



# LOCATING SUBURBIA

MEMORY - PLACE - CREATIVITY

EDITED BY

PAULA HAMILTON & PAUL ASHTON



Locating Suburbia  
Memory, Place, Creativity

Edited by

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton



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This eBook was designed by  
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# INTRODUCTION

## *THE POLITICS AND PASSIONS OF THE SUBURBAN OASIS*

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton

Murder in the suburbs isn't murder technically at all really is it? It's a justifiable reaction to aesthetic deprivation and golf.<sup>1</sup>

Suburbia has been satirised and mocked by the best of them from George Orwell's 1939 caricature in *Coming up for Air* to Dame Edna Everidge from the 1960s and TV's Kath and Kim in twentieth-first century Australia. For many of the generation growing up in the twentieth century, suburbia is, on the one hand, the remembered nightmare from which the human chrysalis escaped to experience adulthood and its pleasures *elsewhere* – the stifling, conformist sameness which nonetheless hid evil deeds like murder. Others hold dear the wistful nostalgic memories about growing up in a domesticated cosy world of backyard games so effectively mobilised by conservative Prime Minister John Howard during the 1990s in relation to Earlwood, a suburb of Sydney.<sup>2</sup>

It is certainly the case that for the older generation who lived through depression and war in the twentieth century, the suburbs represented safety and peace – 'a roof over our heads'; 'a place to call our own'. Like the soldier who came back from Changi POW camp, kissed the ground at Narrabeen, a suburb in Sydney, and said: 'this'll do me'!, the expanding suburbs after the 1950s were the retreat for many men after

time abroad in global conflict; a place to replenish the spirit and build again – individual lives, families, homes, garages, sheds, gardens, lawns. Suburbs have also been long hated,<sup>3</sup> and more recently loved,<sup>4</sup> by writers and intellectuals. They have also been perceived with an uneasy ambiguity, as ‘being neither town nor country, but an unwilling combination of both, and either neat and shining, or cheap and nasty, according to the incomes of its inhabitants’.<sup>5</sup> This was the ‘half world between city and country in which most Australians lived’ that architect Robin Boyd decried in his elitist work on Australia domestic architecture.<sup>6</sup> Recently, however, there has been a strong and growing interest in delineating the complexities of the suburban experience rather than simply denouncing or defending it.

Over the last twenty to thirty years, suburbia has had a make-over. How it is remembered and what place it has had in our lives has also been reconfigured. Many now accept that the nostalgia relates only to a childhood dream of the white Anglo-Saxon part of the population that obscured a great deal more than it revealed. Certainly the historian Andrew May argued in 2009 that ‘the reliance of the twin fictions of the novelist’s pen and of baby-boomer nostalgia for our predominant images of post-war suburban history precludes the prospect of developing more sophisticated historical narratives’.<sup>7</sup> Even before the impact of the massive post-war migration, the suburbs were more culturally and socially diverse than we have previously understood. Class and religious divisions, if not always race and ethnicity, have a long history within suburban communities.<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, the articulation of that nostalgic memory in public forums is strongly contested, as suburban places are made and remade over time.

In March 2013, for example, Peter Roberts wrote a column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* which had the heading: ‘What happened to the suburb I used to know? His particular suburb was Greenacre near Lakemba in Sydney and his article juxtaposed a suburban past and present. He remembers a suburb where he grew up during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a place of peace, sparsely populated, filled with boys sports and games:

Lakemba? Sure that’s where we went to the Sunday matinee at the Odeon every week and watched such pearls as the Three Stooges, Jerry Lewis and Ben-Hur.

Roberts does not mention that Lakemba is now the site of a mosque and one of the biggest Muslim communities in Australia. But most of the *Herald* readers will have this in mind. In his (Anglo-Saxon) memory, there was no violence as there is now, which he blames on the ‘enclave of Little Lebanon’. Greenacre and Lakemba now, he says, have been ‘turned into a minefield, or a battlefield, or a refuge



of drug dealers, criminals, drive-by shooters and terror'. His elegaic tone is one of sadness and loss:

That was my home – the place where I once simply couldn't imagine living anywhere else – transformed to the place where I could never imagine living again.

There were several responses to this letter which seemed to strike a Sydney nerve and gave readers a sense of how the media mediates our collective memories. At least two letters accused Roberts of cloaking racism in nostalgia. Omar Sakr replied in the same edition of the *Herald* with an awareness about the public prominence of such views and how they need to be interrogated. Sakr is particularly critical of the assumption that all of the problems are the result of another ethnic group, as though murder and rape were not part of any other suburban culture. This view, he says, absolves one group for taking responsibility for the problems of the community as a whole. For him, growing up in this area probably twenty or thirty years later, the most important element was the camaraderie of his diverse delinquent friends.

One letter, though, was from someone who had lived for eighteen months in Lakemba until recently and also spent time there on a regular basis now. Con Vaitsas, now of Ashbury, claimed that Roberts' vision was 'way out of whack with reality' and very outdated. He argued that Greenacre and Lakemba were no longer predominantly the home of the Lebanese but a mixture of very different nationalities living peacefully side by side: 'my neighbours were Filipinos and Colombians on either side and Africans opposite us', he wrote. So his perception was one of a successful multicultural community.

Such an exchange does little to recognise the complexity of current suburban life but it does juxtapose the memories from different generations and cultures against one another as alternative experiences of belonging to particular suburban localities.

