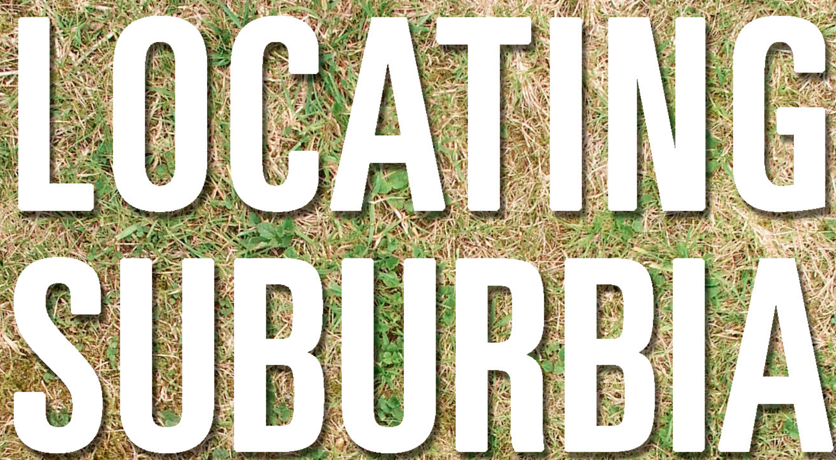

LOCATING SUBURBIA

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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Hamilton, Paula, editor.
Ashton, Paul, 1959- editor.

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Eli Hochberg, Caroline Hunter, Cameron Jones,
Minhky Le and Jumana Shakeer

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Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton
Editors and Co-Directors
Centre for Creative Practice and Cultural Economy

This eBook was designed by
Eli Hochberg, Caroline Hunter, Cameron Jones,
Minhky Le and Jumana Shakeer

CONTENTS

Introduction *1*
Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton

MEMORY

1 The Perfect Garden *7*
Kay Donovan

2 Remembering the Suburban Sensory Landscape in Balmain *18*
Paula Hamilton

3 The First House and the Hop Farm *31*
Margot Nash

4 The Smell of Glass Bead Screens *51*
Andrew Taylor

5 Connecting to the Past *75*
Anna Clark

PLACE

6 A Place for Everyone *88*
Paul Ashton

7 Home *103*
Sue Joseph

8 'It Used to be a Dingy Kind of Joint' *124*
Robert Crawford

9 Liquid Desire *140*
David Aylward

10 'What Happened to the Locals?' *154*
Penny Stannard

11 Reinventing Manly *170*
Theresa Anderson

CREATIVITY

12 The Concrete Remains *187*
Sarah Barns

13 Camperdown Park *204*
John Dale

14 Blood, Belly, Bile *213*
Debra Adelaide
Imagery by Greg Ferris

15 Watery Ghosts *226*
Megan Heyward

16 The Artist as Trickster *243*
Elaine Lally

17 Road, River and Rail *259*
Chris Caines

Author Biographies *268*

References *272*

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.[1]

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 chrysallis 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.[2]

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,[3] and more recently loved,[4] 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’.[5] 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.[6] 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 being 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’.[7] 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.[8] 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.[9]

The identity of suburbia, so far as it can be ascribed one, is shifting and insecure; a borderline and liminal space.[10] Dominant stereotypes have listed it as 'on the margins' beyond edges of cultural sophistication and tradition' and the areas that make up 'sprawl'.[11] 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.[12]

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.

***

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.[13] 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'.[14]

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.[15]

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'.[16] 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.

MEMORY

03

THE FIRST HOUSE AND THE HOP FARM

Margot Nash

THE FIRST HOUSE AND THE HOP FARM

Margot Nash

The first house sits in the hollow of the heart, it will never go away. It is the house of childhood become myth, inhabited by characters larger than life whose murmured conversations whisper and tug at the mind. Enchanted birds and animals out of a private ark sail out on tides of sleep, howling, whistling, mewing, neighing, mooing, baaing, barking…[1]

The last time I saw the old house was in the late 1970s. I had gone for a Sunday drive with my mother, Ethel, her friend Helga and Helga's tiny Chihuahua dog, Pixie, who my mother adored. Mum also enjoyed the attention Helga paid to her and the way Helga took charge and drove the car and made decisions the way a man would. I can't imagine it didn't occur to her to be curious about Helga's sexuality, I certainly was, but my mother was an expert at repression, and Helga was useful. I was a young radical feminist, living and working at the Pram Factory theatre in Carlton at the time, and I suspect Helga was curious about me too.

We headed out on the Maroondah Highway to Ferntree Gully and the promise of Devonshire tea, but I insisted on stopping at Ringwood to see what had happened to the old house. I was curious too about the hop research station out the back my father had set up for Carlton and United Breweries in the 1950s. We had relocated from New Zealand in order for Dad to take up this job, at which he had been remarkably successful, before retiring in the late 1970s. My parents were long divorced, although he was still living nearby. The hop station was still there, but someone else was running it, so there was little chance of bumping into Dad, but my mother was still unhappy about stopping.

