
Wanted: Treasure House of a Nation's Heart: The Search for an Australian Capital City, 1891–1908*

Dr David Headon

When you look at any one of the iconic photographs of the Federation founders, at the Convention meetings of the 1890s or in the first years of the Federal Parliaments in Melbourne, it is hard to avoid resorting to stereotypes. They do project as a group of natty middle-class lawyers, judges and businessmen, and the odd aspirational labour man—which they basically were. All men, sober, sedate, apparently satisfied and—mostly—hirsute. An abundance of facial hair was the fashion of the era. A snapshot judgement today might well describe them as a bunch of boring old farts.

Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of these men emerge as extraordinary characters—gifted, engaged, single-minded when needed, occasionally partisan, and very, very human. Most of them loved a joke. They lived in large times, and spoke—and for some like jovial George Reid, ate—accordingly. They applied themselves with rigour and patience to the dominant public issues of the day, demonstrating a capacity, determination and eloquent self-assurance often missing in our national conversations of the twenty-first century.

This resolute attitude of the Federation founders is never more apparent than in the parliamentary debates and community controversy surrounding the narrative accurately and distinctively labelled at the time as the 'Battle of the Sites'. One of the most interesting individuals destined to play an active role in the national capital narrative is William Astley—journalist, notable *Bulletin* short-story writer on convictism and ... an incorrigible opium addict. For well over a decade, Astley happily assumed the role of promoter of the town of Bathurst's claims to being the national capital. In all likelihood he wrote most of the 'Note Prefatory' that appeared in a 1901 Bathurst tourist booklet in which the future, much-coveted capital site is described as '*the treasure-house of a nation's heart*'.¹ The competition nationwide to become that 'treasure-house' was keen from the start.

In the nearly twenty-year period throughout which the 'Battle of the Sites' raged, from the early 1890s to 1908, numerous towns came and went, crashed and burned, sometimes re-emerged, phoenix-like, from the flames, only to burn again, until, in the last months of 1908, amidst controversy and name-calling, brinksmanship and hectic

* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House, Canberra on 17 October 2008.

¹ 'Price Warung' [William Astley], *Bathurst—the Ideal Federal Capital*. Bathurst, NSW, Glyndwr Whalan, 1901, p. 3.

behind-closed-doors number-crunching, the site that was marketed as ‘Yass-Canberra’ emerged victorious.

But it was a desperately close-run thing. Indeed, after the House of Representatives voted 39–33 for ‘Yass-Canberra’ over Bombala on 8 October 1908—one hundred years ago last week—the Senate settled down to its own session on 28 October, an exhausting debate which continued until 6 November. There could be no Seat of Government Act without the Senate’s endorsement, and after many hours of discussion, argument and abuse, the 36 Senators—there to decide, finally, between ‘Yass-Canberra’ and Tumut, were deadlocked, 18 a-piece. The NSW senators went *en masse* for ‘Yass-Canberra’, the Victorians for Tumut, and it was only when the Victorian James Hiers McColl switched his vote—to the disgust of his fellow-Victorians and, later, Melbourne’s *Age* newspaper, which accused him of ‘ratting’ on his state²—that the bill progressed to obtain the necessary royal assent on 14 December 1908.

The ensuing *Seat of Government Act (1908)* brought to an uneasy close a process which involved no less than seven Commonwealth Governments, five NSW Governments, two Royal Commissions, nine Commonwealth Ministers for Home Affairs, four lapsed Bills and three Acts of the Commonwealth Parliament.³ This ‘Battle of the Sites’ might be more accurately described as a war of attrition.

In this paper, taking my lead from a former Clerk of the House of Representatives who said that the full story was ‘too long and devious’ to recount in one evening, I will discuss this search for our nation’s ‘treasure-house’ city, in one lunchtime, in terms of two distinct periods: the decade from 1891 to Federation, and the seven years from 1902 to 1908. While I will provide the basic details of the story, I don’t intend to trawl over the established linear chronological narrative as such. That’s been done capably by Roger Pegrum in his soon-to-be-republished book, *The Bush Capital—How Australia Chose Canberra as its Federal City* (1983). I want to focus on particular aspects of the story, some of them up until now hidden aspects, that encourage us to reassess the received narrative and put some new faces into the frame. The more you get to know the men behind the suburban and street names of Canberra, the more compelling they become, and the more the absorbing Canberra story comes to life.

First, some necessary background detail. The search for an Australian capital city site effectively began with two important political events at the beginning of the 1890s. The first of them was the Australasian Federation Conference in Melbourne, in February 1890—where Sir Henry Parkes, that long-white-bearded, impressively virile, grand old charlatan of a man rallied infant national sentiment, a full ten years before Federation, with his creative reference to ‘the crimson thread of kinship [that] runs through us all’.⁴ At the same conference, the emergent leader of the Federation movement in Victoria, Alfred Deakin, spoke loftily of the commonality shared by all

² See Roger Pegrum, *The Bush Capital—How Australia Chose Canberra as its Federal City*. Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1983, p. 141.

³ See Gavin Souter, *Acts of Parliament*. Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1988, p. 104.

⁴ See David Headon, *The Symbolic Role of the National Capital—From Colonial Argument to 21st Century Ideals*. Canberra, NCR, 2003, p. 14.

six Australian colonies—‘a people’, as he put it, ‘one in blood, race, religion and aspirations’.⁵

At the second and far more significant meeting, the National Australasian Convention, held in Sydney in March/April 1891 and destined to adopt a draft Constitution Bill to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia, the rhetoric from the leading delegates was similar to Melbourne. Parkes’ banquet toast was to ‘One People/One Destiny’, and his subsequent address anticipated the inhabitants of the southern continent becoming ‘an Australian people’, and their country ‘the brightest jewel in the crown of the Empire’.⁶

Yet despite this consciously elevated tone, this agenda manipulation, the problem with the Melbourne and Sydney meetings—the elephant in the room that could only be kept docile for so long—was that the utterances of Parkes and Barton and Deakin and their ardent fellow-Federationists present could only temporarily disguise the tension of colonial rivalry and colonial jealousy. Deakin might well trumpet that all present at the Convention were one in blood and aspiration, but everyone there knew that NSW/Victorian antipathy already had a long and often bristling history. Since the discovery of gold in the early 1850s, and consequent rapid Victorian advancement, they had been constant rivals.

