

Family, Community and Nation

Understanding Identity through the History and Heritage of the Blue Mountains of Australia

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This chapter reveals how Blue Mountains' communities have memorialized the history of their area since the late nineteenth century and what affective relationships have been forged in this process.¹ It will show how local women's passions for history and heritage cemented their families' legacies and longstanding contributions to their local communities and how locals built on their passions by sharing and preserving these histories. Using Laurajane Smith's work I define heritage as 'a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present'. This is both a social and a cultural process that crystallizes the significance of the uses of the past in the present.² This chapter focuses on the process of making history in the Blue Mountains drawing on interviews, survey responses and focus groups with family, local and community historians, and on two material culture collections and homes inherited and preserved by the Blue Mountains Historical Society and the National Trust. I will show how acts of making meaning in the home, the transfer of stories and objects between different generations of families and their eventual preservation in public spaces, continue to produce passionate encounters between the past and present.

How was an Authorized Heritage Discourse produced in the Mountains?

As cultural heritage scholar Laurajane Smith suggests, our knowledge of heritage has long been dominated, mostly unreflexively, by a very specific Western discourse. This is the 'Authorized Heritage Discourse' (AHD) that normalizes our understandings of what is heritage and privileges particular voices and approaches to the past in public, with a focus on the lives and the objects associated with the privileged elite not the poor, men rather than women, and white people rather than people of colour. These voices

and approaches have profoundly shaped cultural heritage in diverse national contexts and remain powerful today.³ The 'discourse takes its cue from the grand narratives of nation and class on the one hand, and technical expertise and aesthetic judgement on the other'. National museums were established as sites for the creation of national identity alongside the rise of the nation-state in the nineteenth century. Museums also became tools of the nation-state both defining and regulating national identity and appropriate classed behaviour through governmentality.⁴ These 'nationalizing discourses' also came to 'underlie the discipline of archaeology and history' as they were forged within academic contexts in the late nineteenth century.⁵ This process marginalized women in the production of historical knowledge and professionalized the discipline within the tertiary sector. As a result, consumers of heritage the world over have been inculcated to concentrate their cultural gaze on grand houses and monuments rather than more modest dwellings, denying the value and significance of intangible cultural heritage in the process.⁶ But what other kinds of history and heritage work play out in regional, rather than metropolitan, contexts?

Many locals and visitors to the UNESCO World Heritage Area of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, ninety minutes' drive west of Sydney, Australia, are unaware of the diverse histories that impact on present-day communities, including the area's industrial past. While many Australian people accept the AHD that privileges national narratives of colonial settlement and white exploration without question or reflection on its impact on First Nations peoples or working-class populations, research has shown that most Australian citizens enjoy engaging with history on a personal level – enjoying an intimate connection to the past, learning about the social history of the marginalized.⁷ This leads some to use these intimate, more vernacular and emotionally present histories to challenge the AHD produced by nation states and wealthy elites. This chapter will reveal how some Blue Mountains locals have used family history and heritage as 'a tool of opposition and subversion' since the mid-twentieth century.⁸ It shows the potential of family and local history to challenge AHD more radically in the present and future, and the productive outcomes of passionate encounters with the past on a local and regional level. It takes its cue from a number of cultural heritage scholars and public history practitioners, including Dolores Hayden who has played with the politically subversive possibilities of heritage in her work in urban communities in Los Angeles.⁹ Smith reminds us, using Wertsch's work on memory, that remembering, like the creation of heritage, is an active process, not static. The past is continuously recreated in the present, with new things, new spaces and new people.¹⁰ I want to encourage historians and heritage practitioners to work with regional communities to make people better aware of the historical and social construction of spaces and places and the emotional and political uses and meanings attached to them.

