

Devotion, Daring and Sense of Destiny: Surveyors of the Early Commonwealth*

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During the decade that preceded Federation, the Australian colonies entertained a number of visiting dignitaries and international celebrities curious about the former British convict gulag that had so spectacularly reversed its grim early fortunes. None of the visitors was as popular as the American writer and humourist Samuel Clemens—Mark Twain. In Australia on a world-wide lecturing tour in 1895 because of some ill-chosen investments, Twain took an avid interest in Australian culture and history. In the publication of his travels that followed soon after his southern sojourn, *Following the Equator* (1897), he observed with characteristic flair:

Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer, and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies. And all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises, and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.¹

When the many Australians who read *Following the Equator* over the next one hundred years read this paragraph, they must surely have reflected, with satisfaction and not a little pride, on a succession of historical milestones: the transformational Lachlan Macquarie years, for example; the opening up of the interior; John McDouall Stuart's epic explorer quest; Lola Montez defiantly horse-whipping a critical newspaper editor in booming gold-rush Ballarat; Eureka; the world firsts of the Australian labour movement; the sporting achievements of the cricketers, the rowers, Archer and Carbine; the Australian Constitution story; Federation itself; Gallipoli; and Kokoda, to name a sample.

Few of Twain's Australian readers would have considered the Canberra story, the birth of the national capital, on their list, and yet the creation of the capital city of the fledgling nation fits Twain's description like a glove, especially the many yarns included in the Grand Narrative's first instalments:

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¹ Mark Twain, *Mark Twain in Australia and New Zealand* [excerpted from *Following the Equator*, 1897]. Ringwood, Vic., Penguin Books Australia, 1973, p. 169.

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- opium addict, journalist and convict short story writer William Astley, for instance, determined to achieve continent-wide interest in the so-called ‘Battle of the Sites’ to find the country’s ideal capital;
 - Australia’s second prime minister, Alfred Deakin, prime minister on three separate occasions, holder of the reins of power through key national capital selection years, and yet a man more passionately attached to the idea of raising the dead than raising taxes;
 - third prime minister, Chris Watson, born in poverty on a ship in the bay of Valparaiso, Chile, destined to be the first labour leader of a modern democracy and whose intervention for Canberra as the best capital site was based in part on his love of trout;
 - the many ‘tours’ of the enthused senators and members, to obscure, mostly southern NSW towns and regions, full of high-mindedness, high aspirations and sundry high jinks;
 - the plethora of votes in the House and the Senate that at one point gave the capital city nod to the Snowy River hamlet of Dalgety in 1904, and at other confused and confusing moments to Tumut, to Bombala, and to the apple town of Batlow²;
 - the seemingly interminable process of locating a capital that exhausted seven Commonwealth governments, five NSW governments, two royal commissions, nine Commonwealth ministers of home affairs, and involved four lapsed bills and three Acts of the Commonwealth Parliament³;
 - the courageous rebel Victorian senator James Hiers McColl, who turned an 18–18 deadlock Senate vote between Tumut and a hybrid concoction called ‘Yass–Canberra’, into a 19–17 triumph, as Australia finally got a Seat of Government Act in 1908 that would hold its place—in favour of the hybrid.⁴ This was the result of a clever, last-minute compromise thought up by Chris Watson and George Reid, Australia’s fourth prime minister, that carried the day, and just enough of the doubters.

I could go on, and did in a Senate lecture a couple of years ago.⁵

There is little doubt that Twain’s contradictions and ‘incredibilites’ are everywhere apparent in the two lively decades of the emergent Canberra story up to 14 December 1908, when the necessary royal assent for the *Seat of Government Act 1908* made it

² See, for example, Roger Pegrum, *The Bush Capital: How Australia Chose Canberra as its Federal City*. Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1983.

³ Gavin Souter, *Acts of Parliament: A Narrative History of the Senate and House of Representatives, Commonwealth of Australia*. Carlton, Vic., Melbourne University Press, 1989, p. 104.

⁴ Pegrum, *op. cit.*, pp. 140–4.

⁵ David Headon, ‘Wanted: treasure house of a nation’s heart: the search for an Australian capital city, 1891–1908’, *Papers on Parliament*, no. 50, March 2009, pp. 51–68.

law. But what of the surprises, the adventures, the incongruities that the American so delighted in? To locate them, we need to turn our attention to the next instalment of the Canberra story. Less colourful perhaps, but every bit as imposing and surprising. Chapter the Second, if you like, which places an unlikely group, the Commonwealth surveyors, into our main frame—the men whom respected historian Laurie Fitzhardinge termed, with affection and admiration, ‘the heralds of a new era’.⁶

With the utmost respect for the practical capabilities and talents of surveyors as a group, it is surely fair to say that theirs is hardly a profession with which one readily associates high adventure, surprises and assorted incredibilities consistent with Twain’s observations. Yet these are exactly what you get in the minutiae of the saga of Canberra’s Commonwealth surveyors.