### **What is Suburbia?**

Suburbs are geographically defined areas on a map, spatially located in our memories and also an idea: they colonise our imaginations as both inside and outside the pale. But beyond the government defined boundaries, how are they delineated? Are they anything beyond the city central? Inner city areas such as Surry Hills or Balmain are certainly not brought to mind by this term. Spatially the suburbs are seen as 'out there' away from the inner city which somehow don't meet the criteria for single story occupation on a block of land which we think of as characteristically suburban. But where does the inner city begin and end now? Redfern, Waterloo, Alexandria, Drummoyne,

St Leonard's? 'As a state of mind and a way of living', Humphrey McQueen has observed,

Suburbia is not confined to certain geographic areas but can thrive where there are no suburbs... It is pointless to lay down a criterion for suburbia that includes duplexes, but excludes a row of terraces. Where it survives outside its natural habitat, suburbia still aspires to the ways of living that are most completely realised by nuclear families on garden blocks with detached houses.<sup>9</sup>

The identity of suburbia, so far as it can be ascribed one, is shifting and insecure; a borderline and liminal space.<sup>10</sup> Dominant stereotypes have listed it as 'on the margins' beyond edges of cultural sophistication and tradition' and the areas that make up 'sprawl'.<sup>11</sup> But in the twenty-first century this static view has to be modified somewhat. And it is evident from this collection that suburban dwellers themselves have redefined being cosmopolitan as house prices in the inner suburbs skyrocket and push people further afield.<sup>12</sup>

The study of suburbs is often viewed as separate from the city or the urban as a whole. But in fact not only are suburbs obviously integral; they are now part of the networked city, reinforcing much older electricity grids, transport and water services with contemporary communications networks, especially the internet and mobile telephony which has facilitated greater interaction between suburbs and across the urban generally. Suburbs are always relational in this sense and though we tend to throw a light on the local or the small concerns within the suburb as case studies, this collection does not argue for their isolation from the wider urban landscape, for we know that local knowledge too, has the power to change lives.

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This collection was set up as a collaborative project by members of the Research Strength in Creative Practices and Cultural Economy at the University of Technology, Sydney, is in the first instance a testament to that range and complexity of twenty-first century responses to city suburbs, predominantly in Sydney, though with a nod to other suburban contexts on the most-populated eastern seaboard of Australia, such as Melbourne and Brisbane. Secondly, the collection showcases the lively engagement and interdisciplinary nature of the intellectual culture in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, from the more traditional scholarly approaches of Humanities scholars to the range of cultural forms which make up Creative Practice in the academy, especially in this

case, Creative Writing and Media Arts.<sup>13</sup> We had many seminars and discussions which took place in 2011 and 2012 about the ideas for the collection. We began by viewing it from the perspective of lived experience, always believing it possible that new technologies can create different spaces for collaborative scholarship within the traditional frame of a book.

And so it proved. We found that the tension between representing how a world was experienced while keeping that detached critical eye on its form and nature could work very well through a range of artistic and scholarly practice that spoke to each other. Karen Till, writing about her own engagement with memory studies as an artist, argues that more traditional scholars have a lot to gain by heeding the work of artists 'who also acknowledge the ways that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds'.<sup>14</sup>

Three distinct themes emerged in relation to the central concept of re-imagining the suburban which people researched and made for this publication. As our title indicates these became remembered suburbs anchored either by our own personal past or those of others, suburbs as places that were made and remade across time and suburbs not only as the subject for various creative representations but also increasingly where creativity as an identified practice or industry takes place.<sup>15</sup>

Some of our essays take as their subject particular suburbs such as Bondi, Manly and Campbelltown. Others range across time and the space of the urban and suburban. Others focus on those inner city in-betweens, subject of urban renewal and consolidation, such as Marrickville, Pyrmont and Balmain. Some utilise the concept of the even more local through a focus on the park, shops, the backyard or the suburban house. And still others explore what took place in the homes of these areas there that came to be identified with suburban life.

Referring to the suburbs of England, Roger Silverstone previously commented in his 1997 book *Visions of Suburbia* that 'An understanding of how suburbia was produced and continues to be both produced and reproduced is an essential precondition for an understanding of the twentieth century, an understanding above all of our emerging character and contradictions of our everyday lives'.<sup>16</sup> Whether his argument for the centrality of suburbia to historical understanding still holds for the twenty-first century remains to be seen given the many different shapes it now takes in our imaginations.

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**MEMORY**

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08

'IT USED TO BE A DINGY KIND OF JOINT'

Robert Crawford

# 'IT USED TO BE A DINGY KIND OF JOINT'

REFLECTIONS ON PUBS AND THE PAST IN PYRMONT AND ULTIMO

Robert Crawford

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*It is a warm Tuesday afternoon in October 2011. The Harlequin Inn in the inner Sydney suburb of Pyrmont conducts a quiet if steady trade. Patrons seem to enjoy the pub's serenity. Some are engaged in languid conversations; others quietly sip their beer and watch the passing traffic.*

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It is a far cry from the bustle that descends on the ‘Harley’ on a Friday evening or when a rugby international is being shown on the big screen. Asked for his impression of the pub on this warm afternoon, 31-year-old patron Chris Bowen comments that, ‘It looks a lot more upper class today, it used to be a more of an old fashioned... old looking dingy kind of joint’.<sup>1</sup> Bowen’s description of the Harlequin Inn could be equally applied to its immediate surrounds. No longer a ‘dingy kind of joint’, Pyrmont and its neighbouring suburb Ultimo are now salubrious and highly sought after locations.