In a recent photo essay, Vanessa Whittington used Smith's work to identify the AHD produced by white male colonial settlers and explorers in the lower Blue Mountains. She argues that this discourse works to exclude Aboriginal inhabitants and women of all cultural backgrounds in the present-day mountains. In her article, she identifies the different ways statues and memorials in the lower Blue Mountains revere white male settlers and explorers such as Blaxland, ignoring the impact of white settlement on the local Dharug and Gundungarra population. As an anti-colonial woman and critic of

nationalist discourse, she hopes that a focus on her personal heritage and engagement with her garden as a cultural space enables her to critique masculine heritage and privilege her woman-centred perspective, encouraging others to do the same.¹¹ This chapter expands on forgotten women's histories of the mountains and highlights the value and significance of local family stories and objects displayed at Tarella Cottage and Woodford Academy for national histories.

Tourism

A focus on tourism – the Blue Mountains' most important industry, following the expansion of the railway in the late nineteenth century – has depoliticized the mountains. As public historians involved with an Australian Research Council Linkage project examining the history and heritage of abandoned shale mining sites in the Megalong and Jamison Valleys, our team of historians, archaeologists and heritage consultants are committed to inserting the history of working-class people, including Aboriginal people, women and children, back into the mountains.

As the literature suggests, settler colonial nations have tended to focus on the natural environment rather than built colonial heritage when representing their national histories, obscuring the racial conflict and theft of land that resulted in their settlement. The Blue Mountains Cultural Centre in Katoomba certainly foregrounds the spectacular scenery of the mountains, rather than its local history. The valorization of white male settlers by the local tourist industry began in the late nineteenth century when tourists were first attracted to the Mountains, and this memory of settlement and discovery remains powerful today. Survey responses and focus group interviews with locals on the representation of the history of the Blue Mountains suggest the same emphasis is in evidence everywhere today. Robyne Ridge, former high school history teacher, is vice president of the Blue Mountains Historical Society in Wentworth Falls, and she writes a monthly historical article for the *Blue Mountains Gazette*. She remains surprised with 'what little people (who read the *Gazette*) seem to know about the mountains' history'.¹² I led a focus group at the Blue Mountains Historical Society in March 2023, which included Robyne Ridge, Ross Ingram, treasurer of the Society, and Brian Fox, former cartographer, local bush walker, researcher and author. All have enjoyed active membership of this vibrant local historical society for over a decade.¹³ They suggest that non-locals have mainly understood the Blue Mountains as a route to richer pastures or as a short-term holiday destination. Most locals, without an explicit interest in history, are not interested in the area's past at all.

When settler history has been the focus of local history exhibitions this has, until recently, been celebratory, male, 'explorer' and 'pioneer' and focused on the 'first' Blue Mountains crossing in 1813 and the 'Explorers Tree'. The 'explorers' Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson supposedly carved their initials in the tree before completing their crossing.¹⁴ If locals know anything about the history of the mountains today, it is usually a brief history of the journey which was marked by the tree.¹⁵ The 1880s were a key decade in the creation of nationalist settler narratives across Australia and the Crossing of the Blue Mountains played a major part in this myth-making.¹⁶ The

Explorers Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth have been memorialized not just in this controversial tree, but in the names of towns, settlements, streets, houses and landscape markers across the Blue Mountains.¹⁷

In February 2023, I interviewed John Low who was the Local Studies Librarian for the Blue Mountains from 1982 until his retirement in 2007. John also sat on the Heritage Advisory Committee of the Blue Mountains Council until 2022 (having joined from 2013/2014). There are few locals as knowledgeable about the Blue Mountains past as John, who was responsible for establishing and growing the excellent Local Studies section at Springwood Library from 1982. He surfed a wave of growing enthusiasm for public and local libraries as library associations became very active across Sydney and the NSW regions in the 1970s and 1980s. John suggests that funding for the Bicentenary celebrations in 1988 increased interest in and knowledge of the value of local history in the mountains.¹⁸ Despite this enthusiastic growth of family and local history, locals like John remain concerned that it is hard to find histories of Blue Mountains' women and they hope new research might reveal it.¹⁹ Using the two case studies of Tarella Cottage and Woodford Academy I will show how local women from the mid-twentieth century worked hard to share their passion for the past using family and local history. Through their work with local historical societies these women conserved and celebrated history to challenge the historical invisibility of women and the regions. This is one way in which women have used the inheritance of family history and material culture to make their mark on the local environs of the Blue Mountains. Passionate advocates working for local museums and historical organizations are continuing their work and ensuring their memories and the political impact of that memory work is not lost for present and future generations.

