Where Should We Put the Memory?
The iconography of commemoration in Australian public parks

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For nearly 200 years Australia’s urban public parks and gardens have been used for the public display of memory. This is manifested most frequently in three iconographic customs: special landscaping, naming, and the placement of commemorative and historical artefacts. From the statue of New South Wales’ Governor Richard Bourke (1842, Sydney Domain) to the Anzac Peace Park (2010, Albany, Western Australia), the association between parkland and commemoration has been long and persistent. This has been by way of landscape designs and plantings, memorial gardens, parks named after important events (Australia’s Bicentennial), and public reserves that commemorate worthy people (Don Bradman). Parks also act as containers for countless commemorative objects as diverse as monuments, cannon, agricultural equipment, plaques and flowers. By exploring these conventions through examples from across the nation and over two centuries, the paper considers the relationship between Australia’s urban public parks and the commemorative icons contained within them. Have public parks become emblematic settings for national and local feelings, or dumping grounds for public commemoration or, perhaps, a bit of both? The paper considers the commemorative capacity of Australian urban public parks as a way to consider whether the memorials make meaningful gestures, and to explore the relationship between memory and place.

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commemorative objects and the nature of their locations has only been touched on in the literature (Lake, 2006; Martin, 2006; McShane, 2012; Gibson, 2013). This paper considers the relationship between the urban public parks and the commemorations that they contain. The commemorative features can take a variety of forms: a name, a monument, an object, a piece of landscaping. The examples that follow have been chosen as they demonstrate trends across the whole country and over a time span from the 1840s to the 2010s. They address matters of nationalism, war, the complexities of meaningful commemoration, and the sometimes intricate and problematic relationships between urban parklands and overt expressions of remembrance. So, to begin with a statue and two guns.

**COLONY AND EMPIRE**

In April 1842, a large bronze statue of Sir Richard Bourke was unveiled in a prominent position at the Macquarie Street entrance to Sydney’s Domain parklands. The European tradition of placing commemorative objects in the form of monumental figure sculptures within urban public spaces began with the erection of a statue of King Louis XIII in the Place Royale (now Place des Vosges) in Paris in 1639. The square had been made in 1612 as part of Henri IV’s program of urban renewal that saw Paris become the precursor of the modern city and an exemplar of urban modernity. (DeJean, 2014, 45-61). The location of that statue, within an outdoor space specifically intended as a walking place for all Parisians, generated a close association between the concept of commemoration and urban public spatiality. This idea finally percolated into Britain in the early nineteenth-century, and thus to Australia.

Although Bourke was not universally liked during his seven-year term as governor of New South Wales (NSW), a campaign to pay honour to him began before his departure from Sydney in December 1837. The association with Australia’s first public park was not accidental, as the committee that raised money for the statue was led by Sir John Jamieson, who had previously been one of the commissioners who oversaw Sydney’s Botanic Gardens (Sydney Herald, 23 June 1836; Sydney Gazette, 22 December 1838). In time the public donated over £2000 towards the statue’s cost. With no foundry in Australia, the statue was made and cast in Britain (sculptor Edward Hodges Baily) and installed with an engraved plaque explaining at length Bourke’s service to Australia (Sydney Gazette, 25 November 1837; 12 April 1842; Sydney Monitor, 11 December 1837).

