IMPERIAL OUTREACH

From the mid eighteenth century until the American War of Independence, British imperial aspirations were largely mercantile and private in nature, brought about by the pursuit of wealth by the monarchy or those close to it. This extrapolation of wealth from colonies occurred within a restrictive but not necessarily thorough administration of affairs uncommercial.

By the 1820s, the aspirations of individuals (working singly or in small groups) expressed in a series of cohesive though apparently disconnected activities, constructed a diverse and scattered Empire. The Colonial Office – established in 1825 – increasingly exercised control over the colonies through its bureaucracy, as part of a developing systemisation of control intended to more closely ally the interests of colonists with those of the Empire. This understanding of benefit underpinned imperial expansion to foreign lands, both to provide resources to the Empire and to bring land into production. Place by place the Empire was extended, each serving to reinforce the other through markets, labor and materials. Dominion meant control of land, preferably directly through colonisation. In Western Australia’s case, the singular interest expressed by Captain James Stirling meshed with an increasing concern about French interests on the coast, resulting in annexation and settlement agreed to by Whitehall.

By the mid nineteenth century, the Empire was such as the world had never seen, and all its goods and benefits flowed back to Britain. Queen Victoria, the personification of Empire, exemplified this identification with a greater whole, despite the realm being comprised of disparate experiences and far from heterogeneous interests. A self-conscious homogeneity was mass-marketed through influential institutions and via the popular press. The Great Exhibition of 1851 brought to the working classes the sense that they were part of a greater whole, whereas the great cultural institutions funded from its profits – the Albert Hall, Victoria and Albert Museum, Natural History Museum and Imperial College – amplified and defined this engagement. These collocated citadels of culture were the concrete expression of a paternalistic and assured world view that all knowledge could be discovered, codified and measured. Western Australia followed suit, constructing its own set of cultural edifices in the northern part of central Perth – the Geological Museum, Victoria Public Library, Jubilee Museum and Art Gallery. This both reinforced the connection with the learned and learning culture of the Empire and served to surround a convict-built gaol, hiding its ‘stain’ from view.

Ironically, as the main drivers of Empire were being codified, the Empire was losing impetus. Under pressure from new imperial powers, the Empire was, by the early twentieth century, waning – drained by the Boer War, the Crimean War and World War I and by the increasing independence of former colonies. By mid century, imperialism began to be framed in terms of self-preservation and the uniqueness of Britain – a type of propaganda intended to bolster a war-weary populace. The advent of television and its attendant vigorous English shows – particularly comedy – redefined the British Empire in a fading caricature of its previous gentility and asserted
its difference and independence from the world’s new colonial power, the United States. In Perth, too, the gentility faded. The discovery of nickel in the 1960s and the subsequent mineral boom saw fine sandstone buildings in the elegant boulevard of St George’s Terrace pulled down to create a ‘mini-Dallas’, its tall, slim towers glinting in the afternoon sunlight and framing a new view of Perth – from South Perth across the river, opposite the city.²

ACQUISITION

The naming of Western Australia took place on 21 January 1827. Major Edmund Lockyer of the Royal Navy raised the British flag on the southern coast at a place to be called Albany and claimed ‘the whole of Western Australia … as belonging to the Crown’.³ In doing so, he spoke into existence both the claim and context of the land as an asset of the British Empire.⁴ The moral right to name came from the spiritual authority of the monarch, which was held to be God-ordained and thus unquestionable. It reflected both the power to speak the words, the right to name and the ability to create – in this case a sovereign claim to create a new society over lands perceived to be empty. Subsequent exploration of the coast and the founding of the Swan River Colony were based on the right explicit in this naming and annexation.

When, on 2 May 1829, Captain Fremantle raised the British flag in the vicinity of South Head, in the place that was later to bear his name, and claimed ‘all that part of New Holland which is not included within the territory of New South Wales’ for the British Crown, he was confirming Lockyer’s naming of Western Australia as well as restating dominion over the land.

The first to divide the land of Western Australia were military surveyors employed by the British army. They trod the land, enduring hardships and privations of heat, isolation and fear of attack, lugging heavy equipment over unfamiliar territory. Striving to impose the accuracy of straight lines on an inhospitable landscape, their work was that of Empire: of acquisition, wealth-building and expungement.

Lines – the most elemental aspect of geometry – defined potential property by documenting land as object, carved into easily articulated parcels irrespective of geography and terrain. Their articulation of order was based on erasure: acquisition imposed with pen and ink inviolable lines of separation between one ownership and another. They imposed upon the landscape a paradigm of order, by distinguishing land as open to being parcelled, used and owned. The lines of the grid were no longer just imaginary constructs in space; instead, they codified a distinct and exclusionary system of rights and a relationship with the land that was rational and quantifiable at the same time as removing it from its context. The neat rectangles became an exposition of ‘truth’, supporting conquest and the right to make native peoples subservient to the Empire.

Within this paradigm, indigenous inhabitants of the land were as subordinate as their environment. Seen as natural and savage and therefore not ‘civilised’, it was anticipated that they would be absorbed into society or become extinct. Their perceived lesser or inferior qualities meant they were to be controlled or – in the extreme – owned. Their lands were deemed to be wasted because there was no obvious form of ownership or production; their lack of townships indicated that the land was empty and available to be seized for the exclusive use of the colonists.

After military conquest, hierarchical domination advanced through the regular subdivision of land, imposed over the natural, social, cultural and legal landscapes of the indigenous landholders. With these actions of the pen were landforms, landscapes and people subsumed. The
drawn form of the land became its reality; the light and shade of the terrain, the light and shade of civilisation – and the natural, savage. As a tool of Empire, the surveyor’s maps became an expression of a proposed reality, an exposition of order and rigour used for conquest of the land and native peoples, followed by colonists and the establishment of a ruling society. Superficially, at least, the surveyors (and the town plans they created) treated the landscape as a tabula rasa upon which would be inscribed the activities of the new owners.

The use of the army to survey the land in colonial outposts carried with it an explicit authority underpinning the implicit right to use violence for property acquisition. Nicholas Blomley argues that ‘three geographic concepts – the frontier, the survey and the grid’ – were tools of violence legitimised by the State without reference to prior ownership unless it could be proven within a legal context set by the conquerors. His argument echoes Locke, Hegel and Derrida, who refer to the legitimate use of force in the context of the body, the State and the law, respectively. Locke went so far as to state that ‘there can be no injury, where there is no property’, and that the process of legal right excluded those not possessing the authority to use property. The State, in turn, authorised violence (even unto death) by upholding the exclusive right of particular individuals to use and occupy property. Locke argued that people had the right to overthrow tyranny imposed upon their legally proven right of occupation, but there is no argument in his Treatises for those for whom no pre-existing legal right was identified, a philosophical stance that would eventually justify the concept of terra nullius. As such, it precluded recognition of indigenous occupation because a priori their rights did not exist.

**SUBSERVIENCE TO EMPIRE**

In 1827, in the explorations from which the colonisation of Western Australia stemmed, Captain James Stirling traversed the alluvial flats stretching from the foothills of the escarpment to the coastal sand dunes. In his reports to the Home Office, he urged the government to act swiftly to secure the land by colonisation for, while previous reports had found it ‘sterile, forbidding and inhospitable, I represent it as the Land which of all that I have seen in various quarters of the world, possesses the greatest natural attractions’. Stirling’s report declared: ‘This Country … is more valuable for that which it might produce than for its actual productions … It appears to hold out every attraction that a Country in a State of nature can possess’. Benefits cited point to the capacity of the settlement to rapidly become self-sufficient, return future profits for the Empire and strengthen its Indian arm. This set the tenor of future dialogue with England regarding the potential colony and its natural landscape.

Charles Frazer, the botanist accompanying Stirling, reported that the colonists could bring the land into ‘a state of immediate culture, resting upon the open state of the Country, a state which allows not a greater average than 10 trees to an acre’ Near Perth was ‘an elevated flat immediately behind, [which] might be cultivated with advantage’. He believed the land to be superior to New South Wales and suggested that cotton, a valuable commodity in England, could be grown on the ‘several extensive Salt marshes admirably adapted to [it],’ because of the ‘general abundance of Springs, producing water of the best quality, and the consequent permanent humidity of the Soil, two advantages not existing on the Eastern Coast’.
The concept of the colony providing resources to the Empire presupposed the capacity of colonists to control vast acreages over time and to extract from those landholdings items of value for trade. However, unlike the other Australian colonies of the time – New South Wales and Tasmania – the Swan River Colony, of which Perth was capital, was established without the transportation of convicts as its driving force. The colony’s success, therefore, required a degree of mutuality based on connection, loyalty and standing with the Crown, and a continuity of land ownership.

Faced with a colony occupying over one-third of the continent, there was ample scope for the annexation of vast tracts of land for private interests. However, there would be no independent free trade in land as had been the case in New South Wales and other colonies. Disquieted at what had happened there, the arm of the imperial government stretched out, defining the shape and context of the land.

