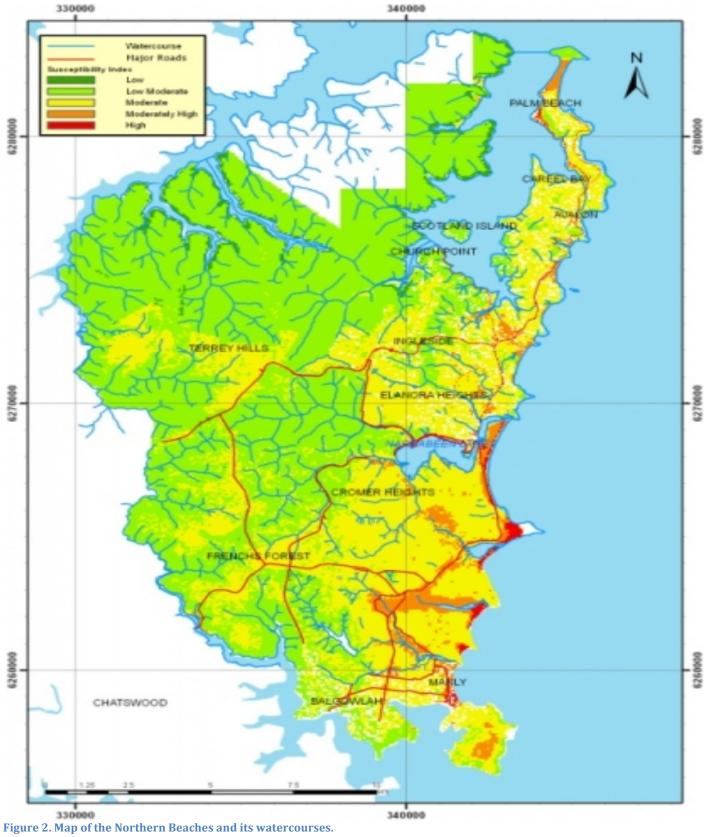
## A Matter of Geography: Aboriginal and European land use and culture on Sydney's Northern Beaches and Hawkesbury regions

The Northern Beaches: for many Sydneysiders, this remote region of Sydney represents both the city's best and worst aspects, depending on whom you ask of course. Affluent. Scenic. Bogan. Distant. These are just a few of the more common ideas people have regarding the Northern Beaches. One that people often don't consider, however, is the region's history. Unlike many other regions of Sydney, the unspoiled nature of much of the peninsula has led to the preservation of hundreds of Aboriginal sacred sites, many of which are several thousand years old. Adding to the layers of indigenous history are sites built and maintained by European settlers, which have contributed greatly to the story of Sydney as a whole. This essay will examine the continuities (or lack thereof) between the cultures of the indigenous peoples of the region, the Garigal people, and that of modern Australia, and how they converge or diverge at certain places. I will then seek to address why we feel a need to preserve these aspects of our past, and how they reflect our present.



Figure 1. John Hunter, Plan of Port Jackson.



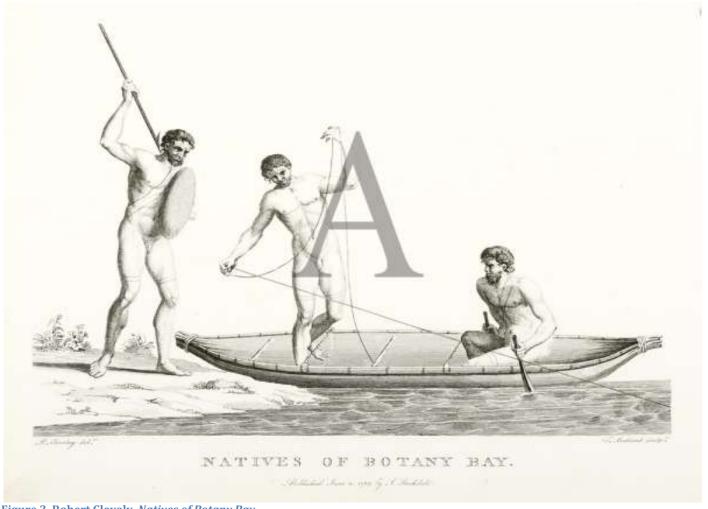


Figure 3. Robert Clevely, Natives of Botany Bay.

