Lloyd reminds us that the Trust “has served as a spearhead for preservation and conservation in Australia. Its contribution to the creation of a national awareness of these issues has been substantial.”<sup>8</sup> A recent contribution has been the campaign to persuade the federal government to introduce tax incentives on historic properties, a measure which found success in the 1993 federal budget.

The 1960s and early 1970s saw little government action in the field of heritage protection. Urban renewal wrecked a number of significant historic precincts in Australian cities. Environmental matters were largely ignored in land and resource development and protection of Aboriginal sites was not an issue. The Whitlam Labour Government addressed these matters, having signalled its intention to do so in the lead to the 1972 election. The term "National Estate"<sup>9</sup> was adopted by the Labour Party prior to its 1972 election to circumscribe the idea and scope of Australian heritage.

The Whitlam Federal Labour Government quickly established the Hope Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate which presented its report in April 1974. Mr. Justice Hope of the New South Wales Supreme Court was the chairman. Its brief was all-embracing and included, *inter alia*, cultural heritage components, European and Aboriginal; natural heritage; cultural property; and education. The totality of the idea of the National Estate was recognized by the Hope Commission through the words of the then Tasmanian Premier, Eric Reece, as "Things that you keep."<sup>10</sup> This pithy analogy remains as a succinct meaning of the idea.

As a result of the Hope Inquiry, itself a historic milestone, two initiatives were implemented. One was government funding for heritage conservation, the other was the birth of the Australian Heritage Commission (AHC). The 1975 AHC Act clearly sets out a definition of the National Estate as "those places, being components of the natural environment of Australia or the cultural environment of Australia that have aesthetic, historic, scientific, or social significance or other special value for future generations as well as the present community."

A major function of the Australian Heritage Commission is the development and maintenance of the Register of the National Estate. The Register provides the Australian community with a comprehensive account of the things that we want to keep. In many ways it is a public display of a significant aspect of Australian culture and identity. Registration does not put legal restraints on private property. Commonwealth departments must consult with the Commission on land within their jurisdiction that is included in the Register. In 1992, there was a total of 10,775 places entered in the Register of which 807 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander places; 8,217 were Historic Environment places (i.e., post-1788); and 1,751 were natural places.<sup>11</sup>

Heritage conservation is now a global concern as people in different countries deem it vital to keep and conserve things from their past.

"Awareness of the past," as David Lowenthal suggests, "is essential to the maintenance of the purpose of life. Without it we would lack all sense of continuity, all apprehension of causality, all knowledge of our own identity."<sup>12</sup> Australian cultural heritage conservation practice is recognized internationally. This is particularly so through the work of Australia ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites). The excellence of Australian practice is recognized through the Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance (The Burra Charter). The Guidelines to the Charter present a philosophy and methodology for conservation and define cultural significance as a "concept which helps in estimating the value of places. The places that are likely to be of significance are those which help an understanding of the past or enrich the present, and which will be of value to future generations."

Like the Australian Heritage Commission Act, cultural significance is seen by the Burra Charter as being related to four values:

**Historic value**

**Social value**

**Aesthetic value**

**Scientific value**

As a result of the cumulative efforts in raising heritage awareness and resultant conservation practice over the past 20 years, Australia is recognized internationally as a principal player in cultural heritage conservation and advances in heritage practice. For example, the developing concept of cultural landscapes has found fertile ground in Australia, particularly with acceptance of the importance of ordinary places and landscapes as the repository of the history of people. The historic landscape at Lanyon, Canberra, is a notable example. The pastoral landscape with all its intellectual and imaginative associations with Arcadian beauty is balanced by the history of landscape making and the interpretation of how previous occupants lived and their values, and not just the owners, but those who worked and shaped the landscape. The simple stone barn at Lanyon, housing an exhibition of 1830s assigned convict workers' lifestyles, is as important a component of the cultural landscape as the grand homestead.

