

The Blue Mountains walking tracks heritage study

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The cultural routes of two civilisations converge and sometimes overlap in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. The Aboriginal dreaming trail of Gurangatch and Mirragan begins near Joadja in the Southern Highlands and ends at Joolundoo waterhole in the upper Fish River 170 km away.¹ Of recorded dreamtime stories this one is located closest to Sydney, being only 25 km from Parramatta at one point. The pursuit of Gurangatch a 'dreamtime serpent' with some of the qualities of the Murray Cod, by Mirragan, a Quoll, passes through areas, such as Wombeyan Caves, the Jamison Valley and Jenolan Caves, associated with the cultural routes of non-Aboriginal tourism. From the 1830s cattlemen used part of the Gurangatch and Mirragan track to move stock between the Burraborang and Megalong Valleys.

The Jamison Valley contains part of the Blue Mountains walking tracks complex, the densest network of constructed tourist tracks in Australia.² The Blue Mountains clifflines have always constrained human movements. The earliest settlers in the region saw Aboriginal people moving between the valleys and ridge tops using the rare natural passes through the cliffs. They called these passes 'Blacks' ladders'. One of these, the Devils Hole, a place of Aboriginal mythological significance, was upgraded and incorporated into the tourist walking track network, after being used by shale miners between 1892 and 1897. Both Aboriginal and settler communities mined for minerals exposed in the sedimentary layers of the cliffs. Aboriginal people extracted chert for toolmaking and lumps of sandstone for the portable grindstones used to sharpen basalt axes in the granite country of the Blue Mountains valleys. Non-Aboriginal people extracted some sandstone for grindstones to sharpen steel axes and for building stone, but were more interested in the energy containing shale and coal layers. Physical evidence of Aboriginal mining and trade in Blue Mountains chert is subtle but the abandoned infrastructure for the transport of the carbonaceous minerals is dramatic. Some of the miners' access routes and railway lines were incorporated into the tourist track system eg., at Gladstone Pass, the Ruined Castle track, and the Newnes railway. The evocative ruins of unnamed, unmapped and unrecorded miners' ghost towns lie close to ancient Aboriginal campsites.

Walking tracks specifically for tourist use were designed and constructed by local volunteer trusts who administered small annual grants from the NSW Lands Department. Trustees were typically local small businessmen who supplemented the \$100 to \$200 annual grants with their own locally raised funds and volunteer labour. They overcame some quite extraordinary obstacles in order to access the 'beauty spots' of each town. Reserve development followed a pattern, with the first tracks accessing lookouts, then the tops and bottoms of waterfalls. Two waterfalls would then be joined by 'passes' at the top and bottom of the cliffline. These large loops would be infilled with a maze of tracks connecting natural features of interest.

Dramatic examples of how ambitious the trustees were in overcoming natural obstacles are provided by viewing two classic nineteenth-century paintings of Blue Mountains valleys. Eugen von Guerard's 1872 painting of the Grose valley and Augustus Earle's c.1826 view of the Jamison Valley both aimed to evoke the

awesome inaccessibility of the valleys.³ Tiny human figures on the clifftops appear to shrink back in horror from these sublime depths. Yet, 80 years after Earle's visit, the massive cliff which dominated his painting and epitomised a place where human beings could never go, had a staircase carved into it. The remarkable National Pass stone staircase, at about 100 metres high and Australia's tallest outdoor staircase, allowed ladies in long dresses and extravagant hats to reach the bottom of Wentworth Falls. The staircase and its associated access track to the Valley of the Waters took four local Irish immigrants about 18 months to construct. They received the minimum basic wage of seven shillings (\$0.70) per day.⁴ Likewise, 27 years after von Guerard's painting, the Grose Valley was breached with a series of stone and wooden staircases allowing tourists to reach the bottom of Govetts Leap falls.