Tarella Cottage and the Blue Mountains Historical Society

The Blue Mountains Historical Society has encouraged diverse historical engagement with the mountains' past since its establishment in 1946.²⁰ A historic house museum, Tarella Cottage, sits adjacent to the Blue Mountains Historical Society's headquarters, library and archives. Open on the last Sunday of each month, it attracts around 30–40 visitors per month. Volunteers suggest that most visitors do not know the Cottage's history but are broadly interested in regional and local history.²¹ Displays within the Cottage focus on the lives of its owners, including John McLaughlin, a Sydney solicitor and local politician who constructed the home as a holiday retreat for his family escaping Sydney's hot summers. He was granted the land for service in the NSW Volunteer Force in 1879. Construction on the house began in 1886 and concluded after the First World War.²² The reason the cottage survives today is due to the efforts of his daughter Beryl who grew up in Waverley.

After schooling at Claremont College, Beryl studied science at the University of Sydney, graduating in 1910. She worked as a teacher in several North Shore private schools before the war and afterwards returned to Sydney University to study architecture in the first year the degree was offered to women, graduating in 1922 to earn a living. She never married, which some suggest was due to the death of a sweetheart

and close friend of her brother Geoffrey. Having survived Gallipoli, Geoffrey perished as the result of a gas attack at Passchendaele on 4 November 1917. He was awarded the Military Cross. Ross Ingram told me, while touring the Cottage, that contemporary members of the Society suspect that both siblings might have been 'gay'. Their father suffered from heart disease, dying intestate in February 1918. His entire estate, valued at 4,191 pounds was granted to his eldest son, John. Beryl's dastardly elder brother remained a cause celebre for much of his professional life. He was convicted of both fraud and larceny and declared bankrupt several times.²³ John took over his deceased father's estate, selling all the family's Sydney-based homes to cover his debts and forcing his mother and sisters, Beryl and Ida, to live in the family's tiny weatherboard holiday home in the mountains. A later neighbour of Beryl's recollected that her resentment towards her elder brother never waned.²⁴ She commuted from Wentworth Falls by train, while working as a junior architect for Henry White until the Depression hit in 1933, when she left her job and moved to the mountains permanently.²⁵ Following her mother's death, Ida had married (the much older) Harold Kane in 1927. Beryl designed their new marital home in Leura. After Ida was widowed, she moved back in to live with Beryl at Tarella which Beryl had bought from her brother in 1937. The sisters moved to and from other local properties that Beryl designed and built, until Ida died, and Beryl moved reluctantly into a nursing home.

Active members of their local communities, Beryl and her elder sister became early patrons of the Blue Mountains Historical Society. Beryl cemented her association with the organization in 1955 when the Society was ousted from the Council chambers for its meetings, and the sisters offered the back room of their home as a potential meeting space. In 1968, they established a museum from the Society on the land. Beryl, unmarried and childless, bequeathed the cottage and its attached land to the Society on her death.²⁶ As Ingram suggests, the continued survival of the house means that Beryl 'will live on forever'.²⁷ It might be safe to assume that Beryl was well aware of the history she was making when passing on her stories and possessions to the Society. The Society undertook an oral history interview with Beryl when she was resident in a Leura nursing home in 1987 at the age of ninety-nine, recording parts of her life-story and her association with the Society.²⁸ Beryl died just before she turned 100 at the Martin Claver Nursing Home and was buried with her family in Waverly Cemetery.²⁹ In her will she bequeathed the property to the Blue Mountains Historical Society 'with power to the said Trustees to maintain the same as the Museum or repository for the historical records of the said Society or otherwise use the same for the general purposes of the Society'. To her niece Elizabeth McLaughlin, daughter of her late nephew, John McLaughlin, Beryl bequeathed all her jewellery. Other beneficiaries included the Wentworth Falls Country Club, the RSPCA, the Anti-TB Association of NSW, the Sydney Rescue Work Society, the Royal Blind Society, the Council on the Ageing for the Blue Mountains Meals on Wheels, eleven named female friends and Stan her gardener, the Trustee of her will, with additional cash for her niece.³⁰