The degree to which land was made available was restricted through regulation by the Crown and made dependant upon the level of capital a colonist brought to the colony. To this end, prior to 1831, land was granted rather than sold. Allocated on the basis of 40 acres for every three pounds of capital, the definition of capital was wide-ranging enough to include domestic furnishings and indentured labour. This, it was proposed, would secure a stable, loyal landholding class, underpinned by subservient labour and reliant upon the markets provided by the rest of the Empire for their continued good fortune. The inclusion of indentured labourers bound to a master as a form of capital was, in itself, a marker of the social differentiation and economic expectation of the colonists.

With Western Australia established by private entrepreneurs, a parallel and mutually beneficial relationship with the imperial establishment would be achieved. Not only would the military needs of the realm be resolved but, in the process, new goods and benefits would flow back to England. The Swan River Colony, and Perth as its capital, would prosper, but its aspirations were to be willingly subservient and intermeshed with those of the Empire.

Stirling was to be guided in his endeavours by a copy of Governor Darling’s 1825 instructions for New South Wales, which had been appended to his own. Settlements were to be established, based on ‘counties of forty miles square, hundreds (ten miles square), and parishes (twenty-five square miles)’. In instructions to the Surveyor-General of the Colony, John Septimus Roe, the grid was restated with emphasis on cardinal points of the compass: ‘The territory is to be divided into Counties, Hundreds, Townships, and square mile sections, and all the boundary lines of these divisions are to have a due North & South, East & West, horizontal direction’.

In keeping with a uniform bureaucratic approach to managing the colonies, the Colonial Office did not heed the Spanish ‘Laws of the Indies’ – the progenitor of much colonial town planning in America – the instructions of which deliberately offset the streets from the cardinal points so as to create shelter from the prevailing winds. In practice, the distances involved in both communicating with England and in surveying the land ameliorated some of the stricter implementation, but the intent of the instructions was clear. For example, Roe, when laying out Perth in 1829, offset the streets so as to best facilitate a northern route between the swamps. Yet the windiness of central Perth – exacerbated by the later construction of high-rise buildings – persists to this day. Later amendments to the northern streets, in response to the presence of
swamps, serendipitously created a more pleasant, sheltered aspect to Northbridge, the modern city’s alfresco dining precinct.  

A DEFINED PLACE IN THE LANDSCAPE

Spiro Kostof has identified three forms of town development: the cosmic pre-capitalist model, which represents cosmological forces on earth and postulates a physical interpretation of social hierarchy in which the grid is subordinate; the practical model, which facilitates the speculative development of unoccupied spaces of which the grid is the predominant form; and the organic model, which proposes that the city can grow as a living entity, and of which the Garden City model of the early twentieth century is the strongest example. Central Perth embodies the first, and has been criticised for being neither the second nor the third.

The cosmic pre-capitalist model was characterised by defined boundaries such as a wall, an area of land that could not be sold or a topographical feature that restricted development. It was limited in size and capacity to grow outward. In effect, the town was simultaneously set apart from its hinterland, the centre elevated in importance and the hinterland subjugated. The town form, so constrained, expressed the spatial rendition of society’s power base – a physical connection between places of importance and a statement about domination of the landscape.

Within the town, the grid was used to reinforce areas of privilege and wealth rather than being a methodology for expansion. Subservient to the prevailing social hierarchy, it emphasised the places of societal importance, power and privilege, such as the barracks or the church, and excluded alternatives uses. Stylised and distinct, its emphasis on places of power effectively rendered it ‘the means of perpetuating the privileges of the property-owning classes descendant from the original settlers, and bolstering a territorial aristocracy’. Land, while sold, was seen less as a commodity than as a necessity for life and social intercourse. Consequently, it could be conceived of as abstract and imbued with values independent of its physical qualities. Ownership of land became the basis of wealth, not only for its capacity to be productive, but also as a foundation of societal relationships and the control of them.

Initial surveying of the town of Perth – an area of some three square miles – was completed in August 1829. Approximately twenty miles to the east of its port of Fremantle, the capital was laid out in a semi-regular grid pattern defined by the Swan River to the south and east, by the promontory of Mount Eliza to the west, and by ‘Fresh water swamps with rushy margins’ to the north (Figure 1).

King (later, Saint) George’s Terrace ran the length of the river foreshore, off which the rest of the town, punctuated by a ‘church site’, was divided into allotments of approximately nine-tenths of an acre in a tight lineal development dominated by a central square, designated ‘B’, upon which the barracks were sited. Behind this was a large rectangle, ‘Q’, consolidating the central area. Lots A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H and L extended both west and east, forming regular blocks. Although reclamation of the foreshore near the jetty has subsequently created an esplanade – a large linear park – at the river’s edge, the street layout has changed little. The colonists of 1829, were they alive, would easily recognise the structure of this part of Perth.
Figure 1: Perth in 1829, reconstructed from papers of the Surveyor-General's Department. Except for the elimination of the swamps and some infilling of the foreshore, central Perth has changed little in plan. Diagram by M. Pitt Morison, 1979. Margaret Pitt Morison Research Collection, Faculty of Architecture, Landscape & Visual Arts, The University of Western Australia.
Land within the town was divided into sections aligned to the Terrace, based on occupation and allocated in a spatially defined manner that A Rapoport has described as representing different ‘patterns and regularities of various social groups, their hierarchies and roles’. Town Lots ‘L’ were set aside for the ‘bazaar’:

Section A was designated for government offices; section C, lots 1–8, were assigned to official persons, section D lots 1–10 ... government employees and artificers, section E with early arrivals, doctors and others connected in some way with the establishment ...

Selection of land was made first by ‘civil officers and artificers’ before general applications for town lots were invited.

Disparate values of improvements required in order to redeem freehold further underpinned the differentiation introduced by the requirement for capital to obtain land grants. Houses on the principal street, King George’s Terrace, were to cost at least 200 pounds, while ‘houses in the bazaar and the other streets’ were to have a value of at least 100 pounds and were to be built within two years of establishing a claim to the land. By requiring high minimum building values and tight time-frames, the regulations effectively excluded all but those with ready capital from purchasing land in the town centre. The requirement of higher building costs for the Terrace was a clear indicator of social status and differentiation of wealth, resulting from expectations of what Perth society should be and how class structure, expectations, accessibility and rights of proprietors would be reflected in the form of its built environment. Apart from servants, the poorer settlers and indentured labourers were effectively removed from the living spaces of the wealthy.

The division of the town into areas of social, commercial, political and military activity was not a feature unique to Perth. This type of distinction of place and form – and, in particular, the segregation of different occupational groups – was a feature of imperialist town planning. Based on the experiences of Asia and Africa, it was a methodology both for protection and for control. By removing the colonists from the indigenous inhabitants, practical outcomes could be assured: the use of the military (should an uprising occur) would be more clear cut, with fewer injuries among the colonists; the spread of disease, and the attendant distribution of aid, could be contained; colonists could be protected easily from an insurgency; and polite society was facilitated by the proximity of the civil, monarchical and religious core. Added to this, the capacity to quarantine from view any disagreeable realities that occupation might impose on others, and the consequent differentiation of spaces and places within a town, was seen as a foundation of imperial colonisation. For example, in New Delhi, areas of the town had been partitioned to differentiate the activities of the colonists – the cantonment for the military personnel and barracks; the ‘civil station’ for the ‘civilian members of the colonial bureaucracy’, including the judges, magistrates, public servants and other members of the civil establishment; the bazaar for commerce; and the ‘native’ quarter.

In Perth, the distinction was bureaucratic. That regulations for cost of housing and initial allocations of land did not include the swamps indicates that this was an uncontested space, a space for others. In the absence of a ‘native’ quarter, the presence of Aborigines using ‘freshwater
swamps with rushy margins’ to the north, with accompanying mosquitoes, midges and miasmas, was a sufficient definition of difference and a natural boundary to ‘civilised’ expansion northward.

In addition to the topographical constraints of the site, Stirling was instructed to reserve land: ‘more effectually to guard against the evils, to be apprehended from an improvident disposal of the land in the immediate vicinity of the Town, you will take care, that a square of three Miles (or one thousand nine hundred and twenty Acres) is reserved for its future extension’. The instructions were consistent with the concept of land reserved for future use and amenity rather than unrestricted individual ownership. This land, prudentially held by the Crown so close to the town, restricted growth outward.

The town plan echoed the layout of Williamsburg in Pennsylvania that became the inspiration for colonial capitals in the United States. Founded in 1698, Williamsburg was conceived of as the capital of a large and productive hinterland, rather than as a trading town. It was the place to which the wealthy landowners travelled for social intercourse and the accoutrements of polite society. Its plan expressed the ideal of a town designed as a state capital, ‘a city in miniature for polite society, not for commerce’.  