There are perhaps no two cultures in the world as different from one another as those of indigenous Australians and Europeans. The reason for this is, undoubtedly, a matter of geography. The vast landmasses of Australia and Europe are antitheses in almost every way. The former: arid, flat, wild, and hostile. The latter: lush, mountainous, cultivated and temperate. The vast differences in the natural environment of the two continents led to a great divergence in culture, making both essentially alien and unfathomable to the other. The fertility of the European soil promoted the development of a sedentary, agricultural lifestyle, while the comparative barrenness of Australia resulted in the birth of a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle based on the availability/scarcity of food and water. Indigenous Australians adapted over untold thousands of years to the rhythms of their homeland, changing and moving with the moods of the land. The isolation of the Australian continent was integral in preserving the essential tenets of indigenous culture over tens of thousands of years, while European civilisation developed in tandem with its close neighbours in Asia and Africa.

This is not to say that there are no similarities or continuities to be found between the two. In fact, I discovered on several field trips that there are several comparisons that may be drawn at various sites across the Northern Beaches, such as the shores of Middle Harbour and Bantry Bay, Bungaroo, Manly and North Head, and West Head and the Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park. At all of these sites it is fascinating to discover the links between Aboriginal and European history and culture and their dependence upon the peninsula's geography.

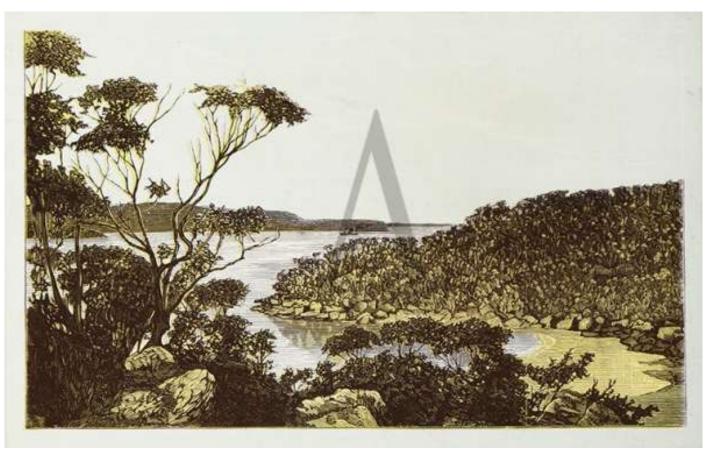


Figure 4. Charles Bayliss, Balmoral, Middle Harbour.

Middle Harbour, dividing the Northern Beaches from the North Shore to the south and west, yielded much in the way of examining cultural continuities, or lack thereof. Its location, being easily accessible from Sydney Harbour by water, meant that in the earliest years of British settlement it was scouted as a potential source of fertile agricultural land and fresh water for the burgeoning colony. Governor Arthur Phillip himself led the most notable expedition; as such, his name is to be found at several points along the route of the expedition, most notably the Governor Phillip Track along Middle Harbour and Carroll Creek. Much of the waterway's natural environment has been preserved as a result of its difficult topography, which is far too rugged for development to extend below the ridgelines, and because of its presence in the initial British surveys of the greater Sydney region.

One of the most important sites on Phillip's route is the unassuming Bungaroo. This site marks the tidal limit of Middle Harbour, and is a known campground of the governor's expedition. There is little else to distinguish this small crossing from other lesser waterways in this region of Sydney, although it is notable as being among the only named locations on the route to survive in a more or less pristine state. The remoteness of Bungaroo, along with this aspect of its history, is perhaps the reason for its survival as a natural place, a place that Europeans have not attempted to make their own, unlike so many others on this continent.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Bradley, William. *A voyage to New South Wales, 1786-1792*. (Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales: Sydney, Australia 1969).