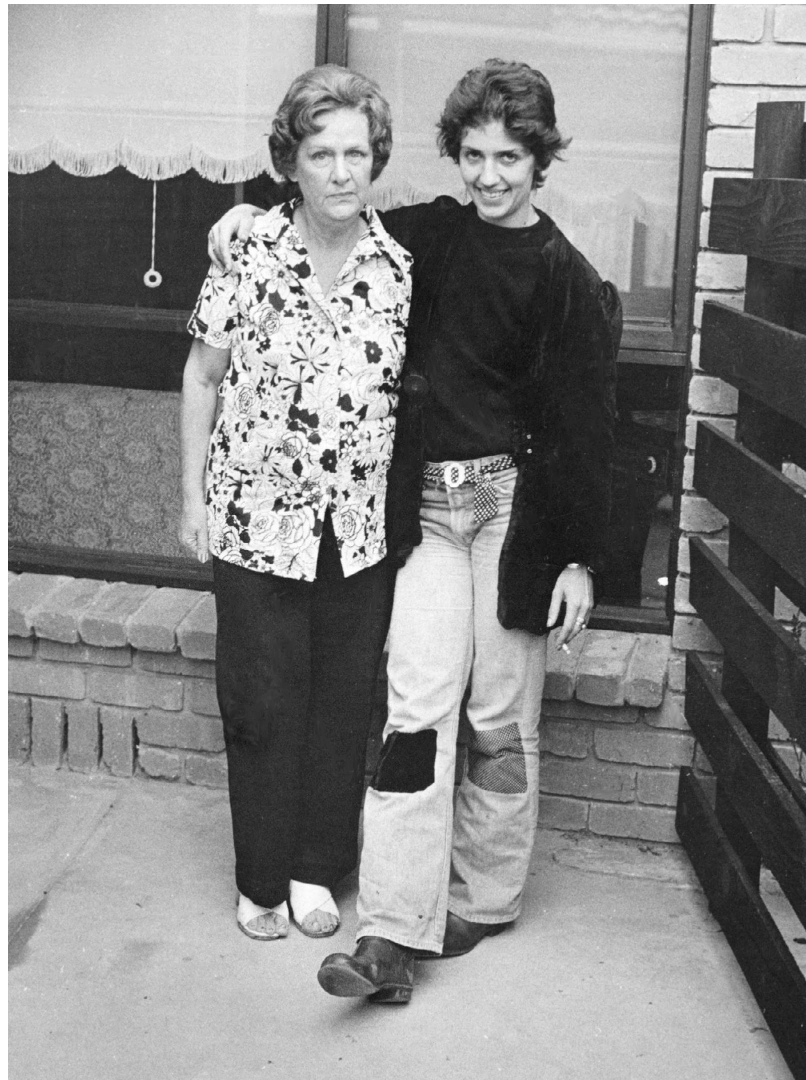
Ringwood is the kind of suburb you can drive through before you know it. The highway runs straight through the centre of town so it is easy to be swept up in the slipstream as massive trucks roar through, linking the city of Melbourne with regional Victoria. Large car yards and factories had replaced the orchards and local corner stores of my childhood, but as we passed the familiar clock tower (which had been moved to the other side of the road) and then the old railway station, I knew exactly where I was, so when we approached the house I quickly guided Helga off the highway and into the driveway. I eagerly climbed out of the car and investigated. The house was a three-bedroom white weatherboard house facing the highway and, while it looked run down and deserted, it still held powerful memories for me. My mother had no interest in revisiting the past and stayed in the car, so while Pixie was let out to pee, I explored.

I went straight around the side, climbed up and peered into my old bedroom window. To my great surprise it was full of books. We knew Penguin Books had bought the property next door, but not that they were using our old home as a storeroom. It was unnerving to see my old bedroom piled high with books, as I had been both alienated from, and fascinated by books as a child. My sister Diana was the bookworm and I was the tomboy. At one stage my mother had to stop my sister reading for me because I wasn't learning to read. We all escaped the tensions in the house through retreating into imaginary

worlds. My mother was a great storyteller, filling up the silences with tall tales and true. She had her own fantasy world fixated on lost opportunities of a grand upper-class colonial life. My sister always had her nose in a book, escaping into the fictional worlds of the great classics, but my imaginary world thrived in the images in the family photograph albums and in exploring the forbidden areas both inside the house and outside on the hop farm. I was obsessed with trying to uncover the secrets I knew were hidden in the house and whenever I had the opportunity I searched the back of the cupboards, inside my parent's drawers and under the house. I even climbed up into the attic and hunted through the old suitcases and boxes that were stored there. I found many strange and curious things, but I couldn't ask anyone what they were for fear of being discovered. Sometimes my mother would catch me playing with her jewellery or she would find something had been moved or tampered with and I would get into trouble. Diana became the 'good' girl and I became the 'bad' one. She was clever, while I had 'personality'. I performed and could always make people laugh, whereas she was withdrawn and asthmatic. This unfortunate division meant we were not friends as children. It was only later, after we had both left home, that we rediscovered each other and began to share the story of the house and the hop farm, and what had happened there.

