Ebbs and flows: water and place identity on the Nepean Peninsula, Victoria, Australia

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Abstract

The Nepean Peninsula, a tiny sliver of land between Bass Strait and Port Phillip, Victoria, Australia, is seascape-landscape-bayscape, a place set between thundering surf and tranquil waters. Girt by sea, its identity is coastal.

Water is fundamental to human existence. Indigenous peoples found springs of living water, the first European settlers left because they could not find fresh water. Early pastoralists learnt and subsequently quarantine facilities were designed to harness fresh water through a network of underground tanks. In the later nineteenth-century Europeans found health giving qualities in the ozone; luxurious pleasure in the sea; the ocean a delight to all their senses. Drought and plenty have impacted on the environment. Connection to mains water allows tourism to thrive. Today sea mist and cloud, swimming or walking alone, remain the pleasure of locals, even as climate change engenders uncertainty and development threatens this coastal environment. Yet whilst meanings, attachments and values might be part of the active negotiation and renegotiation of place, nature itself is busy defining and redefining itself.

This paper traverses poetics, place and planning issues. In considering water and place identity, it employs ‘Place-Based Knowledge’ as a critical means of creatively engaging with the Nepean Peninsula, focusing on the significance of water of coastal identity and meaning. The paper follows a largely chronological journey through history from the perspectives of water and place. It concludes by considering the inevitability of change: through the opportunities, threats and challenges of natural forces and human agency.

Preamble

‘In nature’s infinite book of secrecy/ A little I can read’ (Anthony and Cleopatra Act 1, Sc 2,87).

Over more than four decades my husband and I have grown to love the Nepean Peninsula, to understand its language, to be comfortable with its rhythms, to respect the tumultuous forces of nature and to appreciate its gentler side. During this time we have come to know the fragility of this environment. In this place our three daughters learnt to explore, to see, to touch, to taste, to smell and to hear this coastal place from babyhood to adulthood. Now they treasure the gift of that experience. This experience has revealed to me that in order to be able to identify and continually refine and redefine the spirit of a place, a place must be experienced as meaningful. Today, too many peoples’ experiences of their environment are fragmentary and fleeting. A place, a land/seascape, does not give up its secrets in a hurry. To know place deeply and intimately requires local knowledge: knowledge that comes through engagement over time, through attachment, rather than through visits, impressions (de Jong, 2002). To stand in wonder at Bass Strait still as a lake, or feel its power with its spray in my face and watch it thunder into foam is humbling and awe-inspiring. Every sense awakened.
This place has woven itself into my very being. It is now a part of me as I am part of it. The subtle seasonal changes, the details, the differences, the ephemeral qualities and the memories are revealed to those willing to see, to listen, and to be present. In the conjunction of the ordinary and the marvellous I have been nurtured and renewed physically, emotionally and spiritually. Albert Camus (quoted in Lippard 2000: 5) speaks of travel as ‘a grander and deeper process of learning which leads us back finally to ourselves’. On reflection I see that constant curiosity, engagement, advocacy and depth of learning have accompanied me on a journey that has not yet ended.

**Introduction: water and place identity**

Sandy Toussaint (2006: xvii) in her introduction to the Contemporary Issues volume ‘Water: Histories, Cultures, Ecologies’ states that water is ‘inevitably tied to the past, present and future relationship between humans and their habitats’. Girt by sea, the Nepean Peninsula is a tiny sliver of land at the end of the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia. The two coasts–Port Phillip bayside and Bass Strait ocean side–are integral to its natural and cultural heritage, to its sense of place; to how people have constructed place identity, their subjectivities, relationships and engagement with it. The Nepean Peninsula, together with the Bellarine Peninsula, forms the gateway to Port Phillip at the Heads. It shields the Bay from the tumultuous forces of Bass Strait. This inspirational landscape has nurtured humans over eons. Along the cliff tops and along the quieter shores of the Bay the Boon wurrung people have walked for over 6000 years. Europeans claimed this land as their first settlement in Victoria in 1803. From this place the city of Melbourne was supported by raw materials and defended against global threats and disease. Water helped shape human use of this place: fresh water shaping occupation; the seaside enticing people, providing inspiration, exhilaration and solace. At the time, access was by sea; isolation was its hallmark until the 1950s when the motorcar became a more common mode of transport. Now many Melbournians holiday here to seek respite from urban stress.

In order to gain some insights into the complex relationships between people and the Nepean Peninsula, and to understand why people are so passionate about this coastal environment, it is necessary to consider the role of water, especially salt water. Exploring water and its relationship to place identity on the Nepean Peninsula shows the significance of water in place through time: the Nepean Peninsula is more than a piece of land circumstantially bounded by water. Here water shapes the land. The effect of water upon soil can be time-traced through erosions on the land, heightened here by the narrowness, the slenderness and thinness of this peninsula. In Rebecca Solnit’s words, ‘it cannot be perceived all at once because it unfolds in time’ (2000: 138). Nature is dynamic and has its own temporal agency. Water is the ‘other’ of landform, an element that differentiates one from another. Humans have developed relationships with these natural places, these land/seascapes of the Nepean Peninsula, and have ascribed values and meanings to them. As Toussaint (2006: xvii) writes: ‘Water clearly embodies and gives life to different shapes and forms, can be understood, compared, and analysed from a range of disciplinary vantage points, has been a substantial player in local and world histories, and is often embedded with divergent meaning across cultures’. Thus the Nepean Peninsula could be seen to provide a microcosm of the world, where the significance of water can be brought to light.

