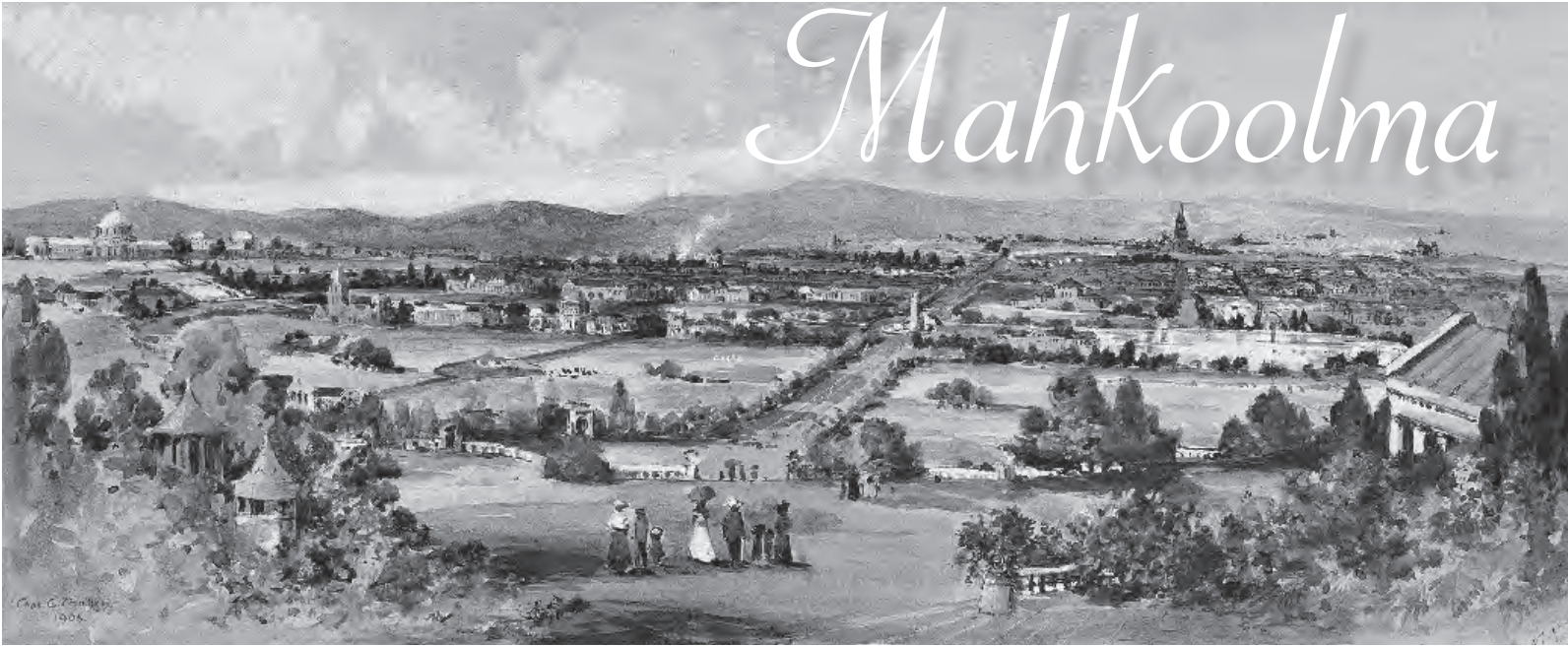


OUR NATIONAL CAPITAL:

Mahkoolma



Greg Wood tells the story of Mahkoolma, promoted by the Chief Architect of New South Wales in 1906 for the nation's capital

Start with an open mind and an uncluttered map; accept the constitutional requirement that the national capital had to be in New South Wales; draw a circle excluding all towns within 100 miles of Sydney; then, as surveyor Charles Scrivener once remarked, the possible sites are as common as fallen leaves in autumn.