The Pyrmont/Ultimo peninsula is in the heart of Sydney, Australia. Since European colonisation, the peninsula’s fortunes have swung wildly – from centre of industrial activity to abandoned slum district to new media and creative hub. At its industrial peak in 1900, the peninsula’s population reached 19 000 but by 1981 it had slumped to a mere 1590 residents. Thirty years later, however, and Pyrmont alone had become home to approximately 12 000 people. The transformations that have enveloped the Pyrmont peninsula have been explored – often passionately – by historians. For them, Pyrmont and Ultimo gave much to Sydney for scant return. Angered by the waves of ‘slum-clearances, demolitions, powerhouses, intolerable traffic and the absence of public facilities’ that had afflicted life in these suburbs, Michael Matthews’ 1983 history of the suburbs sought to capture the ‘more glorious past of this area’ and to mount a case for the improvement of ‘Sydney’s Sink’.<sup>2</sup>

A decade later Shirley Fitzgerald and Hilary Golder were no less upset. ‘To write about the history of the Pyrmont Peninsula is to write in anger’, they declare. ‘[T]he process of moving into a territory, dominating it for profit and then moving on is called rape.’<sup>3</sup> Revisiting their account in 2009, Fitzgerald and Golder observe that Pyrmont and, to a lesser degree, Ultimo had since ‘changed perhaps more than anywhere else in Sydney’.<sup>4</sup> They had become home to the city’s burgeoning media and creative industries, a series of new luxury apartment complexes and, of course, a giant new casino. As with the area’s post-industrial decline in the mid 20th century, which saw both the physical and human landscape suffer, its latest metamorphosis came under fire for being inherently political and lacking in authenticity. Glen Searle and Jason Byrne contend that this image of a new, revitalised and gentrified peninsula is mere fluff created by developers. For them, the transformation ‘from a habitus of production,

a manufacturing and freight enclave, to that of consumption... and ultimately from a neighbourhood to a commodity' had in fact erased the area's history and heritage.<sup>5</sup> While Fitzgerald and Golder agree that in the years between the first and second editions of their book the area had indeed changed again, they were more circumspect than Searle and Byrne about the degree to which the past had been erased: 'Just scratch the surface, and the marks of the past ways remain.'<sup>6</sup>

In *The past is a foreign country*, David Lowenthal contends that, 'The past itself is gone – all that survives are its material residues and the accounts of those who experienced it. No such evidence can tell us about the past with absolute certainty'.<sup>7</sup> But perhaps, rather than seeking certainty, what can be examined is the way in which we value these material residues and anecdotes as connections in the present with the past. This article therefore seeks to explore these connections by using Pierre Nora's notion of '*lieu de mémoire*' and his understanding of 'history that is interested in memory not as remembrance but as the overall structure of the past within the present'.<sup>8</sup> As Matthews, Fitzgerald and Golder reveal, the past has long informed the ways that Pymont and Ultimo are understood.

This chapter uses as its case study the pubs of Pymont and Ultimo. The physical space of the pub offers a unique site for exploring Nora's notions, as it poses as a 'significant entity... which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.<sup>9</sup> The centrality of memory in this approach underscores the importance of the pub's patrons. In actively connecting the present to the past (whether real or imagined), these patrons reveal the ways that memories are not simply recollections about the past; they are also statements about the present.

The Australian pub is nothing if not symbolic. In their recent history of the Australian pub, Diane Kirkby, Tanja Luckins and Chris McConville assert that, 'The pub is an Australian icon. Its history is deeply entwined with the history of colonisation, the development of local communities, shifting political currents, economic fluctuations, population movements and social and cultural change'.<sup>10</sup> The handful of pubs that continue to trade in Pymont and Ultimo are a case in point. One of the first industries that emerged on the Pymont peninsula, the pub trade is also one of the few that continues to operate today. These pubs are long-standing sites of consumption but, equally, they are surviving records of the area's past, its community and industrial past. In his examination of the Australian pub, architectural historian John Freeland reminds us that a pub can be something of an unreliable witness to its own past: 'A pub owes its very survival to its



ability to offer the latest in comfort, service, and amenities consistent with the demands of its customers'.<sup>11</sup> Its efforts to remain up to date may have obscured its architectural integrity and 'authenticity', but the changes themselves can equally provide a vantage point for identifying those points where past intersects with the present – every refurbishment being an exercise in determining the degree to which the past can be accommodated in the present. Patrons and their memories offer additional perspectives that are integral to understanding the pub as a *lieu de mémoire*. Without them, there can be no pub. Moreover, it is their experiences and memories that differentiate one pub from the next.

Of course, patrons and their accounts can be as problematic as the pub itself. Myths abound at the bar – with or without the aid of alcohol. Australian drinkers have thus revelled in the idea that they were world leaders in beer consumption yet Tony Dingle has shown that Australians were more prolific in consuming tea.<sup>12</sup> For drinkers, the public bar's perceived egalitarian nature was an appealing image that positioned them as the epitome or guardians of the national character.<sup>13</sup> In equating the public bar patrons with this specific national type, this image also actively and conveniently marginalised women and Indigenous Australians.<sup>14</sup> Such mythologising is an important element of these *lieux de mémoire*, and the memories and stories of today's patrons at the remaining Pyrmont and Ultimo pubs are revealing for the mythologising that occurs, particularly in relation to the area's recent gentrification. This chapter is based on interviews conducted with patrons of the pubs along the Pyrmont Peninsula in 2011. By recording their views of the pub and its surrounding locale, this chapter gives voice to those individuals whose patronage has been instrumental to the pubs' survival yet have been strangely ignored in the historical accounts of the pub. Their words not only provide a patron's view of the pub and its significance, they also demonstrate the ways in which memory actively connects the past with present.