Tarella is a small wooden cottage, with little rooms, containing a tiny second storey with two small bedrooms. The downstairs living rooms are filled with Beryl's and bits of the family's belongings. A separate kitchen has a working fire where scones are cooked for Sunday visitors.³¹ Beryl studied pottery after graduating with her first

degree and there are examples of her intricate work on display. Current vice president of the society, Robyne Ridge suggests that the house has focused a little too much on the life-story of Beryl's brother Geoffrey, the war hero, largely neglecting Beryl's legacy in the process. It is only in the last two years or so that Beryl's life-story has been emphasized and highlighted.³² In a detailed, excellent website recounting the history of Tarella and its residents, Beryl is placed at the bottom of a long list of McLaughlin family members, which is unfortunate considering that the sole reason the cottage survives today is due to her efforts and bequest.³³ Robyne Ridge is a passionate advocate for Beryl and has worked hard nominating Beryl and Tarella for a Blue Plaque, but with no success so far.³⁴ The NSW's government's 'Blue Plaques Program aims to bring to life the extraordinary people and events that shaped the history of NSW. It is designed for our citizens to learn about the history of their local region'. Thirty-five have been granted since June 2021 when the scheme began.³⁵ Robyne's nomination details Beryl's assiduous work on behalf of the Wentworth Falls local community, especially during the Second World War, and her passion for local history and its place in the history of the Australian nation. As Robyne states, 'We remember Beryl (and her sister Ida) because of this magnificent Mclaughlin donation that supports our history.'³⁶

In the cottage, there are cupboards filled with Beryl's personal belongings, including her pottery, and the various accoutrement of mid-twentieth-century domestic life. Such objects that survive in personal collections and move to displays in local and regional museums are used to tell stories about the Blue Mountains past. Most of the objects at Tarella, like most objects in local museums in the region, focus on the spectacular scenery of the mountains. The ceramic displays that fill the shelves at Tarella represent Blue Mountains' scenery. Anne Coote has counted them all: out of the 158 souvenir ceramics on display in the cottage all but seven display images of natural scenes such as waterfalls, the Three Sisters, valley views. Exceptions included the Lithgow Small Arms Factory, Echo Point Lookout, Leura Mall, Leura from the railway station, a snow scene, Blackheath Swimming Pool and *Insignia of the Palais Royale*.

Museums across the world were transformed in the 1960s and 1970s as the tertiary sector expanded, social history became more popular, and the GLAM sector expanded their audiences. This was especially the case in metropolitan areas but less so in rural and regional parts of Australia. Nonetheless, a renewed interest in Australian history and increased passion for the past among 'ordinary' Australians allowed lots of smaller museums to flourish, as people, working outside the structures of the state, became enthused by projects of memorialization.³⁷ New museology sometimes confronted 'traditional' curatorial emphases and the regulatory functions of the museums set up in the service of the nation-state, as discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter. Local museums came to thrive as sites of community meaning-making but were, and are, often managed by independent volunteers on shoestring budgets. Museums across NSW have predominantly been established by historical society members and are housed in heritage buildings like Tarella and Woodford Academy as discussed in this chapter. They rely on enthusiastic and supportive local volunteers and benefactors to survive and thrive.³⁸ Regional museums in NSW are guided by the umbrella organization Museums and Galleries NSW but resources are severely limited.³⁹ More

resources targeted at cultural heritage from the state and federal government might make a significant impact on local tourism and the Blue Mountains' economy.

Regional museums thrive best when managed in partnership with community members. Laurajane Smith has suggested that museums and sites memorializing the global industrial past are more likely to appeal to working-class visitors and those with an emotional and political investment in these sites. Family histories are often significant in the production and consumption of these sites and visitors' readings and experiences of engagement with heritage and history can be emotionally impactful and transformative. This means that the political work of local and regional museum management of cultural heritage has the potential to be much more radical than that of naturally conservative national museums.⁴⁰ After engaging with local museums across the Blue Mountains I want to suggest that there is much potential to build on the radical, innovative creative work in the Blue Mountains Museum sector.

