**“I Love a Sunburnt Country” homestead under threat**

They may not know where it comes from, but there is one line of poetry that many Australians know by heart: “I love a sunburnt country”.

The phrase is from Dorothea Mackellar’s “My Country”: arguably the best-known poem in Australian history. It has been mentioned more than any other in contemporary Australian political discourse – and yet its origins have been almost forgotten. And in fact, they are currently under threat.

Whitehaven Coal owns the former Mackellar family property Kurrumbede, near Gunnedah in the state's north west. It has an application before the NSW Independent Planning Commission to expand the Vickery mine, installing a coal loader and a railway line that would come within 300 metres of the homestead – and while community advocates fear the vibrations from blasting could shake the very foundations of the more than 110 year old homestead, the likely impact has been described as “indirect”.

This month, the Department of Planning recommended the mine’s expansion, with conditions that these “potential impacts” are “adequately managed through measures to be described” in a heritage management plan.

As I write my biography of Dorothea Mackeller and I understand her deep connection to the land fostered by her time at Kurrumbede, I am furious that we are prepared to risk another chapter of our cultural history to the interests of mining. While “My Country” has been politicised over the years by both the Left and the Right in order to justify differing ideology about drought and bushfires and climate science, honoring its heritage seems to come less easily.  In truth, we have never been good at this. Almost two decades ago, attempts to preserve the Centennial Park home of Patrick White, our only Nobel prize-winning novelist, by governments both Federal and State and the National Trust, failed. Unable to find the funds, the goodwill or the vision to secure it for public posterity, it was sold privately. The public appetite for literary tourism in the United Kingdom continues unabated and yes, Shakespeare, but also Thomas Hardy, Jane Austin and Agatha Christie. Political will was clearly needed early enough for homes to be saved over the centuries. It is hard to imagine a literary trail that would lead to many existing buildings around Australia. There are a number of conflicting claims about the birthplace of poet Banjo Paterson without any historical authority. A restaurant bearing his name, in a house reputed to belong to his grandmother and where he spent some years as a young man, is testimony to the neglect of our cultural icons. Miles Franklin’s name adorns our most prestigious literary awards but her family homestead Brindabella, rebuilt after a fire in 1900, remains in private hands. The property on the ACT and NSW border is described as “a cradle of national culture, loved and lived in by an assembly of notable Australians including Banjo Paterson” in the real estate blurb each time it appears for sale.

Of course, that disregard for our heritage extends well beyond colonial culture. Just this week, we learned that [mining company Rio Tinto exploded a sacred site in Western Australia](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/26/rio-tinto-blasts-46000-year-old-aboriginal-site-to-expand-iron-ore-mine) – the only inland site in Australia that showed 46,000 years of continual occupation, and one which provided a crucial 4000-year-old genetic link to Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura traditional owners living today.

That loss is on an incomparable scale but it is another signal that we are not working urgently enough to protect our cultural heritage, big and small, before it is lost to us forever. The literary significance of Dorothea Mackellar’s Kurrumbede cannot be underestimated. As David Yeneken wrote in his book *Valuing Australia’s National Heritage,* “Once destroyed, [historic places] can never be replaced.” While the decision lies with a State-based agency, all governments have a duty of care to our national heritage and Prime Minister Scott Morrison admitted as much in his speech to the National Press club this week. His roadmap for recovery post-Covid19 included “responsible management and stewardship of what has been left to us to sustainably manage for current and future generations. This is as much true for our environmental, cultural and natural resources as it for our economic and financial ones”.

Whitehaven Coal claims it is committed to preserving the historic homestead and restoring the gardens and has donated $500,000 to make a start on the latter. But it is not only the homestead that is important here. It is the vistas and the outbuildings. The vantage points Dorothea exploited while scratching away in her verse books. It is the landscape it sits in, plains and hills and rivers all. If the integrity of the landscape is compromised, if the context of the building is destroyed, then so is the history of a poem that lit up the national psyche and gave us pride in a country that Dorothea believed was more beautiful, more exotic and more confronting than anything England could lay claim to. We still have time to give future generations the chance to walk the halls of that homestead and gaze upon that landscape, seeing it through Dorothea’s eyes and hearing her lyrics echoing across the countryside.

There is much mythology around the writing of the poem but Dorothea was meticulous about recording her poetry. The first time “My Country” appeared in its entirety in one of her verse books is in 1908, which coincided with an intensely creative period when Dorothea frequently stayed at the country property. The poem was published in *The Spectator* in London in September of that year.

In her extensive diaries, Dorothea writes about Kurrumbede with great affection. In a diary entry from March 1911, Dorothea arrived at the property and rushed down to the Namoi river to see a team of bullocks, twenty-eight in all, taking timber across the waterway. In November 1918, the Mackellars were at Kurrumbede when word came that the Armistice had been signed. “At the end of a hot afternoon, a storm broke on us after waltzing completely around the horizon. I’ll not forget the two dust-devils who strode across the plain just ahead of that black-purple storm.” The Mackellars drove into Gunnedah just in time to hear the tail-end of the Royal Proclamation and the rattling of cans and the tooting of horns.

 Philippa Murray, Chairwoman of the Dorothea Mackellar Memorial Society based in Gunnedah, said the society wanted to see Kurrumbede enjoyed by the wider community. “There is a strong interest in the house and its history. We envisage it as a place to hold public events such as concerts, gatherings and even a literary or poetry festival.”

Whitehaven Coal is now working on a conservation management plan – but given it has owned the property since 2013, and a decision on the mine expansion is imminent, why wasn’t the plan already in place? And while the NSW Heritage Council is currently considering listing the homestead and outbuildings on the State Heritage Register, the decision to expand the mine will be made *before* the findings are released.

“My Country” evoked a common powerful connection to the Australian landscape at a time when the country was finding its feet politically and socially. It has had an immeasurable impact on the collective consciousness of Australians, and, for many, it remains the ultimate expression of the centrality of the land to the Australian identity. We still love our sunburnt country and when the mine is long gone from Kurrumbede and the scarred earth begins a slow rebirth, how much will we have lost?

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