

From the President's Desk

The Historian and Heritage

Presidential Address to the Royal Australian Historical Society at its Annual General Meeting held on 27 April 2010

This is my sixth Presidential address. The address to the Annual General Meeting is one of the rare occasions when I have unconstrained power to do as I please or at least talk on whatever subject I please. Throughout my tenure, I have taken the view that a Presidential address ought not to be a review of the state of the nation or even the historical nation. After all, just before each address, the membership of the RAHS has just approved a written report from the President on the preceding year. So instead I have usually preferred to talk about some of my own research interests. Thus in 2005 I talked about the artistic work of Captain James Wallis with his *camera lucida* on the banks of the Hawkesbury. Still partly on an artistic theme, in the following year I discussed the achievements of George William Evans, while after some bracing fieldwork on the Upper Manning I gave an illustrated talk about specialized maize barns in 2007. Last year, 2009, I looked closer to home and rediscovered one of my predecessors, MacLeod Morgan. But in 2008 I moved outside that framework and mounted the political hustings on the public debate on the future of heritage administration in New South Wales. Following on an article that Carol Liston and I had published in *History* magazine, entitled 'The Heritage Crisis', I gave my address the title 'Heritage and the Historian'.

Two years on, the Heritage Amendment Act has been passed into law, the Heritage Office has become the Heritage Branch of the Department of Planning and the wings of those who care about heritage have been severely clipped. But there has been the positive benefit that the key historical bodies, the History Council of New South Wales, the Professional Historians Association and the RAHS itself, have come together in a joint effort, superseding some of the petty rivalries which weakened the profession a decade ago. Despite the fact that our combined efforts failed to ensure that a historian would continue to be a statutory member of the Heritage Council, despite our failure to persuade the politicians that professional bodies, such as the Institute of Architects or the RAHS, should continue to nominate a panel of names from whom the Minister would select new members of the Heritage Council, despite the general victory of the development lobby right through the planning system, we all remain committed to go on working for a better heritage regime. Since we are keenly aware that there may be a change of government next year, some of us have been sedulously praising the state Liberals for aspects of their declared heritage policy, while also looking to the Greens to be as strongly committed to the protection

of the built environment as they are to the natural environment.

Despite the disappointing results of our campaign within the state system, there have been some short-term successes. Rosemary Annable, chosen from the RAHS's nomination list to succeed me on the old Heritage Council, has been reappointed to the new, smaller Heritage Council and I have been given oral assurances that of course the historian is so valued that when Rosemary has to retire at the end of 2012, she will be replaced by another historian. Oral assurances are pleasant but they are not the same as a statutory guarantee.

The new thematic approach to State listing has got off to a good start, with the Heritage Branch sponsoring really good meetings with professional historians on the convict theme and the Macquarie theme. I am very confident that appropriate Macquarie listings will continue to be finalised and approved by the Minister this year. All this is a limited good. It is limited because the emphasis on a few themes prejudices the chances of listing items of non-indigenous significance which are at risk but which lie outside the privileged areas of convictism, Macquarie and world war.

Similarly I welcome with reservations the recent windfall of funds for heritage. Last year the National Brains Trust Forum on Heritage gave some good advice to the Prime Minister. Among other things we sought the establishment of a national endowment fund for cultural heritage, complementary to the large federal sums available for conserving the natural environment. And indeed the stimulus package designed to stave off recession gave very welcome money, lots of money, to projects relating to cultural heritage throughout the country. The substantial building works, including air-conditioning, currently going on here in History House, which have prevented us from using the auditorium this evening, have been funded to the tune of \$165,000 from this stimulus package. A significant number of our affiliated societies have similarly benefited.

As I reported in the Presidential Desk feature in *History* magazine, New South Wales has the largest number of federal grants by a considerable margin. The aggregate of funds awarded to New South Wales was \$17.5m, of which the 51 small community grants totalled just under \$5m. While we are of course grateful, we ought also to remain aware that this does not necessarily herald any new federal commitment to heritage in general. The administration of these grants has given a great boost in morale to the federal

Department of the Environment, Water, the Arts and Heritage, who after many years of drought could enjoy pouring buckets of money over deserving heritage people. The individual recipients of the grants are naturally appreciative.

But federal government perceptions of heritage have not perceptibly moved, while state Labour politicians have hardened their attitude. The long-term struggle must remain at the front of our agenda.