The sites in contention for the national capital narrowed down considerably 100 years ago this month. In December 1908, the Commonwealth Parliament, reversing an earlier decision in favour of Dalgety, voted to locate the seat of government in the Yass–Canberra region. At this point, the site alternatives were reduced to six, out of the scores of sites originally suggested by local communities, state and federal politicians, town planners, architects, surveyors and engineers. One of the six, Canberra, was favoured; among the others was one called Mahkoolma.

Just why any local community saw advantage in being the national capital site is something of a puzzle. Civic pride was a factor, the chest-puffing potential of national and international focus. So too was the intoxicating possibility of financial gain. Early on, the imprudent expectation was that having the capital nearby would be a bonanza: land would rocket in value and business would thrive. Those listening to parliament knew it was never going to work this way. Many there favoured leasehold, not freehold, for Federal Territory land, and short-term leasehold at that. They wanted the Australian people, rather than local capitalists, to capture the benefits from increasing land values. After 1910, Canberra district landowners discovered, to their horror, that their lot was dispossession (albeit with compensation), not capital gains.

Dalgety had first won parliament's favour because it had abundant water (the Commonwealth Government proposed that the full catchment of the Snowy River be included in the Federal Territory), it was close to the Victorian border, and it would be able to access its very own federal port of Eden. For these same reasons, it was unacceptable to New South Wales Premier Joseph Carruthers. The New South Wales

above:

Charles Coulter (1864–1956)
*Mahkoolma: Imaginative Sketch
Looking East* 1906
appendix to *Report upon Suggested
Site for the Seat of Government of the
Commonwealth at Mahkoolma* 1906
by Walter Liberty Vernon
Manuscripts Collection, MS 7584

below:

Government photographer
Portrait of Walter Liberty Vernon, c.1895
b&w photograph; 28.0 x 22.8 cm
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn4469155
Courtesy State Library of New South
Wales





Government Architect of New South Wales, Walter Liberty Vernon, Coulter's boss. Its purpose was to advocate having Australia's national capital at Mahkoolma, one of the six Yass–Canberra sites that Scrivener re-assessed early in 1909. Mahkoolma was the name of an abandoned rural property near the proposed city site. And where, you ask, is this place? If you go about 20 kilometres west of Yass, the Hume Highway climbs a hill called Conroy's Gap. Mahkoolma was to the south, well south, along the north-western edge of what is now the Burrinjuck reservoir.

Vernon's brochure was a stylish real estate advertisement. After the Dalgety fiasco, he had, together with others in the employ of the New South Wales Government, 'carefully examined all that area of country lying between the main line of railway from Yass to Cootamundra on the north, the Murrumbidgee River on the south, Lake George

Government stymied it, but set its officials to coming up with other site suggestions that, almost inadvertently, led to Canberra's emergence.

In the National Library's Manuscripts Collection is a delightfully presented document: a brochure with an art nouveau cover, hand-painted Charles Coulter illustrations, photographs and maps. It was written in April 1906 by the then

on the east, and Gundagai branch of the railway on the west' to find a 'site suitable for the erection of a capital city', which satisfied the differing requirements of both the Commonwealth and New South Wales governments.

Vernon judged there to be many scenically pleasing possibilities but saw it as essential for the capital to have 'the vista of permanent water', suggesting



the construction of the Barren Jack (Burrinjuck) Dam:

by which the waters of the Murrumbidgee ... will be impounded to an extent of 40 miles in one direction and 9 miles another ... and wholly in mountainous country—gives, in a lavish way, all that is required in this respect.

As the Burrinjuck Dam would be emptied periodically to supply the Riverina with water, Vernon proposed that the height of the dam wall be increased to ensure the capital's water vista never disappeared entirely.

Even in the era before truth in advertising, certain aesthetic flaws could not be airbrushed and, although the proposed site was littered with ring-barked trees, Vernon argued that:

the native scrub which clothes the ranges, and in some more shaded spots develops scenery of a forest character, should be conserved ... and ... some spots ... reafforested.