The isolated inlets and dense forests of Middle Harbour are also important as they harbour some of Sydney's most concentrated Aboriginal sacred sites. Nowhere is this more obvious than at Bantry Bay, a beautiful site of notable historical activity. Although just a short distance by water from heavily populated areas, Bantry Bay is surprisingly difficult to reach by land, being situated well within national park, and lacking direct road access. The richness of the landscape, combined with its isolation, has led to its being of great importance to both Aboriginal and European history. The rich landscape encouraged a relatively heavy Aboriginal presence in the area, as evidenced by the number of engravings of both animal and human figures, indicating that it was a site of some importance for local peoples. The bay's European history has also been strongly influenced by its geography. The simultaneous isolation of the Northern Beaches and its proximity to the city centre meant that in the late 19th century, Bantry Bay, along with similar locations along Middle Harbour such as Balmoral, represented an ideal spot for daytrippers. The eastern shore was the site of numerous facilities for people seeking to escape the humdrum of life in the city, containing dance halls, restaurants, docks, and picnic grounds. Unfortunately, the bay's seclusion resulted in the government's decision to convert the area into a munitions storage facility, until its closure in 1974.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Champion, Shelagh and Champion, George. *Finding the Right Track: Governor Phillip's Inland Exploration from Manly towards Middle Harbour and Westwards: 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1788. (Published by the authors, 1990).* 



Figure 5. Unknown artist, A Holiday at Balmoral.

Though the use of the land surrounding Bantry Bay changed dramatically following the arrival of British colonists in Sydney, it is intriguing that both Europeans and Garigal peoples found a use for the area based on its topography. Fortunately, the decision to close the munitions depot and integrate the bay area into the Garigal National Park indicates that its importance to both cultures will not be forgotten.

Similar to Bantry Bay, North Head and the sheltered coves of North Harbour also hide a significant amount of history. Manly is purported to be one of the first locations in which British explorers encountered Australia's indigenous peoples (certainly north of Sydney Harbour), and also was the

location where an Aboriginal man ritually speared Governor Phillip following a misunderstanding. According to contemporary accounts, the spearing took place at 'Collins Cove', which, interestingly, is believed to have been an older name for Manly Cove, with the original name instead being applied to Collins Beach. Though Manly itself is now one of the most populated suburbs of the Northern Beaches, Collins Beach and the majority of North Head remain protected as part of the Sydney Harbour National Park.<sup>3</sup>

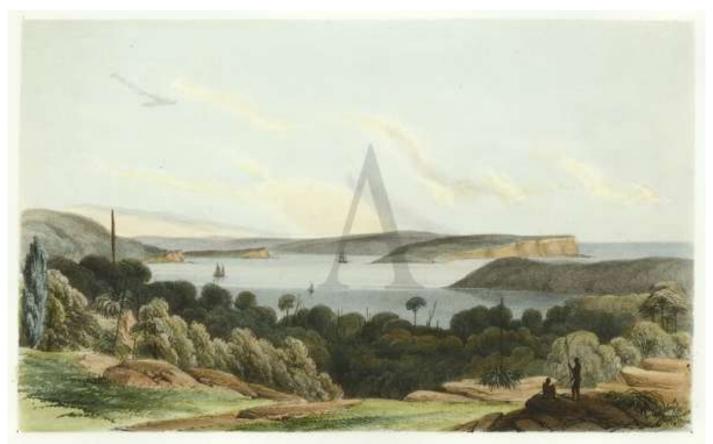


Figure 6. Robert Westmacott, North Head of Port Jackson and the Quarantine Ground.