Historians are needed in active service, both at the high level of policy, as on the Heritage Council, and in the trenches of consultancy, advocacy and publication. I have argued the case for the historian in a number of forums, including the RAHS, and I do not wish to repeat myself. Instead I want to use the second part of this address to look critically at one very recent attempt to demonstrate the need for a historian. This is Sue Rosen's book entitled *Australia's Oldest House: Surveyor John Harris and Experiment Farm Cottage*, a revisionist account of Experiment Farm Cottage in Parramatta.

This publication attracted an unusual amount of media attention after Sue was interviewed on Phillip Adams' *Late Night Live* radio show. The blurb on the back cover of the handsome but pugnacious book is very forthright:

This book reminds readers of the damage done when heritage "experts" refuse to engage with historians.

Sue Rosen vigorously attacks the National Trust, the owner of Experiment Farm, for alleged failures in 'its standards of practice and its decision making processes' (p.124). It is ironic that Sue's book reaches dogmatic conclusions which are not fully supported by the evidence adduced and which are deeply damaged by evidence which she ignores. I am entirely in agreement that the right historical questions must be posed and that to find appropriate answers a familiarity with a wide range of evidence is essential. But I am concerned about the shrillness of the attack on the National Trust, of which I am proud to have remained a committed member through its various political misfortunes. I am concerned too about the snideness of Rosen's criticism of Australia ICOMOS, of which I have been a professional member for decades and which has done more for heritage in this country than any other single body. I do not believe for a moment that either ICOMOS or the National Trust should be immune from criticism, but it is ironic that the book which chastises so freely should itself fail to prove its case.

There are ironies everywhere in this debate. It is ironic that up to the 1970s conventional wisdom had dated Experiment Farm Cottage to the 1790s, which is what Sue is now asserting. When the National Trust bought the property in 1961, it thought that it was acquiring an eighteenth-century house. Only in the 1970s was there an attempt to redate the building to the mid-1830s. Again there is irony in this. The key

player in uncovering evidence for a later date was the formidable Rachel Roxburgh, who had been influential in persuading the National Trust to buy the cottage in the first place. Roxburgh had been the anonymous author of the 1963 guide-book to Experiment Farm, which accepted the 1790s date. I admire the integrity of Roxburgh in following neglected documentary evidence through to conclusions which contradicted her own earlier opinions. Just at the time of her change of mind, Rachel Roxburgh's own historical credentials were displayed to impressive effect in her pioneering book entitled *Early Colonial Houses of New South Wales*, published by Ure Smith in 1974.

Rosen understandably gives a good deal of space to the document which so swayed Rachel Roxburgh. This document is a letter from Elizabeth Macarthur writing from Elizabeth Farm in March 1839, talking about her 'near neighbours', the Campbells, who 'have occupied a new cottage on the Estate of the late Dr. Harris'. Elizabeth Farm is next door to Experiment Farm. Rosen devotes six pages to this letter (pp.85-90) and dismisses Elizabeth Macarthur's testimony about the cottage's location as 'a slip of the pen' for Samuel Marsden's estate on the other side of the river. To correct one's source material in this way needs the strongest possible outside evidence. Otherwise it is an act of desperation. In this case, Rosen supports the emendation with the allegation that Campbell was already living in a new house on part of Marsden's land, a house which is, she says, shown in a pencil sketch and several watercolours by Conrad Martens executed in 1837, 1838 and 1839.

But the house in Martens' drawing and paintings is in fact an accurate representation of Marsden's own house called Newlands, built in 1835. The Campbell house looks quite different and there is no extant drawing of it before March 1839.

The Elizabeth Macarthur letter is only part of the evidence on which, over thirty years ago, the National Trust accepted that an 1830s date for Experiment Farm was most likely. The other evidence of a new cottage includes documentation of Harris's intention to construct a new cottage in 1828 and an unequivocal statement from one of Harris's carpenters about a 'new building' in 1834. Another letter, from Surveyor-General Mitchell in 1834, is mentioned but not quoted by Rosen. What Mitchell said was that

Dr Harris reserves the right of setting back his fence about 50 yards from the cottage that is now building.

In Geoffrey Britton's report on the grounds for the National Trust in 2000, it was noted that the distance from the present Experiment Farm Cottage to the back fence was indeed 50 yards.¹ This is not, of course, a conclusive argument but the coincidence cries out for discussion.