Earlier American colonial town plans had harnessed a closed square, based on the Spanish and Portuguese models, but Williamsburg employed, for the first time, the device of a broad, long street with key buildings terminating its vistas. The main street was 99 feet wide, with at one end William and Mary College and at the other end the Capitol. Off centre to the north, a wider street perpendicularly bisected it, terminating at the Governor’s House. The plan thus connected spatially the three main elements of power on a trafficable street within a compact form in the centre of the town, from which the rest of the grid expanded. This simple but elegant design, which emphasised the symbolic status of the capital, would influence the plans of subsequent capitals in America – Philadelphia and Washington – and through them, of colonial capitals worldwide.

In Perth, the main street was likewise 99 feet wide. Here were established the principal parts of the town: the governor’s residence, the barracks, the government buildings and the finest homes. It was from here that the administrative, political and temporal regulation of the colony was accomplished. The governor’s residence terminated the square to the south, whereas the rise of the land to the west formed a perfect location for a prominent public building and was later used for the barracks and, subsequently, for Parliament House. To the east was constructed the church, sited next to the barracks, thus consolidating the importance of the centre of the town.

Stretching northwards from the centre of the town was planned a wide street – Stirling Street – its width comparable with Saint George’s Terrace. Stirling Street was placed in the only location that would allow it, as a perpendicular boulevard, to proceed as far northwards as possible before encountering the swamps. The central square was sited in response to this requirement, determined by the need for central formality. This street, rooted at the centre of the town, was to create the axis for the northern development of Perth. The lots that formed its edges were aligned east–west to be perpendicular to the street, to maximise the number of lots facing the street, even though this meant disrupting the regular orientation of the town grid (Figure 2).
Figure 2: The 1833 town plan of Perth, showing the orientation of the town lots north of the square.

Inset, Perth, in Discoveries in Western Australia (map). London: John Arrowsmith, 1833. 24/81, J S Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia.
As the principal north–south street, Stirling Street – stretching north from the home of military power in the colony – would be a fitting tribute to the governor. Its position emphasised the importance of the centre of the town. The broad Terrace was home to the administrative, military, monarchial and spiritual institutions of authority; Stirling Street was the spatial extension of that power northward.

Just as Williamsburg was conceived of as a capital city and a centre of polite society rather than a merchant city, so too would be Perth. Colonists could claim a town lot to the equivalent of one acre for every 1000 acres of land they were entitled to under the land grants, creating a space for a ‘town’ house as an secondary place of residence, from which to maintain regular social contacts and conduct business. Balls were held at Government House, and social cohesion was maintained through frequent personal contact in a defined context. Mores were maintained through a cultural diaspora for which the capital placed an important role:

We met with great hospitality in Perth, dined out every day, first day luncheoned at the Governor’s, engaged to dine there on the next … I am not much of a visitor but feel it to be for the interest of my family to keep up a distant acquaintance with the higher circle that they may feel it to be their natural position when they grow up.

Such references were self-conscious. Shortly after the 1788 settlement at Botany Bay, a London engraving showed a similar arrangement near the Governor’s Establishment at Rose Hill, New South Wales: ‘The main street of the new town is already begun. It is to be a mile long, and of such breadth as will shame Pall Mall and Portland Place to “hide their diminished heads”’ (Figure 3).

In a sketch of Perth, nine years after settlement, the town had its own ‘Pall Mall’, even if it was a pale echo of London’s: ‘a long strait space cleared from the forest about 100 yards from Melville Water, represented the Principal Streets of Perth, the houses at wide distances peeping through the trees’.

In Perth, houses were set in their own grounds, and this mediating of public and private space with a buffer of gardens, contrasted with the tightly packed urban streetscapes in the port town of Fremantle, some 20 miles to the west. Consistent with a differentiated hinterland was the provision of town plots (less than an acre) sufficient only for domestic needs, which presupposed that grain and other agricultural produce would come from external estates. The lots were sufficient for an orchard and vegetable garden, some chickens and a domestic animal or two.

The open character of Perth was in part due to regulation – a regulatory paradigm that continues to inform central Perth today. Houses were to be situated ‘on the middle line of each lot and the front of the building to be 30 feet from the boundary of lot on the street,’ a directive that perpetuated a ‘more open rustic appearance’ in Perth than in Fremantle.
Figure 3: Antipodean ‘Pall Mall’: the main street at Rose Hill in the township of Parramatta, 1798, with the Governor’s House terminating the view.
James Heath, A View of the Governor’s House at Rose Hill in the Township of Parramatta, engraving, image and text 20.5 x 24.3 cm, London: Cadell & Davies, 25 May 1798. nla.pic-an 757082, National Library of Australia.

Fremantle, characterised by tight spaces, had houses set close to the street with shallow setbacks. Inward facing and protective of its cargoes, initially there were limited private spaces for social interaction. This meant that, in the main, people were integrally part of the city streetscape, part of the city life. More readily suited to notions of the working class than the gentry, the physical character of Fremantle underpinned assumptions as to its class structure and the social differences between it, a ‘merchant’ city, and Perth, the capital.

The lack of urbanism (Figure 4), but also the spatial amenity of Perth, was commented on by an 1863 observer, Mrs Edward Millett:

since almost all the houses in the best parts of the town stand in their own gardens … the general appearance of the whole place is rather that of one of those suburbs … it makes the place much prettier than it would probably be if a larger trade were carried on there. There is a look of cheerfulness and brightness about the many gardens which surround the houses and the avenue of trees which lines each side of the main road passing from one end to the other of the town, that makes the new-comer feel that a home there might be a very pleasant one [my emphasis].

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UNDER THE AEGIS

If Perth was not to have proximity to the great landed aristocratic families that lorded over the population in Britain, then it would at least have the names of suitable august personages imprinted on the consciousness of the population in their daily traffic along the streets. Initially, at least, such names were drawn from the political elite immediately responsible for decisions about the colony’s future. The town with its attendant natural setting was distinguished by names of spaces and places drawn from the lexicon of the social and political elite of Great Britain. The names bonded the old to the new, made familiar the unfamiliar and posited certainty where none existed. T G H Strehlow notes that Aborigines also used this device, as they named and made familiar every aspect of the landscape, both for identification of the landscape and to create a psychologically supportive relationship with it.

In 1827, when Stirling explored the west coast, he confirmed Willem de Vlamingh’s 1697 report of abundant exotic black swans: ‘Without any exaggeration, I have seen a number of black swans which could not be estimated at less than 500 rise at once ... the crews thought nothing of devouring eight roasted swans in one day’. The subsequent naming of the colony as ‘Swan River’ simultaneously conjured up a pastoral idyll and the exotic, establishing the duality of a gracious landscape and an isolated outpost that endures today.

Stirling named the broad reach of water en route to the proposed site of the capital Melville Water, after the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Second Viscount Melville, and the hills to the east General Darling’s Ranges, in honour of the governor of New South Wales who had authorised Stirling’s expedition to Western Australia. In both, he paid deference to his political and bureau-
ocratic masters. Likewise, Perth itself was named for Sir George Murray, Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, in honour of his birthplace and parliamentary seat. He also gave his name to Murray Street, the third street laid out in Perth, and it must have given him some satisfaction that the main street was a ‘George’s’ Terrace – a further connection, even if somewhat tangentially.

The principal road, King George’s Terrace, was discreetly renamed after the king became mentally ill but the new name, Saint George’s Terrace, in place after his consequent death in 1830, was equally politic. Redolent with heraldic imagery, it had the advantage of being overlaid with Christian hope that such nomenclature would reinforce the divine right of its establishment and offer spiritual solace to its population and protection from metaphorical dragons. Simultaneously, King William was named for the new king, William IV, and part of King George’s Terrace was renamed Adelaide Terrace in honour of the queen – both names reasserting the monarchy after the previous misadventure.47

Hay Street, the second street laid out, was named in honour of R W Hay, Under Secretary of the Colonial Office; Goderich and Howick streets to its east were named for Lord Goderich, briefly Prime Minister in 1827–1828 and later Colonial Secretary, and for Earl Grey of Howick, Prime Minister in 1830–34. Melbourne Street was named in honour of William Lamb, Lord Melbourne, Prime Minister in 1835–1841, as was Lamb Street in the north.48 To the east, Lord Street, the road to Guildford, was so named because it ran from the Roman Catholic church northwards and was close to Goderich, Wellington and Howick streets, all named for lords. The Church Square was named after Victoria, in honour of the divine right of the queen, and Short Street, to its west, for Bishop Augustus Short of the combined diocese of Western Australia and South Australia.49

Further east, names reflected the great triumph of the British over the French and the assertion of their pre-eminent naval power. Wellington Street ran past Wellington Square to Horatio, Nelson and Waterloo crescents and morphed into Trafalgar Road.50 Later, the suburb of West Perth would continue the commemoration of military figures after the campaigns of the Indian Mutiny, celebrated in the creation of Delhi Square and Lucknow and Havelock streets.

