

AUSTRALIA'S AVENUES OF HONOUR: A NEGLECTED STORY

Preamble

Australia's Avenues of Honour to the Great War, have both national and international significance - While they give us a graphic visualisation of death toll - some 60,000, they are much more than this. They tell of the:

1. Neglect of memorials – loss/change of values? From personal/communal to government.
2. The social and landscape imperatives that called them into being?
3. The political imperatives leading to such plantings instead of built memorials.

Introduction

As early as 1892, H. A. James, prominent Sydney horticulturist and garden-writer, took the capital cities to task for having no avenues such as those at Ballarat in Victoria.¹ The story of horticulture, the landscape, gardens or forestry cannot shed its social/historical character. A fundamentalist unhistorical attitude towards them, one consisting exclusively as a self-contained science-based genre is a flawed, biased view that compromises the worth of forestry, of amenity horticulture and landscape design. In sharing my quest today I trust you will take away and pursue aspects of that quest in your own spheres of influence.

In reviewing the social story of Australia's approximately 400 Avenues of Honour, especially those created during the Great War, we will briefly touch on what initially brought them into being in preference to sculptured or built memorials.

These avenues were created in most cases for those who volunteered from their respective communities not specifically for those killed in the Great War as often presented.² Today, the original memorial trees are the best known sole surviving living witnesses to how Australians memorialised their heroes and to what happened in their communities during the the War; as such they are a most important cultural heritage.

Often there was a rationalisation whereby it was decided to memorialise only those who died as at Richmond in Victoria where, if all the local volunteers were represented an avenue of over 5000 trees would be needed. Finding a place for such an avenue was impracticable so the trees were planted to the memory of Richmond's fallen heroes. The resultant avenue along the riverside was swept aside for Tollway development in the late 20th century.

Over the past twenty-five years my method of research into the avenues of honour has been through archived minutes, letters private, published and archived, as well as newspaper reports, unpublished theses and published works with on-site follow ups where possible. I believe the late Professor Ken Inglis's interpretation and dismissal of the avenues of honour as a novelty was a major misunderstanding and misreading of the history, both of the avenues and of their place in wartime and beyond.³ The Walwa avenue Nth East Victoria, planted at the sports ground emphasises the community importance of the town's memorial trees.

Background of avenues as memorials

Colonists in Australia did not have a tradition of erecting monuments to great men or women. Over twenty years ago Inglis found that by 1900 across Australia there were only twenty to thirty monuments honouring people.⁴ So when the new nation was formed there was no embedded monumental tradition, however there were earlier memorial avenues and visiting dignitaries were often invited to plant a tree in honour of their visit. The various colonies had valued trees such as the Separation Tree, Melbourne, the Proclamation Tree in South Australia and the Tree of Knowledge in Queensland.

In Melbourne The Corroboree Tree is particularly significant, as it is a much older link in the chain of Australia's culture of tree planting, arboreal preservation, wartime, monumental and cultural heritage. I believe that there is some evidence that the sacred trees of aboriginal Australians influenced this situation through Melbourne's Corroboree Tree as well as from the currency lads and lasses in New South Wales who spent time with the native peoples in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Similar influences would have come through the many liaisons between Europeans with aboriginal partners, their children and grandchildren time over distance. (Anyone who has viewed the episode of 'Who do You Think You Are' relating to Ray Martin's aboriginal forebears will understand where I am coming from with this analogy).

The factors leading to the creation of our avenues of honour were complex and interconnected. Apart from the impetus of the war there were four other key factors that brought Australia to the creation of these war memorials: Federation, Arbour Day, roadway beautification and distance.

Federation

The colonies were competing on many fronts but with the federation movement there came an excitement and sense of unity that culminated in the act of federation in 1901. This desire to share common aspirations would not have happened prior to that movement and its success. South Australia's efforts at leasing its Northern Territory to Japanese interests in the 1860s is a perfect example of the degree of independence and disinterest in each other the Australasian colonies had despite their common links.⁵

The Great War generated a new ritual of public commemoration in this Australia that previously had little collective, unified or truly national memory. Each of the former colonies, when it became a state within the Commonwealth, continued to retain its own sense of sovereignty through having its own governor to represent the monarch. We see this also in the naming of institutions such as the National Gallery Victoria, and even 20 years after Federation, Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance as the National Shrine. The initial location of the Governor-General in Melbourne, while a temporary arrangement, helped Victorians hold on to their nationalist mindset well into the Commonwealth era.