Water makes a significant contribution to understanding, interpreting and protecting the Nepean Peninsula’s place identity. In considering how salt and fresh water have been valued through time, via a range of perspectives, views, values and experiences recorded by various people, allows an other, often unconsidered, choreography of place. This paper takes a poetic meandering tone, not unlike Rebecca Solnit’s *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000). The theoretical approach is embedded in the writing. This paper relies most heavily upon the experiences of the author; on long-term fieldwork; close observation; on engagement with people and place, through participation with the Nepean Historical Society and the Nepean Conservation Group, through scholarly research and hands on work with Friends’ Groups. In doing so, the paper ranges across poetics, place and planning issues, and grapples with the politics of identity and place. ‘Place-Based Knowledge’ becomes a critical means to creatively
engage with the Nepean Peninsula, through a largely chronological journey undertaken through history via the ebb and flow of water. What emerges is a highly complex picture of interwoven relationships between the natural world and human engagement and understandings, influenced by the inevitability of change: through the opportunities, threats and challenges of natural forces and human agency.

**Sense of place and place-based knowledge (pbk)**

**sense of place**

While there is little room to deal with the huge body of work devoted to the notion ‘sense of place’ in this paper, the significant changes over the past fifty years as to how place is conceptualised is nonetheless acknowledged (for example Gibson 1992; Hayden 1995; Smith, 2006; Cresswell 2009; Wattchow and Brown 2011). Maggie MacKellar in her book *Core of my heart, my country* recognises that ‘A sense of place is a complex connection between land and self’ (2004: 17). This paper extends this understanding to water and relationships that define us particularly in a coastal environment–hearing the water, touching the water, playing in the water, seeing the water, in awe of the water, smelling the salt water, that powerfully evocative ‘sniff of the briny’ (Inglis 1999) and so on. These sensory, aesthetic and environmental components contribute to place through diverse ways of knowing, ways that are far more difficult to deal with than ‘more quantifiable research with fewer epistemological problems’ (Hayden 1995: 18). MacKellar continues

Place is both inside and outside; it takes us beyond ourselves and exists outside of ourselves, yet allows us to make sense of ourselves. Attachments are born into us, but they are also formed through movement, through labour, through words. The expression of a sense of place is difficult to pin down. It shifts constantly and eludes precise definition (2004: 17).

Place as a notion is variously defined. Nowadays, topographical mapping is relatively easily and objectively accomplished. Facts of history can be documented. In contrast, the more subjective evocative and poetic qualities of a place do not reveal themselves so easily. Only over a period of time can one begin to fathom its moods, its soul, its many colours and touch its memories. People make attachments to places. As Yi-Fu Tuan has argued, ‘an individual’s sense of place is both a biological response to the surrounding physical environment and a cultural creation’ (in Hayden 1995: 16). Cultural landscape studies, as Carl Sauer developed them, focused on the evolution of places and included the ‘combination of natural and man-made elements that comprises, at any given time, the essential character of a place’ (in Hayden, 1997: 16). David Salvesen (2002: 41) argues that

> A sense of place provides a sense of belonging and of commitment. It is the repository for our shared memories, experiences and dreams. It is a place of family and community ties – of roots – that stems from our connection to a particular location and its people. And when people feel connected to a place – emotionally, culturally, and spiritually they care deeply about it.

Yet whilst meanings, attachments and values might be part of the active negotiation and renegotiation of place, nature itself is busy defining and redefining itself. This is nowhere more evident than in the dynamic coastal environment of the Nepean Peninsula. Jeff Malpas observes that ‘we are often led to view places as if they were just the static backdrop to action and experience, rather than being the very ground and frame for such’ (1999: 41). Malpas suggests further, that the delineation of place can only be undertaken by a process that, (i) encompasses a variety of sightings from a number of conceptual landmarks, and (ii) undertakes a wide-ranging crisscrossing set of journeys over the land/seascape at issue. Such an experiential and conceptual approach to journeying, sighting and re-sighting takes time, but it enables place on the Nepean Peninsula to be understood through a relational lens (1999: 41, 162). This methodology for exploring place allows for the co-presence of different evidence, and invites engagement with the physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual, in order to develop a more holistic approach to understanding the significance of the Nepean Peninsula.
Place-Based Knowledge (PBK)

The proposition that models for the management of public assets that secure ‘sense of place’ are lacking, inadequate or poorly understood arose from the on-going experience of the chief investigators in the PBK project, in their respective professional roles as place designer (Carter) and cultural heritage advisor (de Jong). The opportunity to observe the transfer of a major public asset (the former Point Nepean Quarantine Station, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria) from Federal to State government ownership (2009) presented an opportunity to examine the role ‘sense of place’ could play in planning the future amenity of the site. This engagement produced initial research that showed that the development of a ‘place-based knowledge’ paradigm could offer an alternative approach to the management and resourcing of such a facility within a National Park into the future; an approach that was story-based, embracing all forms of creative engagement with the site. As Carter (2010) notes

the Point Nepean case study also presented a compelling reason to seek to understand ‘sense of place’ in new ways that answered more appropriately to contemporary conditions of physical mobility, imaginal saturation and possibly paradigmatic shifts in the conditions of social wellbeing and environmental sustainability.