As the swamps were drained, the street names reflected the key players in the growth of the settlement of Perth. Stirling Street was named after James Stirling, the governor. Mangles Street and its westward extension, Ellen Street, were named for Ellen Mangles, Stirling’s wife. To the east of Stirling Street were Mackie and Moore streets, both named after prominent legal men: W H Mackie was chairman of the Courts of Petty and Quarter Sessions, effectively the colony’s principal law officer, and George Fletcher Moore was an Irish lawyer who became Civil Commissioner and Advocate General.51

The swamps were generally named after leading colonists or those who leased them: Lake Sutherland after Henry Sutherland, a surveyor who became Colonial Treasurer and a member of the Legislative Council; Lake Irwin after Captain F C Irwin of the Imperial Services who was acting lieutenant governor after Stirling’s departure.52 Lake Henderson was named after Colonel Henderson, head of the Imperial Services of the colony; Lake Kingsford after Samuel Kingsford, who had been given the right to drain water from it; and Stone’s Lake after G F Stone, the first lessee of the land and the Attorney General, although Edward Barron (after whom Edward Street, edging the lake, would be named) later held the lease. However, Lakes Poulett and Thomson were named in honour of British Cabinet member Poulett-Thomson, later the Lord Sydneham,
who served as president of the Board of Trade in the 1830s. Brisbane Street honoured Major General Sir Thomas Brisbane, a Scot, who had been the governor of New South Wales amid some controversy but was also a distinguished scientist who had done research into astronomy – a valuable resource for a seafaring nation. Beaufort and Francis streets were named after Sir Francis Beaufort, RN, Hydrographer to the Admiralty. Beaufort Street ran past a large swamp, later renamed Birdwood Square after Lieutenant-General Birdwood and another swamp in the east would be named Haig Park, after Field Marshall Douglas Haig, both as a result of the Gallipoli campaign.\textsuperscript{53}

In 1851, the year of the triumph of the Great Exhibition, which showcased the splendours of Britain’s Empire and her technological advances, Albert Square (in honour of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria’s regent who had conceived and championed the exhibition) was created to celebrate the connection to the vast and impressive display and to show loyalty to the Crown.\textsuperscript{54} Conceived as a gracious square straddling Hay Street, it bridged Saint George’s Terrace and Murray Street on high land – a counterpoint to Victoria Square at the other end of Murray Street. It is ironic, therefore, that the decision to send convicts to the Swan River Colony would lead to the demise of the eloquently conceived Albert Square. By 1863, the square was gone, sacrificed to the new Pensioner Barracks, whose northern edge extended into it (Figure 5).\textsuperscript{55}

![Figure 5: The removal of Albert Square, 10 February 1863. Removed to satisfy the needs of imperial bureaucracy, it was replaced by part of the barracks.](image-url)

\textit{Part of the City of Perth Shewing the New town Lots H 21, 22, 49, 50, 51, 52 & 53 created near the site for the Pensioner Barracks, the details in Red being abolished. 10 February 1863. Consignment 3850 item 38d, State Records Office of Western Australia. Department of Lands and Surveys. Reproduced by permission of Western Australian Land Information Authority (Landgate).}
Thus, the tacit extension of Empire to this most far-flung of colonies became a physical one with the construction of a barracks to administer a new form of colonist – convicts. The first free settlement was to become the last convict settlement, bringing with it the funds of the imperial establishment, much needed labour for the colony and an omnipresent administration. The genteel square gone, the barracks’s high position dominated the vista of Saint George’s Terrace, a harsh reminder of the price paid for Empire-sponsored progress. In modern Perth, only the arch of the Barracks remains, famously despoiling the view of Parliament House from the Terrace but a curiously appropriate reminder of Perth’s prevailing urge to concentrate dominant power in administrative bureaucracies. In Perth, at least, the physical reality of the least glamorous aspect of the imperial system would gazump the intellectual and technological achievements of Empire.

An elegantly proportioned urban square, Russell Square, had been laid out in October 1853. On high land, it was the focal point of a new northern route from the city, created by a realignment of Melbourne Street in the south and the creation of Palmerston Street in the north. Town lots surrounded the square and defined two westerly streets: Fitzgerald and Charles (Figure 6).

**Figure 6:** Russell Square, with Lake Henderson to its north. Laid out in 1853, it was to be an elegant urban square for the northern part of central Perth, drawing *cachet* from its London namesake.

Detail from *Perth Townsite Additions and Alterations as approved by the Governor in Executive Council* 29 June 1855. Map 18C, Consignment 3888 item 294, State Records Office of Western Australia. Department of Lands and Surveys. Reproduced by permission of Western Australian Land Information Authority (Landgate).
Named after Lord John Russell, Prime Minister in 1846–52 (and Foreign Secretary at the time of the decision to send convicts to the colony) the naming was politic; but there were also analogies with the elegant and gracious Russell Square in Bloomsbury, which had been created on open fields 50 years before and represented the status to which this area of central Perth aspired. The square was not a small garden space but a large urban opening central to newly defined Melbourne and Palmerston streets, and so provided a focal point in the townscape. It was, together with the southern town lots (not implemented until 1855), drafted to extend the city northward over the drained swamps while retaining the former swamp, Lake Henderson, as a feature to its north – a watery corollary to its green parkland. As with the self-conscious grandeur to which Saint George’s Terrace aspired, Russell Square was to be the focus of a genteel urban square, with the terminating streets underpinning its importance.

Russell Square did not achieve the dignified elegance of its Bloomsbury namesake. The architectural scale of the buildings surrounding it remained modest, and characterised by free-standing single-storey dwellings. The attempt to create a gracious housing estate around a genteel square was premature in an area still affected by regular flooding. It would not be until the gold rush of the 1890s that the area would develop the social cachet alluded to in its name.

The street to the north, which terminated at Russell Square, was named after Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary in Russell’s ministry. To the west, a new northbound street, Fitzgerald Street, was laid out and, almost parallel and to its west, the road to Wanneroo was renamed Charles Street – both in honour of Charles Fitzgerald, the governor who had championed the arrival of the convicts who, in turn, had made possible the drainage. Lamb Street was extended westward and renamed Aberdeen Street after the prime minister, Lord Aberdeen, whose administration (1852–56) immediately followed that of Russell. Ellen and Mangles streets were renamed Newcastle Street, in honour of the Duke of Newcastle, Secretary for the Colonies in Aberdeen’s ministry. Below James, Hardinge Street, an extension of James, was named for Sir Henry Hardinge, Governor-General of India from 1844 to 1848. The naming Hardinge Street was indicative of the colony’s hopes that Perth would become a convalescent station for India’s colonials.

All these imperial names blanket central Perth, carrying with them a history and projecting a set of values to underpin the imperial foundation of this Antipodean outpost, overlaying its physical setting with a symbolic and distinct connection to the values and triumphs of the British Empire. They reflected its foundation and reinforced the intention that the new capital would be tied to the old, secure in its place as part of the Empire. Although today these names are somewhat obscured through ignorance of their history, they are nonetheless indicative and, being partially representative of the conservatism of the city, underwrite its specialness as a place of difference.

ANNULLING THE SWAMPS

The swamps, which Stirling had been so careful to select to protect his fledging capital, were not retained but were incrementally absorbed into individual land holdings, their interconnectivity lost as they were recast. Drainage began in 1833 for commercial purposes. As water levels fell the town expanded northward, creating town lots between or around the diminishing swamps for horticultural and grazing purposes. After 1834, depictions of the natural landscapes increasingly diminished on Perth’s town plans. Whereas the 1833 town plan had plainly stated the
presence of ‘Fresh water swamps with rushy margins’, from 1834 the swamps would be increasingly defined by town lots ringing their perimeters – so much so that by 1838 they would be formally absorbed into the town plan as ‘lakes’ (Figure 7). In later town plans, the depiction of the swamps would be reduced further still. This is an accepted cartographic and planning practice, yet it had the effect of making the lakes ‘disappear’ incrementally, as if they never existed.

Figure 7: The second town plan of Perth, in 1838, dominated its landscape. It shows named lakes in lieu of swamps and the extension of lots eastward from those depicted in 1833. Devoid of topographic representation, it is the plan of a prosperous and orderly town increasingly unhampered by natural impediments.

Perth, September 1838. Consignment 3868 item 289, State Records Office of Western Australia. Department of Lands and Surveys. Reproduced by permission of Western Australian Land Information Authority (Landgate).

From 1840 onwards, drainage works to alleviate flooding and to eradicate miasmas began in earnest, and the swampland was being sold for town lots. By 1845, the swamps were shown as irregular, globular forms and over half had ‘disappeared’. Lakes Kingsford, Irwin, Sutherland and Henderson were named, but the remaining swamps were depicted as empty spaces, joined by drains.

The arrival of convicts in the 1850s meant that manpower was available to divert water from Lakes Kingsford, Irwin and Sutherland to Claise Brook, and by August 1854 part of the newly drained Lake Kingsford was offered for sale to the public as ‘rich garden ground’. More works took place in the 1870s and 1890s, and by the end of the century the swamp system would be subsumed into the formal grid of Perth. Only at Claisebrook to the east, originally the mouth of the swamp system, would remnants remain – functioning as an exit point for underground drains that, even today, carry water as part of the Claisebrook Catchment Area.