Consider, at the outset, the spare facts surrounding Claude Stafford Vautin, the man apparently responsible for so much of the precious surveyor and broader community photographic record of Canberra’s early history, a hundred years ago, including a number of those now iconic shots atop the Big Ceremony podium on the first Canberra Day, 12 March 1913, featuring Lord and Lady Denman, Andrew Fisher and King O’Malley. Or rather, we think this cache of photographs was the work of Claude Stafford. The National Archives is of that opinion. However, the photos may just have been the work of his immensely skilled cartographer and photographer father Ernest, who put a bullet in his head at the Randwick Rifle Range, aged 59, in 1916.

The Canberra Vautin story, Claude Stafford and Ernest Stafford, gets a little curiouser when we explore their common lineage: one direct forebear, Claude Stafford’s great, great grandfather, Claude Theodore, was the aide-de-camp of Napoleon Bonaparte himself. A related descendant, it appears, is one Paul ‘Fatty’ Vautin, proud Queenslander, former Australian Rugby League footballer and Channel 9 *Footy Show* host. Surprises, incredibilities indeed. There are a few more in store.

This paper will focus on a selection of the surveyors’ centenary stories—yarns about those men and their pioneer wives who, between 1909 and 1915, camped on the Limestone Plains and in the nearby Brindabellas and southern alps in order to survey the city within, and the border of, the new Federal Capital Territory (FCT), as it would be called at its commencement date, 1 January 1911. The FCT perimeter measured out a very big border. Surveying it accurately took years, and heaps of ingenuity, devotion and, yes, even a little daring. Weather and water loomed large. Lifelong friendships were forged. Characters abounded. Egos too.

⁶ Laurence Frederic Fitzhardinge, ‘Old Canberra and district 1820–1910’, in H.L. White (ed.), *Canberra, a Nation’s Capital*. Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1954, p. 32.

These surveyors a century ago had a keen sense of their role in the ‘nation-building’ project. In Canberra over a seven-year period, a period during which Australia became embroiled in the Great War, the surveyors undertook a specialist task. In the course of carrying it out, they rubbed shoulders, and shared their fires and camps, with like-minded Commonwealth and state politicians, geologists, meteorologists, astronomers, engineers, architects and military men. All relished the chance to be a part of something far bigger than themselves, a part of an endeavour destined to exert a lasting impact on the generations of Australians to come.

This paper will first recall a long-forgotten conference of Australian professional men that took place in Melbourne in 1901, a gathering which helps us to place the surveyors in cultural and industry context; secondly, some necessary detail will be provided about the premier surveyor of his generation, Charles Robert Scrivener, his character, his influence, his aura and his commanding role in the early Canberra story; next, the facts of the broader surveyor narrative will be clarified, focussing on a few of the other men of significance involved and the reason why they were rightly regarded at the time as ‘heralds of a new era’; fourth and finally, these stout-hearted men will be placed among their professional and political peers in Canberra during a period of years, pre-World War I, acknowledged and welcomed at the time as being consciously, programmatically ‘nation-building’.

As Prime Minister Julia Gillard searches for ways to formulate and progress a big-ticket issue agenda for 2011, she could do a lot worse than use, as a benchmark for action, the determination and courage of her Labor Party centenary predecessor, Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, who, a hundred years ago, made gutsy decisions for his adopted country that left a lasting legacy.

To gain some insight into the cultural milieu into which we place the first Commonwealth surveyors, we need to go back a few years before the watershed year 1909, back to 1901, the year of Federation. When the first Commonwealth Parliament was opened in Melbourne on 9 May, just down the road in Collins Street (and running for a full fortnight from 6–17 May) a meeting of design and building professionals was already underway. The event’s full title was ‘The Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia’.⁷ The design of Australia’s new capital, all the participants agreed, was far too important to leave only to the politicians. Experts must be called in on this matter of national significance, and the Congress was organised to signal such intent. Two

⁷ *Proceedings of the Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia, Held in Melbourne in May 1901*. Melbourne, J.C. Stephens, 1901.

‘resolutions’ were adopted, a first insisting that design professionals must be fully involved in the selection of site, and a second, more portentous resolution:

... in the opinion of this Congress it is important that the Federal Capital should be laid out in the most perfect manner possible, and that, to avoid the mistakes made in many cities of spoiling the plan by utilising existing buildings, it is desirable that in any site obtained, all obstructions be removed that would in any way prevent the adoption of the most perfect design.⁸

There would be times in the years ahead when certain politicians, Labor and non-Labor alike, agitated for a downmarket, narrowly utilitarian, ‘wattle and daub’ capital, but for the most part—and certainly at the key moments—high aspiration was in the ascendant.