Perhaps the most notable parallel is the notion of 'isolation'. As with Bantry Bay, North Head is easily accessible by water, though in the early days of the colony it was a world away from Sydney city. It is for this reason that the infamous Quarantine Station was established on its slopes. For over 150 years the Quarantine Station was a place of isolation for foreigners visiting Sydney, intended to prevent the spread of infectious disease. It is fascinating to note that, although much of the detail has been lost, the region's indigenous peoples also utilised the headland as a place of healing. From the scenic lookout one is offered unparalleled views of Port Jackson, and it is likely that the beauty of the surroundings, combined with both the abundant natural resources and the lack of accessibility, worked to restore an individual to physical, mental, and spiritual health.

It is also worth discussing the headland's military history. Much like West Head to the north, North Head provided a lookout of incomparable strategic value, and during the Second World War the headland became increasingly militarised, as evidenced by the scattered ruins of gunneries across its eastern cliffs

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Champion, Shelagh and Champion, George. *The Spearing of Governor Phillip at Collins Cove (now Manly Cove), 7th September, 1790.* (Published by the authors, 1989).

and the network of tunnels beneath its surface. North Head thus stood at the ready in the event of a Japanese invasion, highlighting once again the impact of geography upon history.





Figure 7. James Samuel Bray, Australian Views 1887 - 1896.

Finally, a discussion of the history of Sydney's north is incomplete without mention of Broken Bay. This vast inlet, along with its various tributaries, functioned for decades as a barrier to the expansion of the city. The sheer isolation of the bay and its waterways, coupled with the ruggedness of the surrounding environment, meant that many in the colony considered it a place of lawlessness and frontier violence, hidden away from the eyes of colonial officials. The fertility of the lands surrounding the upper banks of the Hawkesbury River were an appealing prize for new settlers, and the river became the site of countless conflicts between Europeans and the land's traditional owners, who had already been forced away from lands closer to Sydney itself.<sup>4 5</sup> A most telling example of this clash of cultures is Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River*. Based on a true story, the novel is a fictionalised account of the way in which her own ancestors stole land from the Hawkesbury River's indigenous peoples, and illustrates the tensions that existed between the two cultures due to their mutual incomprehension.<sup>6</sup>

The sheer inaccessibility of this land led to the creation of the Ku-Ring-Gai Chase National Park, a truly vast area that restricts urban growth and protects the natural environment and sacred sites within. Nowhere is the success of the park more evident than at West Head, the western entry into Pittwater. At West Head, Aboriginal and European history converge once again, as the headland's strategic location made it an attractive site for both cultures. Evidence of Aboriginal occupation here is subtle, with the most obvious trace being the Red Hands Cave, just a short walk from the main lookout point. Similarly,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Barkley-Jack, Jan. *Hawkesbury Settlement Revealed: A New Look at Australia's Third Mainland Settlement*, 1793 – 1802. (Rosenberg Publishing: Kenthurst, NSW, Australia, 2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Broome, Richard. *Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance, 1788 – 2001.* (Southwood Press: Sydney, Australia 1982).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Grenville, Kate. *The Secret River*. (The Text Publishing Company: Melbourne, Australia 2005).

apart from the road, the lookout, and associated signage, one would be hard-pressed to notice any sign of European interference. However, at the base of the headland lie ruins and relics dating to the Second World War, placed there for exactly the same reason as the fortifications on North Head – as a precaution against Japanese invasion. This is a clear example of the way that the geography of the Northern Beaches has determined the course of its history, as West Head, despite its distance from the city centre, would be the first location to be attacked in the event of an invasion, as the many intertwining rivers and islands of Broken Bay would make for a perfect defensive position from which to invade.



Figure 8. James Muir Auld, Summer time, Broken Bay

In conclusion, it is clear that the history of the Northern Beaches, so distinct from other regions of Sydney, stems from the simple fact of its complex geography. For thousands of years, if not more, the Garigal people were the sole inhabitants of the peninsula, thriving among its verdant ridges and valleys and its rich waterways. The reverence with which they cared for their home is evident in the traces they have left behind, from simple handprints, to grinding grooves, to elaborate cliffside carvings. The arrival of British colonists on this land birthed a new era that changed much of the landscape, but was no less informed by the basic structure of the landscape. From simple needs such as finding fresh water and

arable land, to the threat of infectious disease and foreign invasions, the descendents of the European settlers have been no less immune to the moods of the land than the peninsula's first peoples. We can be sure, however, that the Northern Beaches has a more vivid history than most people realise, and that it is a history that people ought to know about.

