



North Shore Historical Society Inc.

Celebrating North Sydney's Heritage

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NEXT GENERAL MEETING

6.00pm Thursday 14th August 2025

To be held, **First Floor** Stanton Library, 234 Miller Street, North Sydney.

Commencing at 6pm, our meeting will finish around 7.30pm- the library closes at 8.00pm

Note: The meeting is being held on the FIRST floor

July Guest Speaker: Adam Courtenay

Adam Courtenay is a Sydney-based writer and financial journalist. He has had a long career in the UK and Australia, writing for papers such as the Financial Times, the Sunday Times and the SMH/Age. Adam has a love of Australian history and has written many books, including *The Ship That Never Was*, and *Three Sheets to the Wind*. He is the son of Australia's best-loved storyteller, Bryce Courtenay.



Topic: Mr Todd's Marvel - How Charles Todd's dream telegraphed Australia into the modern world

It was on his wedding day in 1855 that Englishman Charles Todd first told the world of his dream. He and his new wife Alice were about to travel 12,000 miles to the colony of South Australia where he would take up a position as Superintendent of Telegraphs. He dreamt that his adopted home would one day be linked to the world.

Todd would have to wait, but by 1870 the world's telegraphic system was ready, poised to connect with Australia. He could now set in train a plan he had thought about for years. That year he began to send thousands of tons of materials, countless animals and hundreds of men into five different climatic zones. He would string a telegraph line from Adelaide to Darwin, from the temperate south into the red heart of Australia - and on to the tropical north. He would need 3,000 kilometres of wire and 36,000 poles.

Mr Todd's Marvel is about one man's doggedness to realise a dream. 'Telegraph Todd' would send the Overland Telegraph Line into barely explored and sparsely populated parts of Australia, opening up the continent like never before.

Welcome to new member: Derin Inan



July 2025 report by Don Napper

The Story Thief - Kyra Geddes

Kyra began her fascinating talk by stating that it was her publisher who chose the title *The Story Thief* for her debut book. This title was considered more eye-catching, and even more controversial, than the one that she had chosen. Kyra's story is a feminist retelling, coupled with an extension in time, of Henry Lawson's ever popular short story, *The Drover's Wife*. This was first published in *The Bulletin* in 1892 and represents the Australian frontier myth told sublimely in just a few pages. This myth is one to which some urban Australians still subscribe.

Because it derived from Lawson's fictional short story, Kyra said that her fictional novel fell into the 'historical fiction' genre. This is different from Susan Luke's children's book, *Marion and the Forty Thieves*, that formed the basis of the Society's talk in May. The latter is classified as 'creative nonfiction' because it used actual historical names and locations. While none of the major characters in *The Story Thief* were real, Kyra's extremely thorough historical research covered both actual people and places in Sydney over the extension in time of half-century that the book's narrative spans. This allowed her to use in the background stories and settings of the novel the names of real-life individuals: these included the artist Treania Smith and the horticulturist Professor Waterhouse and his garden at *Eryldene*, as well as institutions such as the Taronga Zoo and Waverly Cemetery. Together, they constitute significant elements of creative nonfiction in Kyra's novel aimed at providing the reader with a more familiar background and well-known historical characters.

Kyra gave the meeting a brief summary of the dramatic storyline of *The Drover's Wife*. An unnamed woman, whom Kyra said is a bush heroine, lives with her four children in an isolated wooden hut in the remote outback of NSW while her husband is away droving for months on end. One day, near sunset, a five-foot long poisonous black snake slithers under the hut. To protect her children, the woman puts them to bed on the kitchen table and waits with her dog, Alligator, for the snake to emerge from the hole in the wall so that she can kill it. The woman reflects overnight on the many hardships that she has faced in her isolated life: these have included the death of a child in childbirth, as well as floods, droughts and fighting bushfires and other natural disasters. In the morning, when the snake emerges, the woman, with the help of Alligator, kills it and makes her family safe. This is a family fighting for its very existence in a harsh environment and surviving.