All thirteen papers presented at the Congress reiterated a commitment to world’s best practice design. In his opening address, George Higgins purposefully recalled the splendour of Daniel Burnham’s White City pavilions, at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Throughout his paper, Higgins addressed Australia’s unique opportunity to build ‘a model city’, an ‘ideal city’, and his introductory words set the elevated tone for what followed.⁹

Two points about this timely meeting need to be made: first, the fact that the opening two papers in the published proceedings were by surveyors, ahead of the engineers, architects and what today we would call landscape architects; and second, there was no sign of any ‘grandstanding’ by any of the professions. What do I mean? Well, in the twenty or so years preceding the conference, and in the decade following it, heated debate amongst the professions continued virtually unabated as to which one was best suited to lead the relatively new ‘science’ of town planning. The architects would make the most audacious international bid for this premier status at the first international town planning conference (in London, October 1910),¹⁰ but there was no sign of any antipathy amongst the Australians in Melbourne. All sang from the same song sheet, endorsed the same aims for the new nation’s capital and applied themselves to the task of articulating the role to be played by their particular profession. Surveyor R. Henson Broadhurst anticipated a very real problem to emerge in Canberra 10 years later, when he stated that:

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹ George Higgins, ‘Inaugural address’, *ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁰ *Transactions: Town Planning Conference*, London, 10–15 October 1910 (The Royal Institute of British Architects). London, The Royal Institute of British Architects, 1911.

The surveyor, bearing in mind the trouble and litigation continually proceeding in the existing cities owing to the imperfections of the original surveys, proposes to himself, that, in the new city, the surveys shall be accurate, and the marking permanent.¹¹

It would be the lack of such accuracy in the nineteenth-century surveys of the Canberra region that continually undermined the work of the Federation border surveyors, but more of that shortly. Surveyor Broadhurst, when delivering a paper of technical quality concerned with the laying out of the Commonwealth capital and emphasising the importance of issues such as sanitation, street width and intersection design, reflected the spirit of the gathering. He concluded by expressing his desire to see the Congress' collective efforts 'bear fruit in the improvement of the new city, to which we all hope to be able to point with pride as the outcome of Australian intelligence, aided by the experience of all ages'.¹²

In the exhibition which I recently curated (which had the same title as this lecture, was hung in the Presiding Officers' Gallery, Parliament House, and ran from 17 December 2010 to 15 March 2011), a copy of the rare Congress *Proceedings* was on display—along with Charles Coulter's iconic watercolour of an imagined Lake George capital city looking like an Australian Venice. The Melbourne Congress *Proceedings* booklet included a black-and-white reproduction of Coulter's 'ideal city'.

It is testament to the impact of the 1901 Congress that, within a week of the *Seat of Government Act 1908* being written into law, the Minister for Home Affairs in the Fisher Labor government, Hugh Mahon, issued a set of visionary instructions to 'District Surveyor Charles Scrivener'. The capital city to come would start with the contribution of the surveyors. We will never know who wrote those instructions, but we do have a pretty fair idea of what the writer had been reading. Channelling the 1901 Congress, Minister Mahon challenged his District Surveyor with a set of memorable words:

The surveyor will bear in mind that the federal capital should be a beautiful city, occupying a commanding position, with extensive views, and embracing distinctive features which will lend themselves to the

¹¹ R. Henson Broadhurst, 'Suggestions concerning the laying out of the Commonwealth capital', *Proceedings of the Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia*, op. cit., p. 14.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 17.

evolution of a design worthy of the object, not only for the present, but for all time ...¹³

While Mahon would soon drop out of our narrative, the recipient of his instructions, Charley Scrivener, was destined to fulfil a noble role—in the seven or so years following 1908, arguably the leading role on our national capital stage.

Charles Robert Scrivener was born in 1855 in modest circumstances in Canterbury, Sydney. At age 21, he was appointed by the NSW Colonial Secretary as a cadet in the Trigonometrical Branch of the NSW Surveyor-General's office. Made a staff surveyor in 1901, Scrivener impressed his peers with an extraordinary work ethic, a passion for field work (the more rugged the terrain, the better), and meticulous attention to detail. These qualities were recognised, both in the NSW Government and by those in the emergent Commonwealth Public Service, who required a level of surveying expertise commensurate with the national scale of the tasks ahead.