Some twenty-three years later, in the spring of 1865, two Russian cannon were placed on either side of Bourke’s statue without ceremony or inscription. The cannon had been captured during the Crimean War (1853-1856) and were presented to the City of Sydney by Queen Victoria as part of her government’s distribution of war trophies to cities around the British Empire. Sydney Council had to hold the guns in storage while permission was sought from the NSW Lands Department to place them near Bourke’s statue. It was not lost on observers at the time that one gun would point towards the residential area of Woolloomooloo, and the other towards the ‘Australian Library’ (now State Library of NSW, Sydney Morning Herald, 26 August 1865).
In 1914, five decades after the cannon first flanked Bourke’s statue, their meaning had become hard to decipher. A Sydney writer lamented that the guns did not have ‘some commemorative inscription… to record the deeds which won them, and the imperial spirit which inspired the gift of them to Sydney’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 17 January 1914). The placement of the guns next to the statue had created a confusing relationship between a governor who left the colony in 1837 and the spoils of a European war fought in the 1850s. In 1925 the physical link between Bourke’s statue and the ‘imperial’ guns was broken when the Domain was re-landscaped and the weapons were relocated to Centennial Park. The positioning of the cannon in 1865 set a precedent for locating military paraphernalia in public parks in Australia, despite the hovering question of whether public parks are suitable places to display weapons of war. Today one of the Russian cannons is aimed directly at Centennial Park’s Visitor Centre and the guns’ status as icons of empire has faded along with their validity as representatives of the power of Great Britain.

**WAR AND THE ROSE**

If the placement of cannons in public parks has stretched meaningful connection between military endeavour and urban leisure, flowers may provide a more appropriate language for the commemorative expression in such places. A strong relationship between roses, memory and public parks developed in Australia in the twentieth-century. Although roses are visually pleasing and resilient plants and have had an association with Australian public space since the 1830s, the iconographic lineage between Australian war history and the flower may not be immediately apparent. In 1943 the president of the National Rose Society of Western Australia (NRSWA), Charles Frost, attempted to persuade the Perth City Council to make a ‘civic rose garden’ in the city. In November that year he accompanied Perth’s Town Clerk William Bold and City Gardener H.N. Braithwaite on a tour of the city’s parklands with this in mind (West Australian, 5 November 1943).
The following year Harold Boas, a city councillor and architect, attempted to make the idea his own by proposing ‘rose gardens of memory’ in Australia’s capital cities to honour ‘fallen soldiers’ (West Australian, 5 November 1943; 20 May 1944; Mail, 13 May 1944). Instead, the Perth City Council acted on Braithwaite’s suggestion of establishing a ‘Peace Memorial Rose Garden’ on a small reserve of public land in the developing residential suburb of Floreat Park (West Australian, 22 June 1944; 7 November 1944). The rose garden’s name suggests that the Perth Council was focussed on the future and its five-year plan for the city’s expansion rather than on the war (see for example West Australian, 16 November 1944; 6 June 1947). The plantings and the reserve (now named the ‘Rose Gardens’) are still well maintained today (TOP, 2015).

Possibly inspired by this urban rose planting, at the close of World War Two the NRSWA began a campaign to have a rose garden made in Kings Park (Perth’s premier public reserve) that would be ‘more national in character, a truly State memorial’. The society asserted that the garden would represent all the people of Western Australia (WA) and would be not only ‘beautiful’ and ‘dignified’, but also a ‘symbol of culture and refinement’. The NRSWA launched a public appeal for funds, and in November it donated the proceeds from its record-breaking spring show to the ‘Perth Memorial Rose Garden trust fund’ (West Australian, 22 September 1945; 10 November 1945). The idea and the Kings Park location were supported by the RSL and WA’s Minister for Lands, Lindsay Thorn, at least in principle if not financially. However, throughout 1946 and 1947 the plans attracted significant opposition, primarily from those concerned for the indigenous flora and fauna of Kings Park, among them the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia, the Gould League of Bird Lovers and the Western Australian Naturalists’ Club, and the scheme did not eventuate (West Australian, 17 December 1946).

Notwithstanding this failed effort, the NRSWA also instigated a campaign to have memorial rose gardens created as places of public commemoration in every part of the state. It did this, I surmise, by contacting every local government body in WA. By May 1946 the NRSWA was claiming that 50 had agreed to ‘launch’ a rose garden ‘in their own districts’ (Sunday Times, 26 May 1946). This dramatic assertion, while reflecting the extent of the society’s campaign of persuasion, was a considerable overreach. I have identified seven memorial rose gardens that were constructed and planted in public reserves in Western Australia in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Collie, Fremantle, Kondinin, Mosman Park, Nedlands, Pinjarra, Wagin). Despite the low number, these rose gardens were a tangible and sensual way to represent significance, and this use of the flower can be understood as a mediating artefact between the real place and the metaphysical resonances of loss.