At the Melbourne Conference, the uneasy truce collapsed when one of the NSW delegates, the Treasurer in the NSW Government, William McMillan, gave a foretaste of what lay ahead when he verbally brandished the superior role and claims of his own colony—triumphantly referring to NSW as ‘the Mother Colony’. Let delegates be in no doubt, said McMillan, if Federation did occur, it would be NSW making the greatest sacrifices.⁷ Understandably, such a provocative line failed to impress the non-NSW delegates, especially the Victorians.

And then in Sydney in 1891, exactly the same thing happened. This time George Dibbs, a NSW delegate and future NSW Premier, dropped what became known as Dibbs’ ‘bombshells’, when he proposed, as the capital city of a future Federation ... Sydney—his own home town, his patch, ‘favoured by Nature’, gushed George Dibbs, ‘favoured by the great Creator himself ...’.⁸ Dibbs put the motion, and the cat, among the pigeons: Sydney must be the new nation’s capital. While the motion predictably failed dismally, amidst widespread mirth and cynicism among the other delegates, it was clear that if Federation did occur, then the issue of where the national capital would be sited was certain to be controversial. South Australia’s very dignified Richard Chaffey Baker referred to it as ‘the burning question’, and he advocated postponement. The entrenched Federationists among the delegates to the Convention could not agree quickly enough. With Federation still only a possibility, the national capital issue was simply too hot to handle.

But while the politicians judiciously paused, the citizens of the colonial continent enthused. Postponement was the catalyst for continental aspiration. Cities, towns and

⁵ See Kathleen Dermody, *A Nation at Last. The Story of Federation*. Canberra, AGPS, 1997, p. 8.

⁶ Ibid. p. 11.

⁷ Headon, op. cit., p. 14.

⁸ Ibid. p. 16.

regions across the country began to fancy their chances of becoming this ‘treasure-house’ of a nation. What started, almost immediately following the 1891 Convention, was a lively and at times undignified scramble, by a host of opportunist individuals—and their cities, towns and regions—to assert their pre-eminent claims. Propaganda booklets began popping up like mushrooms; propagandising journalists leapt into print to tout the next big thing, the next speculative national capital site.

The cocky residents of the two urban powerhouses, Sydney and Melbourne, thought they were certainties, but the queue was forming quickly, with a myriad list of possibilities—the vast bulk of them drawn from the colonies of South Australia, Victoria and NSW. Sydney surveyor and engineer, F. Oliver Jones, in 1894 called his imagined ‘imperial capital’ *Pacivica*—a ‘model “City Beautiful”’ in the virgin bush of Ku-ring-gai Chase on the banks of the Hawkesbury.⁹ Character-building and nation-building sport would be played, as Jones put it, on ‘a Pan-Britannic Sports Ground’¹⁰ in a revival of the ancient Olympic Games. And remember: this was two years before the Olympic Games were revived in Athens in 1896. Jones promoted a model ‘Empire-Building’ community, shaped on ‘new yet British lines’.¹¹

Others dreamed more adventurously, if even less practically. In August 1894—the same year that Jones proposed his ‘Pacivica’—the *Bulletin* ran an elaborate article entitled ‘Democratic Federation’, by the radical Queensland journalist and politician J.G. Drake, in which he imagined a grand capital of some 50 000 square miles situated at Cameron Corner, where the arid inland borders of NSW, South Australia and Queensland meet. As Professor Duncan Waterson writes, Drake’s national capital was ‘to be dry—free from coastal heat and debilitating alcohol—alien and aboriginal free, socially pure, and productive of superior Australian Britons in terms of physique, intellect and institutions’.¹² Drake’s ideal citizens, in a vision consistent with the race-driven community values of the era, would be ‘the superior prototypes of the new Australian clean white warrior race’. Such a race would apparently populate and purify the nearby towns of Cunnamulla, Charleville, Thargomindah and Bourke.

Drake’s proposal was so seriously discussed that, in 1896, it was published in a stand-alone booklet in Brisbane under the title: *Federation, Imperial or Democratic*.¹³ Clearly, the inland utopia built with eugenic community bricks got others thinking, for in the same year that Drake’s dream was reprinted and promulgated, another *Bulletin* writer conjured something similar, this time located in the isolated MacDonnell Ranges of South Australia—a utopian home intended to ‘open up the interior’ and keep out blacks and ‘black-labour syndicates’.¹⁴

⁹ See Tessa Milne, ‘An Australian Atlantis: Jones’ vision.’ *The New Federalist*, No. 3, June 1999, p. 26. I would like to acknowledge the excellent background papers included in this issue of *The New Federalist*, most of which focussed on the ‘burning issue’ of the prospective national capital site. Several papers are quoted below.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Duncan Waterson, ‘“Progress, Purity and Prohibition”: J.G. Drake’s Federal Inland Capital Proposal, 1894–1899.’ *The New Federalist*, No. 3, June 1999, pp. 51–2.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 51.

¹⁴ See John Bannon, ‘Queenliest Cities: Australia’s capital in the central state’, *The New Federalist*, No. 3, June 1999, p. 49.