Most of my survey respondents and focus group participants want more people, locals and tourists, to know about the valuable labour and legacies of local women. When working as the Council's Local Studies librarian, John Low was well aware of women's important contributions to local and family history societies. While most local societies were headed by men, he was certain that much of the 'real' work was undertaken by women as secretaries. He wants people to understand that better knowledge of local history gives people a richer sense of place; it 'anchors them' in their present lives.⁴¹ Low is not alone among locals passionate about history, heritage, and environment in the Mountains.

As I have suggested in previous publications, women within families, especially if they were childless, have long used family history, material culture and their passion for local history to make their mark on the historical record. Women's roles within their family cultural economies were rarely passive.⁴² I have also written about the meanings of the material culture that families brought with them from Britain to colonial Australia. The preservation of family stories and objects across the generations often lay in the hands of women, mothers, daughters and often those daughters who did not marry and have children of their own.⁴³ I continue that work here, drawing attention to how the labour and legacies of local mountains' women have made a quiet and significant mark on local history in the mountains. Despite their passion, efforts and enthusiasm, however, much of this history remains invisible to most. These Blue Mountains women are key to this process of meaning-making, revealing the value of their often-invisible labour within their families and communities. Their work as powerhouses of their local communities is revealed in the transfer of their domestic stories and belongings to public spaces and display and disseminated by locals who share similar passions for the past.

Woodford Academy and the National Trust

Another historic property, the earliest built house in the mountains, situated on the main road through the mountains and well known to most locals, but barely known to others, is Woodford Academy.⁴⁴ One of my survey respondents Kate O'Neill has

lived in the Blue Mountains since the mid-1990s and is currently employed at the City Recital Hall in Sydney while undertaking her qualifications in museum and heritage studies. She has a deep passion for local and public history and is keen to share this with others. She particularly loves the National Trust property Woodford Academy that most motorists barely glance at as they speed through the mountains. I travelled to and from the mountains many times before my research for this chapter, and Kate's survey response encouraged me to visit this charming property.

This site has been a school, pub, guesthouse and private residence since it was established in 1832, and it holds a variety of objects dating from the 1890s.⁴⁵ The property was bequeathed to the National Trust in 1979 by John McManamey's sole surviving daughter Gertrude. Here we see another woman committed to using history and heritage to reveal the hidden labour of women through the preservation of family stories and objects. A Classics scholar, her father had leased the building in 1907 to open a school for boys. When it shut in 1936, it became the family home.⁴⁶ John McManamey encouraged his students to make their mark on the world and to think carefully about their legacies. John's wife, Henrietta, and their two daughters, Jessie and Gertrude, helped care for the schoolboys. Henrietta had worked as a schoolteacher and governess before she married. The McManamey girls, who were educated alongside the schoolboys, also went on to teach at the school before it closed. Henrietta died in 1913 at the age of forty-three. Tragically killed as he crossed the road outside the house in 1946, John left the property to his unmarried daughters. Jessie died in 1972. Gertrude's bequest of her home to the National Trust in 1979 was on condition she could live there until her death. She resided in the five stone rooms of the original 1834 inn until she moved to hospital in 1986. She died in 1988.

Woodford Academy had been close to closure, due to low visitor numbers, but user engagement and visitation to the site has increased dramatically in recent years. Recent shifts in display and curation have focused on integrating the community with considerable success. The Academy's unique dedicated Aboriginal Interpretative Room explores the region's indigenous art, culture and history through the work of Darug Elder Chris Tobin. The property also houses an excellent volunteer-run café selling delicious cakes, along with a book and gift stall. It is now understood to encompass 'non-traditional' approaches to display, including local, contemporary art site-specific work, initiated by Elizabeth Burgess and Jacqueline Spedding and continued through an Artist in Residence program managed by Beata Geyer. Their painstaking efforts have clearly helped forge a strong sense of community among artists and local community members in the mountains, especially as artists and other creative workers fled Sydney with the rise in property prices and increased rent costs. Community effort has been mostly voluntary, and the property, like many others, is crying out for financial resources.⁴⁷ Kate suggests this site has the potential to teach us much about the history of women in the mountains. A short video on display in the house includes a late-in-life interview with Gertrude.⁴⁸ The women's history of the site has been a recent focus of Kate's research, especially the role of women running the guesthouse at Woodford house.⁴⁹ She suggests that while we now understand the upper mountains to be the major site of the mountain's tourism industry, Kate thinks more people should be made aware of the fascinating history and heritage of the lower mountains. The collaboration

