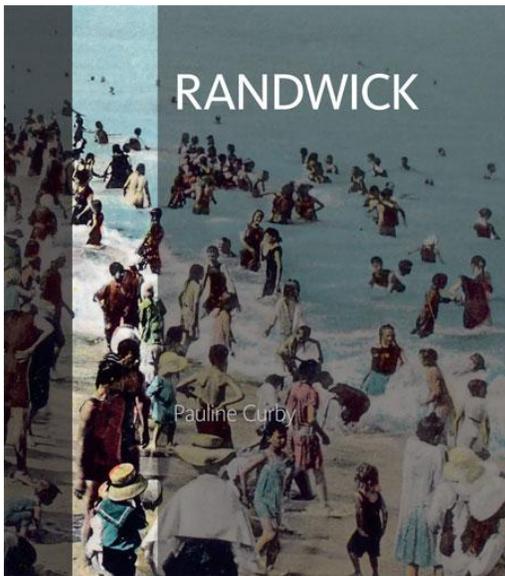


Randwick by Pauline Curby. Randwick, NSW: Randwick City Council, 2009, pp. 404, AUD \$69.95 Hardback, ISBN: 9780908510085.



The editors of this journal asked me to review Pauline Curby's impressive book because of my work on *Locating Australia's Past: A practical guide to writing local history in New South Wales*, first published in 1988. Then, I was project officer for the Local History Co-ordination Project, a centre established in 1986 in the School of History at the University of New South Wales and funded by the University and the Australian Bicentennial Authority. The idea of the Project's directors, Patrick O'Farrell and John Ingleson, was to create a sort of information bureau of local history in New South Wales. An aim was to initiate a broad, public discussion on the nature and possibilities of local history, one that might open up new

directions while recognising legacies from a number of academic traditions that used local history to explore the past including the French Annales School and the lively local studies approach of some British social historians. In Australia, the Royal Australian Historical Society had published scholarly articles on local history in its journal since its establishment in the early twentieth century, providing an important source of both analytical and antiquarian detail on towns and regions in New South Wales including Sydney suburbs. There was also the Australian academic tradition of regional studies of squatters and pastoralism. Its heyday was in the 1960s and early 1970s, and included *Men of Yesterday* (1961), Margaret Kiddle's classic history of the western district of Victoria, *Discovering Monaro* (1972), W. K. Hancock's environmental history of Monaro in south-eastern New South Wales, and *Squatter, Selector and Storekeeper* (1969), Duncan Waterson's history of the Darling Downs.

By 1986, in the lead up to the bicentenary of Cook's arrival in Australia, there were clear signs of a new grassroots awareness of local history alongside the established interests of local historical societies which had emerged from the 1930s. Curriculum changes in New South Wales introduced local studies approaches to the study of history at school. A change in government funding priorities created opportunities for local libraries to establish local history collections, and enabled municipal councils to incorporate local history into their programs, including partnerships with commercial publishers and professional historians that resulted in a number of important regional histories such as *Narranderra Shire* by Bill Gammage.

Alongside these initiatives, there was also the work of Max Kelly, Peter Spearritt, Shirley Fitzgerald, Paul Ashton, Grace Karskens and others on the history of Sydney and its suburbs. Versed in the tradition of urban history, Kelly and Fitzgerald in particular brought a new way of exploring Sydney's local history through the study of relationships between places—especially suburbs and the city—and people, in order to understand how place and humans have shaped one another. These histories emphasised the importance

of social relations in order to address questions of municipal character and identity, the often inevitable conflicts that arise as communities work out ways to accommodate different ideas of identity, which sometimes end not in tolerance of differences, but in the obliteration of one set of community values for another. Ideas of community can be strong, but as these historians showed, in local histories of Sydney's suburbs they can also be surprisingly fragile.

Pauline Curby's *Randwick* falls into this Sydney school of local urban history. The book begins with two maps, one showing the municipality of Randwick in the context of greater Sydney, the other usefully showing the suburbs of Randwick as they have been over time. Anyone familiar with eastern Sydney will immediately recognise the diversity of the municipality. To the north of Randwick municipality is Centennial Park, which Henry Parkes titled the 'people's park' at its opening in 1888 in celebration of 100 years of British rule. To the south is Botany Bay National Park, a place with a complex identity based on living memories of Aboriginal people, the unemployed of the 1930s depression, and postwar immigrants, as well as the distant memories of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century French explorers. In between, there are suburbs of such social difference that in one sense the history of Randwick is a remarkable cross-section of Australian class relations. In the north is the nineteenth-century suburb of Randwick, an upper middle-class enclave of good manners and comfortable housing including grand mansions (some of which have been demolished). Alongside Randwick the suburb is the more relaxed beachside suburb of Coogee, which was gazetted in 1838, with a mixed history of residential expansion and development as a seaside resort. The twentieth century oversaw various formal low-cost housing projects including the soldier settlement and workers' cottage schemes in Matraville and its environs, where volunteers literally dug away endless sandhills to enable the construction of housing estates. There were also the real estate subdivisions of Kensington, Kingsford and Maroubra, and from the 1920s the mass construction of flats in Randwick and Coogee, a form of low-cost and compact housing that challenged the Australian dream of a quarter acre block.

