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The Conservation Ethic in the Establishment of Yellowstone and Royal National Parks

Kim Allen Scott

The brief story appearing in the March 28, 1879, issue of the *Sydney Morning Herald* irritated Sir John Robertson and motivated him to reach for his pen and stationery. The 51-year-old parliamentarian for New South Wales had often faced harsh criticism in Australia’s largest daily newspaper, but today’s complimentary column apparently vexed him as much as the many hostile notices he had received over his political career. On first glance, it seems the news story would be one to have delighted Robertson: a glowing report lauding his efforts to establish Australia’s first national park.1 “The credit of the idea of dedicating a large tract of land for such a purpose,” the *Herald* reported, “is principally due to Sir John Robertson, who has thought of the project for years.”2 Perhaps Robertson felt that credit for the idea belonged to more people than himself, but concern about alienating a political ally may also have caused him to send a note of explanation to the colony’s premier, Sir Henry Parkes. “I am much annoyed at finding that my name is so prominently put forward for special mention in the *Herald* in connection with the National Park,” Robertson scribbled.

“This kind of thing, if worthy of approval, should go to the good of the whole government, and not to any individual.”3

The origin of the idea that led to setting aside the land known today as Royal National Park has been accurately described as “murky,” suggesting a possible parallel with the history of Yellowstone National Park, which was established in 1872.4 (Until it took on the name “Royal National Park” after the Queen’s visit in 1954, it was called simply “the National Park,” as was Yellowstone during the first months of its existence.) Despite his protests to the contrary, Sir John Robertson appears to have been the main advocate for the park idea, and without an extensive record of early exploration and discussion of reserving a wilderness tract for recreation, a comparison of its development in Australia with that in Yellowstone depends partly on the documentation left by Robertson. In the United States, an ample historical record shows an abiding wonderment of the Yellowstone country that caused early explorers to express a desire to preserve it, and an enduring myth has arisen over the years regarding their initial resolution to do so. When considering the
establishment of Royal National Park, did Sir John Robertson share some of the same ideals expressed by those who argued for the setting aside of Yellowstone?

Historians Melissa Harper and Richard White, who have identified key differences in the American and Australian experiences, claim that studies emphasizing the inadequacy of Royal's management standards in comparison to Yellowstone's have contributed to the obscurity of the Australian park's origin. This emphasis by some writers on park management shortcomings has resulted in the implication that conservation concerns played little or no role in New South Wales during the 1880s when the development of Royal National Park began. The following brief comparison of Royal and Yellowstone national parks helps illustrate Harper's and White's conclusions by demonstrating the existence of a similar desire to maintain a natural landscape by withdrawing two very different places from private ownership.

Reports from early explorations

Of course, the credit for the “discovery” of both Yellowstone and Royal belongs to the indigenous people who populated Australia and North America long before the arrival of European settlers. In Australia, that settlement began in 1788 when the first fleet of convict ships sent from England arrived at Botany Bay on the continent’s southeast coast. Most of the initial European colonists were prisoners and not free to do any exploring beyond the environs of the settlement at Sydney, situated at Port Jackson just to the north of Botany Bay; but gradually free settlers and adventurous sailors set out to investigate more of the southern coastline. In 1795 Henry Hacking, a pilot from a visiting ship, journeyed south from Sydney on a kangaroo hunt and became the first to locate a small, shallow bay south of Botany. His name was given to Port Hacking and the river which fed into it from the high tablelands beyond.

The first recorded reconnaissance of Port Hacking occurred in March 1796, when Matthew Flinders and George Bass, two British naval officers, sailed from Sydney in the Tom Thumb, a minuscule open boat. They wanted to investigate Hacking’s discovery and produce an accurate map of the coastline beyond, but the Tom Thumb proved woefully inadequate to deal with the rough surf and forced the exploring party to sleep in the boat many nights rather than risk a landing. Having spent two days of their journey exploring Port Hacking, they were unimpressed. “Finding the port very shoal,” wrote Flinders, “and but few places in it fit for shipping, we did not think it worth while expending much time about.” Nothing along the plateau that rose above the bay looked particularly interesting to the men, and they ventured no further inland than a camp on the northern point of the inlet.