between the National Trust, its hard-working volunteers, local artists and creatives at Woodford Academy has clearly been productive.

Local museums and libraries remain important sites of civic purpose in the mountains, and elsewhere. They are the 'beating heart of their communities'.⁵⁰ John Low understood his role to be collaborative and communicative throughout his career and continues this work in retirement. He believed that it was important to network with local historical societies and organizations to do his job successfully. As is the case with many local and community historical societies, however, rivalries rather than collaboration, can complicate local relationships leading to poorer outcomes for members, locals and visitors. Brian Fox spoke of the insularity of Blue Mountains towns until the 1920s. However, the same holds true today with a clear distinction between communities that live in the upper versus the lower mountains. Ingram suggested that the cultural heritage organizations and historical societies in the region are 'not an integrated group'. The Blue Mountains Association of Cultural Heritage Organisations (BMACHO) was constructed as an umbrella group in April 2006 trying to bring all these organizations together. Members think that in theory it is a great organization but feel that it does not work particularly well in practice. The National Trust and the Blue Mountains Historical Society do not share members and volunteers for example.⁵¹ Although, collectively, those interviewed for this project believe that things are getting better – there are town planners now very interested in history and heritage for example – John Low remains concerned by the same dreary stories being repeated by local tourist businesses and the Council.

The Council and related history organizations might be better served by highlighting more diverse histories of the area's past. Local and community historians find the process of the historical resurrection of ordinary people and local history empowering both for their ancestors and themselves. Histories produced within families and later valued by local museums have the potential to become part of the rich multicultural history of their nations. The memory-making undertaken by family and local historians allows these researchers to use their personal histories to insert themselves and their families into wider historical narratives from which they have been excluded up to now.

Beryl McLaughlin and Gertrude McMannamy are fine examples of the gendered practice of constructing and sharing family stories.⁵² Gloyn and her co-authors have shown us that, 'contemporary gendered practices of family archiving and memory processes have long historical roots'. They suggest 'that this strong gendered nature of different archival practices is part of the reason why informal and family archives tend to remain undervalued within the historical discipline'.⁵³ It is important that organizations and institutions that survive today due to the contributions of such archives, value their creators' efforts appropriately. Tarella and Woodford have energetic and enthusiastic volunteers working hard on their preservation and displays but Tarella could emphasize the history of Beryl a little more and Woodford could display Gertrude's role in the house's legacy more emphatically. The Blue Mountains Historical Society and local National Trust volunteers are doing excellent work, but they need support, and if they worked collaboratively, the history of women in the mountains might come through more coherently.

While they are all keen to better represent the history of women and Aboriginal people in the area, the history of the area's working class remains undocumented and not represented. Both Beryl and Gertrude were relatively affluent women compared with the miners' wives and related service-workers our research project is mostly focused on. Our team of researchers hope to integrate the history of the working class as a group, including working-class women and children and Aboriginal people, and to share the history we produce in a local historical walking tour. Most of the ARC team, driven by their work in public history, are motivated by their politics and intent on examining class, race and gender in history. Museums need to matter to local communities, to represent their diversity and to help build healthy, inclusive communities. The Blue Mountains community knows very little about the area's industrial past. Even people who visit Scenic World, one of NSW's most popular tourist destinations, remain blissfully unaware of the area's mining history despite it being marked and represented on the valley floor.⁵⁴ The forgotten labour history of the mountains has much potential for drawing thousands more visitors to the mountains to stay, shop and spend which would have enormous economic, cultural and social benefits for the area.

Notes

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