## **Blog posts**

• Bantry Bay and Middle Harbour.

Okay, here we go! Today marked my first field trips for the project, so I decided to begin locally. My first excursion was to nearby Middle Harbour, whose main channel and tributaries isolate the peninsula that is the Northern Beaches from the more heavily populated North Shore. I visited several different locations along the eastern shore of the harbour, beginning with Davidson Park in Forestville, moving on to Flat Rock Beach in Killarney Heights, and finally to Bantry Bay.

This area was fascinating. Located within the boundaries of Garigal National Park (named after the region's indigenous people), I greatly enjoyed the inherent contradictions resulting from geography. Here, as in much of the greater Sydney region, sandstone cliffs soar above thin valleys threaded through with life-giving water. And yet, in none of the places I visited today, was I more than a kilometre or two from suburbia. In particular I have to note the presence of the Roseville Bridge, one of only three access points to the Northern Beaches. Perched above a landscape like I described, the bridge was to me a fascinating contradiction. Walking down in Davidson Park, one would feel like they are a world away from the big city. And yet, even well upstream it is possible to hear the sounds of traffic as it reverberates down the valley walls and across the water. Even once I could no longer see or really discern the noise of the bridge, I was acutely aware that I was sandwiched between two very well populated suburbs. I felt like an intruder into this landscape, as I can only imagine the very first European settlers did. Unfortunately, I was unable to find any obvious sign of Aboriginal habitation along this route, though I do not doubt that my inexperienced eyes simply missed what were likely several important sites.

From here I made my way to Flat Rock Beach, a picturesque little spot down at the very bottom of Killarney Heights. I had not read of any Aboriginal sites at that particular place, but I was intrigued by the idea that there was a beautiful and relatively private beach just waiting to be explored! And wow, was it worth my time. I could not believe how beautiful this beach was – water clear as a tropical sea, a rushing waterfall (full from recent rain), enormous old trees to provide shade, crabs scuttling across the sand, and the songs of a dozen different kinds of birds. I continued along the Magazine Track, which runs from Flat Rock Beach along the base of the escarpment and around into Bantry Bay.

I continued to be mesmerised by the incredible scenery of the area as my route took me towards the bay. The shores of Bantry Bay are far quieter than most other sections of Middle Harbour, and it was for this reason that the region has, ironically, long remained popular. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Bantry Bay (named after a large inlet on the southern coast of Ireland) was a popular spot for daytrippers, providing just the right balance of isolation and proximity to Sydney. Before its conversion into a munitions storage facility, the bay was a centre of recreation, with dance halls, picnic grounds, and a restaurant. The site was repurposed for much the same reason; close enough to the city centre to be of strategic value, but isolated enough that it did not present a safety hazard. The site was closed in 1974, leaving the ruins to be consumed by the bushland. I had hoped to wander around these old buildings, but unfortunately they were fenced off and inaccessible by land. I was very disappointed ... though the buildings were easily seen from the path, they remained just out of my reach.

All was not lost, however, as though I could not access this particular site, this part of Middle Harbour has a wealth of recorded Aboriginal sites, one of which I have been assigned by the Aboriginal Heritage Office to monitor. For the purpose of preserving the sacred site's integrity, I am not able to divulge its location or the exact nature of the site. Suffice it to say, the site is very beautiful, and appears undisturbed in spite of its location. It was there that the day's expedition came to a close – I sat for a while, enjoying the peace and, perhaps equally as much, the opportunity to rest my legs!

• Bungaroo, St Ives.

