

Gone Camping by Bill Garner July

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IT IS CURIOUS THAT camping has been overlooked as a significant part of our history. Almost no attention has been paid to it. I am not aware of any histories of camping in Australia. A cursory check of the State Library catalogue reveals directories of camping grounds and catalogs of camping equipment and seasonal articles in the weekend magazines, but no serious studies-not even a coffee-table book.

Yet camping has powerful mythological importance for Australians. It is a relationship to place that spans the settlement divide. Camping has been a common human activity for a very long time. Europeans may have brought tents to Australia but they did not bring camping. The Aborigines are great campers. From their arrival, Europeans found it natural to refer to Aboriginal 'camps'. The middens along the coast tell us how they moved from one good spot to another, visiting the same sites year after year. And the camper's eye notes what well-chosen sites they are: near the beach but out of the wind; near a creek but sheltered behind the dunes. Exactly the sort of spots that came to be prized by other campers until they too were driven back from the foreshores by the same conniving partnership of government and land-grabber.

You query the term 'campers' to describe Aborigines, fearing that it may be derogatory? Then you are not a camper. Camping is a tradition indigenous and non-indigenous share without having to anguish about it. It is a love of sitting down on a spot for a while. The Aborigines would arrive at a spot they knew from last year (and the year before that and the year before that), knock up a bark lean-to, light a fire and throw on a feed. Exactly as campers do now with aluminium, canvas and a gas bottle. And, given the chance, we choose-the same sort of spots to pitch our camps. We do this because our parents showed us where and how to do it. The lore of camping is sustained by oral, not written, tradition. Technological innovations cannot hide the fact that the activity itself has not changed over thousands of years. Nomads, gypsies, travellers, campers-we all sustain this living link to the pre-settlement period. Making a temporary camp somewhere, then moving on, still remains the

best way to know this or any country.

When anyone landed here they camped. The Buginese camped while they fished for sea slug. The Portuguese and the Dutch camped (but didn't choose good spots). And when the British arrived they camped too in rows, with flags. Constructed of canvas and rope and wooden poles, these tents were made of the same elements as the sailing ships by which they came. Today, the pitches may have morphed into domes and the rope into synthetic fibre, but tents are still very much with us. We like to have one. How many million tents would there be in Australia? What family does not have one tucked away in the garage or under the house? For there is a handed-down wisdom: we'll be all right so long as we have a tent. Don't worry about Y2K: if the worst comes to the worst, we can always camp out.

Explorers carried tents. They were followed by the squatters and settlers whose first dwelling was almost invariably a tent. When gold was discovered, tent cities sprang up. These were our greatest-ever gatherings of campers. S.T. Gill's drawings illustrate how ubiquitous were the little domestic tents, but there were also tent stores, tent hotels, tent courthouses and tent theatres. It was tent everything. And on the other side of the creek, the Chinese camped in tents too. Even our artists camped. Pictures of tents hang in our national collections. You cannot think visually about Australian history without seeing camps and tents.

When we felt the need to prove ourselves in war we sent campers. We sent campers to the Crimea and campers to the Boer War. And when the big one came in 1914 we created vast canvas encampments at Broadmeadows and then packed them up and took them with us to Egypt. At Heliopolis there were thousands of AIF tents immaculately laid out within sight of the Pyramids. We took tents to Gallipoli. And by God we wished we'd had them at Ypres when the trenches were full of freezing water.

Camping is central to the Australian military experience. Being in the field is called being 'under canvas'. War is more about camping than about killing. We were still camping in Korea and Vietnam: The heavy-duck, centre-poled, wooden-floored army tent remains about as solid a tent as you can get. You can run up one side and down the other without causing the slightest damage. It's the brick-veneer of tents. In the housing shortage after the Second World

War, people bought them as first homes.

The arrival of the car ushered in the period of the auto-tent. This developed into an annual migration of a large part of the population from suburban villas to the seaside. By the 1950s, camping was the chosen form of holiday-making for most Australians.

Campers took over all the most desirable foreshores of the eastern coast. Inland, tents were strung like canvas pearls along the banks of every decent river.

The Golden Years of camping lasted until the late 1960s. This was camping by choice rather than necessity. Although there were designated camp grounds, usually administered by local shires, many people preferred to find a quiet little spot of their own, away from everyone else. You could camp almost anywhere. The law was lax, or rather, relaxed. The beach side of the coastal roads belonged almost exclusively to the campers. You won't find many tents there now. Only 'No Camping' signs.