One rose garden prompted by the NRSWA’s urging was planted at Collie in 1950 in the town’s existing Soldiers Memorial Park. The history of this public park illustrates the complexities that one site can accommodate when it comes to public commemoration. It is also among the early examples of a soldiers’ memorial park in Australia, a form of commemoration favoured by many towns and suburbs following World War One. And the park’s history demonstrates that although the association in Australia between the rose and war gained prominence with the mid-century efforts of the NRSWA, it actually has antecedents from the interwar period.

In October 1915 the people of Collie held a public meeting. In this new mining town, only 20 years old, the community wished to determine how it should ‘do honour to those who have left here to battle for the Empire’ by making a permanent memorial of some kind. The most popular suggestion
was to turn a ‘plot of ground’ in the town into a garden where a block of granite could be erected and engraved with the names of local men who had served in the war. A memorial fund was started, and although several years passed before this objective was met, it was eventually realised. Work began in 1921 to landscape a site on the banks of the Collie River. The war memorial was a handsome obelisk of Western Australian granite listing the names of the men from Collie who had died in World War One. The land was grassed by volunteers working on Saturday afternoons, and members of the bereaved families planted an avenue of 100 ornamental trees (West Australian, 5 September 1921; 6 February 1932). The very landscape, along with the obelisk, had become an icon of grief and particularly of remembrance. This marking of the land became a notable and common practice at a time when so many bodies of Australia’s war dead had been buried far away on Europe’s battlefields.

Over time the park in Collie accumulated other commemorative objects that enhanced its status as a memorial garden. To mark Western Australia’s centenary in 1929, an ornamental gateway was commissioned. For the opening of these ‘Centenary Gates’ in 1932, new flowerbeds were dug and planted with roses (FIG 2). On this celebratory occasion Colonel Herbert Collett, state president of the RSL and later a National senator, took the opportunity to remind those present that everyone ‘should not forget the war… We need to be constantly reminded of what war costs’ (West Australian, 14 October 1929; 6 February 1932). After 1945 the names of local men who had died in World War Two were added to the war memorial.

Figure 2: ‘War memorial, surrounded by a rose garden’, Centenary Park (Soldiers’ Memorial Park), Collie, Western Australia, 1935. (Western Mail, 25 April 1935)

Eighteen years later, in the winter of 1950, the municipal council planted 147 roses as a memorial garden in remembrance of all the Collie men who had died in the two world wars (West Australian, 19 August 1950; 2 September 1950). This suggests not only that this planting was prompted by the NRSWA’s urging, but also that the 1930s planting of roses had not survived. Then, in 1990, a ‘new’ planting of roses was made to remember two specific war victims, again suggesting that the
previous planting had not endured. As a final gesture to Collie Park’s status as a commemorative place, in 2000 a ‘sacred stone’ was placed near the war memorial to commemorate Aboriginal people killed in war. In 2010 the park was listed on WA’s heritage register, which cited and dated its commemorative features: the war memorial and ‘avenue of honour’ (1921), the ‘commemorative arch and gates’ (1930, sic) and the memorial rose garden (1990) as reasons for its heritage status (HCWA, 2010).