That day as I peered in at the books, I was gripped by a desire to climb in and see what they were, the inquisitive and mischievous child returning, seeking adventure and sure to get into trouble yet again.

Once Pixie was back in the car, my mother was impatient to keep moving, but I insisted on heading out the back to see what had happened to the hop farm. I knew my father had bred a famous hop called 'The Pride Of Ringwood', but at that time I had no idea just how important it had been for hop growing and brewing in Australia. This was something I would discover later. What my father did in the Nissen hut that was his office and laboratory and in the cluster of outhouses on the hop farm was a source of endless curiosity for me. Whatever it was, it was always accompanied by the rich and fecund smells of the earth and hops. We grew up with the pungent aroma of spent hop mulch and hops drying after the harvest. This smell has the power to instantly bring back memories of Ringwood and the hours I spent exploring the hop farm and the sheds, where sacks of blood and bone and dried hops were stored. Sometimes I made secret cubbies among the sacks so I could climb down into their smelly depths to hide. I loved running down though the hop fields into the forbidden territory down the back where the creek marked the border of our land from the bush; where the bellbirds sang and tiny green tree snakes curled through the branches.



[Figure 1] My mother and I, the Pram Factory era (Photo: Ponch Hawkes, 'Ethel and Margot, 1978', Our Mum's and us series)

[Figure 2] Me and my sister Diana out the back (Photo: Nash private collection)

My father's brief from Carlton and United Breweries had been to breed a hop more suited to the Australian climate. The brewing industry had expanded rapidly in the post-war period and local hops were only meeting half of the brewers' requirements, which meant large quantities of hops had to be imported from the US and the UK. The brewers were growing the Californian Golden Cluster variety, but were unhappy with it, as it had a very harsh flavour.[2] My father set to work researching and documenting the remarkable properties of the hop. In one of his reports for Carlton and United Breweries, he wrote:

> Hops will grow up to six inches in twenty-four hours and if given the opportunity will climb to twenty-six feet in a season. […] Besides imparting the bitter flavour to the rather sweet ale, it was discovered that hops had no effect on the workings of the yeast, yet they helped to protect the beer from bacteria, thus improving its keeping qualities.[3]

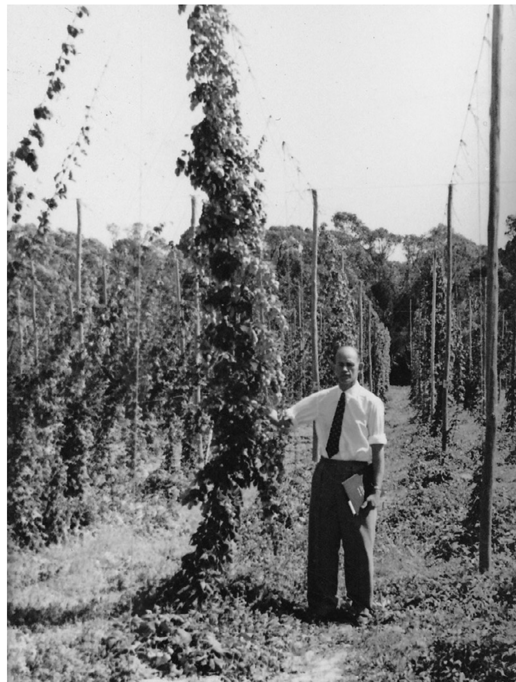
My father used an open pollination system, planting thousands of different female hops and then planting wild male hops from Tasmania through the field to pollinate them. The first major hop he developed was 'The Ringwood Special', soon superseded by 'The Pride of Ringwood'. 'Pride's' mother was a hop called 'The Pride of Kent' and its father was an unnamed wild Tasmanian hop. It became prized for its high resin content, high crop yield and resistance to disease,[4] in particular to the deadly fungal disease *Phytophthora citricola*, or root rot, which was killing up to 30 per cent of hop plants in Australia per year at the time.[5] When 'Pride' was released it was the highest alpha-acid-yielding hop in the world. Alpha acids are found in the resin glands of the female flowers, and produce the unique bitter taste of beer, but 'Pride' also had a distinct citrus aroma.[6] It would become the main hop grown in Australia, flavouring Victoria Bitter and Foster's Lager, and accounting for about 90 per cent of Australia's hop production. It would also be grown extensively overseas.[7]

As I made my way through the remnants of our old vegetable garden, which lay between the house and the hop station, I could see the old sheds and the Nissen hut laboratory. I could also see a beige station wagon parked outside the hut, so I stopped. Apart from the distant drone of the highway it was very quiet and I couldn't see any movement. Behind the sheds I could see the row of tall poplar trees my father had planted as a windbreak for the hops when the farm was set up, but I couldn't see if the farm itself was still there. When we were growing up, there were rows and rows of hop plants running all the way down to the little creek at the back, where I loved playing. I wanted to see if the farm was still there, but I was nervous about exploring any further and aware of my mother sitting in the car, anxious to get back on the road.