Most proposals, however, were not as extreme as those of Jones and his clones. Murray River towns such as Echuca, Corowa and Albury, for example, portrayed themselves as an ideal compromise for the dominant three colonies. Ballarat—the heavily supported ‘Marvellous City of Ballarat’ according to one commentator—packaged itself as a city with undeniable ‘national prominence’, a city built on ‘gold, the Eureka Stockade and democracy, gardens, Lake Wendouree and civil amenity’. According to the *Ballarat Courier* of February 1898: ‘gold, loose and in nugget form, shouted the name Ballarat to all corners of the globe’.¹⁵

When the Hon. Edmund Barton, soon to be Australia’s first Prime Minister (what country doesn’t know the name of its first Prime Minister?) visited Ballarat in February 1898 he consciously avoided any discussion of Ballarat’s capital claims—refusing, as he said, to ‘encroach on a rather delicate subject’—but he could still be fulsome in his praise of the city’s ‘great industries, and fertile fields’, its prosperous infrastructure.¹⁶ Industry was also the keynote of the bids of South Australia’s Port Augusta and Mt Gambier—the former, based on inter-colonial and international ocean trade, and the latter promoted because of its superior climate and scenery, central location, and proximity to the nearby harbour port of Portland, just over the Victorian border. Within months of the Australasian Federation Conference in Melbourne at the beginning of 1890, South Australian Legislative Councillor, Dr Allan Campbell, addressing the citizens of Port Augusta with a talk entitled ‘Federation and South Australia’, could not contain his enthusiasm. He concluded with the flourish of a rich rhetorical question: ‘Where then can a situation be selected for the future seat of Federal Government possessing such advantages as Port Augusta offers? I do not see one on the whole map!’¹⁷

While few outside Port Augusta would have agreed with Councillor Campbell, sentiment like his infected the entire nation throughout the 1890s. Patently, no town, no spot, was ruled out amidst the ambition, wild hope and barely suppressed euphoria of an otherwise difficult decade.

But then, as has been well-covered elsewhere, a so-called ‘secret’ deal at the hastily convened colonial Premiers’ Conference, in January/February 1899, abruptly changed the rules of the game. After the first Federation referenda failed in 1898—because a truculent NSW insisted that there must be the arbitrary figure of 80 000 ‘yes’ votes, rather than a simple majority—NSW Premier George Reid, ever the experienced showman and cunning politician, perceived advantage for his home colony. He played his trump card at the Premiers’ Conference: if NSW, the self-ascribed ‘Mother’ of the colonies, did not get the nod to host the capital, then, Reid told his fellow-premiers, he could not see the colony ever wanting to be in a continental Federation.

This was crude, ‘gunboat’ politics, but it obtained the desired result: a rewriting of the relevant part of the Constitution draft, Section 125, to read:

¹⁵ See Gay Sweeney, ‘“Federation and fizz”: Ballarat’s bid to be the ACT.’ *The New Federalist*, No. 3, June 1999, p. 38.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See Bannon, op. cit., p. 45.

The seat of Government of the Commonwealth shall be determined by the Parliament ... and shall be in the State of New South Wales, and be distant not less than one hundred miles from Sydney.

Yes, the capital would be in NSW, but the other states had made certain that Sydney would be excluded. And more, until there was such a capital, the Victorians secured the compromise deal that Melbourne would be the temporary site. Many Melburnians were soon of the opinion that their sizeable foot in the Section 125 door would eventually get them the capital permanently.

The draft Constitution, with these very specific national capital clauses, was signed into British law by the Parliament and Queen Victoria in July 1900. The leading Australian politicians of the day—among them, Edmund Barton, Alfred Deakin and Charles Kingston—revelled in their triumph. It has been said that after the vote they retired with appropriate dignity and decorum to a Westminster committee room, whereupon they joined hands and danced a jig of unbounded celebration.

Australia had its Federation, its Constitution, and its Section 125.

What began then was a far more formidable set of engagements in the ‘Battle of the Sites’ when, for six more years, 1902 to 1908, a newly energized bunch of NSW towns began to assert their fresh claims to being Australia’s new capital city. It was a battle fought as tigerishly and as tactically as any wartime conflict, but, right from the start, in 1901–2, the written and unwritten rules of the battle were well understood by the combatants.

- the site had to be in NSW, a hundred miles from Sydney;
- the site would be inland, for a coastal city risked both the outbreak of disease and bombardment from foreign ships;
- the site must have a plentiful water supply;
- the site must be a beautiful one, a place where Nature could elevate and inspire—a place combining the attributes of the ‘City Beautiful’ and the ‘Garden City’; and perhaps most significantly at the time,
- the site must be in a cold region.

In the second half of this paper, I want to focus our attention on arguably the three most intriguing combatants involved in the ‘Battle of the Sites’, three key case studies, if you like: first, the town of Bathurst, its bold bid and poised promotional strategy brought unstuck by the harsh reality of Section 125 (poor old Bathurst was perceived by those who counted to be just inside the 100-mile limit—it was just too close to Sydney); second, the remote Snowy River town of Dalgety, the focus of such close attention in 1904 and again, briefly, in 1908, that it went within a whisker of actually becoming Australia’s national capital—and there is a *Commonwealth Government Seat of Government Act (1904)*, of 15 August 1904, to prove it; and finally, the option known as ‘Yass-Canberra’, which would receive the royal assent at the end of 1908.

Case Study 1: Bathurst

The lament of the failed Bathurst bid. Bathurst was such a busy colonial town, such a constant production-line manufacturer of sporting and cultural achievers, that by the 1880s it had become a thriving metropolis. The town attracted many quality citizens from elsewhere, not least William Astley, the man destined to make a literary name for himself, under the pseudonym of 'Price Warung', for his classic stories on convictism published in the *Bulletin*, and read throughout the country. But that would be in the 1890s. In the 1880s, Astley paid a visit to go-ahead Bathurst, and stayed, soon obtaining a following with his searching political columns in the *Bathurst Daily Times* and the *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, a number of them exploring his passionate commitment to the Federation cause.¹⁸ Astley sought to educate and enlighten his readers.