The Flinders and Bass report on Port Hacking reinforces the notion that the land that became Royal National Park had no outstanding features to convince anyone to preserve it from settlement. This differs greatly from the early record of Yellowstone, where the draw of the land became apparent from the earliest sightings. The first known Euro-American to see Yellowstone was John Colter, a former member of the Lewis and Clark expedition who passed through the area in 1807. Colter left no written record of his observations, nor did most of the fur trappers who wandered the area during the next few decades, but the incredible geothermal features, along with the gigantic expanse of Yellowstone Lake, resulted in an oral tradition that fed the curiosity of other adventurous souls to see the place for themselves.

Starting in 1869 three consecutive expeditions over the course of as many years provided authoritative reports that helped convince the US government to have the area removed from settlement consideration. During the months leading up to the act designating Yellowstone as a national park, Nathaniel Langford, Cornelius Hedges, and others published articles that advocated setting Yellowstone aside, but not entirely due to concerns over preserving its natural state. The statute that established Yellowstone declared it a “pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people,” while the New South Wales Government Gazette reported on the land withdrawn for a “national park” with a lengthy legal description of its initial grant of 18,000 acres...
and the names of the men chosen for membership on the board of trustees. Language suggesting that Robertson had some familiarity with the Yellowstone Park Act appears only in the trustees’ first minute book, which refers to “securing a suitable area, as to extent and situation, etc., for the use and enjoyment of the people of New South Wales.”

**Parks as recreational amenities**

It would be natural to assume that the common heritage of English settlers and the idea of establishing public areas or “commons” for the recreation of all citizens would have resulted in a parallel development of a park idea in Australia and America during the nineteenth century, and a superficial examination of the record reinforces that assumption. In 1788, Sir Arthur Phillip, the first governor of New South Wales, appropriated a considerable tract of land adjacent to Sydney as his private “Domain.” In 1810, Governor Lachlan Macquarie divided the Domain into a public walking area (Hyde Park) and a more exclusive botanical garden with restricted access. Macquarie had a road built through the garden by 1816, but continued to keep out “idle and profligate persons” in favor of recreational use by more respectable classes. By 1831, however, Sydney’s Royal Botanic Gardens was a reserve open to the general public.

Similarly, New York City authorities purchased extensive acreage near the metropolis in 1851 and hired landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead to design Central Park. As with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Central Park evolved into a place for the enjoyment of ordinary citizens, but the concept of preserving the area in a natural state did not enter into the planning. In both cases, the land was transformed for its perceived enhancement, with artificial lakes and walkways in Central Park and the cultivation of non-native plants and trees in the Botanic Gardens. If anyone saw a reason to maintain these areas in a “wild” state, planners on both continents ignored their concerns in an enthusiastic attempt to create a pleasing ground of civilized attractions.

Of course the idea to reserve a large tract of land on a national scale for recreation is very different from planning and developing an urban park, and here is where the American and Australian models begin to differ significantly. Harper and White have concluded that the need of Australian citizens, especially those in the growing urban congestion of Sydney and its suburbs, put the emphasis on “not what the park contained, but…what the people needed in the way of healthy recreation. In some sense, any large undeveloped tract of land would have done.” This thesis identifies an inspiration for the establishment of Royal National Park that drew from urban parks in London and New York rather than Yellowstone.

Regardless of whether the urge to preserve the parks came from the needs of the people or the call of the wilderness, modern writers have bemoaned the utilitarian management practices that characterized both Yellowstone’s and Royal’s past. For example, essays condemning the National Park Service’s eradication of the wolf in Yellowstone during the 1930s formed part of the argument used for reintroduction of the species in the 1990s. Likewise, many published descriptions of Royal National Park’s custodianship come to conclusions similar to a guidebook’s statement that “the original concept of what a national park should be like had little in common with modern conservation principles.” The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Australia states, “The reasons for establishing these early parks would satisfy few conservationists today. They existed to provide social and recreational amenities, with little basis in moral values or wilderness concepts.”