### **Forgotten Foundations**

In 1889 the Sydney *Illustrated News* featured a special report on Pyrmont. Describing it as being 'not an attractive place... possessing but few interesting associations', the reporter was more intrigued by the peculiarity of the names along the peninsula: 'Nobody appears to know how the name of Pyrmont originated... The city archives contain no information on the subject, and strange to say the origin of the name Ultimo... is equally obscure'.<sup>15</sup> The past was forgotten and, in any case, was of little relevance to the area in its current role as 'an industrial centre'.

Pymont had in fact been named after Bad Pymont in Germany in 1806, when a party of picnickers visited one of the properties of the famed entrepreneur and pastoralist John McArthur and noted the similarities between the ‘pure and uncontaminated’ springs in the two places.<sup>16</sup> Ultimo’s history was similarly recorded. It had been named by John Harris, the surgeon of the New South Wales Corps. Awarded the land in 1803, Harris named it in honour of a legal technicality that had enabled him to avoid being court martialled.<sup>17</sup> For the indigenous Cadigal inhabitants, there was little such confusion: the area was called Pirrama. However, Fitzgerald and Golder note that the ‘similarity between the names Pirrama and Pymont is... striking’ and are tempted to imagine that the name was the result of a meeting between the land’s traditional owners and the recent arrivals.<sup>18</sup> Such stories would be forgotten as the area’s new owners looked towards the future.

By 1842, Pymont, along with other outlying suburbs, was seen as a viable residence for Sydney’s growing population. ‘The Surry Hills, Pymont, Balmain, &c, are becoming the resort of those who are glad to escape from the rents of Sydney’, observed the *Sydney Morning Herald*,<sup>19</sup> whilst the *Australian* predicted a more prosperous future: ‘We do not doubt that the villages of Balmain and Pymont will, in good time, be as much frequented as New Brighton, and the other pleasant watering places on the banks of the Mersey’.<sup>20</sup> It would be a long time before this dream would be realised. In the meantime, industry emerged as the driver of development in both Pymont and Ultimo, albeit a slow one. For Pymont, the foundations of this growth lay underfoot; Pymont sandstone was renowned for its quality and durability. Already in 1826, *the Sydney Gazette* could report that, ‘There are from 25 to 27 stonemasons and stone-cutters already employed’ in the area.<sup>21</sup> Shipyards would follow as well as associated industries.<sup>22</sup> The completion of the Pymont Bridge in 1858 provided an additional boost, connecting the peninsula’s expanding industries to the city. Ultimo’s development was slower. Up until the 1870s, it had remained semi-rural with an assortment of small industries. Its industrialisation was then spurred by the growth in the wool industry and the Darling Harbour goods yards.<sup>23</sup> Thus by 1889, it was regarded as ‘a perfect hive of industry, a busy bustling manufacturing centre’ – its settler origins now obscured beneath a layer of soot and grime.<sup>24</sup>

As a working-class district, Pymont and Ultimo was not a site of domestic dreams. Few travelled there by choice. Campaigning for the Legislative Assembly’s City West seat in 1863, Geoffrey Eagar candidly confessed to his audience gathered at the Pymont Bridge Hotel that ‘although born and bred in Sydney, this was his first visit to Pymont’.<sup>25</sup> Although Eagar was careful not to say it, the locals,

like the industries that employed them, had the reputation of being rough. Many would wear this reputation with pride. Recounting his childhood in the area during the interwar years, Bob Boyle claimed that ‘the fair dinkum Pymonter, was a pretty good type of individual... tough and rough and ready... The sort of people that would knock you down at the drop of a hat if you misbehaved and then put their hand out to pick you up’.<sup>26</sup>

In 2011, various drinkers in the region readily recalled its historic reputation. At the Pymont Point Hotel, Kylie Fulton almost echoed Boyle’s observations when she warned: ‘The one big thing about Pymont... it’s the most friendliest, loveliest people, but if you push one of them, you’re gone’.<sup>27</sup> For Tony Scully, a fellow patron at the Point Hotel, memories of the area’s past had prompted him to question the housing commission’s offer of a place in Pymont:

Years ago in the 50s... I had to come out to Pymont to the wharves... I live in a housing commission now. When they told me we have a unit for you in Pymont, I thought, aww, Pymont, I don’t like the sound of that because Pymont was a bit rough in those days in the 50s.<sup>28</sup>

Some drinkers recalled a more romantic version of the area’s past. Debra Harris’ account of the stolen goods market operating in Pymont in the 1980s reveals a nostalgia for the area’s past and its people:

This place in its old time was full of wharfies... very close people. Come down here on a Saturday, open up the van, get anything... food, anything like. Cos Pymont’s a battlers’ joint... All long gone. You could come down and get your odd gun if you wanted to, it all depends... It’s very old school, very tight.<sup>29</sup>