When Prime Minister Deakin adopted a proactive stance on the capital site issue in the first months of 1904, it was to Scrivener and his surveyor colleague, A.H. Chesterman, that he turned to investigate capital site options in the southern alps and surrounding districts. Chesterman inspected 10 sites around Tumut (a couple of which, incidentally, were magnificently represented in large Monte Luke photographs in the exhibition). Scrivener, on the other hand, looked at a range of sites in the Southern Monaro, among them the town of Dalgety.¹⁴

During a parliamentary recess, Scrivener, District Surveyor Scrivener, was joined by the prime minister, who was keen to have a closer look at Bombala and Dalgety. Shortly after, Scrivener entertained two more VIPs: the former long-time premier of Western Australia, renowned explorer and federal government minister John, later Sir John, Forrest (whose Historic Memorials Committee portrait was in the exhibition), and former Boer War staff officer and Inspector-General of Works in the Home Affairs Department, Percy Owen.

Scrivener had begun rubbing shoulders, and sharing fires, with the nation's leadership. He made a deep impression on them at the time, and they wouldn't forget it. When the time came to survey in more detail the selected Yass–Canberra site, at the beginning of 1909, it was to Scrivener that the governing Labor Party looked. Deakin, Forrest and Owen so loudly sang his praises as the only possible choice that

¹³ Quoted in David Headon, *The Symbolic Role of the National Capital: From Colonial Argument to 21st Century Ideals*. Canberra, National Capital Authority, 2003, p. 36.

¹⁴ Pegrum, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

Fisher opted for him despite the advocacy coming from the other side of the political divide.

Many years later, coinciding with the opening of the provisional Parliament House in May 1927, Colonel Percy Owen OBE discussed the roots of the Canberra story in a delightful memoir for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He recalled with fondness the 1904 excursion in which he participated, the delegation traversing the Victorian countryside, and then working its way through Croajingolong, Delegate, Bombala, Buckley's Crossing (the old name for Dalgety), Kiandra, Yarrangobilly Caves, Gadara and Tumbarumba. Owen vividly remembered the campfire chats, 'full of anecdote, poetry and reminiscences', as he put it. For Owen, Charley Scrivener excelled:

... a man ... eminent in his profession, and with a thorough knowledge of the region selected by the Parliament. I met him in Melbourne, and travelled in his buggy with a pair of horses ... Scrivener ... had a strong personality. He was frugal, indomitable, a martinet, but withal genial and lovable.¹⁵

This is about as complete and insightful a summary of the man as we get from any source. For his part, the experience Scrivener personally gained in 1904 as he imposed his formidable character on men of considerable ability and genuine political clout, would serve him well when the succession of federal delegations to Canberra began in earnest in the first months of 1909, continuing right up to his retirement in 1915.

Acting quickly on Mahon's detailed set of instructions for the capital, in the first weeks of 1909 and with characteristic efficiency, Scrivener produced a preliminary report on the Yass–Canberra site by 25 February. He remained 'lukewarm' about the extended site as a whole but, as he wrote, he 'regarded the Canberra site as the best that can be obtained ... being prominently situated and yet sheltered, while facilities are afforded for storing water for ornamental purposes at a reasonable cost'.¹⁶ A capital in Canberra, he wrote, 'would probably lie in an amphitheatre of hills with an outlook towards the north and north-east ...'

When establishing the first surveyors' camp in Canberra, in February 1909, Scrivener did so in consultation with Minister Mahon and Colonel David Miller. Miller, like Owen, served in the Boer War, as an officer with the Imperial Bushmen's contingent. He was appointed as the first secretary of the Commonwealth Department of Home

¹⁵ Percy Owen, 'Stories of field work: trials of survey officers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 May 1927, p. 6.

Affairs in November 1901, and would remain in that position for over a decade, until he was appointed as the first administrator of the new Federal Capital Territory in late 1912. Miller was an intimidating government bureaucrat and an uncompromising adversary. Surveyor Arthur Percival, about whom we are about to hear more, remembered Miller in two words: ‘gruff and frightening’.¹⁷ This seems to have been the common consensus.

Scrivener, Mahon and Miller chose the first surveyor camp on Kurrajong Hill (now Capital Hill) on 2 March 1909. A matter of days later, the Federal City ‘Members’ Camp’ was established nearby as a base for the first visiting delegation of federal politicians. Boer War veteran Colonel Miller, it appears, ran the camp with rigid discipline, one of the seventeen participating parliamentarians, NSW MHR Jimmy Catts, laconically observing at the time that ‘if there is one special feature about the camp, it is its strictly business appearance and military setting’.¹⁸ The camp was fortunately recreated for us in a series of postcard photographs by the Yass printing firm of Howard and Shearsby, all of which were reproduced in the exhibition.

