

# A VACANT LOT

## D.H. LAWRENCE AND THE SYDNEY REAL ESTATE SCENE



C.W.B. King  
*The Very Cream of Austinmer,  
Second Subdivision* 1913  
coloured map; 15.5 x 25.8 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.map-1fsp20

A GOOD STORY LINE FOR A COMEDY might be *D.H. Lawrence is shown the true soul of Australia by Sydney real estate agents*—but, if Lawrence’s novel *Kangaroo* is anything to go by, the great English novelist wasn’t laughing. Written during his visit to Australia in 1922, his encounter with the Sydney real estate scene was destined to end in tears.

There is a memorable passage in *Kangaroo* where Lawrence, in autobiographical guise as English writer-in-exile Richard Lovat Somers, fresh off the boat, takes possession of a bungalow in Sydney. He is irked by the

STUART MACKENZIE EXPLORES THE GENRE OF REAL ESTATE LITERATURE THROUGH THE LIBRARY’S HISTORICAL SALES PLANS

local fondness for giving cottages names like Tres Bon and The Angels Roost or U-An-Me. Somers, Lawrence writes, ‘rather hoped for one of the Australian names, Wallamby or Wagga-Wagga’. Approaching his new domicile with his wife, he is relieved to see the name painted by the door:

*‘Forestin’, he said, reading the flourishing T as an F. ‘What language do you imagine that is?’ ‘It’s T, not F,’ said Harriet. ‘Torestin,’ he said, pronouncing it like Russian. ‘Must be a native word.’ ‘No,’ said Harriet. ‘It means To rest in.’ She didn’t even laugh at him. He became painfully silent.*

In reality, the 36-year-old Lawrence and his wife, free-spirited German aristocrat Frieda von Richthofen, had installed themselves in a seaside bungalow at Thirroul, near Wollongong, some 50 kilometres to Sydney’s south. They had fled war-torn Europe and a barrage of public and official outrage against his overtly sexual novels and outspoken anti-militarism during the First World War. The bungalow was called Wyewurk, a name with which Lawrence was so taken that he used it for the home of his novel’s main protagonist, describing it as being ‘built by a man who had inherited ... a modest income, and who had written thus permanently his retort against society on his door’.

On a recent foray into the National Library of Australia’s collection of historical sales plans, I chanced upon the original 1919 advertisement for Wyewurk (spelt ‘Wywurk’) in the real estate journal *Properties and Premises* by Hardie and Gorman Pty Ltd:



is extremely charming. Echoing the Wyewurk pitch, the 1923 *Pearl of Pittwater Estate* sales plan states:

*The Vendor having dedicated the beautiful beach reservation for public recreation, dwellers on all parts of the Estate share in the advantages of this silvery strand flanked by a belt of green sward and trees. Fine swimming is within 'kimono distance' of every lot of the estate, and as for the fishing, well he is a poor angler who cannot 'snare them' here.*

Fishing is commonly pitched as an attraction. Further up the coast at *Tuggerah Lakes—2 ½ Hours' Train*

from Sydney, according to real estate agent S.T. Rodd, a 'land of sport' was on offer for 'fishing, shooting, bathing'. Not only, we are told, was the lake swarming with fish and free from sharks, but 'the Gun is amply provided for. The Lakes abound with wild ducks and swans'. The real estate publicity signals a high point in the art of living aimed at outdoors-loving Australians, who liked nothing more—or so it would seem—than to lie back on a beach in bathers, rod and rifle at hand, and with ample leisure for studying recipes for swan pie.

The graphic quality of the Library's sales plans paints a picture of early Sydney as a paradise beckoning to be inhabited.