[Figure 3] Bill Nash in the Ringwood Nissen hut laboratory, c1958 (Photo: John Gallagher)

[Figure 4] Dad and Diana out the back, the house in the background (Photo: Nash private collection)

Instead of pushing on I knelt down and plunged my hands into the soil, only to discover it wasn't the rich dark soil I expected but hard yellow clay. In my ignorance I decided that my father had leached the soil for his work and left it for dead. It would be years before I would discover that far from ripping the goodness from the soil my father had constantly organically enriched the naturally clay-based soil. My sister remembers how for years truckloads of spent hops would be delivered each week from Carlton and United Breweries in the city to mulch into the soil. Hops throw out sticky runners with small spiny hooks that twist clockwise and are trained up strings attached to tall poles.[8] The less these runners try to grow out horizontally along the ground the better. Rupert Saines, who worked closely with my father for 26 years, as manager of the hop farm in the Ovens Valley where the new hop varieties were planted out, told me later that the clay-based soil in Ringwood had proven useful as it discouraged horizontal growth. [9]



[Figure 5] Bill Nash, Ringwood, c1955 (Photo: Nash private collection)

That day the heavy yellow clay seemed a far cry from the rich dark soil I thought I remembered. It felt as if the old farm had dried up and was on its last legs. Putting dates together now, I realise our visit probably coincided with the time the research station was being shut down and everything packed up and moved to the Ovens Valley. According to the Brewery, the Maroondah Highway had become wider and busier and headlights from passing traffic at night had started to interfere with the natural lifecycle of the hops, so a decision had been made to shut down the station and relocate it.[10]

I don't know when the house was demolished, but the last time I went to Ringwood my friend Tim and I drove straight past and had to circle back, searching for street numbers on the used car yards and warehouses, and even then we nearly missed it. There was a

'For Lease' sign where the house used to be and a road that led to a concrete car park and a massive storage warehouse where the hop farm had been. The row of poplar trees marking the boundary were the only thing left to tell me I was home. The poplars had survived in all their majesty and were now massive. As I got out of the car a breeze came up and began to ripple back and forth through the leaves and I was suddenly transported back into my childhood running down the boundary line. I realised that it was not just the smell of hops that had the power to conjure memory, but the sound of the wind, whistling and playing its songs in the poplar trees as I lay on the ground gazing at the clouds moving across the sky, making up stories and dreaming. Where the farm had been was now completely covered by a concrete slab. However, I could see through the thick wire fence and the padlocked gate that the creek was still there.

Stormwater fed into the creek and rubbish was strewn under some of the bushes, but there was a strip of land that was still predominantly bush and a walking track that followed the creek. The old pine tree I remembered so well was still there with its now massive trunk and bed of soft pine needles around the base, taking me back to stories of the enchanted forest and the magic faraway tree whose branches reached up into the clouds, leading to magic creatures and strange new lands for children who dared to climb it.

A Strange New Land

One of my earliest memories is lying in a bright green bath and having my stomach pumped with a long flesh-pink rubber hose, because I had swallowed nail polish remover. I have always placed this memory in the bathroom at Ringwood and connected it to piles of half-opened cardboard boxes, as if we had just moved into the house, but my mother surprised me one day by telling me that this had happened in Lincoln, in New Zealand's South Island, not long before we left for Australia. This vivid early memory, so connected to physical trauma, had mixed up the two countries and in the process blurred the boundaries between them. The boxes I remember were no doubt in the process of being packed not unpacked, but why do I remember the nail polish remover on top of a wardrobe, which, as a toddler, I could not possibly have reached? Perhaps this is what Freud called a screen memory as it has screened out the trauma of the horrific acid taste and replaced it with a strangely serene memory, constructed perhaps out of family stories and imaginings. My earliest memory, however, originates in New Zealand and has no image. It is connected entirely to the smell of tamarillos or tree tomatoes. My maternal grandmother had a tamarillo tree in her backyard and my older sister Diana remembers her smothering them in white sugar for us whenever we visited. I suspect this memory is, again, connected to leaving New Zealand for Australia, as we would have visited grandma to say goodbye.