If the politicians were whipped into line by the frightening Miller, they could at least gain some pleasure from the meals produced by their imported parliamentary chef. Life was not nearly as amenable for Scrivener’s mob. They, like their leader, worked sixteen hours a day, every day, for two solid months to assist in the production of what is usually referred to as Scrivener’s *Second Report*, dated 22 May 1909. It is hardly surprising that a board appointed by Minister Mahon in March 1909 fully endorsed the controversial report because the board of mates comprised Colonel Miller, Lieutenant Colonel Owen (by then the Director-General of Public Works), Colonel Walter Liberty Vernon, the NSW Government Architect and yet another Boer War veteran, and Scrivener himself.¹⁹ Conflict of interest protocols, it seems, were not a priority in the first years of the Commonwealth Public Service. Scrivener had a veritable army of supporters for his work. A clique of colonels.

It is clear from Scrivener’s correspondence that the issue of water storage always loomed largest for him. In the *Second Report* he rejected the water flow estimates for the Cotter River supplied by the authoritative voice of NSW Chief Engineer for

¹⁶ Quoted in Greg Murphy, ‘Prelude to the planning of Canberra’, *Canberra Historical Journal*, New series no. 21, March 1988, p. 15.

¹⁷ Arthur Percival, ‘Canberra’s foundations, 1911–1916’, reproduced in *Canberra and District Historical Society Newsletter*, no. 426, December 2009/January 2010, p. 7.

¹⁸ Quoted in ‘Scrivener and his 1909 survey’, *Canberra and District Historical Society Newsletter*, no. 422, April/May 2009, p. 11.

¹⁹ ‘Report of Advisory Board, submitting views and recommendations’, in *Federal Capital Site* (correspondence and reports), Legislative Assembly, New South Wales, 14 July 1909, no. 38, pp. 27–9.

Harbours and Water Supply, E.M. De Burgh.²⁰ A robust correspondence resulted between the NSW and Commonwealth governments, as bureaucrats from both sides poured over the water catchment statistics of the Canberra site in minute detail. This exchange is given an extra layer of complexity when you factor in that the federal government of Alfred Deakin took over from Fisher right in the middle of it, in May 1909; and a further layer of complexity when, despite the *Seat of Government Act 1908*, and despite the busy activity of Scrivener's team, throughout the second half of the same year the anti-Canberra lobby in the federal parliament, made up mostly of Victorian politicians sensing for the first time that the capital might actually leave their state, mischievously expanded their militant efforts to quash the Seat of Government Act.

In defiance of the chronic insularity of much parliamentary discussion, Prime Minister Deakin and his Home Affairs Minister, George Fuller, were committed to establishing the first infrastructure of the chosen capital site. Hence, on 6 December 1909, with the NSW land package having finally been gifted to the Commonwealth, Minister Fuller alerted his leader to a pressing practical issue: the need now to have 'territorial boundaries ... accurately determined on the ground'.²¹ The acquisition of land in private hands, by the Commonwealth, must proceed in a dignified way. Both Fuller and Deakin refused to countenance anyone but Scrivener for the demanding job ahead. Certainty and precision were essential, for all parties.

Fuller appointed Scrivener as the first Director of Commonwealth Lands and Surveys. He immediately set about obtaining exactly the men he wanted, and he succeeded: quality individuals such as Percy Sheaffe, who started the border survey at Mount Coree in wintry June 1910, worked on it accompanied by his wife for the next three years under exacting conditions, and eventually became a Chief Surveyor; 'Happy' Harry Mouat, the man who rarely smiled, but who worked assiduously on the border survey from October 1913 to May 1915, and who would later become the Commonwealth Property Officer; 'Fast' Freddie Johnston, proud owner of one of the FCT's first cars (a Model T Ford), who surveyed the border for three months in 1915, and who eventually became the Commonwealth's fourth Surveyor-General; and Arthur Percival, who mostly worked on the technical aspects of the city's survey, and who was appointed to the role of Commonwealth Surveyor-General in 1929, serving for a lengthy fifteen years in that position.

On 8 January 1910 the Federal Capital Survey Camp was established on the site of the 1909 camp, Sheaffe and Percival joining Scrivener's team on 19 January. The sum of

²⁰ *ibid.*, no. 17, pp. 5–6; no. 23, pp. 7–8; no. 30, pp. 14–16; no. 34, pp. 16–18; no. 35, pp. 19–23.

²¹ Quoted in Matthew Higgins, *Surveyors at the Snowline: Surveying the ACT–NSW Border 1910–1915*. Canberra, National Trust of Australia, 1996, p. 19.

technical tasks confronting the relatively small group has been well summarised by Scrivener biographer Terry Birtles: ‘a triangulation survey of the territory; preparation of the close contour survey; demarcation of the territory boundary and water catchments ... ; engineering surveys for water supply, sewerage pipes, roads, the railway and bridges; confirmation of cadastral boundaries of privately owned land to be acquired; and pegging out land boundaries at Jervis Bay’.²² Progress was swift. By the end of February, nearly 24 miles in the transverse of the survey was completed, 94 miles of contours had been defined, a meteorological station established and instruments installed to gauge creek flow and evaporation. In March, 17 tons of building material had arrived for construction of temporary premises.²³ The first wave of essential Commonwealth infrastructure was off to a flyer in the hands of a group united by common purpose and collectively devoted to the work in hand.