Full disclosure: this track is not on the Northern Beaches. Rather, it begins near the eastern end of Hunter Avenue in St Ives, descending to Middle Harbour from the west. I couldn't resist visiting Bungaroo, as it is a site known to have been the location of campsite made by Governor Phillip and company on the unsuccessful quest for a source of fresh water. The location itself marks the tidal limit of Middle Harbour. Another disclaimer: I got lost on this track!

The track itself is easy enough to find – you simply follow the pipeline until you come to a signpost indicating where the Bungaroo Track diverges from the main Pipeline Track. Unfortunately for me, the Bungaroo Track was incredibly overgrown, and in spite of the occasional guidepost, I simply couldn't continue. I made it as far as a large rocky overlook, but I could not find a safe way to descend. Instead I made my slow way back to the pipeline, which I followed all the way down a very clear path to Middle Harbour. This was a picturesque spot. I found a lovely grassy bank shaded by a wide spreading tree, where I was able to cool off before beginning the long trek back uphill. The narrow valley funnelled a pleasant breeze right up over me, which certainly helped!

As nice as this little bank was, I was disappointed that I was (according to Maps anyway!) just a short walk from Bungaroo itself, and yet unable to penetrate the thick bush separating me from it. However, this was still a worthwhile trip, as I feel I gained a real sense of what Aboriginal people and early European explorers would have experienced as they roamed across the land to find sustenance.

Manly: North Head and Collins Beach.

Today I made the transition from some of the Northern Beaches'/North Shore's lesser-known tracks to some of its most frequently visited places. In fact, I owe my idea to visit this spot to a class excursion to Manly's (in)famous Quarantine Station. Located on an isolated cove on the western shore of North Head, the Quarantine Station is certainly one of Sydney's more notable historical sites, and if you're a tourist, no excursion north of the Harbour Bridge is complete without a visit here!

The Quarantine Station marks a notable site of convergence between Aboriginal and European history and culture. Unlike the other sites that I have visited, which have had vastly different characters, there remains one very notable fact that binds the Aboriginal and European usages of this place – a connotation of healing. I have to give credit to Doctor Peter Hobbins, who on the aforementioned class field trip alerted us to this fact and sparked the idea that led to this project.

I was astonished to learn that, although the methods of healing were utterly different, the purpose of the site remained the same – a place of isolation and recovery, safe from the goings-on of the greater world. I must admit, this piece of knowledge made me view the place in a very different light. When I left I felt like I had an appreciation that went beyond a nice outing.

Anyway, I had two other places to visit at Manly, the first being Collins Beach. Collins Beach, like the nearby Q Station, is at the end of a small inlet on the western side of North Head, and was more than a little similar to Flat Rock Beach in terms of its overall aesthetic. Larger than Flat Rock, Collins shared the same crystal-clear water, the same diversity of life (side note: I have never seen so many water dragons in my life! I probably saw seven or eight just between the car park and the beach), and even a picturesque waterfall. I wasn't just there for the scenery, though. This beach is one of the potential locations at which an Aboriginal man ritually speared Governor Phillip. In addition, the Manly region is considered to be the first location on the Northern Beaches (and counted among the first in Sydney) where British colonists encountered Sydney's indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, I fear I went to the wrong location, as there was absolutely nothing there to indicate that these historic encounters had in fact occurred here. Far more likely, I now presume, is that they occurred at Manly Cove itself. This is the first time that my sources have let me down!

Anyway, from Collins Beach I continued on to the scenic lookouts. I hadn't been there in years, and words failed me. The weather was perfect, and seemingly all of Sydney sparkled in the sunlight. For a long while I just sat, trying to pick out as many details as I could before embarking on the Fairfax trail, on the eastern side of the headland. Unfortunately there was little evidence of any Aboriginal occupation in the area, but North Head's European history was equally fascinating, to say nothing of the spectacular cliff-side scenery! I barely scratched the surface – the only major sites of interest I came across were what I believe are long-abandoned gunnery outposts facing the ocean. Again, so far as I could tell, they were constructed during the Second World War to combat a potential Japanese invasion.