*'Wywurk' ... 'Why work' indeed when one has a retreat like this to tempt from the turmoil and effort of city life to the restful murmur of the beach? ... The fortunate owner of 'Wywurk' can tumble out of bed on its sheltered verandah, run down the path to the beach, and in thirty seconds revel in the froth of the breakers. Again one asks, 'Why work'?*

Reputedly, next door to Wyewurk were bungalows called Wyewurrie and Chirrup. While we may fancy that these were designed to cheer up grumpy English novelists who had strayed too far from Margate, one could safely guess that the real estate agent who penned these would have been thrilled to know his entrepreneurial wit had claimed the attention of one of the greats of twentieth-century literature. The cottage-naming habit, as Lawrence realised, said much about Australians, with their predilection for coastal real estate and a 'no worries' lifestyle. One scarcely dares to speculate what Lawrence would have thought of a weekend I once came across called *Didyabringyagrogalong*.

The sense of boundless leisure in a land of idyllic scenery as described in the real estate literature at the time of Lawrence's visit

LEFT  
H.W. Horning & Co.  
*The Dee Why Beach Estate, Manly* (detail) 1911  
reverse of promotional map  
31.7 x 50.6 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.map-1fsp1433

BELOW LEFT  
Watkin & Watkin  
*Tuggerah Lakes, the Fisherman's Paradise*  
coloured map; 82.1 x 51.2 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.cat-vn4559883

BELOW RIGHT  
Huntley & Barnard  
*Freshwater Heights, Manly*  
1885  
coloured map; 85.6 x 53.0 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.map-1fsp1443





ABOVE  
Arthur Rickard & Co.  
Narrabeen Lakes Estate,  
in the Delightful Village  
of Narrabeen, 7 Miles  
from Manly 1906  
coloured map; 50.7 x 82.4 cm  
Maps Collection, nla.map-1fsp1700

BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT  
Unknown artist  
Cover of Narrabeen Lakes Estate,  
1906 by Arthur Rickard & Co.  
Ltd, Auctioneers  
Maps Collection, nla.map-1fsp1695

The attractions of the  
Narrabeen estate, 'right in the  
centre of Narrabeen'  
reproduced from Narrabeen  
Lakes Estate, 1906 by Arthur  
Rickard & Co. Ltd, Auctioneers  
Maps Collection, nla.map-1fsp1695

Unknown photographer  
'The Lake Frontages on the Estate'  
reproduced from Narrabeen  
Lakes Estate, 1906 by Arthur  
Rickard & Co. Ltd, Auctioneers  
Maps Collection, nla.map-1fsp1695

As a cartographic record of the emerging metropolis, tracking development from penal colony days to the 1930s, the collection is close to comprehensive, amounting to over 14 000 plans, most bequeathed from the collection of tireless bibliographer and Sydney judge, Sir John Ferguson (1881–1969). As a social record, the literature records the emergence of a distinctive national temperament, celebrating landscape and leisure. The ideal of home ownership in the suburbs shaped our mental condition as much as other social revolutions of the time. Australia, by the turn of the

century, had established a reputation as a 'working man's paradise' through the introduction of the eight-hour day—the ideal day of '8 Hours Labour 8 Hours Recreation 8 Hours Rest'. Extra daylight hours and free Saturday afternoons created a surge in sport, surfing, camping and stays in seaside weekenders.

A holiday mood seems to have taken hold of the real-estate purchasing public around this time. In 1906, for example, the *Narrabeen Lakes Estate*, then a sleepy village and camping spot with a superb beach and lagoon, was brought onto the market by Arthur Rickard, 'Auctioneer and Realty Specialist'. Rickard, whose trademark 'Easy Terms'—combined with 'special coaches', 'light refreshments' and 'a band' to make auction day attractive to daytrippers—won a large share of customers. His pocket-sized brochure, like hundreds of others in the Library's collection, reads like a manual for finding happiness, decorated with seaside scenes of sailing boats, bathing beauties and happy couples canoodling on the lagoon. Rickard opens his pitch for Narrabeen, with a cheeky Shakespearean twist:

*To 'loaf'—or not to 'loaf'. That is NOT the question. The question is ... WHERE will you 'loaf'? ... the Narrabeen Lakes Estate is an ideal 'loafing' spot. Here, far from the madding crowd, you can enjoy a lazy holiday to the full, for you need never leave your camp, so delightful is the air. Yet, if you like boating, lake bathing, surf bathing, sun bathing, harbour fishing, rock fishing, shooting, or delightful rambles—in fact, everything to give the complete change your close city life demands—you have for choice right here.*