But Australians are a camping people. It's in the blood. When I set out as a 22-yearold to cross Asia to Europe on the overland trail, I carried a tent (as well as a billy, a frying pan, flour and salt). That was in 1966, not 1866. I carried my house on my back. I slept out. I was self-sufficient. That seems quaint today, but once it guaranteed survival.

Campers pride themselves on getting by with as little as possible. This is not a fashionable attitude.

Camping is for getting on the cheap what others pay for. That is heresy in a world that says the best should be reserved for those who can pay the most. And even though it is now possible to support your camp with all sorts of clever gas appliances, the basic experience of camping remains that of doing without. For tens of thousands of Australians it is an annual pilgrimage to celebrate a simpler life.

It goes beyond proving that you can survive without electricity. Camping connects you directly with the earth and the sky, the vegetation, the animals and especially the birds: The strength of the wind; the power of the waves; they overwhelm you. You understand the scale of things and your own place. Camping is a test of endurance. You can't avoid the elements. 'Going inside' a tent is no escape. You have to tough it out. But if you want to know this land, experience it, there is no better way. When you camp you live in the dirt, in the rain, in the sun.

But camping is unfashionable in government circles. It resonates too much with the old values. For above

all it is a profoundly egalitarian experience. It is a greater leveller than spectator sport and it remains staunchly amateur. There are no corporate boxes (although they're working on that). While there are classes among campers, they reflect camping skills and not wealth. The rich do not necessarily have the best gear and those with the best gear are not necessarily good campers. Good campers are those who camp well, using what they have. In campgrounds everyone is always on view. A popular pastime is walking along the lines looking into other people's camps and acknowledging particularly elegant or ingenious set-ups. The only fences here are windbreaks made of hessian. This lack of privacy is another thing non-campers find abhorrent. It is also why privatisation is inimical to camping. Camping is a public, communal activity where 'privacy' is respected by keeping your radio down, not by hiding your bodily functions. The great gathering place is still the public bathnow known as the shower block. Improvisation is particularly admired by campers. Camping is one of the few activities where skill with a piece of fencing wire, or similar, is still appreciated. If this seems a compendium of old Australian virtues, it is not surprising. Camping sustains the old culture. Camping lore is passed down from hand to hand, generation to generation. Skills and tools are shared. People keep an eye out for one another's stuff. Children wander freely in next door and are rewarded with a biscuit. Above all, campgrounds exhibit every known form of the extended family, gathered in an atmosphere of kindly tolerance.

And yet for some years simple family camping-this quintessential Australian experience-has been coming under sustained attack. We have been driven back from the beach side of the road. We have been corralled into reservations. They won't let us have our dogs. Sound familiar? Campers are being pushed away from the coast for the same reasons as were the Aborigines. We are in the way of progress.

We mess up the view. Our primitive encampments 'greedily' exclude those who want to enjoy the scenery through picture windows. Quite simply, we have found ourselves in the way of profit.

Camping is becoming an endangered activity. It should be protected. It is important for the culture. But the family camping holiday does not sit comfortably with the tourist industry because camping is about minimising economic activity rather than maximising

it. The last thing most campers want is more *service*. It's all about doing it yourself-another of these old Australian values.

Now the Victorian Government wants to force the shires to sell off their campgrounds to entrepreneurs who will 'make better use of them', meaning that they want to extend upmarket accommodation at the expense of campers. This is a violation of the whole tradition of camping on public land that has been a continuous part of our national culture not only recreationally but also historically and spiritually. So far this battle has been joined mainly with respect to high-profile places such as Wilson's Promontory. But for many years campers have been feeling the squeeze all over the state. Privatisation of publicly owned campgrounds is the last stage of this process. The plan has been drawn up. But this is not simply about certain places. There is something else at stake. How is it, that those in power seem to have missed the historical and cultural significance of this simple, inexpensive, inclusive, very Australian activity? Perhaps it is because no-one has put it in these terms. Or perhaps it is because it is so cheap. In dollar land, nothing cheap is valuable. There is an ideological mote in the government eye that seems to prevent it from seeing the cultural importance of camping. It may be true that there is a relatively small economic advantage to be extracted from it compared with farming tourists. Family camping is essentially a domestic activity. It is not marketable to the international trade. In fact, as at The Prom, it is seen to get in the way of potential business by taking up valuable space. Even more distressing may be the suspicion that campers actually seek to subtract financial value in order to add spiritual value. Camping links us both to our ancestors and to the land. It is time to defend it as a major culture form in its own right. *Bill Garner*