[Figure 6] Me and Mum, just before leaving New Zealand (Photo: Nash private collection)

Moving to Australia was a challenge for the whole family. My parents had to leave family and friends behind and we only had a couple of distant cousins in Australia who lived miles away and who we would rarely see. But the job offered my father the research challenge he longed for, and it was a prestigious job for a young scientist, so it was also an exciting move. My father was a working class boy who had chosen to take a small inheritance early in order to go to university. His great uncle, Thomas Watson, a wealthy Sydney identity, had died childless and left a small fortune of £20,000 to his 13 nieces and nephews, of which his mother, my grandmother, Caroline Watson was one. Dad's share enabled him to graduate with a Bachelor of Agricultural Science from Lincoln Agricultural College. After returning from the war, he was chosen to set up a hop research in the hop-growing region of Riwaka in the South Island. First the New Zealand government sent him to the UK to study at Wye College School of Agriculture in Kent, which at that time was the leading hop breeding research institution in the world. He studied with the legendary Prof. E.S. Salmon, whose 1931 open pollinated hop 'The Pride of Kent' would later play a major role in my father's research.[11] Dad returned to New Zealand full of energy for the Riwaka project, but the plans were continually delayed, causing endless frustration, and so when the offer from Carlton and United Breweries in Melbourne came through, he accepted it and we moved to Australia.

We arrived in Sydney on a passenger ship called the Wanganella on 18 September 1950, and while I was only a toddler I clearly remember looking over the side as we approached the dock and seeing mermaids languidly swimming with the boat. I can still see the flick of their silvery tails and their long tresses snaking through the

water. No one can talk me out of this memory nor that we arrived in Sydney not Melbourne. I have no idea why I have always been sure of this – perhaps I overheard something my parents said. They are both dead now, but a search of passenger records in the National Archives of Australia revealed that we did arrive in Sydney. I don't know how we travelled from Sydney to Melbourne, but when we arrived, the Ringwood house was still being built so we stayed further out in Olinda until it was finished. Rupert Saines remembers coming down from the Ovens Valley in early 1951 and helping set up the hop station. It was built on a hectare of land that had previously been an apple orchard, owned by local orchardist Dave Meyland. Ollie Meyland, Dave's brother, had an orchard over the road and owned a machine that pulled trees up. When Rupert arrived the land was covered in upturned apple trees with their roots poking up into the air. It was Rupert's job to cut the trees up, so that when they dried out my father could burn them. Rupert stayed in the 'Ringwood Coffee Palace', a boarding house near the Ringwood railway station, where he could have breakfast and then walk to the hop farm.

By that stage the Nissen hut was there and so was the little glass-house and some of the sheds. We must have moved into the house by that stage as my mother cooked a midday meal for him every day. He remembers it as a happy time with me sitting up in a high chair and my sister sitting on the other side of the table. What struck Rupert was that my mother's lunches were not only delicious, but they were quite different from any meal he had ever had before. He was used to having a plate put in front of him with meat and two vegetables, but my mother put three or four different dishes on the table and you served yourself.[12] This was quite exotic for a country lad. When I visited Rupert in 2011 his wife Josie made lunch with a number of different dishes from which we could serve ourselves. When I told my sister this story she dragged out the old beaten up silver-plated nest of serving dishes, which we ate out of every night as children, and had them re-silvered for me as a birthday present. Carrots in one layer, beans in another, and potatoes in the deepest section at the bottom. It was probably a wedding present and meant for special occasions, but my mother liked to keep up appearances, even in the outer suburbs of Ringwood.

Ringwood is 29 km from Melbourne and in the 1950s it was right on the outer edges of the suburbs. The land is the traditional land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation who occupied the Yarra River Valley and took their name from 'wurun' or 'Manna Gum', which is common along the Yarra River.[13] The Mullum Mullum creek, which ran down the back of our place, is a tributary of the Yarra River. Its name comes from the Woiwurrung language, and is thought to mean 'place of many big birds', alluding to eagles and owls in the area.[14] However,

some historians have argued it is a mistranslation of Ballum Ballum meaning 'place of many butterflies'.[15] There were certainly large bright blue butterflies, as well as the more common orange and black ones. I remember holding my breath if they landed and watching as they pumped their wings like bellows, as if they were breathing. I also remember owls hooting at night and bellbirds singing in the trees, but the birds I remember most were the magpies and fat kookaburras perched on poles in our backyard, swooping down at dusk to take scraps of meat from our fingers.

[Figure 7] Dave Meyland, CUB Hop Station, Ringwood, c1955 (Photo: Ringwood Historical Society)

Dave Meyland went to work for my father on the hop farm, becoming Dad's right hand man. He was the one who dug our vegetable garden and who continued to tend the hop farm after Dad retired. While most of the apple trees were pulled up when the hop farm was established, a few were kept. Plum, peach, apricot and nectarine trees were planted, some lining the driveway that led past the vegetable garden to the research station out the back. Dave's wife and other members of the Meyland family would often come and pick hops when the harvest was on.

Not long after we arrived, my mother went walking with us down to the creek, and what looked at first like a log of wood moved. It was a large brown snake. Coming from New Zealand where there are no snakes, she was terrified and screamed loudly, bringing the men running. We were banned from ever going down there again, but I took little notice of this and made my way down there whenever I could. Often when we came home from school there would be snakes the men had killed hanging on the fence, usually after they had ploughed the

field and disturbed the snake's hibernation. Once one of the men cut the head off a large venomous copperhead snake, which are native to the area, and put the body in the letterbox to give Mum a fright. Perhaps they thought she was giving herself airs and looking down on them. If so, they were right.

