

Born in a Tent: How Camping Makes Us Australian.

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Writing in 1854 in the promisingly-titled, *Australia as it Really Is*, F. Eldershaw commented on the centrality of the tent to Australian life. He remarked, “Encamping out at night is a universal practice. Indeed, an experienced Australian never dreams of travelling of making to a house for lodgings...it is always found to be more agreeable to sleep out at night, under an awning, such as that of a blanket, or a covering formed of a sheet of calico” (quoted in Garner, 109). Garner’s wide-ranging study offers a wealth of material for those with an interest in colonial Australia, although it also engages with camping in the present day.

Australia is, according to Bill Garner’s readable and carefully researched, *Born in a Tent*, a nation founded in camping, in which—to this day—many regard the tents stashed in their attics or garages as a form of insurance against homelessness. Clearly a labour of love for Garner, who is a passionate and committed camper, the book combines anecdotes with rigorous archival research, seeking to understand why camping has been ignored in histories of Australia. While Garner’s work is primarily focused around European settler experiences, he is careful to register a separate indigenous tradition of camping, dating back tens of thousands of years. Camping, though, became tied to the colonial venture very quickly, and Garner offers many riveting examples of the centrality of the outdoor experience to settler culture.

Camping was, in nineteenth-century Australia, more often associated with necessity than with leisure, and Garner carefully maps many different forms of encampment. Surveyors, like John Black Henderson and his assistant, Oliver Collins, had by necessity to live in tents, as they charted the landscape and its inhabitants. Henderson and Collins, quite amazingly, shared a tent for two years, although the pair found it enormously difficult to live together. Collins kept a diary of his experiences, complaining of Henderson’s laziness, heavy drinking and delusions of superiority. On his one day off each week, when he was able to leave Henderson behind, Collins sketched wildflowers, landscapes and wildlife. Like many surveyors, his work opened the landscape up to visitors, who responded to accounts of the country’s great beauty by travelling, with their tents, to see it for themselves.

Garner reminds us that nineteenth-century campers came from all social classes. Governor Lachlan Macquarie and his wife Elizabeth were responsible, according to Garner, for making camping fashionable in New South Wales. Their trip to Bathurst in 1815 was the first official journey over the Blue Mountains, as the Macquaries tried out a new road. The trip was reported in the *Sydney Gazette* and Garner claims the account as Australia’s first camping guide. The “Progress,” as it was known, must have been quite a spectacle, since in addition to their tents, folding tables, hammocks and bullock wagons, the Macquaries and their entourage also carried, “plenty of food and a good supply of wine and rum” (37). Packing light, it would seem, was not a skill that was valued at this historical juncture, although since the Macquaries travelled with officials, servants, convicts and a military escort, the sheer number of participants would have demanded provisions on a large scale.

It was in preparation for the Macquaries' journey, according to Garner, that Australia's first caravan was prepared. William Cox, the road-builder charged with leading the party, fitted out a cart with, "bunk, cupboards and a canvas annexe" (37). The Macquaries were certainly not Australia's only high-profile campers, though. Sir John and Lady Jane Franklin were, unsurprisingly, keen on retreating into the Tasmanian wilderness and make several appearances in Garner's history.

While camping could be about communing with the bush, Garner reminds us that many nineteenth and twentieth-century campers were itinerant workers. Road-builders, railway construction-workers and gold prospectors all inhabited tent cities, some of which were massive in scale. Curiously, Garner observes that instead of becoming dens of masculinity, campsites enabled men to perform tasks that were customarily associated with the feminine. Men cooked and cleaned and darned their clothes, because there was nobody to perform these tasks for them. Furthermore, as Garner demonstrates through a sensitive analysis of photographs and engravings, the men involved embraced this makeshift domesticity and its many challenges.

Other camps were more political in their inclination and Garner gives a particularly compelling account of Julian Stuart, who was imprisoned for sedition in 1891, having joined the shearers' strike. Camp life radicalized Stuart, who learned of industrial action from Scottish stonemasons and other "advanced thinkers" whom he met as he moved from camp to camp. Strike camps and union camps arose when pastoralists or managers refused to pay the wages demanded by the trade unions and, Garner notes, by April 1891 there were more than 8000 striking shearers in 40 camps across New South Wales and Northern Queensland. The Queensland government responded to this development by establishing police and militia camps, which inevitably led to a stand-off. The weather was not, alas, on the side of the strikers and rain, floods and mosquitoes combined with depleted funds eventually led to the break up of the camps and an end to the strike.

Tents were also associated with experimental socialism in the 1890s, and Garner recounts the fascinating emergence of state government-sponsored co-operatives, along the Murray River. The Murtha settlement, as it was known, operated as a commune, responding to unemployment in the region, and members shared all wealth equally. Garner skilfully reads beneath the utopian rhetoric characterising these camps, noting that the very activity of living in a tent to this day creates a playful, "alternative, more co-operate life" than the life campers lead at home.

Born in a Tent is an engaging history of the many forms of camping in Australia's past and present. Garner's lively prose and fine scholarship are complemented by an unusually generous selection of carefully-chosen illustrations. While accessible to the general reader, this study is a valuable resource for those interested in colonial history, ecology, tourism, and the development of the labour movement. *Born in a Tent* is historical writing at its very best.

Grace Moore

Grace Moore is a Senior Research Fellow at the ARC's Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (University of Melbourne). She is at present writing a book on

nineteenth-century settlers and fire, while pursuing a research interest in the ecological humanities.