So while a new political and cultural landscape was emerging so too was a new physical landscape. An avenue of honour is a landscape shaped by community, a landscape that in turn shaped that community into the future. This cultural landscape may have had a short-term or longer-term future, but it did shape communities as much as its creators shaped the avenue just as federation started shaping the communal mindset.

Arbour Day

The Arbour Day practice was introduced to Australia following Stephen Cureton's testimony before the Victorian Royal Commission into Vegetable Products in 1886.⁶ In his testimony Cureton, agent and deputy for the Chaffey brothers' Australian Irrigation Colonies spoke of such days in the USA, telling of how it was customary there to plant trees. Following this, a great deal of attention by the South Australian Agricultural Bureau and similar bodies in the other colonies focussed on the story of Arbor Day as developed from Nebraska in 1872.⁷

Almost two years after Cureton's testimony, arbour days were introduced here, initially in South Australia and Victoria. These were the two colonies that had been most immediately influenced by the Chaffey brothers work in Australia. So from 1890 we had a de-facto national focus on tree planting, re-forestation and the like. However by 1914 the impetus of Arbour Day was flagging and the Victorian Education Gazette and Teachers Aid lamented this decline.⁸ Education leaders in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales were certainly worrying about the decline in interest in arbour day as were community leaders looking to beautify their towns.

Given South Australia's strong Arbor Day tradition it is not surprising to find that a son of a pioneer overlander from Sydney to Encounter Bay in 1851 should plant the first Avenue of Honour in Australia to those who volunteered to serve in the Great War. In May 1915 Robert Clark followed up earlier planting efforts at Normanville by having the main street planted with Moreton Bay Figs at his own expense.⁹ Each tree was labelled with the names of local volunteers. This was the world's first true Avenue of Honour although the name was not coined for Australia's marked trees in such memorial avenues for another two years.

Clark's efforts were reported in the Adelaide and South Australian regional press as well as in Victoria with the result that almost immediately his efforts were given a government imprimatur when a few weeks later the South Australian premier, Mr Vaughan, appealed for other centres to also undertake tree planting to perpetuate the memory of the volunteer soldiers suggesting that the government could help finance such efforts.¹⁰

Other avenues, groves and memorial plantings followed in rapid succession at Brighton, Blythe, Lobethal, Mt Lofty, Renmark, Pinaroo, Willunga, Houghton, Victor Harbor, and others. In Western Victoria, reporting on the Normanville memorial avenue emphasised that Clark had met all costs. This was soon followed by plantings in western Victoria and within the year avenue plantings and proposals were underway across that state.

Switching quickly to New South Wales much of the promotion can be attributed to Mr Donald Fraser an Inspector of Schools there. In 1916 Fraser called for memorial avenues to be planted as Anzac Avenues.¹¹ He lobbied hard and wrote to politicians and community groups throughout New South Wales as well as publishing his ideas in newspapers across the state under the pseudonym of "Jimmy Pannikin". He also communicated his ideas interstate. His appeal was adopted by Frank Tate, Victoria's Director of Education and promoted vigorously through the State Education Department.¹² In South Australia he addressed the parliament supporting the earlier push by government after the Normanville initiative in 1915.¹³

Distance and Beautification.

Australian communities had coped with the demands of distance for over a century before being caught up in this war. In that time vast territories had been traversed and wide three chain reserves stretched across the country for travelling stock and people. Towns had grown up around these wide verges and many communities were only too aware of the need to ameliorate the effect on their senses of the visual expanse and to counteract the dust created in dry weather. By planting trees alongside the former stock routes both these problems could be tackled.

Back in 1913 councillor Clark at Yankalilla in South Australia was involved in local beautification efforts and led moves for planting trees at Jetty Rd Normanville.¹⁴ Across in Victoria and NSW similar plantings were being undertaken as part of roadside beautification. As demonstrated at Normanville, Gundagai, Seymour, Glenlyon, Meredith, Inverleigh and elsewhere beautification was often brought into the arguments in support of Arbour Day and this translated later into similar arguments for the avenues of honour.