There is ample evidence to bolster such statements. In Yellowstone, the struggle to protect the land’s geothermal features and wildlife had an uneven beginning. Congress did not allocate any money specifically for Yellowstone’s protection, and although the legislation that established the park called for the “preservation” of its “wonders” and their “retention in their natural condition,” those mandates were often ignored. The park’s first superintendent, Nathaniel Langford, bemoaned tourist poaching and vandalism, but advocated leasing saw mills in Yellowstone because “a large portion of the park is covered with a heavy growth of pine timber, fit only for manufacture into lumber.” Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delano set forth five rules to protect the park when it was established, but these were not publicized until 1877 and even modest enforcement of them was
not possible until the US Army took over park administration in 1886. Only decades later did a wilderness appreciation ethic begin to achieve mature expression in the United States in the writings of such luminaries as John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt.

**Development of a conservation ethic**

Although Australia does not appear to have enjoyed as robust a conservation philosophy as came to fruition in the United States after the turn of the century, Sir John Robertson’s actions demonstrate that the beginnings of such an ethic did exist in the 1870s and 1880s. Robertson was born in 1816, the son of a London watchmaker who received a huge grant of crown lands in New South Wales and moved his family there in 1822. Robertson early aligned himself with the interests of the country’s “squatters,” pastoral settlers who claimed vast tracts of outback countryside simply by their occupation and subsequent “improvement” of the land for grazing. When he started his political career, however, Robertson began championing the cause of “selectors,” small farmers whose interests lay in breaking up the holdings of the squatters by a fair government distribution process. His interest in land reform became his consistent theme in colonial government service.

Robertson rose to serve as premier (equivalent to the office of prime minister) of the New South Wales parliament five times. This chief executive duty alternated with his assignment to lesser posts during periodic elections that recalled sitting governments, and at the time of Royal National Park’s founding in 1879 Robertson was vice president of the executive council under a coalition regime that he shared with the premier, Sir Henry Parkes. Since one of Robertson’s governmental demotions in the 1860s resulted from the hostility of the selector class to his proposal reserving a tract of crown land for a water development project, he seemed to have reason to avoid a plan to set aside part of the country for a park. Nevertheless, Robertson enthusiastically pushed for the establishment of Royal National Park in early 1879, making his case palatable to the selector constituency primarily because the tract had little or no potential for small farms. A similar argument was made for Yellowstone. At the time the establishment of Yellowstone and Royal as national parks was being considered, significant mineral deposits had not been discovered in either area, and while Yellowstone’s altitude made it undesirable for crops or livestock grazing, the heavily timbered and rugged terrain of Royal discouraged agricultural interests.

Development for the accommodation of tourists began slowly after the establishment of both Yellowstone and Royal, but differed slightly in objectives. While adequate roads for access to visual attractions consumed the limited allocations that eventually came to Yellowstone, road development took place immediately at Royal with specifically directed government funds, and concurrent with work to transform some acreage into a venue more like Sydney’s Botanic Gardens. Contracts were offered for “grubbing and clearing” specific parcels and the construction of a dam below the confluence of the Hacking River and Kangaroo Creek to ensure that their upper reaches would henceforth contain fresh water. The working camp near the dam became the site of extensive logging, grass planting, and the introduction of quail and freshwater fish such as trout and salmon. Eventually the camp would be named Audley and become the park headquarters with boat sheds, a guest house, and other amenities.