The walk, while dramatic, was rather short, and I soon found myself back at my car, bringing an end to today's adventure.

## Bobbin Head.

Same as Bungaroo, this particular walk did not occur on the Northern Beaches. My purpose in exploring this area was to gain an understanding of how the Hawkesbury River and its tributaries were for so long viewed by Sydneysiders as a lawless frontier inhibiting European expansion and exploration. I must admit to having been inspired by watching the adaptation of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, which depicted the immense isolation experienced by those Europeans brave enough to make a life for themselves in this starkly beautiful and rugged landscape, and also the unspeakable violence between these settlers and Aboriginal people. Though I was not able to ascertain much in the way of historical fact by visiting Bobbin Head, I feel I learned something just by being immersed in the landscape. This place, only a matter of kilometres from the centre of Sydney, could hardly feel further away.

I was fortunate enough to have the park almost to myself, and I thoroughly enjoyed the silence, broken occasionally by the odd car, or a boat plying its way up and down Cowan Creek, or the squawks of native birds. This was an easy, pleasant walk, and I enjoyed the mangrove scenery very much. After a surprisingly short walk I came across a beautiful Aboriginal site: a collection of grinding grooves with lovely views over the water. Though the location of this site is no secret, I felt like it was my own special discovery. It is easy for me, as a history student, to assume the casual observer would have only a fleeting interest, restricted just to the moment. I, however, felt a profound connection to the deep history of this place, so it is not unreasonable to consider that others might be affected in a similar way.

I also just want to note that, unlike my excursions through Garigal National Park, I felt much more 'distant' from the city. Though the physical environments were almost indistinguishable, one can very much feel the presence of the urban areas surrounding Garigal National Park, whereas Ku-Ring-Gai

Chase National Park retains the feel of a 'frontier', even despite the presence of a marina just around the bend.

West Head.

Today marked my final field trip for this project, and I chose to revisit one of the most awe-inspiring places I know – West Head. As its name would suggest, West Head is the western headland marking the entrance from Pittwater into Broken Bay, and as such commands an incredible view of the surrounding region. From the lookout point, I was able to see all of the 'five waters': the Tasman Sea, Brisbane Water, the Hawkesbury River, Cowan Creek, and Pittwater.

Needless to say, I was impressed, even in spite of having been there before.

This time however, I went further in my exploration of the area – specifically, I walked the length of the Red Hands track, which led me through thick bush to a dramatic rock shelter that contained an Aboriginal hand painting. According to the signage, the painting was approximately 2000 years old. Though the marking was fairly simple, I imagine that it is quite inexplicable in terms of cultural value. Unlike the grinding grooves at Bobbin Head, which were obviously of a practical nature, I imagine there must have been an intriguing and complex reasoning behind this marking. I was also quite astonished that any European could have ever found it – the rock structure itself is so isolated, and similar enough to others nearby, that I cannot imagine ever chancing upon it without assistance. I wonder if perhaps that were the idea – it would mark a spot important to the person who made the print, while being isolated enough that intruders could not find it. Unfortunately, I doubt I'll ever find out the answer to that question.

I also learnt something new about West Head just as I was leaving. Apparently, the whole headland (and many of the surrounding waterways) was heavily fortified during the Second World War to protect against a potential Japanese invasion. I obviously knew that this was the case at North Head, being at the entrance to Port Jackson, but I had never considered that a similar degree of fortification occurred this far north of the city. The signage indicated that most of these defensive structures were located at the base of the headland, accessible only by water, which I suppose must have lent them a degree of defensibility that a cliff-top position could not.

This outing just goes to show how much you can learn about a place you think you already know. While I had never before visited the Red Hands Cave, I was not at all surprised to learn that this area was home to an Aboriginal site. I was very surprised to learn of my ignorance regarding the headland's European history, in particular just how real the belief in a Japanese invasion of Sydney was.

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