The Soldiers Memorial Park in Collie is a significant example of a how a community has maintained a persistent connection between remembrance and an urban landscape constructed for commemorative ritual. But the memorial park also exemplifies how such connections are not necessarily stable. First, the park’s name suffered one period of slippage, when in the 1930s it temporarily changed from Soldier’s Memorial Park to ‘Centenary Park’, then reverted to the original name. Second, the three versions of the memorial rose garden act as a reminder that public places with ornamental features (whether commemorative or not) require constant care, vigilance and money, or the plantings will suffer. Third, the desire for commemorative longevity can clash with other cultural concerns. In the case of Collie’s Soldiers Memorial Park, this is the matter of environmental attitudes to plants. The trees that make the avenue of honour are Camphor Laurels (Camphora cinnamomum, native to SE Asia). These beautiful evergreen trees are found in many Australian parks, and there is no question that the mature collection in Collie is noteworthy and historic – indeed it forms part of the park’s significance as a Western Australian ‘heritage place’. As Collie’s park demonstrates, the Camphor Laurel as an ornamental species was once desired in Australia. Now, however, it is classified as an invasive pest.

Despite the effects of time, commemoration has been accommodated well in Collie’s memorial park. This is not always the case. Another Western Australian town, Albany, where Australia and New Zealand’s first contingent of World War One troops gathered for departure to the Middle East, has taken recent advantage of Federal Government funding to revive its existing foreshore reserve as the ‘Anzac Peace Park’, which ‘opened’ in 2010 (for Albany’s relationship to Anzac see Stephens, 2014, 39). The new landscape design has created the Pier of Remembrance, the Interpretive Walk and the Lone Pine Grove.

The Albany Peace Park, however, makes no reference to the Albany RSL Nurses Memorial Rose Garden, which is located nearby. This modest garden of roses was planted in 1935 on a small and slightly derelict public reserve next to Albany’s railway station. The garden’s circular layout was designed by Jack Page, RSL member and Albany’s Municipal Gardener, with volunteer labour provided by members of the local RSL. The garden not only resuscitated public land, it also recognised the ‘gallant women’ of the 1914-18 war. In the 1930s this was an unusual remembrance of women’s war service (Albany Advertiser, 25 February 1937; 1 April 1937; 24 April 1939; 15 June 1939). It is unfortunate, therefore, that the memory and status of this memorial garden and the associations it makes between women and war have been overtaken in the town’s war commemoration by the new park. Local (and gendered) history has been subsumed by the town’s attempt to make an iconographic connection to the greater (and largely male) national history of Anzac, thus demonstrating how selective the management of heritage can be. At least the local council gardeners maintain the roses.
NAMING AND NATION

As Albany’s Anzac Peace Park demonstrates, the common practice of naming of parks or portions of them, to commemorate an event or person, can result in tenuous commemorative meaning. This is particularly so when associated with expressions of nationalism. In 1988 a number of parks in Australia were named ‘Bicentennial’, as communities claimed their place within that national historical narrative. At least four ‘bicentennial’ parks appeared in Sydney when suburban councils and government agencies used funding flowing from state and national governments. A new, 47-hectare Bicentennial Park was created on the banks of the Parramatta River in Concord, a transformation of so-called ‘derelict’ land into a park with riverside wetlands and ‘lakeside meadows’ (Sydney Olympic Park 2015). The park is now part of the much larger Sydney Olympic Park precinct, and the ‘Bicentennial’ name commemorates no more than government largesse. There is no link between the form of remembrance and what the funding enabled, that is, the environmental recovery of land and wetlands damaged over time by neglect and industrial pollution.

Another ‘Bicentennial Park’ is in the Sydney suburb of West Pymble. The local council used the funding to amalgamate an existing reserve, known as the Lofberg Oval, and an adjacent quarry into a more extensive sporting and active recreation park. The renaming acknowledged the generosity of governments at a time of heightened nationalism. But the new name wiped away a meaningful reference to West Pymble’s history, as the original recreation reserve had been named after a family with connections to the area dating from the 1850s (Cameron-Smith, 2012). In both these examples the park as an icon of the Bicentennial is asserted through the naming, but the value of ‘bicentennial’ as a commemorative declaration of government munificence will inevitably weaken over time.