Kyra said that she first read *The Drover's Wife* when she was studying English at Macquarie University. She was struck by the fact that the heroine and her two daughters were not given names whereas the two sons were named, not to mention the dog, Alligator. Lawson had written in the story that "as a girl, she built the usual castles in the air, but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead". Kyra found this patronizingly reductive as she believes that despite enduring such suffering in isolation, the woman would have held fast to many aspirations even if they changed, something that Lawson as a man would not understand.

The Drover's Wife was published in *The Bulletin* because its long-time editor, JF Archibald, sought to create a national identity in the run up to Federation. His vision focused on the values of bush life so authors like Lawson were well rewarded for promoting bush life in their writings. Lawson was especially well qualified to do this because he had been born in Grenfell and educated in Gulgong and Mudgee. Kyra said that Lawson was very shy and that this shyness may have led to his excessive drinking from an early age.

Over the years, there have been numerous retellings of *The Drover's Wife*. These include those of Murray Bail (1971), Barbara Jefferis (1980, a feminist retelling), Leah Purcell (2016, an indigenous retelling that was initially a play and now is also a film, with perhaps an opera in the future) and Frank

Moorhouse (2017, a comprehensive anthology). Kyra's book is the latest and longest of these many retellings.



Kyra said that one of the inspirations for her work was the 1945 oil painting by Russell Drysdale, entitled *The Drover's Wife*, which is in the collection at the National Gallery, Canberra. Drysdale always maintained that his painting, despite its title, has nothing to do with Lawson's short story. In 1975, Murray Bail published a short story that fused the two together for many people (Bail also claimed that the woman depicted in the painting was his wife Hazel, who had just left him).

The narrator, Lillian, in Kyra's novel, was born in 1892, the very year that Henry Lawson wrote *The Drover's Wife*. When she was aged 8, Lillian was the only member of her family to survive a bushfire. This resulted in her being sent to a convent at Rose Bay to be educated. When she was 16, she read Lawson's short story and was convinced that it is based upon her own family history, which she became determined to prove. Lillian thinks that Henry Lawson has stolen her family's story and is thus a story thief. But as the years pass, the truth becomes more problematic, and Lillian must decide what is more important: holding onto the past or embracing the future.

Kyra's carefully constructed and superbly presented talk, based on ten years of research, was extremely well received by all members present. Hopefully, we do not have to wait another decade for her second book.



Outing Thursday 18th September

Our next outing on Thursday 18 September will be a visit to Mercy Mission & Heritage Centre, Stormanston House 27 McLaren Street North Sydney.



The Mission and Heritage Centre focuses on:

- Mercy education from its beginning at The Rocks
- The establishment and development of the Mater Hospital Crows Nest
- The Monte Mercy Sisters; response to the social calls of society over the past 150 years

The story is presented through artefacts, photos, newspaper clippings, commemorative items, memorabilia, instruments, habits and uniforms and audio-visual material.

We will be served fresh scones and home-made lemon drizzle cake with tea or coffee in exquisite china cups and saucers!

Donation \$10

Meet at 10am outside 27 McLaren Street



Wading through the Archives

Susan Wade

Edition No 100

A special edition for me! I am amazed and excited to realise it's been 10 years since I began writing Bulletin articles! And I would like to thank Geoff Huntington, our Editor, and those History Society members who frequently acknowledge and discuss my contributions – it is very much appreciated!

I am currently wading through the archive boxes for 1935/6 and am constantly reminded how very different life was for residents 90 or so years ago, in our community.

Firstly, a letter dated December 1936 from Mr. John. W. Eaton of McMahons Point thanking the Council for the letter he received from them with reference to his recent illness, and the hearty congratulations from the Council for his 84th birthday anniversary (probably uncommon to receive such greetings from the Council these days). He also mentioned that it was over 70 years since he first landed as a boy in North Sydney when there were very few residents on this side of the harbour.