We lived a fairly isolated life in Ringwood and my parents made few friends locally. Growing up without any extended family and coming from another country meant we always felt different. We were New Zealanders, not Australians, and my mother was adamant that we would not learn to speak like Australians. In those days Ringwood was known as a rough place and she wasn't keen on us mixing with the local kids. Years later I discovered that the great train robber Ronald Biggs hid out in Ringwood and worked as a house painter during the 1960s, and the Mickelberg brothers, who were accused of the Perth Mint Swindle of 1982, also came from Ringwood. The children-we-weren't-allowed-to-play-with (whose parents bred greyhounds) lived next door and down the road the local bodgies loitered around the local milk bar trying to look like Elvis Presley. When my sister started school my parents stretched the budget and sent her to a private school in the heart of Ringwood called Winnington Grammar.[16] Being 16 months younger, I stayed home alone for a year before going to school. During this time I made up my own language in order to converse with the fairies in the hydrangea bushes, and which, to my embarrassment, my mother would make me 'speak' sometimes in front of guests. I also had an imaginary playmate called Jane Blah who looked like Popeye's girlfriend Olive Oyl.

[Figure 8] My sister off to school, while I stayed home to play with Jane Blah (Photo: Nash private collection)

We grew up on a steady supply of fresh fruit and vegetables and eggs from the chooks, some of which were named after my mother's aunts: Dora, Connie, Minnie and Bertha. Sometimes my father would chop the head off one of the chooks and my sister and I would scream with horror as it ran around with no head while my father laughed. Later we would have to be sensible and hold the headless body and pluck all the feathers out of its warm pink skin. These were always special occasions like birthdays or Christmas. We never had turkey at Christmas and there were no take-away chicken shops, so a chook was a special treat. We didn't have a fridge for a long time either, so most of our food was picked fresh, and eaten quickly, or else it was bottled and preserved for later. We did have an ice chest and the iceman would come every week and deliver a big block of ice that would be stored in a compartment at the top and gradually melt. The ice chest was not very large so it mainly stored things like butter and milk. The milkman had an old dray horse that pulled a cart with a bell and would come every day. We would run out to collect the bottles when we heard the bell, and hope for a spoon of thick cream from the top as a reward. We didn't have a septic tank for years so the 'dunny man' would come and collect the 'night soil'. I still remember his dark weather-beaten skin, thick gloves and dark clothes, and the smelly shiny black metal cans with their tight metal lids that he would hoist high up onto his shoulder and deposit on the back of his truck.

Looking at the photos of the house now I am astonished at how bare the front and the backyard were, how close the houses next door were, and how bleak and enclosed the house looks compared with the vegetable garden and the hop farm out the back. When the sunroom extension was built it opened up the house, bringing light into the dark interior and provided a new space for play and entertaining.

[Figure 9] Me and Diana out the front after the sunroom was built (Photo: Nash private collection)

Out past the vegetable garden the laboratory and the cluster of outhouses were full of all sorts of strange instruments and pieces of equipment, but if asked about something that was too difficult to explain to a child, my father's tongue-in-cheek response was always that it was 'wigwam for a goose's bridle'. The laboratory and the sheds were the sites of secret experiments that never ceased to fascinate me. There was the insect-proof shed where Dad bred different varieties of hops to be used for experiments into hop diseases. It had an 'airlock' porch you had to go through before entering the inner chamber to stop any insects finding their way in when you opened the door. This ensured the hops were not contaminated in any way and he would always boast that no hop leaving Ringwood had any disease.

[Figure 10] Messrs. R. Saines and A. Nash examining hop roots.
Image accompanied Bill Nash's article, 'The new varieties of hops', in *What's brewing*? (ed) Morris Walsh, Carlton and United Breweries, quarterly internal publication, vol 12, no 2, 1961, p7 (Photographer unknown)

Rupert Saines was my father's other right hand man. He was based at the Rostrevor hop farm in the Ovens Valley and would drive down to Ringwood regularly to pick up hops cuttings and return to plant them out and nurture them. On my father's instructions he dug a plot of land and infected it with the deadly fungal disease *Phytophthora citricola*, or root rot, and buried dozens of hop cuttings in it. When he dug it up later he made the discovery that only one hop, later named 'The Pride of Ringwood', had withstood the rot.