The history of Randwick, the municipality, could be visualised as a panoramic painting, the south represented by humpies and shanty shacks, graduating to small bungalows, until reaching the north represented by comfortable, middle-class bungalows, apartment blocks as well as mansions and large town houses. In between there are also a number of principal public institutions including the mid nineteenth-century Asylum for the Relief of Destitute Children, (the Edmund Blackett designed buildings now part of the Prince of Wales hospital), the Coast Hospital where people with contagion were isolated, Long Bay Gaol, major teaching hospitals and the University of New South Wales. And we must not forget Randwick Racecourse, the heavy industry of Port Botany or the Malabar sewage outlet that almost from its beginning was overloaded with waste far beyond its capacity to manage appropriately. One of the real pleasures of this large format book is the considerable number of photographs from a range of archival sources that provide another layer of meaning to Curby's achievement. We are able to see what the shanties looked like, as well as the lay of the land before it was engulfed by suburban development, alongside telling pictures of those who lived in and used the region.

In some ways, the history of Randwick municipality is a history of manners and customs, in which there are legendary clashes between different communities of interests. One example is local beach culture. For most of the twentieth century, swimmers at

Coogee have flouted council regulations on swimming costumes, rejecting requirements initially to cover flesh from the knees and above, and continuing to do so as costumes became briefer. Swimmers in twentieth-century swimming attire were part of a new body consciousness in which the public exposure of flesh slowly swept aside Victorian sensibilities about the covered body. These episodes are well documented in Curby's book along with other clashes of manners on the municipality's beaches, including the often difficult relations between surfies and surf lifesavers.

Curby's depiction of the nineteenth century suburb of Randwick as a church-centred village establishes the manners and customs of one part of the municipality, and helps to explain the residents' philanthropic support for the local construction and development of the Asylum for the Relief of Destitute Children. Interestingly, though, turn of the twentieth-century evangelicalism came to dominate the municipality's northern beaches. A different sort of Christianity from that of the church serving its village, beach missions took advantage of the crowds at local beaches to convert them to religion, and helps to explain, I think, the different historical character of Randwick's beaches to cosmopolitan Bondi. There are many other examples, such as residents' prejudice towards the largely working class crowd that frequented Kensington Race Track's pony and hack races, yet their ultimate tolerance of the Australian Jockey Club's Randwick Racecourse, though residents did agitate for more police on race days to control drunken behaviour.

But perhaps the starkest example of clashes of manners and customs was over the use of land in the southern parts of the municipality, taking in the region from Little Bay to La Perouse. Maria Nugent argues in *Botany Bay* (2005) that from the late nineteenth century this stretch of land became a convenient site for Sydney's 'social outcasts' presumably because the peninsula was not well served by public transport, thus an acceptable distance between 'civilisation' and 'otherness' was maintained. (In fact, I wondered whether this need to keep the outcasts at bay helped to stymie the various articulate calls in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century for the New South Wales government to build a railway line to Randwick and beyond.) First, the Coast Hospital was built to relocate people who had contagious diseases. Around the same time a few Aboriginal families established a camp, which Sydney authorities decided would be tolerated as a sensible location for the city's Aborigines. Then in the 1930s Depression a large humpy town known as Happy Valley materialised as more and more people were evicted from their Sydney homes. As these shacks were abandoned during World War Two, they were renewed by newly arrived refugees and postwar immigrants from central and eastern Europe, who recreated this shantytown as home and found work in the new postwar economy. Nugent's notion of a cosmopolitan 'urban frontier' where the colour bar was collapsing, survived until the mid-1950s' lust for more suburban blocks when the shantytown was cleared of residents in one of twentieth-century Sydney's largest mass evictions. Suburban manners, it seems, could not tolerate the manners of the dispossessed.

An important underlying theme of the book is the interplay of community interests and the difficult question of who should set standards of acceptable behaviour. Curby shows a long history of clashes between residents, business owners, state government institutions, local organisations and national companies, as the behaviour of one group grated on the values of another. There is no easy answer to this question, but *Randwick* shows that, ultimately, the role of municipal government is to navigate an often difficult course

through the desires and principles of different groups and communities to try to achieve greater public benefit. Of course, as we all know, local government corruption can make this an ideal rather than a reality, and Randwick is no stranger to cases of corruption. But Curby's history shows that municipal government has mostly worked towards this ideal, and is the reason why residents now have flushing toilets connected to sewers, can walk down lighted streets to catch a bus to the city, borrow books or check email at local libraries, shop at local produce markets and surf relatively safely at patrolled beaches.

Randwick Municipal Council should be congratulated for placing their faith in this project and marshalling resources to ensure its professional production. In the opening essay of *Locating Australia's Past*, historian Beverley Kingston wrote that 'there are signs that our long-held belief that in Australia progress is the antithesis to history may be changing', and this book is excellent evidence of a municipal endeavour that sought to document and analyse Randwick's past and its collective memory. While hardly a glorified history of either local government or the municipality, there is optimism in *Randwick*. Despite the insensitive decisions of past governments such as in the management of the natural environment, Pauline Curby's perceptive history shows that local government has been a crucial part of Australian society in helping to shape our lives. As the mantra 'think globally, act locally' gains force, and citizens begin to look to local government for creative leadership in matters of food production, energy consumption and water management, the time for local government to act heroically may have only just begun.

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