For Michael Heffernan, who spent a lot of time in the area in the 1960s, nostalgia stemmed from a discontent with the present-day Pymont: ‘It was romantic. It was historic. It was real. But now it’s artificial’.<sup>30</sup> Other interviewees recalled a different phase in the area’s history – one that was decidedly less romantic. ‘Years ago, when I was growing up, and driving through here it was like a ghost town... This part of town was dead... everything was boarded... it wasn’t high density like it is now’, recalled 40-year-old Paul Blasi, a staff member of the Pymont Bridge Hotel.<sup>31</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s the area was undergoing a radical transformation. As key industries vacated the peninsula, so too did the residents. Plans to expand the very roads that took Blasi past the deserted buildings threatened to further decimate the region and its ailing community.<sup>32</sup> The area’s decline scarcely improved its reputation. As Matthews notes in his history, the

depressed Pyrmont-Ultimo region of the 1960s and 1970s ‘vied with Zetland for last place in Sydney’s annual best suburb competition’.<sup>33</sup> Improving the area and overcoming its reputation would take the better part of two decades.

It was this moribund stage in the area’s history – and the policies leading up to it – that had elicited the emotional responses from historians. The area’s collapse and neglect was viewed as symptomatic of the government’s dismissive view of the city’s poorest inhabitants. However, as the damage had already been done, the passing of this stage in itself was not necessarily lamented. This period of post-collapse dormancy in the 1970s and 1980s sits uneasily within the conventional gentrification thesis that holds that the area’s working-class inhabitants were displaced or usurped by middle-class arrivals. With only 1590 people living there in 1981, the area’s residents had departed long before the gentrifiers moved in. Instead, this period in the Peninsula’s development exemplifies more recent interpretations of gentrification whereby, ‘the focus has moved away from the study of class displacement towards a more anodyne metaphor that describes an ongoing and evolving process of population replacement. It is open to argument as to whether class change in such areas can properly be described as gentrification’.<sup>34</sup> Although the political significance of gentrification remains contested,<sup>35</sup> what concerns us here are the memories and emotional responses people have towards the area: in the popular imagination, Pyrmont-Ultimo was simply no longer what it used to be.

### **Breaking with the Past?**

The area’s first pubs commenced trade in Ultimo along Parramatta Street, today’s Broadway. Recognising the growing importance of this thoroughfare between Sydney and Parramatta, John Harris auctioned off parcels of land along the street in the early 1830s and the first hotels were established shortly thereafter.<sup>36</sup> One of the earliest was Edward Turner’s Stonemason’s Arms, which received its licence in 1834.<sup>37</sup> With the Brisbane Distillery (1825) and, later, the Old Kent Brewery (1835) conveniently located just across the road, the Stonemason’s Arms was well poised to sate the thirst of the passing traffic. By 1842, two further pubs were trading along Parramatta Street between Harris Street and today’s Bay Street, whilst the Haymarket side of George Street (then classed as Ultimo) was home to six licensed establishments.<sup>38</sup> At the other end of the peninsula, Pyrmont’s relative isolation meant that the first hotels only opened their doors in the 1840s. Trading at the western end of John Street, the Pyrmont Hotel received the suburb’s first licence in 1842 (although the Pyrmont Inn’s application for a licence a year earlier had been rejected).<sup>39</sup> Only two hotels were operating a decade later.



However, growing demand for the famed Pymont sandstone would transform the area.

Pymont's hotels reflected its industrial development. With their number growing from three in 1855 to seven in 1871, Fitzgerald and Golder muse that this increase may have been partially responsible for the decision to station a senior constable in the area.<sup>40</sup> Hotel trade proliferated as workers moved into the area to work and live. Such trade reached a high point during the 1880s through to the 1910s, when no fewer than 31 hotels were formally operating on the peninsula – except, of course, on Sundays. Concentrated along major thoroughfares, their location revealed the ebb and flow of life in the region.

Hotel names offer some further insights into the area's development, if at times an eclectic one. As the first hotel in the area, the Hotel Pymont duly highlighted its location. The Pymont Bridge Hotel and the Land's End – today's Pymont Point – have continued this tradition. Other names connected with local industry and the men who worked in it. *The Sydney suburban hotel guide 1886* reveals that quarrymen were well catered for, with two Quarryman's Arms hotels. Maritime workers could drink in the Anchor Weighed Hotel, the A.S.N. Company's hotel, whilst workers heading to or from the Glebe Island abattoirs could find respite in the Butcher's Arms. While the recent opening of the Woolbroker's Arms meant that it was not yet included in the guide, there was little doubt as to its target clientele. Empire loyalty (or lofty aspirations) could be expressed through the 'royal' prefix (Royal Oak, Royal Pacific) or by honouring its heroes (Lord Wolseley, Duke of Cornwall). The Sunderland Arms, the Cumberland and the Bristol Arms may have combined such sentiments with a nostalgia for 'Home'. While the naming of the Duke of Edinburgh, the Caledonian and the Glasgow Arms hoped to evoke similar sentiments, they also attested to the strong presence of Scots in the area, particularly the Scottish stonemasons. Names could also change, as new publicans sought to reinvent their investment. Today's Lord Wolseley had previously traded as the Glasgow Arms (as distinct from the Glasgow Arms on Harris Street), whilst the Pymont Bridge Hotel had previously traded under the names Native Youth, Boyland's, and Montgomery's (named after the publican) before assuming the title of a defunct competitor nearby.