What was it in that particular mixture of genes that made this hop so special? In his book The botany of desire, Michael Pollan argues that what saved the potato from the blight that caused the great potato famine in Ireland in the 1840s were 'genes for resistance that scientists eventually found in wild potatoes growing in the Andes, the potatoes own centre of diversity.'[17] 'The Pride of Ringwood' might well

have been named in honour of its aristocratic mother, 'The Pride of Kent', but perhaps it was the lowly unnamed wild male Tasmanian hop that held the precious genes for resistance that made 'Pride' such a breakthrough. For

> [It is] upon wildness – of all things – that domestication depends… To domesticate another species is to bring it under culture's roof, but when people rely too heavily on too few genes for too long, a plant loses its ability to get along on its own, outdoors.[18]

In 2011, I discovered that Rupert Saines was alive and well and living with his wife, Josie, in the Ovens Valley near the Rostrevor hop farm where he had worked for so many years. To my great surprise I also discovered that everyone called him Rupe. My father always called him Rupert and this was hardwired into my memory so I found it very hard to call him Rupe. Similarly he found it hard to refer to Dad as 'your dad', as he had always called him Mr Nash. Dad's initials were A. S. for Albert Steven but he was often called Bert and at some stage this had morphed into Bill. One of the first things Rupert asked me was what the A. S. stood for, as everyone always called Dad Bill and he couldn't understand why. I was surprised he had never asked, but he explained that my father was his boss and he would always be Mr Nash to him. Listening to the way Rupert spoke about my father made me realise that while these two men had always maintained a very formal relationship, they were quite close. Rupert told me that 'We only had two dust-ups in 26 years'. One was when my father was unwell and the other was when Rupert planted out a hop called the J 78 after my father had told him to destroy it. 'It was a beautiful hop', he told me. He believed in it and couldn't bring himself destroy it. When he was proved right that the hop was worth saving my father, to his credit, conceded that he had been wrong. Rupert also told me that my father confided in him that the seeds he used to grow 'The Pride of Kent' had travelled from Kent, in England, to New Zealand and then later into Australia in my father's pocket.[19] So 'The Pride of Ringwood's aristocratic mother turned out to be an illegal immigrant.

Later, when the hop station was packed up and relocated to Rostrevor, Rupert came down and helped Graham Hughes, who had taken over my father's job when Dad retired. The outhouses and equipment had been carefully packed up and moved to the Ovens Valley where they remain to this day. Rupert helped dismantle the two glasshouses pane-by-pane and pack them onto trucks to be taken the 350 km to the Ovens Valley. Even the old wrought iron gates at the front of our old house were removed and relocated. They are still in Rupert's backyard, along with the little glasshouse and a tiny trailer, used for moving things around the farm, but in which we had had such fun playing as children.

Although Rupert had long since retired, he was tireless in his enthusiasm to show me everything. He took me to the Rostrevor hop farm and showed me the hop field that is named in honour of my father, 'The Nash plot'. There was a Nissen hut in the middle of the hop field next to a huge walnut tree that my father had given to Rupert as a gift when he and Josie were married back in 1954. I assumed the hut was the same one that had been my father's laboratory and office, but Rupert told me that the original had been demolished and disposed of. This one was a smaller version and had been Rupert's shed before he retired. Dad's hut was larger and contained a darkroom where he processed rolls of film documenting both his research and family life. No one knows what happened to the many rolls of film and photographs that he took. Rupert's wife, Josie, told me he always had a camera around his neck. Luckily some photos have survived, but nowhere near the number he reportedly took.

Rupert's Nissen hut was full of rusty old things that he couldn't bring himself to throw away. It was like a museum holding all the remnants from the time when Rupert and my father worked so closely together. Like me, he had held onto the history and refused to throw anything away. Many of the things lying around were gifts from my father; strange devices that reminded me of my father's tongue-in-cheek sense of humour. Not long after my visit, however, they found old power cables in the ground leading to the hut and decided to demolish it on safety grounds.

I was very grateful to Rupert for his many stories recounting my father's pleasure in his work and his generosity toward others, as life with my father was extremely difficult at times and my mother had become more and more negative about him as she got older. Coming to Australia may well have been a great opportunity for my father and his work, but it also placed him under enormous pressure to perform. He worked long hours, often seven days a week, breeding thousands of different hops, looking for that one magic hop that might solve all the problems. According to Mum, he bred 10,000 new varieties in one year alone, but the pressure took its toll.

My father's mental health was already fragile. During World War II he had been a navigator in the New Zealand Air Force. He was stationed in The Wash on the east coast of Great Britain, flying in large Beaufighter bombers. One night, as they were flying in formation across the channel, the Germans had the entire squadron on their radar and two thirds of them didn't come back. Later he flew in tiny high speed Mosquito aircrafts used for reconnaissance and pathfinder missions across Germany and during one attack watched his best friend's plane go down. He was traumatised by the war and suffered from what my

mother called ‘nerves’. The pressure of the new job meant he would regularly collapse and be taken to hospital with what my mother called ‘overwork’. In fact, he was suffering a series of nervous breakdowns and was given electric shock treatment on a regular basis. My mother was unable to discuss Dad’s illness with me, although she did confide in my sister when she was nine years old, as she was frightened and wanted someone else in the house to know about it in case the police had to be called. Dad suffered acute paranoia and would often accuse Mum of collaborating with Russian spies. He drank heavily and would threaten her physically although he never actually hit her. It was therefore left to my sister to tell me that Dad was mentally ill after a particularly acute episode that couldn’t be explained away easily.