Although at first valued by the colonists for their damp soils and fecundity in an arid climate, increasingly the swamps were deemed to be the source of ‘bad air’ or ‘mala aria’. Their miasmas – the ‘unwholesome atmosphere which results from the exhalation of marshy districts’ – were thought to be the cause of disease. Colonists followed the prevailing wisdom with regard to
miasmas and health which advised that land around houses should be clear, not for reasons of fire but because trees collected vapours and ‘retain miasms in the foliage’. Furthermore, the miasmas were deemed to be the progenitor of moral turpitude and held to encourage undesirable characteristics, such as indolence or ‘intemperance’. The sufferer of malaria had symptoms of a disease of the body, but as despoiled water was held to mean more than simply the physical, the resultant lethargy was personalised as indicative of an underlying spiritual failing also. The resultant morbidity and mortality were depicted as behavioural and perceived to be both the cause and the nature of life for those who inhabited low-lying areas. Residents of swamps, slums and less-than-sanitary conditions were assumed to be both physically and morally a danger. Such sites often became the places of rascality, where drinking, whoring and gambling were both indulged vices and the means of earning a daily living.

Despite Jane Dodds emphasising in 1831 that ‘I have infinite pleasure in assuring you that we have met with neither sea nor land monsters’, the ‘air of desolation’ referred to by a 1847 correspondent spoke to an audience versed in the symbolism of swamps and fecund bodies of water. It was a profoundly negative message:

At home, a lake is known only as a sheet of water which seldom or ever is dried up … it is naturally associated in one's mind with pleasant and picturesque scenery, but here it is quite different … there is an air of desolation about these lakes which strikes the spectator at once … It is completely still … without one point of interest in it, as far as striking scenery goes, and totally different from anything I ever saw outside Australia.

The nexus between the swamps as degraded places and the internalisation of negative values associated with them informed decisions about the landscape. Town improvements included the draining of swamps, which was not only the physical draining of an aquatic landscape, but also a psychological action that underpinned the moral authority of imposing sanitation in crowded urban areas. Drainage of the swamps was desirable precisely because it imposed domination on the land and, by extension, allowed civility. By removing the source of miasmas, not only would the physical health of society be improved, but so too would its moral health. Ironically, the place of the swamps became the red-light district of Perth in the 1890s and later – the glowing warmth of the hearth light replaced by the brazen red of the prostitute’s advertisement.

From 1879, the low-lying ‘rich garden grounds’ of Lakes Irwin and Kingsford were incrementally resumed for railway purposes – lines of steel forming a new barrier between the northern and southern sections of the town. No one regretted the expungement of the swamps although, in 1911, W E Bold bewailed the squandered ‘opportunities which presented themselves at the beginning of the colony of laying out an ideal garden city by taking advantage, for ornamental purposes, of the chain of lakes from the eastern end of the City to Monger’s Lake in the north-west’.

For the local Aboriginal community, the swamps were places of plenitude, providing food, meeting places, shelter and familiar hunting grounds, and the interconnectedness of the swamp system meant that the area was part of an annual circuit of camping places. Fish, turtles, oysters, crabs, birds and their eggs, frogs, edible roots, fungi, kangaroos and possums abounded. The waters were fringed with tea-tree, grass trees and paper bark, the last providing shelter. The large
flat spaces of the swamp flood plains created natural amphitheatres for ceremonies and camping. The *Perth Gazette*, reported in 1850 a gathering of some 300 Aborigines, from a wide circuit around Perth, at Lake Henderson on the edge of the town:

> On Friday evening a grand corroboree was held at Anderson’s Lake [sic], at the back of the town, by upwards of 300 natives, belonging to the tribes inhabiting the country for a circuit of 200 miles from Perth. The gibberish of each peculiar dialect, and the various gestures and antics exhibited in the native dance, afforded much amusement to the spectators.\(^{56}\)

Twenty years later, Mrs Edward Millett poignantly foreshadowed the decreasing presence of Aborigines in the city:

> the police interrupted the performance in mercy to the white people, who had been unable to sleep during the two previous nights. We never again saw so many natives collected together at any one time, nor was it merely that they dispersed on the ceasing of the drought which had caused them to congregate around us.\(^{57}\)

Today’s modern dreaming takes Aboriginal youth to this northern fringe of central Perth – the area of the swamps – just as did their ancestors before them. The otherness of the swamps and their appropriateness as a place for Aboriginal occupation was formalised – not as a ‘native quarter’ but as a point of demarcation over which they could not cross after sunset. The line was Newcastle Street and the town to its south was forbidden territory after curfew. Although lifted in 1967, this imposed constraint still exists in a tacit form. There is a lack of Aboriginal presence in the central city, despite the international popularity of their art and the curiosity of tourists to explore their culture. No evidence of Aboriginal occupation is promulgated – there is no Indigenous tourism centre and those shops selling artefacts are privately owned. While not explicitly stated, it is clear that Aborigines are not welcome in central Perth.

**A FLAWED SITE?**

Critics have argued that the site Stirling chose was disadvantageous, as it cramped his capital between the river and the swamps.\(^{68}\) Its position, in the lee of Mount Eliza, prevented cooling sea breezes reaching the northern parts of the planned town and created an unpleasant and unhealthy environment, exacerbated by the presence of the swamps that restricted northward expansion. The shallow river to the south and mud flats to the east inhibited river travel and further growth.\(^{69}\)

George Seddon argued that Point Heathcote, on the south side of the broadest reach of the river, was more advantageous for an expanding city, having the advantages of ‘better ventilation, deeper water and more land’– better ventilation to counteract miasmas and disease, deeper water to allow access by ships, and more land to allow for urban and suburban expansion in the immediate vicinity of the town. For Seddon, Stirling’s siting of Perth in proximity to the swamps meant that land to the north was devalued, and the consequent construction of the railway on this land meant that Perth developed unevenly. The barrier of the railway forced the central business district
west and east, consuming residential housing and resulting in the near absence of inner-city res-
idents and a sterile city core. As a result, St (Saint) George’s Terrace retained its prestige, and its
subsequent over-capitalisation impeded development and investment and further degrading the
streets behind it. Seddon stated: ‘Stirling could hardly have foreseen these problems, but he must
have believed that the township he founded would grow in the future, and he hardly gave it room
to do so’. \(^{70}\)

These criticisms see Perth as it is now and cast a modern eye over the influence of geography
but ignore the historical requirements of such a far-flung settlement. Perth was many thousands
of miles from Britain and the other Australian colonies and needed to be self-sufficient in water
and defence. For Stirling, defence and water were pivotal. Perth’s site excelled in both aspects;
other sites did not.

Although the bar at the mouth of the Swan River made entry into the river difficult, beyond
that, a ship would have relatively unhindered progress as far as the Narrows, the width of the
river allowing protection from shore-based fire. The constriction of the river at the Narrows, in
the shadow of Mount Eliza, made further ingress upstream to the area of Perth Water obvious
and difficult. Therefore, the site was secure from most naval threats. Fresh water was available
from either the river itself, from above the Heirisson Isles where it was fresh, from the streams
in the townsite running from the ridge or from the swamps to the north. The swamps also offered
protection from invasion from the landward and river sides because of their sticky and tenacious
mud, as both the French and the British had discovered earlier in the century. \(^{71}\) A gelatinous
sucking mud would form a barrier that, if not impenetrable, would at least delay any landward
attack. Wet powder was of little use for an invading force. \(^{72}\)

As the Swan River Colony was to ‘incur no expense’ to the Crown other than a minimum
administrative staff and a small military force, \(^{73}\) it was almost entirely bereft of capital and labour
at the time of its founding. Government intervention, as part of the Convict Establishment, came
some 21 years later. Consequently, the colony did not prosper until the gold rushes in the 1890s. \(^{74}\)
Hindered by slow growth, and retaining much of its original form past the period when a suc-
cessful capital might have been expected to expand, the centre of Perth still retains its colonial
features. The layout and usage of Perth are still peculiarly in accord with the original town
planning.

To suggest, as Harold Boas did in the 1930s, that ‘there is little evidence that any great
forethought or planning on accepted town planning lines was considered in the laying out of the
… towns prior to 1929’ \(^{75}\) was to condemn the original decision-making because the form it created
was no longer relevant to the modern city. Such comments are made from the perspective of a
society that had embraced city growth as inevitable and views land as a saleable asset rather than
as the foundation of long-term stability and wealth. No longer was land an end in itself – required
for the production of sustenance for future generations through careful husbandry. Land, instead,
became a commodity and, in particular, a means for profit:

Land is naturally the safest investment of any that offer themselves in the
colonies … it is a generally accepted maxim, that ‘you can’t go far wrong in
buying land’. There is always the chance of making 50 to 100 per cent. in the
year by a land purchase, and at the worst you will get 10 or 20 per cent. per
annum … \(^{76}\)
Freed from the traditional concept of land as a resource for the benefit of society, ‘Public places, parks, and any other allocations that remove land from the market are clearly seen as a waste of a profit producing resource’. This is the dilemma that Perth faces today, with increasing calls for the Esplanade to be developed because its lack of development is seen as an opportunity lost.