Various current-day hotel patrons recalled the pubs' historical relationship with the surrounding area. Of his student days at the Sydney Technical College in Ultimo, Mick Lemon recollected, 'It was like stepping back in time when you used to walk down Harris Street back in the 80s... It was very old style... the street scene was all terrace

houses and it was dotted with pubs all throughout'.<sup>41</sup> At the Glasgow Arms, Dave Sherlock similarly highlighted how the pubs mirrored their surroundings: 'I suppose I came in this pub 24... 25 years ago, when it was a real blood tub... It was just a rough pub, a workers' pub, like the rest of the pubs up and down Harris Street from the Broadway all the way down to Pymont'.<sup>42</sup>

The declining number of pubs in the region generated some comment. Jane Smith at the Glasgow Arms Hotel detailed the recent losses: 'In this area alone... we've lost the Duke of Cornwall, the Vulcan Hotel, the Bristol Arms, the Wolseley's been sold'.<sup>43</sup> Like many interviewed, she blamed big business for these closures:

The places are being bought up by the Cheers organisations, because apparently the law is you're allowed to move a pokie licence two kilometres from the original venue. So they go into places like the Wolseley, the Vulcan... buy up their pokie licences and make them a shell of a place that they used to be... they remove the bottle shop licence as well...<sup>44</sup>

Property developers were also blamed for the declining number of pubs. Pointing to units across the park from the Lord Wolseley, Geoff Holmes stated that: 'I remember a big fire at the wool store that used to be on that block there back in 1980 something... It was one of those big old stores built out of brick and rainforest timber... Probably set by some property developer, I'd say'.<sup>45</sup> If they weren't selling (or razing) the properties, they were moving into them. Of the defunct New York hotel, one patron noted that it had been a 'quite typical Australian pub' but it was now 'some real estate agent or something'.<sup>46</sup>

Property developers and real estate agents were emblematic of broader shifts that had radically reshaped all aspects of life on the peninsula. Although moves to capitalise on the area's location had commenced in the 1980s, it was the 1990s that marked Pymont and Ultimo's renaissance.<sup>47</sup> The ghost town's boarded up buildings and vacant lots were being converted into apartment complexes whilst the warehouses and factories were renovated to suit the requirements of a new industrial sector: media. The impact of these professionals arriving in the area was not simply being reflected in real estate values. At the Pymont Point Hotel, Debra Harris observed that their aspirations resulted in a degree of transience:

The places are being bought up by the Cheers organisations, because apparently the law is you're allowed to move a pokie licence two kilometres from the original venue. So they go into places like the Wolseley, the Vulcan... buy up their pokie

licences and make them a shell of a place that they used to be... they remove the bottle shop licence as well...<sup>48</sup>

The new arrivals also brought new drinking practices. New lounge bars-cum-restaurants such as Oscars on Union Street thus emerged. Interviewed a few doors down at the Pymont Bridge Hotel, 39-year-old Tim Pearse confessed: 'I've been to Oscars a few times, which is a bit more of a modern pub... a bit more fancy bar style... They've got square cushions and all this sort of shit everywhere, but it's actually quite nice – but it can be quite pricey'.<sup>49</sup> Wine bars provided another alternative to the area's pubs, though not for the first time. Such establishments had already operated in the region and across Sydney since the early 20th century, albeit with a decidedly shady reputation.<sup>50</sup> For today's drinkers, wine bars denote a very different drinking experience, as Beck Verity explained:

[I]f we've got something really special that we want to do... we'll go down to Gallon [wine bar], get a bottle of champagne, and celebrate it there and then head to somewhere else. We choose that kind of venue more because it's a bit more upper class...<sup>51</sup>

Verity's comments reveal that wine bars and other licensed venues were not the only challenge faced by the pubs in Pymont and Ultimo. New drinking practices militated against the pub. Rather than stay put, this new generation of drinkers was transient, taking taxis from suburb to suburb in search of a drink as well as an 'experience'.

Hotels in Pymont and Ultimo have reacted to gentrification in different ways, with renovating being the most obvious response. For 'Macca', the Dunkirk's path 'from a semi-old style to a... yuppified pub' was emblematic of what had been happening 'all over Sydney', whereby, 'The old crew, I guess, are being squished out'.<sup>52</sup> One of those pushed out of the Dunkirk was 'Dubbo', a squatter, whose story was relayed by Mick Starr:

[T]here was a bloke squatting here... I went to his funeral two years ago. What was his nickname? Dubbo. He used to collect aluminium cans around here... So anyway they had to pay to get rid of him. I think they gave him \$15 000... He was an old fella, very old. They paid him out and he lost all his money at the races.<sup>53</sup>

The area's changing demographics also affected the very basis of the pub's stock and trade. For the area's traditional working class inhabitants and pensioners, price hikes and boutique brews hardly

enamoured them to the newly renovated pubs. 'I think myself being a pensioner and a lot of the other pensioners, because of the prices increase... they just don't get around as much as they used to', explained Tony Scully.<sup>54</sup> However, price was not the only factor driving traditional patrons away from the renovated pubs. Elliott-Watson felt deeply aggrieved by the perceived attitude meted out to non-professionals upon entering one of the 'corporate' pubs:

You can't just sort of come in off the street in your work clothes and things, then you've got people looking at you and you don't fit in... the type of crowd that's in is all a little bit corporate and they're looking at you going 'well, what's this bloke, should I be worried about him because he's not dressed nice... he's in overalls, he's got paint stains on his clothes or something. He's obviously... come in from work, he must be in it for the long haul, wants to get on the alcohol or something all night'.<sup>55</sup>

For the interviewed patrons, the peninsula's recent transformations threatened to obliterate the past. The old 'blood tubs' were gone. Some had been upgraded to cater for the newly arrived 'yuppy' clientele, whilst others were simply shells, stripped of their assets. Although the region and its populace had indeed undergone a transformation, it was hardly the first since European settlement. Patrons' discussions around the disappearing past therefore blend reality with mythology. While none expressed a desire to return to the 'blood tubs' or the rough and tough lifestyle of earlier generations, their lamentations, as *lieux de mémoire*, do reflect a personal connection with the past as well as an abiding concern about its status.