A significant aspect of these tracks is that they were not brutally imposed on the landscape. Natural organic materials such as local wood and stone were used whenever possible and the constructed features were designed to blend in well with the landscape. Many sections of track are reminiscent of Japanese gardens. Recent studies have concluded that some constructed tracks, such as at Den Fenella at Wentworth Falls, have aesthetic values that are significant at the State level and are being nominated for the N.S.W. State Heritage Register on that criterion. Fine stonemasonry is a feature of many Blue Mountains walking tracks. The National Pass track has over 1800 cut stone steps and stepping stones. Other walking track fabric includes dry stone walling, elaborate drainage systems, historic carved signage, wooden steps, ladders and bridges and early lookout railings and fences. Timber and rock seats, tables, fireplaces, monuments and memorials, a wide variety of shelters, toilets, metal structures, dams and wells, tunnels and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal archaeological relics are found in association with the tracks. The author has carried out detailed assessments of the condition of the fabric on over 300 tracks in the region and completed State Heritage Inventory forms for all the tracks. With the exception of a few tracks constructed on private land, all these walking tracks were created by local community trusts. None were made by the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service who now manages most of them. When the Blue Mountains National Park was created in 1959, it consolidated many of the isolated reserves. However, the key attractions of the park remained the tracks and facilities created by the trusts. Even today when the Blue Mountains National Park has been incorporated into the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, the great majority of visitors to the World Heritage Area experience it while using tracks and lookouts created 70 to 110 years before.

The author has collected thousands of photographs showing people using Blue Mountains walking tracks over the last 140 years. This photographic archive illustrates the cultural practice of doing full-day and half-day bushwalks on safe, highly engineered tracks in groups. Associated documentation in diaries, archives and through oral histories shows that people have valued very highly the intangible cultural heritage values of Blue Mountains walking tracks. ICOMOS in recent years has focussed its attention on the methodologies for documenting the memories, attachments and cultural practices associated with places. This body of work should serve as a counterbalance to elements within the conservation movement and National Parks & Wildlife Service who have a tendency to mock or trivialise the experiences of families and social groups on constructed tracks. Their attachments are sometimes denigrated by comparison with the 'wilderness experience'. The wilderness

movement has, in the last decade, nominated cultural landscapes with a century or more of intensive recreational use and containing large amounts of constructed walking tracks and associated features as wilderness areas.⁵ The National Parks & Wildlife Service has regrettably approved some of these dubious nominations. One poignant aspect of the history of Blue Mountains walking track usage is that places that were once very important to literally millions of people, such as Leura's Weeping Rock, have become abandoned due to poor maintenance and management of their access tracks. Gazetting of such areas as the Upper Grose Valley as wilderness areas will inevitably lead, through current National Parks & Wildlife wilderness area management policies, to a breakdown of attachments between communities and some of their well loved places.

To illustrate some of the diversity of Blue Mountains walking tracks, some examples are provided of tracks and track networks which are under consideration for nomination for the State Heritage Register.

1. **Hydro Majestic walking tracks.**⁶ Australia's largest network of privately constructed walking tracks was made between 1892 and 1912 for William Hargraves and Mark Foy by the master stonemason and dry stone waller, the Scotsman Murdo McLennan. About 18km of tracks was made through Mark Foy's 900ha of land. The network contains perhaps the most elaborate dry stone walling construction in Australia, the 1894 'Coliseum'.
2. **Springwood Lourdes Grotto.**⁷ Seminarians at St Columba's College in North Springwood constructed, in about 1910, a walking track to a replica of the Lourdes Grotto in a nearby gully. The track lies in an area of Aboriginal spiritual significance, providing a rare example of a place to which both black and white Australians have made religious pilgrimages.
3. **Newnes Railway.**⁸ The privately constructed branch railway line between Newnes and the Wolgan Valley was completed in 1907 to transport shale out of the valley. It now lies within National Park and State Forest lands and is a good example of a 'Rails to Trails' conversion.
4. **Mt York Road Complex.**⁹ Between 1814 and 1912, five different roads, including four convict constructions, were made to link the Blue Mountains ridgetop with the Hartley Valley. Cox's Road was the first road to Bathurst and Berghofers Pass one of the last hand made roads in the State. An impressive variety of stone walling techniques is exemplified in this complex.
5. **Bruces Walk.**¹⁰ Made in 1931, this is the longest walking track in the region and the only one in the State constructed by the N.S.W. Railways Department. Originally linking Lawson and Mt Victoria, it utilised access tracks created as part of the supply of bulk electricity from Lithgow to the Blue Mountains Shire.
6. **Engineers track.**¹¹ A 60-km bridle track along the entire length of the Grose River made in 1858/59 as part of a survey for a railway route.