To begin building a PBK model that incorporated creativity into the economy of a public asset we undertook the preparation of an increasingly focused and critical bibliography. The literature review found very little on the term Place-Based Knowledge, indeed the concept of place-based learning/education is poorly understood outside school contexts (the literature review revealed that most, although not all, of the literature on these terms is related to school systems). Further, outside the Canadian context, where the term is used in relation to national park management and governance, its usage is sporadic; related terms being: place-based education; place-based learning; place-conscious education; place-based orientation; place pedagogy; place-based perceptual ecology. If, instead, one focuses on current activities and their management, a different picture emerges. The literature on the regulation of—as opposed to physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual engagement with-public assets is much better developed.

A provisional classification of the literature under several themes—sense of place, narrating place, place-based education, ecotourism/ geotourism, symbolic capital and governance—sought a balance between the regulatory literature and what might be termed the literature of engagement. Common to both, however, is the construction of the ‘visitor’ primarily as a ‘consumer’ or passive subject who represents an impost on the system. While the new governance literature (for example J P Evans 2012) starts to describe community-based management programs that promote informal knowledge economies as ways of factoring in attributes of loyalty, recognition, reciprocity and radiating information paths, this area remains under-theorised at least at a sub-national and regional level.

The purpose of thinking about ‘landscape values, water passages and attachments and extinct language flows together was to apply the principles of place-based learning to the practical challenge of defining “sense of place”’. In the project around PBK the project team understood the notion of ‘place’ as ‘a highly problematic descriptor of belonging, particularly in a colonial and postcolonial context’. Paul Carter (2011: np) eloquently articulated the working hypothesis that

‘place’ is better thought of in terms of rates of exchange: the interest attributed to certain aggregations of natural and human capital is a product of creative investment and ongoing cultural production. The processes that broadly underwrite the ‘knowledge economy’ and more importantly incubate senses of belonging involve a poetic capacity to think—to narrate—different phenomena within a shared domain of immanence or becoming. In contrast with teleological understandings of place, community and wellbeing, that understand these instrumentally—therefore amenable to top-down planning—place-based learning models argue for the heuristic value of places. That is, places as intensifications of flows, pose the problem of catchment, tracing its process and passage rather than standing as repositories or destinations.
Thus PBK was put forward as a new paradigm for understanding, interpreting and managing place. PBK’s focus is twofold:

1. to improve understanding of place-based learning, and
2. to establish strong connections with public asset managers whose cultures are responsive to innovation in public asset governance and management.

Conservative interpretation systems have treated place as static and inert: as a theatre that awaits animation (examples are to be found at Point Nepean National Park and at the Collins Settlement Site Sorrento). Yet a sense of place comes from the fact that the place is already alive with stories and the challenge is not to conjure them up from nothing but to draw attention to the traces of what is already there—and what is already there are not only buildings, and views, plants and dreams, sounds and smells, but a host of stories. PBK could be seen as a system for revealing the ‘sense of place’ of a particular location, of enabling engaged reimaging, and so on. By better linking humans to place, PBK could also help establish an ecological pedagogy that incorporates attuning oneself to the rhythms and scale of the local by nurturing curiosity, wonder and questioning; valuing biodiversity, cultivating interconnections, sensitising our senses, and so on (Williams & Brown 2011).

Five criteria for a PBK approach were developed from experience and the initial literature search. In brief they are:

1. PBK and place: acknowledging that place is dynamic, evolving, changing; fostering in Thomas Berry’s philosophy ‘a re-enchantment with the world’;
2. PBK and knowledge: walking slowly, spending time in one place; revalorising the local; appropriating ethnographic methods;
3. PBK and interpretation and communication: understanding that knowledge is embodied and local; learning to re-narrate place; opening up opportunities for new understandings;
4. PBK and custodianship: reconsidering the meanings of stewardship, belonging and ownership, and
5. PBK and management of public assets: re-appropriating a territory’s heritage; being open minded to a new choreography of place.
6. PBK therefore sets up one framework within which to explore water on the Nepean Peninsula in a meaningful way.

Telling stories

aboriginal and scientific understandings of the creation of place

Learning to re-narrate place begins with opening up opportunities for new understandings, where sense of place and PBK intersect. In serving on the Point Nepean Community Trust (PNCT) with Boon wurrung Elder Caroline Briggs, I slowly learnt to ‘Listen to the People, Listen to the Land’ (Sintra and Murphy 1999) in a new way. On the Nepean Peninsula the Boon wurrung story of Bunjil (the wedge-tailed eagle) and the geologist’s explanation of the formation of Port Phillip juxtapose aboriginal understanding and western scientific understanding of the creation of this Bay. Geological studies inform us that Port Phillip is located in a tectonically controlled sunkland bounded by two major faults: Selwyn’s Fault on the east and the Rowsley Fault on the west. 18,000 years ago the global sea level was 100 metres lower than at present. ‘In Victoria both Port Phillip Bay and Western Port Bay owe their present outlines to the combined effects of tectonic movements that formed the sunklands, and the post glacial eustatic rise that later flooded them’ (PPCC, 1966: 35; Liping Zhou et al, 1994). As Carolyn Briggs tells it:

   Many years ago Melbourne extended right out to the ocean. Port Phillip bay was then a large flat plain where Boon wurrung hunted Kangaroos and cultivated their yam daisy. But one day there came a time of chaos and crises. The Boon wurrung and the other Kulin nations were in conflict. They argued and fought. They neglected their children. They
neglected their land. The sea became angry and began to rise until it covered their plain and threatened to flood the whole of their country. The people went to Bunjil, their creator and spiritual leader. They asked Bunjil to stop the sea from rising. Bunjil told his people that they would have to change their ways if they wanted to save their land. The people thought about what they had been doing and made a promise to follow Bunjil. Bunjil walked out to the sea, raised his spear and directed the sea to stop rising. Bunjil then made the Boon wurrung promise that they would respect the laws.

At Port Phillip Heads deep canyons are now full of sea life in an underwater wonderland that rivals the Great Barrier Reef, where once the mouth of the Yarra River entered Bass Strait. This river, having flowed across a vast plain of fertile grasslands, which it regularly flooded, is held in the memories of the Aboriginal people and is inscribed in the geological record.

It is within the power of place to encompass many meanings, stories, and memories that continually leak into one another, immeasurably enriching one another. Much can be learned from the Boon wurrung approach to country to once again balance the harmony and respect between people and place. On the Nepean Peninsula it is possible, as Freya Matthews writes, for non-indigenous Australians ‘born into this intimately companionable land that has for so long been singing along, humming along, with its inhabitants’ to ‘pause to feel the resonance of the endlessly poetic communiqués that surround us, rediscover, in a contemporary context some of the fundamental aspects of the Aboriginal relation to the world’ (2002: 2). The poetic acknowledges the emotions’ connection and affect in ways that a static interpretation of place cannot. In so doing culture and nature, people and environment, can be reconnected.

Europeans ‘discovering’ place

Research in the Nepean Historical Society Archives, revealed that it was at the Heads, at the entrance to Port Phillip, that Aboriginals witnessed the entry of the first sailing ship the Lady Nelson in 1802 and ‘watched’ the arrival of the first European settlers in 1803. (The Aboriginal population on the Mornington Peninsula was decimated after European settlement began in earnest in the late 1830s.) John Murray kept the log on the Lady Nelson. On 25 February 1802 he noted ‘the Southern Shores of this Noble Harbor’ (2001: 66-67). Just over a year later, J. H. Tuckey, First Lieutenant of His Majesty’s man-of-war Calcutta, recalled his feelings as he gazed for the first time on the southern waters of Port Phillip on a warm Spring day in early October 1803: ‘An expanse of water bounded in many places by the horizon, and as unruffled as the bosom of unpolluted innocence, presented itself to the charmed eye, which roamed over it in silent admiration’ (1999: 5). As Yi-Fu Tuan (1974: 115), explains, ‘the attractiveness to human beings of the sheltered cove by the sea is not difficult to understand. The geometry has a two-fold appeal; on the one hand, the recessions of beach and valley denote security, on the other the open horizon to the water incites adventure’. Today it is still possible to see what the first Europeans saw over two centuries ago: an inviting bay with undulating hills covered in open vegetation in the near distance. Peacefulness for some, the urge to sail for others.

Finding water

Everywhere I walk I see shell middens, revealed through wind and water erosion. While Aboriginal middens have been documented at the Sisters and Sullivan Cove, little if any physical evidence remains of the first European settlement in Victoria, near Sorrento on the Nepean Peninsula. Carl Sauer (1965:309) posits that settlements began on the coast because ‘no other setting is as attractive for the beginning of humanity. The sea, in particular the tidal shore, presented the best opportunity to eat, settle, increase, and learn. Yet Collins settlement lasted only briefly, from October 1803 to May 1804, when it was removed to Tasmania (Coutts 1981). Fresh potable water was one of the biggest issues (remnants of the perforated casks sunk in the sand to collect water for drinking are on display at the Sorrento Historical Museum, Old Mechanics Institute, Sorrento) (Coutts 1981). More extensive European settlement did not begin until after the establishment of Melbourne in 1835, when the peninsula’s proximity and easy access to Melbourne by boat made it a prime area for grazing leases and for acquiring many resources (especially lime and timber) needed in the new settlement (Bridges et al 1992).
In contrast, the Aboriginal people knew where to find water; evidence of the possibility of swamps, soaks, natural waterholes and springs in Point Nepean National Park have been uncovered in the last decades. Wells were constructed in coastal areas behind the dunes and remnants still remain. Water was carried in vessels including those made from kangaroo skin and wood. There is pervasive evidence of shell middens across the tip of the Nepean Peninsula, not just along the coastal fringe as first thought (Wesson 2006/2007; Hackel 2007/2008; Sullivan 1981). So while Europeans’ first impressions of Port Phillip were favourable, and its picturesque beauty effusively noted, concerns were soon expressed about the lack of fresh water (Cotter, 2011). Europeans felt both at home and not at home; the place being familiar and yet strange (Gibson 1992). In the end they spent too little time at Sullivan Bay to fathom its secrets, and so left without knowing them.