In his brochure, Vernon had a dig at fellow architects and town planners, writing:

it is satisfactory to report that the [Mahkoolma] site offers no opportunity for the 'visionary' to design a theoretical city, either on the Cobweb or Chess Board plan, but like all European capitals and cities that rightly lay claim to beauty of situation and appropriateness of combination of city and surroundings, this one provides a similar opportunity to be followed. While level and gently rising sites for

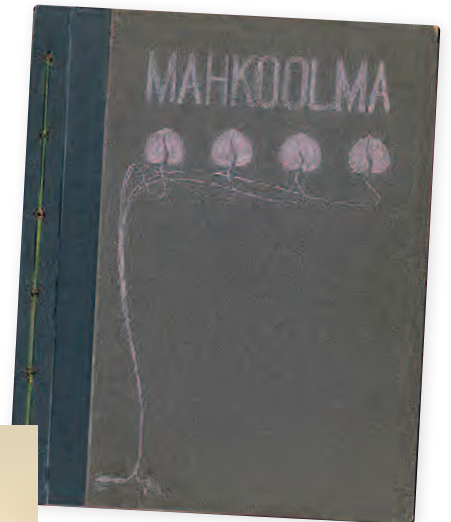
the governmental, commercial and industrial requirements are available at Mahkoolma, the residential suburbs must find a home on the wooded foothills and valleys encircling the main site in all directions.

Enter Charles Coulter. Coulter worked for Vernon but had a public profile in his own right. Back in 1901, he had published an elaborate drawing (now in the National Library) of a proposed capital city on the shores of Lake George, showing that the capital would be imaginative, magnificent, ornate and overbearing. However, Mahkoolma inspired a very different image for Coulter. His sketches include everyday people in the foreground, walking towards a comfortable country town, albeit with a scattering of large buildings in the far distance. It is a modest, accommodating, inexpensive capital.

Not all Vernon's New South Wales colleagues were convinced of Mahkoolma's merits and some promoted other contenders. Vernon's brochure acknowledges that there was 'another site at Camberra [sic], still within the area named, but on the higher reaches of the Murrumbidgee, [which] possesses many qualifications, but in my opinion these are inferior to those of the Mahkoolma site and are mentioned here only as a remote alternative'. At the time Vernon's memorandum was typed (3 April 1906), this 'other site' lacked a name. He left a blank in the document that is only part

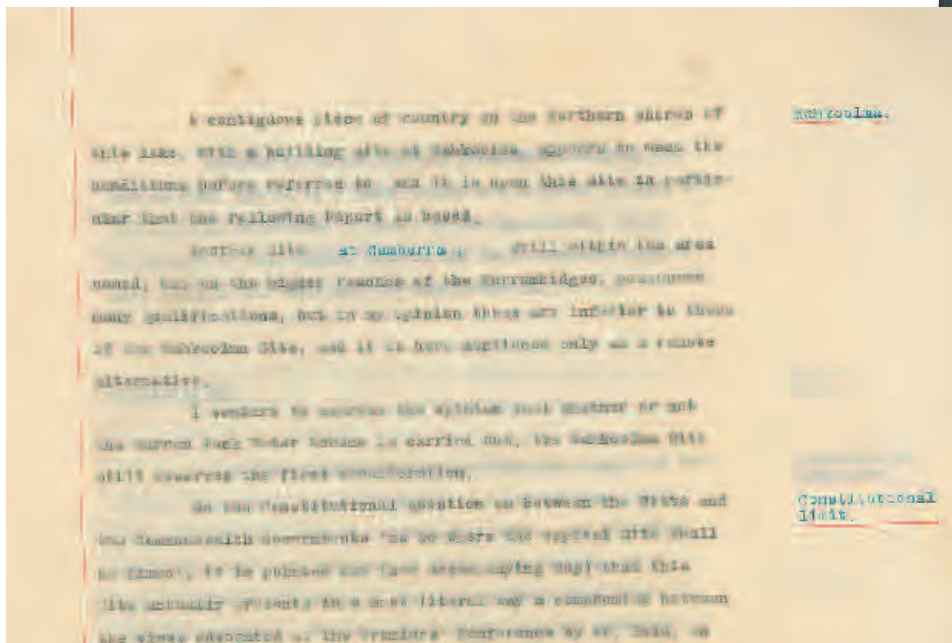
opposite top:
Walter Liberty Vernon and ?,
Assistant Architect
Sketch Map Showing Suggested Capital Site at Mahkoolma ...
1906
appendix to *Report upon Suggested Site for the Seat of Government of the Commonwealth at Mahkoolma 1906* by Walter Liberty Vernon
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opposite below:
Charles Coulter (1864–1956)
Mahkoolma: View from Barren Jack Looking Southeast Over the Valley of the Rivers 1906
appendix to *Report upon Suggested Site for the Seat of Government of the Commonwealth at Mahkoolma 1906* by Walter Liberty Vernon
Manuscripts Collection
MS 7584