We have an excellent grasp of this Scrivener working camp courtesy of several sources: the classic photographs taken by Claude Vautin, the ‘Government Photographer’ as Scrivener called him, who so elegantly captured the men, their wives and partners, and the times, in a number of black-and-white photographs, posed and impromptu; the letters to his children of prolific letter writer and caring father Charley Scrivener, particularly to his daughter Ethel; the diaries of Arthur Percival, still in the possession of the family, and presently being transcribed by Percival’s grandson, Geoff Pryor, former *Canberra Times* cartoonist; and, of course, the plethora of government correspondence and Hansard transcripts readily available. Percy Owen would recall that the

camp in time became comfortable and was always a joy. The party was not big—Scrivener, his assistants, the cook and chainmen, and for a while a full-grown black snake under the floor of Scrivener’s tent. That snake did not survive long.²⁴

The bush humour alive in the camp undoubtedly contributed to its smooth running and esprit de corps. There was a superb photo in the recent exhibition of two visiting senators to the camp, J.J. Long and Arthur Rae, hamming it up for the cameras as they mock shape up, Marquis of Queensbury-style, to demonstrate their conflicting views on the capital site’s merits.²⁵ Also on show was an enlarged copy of the front page of the then *Daily Telegraph* broadsheet, featuring an article entitled: ‘With the new

²² Quoted in Terry Birtles, ‘Charles Scrivener: the surveyor who sited Australia’s national capital (twice)’, unpublished manuscript, ADFA, January 2009, p. 91.

²³ Lyall Gillespie, *Canberra 1820–1913*. Canberra, AGPS Press, 1991, p. 268.

²⁴ Owen, op. cit., p. 6.

²⁵ Pegrum, op. cit., p. 144.

senators at the Yass–Canberra Federal Capital Site’.²⁶ We learn that one delegation of senators embarked on a two-day tour of inspection of the Canberra site on 26 and 27 July 1910. The group included, as the Sydney paper put it, a few ‘Victorian malcontents’ determined still to sink the Canberra site if possible. The majority of those present, however, were in agreement with one of their fellow senators when he declared to an accompanying journalist that ‘to resurrect [the capital site] question [now] ... is nothing short of political body-snatching’.²⁷

This same group had a comic mishap on the second day of its visit (covered in detail by the accompanying media) when NSW senator Allan McDougall, being rowed by the ever-vigilant Scrivener across a particularly frisky Cotter River, found himself, along with the experienced and wilderness-wise Commonwealth Director of Lands and Surveys, in, not on, the Cotter. Months later, when Senator McDougall presented his report of the Canberra visit to the Senate on 15 September, he admitted to being ‘greatly surprised at the roaring stream which I saw at the junction of the Cotter and the Murrumbidgee’, and then, more surprised, he found himself actually testing at firsthand ‘the quality of [said] water’.²⁸ The *Daily Telegraph* reporter noted in passing that Mr Scrivener ‘gave a fine example of a backward somersault into the water’ and that Senator McDougall, once he had arrived at the bank, and was swathed in a ‘huge rug ... provided a fine impersonation of a Maori chief’. The *Daily Telegraph* pictures that accompanied the article effectively captured the spirit of proceedings.

But it was not all smiles, humour and high jinks. Far from it. At many points in his diaries, Arthur Percival refers to ‘graft[ing] hard’. Mr Surveyor Percival enjoyed a punt on the horses, a smoke and a quiet, reflective whisky, but such modes of relaxation were thinly interspersed between exhausting, non-stop toil. In Percival’s case, for example, we know that a standard day was 7.30 am to 6.15 pm, 8 pm to 11.00 pm, every day. This was devotion above and beyond.

On the border, Sheaffe worked just as hard, in even more exacting terrain. ‘In places’, he later wrote, ‘the country encountered was so rough that the party carrying out the survey had to crawl on all fours, measure over precipices, and descend in one mile about 1550 feet’.²⁹ Two of Sheaffe’s original field books that were on display in the exhibition confirm the validity of this memory virtually down to the last inch. And yet

²⁶ ‘With the new senators at the Yass–Canberra Federal Capital Site’, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 1910, p. 15.

²⁷ Quoted in 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. 32–3.