In white Australia's centenary month, January 1888, he took the symbolic opportunity to question the manifest failings of British Imperialism (thus anticipating his anti-transportation short stories to come) and he proposed the idea of what he called a 'Federal Compact' for the Australian colonies.¹⁹ Three years later, energised by the 1891 National Australasian Convention in Sydney, Astley wrote no less than sixteen editorials for the *Bathurst Free Press*, over a one-month period in May/June 1891, in which he enlarged on Federation and its principles.²⁰

It was a more or less natural progression when, in September 1896, in an intentionally provocative letter to the editors of Bathurst's newspapers, Astley began to push the claims of his treasured Bathurst as the best available choice for the coming 'Nation's Capital'.²¹ In the same letter, he also proposed a 'People's Convention', to be held in Bathurst as soon as possible in order to re-ignite popular interest in the Federation issue, and no doubt to strategically position his adopted town. Despite a history of debilitating lapses as a result of opium addiction, Astley over a number of years had gained respect and a well-earned reputation. Accordingly, his 'People's Convention' idea was immediately acted upon, with Astley appointed as its Organising Secretary. Incredibly, the large-scale event took place just months later, in November, and it went script-perfectly, except for the fact that Astley got arrested and gaoled during the gathering (for a fifteen pound debt). The historic Bathurst People's Convention of November 1896 was widely credited at the time with 'popularising federation'²²—and a number of historians since have confirmed this conclusion. It attracted over 150 delegates, went for a week and proceeded smoothly thanks to a thoughtful agenda put together by the absent, imprisoned Astley.

Throughout the Convention, Astley's compelling letter of a couple of months earlier would have been keenly discussed. His brash promotion of Bathurst drew attention to a number of the town's special advantages, its claims to being the capital city: centrality, accessibility, a salubrious inland location in the event of foreign invasion, independence from and a healthy attitude to both Sydney and Melbourne, and

¹⁸ See David Headon, 'Bathurst: "Treasure-house of a Nation's Heart".' *The New Federalist*, No. 3, June 1999, pp. 32–6

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 33

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Dermody, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

²² *Ibid.* p. 35

imposing public buildings.²³ Bathurst's Kings Parade/Machattie Park complex, structured around a government building group designed by renowned Colonial architect James Barnet, was a particular source of local pride.²⁴

Yet despite Astley's, and Bathurst's, timely initiative, when the 'secret' premiers' deal established the wording of Section 125 of the Constitution, Bathurst found itself in no better position than any other NSW town or region. In fact, by cruel chance it was worse off, on technical grounds, for despite the vigorous campaigning by an energetic citizenry; despite being a thriving town, well-located inland and chilly in winter, with more impressive public buildings and parks than most; despite having arguably the finest promotional material circulating amongst the key decision-making politicians—no less than three volumes written by Astley between 1901 and 1904, the first of them with the attention-grabbing title, *Bathurst: the Ideal Federal Capital* (1901);²⁵ despite all of these obvious credits, by 1902, when the real work of locating a capital started, Bathurst had effectively run its race, and disappeared from view. Why? That immovable, immutable Section 125's 100-mile limit. Bathurst, it was concluded, lay just inside. In the *Ideal Capital* volume, in a preliminary note, the book's printer and publisher, Glyndwr Whalan, desperately sought to diffuse the problem, but you can sense his anxiety when he writes:

The men whom the Nation calls to the task will surely not lack either the judgement or the courage to say, if need be, to the people of Australia: '*Enlarge the radial limit by a fraction, and we will give you a perfect site for the Territory and Capital*'.²⁶

The plea was ignored. The chicken bone in Bathurst's throat, that wretched clause, choked its initially confident if ultimately ill-fated bid to be the 'treasure-house of a nation's heart'.

Case Study 2: Dalgety

The third and concluding meeting of the three Australasian Federal Convention meetings of 1897–8, held in Melbourne in the summer months of early 1898, adopted the amended draft Constitution. The attending delegates sweltered in the intense January Melbourne heat, so it was no surprise when the popular John Forrest, gifted surveyor, noted explorer and West Australian Premier since 1890, crystallized the popular sentiment of the gathering when he gave voice to what has since been referred to as the 'cold climate myth'—that widely held belief of the time that the Anglo Saxon and Anglo Celtic peoples functioned at their best, their British Empire best, in a cold climate. That's right. White intelligence and the leadership instinct revelled in the frost, wind and snow. Forrest, despite the obvious implication for his own colony, applied the belief directly to the national capital debate when he stated that the new capital 'ought to be a cool place; indeed the coolest place in Australia'.²⁷ In the years

²³ See Robert Freestone, *Designing Australia's Cities: Culture, Commerce and the City Beautiful, 1900–1930*. Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, [2007], p. 50.

²⁴ See Headon, *The New Federalist*, op. cit., pp. 32–3.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 32.

²⁶ Headon, *Symbolic Rule*, op. cit., p. 21.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 24.

that followed, this pervasive stance largely drove the debate. The ‘cold climate myth’ meant that otherwise attractive NSW locations, such as Port Macquarie or beautiful Byron Bay, were not considered. The Federation founders, in search of their ‘ideal’ federal capital, looked for inspiration northwest to Armidale, west beyond unlucky Bathurst, and especially straight south of Sydney. Snow-capped mountains, not beaches, were the geographic fashion of the era in an Australia still very, very British.

American import, the ‘legendary’ King O’Malley, another active participant in the national capital narrative, would develop a particularly soft spot for Bombala in the more remote south. When he visited the town he asked, only just tongue-in-cheek, whether it was true that to start a cemetery in Bombala the locals had to import dead men from Sydney. In the House of Representatives debates of October 1903, O’Malley was more expansive: ‘If ever there was a spot set apart by the Creator to be the capital of this great Australia—the pivot around which white civilization should revolve—it is Bombala’.²⁸ Waxing Biblically lyrical, he continued: ‘I could almost see the Garden of Eden at Bombala. I could see Adam and Eve leaving after they had eaten of the tree of life—for the tree of life is growing there today’. Bombala was, for O’Malley, the tangible proof that the ‘history of the world shows that cold climates have produced the greatest geniuses ...’

While such extremes were characteristic O’Malley, part of the spruiker’s craft, they do give us some insight into the values and mores of the era. And it was in this context that distant Dalgety, near Bombala but more remote still, emerged. Dalgety presents a revealing tale.