My research reveals that Mr. John Wood Eaton was the founder and governing director of John W. Eaton Pty. Limited, timber merchants, of North Sydney. He was of Scottish parentage, but was born at Ashton-Under-Lyne, England, in 1852, arriving in Sydney at the age of five years in the ship the *Gipsy Bride*. He lived in North Sydney for 80 years, and was educated at Fort Street school, daily rowing across the harbour. He was afterwards a builder, and in 1880 founded the firm of John W. Eaton Pty Limited, at Junction and Arthur Streets, North Sydney, later removing to Blue's Point.

Mr. Eaton was a member of the board of directors of the Royal North Shore Hospital for 27 years, 20 of which were served as a vice-president. He took an active part in the raising of funds for patriotic purposes during and since the war.¹



John W. Eaton (1852-1938) founded his timber company in 1880 near the present-day North Sydney railway station. His brother Frank subsequently relocated the business to McMahons Point. John W. Eaton Pty Ltd boomed from the 1890s to the 1920s, and its facilities included a powerhouse, two sawmills, an engineer's shop, a joinery shop, a blacksmiths shop, a wharf and crane. After the business left the McMahons Point site in 1982, its land was bought by the North Sydney Council and converted into a park named

Sawmillers Reserve, which is still in existence.

Secondly, if you have read my article in the April 2025 Journal about the **Flats of North Sydney**, you will now be aware of the objections by many locals about these "objectional 2 and 3 story walk-ups" being built in the North Sydney Municipality during this era. This time the writer is protesting the erection of flats at the rear of shops opposite the Commonwealth Bank, Military Road, Neutral Bay,

¹ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17492569>

where a block of 12 flats was being erected. The site was inspected by the Works Inspection Committee on 5th August 1936, and it was resolved “That the applicant be informed that Council is favourable to the proposal.”²

And as if to drive away such protests, the Town Clerk wrote “The design for the flats is such that ample open spaces have been provided, and access to the flats will be from Military Road and not from the lane at the rear, as suggested by the writer of the complaining letter. The Town Clerk also wrote that “the matter of erecting these flats received such consideration by the Council, sketch plans were submitted by the Architect, and the site then inspected by the Members of the Council.”³



Another issue residents were increasingly dealing with was the necessity to drive over the gutter to get their motor car into their garage, as it was the “early days” of privately owned motor vehicles, Council simply tarred the roadway and put gutters along the edges. There was no attention to driveways, as illustrated by the following letter. Mr East of Rocklands Road wrote to Council to state that “many months ago the pavements and concrete drives were repaired in Rocklands Road but there is now a deep gutter making it difficult to drive over for entrance to the garage. It would be impossible to drive a car over the gutter without damage to the car. It is my intention to buy a new car so would you kindly have the gutter lowered at the entrance to my house. Sometime ago Mr Tiley of Rocklands Road had a similar alteration made by you to enable him to drive his new car across the pavement and I would be very grateful if similar could be done for me”.⁴

In 1930s North Sydney, there weren't necessarily roads explicitly designed without driveways. Instead, many roads were simply built with footpaths and kerbs, and driveways were added as needed by individual property owners. However, some roads in North Sydney, particularly those in more established or commercial areas, may have had fewer or no driveways due to factors like narrow streets, building designs, or high pedestrian traffic.

In March 1935 the Town Clerk wrote to Mr Hayes, of the **Swimming Baths Lavender Bay**, expressing Council's appreciation of his recent successful rescue from drowning and subsequent resuscitation of a boy at Lavender Bay. “And as this is not the first time you have saved a life, and the Council is proud and pleased to have a man of your stamina and experience in life-saving methods in charge of the Swimming Baths”.