**Waterscapes**

My senses are alert to the smell of the sea, the thundering surf, the taste of salt carried on the wind, the lapping of the bay: ‘Experience is at the heart of what place means’ of knowing place. ‘It is this notion of experience that lies at the heart of the humanistic approach to place,’ ‘inspired by philosophies of meaning such as phenomenology’ (Cresswell, 2009:170). Europeans eventually found beauty and solace in the land/seascape of the Nepean Peninsula. Henry Handel Richardson’s *The Getting of Wisdom*, published in 1910, contains a fictional account of the author’s own holiday in ‘Sorrento’ around 1885. Ethel Richardson was profoundly moved by the landscape, its beauty revealed only after strenuous effort: ‘When… you had laboriously attained the summit of the great dune, the sight that met you almost took your breath away: as far as the eye could reach, the bluest of skies melting into the bluest of seas, which broke its foam-flecked edge against the flat, brown reefs’ (Ritchie nd a).

Ethel was looking over Bass Strait taking in all of today’s National Parks from Point Nepean to Cape Schanck. Today, the climb is just as steep and the walk along the cliff tops over coastal sand dunes still offers spectacular views of the ocean and extensive coastline; the walks are mind clearing and physically invigorating. Diurnal and seasonal changes constantly surprise. An echidna marches across the dunes, snuffles in the sand, hides hurriedly, checks if human has gone, continues. I give thanks for the privilege of being present, of bearing witness.

Henry Prior, a member of one of the families who made the wild coast of the Nepean Peninsula their own in the early twentieth-century, wrote of his experiences in 1909: ‘Everything here is governed by the tide…. A few minutes walk and we stand on the cliffs overlooking the ocean, at one of the best spots along this coast. It is our custom to note visitors expressions as the panorama of ocean and coast line unfolds—“lovely”, “magnificent”, “beautiful”’ (Prior 1909: np). Prior continued: ‘The little bay is semi circular in shape with sandstone and limestone cliffs, and at one end a fine arched arch which one visitor named the “Arch of Titus” from a fanciful resemblance to the ruin as seen by him in his travels, but most people call it Bridgewater. Near the arch is our swimming pool, a delightful place with beautifully clear water’ (Prior 1909: np). A century on, this is my swimming pool too—shared with schools of fish, squid, sting-rays and octopusses, even a surfing penguin! All the while watched over by pacific gulls, the white faced blue heron, expectant cormorants, and fossicking Oyster Catchers. A Peregrine Falcon searches for a safe nesting crevice. Only in January are the spectators human. For me, life at Blairgowrie today is still governed by the tides, by the ebb and flow of low water and high water, by the ever-changing dynamic conditions physically experienced. While the view from the cliffs are awe inspiring, nothing beats the sheer pleasure of swimming in the deep still rock pools exposed at low tide, full to the brim, when you are at the same level as the base of the enormous surf rollers, yet protected by the rock shelf. As the tide turns you enjoy natural spas, it’s like swimming in champagne when you’ve just popped the cork! The physicality of place elicits an emotional response. Place is simply part of lived experience. As Casey observes ‘to live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in’ (1996: 18). This intimate local knowledge heightens the possibility of ‘knowing’ other places.

**Protecting Melbourne**

The history of this place also began to seep into me, the ‘old-timers’ remembered earlier generations, and the archives beckoned. In the short period between the reflections by Ethel
Richardson and Henry Prior, circumstances arose which made Victorians realise that they needed to build fortifications. Already in 1853, an editorial in the Argus warned ‘in the event of war we are in a very defenceless state and that the fact of it being known all over the world that we have a few millions worth of solid gold within cannon shot of the Bay is a circumstance which renders us peculiarly liable to attack’. Various global skirmishes had alerted the Colony to its continued vulnerable state in the decades that followed. In 1885 Russian attempts to take Afghanistan alarmed Britain and her Colonies. In response to over two hundred war scares, Victoria’s defences were constructed using the latest technologies. During the 1880s and early 1890s, Point Nepean, on the tip of the Nepean Peninsula, was known as Victoria’s Gibraltar. Further fortifications were built in the twentieth century. Life in the First and Second World Wars was far from idyllic for the men who were stationed at the guns at Fort Nepean (O’Neill 1988: 39). On duty in the concrete bunkers, watching seawards, it was ‘a cold damp existence where one dare not blink, for fear of missing something; the job an eye strain, a mental strain.’ The cold was unbearable, ‘seeping from your boots through your whole body.’ (Warr nd: np).

The wide horizons and breathtaking views of Bass Strait presented a very different perspective for those assigned the arduous task of continuous surveillance.

**Quarantine**

On the very tip of Point Nepean isolation is manifest–it is at its wildest when a gale is blowing, the ocean roaring, the Heads hostile. With the discovery of gold in the early 1850s, and the subsequent gold rush, Melbourne’s and Victoria’s population exploded. In 1852, 293 ships arrived at Port Phillip; in 1853 there were 900 arrivals. Seeking an isolated place away from the city for a quarantine station became urgent when the *Ticonderoga* arrived at the Heads in November 1852 with nearly 300 of her passengers ill with fever, another hundred having already died on the way (Serle 1963; Welch 1969; Kruitop 2002). In response to the *Ticonderoga* crisis, the late 1850s witnessed the building of significant accommodation on the site: five dormitory buildings, large airy barracks, out of the local limestone were constructed to house the immigrants. As an architectural historian, this early architecture piques my interest. Yet Frances O’Neill reminds us that ‘For the new arrivals, whether at the time of the gold rushes or after World War II, a stay in the quarantine station meant an unwelcome interlude before a new life began’ (O’Neill 1988: 20-21).

