

7 Kamberri country becomes the Federal Capital Territory

The British government had been recommending a federal union of Australian states for more than half a century but the national push for such a union from Australians themselves did not express itself nationally until the 1880s. Australia became a federal Commonwealth by an Act of the British Parliament on 1 January 1901 after a series of intense consultations between the colonial states (New South Wales, Tasmania, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia). One of the next steps was to create a capital. Local Queanbeyan aldermen such as Edward William O'Sullivan and John Gale were strong supporters of Federation and pushed successfully for the establishment of a Queanbeyan Federal Site Committee which would argue the case for locating the Federal Capital in their district.

Although the Lands Acquisition Act, which would permit the 'Commonwealth' to acquire land for a Federal Capital Territory, was passed in 1906, it was not until June 1909 that the final decision was made to locate the capital of Australia in the Queanbeyan district. In 1909, the New South Wales Government under Premier Charles Gregory Wade, surrendered territory under Section III of the Australian Constitution in both the Queanbeyan district and Jervis Bay.¹ The Commonwealth assumed possession of the Territory on 1 January 1911.

Ironically, some of the first estates to have been established on Kamberri land were also the first to be resumed compulsorily for Federal Capital land. These included *Acton*, *Duntroon*, *Yarralumla*, *Tuggeranong* and *Bulga Creek*.² They were gazetted in 1912. Unlike the Kamberri, at least the dispossessed European landlords were compensated for their loss. This was provided for in the *Loan Act 1911*, which empowered the Federal Treasurer to borrow £600 000 for the acquisition of properties within the territory.³

1. Watson, F, 1927, p 132.

2. Acquisition of land within the Federal Territory for Commonwealth Purpose. Australian Archives A110, FC 12/2797.

3. Watson, 1927, p 157.

The foundation stone and commencement column were laid on Camp Hill⁴ on 12 March 1913, at which time Lady Denman, wife of the Governor-General, announced that the name of the capital would be Canberra. This might seem to some readers a non-event since the place had been referred to by generations of European settlers as Canberra or Canbury or Caarnberra since the 1820s. Perhaps it was because 'Canberra' was a derivation of the Aboriginal name, Kamberri, or Kamberra, that some hoped Australia's capital might be given a more European name. To their credit, the local residents of European descent in the district were delighted that the name of Canberra was to stay.

Descendants of the Kamberri were still resident in their traditional country when the capital was built. In fact one of them, Roddy Williams, son of Black Harry, worked on the construction of the provisional Parliament House⁵ and others helped remodel Yarralumla to make it acceptable as a Governor-General's residence.⁶

Throughout this period, though, the Kamberri remained a 'silent' presence. While debates raged in Sydney newspapers about the meaning of the name, nobody consulted them. A number of self-appointed experts offered some quite absurd suggestions regarding Canberra's derivation, which were left to the surviving children of the earliest European settlers to refute.⁷ Yet few of the old timers knew the meaning of the original name for the district – Canbury, or Kgamberry or however it was spelled – and they did not necessarily agree on its proper pronunciation.⁸ Aubrey Mowle, son of Stewart Marjoribanks Mowle (see Part I), shared with the readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* some of his father's recorded memories of the district in the earliest days of European settlement and the proper pronunciation of its name:

July 21st 1838: ... Dr Murray and Aubrey [James and Terence Aubrey Murray] started for Sydney, rode with them to the end of Canberry Plain ... how many times I turned in my saddle to admire the prospect, a most beautiful spot ... the native name of Canberry is Caanberra, the first syllable is long – phonetically Karnberra.⁹

Aubrey added that he was baptised at St John the Baptist Anglican Church on 16 April 1848 'and the certificate shows at that time the name was spelt Canberra'.