One man destined to play a highly significant, if now forgotten role in the hunt for the capital was long-time NSW politician Sir Joseph Carruthers. In 1927, when the *Canberra Times* brought out a special ‘commemorative issue’ on the day of the opening of the provisional parliament in Canberra, the 9th of May, it was Sir Joseph Carruthers, a former NSW state politician and former NSW Premier, who was invited to recall the story of the federal capital’s birth.

Typically forthright, Carruthers in an long article systematically recorded the details of what he called ‘the Battle of the Sites’, and his leading role in it. Curiously, the article is neither a jubilant nor even a particularly satisfying recollection for the writer. Quite the contrary. At one point in his opening paragraphs he confesses:

It is none too pleasant to revive these memories of other days, and if there has been any change for the better in these last 20 years one could afford to close the veil. But they have continued from 1901, right down to 1927, and will only now cease ... when the Federal Parliament [meets] at Canberra, and the real seat of Government [is] inaugurated there.²⁹

‘They’ have continued’, ‘they will not cease’. Who is he talking about and what were their motives in meddling? Disrupting? Undermining? These questions need answering, but to do that a little more detail is needed.

²⁸ *Canberra Times*, 9 May 1927, p. 3.

²⁹ J.H. Carruthers, ‘Reminiscences’, *Canberra Times* 9 May 1927.

After the euphoria of the new nation's celebrations in 1901, the Federation parliamentarians well knew that they had been entrusted by the nation with (as it was put at the time) 'expeditiously' finding a permanent capital. So began the search ... the extraordinary 'Tours' of the senators and members of the House of Representatives. By train. By sea. By coach. And when necessary, by foot.

The first group to head out into the bush of NSW were the senators, for three weeks in February 1902; the members of the House of Reps, even more enterprising, went at a breakneck pace over two weeks in May. Between them, they looked at sites in Armidale, Orange, Lyndhurst, Bathurst, Goulburn, Yass, Tumut, Bombala, Albury, Lake George and Canberra, via the Queanbeyan railway station. At one point heading south, they jumped on a ferry at Nowra to hasten the trip to the potential capital city port town of Eden/Two-fold Bay, where the town (typical of the time) erected a Federal Capital arch to welcome the visiting parliamentarians.

For the wonderful visual record of these site visits, we have the photographer Edward Thomas 'Monte' Luke to thank, for he accompanied the parliamentarians—and captured them on his elegant gelatin silver images, sometimes in formal mode, and at other times full of mischief, spontaneity and, as historian Manning Clark put it, sheer 'buffoonery'. The album containing Monte Luke's photographs, a real national treasure, is now safely housed in the Pictorial Section of the National Library.³⁰

These first tours were orchestrated by the former NSW Premier and former anti-Federationist Sir William Lyne—after whom the Canberra suburb of Lyneham was named—a big hulk of a man whom Billy Hughes, our controversial seventh Prime Minister would describe as 'one of the most remarkable men in our history'.³¹ Though NSW and federal politician, Sir George Reid, our fourth Prime Minister, would sardonically refer to these 1902 tours as 'Lyne's picnics',³² we know that the astute Lyne had a political agenda. He was the member for the massive southern NSW electorate of Hume, which stretched all the way from Wagga to the Victorian border, and he desperately wanted the capital in his electorate.

Lyne lobbied hard for Albury or Tumut, but his federal neighbour, Austin Chapman, a robust Federation personality who has also given his name to a Canberra suburb—and was the first member for the 'bell-weather' seat of Eden-Monaro—Chapman, with equal determination, wanted the capital on his own turf. So he promoted Bombala, and the even more remote town of Dalgety.

Lyne and Chapman engaged in their own battle for the ultimate prize, and nearly three years of intense parliamentary debates later, on 15 August 1904, the first Labor Federal Government, led by the charismatic Chris Watson, saw through its only significant piece of legislation during a heavily contested four months in office. The seat of government would be Dalgety.

³⁰ See E.T. Luke, 'Tour of the Senators' album, Pictures Collection NLA.PIC-AN 10801466, National Library of Australia, 1902.

³¹ W.M. Hughes, *Policies and Potentates*. Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1950, p. 28.

³² See Pegrum, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

Dalgety? While historian Geoffrey Blainey in his *Shorter History of Australia* writes that ‘freezing’ little Dalgety was ‘more suited for a penitentiary than a seat of government’,³³ what we can say with the benefit of one hundred years of hindsight is that the town’s plentiful water supply, inland location and cold, cold winters did give it contemporary appeal. The sheer abundance of water, so engaging to the eye in the then surging waters of the Snowy River running right through the town, powerfully influenced the two most significant surveyors at the time: Sir John Forrest, and Charles Scrivener, a NSW District Surveyor and the man who would eventually produce the Commonwealth survey of the Canberra site in 1909, and later be appointed to the prestigious position of Director of Commonwealth Lands and Surveys. Forrest and Scrivener were adamant in 1904 that Dalgety was the best site for the nation’s capital. Their reputation and status could not easily be ignored, not even by the NSW politicians determined to see the capital much closer to Sydney.

But against the considered research of Forrest and Scrivener was the first-hand testimony of the federal parliamentarians who experienced Dalgety for themselves. Most found the site impossibly cold. As we would expect of any one of his descriptions of towns in rival Eden-Monaro, William Lyne dismissed Dalgety as an ‘outlandish, freezing place’ where the climate, he said, would ‘kill half of the older men’.³⁴ Queensland House of Representatives member Sinclair, used to balmy climes, was utterly intimidated by the stunted timber and howling winds—winds so severe, he declared, you had to hang on for dear life.³⁵ On one excursion to Dalgety, a delegation of which Billy Hughes was a member established the ‘Order of the Blue Legged Pelicans’—a very weird society, Hughes would write, formed at ‘a place where the highest flights of Nature’s beauty are associated with her *lowest* temperatures’.³⁶