It is ironic, therefore, that commentators who are so perceptive about today’s planning of Perth have criticised the original siting, unaware that Perth is one of the few remaining British imperial cities to express the key principles of pre-capitalist town planning in a relatively pure form. Perth was topographically and geographically constrained, with the military, spiritual, governmental and temporal centres located centrally and differentiated spatially to emphasise their importance. Land was to be held long-term as the basis of wealth, and access to it was based on differentiation. The town – supported by a productive hinterland, held in the hands of a few – was a small, secure, distinctive place in the landscape: the capital and the seat of power.

While the initial reservation of three miles square for the town did not survive due to pressure for land close to the town, modern Perth does have 1000 acres kept aside as King’s Park, on Mount Eliza. This vantage point has been favoured for views since settlement, as it looks down on the capital nestled into the bay below, giving Perth a self-conscious prettiness unique for a capital city. Views of Perth consistently confirm the capital’s defined place in the landscape. They show the town from Mount Eliza, encapsulated by Nature, constrained and framed by it, with no attempt to present it as reaching far out into the hinterland (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Perth from the brow of Mount Eliza in 1838, as depicted by C D Wittenoom: constrained by its topography with the river as its footstool.
C D Wittenoom, ‘Perth from Mount Eliza 1838’, lithograph. From Nathaniel Ogle. 1839. The Colony of Western Australia: A Manual for Emigrants to that Settlement or its Dependencies … with the most correct map extant. London: James Fraser.
The beauty of Perth’s situation and of its relationship to the river at its feet has always been
a defining feature:

I have just returned from head quarters (Perth) which is about 12 or 14 miles
inland on the north bank of the Swan, where you have one of the most delightful
demi-panoramic views, I suppose, in the world … In sailing up this intricate
river, the scenery is truly picturesque, and in many of the windings nearly ro-
monic to a degree almost inconceivable.  

In most of the images, the river takes precedence (Figures 9, 10). While this is a function of
the initial riverine exploration, the images nevertheless capture the abiding importance of water
to West Australians in their self-definition and, more particularly, in their definition of the de-
sirability of Perth as a capital city.

The images are both proof and exposition of the special place that Perth was intended to be – the capital, distinctive in the landscape, bathed in Antipodean sunlight, with the river as its footstool (Figure 11). It is a view of a city particular and constrained in a pristine environment. It is a pre-capitalist place of distinction rather than a prosperous, expansionist city.

Framed by trees, Perth was confirmed in its picturesqueness – a genteel paradise or private
estate on a broad stretch of river, its ‘frontage and rear of garden-grounds’,80 a reduced version
of contemporaneous Adelaide’s green belt. Little had changed by the early twentieth century,
despite the outward expansion of the suburbs engendered by the gold rushes of the 1890s (Figure
12). Seemingly idiosyncratic, this view is still the most favoured one of Perth (Figure 13), under-
writing the picturesque and constrained quality of the central city and confirming its umbilical
relationship with the river.

Figure 9: A view of the south of Perth from the high land of Mount Eliza by Frederick Garling during the 1827 explorations. The paintings
from the voyage depicted the landscape with an overlay of European trees – the familiar in the unfamiliar world. The site of the town
was established to the east of this vantage point.
Frederick Garling, View from Mount Eliza, 1827, watercolour, 15 x 37 cm. Acc. 84, The Holmes à Court Collection, courtesy of Heytesbury, Perth.
Figure 10: Horace Sampson's view of Perth in 1847.
Horace Sampson, *Perth 1847*, watercolour, gouache and pen and ink, 27.5 x 40.3 cm, gift of Mr D Rannard, 1923. State Art Collection, Art Gallery of Western Australia.

Figure 11: Perth in the 1850s: a small, distinct seat of power in the landscape.
Figure 12: A pervasive view of Perth, encapsulated within its environment, continued into the twentieth century. Edith Florence Trethowan, *Mounts Bay Road Towards Perth*, c1931, wood engraving, 15.3 x 10.2 cm. Acc. 383, The Holmes & Court Collection, courtesy of Heytesbury, Perth.
Perth’s buildings were initially rudimentary and simple; however, as the settlement grew they began to take on a form that fulfilled a different purpose – that of symbolising the culture and aspirations of Empire in a remote settlement.  

The arrival of convicts in 1850 heralded the advent of labour and capital to invest in government infrastructure. Within the ‘B’ square, in close proximity, the new buildings of colonial authority arose – Government House, the Town Hall and the Government Offices. They were constructed in the Gothic style – a style much in vogue in England and also being used for the Westminster Palace Houses of Parliament and the central government offices in Whitehall, the Colonial Office, Foreign, Home and India Offices. 

Constructed of locally harvested clay bricks, mellow in colour and soft in texture, the public architecture of the colony was relatively small-scale as befitting a new settlement. Laid in Flemish bond, the prettiness of decorative diapered brickwork, where soft yellow met russet hue in opposition, was offset with symbols of temporal power, of force, of monarchy, sovereignty, hierarchy and order. Battlements and other Tudor-inspired embellishments festooned the buildings, adding a festive air that was underpinned by the tacit understanding that the symbols represented the controlling power in the colony.
The new Government House of 1864 was made of local bricks in the familiar checker-board pattern. Yet this decorative effect could have been omitted completely and probably not missed. For, more than any other building of this period, Government House is a riot of decoration. All its major features are picked out in render, in sharp contrast to the brickwork: bay windows, battlements, towers, quoins, groupings of windows, doorways, dormer windows, pinnacles, chimneys. Interwoven with all this are different coloured bricks in bond pattern, string courses and weathervanes. Cloisters at ground level allow views over the river and access to the cooling afternoon breezes. The whole building has a festive, vital air, reflective of the new, convict-based development of the colony (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Government House with the Pensioner Guards arrayed in formation in 1864. An overt display of force complements the tacit acknowledgement of power embodied in the architecture. 'The Government House at Perth, Western Australia', lithograph, Illustrated London News, 19 March 1864. 012664d, J S Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia.

Perhaps fittingly, construction of the Perth Town Hall began after it became known that transportation to the colony would cease. It is the largest and most impressive example of secular Gothic Revival in the colony. By the time it was completed in 1870, the colony was on the verge of self-government. This building, more than any other of the period, came closest in spirit to the English Gothic revival. Towering over its modest neighbours, it was resplendent in Gothic livery – a medieval town hall in dry and dusty Perth (Figure 15) and a joyous declaration of faith in the new colony and its future management. Nevertheless, its decoration draws heavily on Tudor imagery, thus reinforcing subtly the impress of Empire while celebrating the authority of the citizenry of Perth through their newly elected city council.
Figure 15: The Town Hall: a new English edifice for Perth in the form of a medieval market place. Photograph by Government Photographer, c.1870, 011588D, J S Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia.
The arrival of convicts necessitated the construction of a new barracks for the pensioner guards who were to supervise them. The new building was on the northern flank of Mount Eliza, at the western end of the town. It created an empathic end point to the western vista along Saint George’s Terrace. Its dominant form, peering down the main street of Perth, was a permanent reminder of the massive weight of convictism and of the imperial establishment that the citizens of Perth had actively requested.

The subsequent erasure of the barracks at the central square and its transfer to higher land at the west of the town did not diminish the importance of the central ‘B’ site. In the 1850s, the Legislative Council’s building was constructed near the Town Hall. The centrality of the government presence, confirmed through the construction and collocation of administration buildings, exerting both overt and tacit control in the centre of the city. In 1874, large and impressive Government Offices were constructed, housing the Cabinet, Treasury, Titles Office and Post Office. Extended upward and outward in stages until 1904, and eventually French Revivalist in style, the Central Government Offices still defines the pre-eminent intersection at the corner of St George’s Terrace and Barrack Street (Figure 16).

The decorative elements of Government House, the Town Hall and the new Barracks tied the Gothic to the supremacy of the monarchy over the church, and underwrote the creed of land ownership and land-based power through the symbolism of the monarch. The right and capacity of the government to control the lives of the colony’s subjects thus seemed divinely ordained as right and just. Such symbolism was not lost on the population. It showed them that access to
the social and political ascendancy in the colony was in the hands of people who believed in order, privilege, inherited wealth and power and hierarchy. Perth, the isolated colony at the end of the world, could draw on the weight of imperial symbolism from the Golden Age of Elizabeth – imagery from the foundation of British colonial expansion. It is not without reason that Government House is reminiscent of the Tower of London.