By instigating, overseeing, and financing such activities, Robertson and his fellow trustees appeared to have no more interest in preserving the natural landscape at Royal National Park than their predecessors had when developing Sydney’s Domain and Botanic Gardens. However, several references within the trustees’ minutes suggest otherwise. For example, on February 23, 1880, less than a year after the park’s founding, the trustees hired two rangers to patrol the park in order to report to the secretary “any unauthorized interference with the timber, indigenous and other plants, etc.…to specifically see that oyster shells, etc., are not removed without proper authority.” Obviously the trustees were concerned with the natural landscape or they would not have specified “indigenous” flora nor paid attention to anything as minute as harvesting oyster shells from the park’s northern beaches. In an 1883 report to members of parliament, Robertson mentioned the hiring of a caretaker and two rangers to “prevent removal from the Park or destruction of the plants, palms, tree ferns, Christmas bushes, etc., which are indigenous and for preventing destruction or injury of game.”
A plant-poaching incident

Perhaps the strongest evidence of Robertson's inclination for preserving the natural landscape came in an incident several years later. On Good Friday, April 3, 1885, Llewellyn Charles Russell Jones started out from his home in Marrickville to visit Royal National Park with several friends in a spacious horse-drawn buggy. A wealthy attorney and chairman of the Mont de Peite Bank of New South Wales, Jones had recently completed a world tour and enjoyed a public reputation that would eventually carry him to a successful career as a member of the New South Wales parliament. Jones and his party arrived at the main camp near the dam on the Hacking River at midday and engaged John Dodds, the custodian of the boat franchise, to row them about two miles up the river. When Jones mentioned that he intended to dig up some plants for his home, Dodds pointed out that doing so would violate the park rules.

That seems to be the extent of the boatman's courage in dealing with such a powerful man as Jones. Dodds landed the boat as directed in a remote part of the forest where Jones and his friends got out, walked into the bush a little way, and then returned in an hour or so with a large tree fern, some rock lilies, and a few staghorn ferns. They brought the plants back to the main camp, where they apparently spent the night without interference from any of the park employees who shared the site with them. Edward Coulson, who was the overseer of the land clearing crew, and four laborers saw Jones and his friends load the plants onto his buggy on Saturday morning to begin the long ride back to Sydney with their trophies, the tree fern sticking conspicuously out from the rear of the vehicle.18

Although he may have felt too intimidated by Jones to say anything before the attorney left, Coulson made his way to Summerhill and reported the incident at the home of William Freeman, the secretary of the park's board of trustees. Freeman in turn contacted Sir John Robertson, who shared none of the workmen's timidity in dealing with Jones. Robertson directed Freeman to gather testimony from anyone who may have witnessed the Jones theft. For days afterwards, Freeman gathered statements from Coulson, Dodds, all of the laborers at the main camp, two contractors working along the Sydney road who had seen Jones pass by on the way back to town, and Robert Allars, the toll collector for the cable ferry at Georges River that Jones used to return to Marrickville.19 It seemed like an airtight case, and Robertson planned to present it at the May 5th meeting of the trustees for a vote to bring charges against Jones in police court. Unfortunately for Robertson's plans, however, the meeting considered several other items on the agenda first, and Robertson was called away to another engagement before the remaining members brought the Jones case up for discussion.

For some unexplained reason, the board briefly considered all of the painstakingly gathered evidence and "in view of the peculiar circumstances, resolved not to take proceedings at police court but rather that the chairman be asked to write to Mr. Jones remonstrating against his conduct." When Robertson discovered what the board had done, he inserted an angry note into the margin of the minute book's page that demanded his protest be entered into the record.20 By then it was too late, and Jones escaped with what can charitably be described as a slap on the wrist. What the "peculiar circumstances" may have been we will never know, but one of the trustees who voted to dismiss the Jones incident was one of his neighbors, Joseph Graham, who owned a Marrickville nursery business.21

While this incident is hardly the stuff of Yellowstone's early struggle against elk poachers and geyser vandals, it does demonstrate that Robertson cared enough about the natural environment of Royal National Park to make a federal case out the filching of a few plants. There had not yet been a concise statement of conservation objectives but, as previously noted, there really wasn't anything published during Yellowstone's first five years either. What the Jones incident provides is a careful listing of every circumstantial mention of preservation concerns that Robertson could find, including contracts for land clearing that specified which trees and shrubs to spare, camping permits issued to transient railway workers in the park that mandated foliage be left alone, and even instructions to road building crews to divert the Hacking River Valley route in several places out of deference to large standing trees. In each of these instances Robertson shows intent as much as statute for conservation and an early conception of wilderness appreciation that future Australians would articulate with more precision.