The arrival of the *Ticonderoga* in 1852 led to the immediate demand for a permanent water solution. The numbers of people to be housed at the Quarantine Station required a substantial and reliable water supply. By 1875 a system was in place that operated by collecting rainwater run-off from roofs in eleven stone underground storage tanks. From there water was pumped by hand to a large reservoir on an elevated area of the site, then gravity fed back to the buildings for use in boilers, showers and for domestic purposes (Wesson 2006/07). By the 1940s the site was connected to mains water, concern for its collection and supply abated, and stormwater became a waste product requiring efficient drainage systems to remove this once precious commodity as quickly as possible. Furthermore, Government legislation implemented through local councils forbade rainwater collection and storage for domestic consumption. As alienation from direct water sources occurred over the twentieth-century, fresh water became a remote, treated and distant commodity of no particular origin (Wesson 2006/07). At the beginning of the twenty-first century I observe that the Nepean Peninsula is being sewered: septic tanks are being replaced and residents are being enticed to a more ‘eco-friendly’ solution. Again the ‘problem’ is being removed off site. At the same time the ‘semi-treated’ sewage outfall at Gunnamatta remains, fouling Bass Strait. Questions of custodianship of this place are being evaded as fresh water is used to circulate human effluent.

**Escaping to the seaside**

Arriving home at Blairgowrie, it never ceases to amaze me that the burdens and stresses of work, and the busyness of life if the truth be told, literally lift from my shoulders. And it did not take Victorians long to discover something of the life giving qualities of the Nepean Peninsula, where (salt)water and place identity are intricately intertwined. Again the archives provide evidence of the leisure activities of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century middle-classes who
frequented the southern Mornington Peninsula. The *Federated Australian* reported in 1900 that ‘The Back Beach is never without its crowd of ladies and children drinking in the healthful breezes of the place’. In the 1870s well-known Melbourne citizens were attracted to the area as an escape from the tensions of life in the city (*The Federated Australian* 1900; Winzenried 1994). Today locals have to share the place with national and international visitors and tourists.

The most enterprising character was George Selth Coppin. His vision was for a bustling seaside resort, accessible by paddle steamers, capable of carrying thousands of passengers. Furthermore in 1874 he had the foresight to set aside a strip of coastal land along Bass Strait from Cape Schanck to Point Nepean as a public reserve (now the Mornington Peninsula and Point Nepean National Parks). At the same time, several medical men publicly extolled the health giving properties of this area, themselves acquiring properties along the ocean beach. They have left accounts of idyllic, carefree, isolated holidays along the very beautiful ocean beach (*The Federated Australian* 1900; Winzenried 1994).

The 1876 *A Guide to Sorrento* contained two passages by eminent Melbourne doctors. Dr John Blair writing that ‘This favourite watering place offers peculiar advantages to the invalid, or the man seeking healthful repose from overwork. The air is pure and invigorating’. He highlights ‘the highly ozoned atmosphere of the back beach refreshingly diffused by the ceaseless roll of the ocean’. Dr George Graham writes ‘As a residence for invalids, particularly children, of a delicate constitution, I know of no other place in Victoria to equal it, more particularly on account of the water holding lime in solution in such quantities as renders it most beneficial to children whose bones are soft’ (Ritchie nd b). Yet a glimpse of ‘The Great Ocean! Strongest of creation’s sons, unconquerable, unreposed, untired, that roll’d the wild, profound, eternal bass in nature’s anthems’, would have reminded others of the unforgiving nature of the sea and the wreck of sailing ships like the Sierra Nevada in May 1900 (Hugh George, *The Leader* 1900).

A local resident, J G Ritchie wrote of the area in the 1920s:

> We would travel to Sorrento on the [paddle steamer] *Weeroona*.... Then [by horse and cart] the trip to the camp seemed to take hours; firstly along the ‘white road’ [the Nepean highway] and then Hughes Rd corner through deep sand tracks with horses struggling up each rise.... The daily routine at the camp did not vary greatly. There was always fish for breakfast–great mountains of fillets of sweep, leather jacket, rock-fish and so on. After breakfast, lunch and tea were packed and the rest of the day was spent at Bridgewater Bay then quite isolated excepting for occasional picniers [sic], who were looked on as trespassers. (Ritchie nd a).

Only at the lowest of low tides is Graham’s Reef at Koreen Point, Bridgewater Bay, accessible. Here deep pools invite one to swim; there are reefs to explore and ruins of an ‘aquarium and grotto’ built in the years 1929–1932; palpable reminders of another time, of others connected to this place; of stories waiting to be told.