When the Federation founders were engaged on these regular visits a century ago, there were two hotels in Dalgety: the Buckley’s Crossing Hotel and ‘Keating’s Horse and Jockey Inn’. A few wonderful stories of those stays have survived. When the esteemed members of the Order of the Pelican were cosily ensconced in Keating’s one typically brisk night, one of their number was almost the first fatality of the Federal Tours, having suddenly found his trousers alight because he was too close to the fireplace. However, dousing the flame evidently proved more problematic than it might otherwise have been—for the reason that the member in question had a wooden leg! They managed to put him out safely.³⁷

On another night, with all the visitors imbibing and in garrulous mood, it was decided that a representative of the parliamentarians—the local state member, Gus Miller—and a press representative, the leader of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, George Cockerell, would compete for what was described as ‘supremacy in song’. Patriotic offerings such as ‘The Death of Nelson’ and ‘Let Me Like a Soldier Fall’ filled the air. Hughes was the competition judge and, adept politician that he always was, he gave a popular decision to the local boy, Miller, ‘by a nose’.³⁸

³³ Geoffrey Blainey, *A Shorter History of Australia*. Port Melbourne, Mandarin, 1995, p. 73.

³⁴ See Ian Warden, ‘A capital climate’, *Canberra Times*, 19 May 2008, Times2, p.4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Hughes, op. cit., pp. 54–69.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 66.

Most our Federation era forebears, Australian Britons to the core, embraced winter weather. But it seems that with Dalgety, they were prepared to draw a line in the snow. Sir Joseph Carruthers, in his 1927 *Canberra Times* reminiscence recalled a meeting with a number of Tasmanian and Victorian members of the Federal Parliament where he, Carruthers, mentioned Dalgety's inaccessibility. Whereupon one of the members said: 'Yes, that is exactly why I voted for Dalgety'. 'What do you mean?' asked Carruthers, and the reply was: 'Don't you realise that quite a lot of us deliberately voted for the most impossible site in order to destroy the possibility of having a 'bush capital' inflicted on Australia?'³⁹

Now in the last months of 1904 Carruthers, as Premier of NSW, knew nothing of these Victorian tactics. But he did know his constituency and he did know the extent of his considerable power. The Australian Constitution stated that the capital had to be in NSW, but before any selected site could be operational the NSW state government had first to give the land to the Commonwealth. The NSW Government had the whip hand—in effect it had a right of veto. In a parliamentary speech Carruthers, no doubt playing to his immediate and wider community audience put it with crystal clarity: '... not one acre, not one foot, not one inch of our territory can be taken away or withdrawn from our governing powers without our consent and authority.'⁴⁰

The ink of the Governor-General Lord Dudley's signature to the Dalgety Seat of Government Act had hardly had time to dry on the page than Carruthers made clear to the Prime Minister of the day, George Reid—and his successor soon after, affable Alfred Deakin—that he was not happy. For Carruthers, like most of his NSW Government colleagues, Dalgety, on the same latitude as Nimmitabel and Thredbo, was so close to the state of Victoria that it might as well be in that state. Besides, Dalgety was just too bloody cold.

The Dalgety option disappeared. It would reappear briefly—and potently—in the final discussions of 1908, but with the benefit of hindsight, we can say that the Dalgety bid died on the parliamentary tables of Macquarie Street, Sydney, in late 1904.

Case Study 3: 'Yass-Canberra'

The self-interested parliamentarians in the NSW Legislative Assembly were only too well aware that the nation's new capital had to be at least 100 miles from Sydney, but they didn't want it to be much further away. '*At least 100 miles*' was soon interpreted by many of the Mother Colony's, the Mother State's, more parochial and vociferous politicians as '*about 100 miles*'. No more.

With characteristic bluntness, Carruthers wrote to the Federal Minister for Home Affairs, Dugald Thomson, on 11 April 1905, providing him with a list of Dalgety's 'more prominent disqualifications'. The NSW Government had vetoed the Federal Government choice. Simple as that.

³⁹ Carruthers, op. cit.

⁴⁰ See Derek Drinkwater, 'How McDougall reached the shore: the Senate and the federal capital site 1901–1910.' *Canberra Historical Journal*, new series, No. 42, September 1998, pp. 28–30.

But distant Dalgety's eclipse signalled the beginning of more accessible and amenable Canberra's rise. But why?? Why the Canberra region rather than, say, appropriately frosty Armidale, or nippy Orange, or even the more southerly and snowy hamlet of Tumut?

In part at least, this question has a grass roots explanation. It is a local story. It was the great fortune of the Canberra/Queanbeyan area—in the 1880s, 1890s and into the new century—to have as its NSW parliamentary representative, one Edward William O'Sullivan. O'Sullivan was the Member for Queanbeyan for almost twenty years, from 1885 to 1904, during which time he played a highly productive community role, first in helping to educate the area's citizens about the benefits of a possible Federation (like William Astley in Bathurst); and, secondly, as one of the first colonial public figures to push the Canberra region's suitability as the national capital site.

O'Sullivan was a great Australian and something of a Renaissance man in his broad cultural interests: one of our country's earliest republicans, he was also a supporter of the labour cause, an outspoken advocate of women's suffrage, a keen supporter of the arts (especially women in the arts), a playwright (of popular plays such as *The Eureka Stockade* and *Coo-ee*), a novelist, a theatre-lover, a sport lover—and, above all, a serial founder of philanthropic organisations and promoter of worthy causes.⁴¹

The *Bulletin*, always eager to lop the heads off society's tall poppies, couldn't help but admire O'Sullivan's civic devotion. As one *Bulletin* journalist wrote:

He has helped to run more newspapers ... led more political agitations, and delivered more democratic exhortations than any other man who ever looked upon the Southern Cross ... He is the kind of man whom one would rather be fighting with than against...⁴²

When O'Sullivan became the Minister for Public Works in the NSW state government in the Federation year of 1901, he was, according to his biographer, 'the most dynamic force in [his] government'.⁴³ The Queanbeyan electorate admired him, and learned much from him; he, in turn, recognised their political acumen, once memorably referring to his politically engaged constituents as 'the free selectors, farmers and the intelligent democracy' of Queanbeyan.⁴⁴

The region was switched on, so much so that when William Lyne, as NSW Premier, in 1899 asked the reputable President of the NSW Land Appeal Court, Alexander Oliver, to head up a Royal Commission to analyse the claims of the scattered Federal

⁴¹ See David Headon, 'On the side of the angels: E.W. O'Sullivan as republican, feminist and federationist', in David Headon and John Williams, eds, *Makers of Miracles—the Cast of the Federation Story*. Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2000, pp. 141–152; Bruce Mansfield, *Australian Democrat—the Career of Goward William O'Sullivan 1846–1910*. Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1965, p. 294.