Park naming as a form of commemoration can be tricky in other ways, as exemplified by Glebe Park, in Bowral, a NSW country town. Don Bradman, Australia’s ‘greatest cricketer’, lived part of his life and began his cricket career in Bowral. In 1938 the Bowral Council named the cricket ground in the northern portion of Glebe Park the Bradman Oval. This commemorated Bradman’s sporting prowess and the town’s connection to him as a national figure. At the time Bradman was at the height of his cricketing fame and the oval was a shabby, unkempt playing field. The naming encouraged the Bowral cricket club to contribute to the upkeep of the ground, which it did for nearly ten years, until in 1947 the council introduced ground fees for all council playing fields: the cricket season fees for the Bradman Oval were ten guineas, double the fee for other council ovals. (Argus, 12 October 1938; Southern Mail, 13 September 1940; 15 October 1940; 30 September 1941; 19 September 1947; 21 November 1947).

The Bradman connection proved a boon to Bowral when the oval gained a new pavilion in 1989 to house a collection of cricket memorabilia. It was subsequently named the ‘Bradman Museum’. But when Heritage New South Wales listed the site in 2000, it mistook ‘Bradman Oval’ to be the name of the whole park. In 2010 the museum was extended, using a grant of $7.4 million dollars from the NSW government. The name was extended as well, to the ‘Don Bradman Museum and International Cricket Hall of Fame’. Despite such excitement, the oval has continued to function the same as any well cared for country town sports ground, hosting the cricket and football seasons for the people of Bowral and the district.
In recent years, however, something else shifted attention a little from Glebe Park’s sporty end. In 2013, as part of Bowral’s 150th anniversary shindig, a bronze statue of the children’s famous character, Mary Poppins, was unveiled in the park. The connection? Poppins’ creator, Helen Lyndon Goff (who wrote as P.L. Travers) lived opposite the park during her childhood. The idea of the statue began as a local ‘Mary Poppins Birthplace’ campaign by Bowral schoolgirl Melissa McShane, was promoted by the Southern Highlands Youth Arts Council, and paid for with a Federal Government Tourist Quality Program grant of $26,400 plus $50,000 raised by the community (Southern Highland News, 17 January 2012, 10 August 2012, 30 March 2015).

However, this statue of Mary Poppins is not the only one in an Australian park, nor is it the first. That honour belongs to suburban Sydney, where – also at the behest of a local schoolgirl (Gracie Drew), and because P.L. Travers had lived across the road – in 2004, the Ashfield Municipal Council installed a bronze statue of the fictional character into Ashfield Park (Sydney Morning Herald, 13 March 2004).
Is it possible to compare these two statues and their capacity to commemorate the reading habits of schoolgirls? Or is it more a question of how the landscape contributes to the remembrance, or at least the ability of people to engage. In Ashfield the statue is placed on a stone plinth, in a tightly planted garden bed within the park’s fenced, shaded children’s playground. In this location the statue is charming but passive and sombre, with the character of a memorial. In quite striking contrast, the statue at Bowral is of Mary Poppins in flight, and quite low to the ground on an open lawn. It is a statue to be touched and climbed on, and so creates a dynamic relationship between the memorial object and the park. At Ashfield Mary Poppins is just another memorial in the large park. On the other hand, at Glebe Park Mary Poppins has added a second field of play and it can be argued that the statue’s presence has saved it from being subsumed by the grandiosity of the ‘Bradman Oval’ agenda. This is not just because of the Heritage Register’s name slippage, but because Glebe Park clearly survives as a viable and useful place of local public recreation and commemoration in the face of the cricket museum’s national positioning. Bowral’s Glebe Park has easily accommodated two unrelated iconographic figures, one representing sport and the nation and the other international children’s literature, and both functioning as centres of action and play.