4. The Kamberri referred to this as Kurrajong Hill.
5. Personal comment by Elizabeth Homer, nee Grovenor, niece of Roddy Williams. Mrs Homer visited Roddy frequently at his camp at Red Hill when she was a child. He also had a room at a local working men's hostel. Jackson-Nakano, Ann, 1998a, Interview with Elizabeth Homer, Sydney.
6. Billy Bluett mentions members of the Kamberri working on Yarralumla up until its acquisition by the Commonwealth (in Bluett, WP, 1927), but according to the oral histories of descendants of the Williams and Grovenor families, some of them stayed on to help with the reconstruction of the house that became the Governor-General's official residence.
7. Letters to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, March, April, May and June 1913.
8. John Gale had consulted Nellie Hamilton about the meaning of the name but claimed she was 'reluctant' to tell him (Gale, John, 1927). It is possible, however, that she did not know either as she was not originally from the area. Frederick Campbell, grandson of Robert, the founder of Duntroon, said it meant 'head of the plain'.
9. Mowle, Aubrey, 1913, quoting from his father's records, 'The name Canberra', Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 March.

Frederick Campbell, grandson of Robert (the founder of *Duntroon*), claimed that Canberra:

was always pronounced Canberrie by the blacks, is an aboriginal name, and as well as I can remember signifies the 'head of the plain', a chief meeting place for the holding of their corroborees. The native name for Duntroon (now the site of the Royal Military College) is Pialligo, which means 'good camping place', and it was on that account that Ainslie, my grandfather's overseer, pitched his camp here.¹⁰

The sudden interest in Canberra and its history created a flurry of publications by old timers, including some nonagenarians who had grown up with Kamberri children. The consensus that 'Canberra' was a derivative of a 'native name' created interest in the Aboriginal people who were recorded as being in the district at the time the Europeans first arrived. Unfortunately, however, there appeared still to be an assumption that they were all long gone as nobody bothered to consult Kamberri who still lived there. The old timers who knew them were as silent on this issue as the Kamberri themselves.

Black Harry and Black Dick were still wandering around Gudgenby at that time and they camped frequently at the rock shelter at Yankee Hat. Marmaduke Lee, owner of Gudgenby station from 1907 to 1920, could have asked the two Kamberri men some of the questions that the general interested public then wanted answered. Perhaps, like his more academic contemporaries, he assumed they had forgotten their traditional culture or had never known anything about it.¹¹ On the other hand, since his son, Edward, by his own later confession, had, with his sister, added his own designs to the Aboriginal cave art on the property, perhaps Marmaduke was avoiding Black Dick and Black Harry!

The Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Blakeley, accompanied by Mr Hossfield, his deputy and geological adviser, examined the two rock shelters on Gudgenby station using one of the local Oldfield family as a guide in 1931. Following this expedition, the Home Affairs Department issued a press release,¹² which was reproduced almost word for word in the local *Canberra Times*,¹³ claiming an acknowledgment of the 'native occupation of the Federal Capital site' and that 'various native locality names had been given to numerous places'. The article explained that the two rock shelters referred to were at Yankee Hat, with its 18 recognisable figures that could be seen dimly through the soot deposited by former camp fires, and Rendezvous Creek:

The existence of newer designs superimposed on old ones, the jaded appearance of some as contrasted with the freshness of others, the smoke-grimed walls and deposits of ashes on the floor, all bear mute witness to a long-continued occupation of the district by the aborigines.¹⁴

10. Campbell, FA, 1913, 'Canberra', Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald* 15 May.

11. Lee, Edward, 'Marmaduke Lee', [n.d.].

12. Press Release, Home Affairs Department, Commonwealth of Australia, 'Aboriginal occupation of the ACT', 29 October 1931. Australian Archives A1 31/8305.

13. 'Aboriginal art in the Territory. Mural decorations found in rock shelters', *Canberra Times* 30 October 1931.

14. *Ibid.*

Perhaps it was this article that prompted Edward Lee to write his confession concerning his and his sister's contributions to these designs on a piece of paper I found in the collection of the Cumpston family records at the National Library of Australia. Edward also put straight, although, sadly, not publicly, the fact that those two rock shelters had only relatively recently been vacated, about 15 years previously, by Black Harry and Black Dick, who continued to camp there in the first two decades of the 20th century.

By that time, the numerous children and grandchildren of Black Dick were living at Yass but Black Harry's son, Roddy, was still living in Canberra, occasionally camping nearby on Red Hill. Any one of the Oldfield family, including, no doubt, the unidentified Oldfield guide for the Minister for Home Affairs, could have informed the Commonwealth about how recent was 'Aboriginal occupation' of the territory. Most of the Oldfield family had worked with both Black Dick and Black Harry.¹⁵ Why did none of the local settlers who knew the Aboriginal families amongst them bother to enlighten Commonwealth Government officials about these local identities? Perhaps the Commonwealth Government did not ask?