above:
Walter Liberty Vernon
Report upon Suggested Site for the Seat of Government of the Commonwealth at Mahkoolma 1906
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left:
Page showing the later addition of the name of the alternative site, 'Camberra'
reproduced from *Report upon Suggested Site for the Seat of Government of the Commonwealth at Mahkoolma 1906* by Walter Liberty Vernon
Manuscripts Collection, MS 7584



filled by 'Camberra', the name added in ink of a different colour.

The New South Wales Government leaned Vernon's way. It spoke of the Lake George and Canberra sites as possibilities but lauded Mahkoolma. In August 1906, Premier Carruthers invited members of the Federal Parliament to visit the proffered alternatives, at the New South Wales Government's expense. Thirty-three parliamentarians did so. The visits took place over two weekends; special trains were laid on from Melbourne. *The Daily Telegraph* of Monday 13 August 1906 described what happened:

Great events from little causes spring and the fact that a group of 10 or twelve men were hard at work on Saturday morning on a muddy bush road, not far from Yass, in getting a trap out of the bog into which it had sunk to the axles, may have, in its way, an influence upon the destinies of Australia. For these men were Federal politicians, a section of the party of 33 members who left Melbourne on Friday night to visit certain territories in New South Wales proposed for the Federal capital, and it was in the course of their journey to the new site, Mahkoolma, about 16 miles southwest of Bowning, the station just below Yass, on the main Southern Railway, that the members had their back blocks adventure. Some of them nearly fell into the Couradigbee [sic] Road, which is quite unformed, under rain, hilly, and in places like a morass from the recent rains. Hence, they reached Mahkoolma flustered, two hours late, and in a frame of mind which would not have encouraged them to a judicial inspection of the Territory. In fact, the majority of them had barely time to do much more than to eat their luncheon, look across the sloping plateau towards the enveloping range of timber covered hills, or at the dense array of dead trees which gave the rising ground behind them such a desperate appearance, examine certain plans

prepared by the Works Department, and hunt for their rugs, to begin the return journey, in order that they might overcome the terrors of the Couradigbee road before darkness set in. Had they climbed some of the hills, as Mr J.C. Watson and Mr Webster did, they would have obtained a much more extensive view, and, no doubt, returned with different impressions.

The Sydney Morning Herald headline read 'Search for a Capital: A Dreary Pilgrimage: A Condemned Site' and reported that:

The result of the visit of the Federal Parliamentary Party to Mahkoolma has been to eliminate that suggested site of the capital from any possibility of selection by the Commonwealth Parliament.

Two days later, the mood changed, with the *Herald* recording that:

In a district of fine landscapes, Canberra is one of the most picturesque of spots, and presented a charming spectacle this morning under the sun from an uncluttered sky. It was a clear, frosty morning, such as can be enjoyed at these high altitudes, where a deep breath of the air is like a draft of champagne.

The press also reported Vernon as saying that 'If you can find a site more beautiful than Canberra, you will have a difficult task'. Vernon was conceding defeat.

In January 1909, Charles Scrivener again scrutinised the site, and found no reason to cavil with the parliamentarians' earlier reaction. As far as he was concerned, if the capital was to be in the Yass–Canberra region, the best site was Canberra.

GREG WOOD is currently researching the formative history of Canberra as the nation's capital

Unknown photographer
Lower Portion of Site: Imperfect Picture Owing to Smoke from Bush Fires 1906
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