THE FADED MEMORY

The placement of the Mary Poppins statues highlights the common commemorative practice of utilising parks as containers of local memory. However, this can be a slightly troubling practice, as it does not necessarily sustain history in a meaningful way, as two cases illustrate. In December 1874 the government in NSW recorded the transit of the planet Venus by taking scientific observations at four locations in the colony, one of them at the regional town of Goulburn. This attracted some local attention at the time. A plaque was made to record the event and it was installed in the town’s
Belmore Park. In 1997 the plaque was placed on a low and unprepossessing brick column and repositioned in the park to make way for a children’s playground (Goulburn Herald, 25 November 1874; Sydney Morning Herald, 21 December 1874; Goulburn Mulwaree Council, 2014). Its present location on a path and crowded next to a seat makes the plaque’s meaning almost incomprehensible. In the second instance, a farm wagon has been placed in Apex Park in the Victorian regional city of Wangaratta. While the wagon is discernably old, there is no sign or label to explain its presence. Wangaratta is a lively city with an important regional performing arts centre. As it has no public repository for history however, it seems the park is functioning as an outdoor museum, but without any of the intellectual infrastructure that would attach meaning to the object. In this context it is possible to see the park as a kind of dumping ground for historical objects that a community feels should be kept, but doesn’t quite know what to do with.

With the academy’s interest in ‘memory studies’ over the last decade or so, the words ‘commemoration’ and ‘memorial’ have come to be associated most closely with loss and mourning (Damousi, 2010). For example, in a book optimistically titled Places of the Heart: Memorials in Australia, the authors define ‘memorials’ as ‘objects designed to preserve the memory of a person, animal or event that is symbolic, usually away from where the physical remains are buried’ (Ashton et al, 2012, 1). I do not wish to suggest that there is no link between public space and public mourning. The instances of expressive public war memorials included in this paper illustrate exactly that connection. But there are myriad ways in which people utilise urban park landscapes in order to make public expressions of memory, not just of loss.

‘Commemoration’ and ‘memorial’ do not deserve such a narrowing of meaning, and I take this opportunity to restore these two words to a status of multiple meanings and relevance in the whole matter of how we publicly remember the past. I wish to restore a meaningful connection between these two words and the human need for remembrance in all its forms, both sad and happy. As an example of the latter, in 1976 the Perth City Council redeveloped Delhi Square, a small public reserve in West Perth, and renamed it the Harold Boas Gardens. It has since become, to quote the City, a ‘premier park for wedding ceremonies’ (COP, 2015). It is also the case that weddings by their nature are a form of commemoration, and it is fitting that public parks have become places for nuptial festivities and celebrations. While Boas was not the only person promoting the creation of rose gardens in Western Australia in the 1940s, he certainly gave his support to the idea. So it is appropriate that he should be remembered by relating his name to a public park, even if, over time, his significance in Perth’s history will fade away.

CONCLUSION

Are public parks suitable locations for commemoration? Those who undertake the task of associating commemorations with public parks do so with the intention that the remembrance will have a meaningful future. Australia’s urban public reserves are maintained as public open spaces over time, which implies that they should be safe havens for a commemorative name or a memorial object. But a stroke of a municipal pen can replace a local history with the grander one of the nation, as with the nominal transformation of the Lofberg Oval to the Bicentennial Park, or a community’s attention can shift from say, Don Bradman to Mary Poppins.
The physical manifestations of memory in Australia’s urban public parks frequently demonstrate attempts to connect the local to a larger agenda and certainly make patterns of association as the examples here demonstrate: the colony and empire in the 1860s; ornamental planting and global war in the 1920s and 1940s; local recreation and national pride in the 1930s and 1980s; children’s play and international literature in the 2010s. It is not surprising that parks can accommodate such variety of purpose, but the spatial relationship between such locations and memory can be troublesome of confusing. Nevertheless, the urban park continues to be a favoured repository for the display of public memory. This, it would seem, can have a transformative effect, so making the park itself – and not just its representation of memory – an iconographic object of remembrance.

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