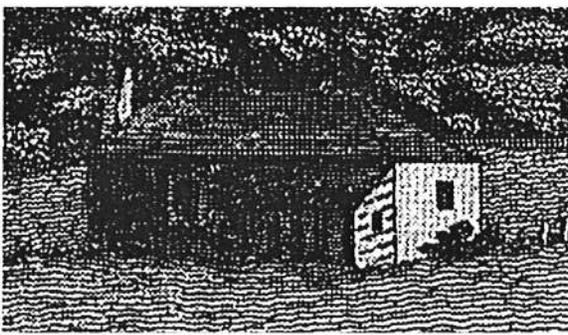
The same pattern of selective documentation and discomfort with visual sources is evident also in the critical part of the book, the positive case for



[Experiment Farm Cottage. RAHS Collection.]

1795. There is no time to discuss what I regard as inconclusive documentary evidence for a house built by Harris in the 1790s. Sue believes that there was such an eighteenth-century house with a verandah. Although she concedes at one point (p.98) that the French doors could have been added later, the general thrust of the book is that the house of the 1790s was fundamentally the house of 2010.

One way of testing whether such a hypothesis is plausible is to look at early topographical views. There are two critically important and reasonably detailed views of Experiment Farm Cottage, one painted in 1804 or 1805, the other engraved in Sydney and published in 1813. Both are by highly reputable topographical artists, George William Evans and John Eyre. Neither image is mentioned, much less reproduced, by Rosen. The Evans watercolour was owned by Caroline Simpson, who commissioned Sue's research; it is now in the Caroline Simpson collection at the Historic Houses Trust. It was reproduced in colour as figure 4.5 in Sue's own sumptuously illustrated book on *Government House, Parramatta*, published in 2003. The Eyre image was reproduced in Tim McCormick's indispensable book, *First Views of Australia*, which has been available since 1988. Rosen does not cite McCormick in her bibliography, but the view is reproduced in a report to the National Trust away back in 2000, which she cites for other purposes in her book.



[Experiment Farm in 1813, from the south-east. Drawn by John Eyre, engraved by Walter Preston, published by Absalom West. Courtesy of Ian Stephenson.]

Sue Rosen has alerted us all to the fact that there are still things to be debated about the origins of Experiment Farm Cottage. There is still work to be done beyond the reports commissioned over the years by the National Trust, and still work to be done after the Rosen book. We all know of fatter houses which have early thin ones lurking within and it is not impossible that there is eighteenth-century fabric within Experiment Farm, as there is within Elizabeth Farm next door. The physical fabric of the roof needs to be examined by an architect and an historical archaeologist with appropriate experience and tested against the two unmatching sets of roof timbers which the government is known to have supplied to Harris about 1794. The early location plans of buildings on the property in 1792, 1804 and 1844 need to be adjusted and superimposed as Andrew Wilson at the University of Sydney's Archaeological Computing Laboratory is so experienced in doing. The early topographical drawings and paintings need to be re-examined with more rigour. The results of such further necessary work on physical and graphic evidence then needs to be conflated with archaeological findings and with the documents and graphics already exhaustively presented by Colleen Morris in 2000 and revisited by Sue Rosen ten years later.²

So what Sue Rosen's book has done is to set off a new set of more pointed questions and what we need to do as historians, what the National Trust needs to do as a responsible owner, is to devise methodologies to answer the questions.

I have devoted the latter part of this address to a book with which I profoundly disagree, because I think that it raises issues which the profession needs to face as we continue to declare that the historian has an essential role in the evaluation of heritage. Genuine debate is a good thing. Let us not pretend that all historians see eye to eye. Let us not avoid disagreement, as long as it is polite, well argued and well supported. For it matters that difficult things should be thrashed out. Sue Rosen's last chapter is entitled 'Why it Matters' and I sympathise with her belief that if her 1795 dating is believed, this has an 'impact on the founding story of European settlement in Australia' (p.118).

Of course, it matters, and of course the understanding of our heritage matters, and of course the special skills of historians should be utilised by the National Trust and the wider heritage profession. But the historians will not always go unchallenged: it is a healthy discipline that can accommodate these challenges and emerge refreshed. The Royal Australian Historical Society is committed to forthright, fearless but courteous debate.

Ian Jack

1 Geoffrey Britton, 'Experiment Farm, Harris Park: Proposals for the Grounds', report to National Trust, August 2000, p.5

2 Colleen Morris, 'Experiment Farm, Harris Park: Proposals for the Grounds, Part II: Historical Analysis', report to National Trust, September 2000, *passim*.