Statements in the 1893 Official Guide to the National Park of New South Wales and its subsequent editions indicated that the park's trustees appreciated the undeveloped landscape despite their failure to maintain it in that state. During the first 90 years of the park's existence they oversaw the introduction of deer and goats, the complete alteration of the Hacking River's streambed ecology, the establishment of an artillery firing range, and even the leasing of substantial tracts for logging. A public outcry over the latter practice in the 1920s forced the trustees to reverse their agreement with the Metropolitan Coal Company, but they allowed gravel mining to continue well into the 1950s.

Robertson's legacy

A more thorough articulation of environmental protection did not come to Royal National Park until the 1967 passage of the New South Wales National Park and Wildlife Act, which recognized wilderness as a category of land use and transferred management of the park from its board of trustees.
to the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service.22 The park was periodically enlarged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and today it welcomes thousands of Australians who appreciate a 37,000-acre refuge of nature within an increasingly congested coastal area.

Robertson retired from public life in June 1886, partly because of an injury sustained while working in the park, and died in 1891. He received a number of honors for his service to New South Wales over his long career, but his work in establishing Royal National Park has been somewhat overshadowed by his name having been given to a federal electoral division far north of the park and a small town just as far to the south—a town which boasts a sculpture of Australia’s largest potato. Within Royal National Park itself only a small knoll and footpath southwest of Audley bear his name.

Perhaps Robertson wanted it that way. Unlike Nathaniel Langford, who credited his 1870 exploring party with way. Unlike Nathaniel Langford, who credited his 1870 exploring party with

If nothing else, the letter shows a modesty that stands as bright a monument as any that could have been physically erected within the park. Even though he wouldn’t take credit for it, Robertson left a beautiful legacy that modern day caretakers have preserved “for the use and enjoyment of the people of New South Wales.”

Endnotes

1 In 1875, three years after Yellowstone’s founding, the US Government designated Mackinac Island as a national park, but in 1891 it passed into the custodianship of the state of Michigan, making Australia’s Royal National Park the second oldest national park now in existence.


3 Sydeny Morning Herald, March 28, 1879.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.


8 State Records, NSW: National Park Trust (Royal National Park, Audley); NRS 10724, Minute Books of the Board of Trustees, 1875–1875 [9/2200.1] entry of September 25, 1879.


16 State Records, NSW: National Park Trust (Royal National Park, Audley); NRS 10723, Miscellaneous Papers Regarding the Proposed National Park, 1879–1885 [9/2189] report “Alleged Depredations at the National Park by L.C.R. Jones on Good Friday, 3rd April, 1885 and removal of tree fern, etc. by the same person on Saturday, 4th April 1885 from that Park.”

17 Ibid.

18 State Records, NSW: National Park Trust (Royal National Park, Audley); NRS 10724, Minute Books of the Board of Trustees, 1875–1875 [9/2200.1] entry of May 4, 1885.

19 Sands’ Sydney and Suburban Directory (Sydney: J. Sands, 1885).

20 The foundations of the current management philosophy for the park can be found in the 1974 New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Act. The act states that “The purpose of reserving land as a national park is to identify, protect and conserve areas containing outstanding or representative ecosystems, natural or cultural features or landscapes or phenomena that provide opportunities for public appreciation and inspiration and sustainable visitor or tourist use and enjoyment.” The “Organic Act” of August 25, 1916, which pertains to national parks in the United States compares favorably by articulating a purpose “…to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”


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