



A vision splendid

In the lead up to Canberra's centenary in 2013, a recent exhibition at Parliament House has captured the drama and devotion of Canberra's surveyors as they mapped out the nation's capital. Story: David Headon

In two years' time, the nation's capital will celebrate its 100th birthday. Throughout 2013 there will be numerous opportunities to recognise, reflect upon and commemorate some of Canberra's most engaging foundation stories, especially on and around 12 March.

For this was the day when, a century earlier (and an hour or so after the Governor-General's wife, Lady Denman, officially named 'Canberra'), the Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher enthused a VIP luncheon with his vision of a future capital where "the best thoughts of Australia will be given expression to". He imagined Canberra in the not too distant future as a seat of learning, politics and the home of art.

Rising to a sense of momentous occasion for the new nation, the Governor-General, Lord Denman, looked to the creation of "a city bearing perhaps some resemblance to the city beautiful of our dreams".

Several decades after his own controversial prime ministership (1915-23), Billy Hughes recalled the nation-building agenda of the pre-Great War years with genuine fondness, singling out the saga of the national capital for special attention. As he wrote in *Policies and Potentates* (1950): "... the story of how the Parliament of the Commonwealth came to choose Canberra as the Seat of Government is a chapter of history about which lingers the fragrance of romance."

It is an acute observation, one supported by a wealth of information and anecdote that, taken collectively, contradicts the last gasps of unthinking prejudice about Canberra and its roots that you still hear muttered in the odd pub or on the odd talk-back radio station.

Hughes, of course, had an active role in Canberra's beginnings, as did so many of his larger-than-life parliamentary colleagues. As much as anyone, he was aware of the drama and intrigue that surrounded the 'Battle of the Sites', when towns and regions across Australia in the 1890s, and across NSW after Federation in 1901 (courtesy of the Australian Constitution's section 125), aggressively promoted their credentials to be what one

contemporary writer called “the treasure-house of a nation’s heart”.

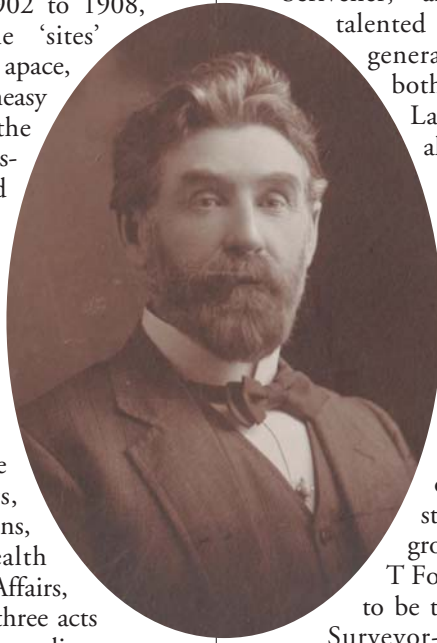
In the years from 1902 to 1908, the combat of the ‘sites’ antagonists continued apace, finally reaching an uneasy conclusion when the region known as ‘Yass-Canberra’ was named as the capital site, and became the subject of the milestone Seat of Government Act (1908). The extraordinary process had involved 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.

Billy Hughes’ fine turn of descriptive phrase about Canberra’s early history elegantly captures the flavour of the well-documented ‘sites’ saga, but it is just as relevant to a number of the unknown stories as well. One of these ‘forgotten’ narratives was the subject of a recent exhibition at Parliament House, entitled ‘Devotion, Daring and Sense of Destiny: Surveyors of the Early Commonwealth’.

Spanning the exact anniversary of the Federal Capital Territory’s commencement, the exhibition explored the crucial role played by Canberra’s first generation of Commonwealth surveyors, primarily through a stunning display of some of Canberra’s most iconic foundation photographs. Complementing this gallery of classic shots was a host of visual material being seen for the first time.

In the exhibition, the surveyor yarns found their proper place in Canberra’s grand narrative.

Between 1909 and 1915, these men (and, on occasion, their hardy, supportive wives), camped on the Limestone Plains and in the nearby mountains in order to survey both the new bush capital city’s environs and the border of the nation’s federal territory. It was a very big border. Getting around it took ingenuity, commitment, devotion and, yes, even a little daring. Weather and water always loomed large, just as they do today. Lifelong friendships were forged. Characters abounded. Egos too.



The exhibition introduced us to a fascinating group, including: Charles Scrivener, arguably the most talented surveyor of his generation, prized by both conservative and Labor governments alike; Percy Sheaffe, destined to play a leading role in the five-year border survey; ‘Happy’ Harry Mouat, border surveyor of talent who was not much given to a grin; ‘Fast’ Freddie Johnston, one of the more stylish members of the group, with his Model T Ford, who would go on to be the Commonwealth’s

Surveyor-General; Arthur Percival, also eventually rewarded with the Surveyor-General post; and physiographic surveyor Griffith Taylor, perhaps best known as a member of the Scott Antarctic party (1911-12) and a great mate of Douglas Mawson’s. Taylor took a lifelong professional and personal interest in the evolution of his beloved nation’s capital city.

The first Commonwealth surveyors had a keen sense of their role in Prime Minister Fisher’s ‘nation-building’ project. In early Canberra they had a specialist job to do, but they regularly rubbed shoulders and shared fires with both Commonwealth and state

politicians, geologists, meteorologists, astronomers, engineers, architects and military men. All relished the chance to be part of something far bigger than themselves – part of an endeavour destined to exert a lasting impact on the generations of Australians to come.

While the exhibition focused on the surveyors, it also provided fascinating glimpses of a number of the associated cast, including: three prime ministers of the era (Andrew Deakin, Chris Watson and Andrew Fisher); the imposing (Sir) John Forrest, surveyor, explorer and long-time Premier of Western Australia; Colonel David Miller, long-time Secretary in the Department of Home Affairs, and as intimidating a government bureaucrat as any to stalk the corridors of power; the photographer Charles Stafford Vautin, whose ancestors included the aide-de-camp of Napoleon Bonaparte, and whose distant relatives to come include Paul ‘Fatty’ Vautin; and the controversial, irrepressible King O’Malley, Minister for Home Affairs during the key years, 1910–13, and the man who imposed prohibition on the fledgling capital (lasting from 1911 to 1928).

The Commonwealth politicians based in Canberra managed to find themselves a drink during the 1920s, as did the surveying fraternity, but that’s perhaps a story for another time. •

David Headon was curator of the exhibition ‘Devotion, Daring and Destiny: Surveyors of the Early Commonwealth’.



TEAMWORK: The Second Survey Camp’s leadership team at Camp Hill (lower part of Capital Hill), January 1910 (seated, left to right) Felix Broinowski, chief draftsman; Arthur Percival, surveyor; Charles Scrivener, soon to be appointed first Director of Commonwealth Lands and Surveys; Percy Sheaffe, surveyor; (standing, left to right) L Morgan, surveyor; W G Chapman, clerk. Top: King O’Malley.