Anne Whiston Spirn reminds us that ‘Memories are sensual, personal, place-specific’ (1998: 98). Barbara Bender writes in the introduction to *Contested Landscapes: Movement, Exile and Place* that ‘The study of landscape is much more than an academic exercise—it is about the complexity of people’s lives, historical contingency, contestation, motion and change’ (2001: 2). This is clearly evident on the Nepean Peninsula, where sense of place, PBK and water and place identity are critical to developing understanding, appreciation and care in living in such a fragile coastal environment. Local voices today confirm this. Des Cory recalled ‘When I first saw the headland I fell in love with Bridgewater Bay’ (de Jong 2006), it was only over time that he formed a deep abiding connection to this place. Into his nineties, I would meet him on his daily circuit walk, and we would chat about the changes he observed. Meryl O’Brien talked about her home, as ‘a house on the hill on the edge of the ocean reserve which led down to Bass Strait’ (de Jong 2006). Even as an octogenarian, she slept on the back verandah with her dog – so she could stay in tune with the atmosphere, the seasons. Suzanne Ewart says ‘Sorrento is a family place. We are Bay beach people.’ Her husband Don reflected that ‘Values of place are a bit indefinable...there is a feeling of belonging to place. There is a uniqueness here, where we hear the ocean pounding, or the water lapping on the Bay side, depending on the wind’ (de Jong 2006). The many moods of the Nepean Peninsula, girt by sea, are manifest.
**Threats to the coastal environment**

As President of the Nepean Conservation Group, it is my mission ‘To lead and inspire the community to appreciate, recognise, conserve, protect and celebrate the natural, cultural and built heritage of the Nepean Peninsula’ (http://www.nepeanconservationgroup.org.au). Natural events and human developments always threaten this dynamic coastal environment. Two recent cases—Collins Settlement site, Sorrento and the former Quarantine Station precinct in Point Nepean National Park—highlight significant issues. In the first case, the 2010 sale of a large privately held estate at the historic Collins Settlement site, sparked contestations regarding the development of new planning subdivisions and subsequently a battle for the retention of significant views between the Eastern and Western Sisters, along Sullivan Bay. In the second, the proposal for a major commercial resort and spa development in the former Quarantine precinct of Point Nepean National Park and the granting of a long-term lease at the end of 2014 raised concerns in relation to ‘sense of place’ and management of public assets, the appropriation of a territory’s heritage, and the meanings of stewardship, belonging and ownership.

**The Collins Settlement Shelmerdine Subdivision**

The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) approved a five-lot subdivision of the Shelmerdine land at the Collins Settlement site in December 2010, subject to a number of conditions to help conserve the natural environment of this historic place. The conditions, mindful of the water frontage, included:

a. The appointment of a master architect for the duration of the development of all five lots to oversee design and development to ensure that design quality and appearance of both built form and landscaping are sensitive to the significance of the site.

b. A seven to ten meter wide landscaped area adjacent to the beach and the top of the cliff for the length of the northern (beach side) of the site – species selected should grow to create a canopy under which the houses can see the water

c. 319 square metres of land in the northern corner of the site to be set aside as public open space – for the creation of a lookout platform to view Sullivan Bay Beach and the Western Sister

The view is all that is now left. The view from the Eastern Sister to Western Sister along Sullivan Bay (landside and waterside) is considered of paramount importance, not be interfered with, jeopardised or affected. The view from the Eastern Sister, over Sullivan Bay, the Cove and beach, across to the Western Sister is critical to the understanding, interpretation and experience of this historic site. The local communities have been unwavering on this point. It is the view that gives access to the topography, the landforms of Sullivan Bay, the relationships between Port Phillip and this small cove, and makes sense to the viewer as to why this strategic location was chosen by Collins. The view enhances the ability of the public to interpret the site both as an area frequented by Aboriginal groups and as the place of a highly isolated European settlement. The case was heard at VCAT in June 2015. In August VCAT ruled that the view cone is to be maintained and protected in perpetuity (VCAT reference No. P2091/2014 Permit no. P13/1830).

Laurajane Smith (2006: 77) in her section on Place in ‘Uses of Heritage’ writes that ‘sense of place demands recognition that the act of being at a heritage place and experiencing that place…is fundamentally significant.’ She continues:

Those experiences of being in a place will have an affect that will help to define the meanings and ideas an individual constructs. This will be done not only in terms of the past represented at the heritage place, but also the meanings it has for and in the present, and in terms of the sense of social and cultural constructs of ‘place’ or identity that an individual takes away. The meanings and memories of past human experiences are thus remembered through contemporary interactions with physical places and landscapes and through the performances enacted within them.
A spa resort in a National Park

Such experiences are palpably manifest in Point Nepean National Park. The Point Leisure Group development proposal for a high class spa resort in the former Quarantine precinct, based on yet to be discovered geothermal springs, did little to engage with or enhance place in this fragile environment. It activated it and commercialised it, in a bid to make it the same as everywhere else. It is possible that local communities and their histories, as well as local ecologies could have been erased by this development, which would have led to a profound sense of loss. Philosophers implore us to be quiet, to be attentive to the subtle local elements at work, combining to provide the essential character of a place. What place literature draws our attention to is the importance of the lived experience of place for individual and collective identity. A sensitively considered spa and geothermal experience could have added another layer to the history of this site. Instead it proposed to obliterate all that had gone before. In the proposed spa resort development the sensing body became ironically sidelined, ensuring that the experience of place remained fleeting and superficial, replaced by the ‘spa experience’ alone.