By the 1880s, the period of convict importation had finished. New institutions of culture and learning were being planned. To celebrate Queen Victoria’s jubilee, the Victoria Public Library was opened on Saint George’s Terrace, a fitting complement to the subscription-based Swan River Mechanics Institute that had opened its doors in 1851 and the Working Men’s Institute of 1885.

The railway opened in 1881, splicing the city – its tracks in the beds of the former swamps now tamed by increasingly sophisticated drainage. To its north, a new set of buildings was conceived on the perimeter of the former gaol, simultaneously encasing and hiding it from view while appropriating it as a historic artefact (Figure 17).

Psychologically and visually, these buildings extended the townscape northwards, underpinning the growth and increasing wealth of the new city and emphasising the relationships between growth and cultural pursuits. They thus express in architectural form the underlying belief in the supremacy of learning, Empire and the pursuit of knowledge. They are a visual link between the power and authority of the state and the power and authority of learning and culture. How appropriate then, that they should be located upon the site of the Perth Gaol – the overt control of the cell had been replaced by the more sophisticated control of culture.  

Even as the traces of convictism were being erased by the construction of the new Museum and Art Gallery, the paradigm of imperialism was being expressed. The new buildings occupied the site on a north–south axis. Together with a proposed new Parliament House constructed behind the Barracks at the top of the Terrace, they would comprise two conceptually linked public complexes on high ground: one displaying political power and the other educative power, with both displaying the strength of Empire.
By constructing a series of buildings dedicated to the exposition of erudition and learning, the Library, the Art Gallery and the Museum, the city fathers were playing out an imperial concept – that of the capacity to collect, collate and quantify all knowledge of the world in one place, where it could be disassembled, studied, catalogued and controlled. From descriptions of specimens of flora and fauna to those of geological features, these collections not only satisfied natural curiosity about a strange new land but were designed and promoted specifically as a means to understanding the resources of the land and how they could be harvested for the benefit of the Empire.

This collocation of knowledge about the world and the exposition of it was a cultural extension of the administrative collocation of a generation before. The collection of information, like the claiming of the land, embodied a paradigm of control – a technique for understanding based on reductionism, evidence ensconced in a glass bell or test-tube just as the coast of Australia had been encased in pink wash on a map of colonial conquest. It extended the great explorations of the globe in the late eighteenth century for scientific and wealth-building purposes by harnessing the fruits of commerce, industrialisation and labour to its cause – Empire was self-conscious and consumerist. Travel, education and knowledge formed a mindset whose purpose was to enlighten but, simultaneously to endorse, a pervasive cultural context – that of the British. All others were oddities – to be admired, studied, dissected or decried, but all subservient to the British:

Nobody ... who has paid any attention to the peculiar features of our present era, will doubt for a moment that we are living at a period of most wonderful transition, which tends rapidly to accomplish that great end, to which, indeed, all history points – the realization of the unity of mankind ...  

This attitude permeated the outposts of Empire and expressed itself in London through massive imperial institutions and seats of culture – the National History Museum, Science Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum and Albert Hall. They, in their turn, had been funded by the success of the Great Exhibition of 1851, which had showcased the diversity of the British Empire and her technological advancement. This was no idle, gentlemanly pursuit of knowledge, but a self-defining and self-reinforcing activity of conquest – first physical and then intellectual – of the landscape in which the outposts of empire found themselves. By cataloguing and categorising the world, differences could be assimilated – crowded into showcases or captured in formaldehyde – and would form the basis of a captivity of culture that underpinned the Empire’s assumption of superiority. This self-conscious self-confidence would create its own self-fulfilling unity. The colonists were the progenitors and the paragons of Empire – they delineated the boundaries of polite taste as they rode over foreign lands; they harnessed the lines of maps and surveyors to conquer the minutiae of other cultures; they were civilisers in the face of wildness and wilderness, and their land, no matter how far distant from Britain, would express and enhance the Empire.

If Perth, in a new century, was still depicted as a romantic paradise in views from Mount Eliza, it would also be the recipient of fine new civic buildings. The Museum and Art Gallery were miniature versions of those in England, as was envisaged for the Government Buildings. Reflecting its new turn-of-the-century importance and prosperity, relocation of the governmental functions of Saint George’s Terrace would allow a new civic heart – a redefined ‘Pall Mall’ to the north that would enable the development of a commercial precinct to the south. The revised
scheme would enable Russell Square to be upgraded as a formal park, with an opera house to the south. The whole would be punctuated by fine civic buildings displaying a buoyant architectural verticality provided by spires, towers and obelisks. The city would have Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square and Admiralty Arch all rolled into one. It would, at last, be joined seamlessly to its northern suburbs and ‘by such means Perth could be transformed into a beautiful city, made worthy of the magnificent site which it had the privilege of occupying’. The scheme did not proceed. Saint George’s Terrace retained its dominant role and the central city its linear development, isolated from expansion outward.

**TETHERED STILL?**

Whither Perth? Is it ‘Dullsville’ as chastised, Cinderella as lampooned or merely a sleepy hollow in a new millennium, still bathed in its early nineteenth-century pre-capitalist similitude?

With nascent bravado, Perth struggles with its identity. Depicted as an indolent and callow youth, Perth is in fact older than Melbourne, with which it is so unfavourably compared – Melbourne, the Australian embodiment of the gloriously self-conscious period of imperialism, rampant in its gold-boom architecture and redolent with the then newly defined Australian ethos of urban life.

The reality of being the most isolated capital city in the world sits heavily on the city’s shoulders – there is an element of self-doubt about its capacity to be an interesting and dynamic centre, notwithstanding being the Asian gateway to Australia. Despite its prettiness, and perhaps because of it, Perth has an unease with itself. A disbelief as to the validity of Perth as a capital city echoes the words of a disappointed visitor in 1829 who, after extolling the beauty of Perth’s situation, lamented that ‘so palpable and unpardonable a delusion is not to be met with in the whole annals of Gullism’.

The establishment of Perth and its quasi-entrepreneurial but constrained beginnings has left a curious stamp on the capital that creates an ongoing tension between buoyant enthusiasm and a restrictive and controlling governance. The fractured management of the centre of the city – anomalous in a capital – is a lasting legacy of imperialism. Tethered to the past, where terms of engagement with the landscape and the economy were dictated or harnessed by a far-distant power, Perth still acts as if it is waiting for instructions from the Colonial Office – waiting to be given permission to grow and develop, waiting to breathe (Figures 18, 19). The tether is cut, but Perth still hankers for the strong hand of control, finding increasingly its reference points for culture from America as it simultaneously sells its future to China and India.

Modern Perth’s attitudes to city form, its institutions, its regulation and its use are firmly rooted in its past. From its founding by a member of the British military, who saw potential in the colony, to the decision to annex and colonise the land, this Antipodean enterprise was not be independent of the constraints of Empire. From Stirling’s initial selection of the location, with its freshwater swamps as an aquatic resource and potential defensive barrier, the site of Perth was a resource to be used within a particular and specialised context –to be of benefit not only to the colony but by extension to the Empire. Its isolation, vulnerability and indifferent early success only served to reinforce its dependence on the Colonial Office and its purse strings, most obviously through the introduction of convict labour. In 1850, when convicts arrived at the colony’s request, it became the last British colony to be so disposed. Thus, Perth would be both
first and last – first to be settled as a free colony; last to receive convicts. The tension between freedom and entrepreneurial spirit and an authoritarian administration is one that Perth still struggles to reconcile.94

There is an abiding stillness and sterility in the centre of Perth, brought about by a mid-twentieth-century policy to remove residential quarters from the city. This was in response to a modernist planning paradigm that the city should be for commerce and government only – a special administrative centre, surrounded by suburbs from which the workers would commute. Although a twentieth-century concept, and derived from different sources, the result of the planning is surprisingly similar to the pre-capitalist cosmic grid that Perth exemplifies.

Saint George’s Terrace is still the ‘best’ street in town and the address to which fledgling entrepreneurial enterprise aspires. The impact of the ‘new’ convict-built Barracks at the end of the Terrace in 1863 lingers still. Parliament House is sited at the western end of the Terrace, on the high land that forms the northern flank of Mount Eliza. This building, wherein sit the representatives of the State, nevertheless gazes down on the Terrace through the prism of the former barracks gatehouse. It is a fitting image – the striving, successful commercial district overlooked by the people’s representatives; their gaze in turn constrained by the remnants of imperialism in its most strident form – convictism.
The central ‘B’ square retains the most important colonial buildings in central Perth; Government House is adjacent on the southern side of the Terrace and the eastern edge of the square, its lower gardens resting at the original foreshore; the convict-built Town Hall has recently undergone a multi-million-dollar refurbishment. Few, looking at the Old Treasury Buildings and Titles Office and Saint George’s Cathedral in the centre of the city understand their significance, although they are the finest government buildings. Debate as to the future uses of the buildings continues to rage in Perth for, although empty since the early 1990s, there is reluctance to convert them to a use other than governmental. Plans, thwarted as recently as 2003, to refurbish them for the return of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet and the Treasury have resulted in hiatus. Alternative proposals range from private hotel to apartments, and the Titles building is proposed to be converted to the City of Perth Public Library.