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 33–4; *Daily Telegraph*, 28 July 1910, p. 7; ‘With the new senators’, *Daily Telegraph*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁹ P.L. Sheaffe, ‘Founding the city: selection and design’, *Sydney Morning Herald* [Canberra Supplement], 9 May 1927.

this did not stop Sheaffe reminiscing in later age that the national capital chapter of his life was his most treasured, and certainly his most significant achievement. In his article on Canberra, entitled 'Selection and Design', that appeared in a *Sydney Morning Herald* supplement to mark the opening of the provisional Parliament in 1927, Sheaffe probably voiced the sentiments of all his surveyor colleagues who worked on the national capital in the first years when he wrote sagely:

As the home reflects the occupier, so Canberra should reflect the Australian people. Its growth is our responsibility. Great as the responsibility is, let us resolve with grit and determination that the best traditions of our race should be upheld.³⁰

Sentiments such as these relentlessly drove a generation of professional men in the 'nation-building' years in Canberra prior to the Great War, not only the surveyors, but also those with whom they regularly engaged on big national projects. Griffith Taylor was one. Internationally recognised geographer, celebrated Antarctic explorer, protégé of the legendary Professor T.W. Edgeworth David, mate of the even more legendary Douglas Mawson and brilliant if eccentric physiographic surveyor of the FCT, Thomas Griffith Taylor had a lifelong interest in his nation's capital city. He took to heart the life lessons inculcated by his mentor, Professor David: namely, saturate yourself with as much learning and specialist training as you can get, and put those skills, when ready, to work for the nation.³¹ So when the call went out from Melbourne in the first years of the new century for physiographic surveyors to study the meteorological and physiographical qualities of the competing capital sites, Taylor's hand was first in the air. He wrote his first scholarly article on Canberra in 1907, and followed this up with expert analyses of Canberra's geography in 1910 and 1914.³²

Taylor's work had seamless connections with the brand new Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology. Throughout 1906, the House of Representatives in particular featured a series of high-quality debates on meteorology and weather. Andrew Fisher, Joseph Cook, John Forrest and James Hiers McColl were just a few of the parliamentarians who took an intense interest in the subject and its application to a future capital, ahead

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford, *Griffith Taylor: Visionary Environmentalist Explorer*. Canberra, National Library of Australia, 2008, pp. 24, 115; Thomas Griffith Taylor, *Journeyman Taylor: The Education of a Scientist*. London, Robert Hale Ltd, 1958.

³² Thomas Griffith Taylor, 'The physiography of the proposed federal territory at Canberra', *Bulletin* (Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology, Melbourne), no. 6, pp. 7–13; Thomas Griffith Taylor, 'The evolution of a capital: a physiographic study of the foundation of Canberra, Australia', *Geographical Journal*, vol. 43, no. 5, May 1914, pp. 536–50.

of the formation of the bureau.³³ This interest was the catalyst for the appointment of Henry Ambrose Hunt on 1 January 1907 as the first Commonwealth Meteorologist. Griffith Taylor and E.T. Quayle would, a few years later, collaborate with Hunt to produce a landmark volume in 1913, *The Climate and Weather of Australia*, the first Australian textbook on what one contemporary South Australian newspaper lyrically described as ‘the romance of the upper air’.³⁴

Hunt, Taylor and Scrivener saw a great deal of Pietro Baracchi in Canberra during the pre-war years because Baracchi, the Victorian Government Astronomer, was called in to manage the siting and erection of the James Oddie Telescope at Mount Stromlo. Baracchi and Scrivener chose the location in March 1911, and by September the road to Stromlo was completed and the telescope in place—enabling ‘the meridian to which all surveys would be referred to be determined’, courtesy of a fixed point on the summit.³⁵ King O’Malley (a serial dreamer of ambitious dreams, the Minister for Home Affairs in the Fisher Government from 1910 to 1913, a man bent on making Canberra, as he creatively put it, ‘hum’) was one step closer to achieving his national infrastructure goal of putting ‘the Astronomical, Meteorological, and Solar-Physical Observatories ... in one single compound’ in the nation’s capital.³⁶ While it would not happen, such a futuristic concept was typical of the times.

When Charles Scrivener retired as the first Commonwealth Director of Lands and Surveys in 1915, the entire surveying and professional fraternity in Canberra turned out to bid him farewell. Actually, there were apparently a number of Melba-like farewells. Three Claude Vautin photos in the exhibition captured the mood of celebration and due recognition. On 28 May of the same year, ‘Happy’ Harry Mouat and ‘Fast’ Freddie Johnston met at Mouat’s R87 corner mark in the deep south of the FCT to finally complete the five-year survey.³⁷ It was the end of an era. Just seven weeks earlier, the diggers of the 1st AIF ran up the steep cliffs of the Gallipoli Peninsula, headlong into Turkish soldiers fighting for life and country. Australia would be forever changed as a result.

