A love letter from the Subiaco Creek community

In Rydalmere where I live, the Hawkesbury Sandstone or 'Yellowblock' is Nature's miraculous creation, extending as a compressed 30 to 240 m thick Triassic sedimentary layer from 234 to 232 mya across the area of the Sydney Basin, about 44,000 sq km onshore and 5,000 offshore, the outpouring of a palaeoflow originating in the Gondwanan Trans-Antarctic orogen.

From its chiselled stone near Pyrmont, many of Sydney's greatest 19th and 20th century public buildings have arisen, leaving the Hawkesbury Sandstone buried beneath them, mostly inaccessible under the recent human accretions.

For a glimpse of what was, we must go further from the city.

*

I often like to walk through the ancient and spare sandstone country of West Head at the mouth of the Hawkesbury in Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park, reflecting on the long forgotten Aboriginal pathways and the slowly disappearing rock art, while I pass beneath the Kali-like Sydney Red Gums (*Angophora costata* – less red than a combination of pink and grey) writhing towards the sky, and I wonder about the landscape and the layers and memories in time and across time, trying to imagine its changing topographical narrative like a set of photographs, time lapsed at one million year intervals; and I forever ask myself how the different deposits of sandstone came to be, the most recent extending right across the Sydney Basin, hundreds of metres deep, up-swelling to the rugged escarpments of the national parks which intrude into and around the pressing suburbs of humanity.

The bays and headlands of the area now carry British names and I muse that the act of renaming a place is an act of dispossession as sure as murder.

Broken Bay, with the absent mindedness of immeasurable years, dream-reaching north through fingering inlets from Killcare to Woy Woy, is magnificent today, and was magnificent when Governor Arthur Phillip first explored its edges by rowboat in the late 18th century.

The Aboriginal names and toponymy have become mostly lost along with the language and dialects of the area, swept away without any real measure of white settlers' regret.

*

Aboriginal memories of traumatic events have a timeless moral quality, probing the why, where individual actors can merge into the metaphysical, the storyline becoming the story, the story becoming a collective dream (or nightmare), the kinship and identity lost, along with the totems and songlines, in the face of blunt oppression and asymmetric force.

For the British, their memories were tied to the purely physical characteristics of when and how and how much and who and for how long – they were unchallenged by why; the 'what' was immaterial, a matter of sly circumspection, devious in the telling, the commercial outcome of far greater interest, the rules of Nature as property.

I look at my dog, Josie, who is snuffling in the grass, in her library. *Soli deo gloria.* I turn back to feeding the bush turkey that has come in from Subiaco Creek to say, 'hello'. V*ita est supplicium.*

*

It is the quality of our thoughts, not their number and relative duration, which determines - apart from our perceptions of what we know through direct experience - the timeless aspects of our lives.

I think of thought, casually directed and made possible through consciousness, as a series of defining brush strokes, each gently pasted on life's canvas, there, and there, with a regular, almost mechanical deposition, abstract at first, then more measured and methodical, until the thought fragments become clothed in colours and hues selected, against the emerging landscape of collected ideas, from a palette of imperfectly remembered experiences, regrets and quiet desires, like an impressionist painting.

In this, I'm reminded by the quintessential abstract Aboriginal artworks, which derive timelessness from the stories of the dreamtime, from a Jungian collective unconscious, of the

power of inspired representational and symbolic art, whose range and intellectual depth we are just beginning to appreciate.

Music is a painting in time, architecture a painting frozen in time, timeless, its form sculpted for the ages. While the music loses its form from each moment, the sound dissipated in a ghostly movement of air, memory derives, from frozen instants, the themes, musical arguments, structures and magical conclusions that capture our imagination.

So it is with a garden.

By Ray Gibbons