PBK would recognise the rich and diverse heritage of the Nepean Peninsula; use past, present, future-creatively, imaginatively and truthfully; build strong and inclusive networks and partnerships throughout the region and beyond; resource the community and empower all people. Natural and cultural heritage places are a key resource of the State of Victoria, Australia. PNNP is a key natural and cultural heritage site, water being but one way of reading the site. Adopting a focus on place compels us to consider how the particular qualities within local places may be wiped out by modern development. Humans mourn places as well as people. Places are those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific land/waterscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other. Experiential knowledge (one of the pillars of PBK) is critical to policy development and to commercial decision-making.

The process of reinvention and renewal involves the participation of multiple creative communities, rather than an exclusive government driven Expression of Interest process. The Liberal Napthine Government signed off the 55-year lease for 65 hectares of public land with the private developer in November 2014, on the eve of the Victorian election. The Labor Andrews Government won that election, promising to review the process and the lease. The lease lapsed on 30 June 2015 because planning provisions required under the lease were not passed by Parliament. Communities are now re-engaging with government to update the 2010 Master Plan to move forward with a sensitive and appropriate redevelopment of the site.

Change – a challenge and an opportunity

The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance, The Burra Charter, 2013 (Burra Charter), helps us to make good decisions about the care of important places. It states inter alia that the place itself is important; that we should understand the significance of the place; and that significance should guide decisions. Further we should do as much as necessary, as little as possible. A sense of place provides a sense of belonging and of commitment. Only when people care about a place deeply will they be moved to care for it.

The author Christina Baldwin while acknowledging that ‘change is the constant’ sees change positively as ‘the signal for rebirth’ (1977). In that spirit, this paper suggests that we human beings recognise the rich and diverse heritage of place; revalorise the local (that we be outward looking from inward strength); proactively use State Government, Parks Victoria and local government (MPSC) natural and cultural heritage plans to develop a sustainable future for the region; build strong and inclusive networks and partnerships throughout the region and beyond; resource the community by empowering all people; and tell the richness of the Nepean Peninsula’s story-past, present, future-creatively, imaginatively, and truthfully.

Toussaint (2006: vii) in writing about the relationships between people and water sources, states that ‘water retains universal characteristics, but human interactions with water are context dependent. The uses, sounds, visions, colours and smells of water differ from time
to time’. Looking at the Nepean Peninsula from the multiple and changing perspectives of place and water allows another choreography of place and the opportunity and challenge to make a significant contribution to understanding, interpreting and protecting its place identity. On the Nepean Peninsula it is land/seascape that allows one to read place whole. We must never lose sight of these important coastal environments and their significance. The Australian Heritage Commission recognises that Australians have a history of profound emotional responses to the Australian environment and suggests that these landscapes are inspirational places which have special qualities and attributes that have evoked, in Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, widely shared perceptions of beauty, awe, spiritual and symbolic meanings, time depth, naturalness, peacefulness, terror, fear, tranquillity or mystery, or other strong experience. Further, ‘inspirational landscapes are essentially those places associated with positive and inspiring aesthetic or cultural perceptions of a place and experiences derived from place’ (Context 2003:5). The Nepean Peninsula is indeed an ‘inspirational landscape’. Here ‘stories’ stretch over eons – they co-exist in complex, sometimes contradictory, and profound ways. Deborah Bird Rose argues that ‘Place requires you to be intercultural, inter-temporal, open-minded to the imperatives of the lives that are lived there’ (2009:1-13).

The National Cultural Heritage Forum’s vision for Australia’s cultural heritage, presented to the Minister for Environment and Heritage in 2004, acknowledged the close nexus between natural and cultural heritage, so evident on the Nepean Peninsula: ‘Australia’s heritage, shaped by nature and history, is an inheritance passed from one generation to the next. It is a living record of places, objects, events, associations and memories, which define and sustain our natural and cultural history. It is for us, the present generation, to nourish and nurture this inheritance for future generations’ (Australian Council of National Trusts 2005). Using water and place identity as one lens, on the Nepean Peninsula we have an opportunity to look at the many ways through which peoples have perceived and idealised this place, how it has become and how it has shaped them. This paper challenges those who come to the Nepean Peninsula, to not simply marvel at its grandeur or develop a corner of suburbia, but to ‘go there to discover specific ways in which you can inscribe yourself more deeply into the world, to remake and unmake the histories that brought you there and to learn and relearn the connections between your embodied self, other people and the world of constancy and flux’ (Rose 2002:1). Through the tidal ebb and flow, water allows us here to enter the transient and the eternal.

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Endnotes

1 There are over 60 variations to the spelling of Boon Wurrung, refer to http://www.boonwurrung.org/; See also Cotter, Richard 2001, Boon wurrung: people of the Port Phillip district, Lavender Hill Multimedia, Red Hill South, Vic.

2 The author would like to thank Deakin Centre for Memory Imagination and Innovation (CMII), Professor Paul Carter and Joan Kenny, research assistant, for the development of this research project. Refer to de Jong, Ursula, ‘Place-based knowledge (PBK): exploring a new paradigm through Point Nepean National Park, Victoria, Australia’, unpublished paper delivered at the International National Trusts Conference, Victoria, BC, Canada, 2011.


4 Henry Handel Richardson was the nom de plume of Ethel Richardson.