### Maintaining the Past

'The Quarrymans is [a] really good old local one', asserted Debra Harris. 'I think [it's] the only local hotel left in the area that's still kept its energy and it's real people in there... the original type of pub... original tiles on the front, things like that. Original old beer pictures and things like that, painted.'<sup>56</sup> Although various patrons were concerned that gentrification was progressively eroding the area's past, a significantly larger number of respondents adopted a much more positive perception of the area, its pubs, and their relationship with the past. Far from losing the past, these patrons believed that their pub was intimately linked to the area and its past. More importantly, they felt that the pub's presence both established and reinforced these connections.

The view that their pub was somehow historical was expressed by various patrons in different ways. For Blasi, the age of the Pymont Bridge Hotel spoke for itself: 'A lot of history. A 100-year-old building'.<sup>57</sup> Others simply sensed it. 'Yeah, it's good', stated Todd Smith at the



Dunkirk. 'It's kind of old. Seems like a bit of history here.'<sup>58</sup> The Lord Wolseley elicited particularly strong reactions from drinkers. Wolseley patron Mark Conyers thus echoed Smith's terms, albeit in more definite terms: '[It's] good. It's nice. It's old... It's got a lot of history about it'.<sup>59</sup> Female drinkers at the Lord Wolseley appeared to be more inclined to use the term 'character' to describe these sentiments. 'It's quaint, it's got character. All the locals sort of tend to frequent here. It's nice and sort of quiet. It's just a nice little local', commented Tanya Sharpe.<sup>60</sup> Kal Man, a Hungarian migrant, felt that the heritage that Lord Wolseley upheld went even further:

As a migrant, I been living here 32 years, one of the most beautiful pub I've seen. Lately, I'm fed up with this Americanised, commercial institutes look like a horse stall. This has got a very personal touch, very human feeling... It's an institution of this area, well, as a migrant I probably pay more attention. I love this pub.<sup>61</sup>

The most overtly historical aspect of the pub was the building itself. Patrons pointed to various features to highlight the pub's age. 'You can tell it's old school just by the layout of it, masonry brick... definitely old time', enthused Sean Burgess.<sup>62</sup> Looking around the Pymont Bridge Hotel, Dane Scerri noted, 'it's got the original ceiling, original tiles on the wall, the floor certainly hasn't been polished any time recently'.<sup>63</sup> Significantly, patrons were not adverse to alterations. Older patrons seemed particularly supportive. At the Agincourt Hotel patrons were impressed that the recent renovations had caused little change. 'It's a beautiful building and when the previous management was doing a development application, I was a bit concerned that they might alter the fundamental structure of the place', observed Clive Forbes.<sup>64</sup> However, he 'was very pleased to see the plans and watch the progress of the renovations. It's all been done very carefully'. Visiting the pub for the first time in 30 years, 71-year-old Alan McLeay identified some changes but felt that, 'It's still the same, thank god'.<sup>65</sup>

In their explanations of why they were drinking at a particular pub, patrons frequently made direct and indirect references to the histories and the historical relationship between the pub and the surrounding area. Proximity to work and home was a common response. While the references to work are illustrative of the time of day in which the interviews were undertaken, they nevertheless demonstrate that the needs of the area's workforce, though gentrified, were still being met by the pub. Location may have initially attracted patrons, but it was something else that kept them returning. To this end, respondents were unequivocal: it was the pub's atmosphere that exerted the greatest appeal. A former barman of the Glasgow Arms and now

intermittent patron at the same venue, Jim Papworth was moved by the familial sense of community that had existed there:

It's not one of those all done up and renovated and soulless, totally artificial places. It's a pub pub in the old school, you know, get with your mates, have a beer and leave your problems at the door or talk about your problems – there's always someone here... someone to listen, someone to help... It's a big family, it's an extended family. There's people without families around... this is their family.<sup>66</sup>

Drinkers at the Dunkirk drew on rural images of community to describe their pub's communal ambience. 'All round, it's [a] very nice village pub, village atmosphere', Mark Josey explained, adding, 'I think Pymont's a beautiful area. I think it's got great tradition, it's managed to hold up to its idea of a village close to the city. The community spirit here is very high'.<sup>67</sup>

Taking it further, Debra Harris asserted: 'It's my local, this is my backyard, and I feel comfortable'.<sup>68</sup> Whether it was 'old school', 'community', 'family', or all three, the underlying appeal was comfort. Various respondents therefore used 'comfortable' as a shorthand term. At 43, Michael Anderson simply stated: '[I]t's a comfortable place to come to'.<sup>69</sup> A comfortable atmosphere, it seems, was dependent on the synergy between people and place.