⁴² Mansfield, *Ibid.* p. 91.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 163.

⁴⁴ See Susan Mary Woolcock Withycombe, *Gale Force. John Gale and the Siting of the National Capital*. Queanbeyan, NSW, Queanbeyan & District Centenary of Federation Committee Inc., 2001, pp. 79–83.

Capital Leagues—nearly two full years before Federation—it was no surprise that the Canberra/Queanbeyan democracy was ready to go, and none more so than long-term local citizen John Gale. A statue of Gale, standing proudly on the corner of Low and Monaro Streets in Queanbeyan, flamboyantly declares him to be the ‘Father of Canberra’. He wasn’t, but he undoubtedly played a creative, facilitating role. For it was Gale who first encouraged O’Sullivan to stand for election in Queanbeyan; and it was Gale who immediately followed up O’Sullivan’s success in the 1899 election with a plea to his *Observer* readers to reject what he termed ‘stultifying provincialism’ in favour of ‘a higher platform of united Australian nationhood’.⁴⁵

In October and November 1899, in the pages of the *Observer*, Gale provided specific detail on the unanimously preferred national capital site of a recently formed local working committee:

the area of ten miles square of which the Church of St John the Baptist on Canberra Plain forms at once the centre and the most desirable site for the federal City itself ...⁴⁶

It’s a pretty accurate description, you’d have to agree, of Canberra city today.

This early, determined and sophisticated push by the citizens of Canberra/Queanbeyan to host the capital ensured that, in the years after Federation as the ‘Battle of the Sites’ raged, the region would always be prominent in discussion.

Carruthers and his government disqualified Dalgety at the end of 1904; in the eighteen months that followed, the NSW Premier went firmly on the front foot, committing his government to investigating quality alternative sites. And he would not brook Commonwealth interference with this task. When Prime Minister Deakin, in July 1905, ventured to taunt Carruthers with the resurrected corpse of Dalgety, Carruthers sent an outraged reply, calling this gesture a breach of the Mother State’s ‘good faith’ and ‘the honourable spirit’ of the Constitution compact.⁴⁷ Incredibly, in the conclusion to his letter to Deakin of August 1905, Carruthers could even resort to the barely veiled, yet age-old threat of secession:

Until this question can be answered in the affirmative, there will be a grievance which will sorely strain the loyalty of this State to the Union.⁴⁸

Carruthers ultimately got his way, sending the cream of his NSW Public Works Department in search of sites. This bunch of highly capable individuals, men at the top of their respective design professions, soon interpreted the new policy as an encouragement to look south of Sydney, but not too far south.

⁴⁵ Mansfield, *Ibid.* p. 79.

⁴⁶ Withycombe, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁴⁷ See letter from J.H. Carruthers to Prime Minister Alfred Deakin, 1 August 1905 in ‘Copies of Correspondence—re Federal Capital Site’, National Archives of Australia.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Pretty soon everyone wanted to sneak a peak at the fine southern sites around Yass, Canberra and Lake George. The visits of the federal politicians to the region sharply increased. Queanbeyan's Federal Capital Site Committee, re-energised and refreshed, quickly got their orientation package together to accommodate this sudden—and welcome—demand.

Arguably the turning point in the process was the winter months of July and August 1906, when Prime Minister Deakin, hitherto a Dalgety man by default, finally began to take notice of the increasingly popular Canberra site. More importantly, it was during this period that the future capital secured its most influential supporter: Labor's first Prime Minister, the debonair and popular Chris Watson. Watson had every reason to stick like glue to Dalgety. As earlier mentioned, it was his government's only substantial piece of Commonwealth legislation, but once he came to Canberra, and saw Canberra, he was overwhelmed. On 15 August 1906, Watson wrote to Carruthers, alerting the NSW premier to Canberra—what he now regarded as the best possible national capital site.⁴⁹ Some 36 Senators and MHR's accepted Carruthers' invitation to inspect a range of southern sites in mid-August, including Mahkoolma, Lake George and Canberra.

According to one participant, on this visit Canberra simply 'dazzled'.⁵⁰ Watson was delighted, quite certain that Canberra was the most beautiful site. In the forthcoming two years, a majority of his parliamentary colleagues would come to agree with him. Canberra's charge, fuelled and fostered by a politically literate Monaro plains citizenry, had begun in earnest—and it would prove successful.

When Frederick Watson in his important early volume, *A Brief History of Canberra* (1927), commented in his preface on the 'battle of the sites' (for he too used the phrase), he stated that he had 'omitted purposely the intimate history ... as I think it would be unwise at present to publish the full details.' The birth of Australia's capital city was no easy delivery, but while parochialism and provincialism could at times dominate, these motivations were countered, and finally negated, by a spirit of nation—a spirit embraced by many individuals who find themselves on the suburb and street signage in Canberra today. Such a tribute is the least we can do to recognise their formidable contributions to the national story.



Question — Am I correct to say that the Australian Capital Territory was part of the division of Werriwa at the time of separation from New South Wales? It's just that you mentioned who the members for the other places were but you didn't mention who the member for what became the Australian Capital Territory was.

David Headon — It straddled Eden-Monaro and Werriwa and the member for Werriwa around 1908 was a gentleman by the name of Hall.

⁴⁹ Withycombe, op. cit, pp. 99–101.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Question — I wanted to ask about the Lake George site and exactly where around Lake George was the proposed site and was there any water in the lake at the time?