[Figure 11] Margot, Bill and Diana (Photo: Nash private collection)
[Figure 12] Margot, Ethel (Ettie) and Diana (Photo: Nash private collection)

In these early photographs of the family standing in front of the garage at Ringwood I can see the signs of my father’s illness written on his face, but I can also see the stress and sadness that my mother lived with written on hers. We had an older sister, Felicity, who contracted tubercular meningitis as a toddler and consequently suffered severe brain damage. She was eventually placed in a home for intellectually disabled children in New Zealand. This happened before we were born. My mother would always get upset when she visited her, so when my father was offered the job in Australia he suggested it was an opportunity to ‘build a new life with two healthy girls’, but of course this meant leaving Felicity behind. It was only when she died in 1952, at the age of twelve, that we were told of her existence.

When my mother was older and often in physical pain, she would often recite what can only be called a mantra, ‘This pain has no power over me, this pain has no power over me’. She was from a generation who were stoic. You didn’t complain, you just got on with it, but when she got dementia and forgot to hate my father, she started to miss him and wanted to know where he was, as if he might just walk in the door and hold her hand the way I imagine he did that day in the kitchen when she wept inconsolably for her first born, Felicity, my big sister, who had just died.

My father was a tenacious and clever scientist and while he suffered regular breakdowns he managed to do a remarkable job in a very short period of time. In 2003, on the 50th anniversary of the famous ‘Pride of Ringwood’ hop, that he bred, Grey Leggett, in an address to the Hop Producers Association in Bridport, Tasmania, said,

> The speed at which Nash achieved his success is remarkable. Five years after the project commenced a new variety had been developed. Furthermore the harsh flavour problem of Cluster turned out to be due to kilning practices and this was also solved… What a marvellous variety and break through ‘Pride of Ringwood’ was. ‘Pride’ has an alpha content almost double the existing varieties grown in Australia and also produced significantly higher yields. The US had nothing like ‘The Pride of Ringwood’… and Germany has really had no bitter variety that approached the performance of ‘Pride of Ringwood’.[20]

Although my sister loves a long cold beer after a hard day’s work, I still can’t drink beer. Perhaps its familiar smell brings back the tension that often accompanied family dinners. The smell of hops is quite different. Its heavy pungent smell can still conjure a time when I ran wild and free through the hop farm and dreamt dreams that were full of excitement and desire: dreams that still inform my work and, like my father’s love and passion for his research, give me the courage step into the unknown and risk mixing wildness and culture, in order to discover something new.

[Figure 13] Bill Nash (Photo: Margot Nash, 1978).

For my Father
Bill Nash
8 January 1909 – 25 April (Anzac Day) 1986

Elaine Lally is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her scholarship focuses on creative practice and digital culture, and explores material culture, consumption and everyday life, drawing on the sociology and philosophy of technology. With Ien Ang and Kay Anderson, she co-edited *The Art of Engagement: Culture, Collaboration, Innovation* (2011). She is currently working on a book about online musical collaboration, 'Music making in the Cloud: creativity, collaboration and social media', to be published by Intellect in 2014. She is the author of *At Home with Computers* (Berg, 2002).

Margot Nash holds a MFA (by research) from the College of Fine Arts at the University of NSW. She is an award winning filmmaker and a Senior Lecturer in Creative Practices at the University of Technology, Sydney where she coordinates the postgraduate writing program. Her areas of research include the theory and practice of screenwriting, developing subtext, film directing and Australian independent film history. Her film credits include the experimental shorts *We Aim To Please* (1976: co filmmaker) and *Shadow Panic* (1989: prod, writer, director), the documentary feature *For Love Or Money* (1982: co filmmaker, editor) and the feature dramas *Vacant Possession* (1994: writer, director) and *Call Me Mum* (2005: director, co-script editor). In 2012 she was Filmmaker in Residence at Zürich University of the Arts where she developed a feature length personal essay documentary film about memory and history.

Penny Stannard is a PhD candidate at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her research examines the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions that arise when suburban Australia is placed within the cultural policy discussion. Of particular interest are the intersections that occur between the physical and imagined dimensions of suburbia and how these are encapsulated both theoretically and 'on the ground'. Penny has had a twenty-year career producing contemporary cultural programs for organisations across the government, community, education and not for profit sectors. Her work spans disciplines of practice and is informed by methodologies that engage communities, researchers, policy makers, educators and artists in partnerships that result in creating new cultural material and influencing policy directions.

Andrew Taylor is a Senior Lecturer in Media Arts at the University of Technology, Sydney. He is also a filmmaker and photographer and his film work has been awarded and screened at Australian and International festivals. Andrew's recent research has focused on the use of still images in documentary and work that falls between film and photography. He is currently working on 'Love, Death & Photography', a series of film-photo-essays for TV broadcast and online exhibition.

Chapter 3: First House and the Hop Farm

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