Theoretically, with the establishment of the Federal Capital sites in the Canberra and Jervis Bay districts, the Commonwealth became responsible for Aboriginal people in its territories. In practice, however, it was not yet interested in doing so.

After the *Seat of Government (Administration) Act 1924* was passed, the Federal Capital Commission administered the Federal Capital Territory, including Jervis Bay, from 1924 to 1930. In March 1925 the Commission held a meeting at which proposals regarding housing for the Aboriginal community at Wreck Bay (within the Jervis Bay Commonwealth Territory) were on the agenda. It was thought that this was more 'a national question' than a matter for the Commission, which had neither the experience nor the organization to deal with 'aborigines'.¹⁶ Agreement was eventually reached between the Commonwealth and New South Wales governments that the Aboriginal 'settlement' at Wreck Bay would be administered by the New South Wales Government, at least until the repeal of the *Seat of Government (Administration) Act 1924*¹⁷ (it was repealed finally in 1929). During this period, no mention was made of Aboriginal people in the Federal Capital Territory.

It seems likely that, like their ancestors when the Europeans first arrived at Weereewaa, surviving Kamberri families did not wish to be noticed. There was no open Kamberri protest, for example, when the first Parliament to assemble at the provisional Parliament House in Canberra was declared open officially by a foreign prince on a cold and windy day on 9 May 1927. The only visible Aboriginal representation at the official ceremony consisted of the irrepressible Jimmy Clements, known locally as 'King Billy', and the less flamboyant John Noble, known locally as 'Marvelous'. Jimmy was the son of 'the King of Orange', who, despite the shabbiness of his

15. Diaries of George De Salis, NLA Manuscripts mfm G20727.

16. Minutes of the Meetings of the Federal Capital Commission, Australian Archives A412.

17. *Ibid.*

clothing, was a well-known and well respected 'clever man'¹⁸ who was performing Wiradjuri burbong ceremonies in districts all over southeast Australia that had traditionally followed the bunan ceremonial lines. He had walked from Brungle station, where he was then in residence, in order to be at the opening ceremony. He was then over 80 years old.¹⁹ 'Marvellous' had worked sporadically in the district for some time as a shepherd. He also gave demonstrations of boomerang throwing and occasionally took part in travelling shows. Like Jimmy, he travelled extensively throughout southeast New South Wales. He was born and died at Cootamundra and was also about 80 years old in 1927.²⁰

Both Jimmy and John were Wiradjuri warriors. Was their presence at Parliament House that day a protest on behalf of all Indigenous Australians against the national 'white Australian' government, as some Aboriginal civil rights campaigners later claimed, a claim for Kamberri country on behalf of the Wiradjuri,²¹ or just plain curiosity? It may have seemed to everyone present at the opening of the provisional Parliament House that day that the Kamberri had all disappeared from the district, but they were wrong.



Plate 23: Jimmy Clements on the steps of the provisional Parliament House, Canberra, 11 May 1927

Reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

18. The term 'clever man' was given to men in their communities who had special skills or knowledge.
19. Kaus, David, 1995, 'Jimmy Clements and John Noble at the opening of Parliament House in 1927', produced by the National Museum of Australia on the occasion of the Australian Heritage Commission recognising the Aboriginal Embassy Site as a significant place within an area already in the Register of the National Estate. I assisted in a small way with some of the background research.
20. His death certificate, issued a year later, claimed he was 99 when he died. Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths, NSW, No 3954. John is buried in the Roman Catholic cemetery, Cootamundra. Jimmy Clements, who died a few months after his appearance at the provisional Parliament House, was buried as 'King Billy' in the Church of England section of the Queanbeyan cemetery. John Gale, the Coroner, dispensed with an inquest, accepting the decision of doctors at the Queanbeyan Hospital that the cause of his death was 'senile decay'. Register of Births, Marriages and Deaths, NSW, No 15681.
21. Wiradjuri claims on Kamberri country by some individuals still continue in the 21st century.