The ongoing debate and lack of action highlight the extent to which Perth subconsciously clings to its past and former ways of doing – unable to break free of the imperial thinking that determined the function of the site. Recent refurbishment of the convict-built Town Hall has not resulted in a vibrant community engagement with the building, even though it is sited at the eastern end of the city’s busiest shopping mall. The building stands somewhat awkwardly in the urban fabric – a medieval-styled remnant of an English past, flanked to the south and east by the Government Buildings and Saint George’s Cathedral. To its south, the exclusive Weld Club and Government House mark the edge of commercial activities in the city. From Barrack Street...

Figure 19: The same view in 2007, showing a remarkably similar streetscape to that of 138 years before. Photograph by A Ednie-Brown, 2007, D07-2069. Reproduced with permission.
east, the city shows an indifference to retail, tapering away rapidly in the half city block between Barrack and Pier and all but disappearing, before re-emerging at the Perth Mint and straggling to the shopping area surrounding the East Perth post office. The area is characterised by a lack of commercial activity in both the Terrace area and the streets behind, which are, characteristically, institutional or service based in nature – a legacy from its 1829 planning.

Even the much-vaunted Esplanade at the foreshore is reminiscent of the archetypal village green – a footstool to the bastions of power and privilege. Its function, as the place to commemorate ANZAC Day, ensconces this tradition in the Perth psyche to the irritation of planners and architects, who perceive it to be wasted space and conceive of joining the city to the river by extending the constructed environment southwards. The reluctance with which Perth people have entertained the idea of any redevelopment of the area is indicative of the pervasive influence of how the city should look and function – an idyllic but passive setting for the buildings of the city, above the basin of the river.

Although the riverside bazaar area reduced in importance as river transport decreased, Perth is still characterised by a shopping area clustered around the transport, represented now by the railway, with little integration into the rest of the town – effectively a new bazaar area. Ironically, a despised new Convention Centre – a heavily promoted tool for bringing trade and commerce to the city – has been situated in the area of the original bazaar, despite modern town-planning credos that a closer and more active connection of the city to its riverine environment would be preferable. Lacking engagement with the river in any active way, modern Perth turns its back and faces expectantly northward to the railway station, on the site of the former swamps (Figure 20). Over the railway line, the northern area of central Perth – the entertainment area of Northbridge – both stands as an area of difference in the city and seeks to connect with it.

Figure 20: Perceived as an impediment to future growth – the railway on the site of the former swamps.

The city is constantly encouraged to jump the wedge of land that constrains its centre from its northward expansion, unaware that this constraint was a conscious limit on the expansion of the capital by virtue of predating capitalist expansion for its own sake. Stirling’s selection of the site and its relationship to its geography saw the swamplands as benefit, protection and part of the capital’s distinctive form, not as impediment. Subsequent absorption of the swamps exemplified the paradigm of nature as tool for man, just as they had previously provided a defendable site for an outpost of Empire. Changes to the town plan prevented Stirling Street becoming a
major boulevard northward, but had it done so it would have terminated at the swamps as a water feature, thus retaining their distinctive boundary to the town.

Divided from the city by the area of former swamps, those who enter the current debate about sinking the railway discuss the land they occupied, unaware of their former nature. While the grid subconsciously acknowledges their importance, when discussion turns to parks, there is a lack of engagement with Russell Square as a potential inner-city park of note, despite it being closest to the centre.

The characteristics of the city, which irk those modern commentators who lambaste the lack of development on the foreshore and of seamless connection to the north, also give it graciousness. Its cradle is the Esplanade, with the circle of the river at its feet; the wedge of land to the north, the massive bulk of Mount Eliza to the west and the curve of the river to the east differentiating it from the sprawling suburbs at its perimeter.

Perth, reposing within its Arcadian setting, bathed in shimmering sunlight, settles reluctantly into the twenty-first century, still tethered by its past; its dreams moderated by the reality of its establishment and its picturesqueness beholden to its pre-capitalist form.

The imperialism that influenced Perth was preter-globalism – self-conscious negation of difference while simultaneously absorbing the influences of others. The Empire was cohesive and integrated but not homogenous. Its strength lay in its capacity to absorb and ameliorate difference by imposing its own culture over its colonies. Like an amoeba the Empire engulfed all, cannibalising the conquered; redefining reality for the conquered land.

Perth was part of the Empire and evinces, most clearly, its impress still.

ENDNOTES


4 Battye, *The Cyclopaedia of Western Australia*: 88.


9 J Locke. *Two Treatises on Government*, ch. 5.
Locke. *Two Treatises on Government*, ch. 16.

In the absence of documented land-holding arrangements and visible agricultural pursuits, the use by Aboriginal people was considered non-existent. *Terra nullius*, literally ‘empty land’, was used as a justification for settlement of Aboriginal land by colonists.

The concept of *terra nullius* may have been reinforced because early explorers travelling with Aboriginal guides were often led along the intermediate areas *between* tribal boundaries, where explorers saw few people and so thought the land completely unoccupied; see P Carter. 1987. *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History*. London: Faber and Faber.


*Historical Records of Australia* III: 580. He is describing what became known as Tea Tree Lagoon, west of Clauses Creek – later Claise Creek in the 1833 Arrowsmith map and then known as Claise Brook, Claisebrook and Claisebrook Inlet, now roughly the site of the Haig Park development in East Perth.

*Historical Records of Australia* III: 580. Both Frazer and Stirling would have been familiar with the draining of the fens of England, a new program of which had commenced in 1821 using steam engines.


Colonial Secretary’s Office, Outward Correspondence, 25 August 1829, 49/1: 40–42, item 129, State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA).


Diary of proceedings of the Surveying Department, 4, 9 September 1829, Department of Lands and Surveys, AN3. 5000/222, SROWA.

‘A return of all assignments of town allotments in the several towns of Western Australia from the commencement of the Colony up to the 20th day of July 1832; accompanied by plans and conditions of tenure’, Land and Surveys Red Books, no. 683, vol. 6, 1829–1834, consignment 5000, Department of Lands and Surveys, SROWA; Pitt Morison, ‘Settlement and development’: 13.


Girouard, *Cities & People*: 251.

Girouard, *Cities & People*: ch. 11.


‘A return of all assignments of town allotments’, Department of Lands and Surveys, 20 July 1832.


Perth was not alone in this transference of old names to new land. Sydney had Pitt and Castlereagh and George, and Hobart referenced Argyle, Melbourne and Bathurst to underpin the importance of the imperial realm. Later, Melbourne would have King, George, Queen and Elizabeth – in a simplified expression of imperialism – perhaps more fitting for a colony established in response to civil disobedience regarding land occupation.


Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay*: 182.

King William Street was later shortened, through common usage, to William Street. W E Bold. 1939. ‘Perth: the first hundred years’. *Early Days* (Royal Western Australian Historical Society) 3 (2): 30.

Lamb Street was changed in the 1850s to honour Aberdeen.


There was a large annual celebration for many years to commemorate the victory at the Battle of Trafalgar.
Both men were a product of Empire. William Riddell Birdwood, later first Baron Birdwood of Anzac, was born in India in 1865, son of a member of the Indian Civil Service; Haig had served in the Mahdist and South African wars.

In 1911, in a delightful reversal, the Crystal Palace buildings displayed models of the parliament houses of the various colonies of the Empire and Commonwealth.

Part of the City of Perth Shewing the New town Lots H 21, 22, 49, 50, 51, 52 & 53 created near the site for the Pensioner Barracks, the details in Red being abolished. 10 February 1863. Consignment 3850 item 38d, Department of Lands and Surveys, SROWA.

Plan of the Town of Perth as marked out on the grounds in 1845. 22 June 1845. Copy of Perth Map 18E, consignment 3868 item 297, SROWA. The only other square in central Perth, Weld Square, is a square en passant and has never been much more than a garden park – although named after Governor Weld, as is Perth's most exclusive gentlemen's club.


Inquirer, 2 August 1854, quoting the Government Gazette notice of the day before.


Bold, ‘Perth – The First Hundred Years’: 3.


‘Corroboree’, Inquirer, 23 January 1850.


Statham, ‘Swan River Colony’: 183.


Kostof, The City Shaped: 121.


St George’s Church, the precursor to the cathedral, was also constructed on the central square in 1841, but in the Classic Revival style.

Also known as Victorian Free Gothic. See Apperly et al., A Pictorial Guide: 82–85.

The colony obtained partially representative government in 1870, representative government in 1879 and responsible government in 1890.

Also referred to as Victorian Second Empire. See Apperly et al., A Pictorial Guide: 68–69.


‘Perth as it should be’, lecture by G T Poole, *West Australian*, 26 August 1911.


The orderly, geometric annexation of the land conceived in Downing Street has remnants in the homogenised and centralist approach to the differing landscapes of a continent that is implemented by Canberra, the national capital, in the disguise of federalism.


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