Of course, not every respondent felt completely comfortable in the pub where the interview took place. Alan Jubb bluntly proclaimed that the Agincourt was 'shit... there's no character, too sterile'.<sup>70</sup> Such contrary perceptions provide equally revealing insights into the region's hotels and their historical credentials. At the Harlequin, two patrons used the 'old man' image to criticise nearby pubs. 'The Quarrymans and the Kirk... they're full of old blokes and all that sort of thing', complained Scott Whitehouse.<sup>71</sup> Rob Smith simply described the Dunkirk as 'quite an old man's pub'.<sup>72</sup> In her account of fellow patrons at the Glasgow Arms, Rebecca Williams provided a more detailed account of what constituted an 'old man's pub' and why it did not appeal to her:

It's pretty average... Not much going for it... It's generally an older crowd that seems to have drunk a lot... I'm 28, it doesn't really appeal to me whatsoever. It's got the sports, the pokies, the TAB corp and the casino... it's just not appealing. No music, no nothing... It looks old and a bit run down.<sup>73</sup>

Although Williams does not mention gender, her sentiments dovetail neatly with those that do. Commenting on the area's pubs, Fiona

Brown felt that women were excluded: ‘They all seem to cater for tourists and sports bars. Very guy orientated. That’s all I’ve observed’.<sup>74</sup> Some male patrons were also attuned to the ways in which sports, gambling, décor and drink selection created a gendered environment.<sup>75</sup>

The relationship between class and history was perhaps more complicated. As noted, patrons celebrated the pub’s working class heritage as a key part of its atmosphere. However, as Elliott-Watson’s previous comments readily reveal, numerous patrons were uncomfortable with working class patrons. This disjuncture was particularly evident in comments about the Quarrymans Hotel. Drinkers at the Dunkirk across the road revealed that Harris Street functioned as a barrier between two groups: ‘You get more labourers tradies across at the Quarrymans, and more white collar at the Kirk’.<sup>76</sup> For Mark Josey, the Quarrymans was ‘one of the last kind of spit and sawdust places... It’s managed to keep a hold of its working class tradition when it comes to the bar room area’.<sup>77</sup> The venue was also well known for another perceived working class ‘tradition’ – violence. Various respondents recounted stories of ‘scuffs’ and seemingly random violent outbreaks. Andrew Swain recounted one such incident:

Once I was there drinking, I think there’s bikies and what have you hanging around... I was just chatting to a bloke one day and I turned around for a second and this other bloke comes over and said, ‘you looking at my mate’ and then – whoosker – put one on the button and he was ironed out! We just didn’t know what to do! His other mate came and grabbed him and pulled him away. But it was just out of the blue, couldn’t believe it. Some bloke pepped up on goof balls or something... It’s all right though, not too bad.<sup>78</sup>

### Conclusion

Asked to reflect on the changes that occurred across Pymont and Ultimo in his lifetime, Michael Heffernon offered an ambivalent account: ‘It’s become just another part of Sydney. It’s lost its romance, it’s lost its reality. But it’s gained also as well. It’s gained to become part of Sydney’.<sup>79</sup> While the Peninsula had undergone considerable transformation in recent years, the past had not been entirely erased. The remaining pubs in Pymont and Ultimo actively connect the present to the past, functioning as sites of memory and history. Their location, appearance, function, and names reflect their immediate surroundings and are intertwined with the suburbs’ changing fortunes. Their patrons similarly contribute to this discourse, adding additional layers of meaning to these intersections between the past and present.

On the one hand, patrons were anxious that the past was being lost. Gentrification was identified as the primary culprit. The wealthy new arrivals had little respect for the region's heritage and the vast majority of the pubs on the Peninsula now appeared to be catering to their tastes. In recent years, the pubs in Pyrmont, Ultimo, and across inner city Sydney, have been viewed as worth less than the sum of their parts, namely their liquor licences, poker machine licences and property prices. Evidence of this process marks the landscape. The former Bristol Arms Hotel on the corner of Quarry and Harris streets now houses offices whilst the shell of the former Terminus Hotel slowly crumbles into disrepair as its owners await the right opportunity to redevelop the dilapidated site. Other former hotels have been demolished altogether. Such concerns about the gentrification of the area and the disappearance of the pubs reaffirm the degree to which the remaining pubs perform the function of a *lieu de mémoire* as much as their functional role of dispensing drinks. While the recently established wine bars could offer the latter, they could not offer the former.

Yet patrons' anxieties about the region's transformation were in part offset by the very presence of their pub. In their capacity as 'a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of [this] community', the pubs in Pyrmont and Ultimo have also established a stronger and more intimate connection with the past. Of course, the declining number of pubs has been integral to this relationship. Each closure sees the surviving pubs assume a greater responsibility for upholding the area's memorial heritage. In recent years, renovations have therefore been undertaken with a view to maintaining their presumed integrity – something that various patrons noted appreciatively. Similarly, drinkers themselves overlook the more contentious aspects of the pub's heritage – their capacity to be sites of exclusion, intimidation and violence. Accounts of active avoidance of the rough Quarrymans Hotel underscore this selectivity. The pubs' role in upholding the local community's memorial heritage was aptly illustrated by the fact that one of the area's latest generation of wine bars refused to give permission for patrons to be interviewed as part of this project. Their explanation was that their patrons would not want to be interrupted. Such an explanation did little to refute Searle and Byrnes' claim that the area was now a site of consumption and a commodity in itself.<sup>80</sup> It also reflects an abiding unease about their status in relation to the surrounding area and its heritage. Identifying themselves as recent arrivals, the wine bars clearly did not regard themselves as a *lieu de mémoire*. Only time will tell whether they will ever assume this role.

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## Chapter 8: 'It Used to be a Dingy Kind of Joint'

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