Victorians tend to bow to Edna Walling as the first to do this but she was well down the track. Important though she was, the ANA, Arbour Day bodies and Education authorities as mentioned, had already been doing this long before. Not only within and between the Australian towns was distance consequential but that between Australia and the rest of the European world. This distance from 'civilisation' as they saw it, meant that Australians were free to develop their own form of memorialisation and this was with memorial trees and the Avenues of Honour that sprang up across the country.

War and Politics

By 1914 the Education Departments, the ANA and many Arbor Day committees had been worried by a fall off of interest in the Arbour Day Movement until the War brought about a new focus and breathed life back into it. The War Precautions Act 1914 carried the most contested regulations and series of legislative moves that ultimately surrounded the conscription issue. But for all the focus on such regulations and actions, little regard has been given to those whereby no war memorials costing in excess of £10-0-0 were allowed to be erected and then only with government permission. This provision under the Act came about in a new country with no federal power to implement it, one where most of the population was rural with a high proportion of small business, self-employment and suffering a rural depression.

The impact of the Great War and the following epidemic and Great Depression decimated this rural population and also brought about the shift in Australia from a nation of small businesses to a nation that ever after devolved its energy to bigger businesses and bigger government and bigger capital cities which A. D. Hope coined as 'five teeming sores'. But between the major centres now growing at the cost of that rural population the linking roads were in a parlous state after over a century serving as bullock tracks and droving routes.

While government aimed to control spending by curtailing 'waste' on memorials, the Avenue of Honor Secretary from Rupanyup Victoria wrote to the City of Ballarat in 1917 to thank that council for starting what was the popular choice of War Memorial throughout the nation. Through this and other correspondence, we see that these avenues were perceived as a national form of war memorial. It also highlights an attitude of mind in the Australian psyche that looked to ways around government regulations and places the sensitivities of people as more important than regulations. It is arguable that we may have lost this independent streak in the twenty-first century.

A stand-out feature of the avenues of honour to the Great War was that within the first year of that War their creation commenced in Australia, a young nation far from the European war fronts; for that time a unique form of national memorialisation. Also, as mentioned these memorial avenues were being created not specifically for those killed in the Great War but mostly, for those who volunteered from their respective communities.

The original trees are the sole surviving living witnesses to what happened in Australian communities during that war. This is an important issue in the psyche of people when we mark a tree as diseased, old and dangerous or whatever, when we single it out to be removed or replaced.

Good arboriculture practice and safety issues come into play, but too often we fail to involve those who have had generational links to the trees or a particular tree, and they need to be included to some degree in the decision making. My own family had a tree planted in Monash Avenue, the Ballarat North Avenue of Honour. That tree was removed in 2006 without ceremony or community involvement as all the plaques had been removed over half a century earlier and a new bureaucracy lacked any interest or historical knowledge (corporate memory) that it had in fact ever been a memorial tree. This was the only memorial in the town to this native son, whose family was still in the town and had always been involved in community activities, and is even represented in the national POW memorial. I

include this as it is the case across many communities where I have been involved in avenues being re-instated that had been forgotten even in some cases by local historical societies. Often also a new avenue is planted in a different situation despite the original avenue of trees surviving. Then there are those avenues remaining where the towns have long gone.

Demographic changes over the decades plus war, land management practices, transport and disease and we have lost track- lost sight of an important original concept, to perpetuate life with a living monument. So! Do we look to a living monument or even plant monumental trees or put a plaque on a rock and forget about it after twenty years have passed, or in total rejection of the beliefs that engendered the avenues just carve the dead wood into a statue?

A national movement.

Around rural Australia, quiet, loyal memories were created to local volunteer heroes so that over the generations communities would have a real, living, hands-on memorial that would demand active involvement in terms of care and maintenance and subsequently active remembrance. It was this wide community involvement and interest that kept Ballarat's major avenue memorial activities in the public eye far and wide for over a century. In February 1917 Amphitheatre, Seymour and at Ballarat's Newington ANA avenues of honour were being proposed. Following the Newington discussions, their delegate, a local policeman, took the proposal to the Ballarat Progress Association's Arbour Day meeting in April of that year.¹⁵

The proposal was taken on board by Mr Edward Price of Lucas and Co a Ballarat white-wear (lingerie) factory, and it was under his leadership that the legend we know today was driven and fostered. He it was that claimed his sales director Mrs Tilly Thomson brought the idea back from Mt Lofty in South Australia despite others in the city having been proposed earlier and others nearby already started. The legend of Ballarat's Avenue of Honour has come down through the Lucas story and is reasonably well known and it was this avenue that took the concept to Australia and to the world.