Cultural landscapes are, therefore, seen as embracing the continuity of events, people, and places through time rather than thinking of heritage as being separate and isolated dots on a map. In this context it is notable that Uluru and Katarajuta National Park was redesignated in 1994 on the World Heritage List for its Aboriginal cultural values as an Associative Cultural Landscape under the revised World Heritage categories which finally recognize cultural landscapes.

Traditional stone barn in Derbyshire, England, showing cultural associations with the barn at Lanyon.



Barn at Lanyon, Canberra; this random rubble stone building dates from the 1830s when James Wright owned the property. He had farmed in Derbyshire, England, and brought out his manager, Thomas Locker, who was also a stone mason.



Despite, or because of, the recency of post-1788 settlement and the rich history of Aboriginal culture, Australians have a fascinating and extensive cultural inheritance. This inheritance spans cultural icons, including the grandiose homesteads and urban splendors, the Aboriginal wonders of Uluru and Kakadu National Parks, or the Sydney Opera House. Equally, it embraces the ordinary, everyday cultural landscapes such as Aboriginal

tracks commemorating thousands of years of human relationship with the landscape, the memories of European exploration, convict settlement, the small-scale settlers of the 19th century with their privations and achievements, gold mining, the development of rural Australia with its pastoral theme, forestry, and urban areas with their rich social tapestry.

It seems to be generally accepted that public support for heritage will continue in the future, not least through visits to historic places as the leisure pursuit of cultural tourism expands. The next challenge is perhaps continued improved interpretation of cultural heritage places for visitors through the idea of cultural landscapes where everything is interrelated so that historic places acquire a richness and depth of human meaning. Perhaps we do

need to learn more from Aboriginal understanding of place and the ordinarily sacred.

#### Notes

- 1 See Taylor, K and Winston-Gregson, J (1992), 'Reading Cultural Landscapes as Historic Documents: Windmill Hill, Appin a Case Study,' *Public History Review*, Vol 1, 1992; 127-143.
- 2 For a discussion on the meaning and attraction of the term 'ordinarily sacred' see Patterson, D.D. (1993), 'Redefining the Sacred in the 21st Century,' pp 290-294 in *Proceedings of International Symposium on the Conservation of Urban Squares and Parks, Montreal 12-15 May 1993*, ICOMOS Canada.
- 3 Lloyd, C (1977), *The National Estate. Australia's Heritage*, p 11; Savvas Publishing, Adelaide.
- 4 Williams, M (1974), *The Making of the South Australian Landscape. A Study in the Historical Geography of Australia*, p 473; Academic Press, London.
- 5 See for example White, R (1981), *Inventing Australia. Images and Identity 1688-1980*, G. Allen & Unwin, Sydney; Bonyhady, T (1991), *Images in Opposition. Australian Landscape Painting 1801-1890*; Oxford University Press, Melbourne; Taylor, K (1992), A Symbolic Australian Landscape: Images in Writing and Painting, *Landscape Journal*, 11:2; 127-143.
- 6 Smith, B (1976), 'On Perceiving the Australian Suburb' in Seddon, G and Davis, M, eds, *Man and Landscape in Australia. Towards an Ecological Vision*, AGPS, Canberra.
- 7 In a 1991/92 research project funded by an Australian Research Council Grant the author reviewed over 700 entries for cultural landscapes on Trust classification registers.
- 8 Lloyd, C op cit, p 14.
- 9 The term 'National Estate' was first coined by William Clough Ellis, a British architect in the 1940s: see p 13 *Australian Heritage Commission Annual Report 1992*.
- 10 Lloyd, C op cit, p 11.
- 11 *Australian Heritage Commission Annual Report 1992*.
- 12 Lowenthal, D (1979), 'Age and Artifact: Dilemmas of Appreciation' p 103 in Meinig, D.W., ed, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes. Geographical Essays*, Oxford University Press, New York.

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Photos by the author.