One of the features of the sales plan collection is the first-hand descriptions of Sydney, in its pre-surburban arcadian condition, with miles and miles of waterfronts. Rickard's brochure is another gem of the genre, describing the scene of the estate:

*Enter your boat now and drift ... and as you row once more with lazy stroke, you see passing like flashes, a dozen, a score, a shoal of bream, and mullet, and whiting, and flathead—a veritable fishpond. ... [Drift] beneath wattle boughs that rain down golden showers ... Through shoals*



*of fish, and song, and chatter and pipe of birds, and hearty laugh of jackass. ... feast your eyes with the grandeur of the scenery around them ...*

Evidently, the day after arriving in Sydney in 1922 for their three-month Australian stay, Lawrence and Frieda visited Narrabeen, taking the tram north from Manly, past beaches and headlands. Lawrence was not comfortable in the Australian suburban landscape with its 'thousands of small promiscuous bungalows built of everything from patchwork of kerosene tin up to fine red brick and stucco'. Arriving at the Narrabeen terminus, he drew a picture very different from that of Rickard's brochure.

*This was the end of everywhere, with new 'stores'—that is, fly-blown shops with corrugated iron roofs—and with a tram shelter, and little house agents' booths plastered with signs—and more 'cottages'; that is, bungalows of corrugated iron or brick—and bits of swamp or 'lagoon' where the sea had got in and couldn't get out.*

The Lawrences strolled up the main street (probably Ocean Street), 'a wide rutted space of deep sand, ... looking at the "cottages" on either side ... like so many forlorn chicken-houses, each on its own oblong patch of land, with a fence'. But his wife loved the sea, and wanted to live there, stopping at every bungalow with a sign that said '4 sale' or '2 let'. And, as they lay on the dune in the warm sun at Narrabeen, Lawrence conceded a 'sort of fascination' with the scene:

*Freedom! That's what they always say. 'You feel free in Australia.' ... There is a great relief from tension, from pressure ... The sky is open above you, and the air is open around you. Not the old closing in of Europe. ... But what then? The vacancy of this freedom is almost terrifying. ... without any core or pith or meaning ... and at the same time, the great sense of vacant spaces ... The sense of do-as-you-please liberty. And all utterly uninteresting.*

Lawrence seemed more focused on writing about

Australia than experiencing the full value of seaside revelling—he wrote the 150 000-word *Kangaroo* in an astonishing six weeks, according to Lawrence contemporary, Richard Aldington. Idleness was not a condition that David Herbert Lawrence praised readily. 'Loafing' must have been repugnant.

To be fair to Lawrence, by the time he brought his novel to completion, the charm of sea and bush, even the rain on the tin roofs of the ubiquitous suburban bungalows, had penetrated his English soul like a warm breeze. His mood completely turned, writing with an elated lyricism that even a realtor would have found immodest:

*Nothing is lovelier than to drive into the Australian bush in spring ... great gold bushes full of spring fire, ... the most ethereal golden bloom, ... plumes and plumes and plumes [sic] and trees and bushes of wattle, as if angels had flown out of the softest gold regions of heaven to settle here, in the Australian bush. And the perfume in all the air that might be heaven, and the unutterable stillness, save for strange birds and flocks of parrots, and the motionlessness, save for a stream and butterflies and some small brown bees, ... the bush flowering at the gates of heaven.*

BELOW  
Stanton & Son  
Careel Ocean Beach Estate  
(detail) 1922  
promotional poster  
63.3 x 50.7 cm  
Maps Collection  
nla.map-1fsp499

STUART MACKENZIE is a landscape architect and town planner with a passion for Sydney's urban heritage and bushland. He is writing a book titled 'Absolute Waterfrontage: A Real Estate History of Sydney's Waterfront Suburbs'