I have already mentioned the early moves to create these memorial avenues in South Australia and that Victoria and New South Wales started planting theirs. In 1915 at Warrion near Colac and Lal Lal near Ballarat, communities started planting avenues that like many others were added to throughout the war and later. Following the Victorian Education Department's promotion of the planting of Anzac Avenues for Arbor Day 1916 they were being planted and/or proposed at Smeaton, Ballarat North, Sassafras, Eurack, Amphitheatre and Seymour. In New South Wales Narrabri, Gundagai and Laurieton had also started, so that we find three states had early taken up the call.

With the first anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, Narrabri and Gundagai planted their Anzac Avenues in April and May of 1916. However, despite these and South Australia's early lead, it was the Ballarat Avenue of Honour in 1917 that caught the nation's imagination. Following aggressive corporate promotion of this avenue from the Lucas advertising machine the concept of an Avenue of Honour became fixed in the minds of people and municipalities across the nation. Lucas's campaign, a sort of product placement, put avenues of honour on the map.

Letters and telegrams flowed into Ballarat from other cities, Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Hobart, Perth and lesser municipalities and organisations right up through Queensland. Following a flow of correspondence between Hobart and Ballarat the City of Hobart sent Mr L. J. Lipscombe, their superintendent of reserves and assistant engineer, W. J. Rait to Ballarat to inspect the memorial avenues and take their findings back home.

Ballarat promotions and the Lucas organisation press releases ensured that the story, their story, was relayed to newspapers across the country. Added to the copious correspondence between municipalities and others, the newspapers from 1917 helped spread word of avenue plantings. By the end of 1917 every state had avenues of honour from North Queensland to Western Australia and Tasmania.

I have already mentioned Donald Fraser, alias 'Jimmy Pannikin' a New South Wales Inspector of schools, who had letters published in newspapers across New South Wales and interstate. This in turn brought Frank Tate and the Victorian Education Department on board in advocating for the avenues.¹⁶ Another catalyst in this proliferation of avenues of honour under whatever names they might have variously been called came from a letter sent to all councils in the state by the Victorian Recruitment Committee in 1917 this was also published in newspapers, citing not only the Ballarat example but others.¹⁷

Despite more recent claims of lack of foresight in the selection of cultivars, letters between horticulturalists, departments and councils indicate that, like the Hobart example, wide consultations were often undertaken in this regard. In New South Wales the council at Murwillumbah wrote to J. H. Maiden, director of the Sydney Botanical Gardens for advice on the selection of trees for their avenue, "aware that the success of the avenue depended on the suitability of the trees".¹⁸

In Victoria the Department of Agriculture advised on the choice of Cypress Cupressus macrocarpa following the loss of the earlier Plane Trees Platanus at Queenscliff. Similarly at Rupanyup, Corryong, and elsewhere proponents sought advice from horticultural specialists on the choice of trees taking into account location, soil and climate.¹⁹

In terms of the past, Inga Clendinnen wrote that "in human affairs there is never a single narrative" and this is certainly true of our Avenues of Honour. One of the secondary aims of my research was to raise the question of the legitimacy of Australia's avenues of honour, and importance as a landscape, memorial and cultural record of a post-colonial society. It also tests this legitimacy against what has been set to one side by military historians, social historians, politicians and often even garden history advocates.

By the end of the Great War avenues of honour had been created in all states with over 200 in Victoria, approximately 50 in South Australia and 100 in NSW and smaller numbers across the remaining states. Across this young nation there were at least 400 avenues created before the end of the Great War with more planted into the 1920s and 30s. Today the avenue of honour is accepted as an Australian national cultural form of memorialisation.

Transnational Brief.

