

Ghosts of time: Writer's note

It is my violent love for my city, a feeling as irrational as its geographic assertions – a love for its mix of tolerance and dirt, its sunshine with an undertow, its pride in its own darkness. And of course it is tied up, as everyone's version of their city must be, with nostalgia for my youth.

– Delia Falconer

Many years ago, a friend and I were spitballing – “if a Doctor Who story was ever set in Sydney, where would the TARDIS land?” We suggested the Opera House forecourt, the Botanic Gardens, the Bridge, a laneway in the Rocks; but my ideal landing point for that little blue box would be Observatory Hill. Aside from the view, it's one of my favourite places in Sydney.

Around the same time, I wrote a short story about a group of people who wrote ‘Eternity’ on the streets of Sydney c.1988. For years since, I've wanted to do something more with this story – ostensibly a story told by a grandfather to his granddaughter – but could never find a way to make it work theatrically.

In 2022, while packing the remaining books from my childhood bedroom into boxes as the family home was sold, I found a folder full of these old notes and ideas, research I'd compiled on mid-century Sydney, and a bigger story started to take shape – cities, like time, are palimpsests, texts overwritten over time; deep pasts (still) exist under layers of recent pasts, presents, and futures if we know where (and how) to look for them.

Back home in Melbourne, I came across a copy of Ruth Park's 1973 *A Companion Guide to Sydney* and the project clicked into place: the more I read, 1973 appeared as a kind of watermark year in Australian history – a locus for the Green Bans in Sydney's The Rocks (spearheaded by Jack Mundey and the BLF); the Sydney Opera House was opened (while the Sydney Harbour Bridge had been started 50 years earlier); the Aboriginal Tent Embassy was gathering prominence, with the Aboriginal flag being designed a year or two previously; William Dawes' notebooks (a key text of early Anglo-Indigenous friendship and cultural exchange) had been discovered in a London university archive only months earlier... I wondered if there a way to bring all these moments together, kaleidoscopically – *palimpsestuously* – to show a vision of Sydney, not as forgetful or short-sighted as she sometimes seems to be, but as time-keeper and memory-store, her ideas and passions and currents cycling through her history like water filtering through Sydney sandstone.

I remembered, too, my sister's love for Kenneth Slessor's poems – particularly *Five Bells*' “verticals of light” and “fidget wheels of time” – images which refracted memories of the Bridge, the (first) astronomer William Dawes on his promontory waiting for a comet (Ikaya-Zhang) which never came. I have necessarily cast my net wide and deep in the waters of Sydney's metaphoric, cultural, and metaphysical harbour to try and tell this story, but I hope I've captured something of her shifting beauty, her hypnotic pull; the harbour at the centre of it all.

– GS

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