The Lavender Bay Baths (1910), also known as **Cavill's Baths**, a tidal swimming pool, were once popular with swimmers, located in the area beside the ferry wharf.⁵ See *NSHS Journal no. 176, August 2021*

² Mr. W.C. Ewing 6 January 1937

³ Municipality of North Sydney 29 December 1936

⁴ F.L. East. 165 Castlereagh St Sydney 27 October 1936

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lavender_Bay#:~:text=History,-Lavender%20Ba

And an interesting note about building Luna Park. In July 1935 a letter from the Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board of Pitt St Sydney wrote to Messrs. Phillips Brothers, the developers of Luna Park at Milson's Point, stating that he understood there is some difficulty in the matter of the water being supplied to the buildings during construction. He said that although the plans have not yet been approved by Council, there would be no objection to water being supplied. ⁶



Finally, some correspondence about the **Annual Local Government Swimming Carnival** at Enfield Olympic Swimming Pool. A letter to the Mayor of North Sydney states "In accordance with the practice during the past couple of years, I have arranged the Annual Swimming Carnival for Mayors, Presidents, Aldermen and Councillors of Metropolitan Councils to take place at Enfield Olympic Swimming Pool on Wednesday 11 March at 8 p.m.

The event is a relay race for teams of 3 Bonafide Aldermen and Councillors, a distance 3 laps of 50 ft, (the width of the pool). The cup was won in the first instance by Mosman and is at present held by North Sydney. The usual 25-yard race for Mayors and presidents and Deputy-Mayors will also be held.⁷

A letter dated 27 February 1936 list the Competitor's from North Sydney as: The Mayor, Alderman D.B. Hunter, Aldermen R.C. Forsyth. J.A. Middlemiss, J.G Cramer, C.G. Faulkner, W.J. Rowlinson, F. Delandro and J.S. Stanton (Deputy Mayor).⁸

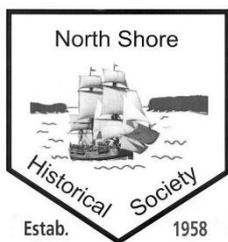
And a letter dated 25 May 1936 from The Town Clerk at Enfield Council Chambers states "**I herewith have pleasure in forwarding the G. B. Phillips Cup, which was won by a team representing the North Sydney Council.**" ⁹

Now here is a thought. Why don't we suggest to the North Sydney Council that they resurrect this **Annual Local Government Swimming Carnival** as part of the (eventual) Official Opening of our new North Sydney Olympic Swimming Pool? Who would like to take this on board as a project for our North Shore Historical Society? I think it has wonderful potential! Any volunteers?

**Images of
Vaucluse House**



⁶ Town Clerk North Sydney Council 19 July 1935
⁷ Town Clerk Enfield 27 February 1936
⁸ Municipality of Enfield 13 February 1936
⁹ Municipality of Enfield 25 May 1936



**The Annual General Meeting of the
North Shore Historical Society Inc.
is scheduled for
Thursday 11th September 2025 at 6pm.**

Second Floor Stanton Library 234 Miller St, North Sydney

All Committee positions fall vacant on the 11th of September 2024:

- President
- Vice President: (2 positions)
- Treasurer A
- Secretary
- Ordinary Committee Member/s

The Committee works to ensure that the Society runs efficiently and is able to offer members information and events of historical interest. We would welcome additional hands to spread the workload and, most importantly, to bring new ideas and variety of input to help improve the operation of the Society. If you are interested, or would like to know more, please speak to the President (9929 6637) or to any other Committee person.

Unassigned positions are available on the Committee for members not wanting initially to take on a specific role.

Nomination Forms for Committee Positions are available – please phone the President 9929 6637 or email NorthShoreHS@hotmail.com.

Nominations must be in writing, signed by the candidate and two other Society members, and lodged with the Secretary by 8pm, 7th August 2024. (This can be done through the Society's post office box – PO Box, 399, North Sydney, 2059 - or by handing it to the Secretary, Eric Stevenson, at the August General Meeting). Please contact the President if you would like assistance in obtaining the signatures of two members to include on your application.

Gaynor Austen
President

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**More
images
of
Vaucluse
House**