As early as 1918 Ballarat's Edward Price boasted that the idea "had been adopted overseas". Australia's Avenues of Honour were used in promoting the concept of memorial avenues in England, Canada, the USA and New Zealand. Ultimately Italy legislated their adoption in that country having gained the idea from Canada which, as mentioned was a flow on from Australian initiatives and promotions.

On this basis I believe Australia's avenues of honour to the Great War are internationally significant and need heritage protection from the greatest to the least. In Yorkshire the Leeds Mercury promoted the Australian introduction of this form of memorial with the Ballarat story and the planting of the first tree in a Melbourne avenue by Prime Minister Billy Hughes. Other examples appeared in newspapers across Britain the USA, Canada and New Zealand.

Two former South Australian leaders were pivotal founding committee members of Britain's Roads of Remembrance Association in 1919. The paper trail from Australia has led to all these countries and I show a few of their avenues by way of example. The image of the sad demise of the avenue at Mortchup in Victoria is one repeated in all the countries mentioned and is, I believe, an indictment of how we have failed not only the World War I communities and their heroes but how we have dismissed our own wonderful national and international legacy.

Many of the original trees are now 115 years old and despite the loss of these avenues with only about 400 remaining in Australia we are still choosing to remove too many without considering that the original living trees are our only life form linked to their people and communities and indeed to ours. We are not alone as Italy has only 6000 of its original 12,000 avenues remaining and other countries have similar stories. In the United States of America some avenues fifty miles long have been sacrificed to modern motorways.

One is reminded of Orwell, "Who controls the past controls the future; Who controls the present controls the past." These surviving living memorials to the Great War whether in whole or part have much to tell us, but have we the patience or wisdom to adequately assess all they have to pass on. In Australia their inspiration still leads to newer memorials such as our Vietnam and Afghanistan avenues of honour. One hopes the decisions of future generations are more considered than some in recent years.

Notes:

¹ James, H. A. *Handbook of Australian Horticulture*. Sydney, NSW: Turner and Henderson, 1892.

² Haddow 1987, Dargavel 1999 and Ziino 2007, all leave us with the idea that the avenues were pseudo graves which, while true in some instances, is far from being the majority where trees were planted for living volunteers as at Normanville 1915 and Ballarat 1917.

³ Inglis, Kenneth. *Sacred Places*, Melbourne, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2001.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Berkery, Frank. *East Goes West*. Melbourne, Vic: Fraser & Jenkinson, 1944.

⁶ Victorian Government, Victorian Royal Commission into Vegetable Products: First Progress Report together with the Minutes of Evidence, 1886-1894, vol. 1 (Melbourne, Vic: Victorian Government, 1890).

⁷ Taffe, Michael. "Victoria's Avenues of Honour to The Great War Lost to the Landscape", B.A, Hons thesis, University of Melbourne, 2006.

⁸ "Arbor Day," *Education Gazette and Teachers' Aid*, Victorian Government, May 25

⁹ "A Living Roll of Honour," *The Express and Telegraph* (Adelaide), 19 May, 1915.

¹⁰ *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 25 Jun 1915

¹¹ "Arbour Day 1916: Anzac Avenues," *The Adelaide Register*, 14 April, 1916; *Victorian Education Gazette and Teachers' Aid*, April 14, 1916.

¹² "Arbour Day 1916: Anzac Avenues," *Education Gazette and Teachers' Aid*, Victorian Government, May 18,

¹³ "Suggested Anzac Arbour Day," *The Register* (Adelaide), 14 April, 1916.

¹⁴ *The Register* (Adelaide) "Normanville", 28 Jun 1913

¹⁵ Taffe, M. "First World War Avenues of Honour: Social History through the Landscape." PhD Thesis, Federation University Australia, 2018.

¹⁶ Arbour Day 1916: *Anzac Avenues*," *Education Gazette and Teachers' Aid*.

¹⁷ "Work for Returned Soldiers: An Avenue of Honour," *Ararat Chronicle and Willaura and Lake Bolac Districts Recorder*, 7 Sept, 1917.

¹⁸ "Memorial Avenue," *Tweed Daily* (Murwillumbah), 20 April, 1918.

¹⁹ Taffe, M. "First World War Avenues of Honour: Social History through the Landscape."

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