David Headon — To answer the second part, there is that splendid water colour by Charles Coulter which was on the cover of the Proceeding of the Congress of Engineers, Architects and Surveyors in Melbourne in 1901. When you look at that you see an Australian Venice to all intents and purposes. In fact, it was dry throughout this entire period. It was certainly dry through the first decade post-federation.

The proposed site was, I think, down the Bungendore end of Lake George. Hence you had people like John Gale, prominent in Queanbeyan, also being on the Lake George Committee.

Question — Where did the word ‘Canberra’ really come from?

David Headon — That’s a tough one. I was yesterday out at the National Capital Exhibition where one of the guides suggested that it came from Canberry.

We know that there are three possibilities. When you look at Frederick Watson, who was mentioned in my paper, or some of the earlier non-Aboriginal writers about the area, most suggest that it came via Canberry. When you look at possibilities in terms of Aboriginal languages of the area, we know that there are two possibilities that emerge in the literature.

One is Canberra as meeting place, and the other is Canberra as a woman’s breasts, looking at both Black Mountain and Mount Ainslie as the two breasts of the woman. We seem to have settled on meeting place, I suspect because it fits the agendas of the moment.

Question — Where is Canberry?

David Headon — It is an English town. Has anyone been to Canberry [Canbry] in England?

Question — Wasn’t there a property named ‘Canberry?’

David Headon — Absolutely, which is the name that was brought from England.

Question — Wasn’t it J.J. Moore who owned the property?

David Headon — It was. John Joshua Moore. Yes.

Question — I didn’t properly appreciate, until you gave your speech today, what a remarkable event it was that Melbourne, having got the national capital, and possession being nine-tenths of the law, actually ended up not keeping it. With the deliberations, were there any clauses around time-lines, that they had to make a decision by a certain period of time, or could it have just gone on forever?

David Headon — It could have gone on forever, and of course that’s what many Melburnians were hoping for. As the epilogue to this story, there were two or three

mentions in the *Age* in the early 1950's about getting the capital back. It was suggested that Canberra was so run down circa 1951, '52, '53, that it should revert to Melbourne. Written into the constitution was that Melbourne would be the temporary site until there was a permanent site and, of course, exactly as you said, Melbourne was hoping that possession was nine tenths of the law.

Question — What about Yass in the description 'Yass/Canberra'? I assume that was just a ruse to delude the Victorian members into thinking it wasn't too far away and on the main line railway.

David Headon — That's exactly right, and it was a package. It seems that both Chris Watson and George Reid moved ultimately to support it. Reid, ever the tactician, had finally decided that the capital wasn't going to be just west of Sydney, where he originally wanted it. It was crucial then that Reid and Watson swung around to support the Yass-Canberra option, a less defined option, and this less threatening and more appealing.

Question — Would you argue that this history continues to have some sort of sub-conscious influence on perceptions of Canberra, or does it just go with the territory by being a national capital that it is perceived the way it is?

David Headon — That's an interesting question. It appears that the high point of the disparagement of Canberra in the twentieth century was at the back-end of the 1930's, 40's and early 50's, when phrases such as Canberra as the 'cemetery with lights' or 'the ruin of a good sheep station' or 'seven suburbs in search of a city' or 'the best way to see Canberra is from the back of a departing train', and so on, originated. Menzies, in the 1930s, 'hated' Canberra, but ultimately became, to use his word 'an apostle' for Canberra in the middle to later 50's and beyond. These days it is so easy for commentators to use the generic term 'Canberra', when they in fact mean the politicians.

Question — I have a question and a comment, if that's ok. First of all a comment. One of my favourite books is Bill Bryson's *Down Under*, which is a wonderful book, and very informative but I don't think I have read a book that bags Canberra so badly. I think it describes it as a city hidden in a bush and the author never finds it and gets drunk on his own and leaves in disgust. If you are involved with the celebration of Canberra, I know that Bill Bryson comes back every year for the writers' festival and maybe you could engage him and show him the better side and get this terrible entry in his book fixed up because I would love to recommend that book but I have great reservations because of his experience. The other question I had was, I was told that the guidelines for the national capital did not allow it to be on the coast line and that the Department of Defence had put that in because they didn't want to have the national capital subject to a naval bombardment. Is that correct?

David Headon — Certainly. The notion of being inland was precisely for that reason. Going inland was a) to escape bombardment and b) many had the sense that if you were at sea level then disease was far more likely to afflict the city. So they went inland for those two reasons.

In the case of Bill Bryson I'm sure many people in this audience would welcome any kind of engagement with him. I only respond by saying that we are a population of just on 330 000. In the last two or three weeks, we have heard the suggestion that we will be aiming at 500 000 not too far down the track. As someone who feels so passionately about this city, I would like to see it slowly going up from 330 000 pretty much until I die and become a part of the soil of this place. Human scale is one of the delights of our town, but not appealing to all, unluckily it seems not to Bill Bryson

I was very closely involved few years ago in the study known as the 'Griffin Legacy' and one of the most enjoyable parts of that experience was reading into the history of city beautiful and garden city ideas. The ACT Government, through the Centenary of Canberra Unit, has commissioned six booklets which will come out in either in March or April of next year. Greg Wood is doing two of them, I'm doing two, Ian Warden is doing one, and Stuart Mackenzie, who did the Griffin Legacy with me, is doing another. What those booklets are basically doing is diving a little more deeply into the extraordinary background history of this city as a city built on progressive ideas.. People like Henry George, in terms of Canberra being leasehold, and Edward Bellamy's utopian novel called *Looking Backwards*, and writers like Walt Whitman, Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson—the whole brigade of visionary thinkers who were cited in the parliamentary discussion of the 1890's and beyond.

It is this part of the story of Canberra that people like Bill Bryson and many others, including other Australians have no clue about: Canberra based on a wonderful set of ideas, hidden narratives which we hope will bubble to the surface in the centenary years between now and 2013. So watch this space and perhaps keep your eye out for those booklets.