7. **Princes Rock Track.**¹² The remnant of a track made by the State government in 1867/68 to allow the Duke of Edinburgh to view Wentworth Falls.
8. **Henry Parkes' Garden tracks.**¹³ Sir Henry Parkes, over a few years from 1887, extensively landscaped his bushland grounds with finely constructed walking tracks most of which are now in local government managed parks or in the Blue Mountains National Park.

Conclusion

Blue Mountains reserve trustees located in each of the mountain villages operated independently to create tourist attractions for their own area. Each town competed against the others for tourists. The result of over a century of 'passionate parochialism' is that often the track networks of adjacent towns came close together. Planning is now taking place to link the local track networks into a Blue Mountains Crossing Walk between Lapstone and Lithgow. This long distance track has links to the Bicentennial National Trail, Barallier Trail and Hume and Hovell Track. It would make the Blue Mountains the entry point for Australia's largest centre of population to an integrated long distance track network linking communities throughout much of south-east Australia.¹⁴ The American greenways movement has been working since the 1980s to create a walking track network that will result in every American being no further than a ten minute walk from a local park with links to other local, regional and National parks throughout the whole country, via greenways and long distance walking tracks.¹⁵ Such a vision is not inconceivable for Australia.

The dreaming trail of Gurangatch and Mirragan is part of a web of Murray Cod dreamings that connect all parts of the Murray-Darling river system. These dreamings are part of the network of songlines that link all areas of this continent. The non-Aboriginal walking tracks that survive for thousands of years into the future will occupy a place in our culture similar to that of dreaming tracks in Aboriginal culture. One author has recently suggested that, with the deepest respect for the ancient Aboriginal dreamings of this continent, we have made the beginnings of a 'white fella's dreaming' in Australia.¹⁶

endnotes

- ¹ Smith, J., *Aboriginal Legends of the Blue Mountains*, Wentworth Falls: Den Fenella Press 1992.
- ² Smith, J., *Blue Mountains Walking Track Heritage Study – Historical Report*, Blackheath: National Parks & Wildlife Service 1999.
- ³ Von Guerard's 'Govetts Leap' is now in the National Gallery of Australia and Earle's 'Bougainville Falls, Prince Regent's Glen' is in the National Library of Australia. Both are illustrated in Speirs, H., *Landscape Art and the Blue Mountains*, Chippendale, NSW: Alternative Publishing 1981, pp.21,122.
- ⁴ Smith, J. and Beaver, D. *The National Pass Conservation Management Plan*, Unpublished Report for National Parks & Wildlife Service 2002.
- ⁵ *Assessment Report on the Nominated Kanangra-Boyd Wilderness*, Sydney: National Parks & Wildlife Service 1991; *Assessment of the Grose Wilderness*, Sydney: National Parks & Wildlife Service 1998.
- ⁶ Smith, J., *Hydro Majestic Walking Tracks, Conservation Management Plan*, Unpublished Report for Hydro Majestic Hotel, 1999, State Heritage Inventory (SHI) forms, 3900201, 3900202.
- ⁷ S.H.I. form 3900033.
- ⁸ S.H.I. form 3900332
- ⁹ S.H.I. form 3900328.
- ¹⁰ S.H.I. form 3900241.
- ¹¹ S.H.I. form 3900232.
- ¹² S.H.I. form 3900088.
- ¹³ S.H.I. form 3900331.
- ¹⁴ Smith, J. *A National Trail System for Australia, Showing Existing and Proposed Long Distance Walking Tracks*, Unpublished map, 1994.
- ¹⁵ Little, C. *Greenways for America*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1990.
- ¹⁶ Borschmann, G. *The People's Forest*, Blackheath: The Peoples Forest Press 1999, p.vii.