Fred Johnston, by then a retired Commonwealth Surveyor-General, wrote a book published in the early 1960s called *Knights and Theodolites*, an account of his family’s surveying dynasty in Western Australia. It’s a pretty dour read, but the

³³ House of Representatives debates, 1 June 1906, p. 2136; Senate debates, 20 June 1906, pp. 422–3, 435; Senate debates, 21 June 1906, p. 535.

³⁴ ‘Romance of the air’, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 11 July 1914, p. 21.

³⁵ C.S. Daley, ‘The growth of a city’, in White (ed.), op. cit., p. 33.

³⁶ House of Representatives debates, 9 August 1910, p. 1282; see ‘Meteorology and climatology’ section in *Canberra: Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia*. Melbourne, Commonwealth of Australia, 1913, p. 111.

³⁷ See Matthew Higgins, *Rugged Beyond Imagination: Stories From an Australian Mountain Region*. Canberra, National Museum of Australia Press, 2009, pp. 119–22.

foreword catches our attention, where a surveying colleague of Johnston's, Robert Fitzgerald, writes wistfully:

We of the Surveying Fraternity are conscious of a long history behind us, of which, however, most of us know next to nothing ... no-one outside our little freemasonry will ever really understand ...³⁸

In the recent exhibition in the nation's parliament, the 'little freemasonry' finally got a richly deserved centenary hour or two in the sun. Charley Scrivener and the many prodigiously talented men that he hired left an indelible mark on the city of Canberra, and the Australian Capital Territory which enfolds it.



Question — This is not a question, it's a bit of trivia. Scrivener was in favour of the name Canberra for the capital city. However, he had great doubts that it would get up and he actually bet his horse that it wouldn't and he lost.

David Headon — Thomas Griffith Taylor tried in his diaries to take credit for pushing the name Canberra and getting it up. But that was absolutely true, Scrivener did lose the bet, as he records himself.

Question — The United States has had a great influence on the development of Australia as a federation. They have a Senate and we have a Senate here. I had thought that when we considered a national capital here in Australia it was to be the same size as that of Washington DC. Was that right or was that just a rumour?

David Headon — Pretty much it was right. Certainly that was the thinking in the later 1890s and at the turn of the century. There were many politicians who wanted a minimalist model. King O'Malley, whom everyone thought was an eccentric character, had quite a history in the national capital story. At first he didn't believe in the site, but he became a great believer. He called Canberra a 'new Eden'— a typical O'Malley phrase—and he moved a House of Representatives motion in July 1901 calling for a thousand square miles of land for the federal territory.

³⁸ Robert D. Fitzgerald, Foreword, in F.M. Johnston, *Knights and Theodolites: A Saga of Surveyors*. Sydney, Edwards & Shaw, 1962, p. 7.

In O'Malley's case—because he'd had a rather chequered career in the United States before he arrived in Australia and some of it was in real estate—he was very conscious of the fact that unless you got a large national capital area, and unless it was leasehold land, then the land sharks and the developers would take over. It wasn't solely O'Malley but he was the person who moved the motion. Scrivener too in his *Second Report* would say that he wanted something in the range of a thousand square miles.

Question — Just a question about Surveyors Hill. Why that particular hill and what can you tell us?

David Headon — I don't think that there is any overwhelming case in connection with my surveyors' story for the naming of Surveyors Hill a century ago. It certainly wasn't named in the Federation period.

Question — Just two points on the size of the city. The research that I did on water catchments clearly indicated that Scrivener saw the territory as having to make two water catchments, but it was confounded by New South Wales not wanting to give up Queanbeyan. I think it's important to look at the ongoing issues that we've had with water quality for Canberra and the Murrumbidgee because the catchment in New South Wales is not protected like the ACT. The second thing I wanted to comment on is that the size of the city relates to the competition in 1911, where there is a clause that states that it was anticipated that this city would grow as the nation grew so there would be that proportional sized growth. I think it's really useful for surveyors to think about what is the boundary of the Canberra city versus the boundary of our territory.

David Headon — There's been a bit of lively exchange on that very subject in the newspapers in recent weeks. You might have seen in the paper that there are two nominations of Canberra to be national heritage listed, possibly in 2013. A process has begun. There will almost certainly be a recommendation to the minister towards the end of 2012. It remains to be seen what that decision will be.

Question — Just in relation to heritage listing. Why is Parliament House not heritage listed and do you think it should be?

David Headon — I think it's only a matter of time before Parliament House is heritage listed. I referred to it earlier in this talk as a magnificent building. I don't think it has been appreciated as it should be by the Australian populace. At present, there are only two world heritage listed buildings in Australia: Sydney's Opera House

and the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, which was purpose-built for the international exposition in 1880.

I think it's only a matter of time until Aldo Giurgola's Parliament House is added to this minimalist list.