

# KELLEHERS AUSTRALIA

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## *The life and works of early Australian Surveyors*

Conducting legal work on a Heritage matter will often lead lawyers to focus on unlit corners of this country's history. Pieces of information regarding how we got to where we are, which are often glossed over. A recent Heritage matter lead Kellehers Australia to examine the life and works of early Australian surveyors, who conducted the important task of mapping Colonial cities and regional towns alike. We provide you with a snapshot of what we have learned through our work.

Surveyors were among the first European settlers to arrive in Australia. A Surveyor-General was present on the First Fleet, as well as the first two ships which landed in South Australia. These men were issued with instructions to record observations in a journal that included the country's general appearance, its soil, flora and fauna and the customs and language of local inhabitants<sup>i</sup>

The conditions they worked in were harsh and they embarked on journeys with drays carrying cumbersome surveying and camping equipment, spending months camping out in the bush and mapping the land. A great indication of the physical and mental toll on these men is provided by prominent surveyor William Urquhart in his retirement letter:

*"(T)he state of my health will no longer permit me to perform the duties required of a district surveyor. ... (T)he frequent exposure to wet, heat & cold has rendered me very unfit for the duties required of me as a field officer; at the same time, that the life that I led for upwards of ten (10 years) under canvas in the bush has unfitted me constitutionally for the close confinement and duties of an office life. I find it absolutely necessary that I should retire before my system is broken up altogether." (sic)<sup>ii</sup>.*

Current day surveyors are regulated by the *Surveyors Act 2004*, which superseded the *Surveyors Act 1978*. But the first surveyors were bound by the laws of England.

Operational circulars prepared by early Surveyor-General provide an example of such insight:

*'you will make at least one reserve for a town or village ... (and) will assign to each parish a name, founded on the native appellation of any hill or place therein... (and) as soon as the plans and descriptions ... are prepared, you will transmit them to me, in order that the originals or copies ... may be forwarded to the Government for advertisement for sale...'<sup>iii</sup>*

Consistent with surveying instructions since Elizabethan times, surveyors took local guides to assist them<sup>iv</sup>. Surveyor-General Mitchell's practice reiterated the benefits of using local names:

*'The great convenience of using native names is obvious ... future travelers may verify my map. Whereas new names are of no use in this respect'.<sup>v</sup>*

His instructions to surveying staff required:

*'the native names of as many places as you can in your map'.<sup>vi</sup>*

Furthermore, similar surveying instructions and regulations made journal-keeping a requirement. Major Mitchell's famous 'Australia Felix' emerged from his journal.

*'The land is, in short, open and available in its present state, for all the purposes of civilised man. We traversed it in two directions with heavy carts, meeting no other obstruction than the softness of the rich soil; and in returning, over flowery plains and green hills, fanned by the breezes of early spring. I named this region Australia Felix, the better to distinguish it from the parched deserts of the interior country, where we had wandered so unprofitably and so long.'<sup>vii</sup>*

'Australia Felix' worked as marketing tool for European Settlement in the colonies, but maintains its importance, to this day, as a beautiful description of Victorian and New South Wales native flora and fauna.

Just like Major Mitchell's 'Australia Felix' the maps of early colonial surveyors are more than documents used solely to examine our history. These detailed and beautiful maps, which Kellehers Australia has recently seen, provide essential information relating to modern day location of historically significant landmarks.

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<sup>i</sup> Colonization Commissioners for South Australia to Colonel William Light, Surveyor General for the Province of South Australia, 1836, Letter of Instructions 9 March. Light resigned in 1838, refusing to use less accurate surveying methods and formed a private company, the Land and Survey Office, adjoining his hut. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Light](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Light) accessed 11.4.15

<sup>ii</sup> Ken James, *Provenance: The Journal of the Public Record Office Victoria*, no 8, Sept, 2009, via url <http://prov.vic.gov.au/publications/provenance/provenance2009/william-swan-urquhart> (accessed 27 March 2015)

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid p 62,64

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Shellam, Tiffany, 2009, *Shaking Hands on the Fringe*, University of Western Australia Press, Western Australia, Chapter 7

v Mitchell, T., 1838, *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia, with descriptions of the recently explored region of Australia Felix, and the present colony of New South Wales*, Volumes 1 & 2, T & W Boone, London, page 174, referred to in Birch, T., 2003, Nothing has changed: the making and unmaking of Koori culture, in Grossman, M. (ed.), *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 145-159.

vi Flannery, Tim, 1998, *The Explorers*, Text Publishing, Melbourne.

vii <http://prov.vic.gov.au/publications/provenance/provenance2009/william-swan-urquhart> (accessed 27 March 2015)

viii Mitchell, T.L., 1839, *Three Expeditions into the interior of Eastern Australia*, Boone, London, in *Epic Australian exploration: the role of the Scots*, in Inglis, Alison and Tyron, Patricia, ed., 2013, *For Auld Lang Syne: Images of Scottish Australia From First Fleet to Federation*, Art Gallery of Ballarat, p118.