

THE NEW AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL

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IN days to come a visit to Canberra may degenerate into a commonplace, a matter-of-course stop on the route of the average globe-trotter. H. R. H. the Duke of York will before long place the new capital definitely on the map, and bestow upon it the prominence and popularity usually attendant on royal favour. But such of us as have been honoured with a peep behind the scenes, while the show has been in the making, may congratulate ourselves on having enjoyed a glimpse of a city's evolution from the nothingness of a somewhat bare and treeless countryside to the proud seat of government of a vast island continent. Not so long since, in September 1925 to be exact, in company with a party of Empire journalists bent on learning something of the real Australia, I was privileged to spend a day in Canberra and the surrounding Federal Territory of the same name. It was a memorable visit, and one to which in future years, in the light of the undoubted advancement of the Commonwealth to a position of prominence among the nations of the world, it should be possible to look back with a certain degree of satisfaction.

We had been warned that up among the hills, in which lies cradled the great open site of the new city, it would be chilly, and shortly after leaving Sydney great metal containers filled with hot water were placed in the sleeping compartments of our train to spread a needed warmth. As the night advanced it grew noticeably colder, but our railway hosts had provided plenty of blankets, and it was not until we had to make an early toilet at our destination and turn out in the nippy atmosphere of a chill September morning that we experienced sensations akin to those which travellers encounter in Canada in spring or fall. For Canberra lies 75 miles inland and 1,900 feet above sea level, and is subject, we were informed, to wider variations in temperature than places located on the coast.

It is difficult to express in words the feelings that came over one as the party were motored the mile or more from the little station at the end of the railway to the Hotel Canberra. Years ago I have had somewhat the same sensations when visiting some of the newer cities in Western Canada, places then in the making,

but now expanded into important centres of population. Here were to be seen the actual beginnings of what would, in course of time, become an established and presumably handsome city. For the time being, however, an impression of emptiness and loneliness seemed to pervade the place, accentuated by the contrast with the busy and populous city of Sydney which we had just left.

In that gloriously clear and exhilarating September morning there was spread before us a far-flung panorama, rolling country of an open park-like character stretching on and on to distant hills and more distant mountains, a vast amphitheatre across which trickled a tiny river, the Molonglo. Here and there, at seemingly distant intervals, and looking tiny in that spacious setting, buildings rose from the almost tree-less land, the beginnings of the city. Our immediate destination, the Hotel Canberra, was in architecture and arrangement entirely unlike the principal hotels in Canada, and a marked contrast, one might say, to the Chateau Laurier at Ottawa. It was not one building but a group of buildings, sleeping pavilions radiating from a central structure containing the hotel offices, lounge and dining-room. These pavilions, ten in number, and connected by covered passage-ways or arcades with the main building, were for the most part one storey in height, of brick construction covered with a white stucco. Between the pavilions lay attractive garden courts, while surrounding the hotel there had been laid out gardens, shrubberies and tennis courts, affording a most pleasant setting. The impression was that of some Californian or Mexican inn, a suggestion of the kind of climate that one might expect to encounter at some seasons at least in this part of the world.

Breakfast disposed of in the peaceful surroundings of this charming hostelry, the first and eager objective of the visitors was the future home of Australia's legislators, that home which has been so many years in the making,—the Parliament House. The building stood in proud isolation not far from the hotel on the slope of a gently rising hill, its portals looking down on the broad level valley of the Molonglo. Construction was still far from complete, though one was able to obtain a fair conception of its size and arrangement. We were informed, of course, that this great structure, which bore all the outward evidences of permanence, was merely a provisional affair, and that the real Parliament House, of monumental design, would eventually be erected on a site higher up the hill. It is expected that at least fifty years of service will be obtained from the present building, and judging

from the solid type of construction one might reasonably anticipate a longer period, for it has been built of brick covered with white stucco and bears every evidence of stability. Architecturally also, in spite of its provisional nature, the new Parliament House is not without attraction; when the landscape architect adds the finishing touches to its surroundings and artificial lakes are completed in the foreground, it should present an imposing appearance.

The building contains two large and lofty chambers, one for the Senate and the other for the House of Representatives, together with all necessary offices, lobbies, committee rooms and library. At the time of our visit only the skeletons of these apartments were observable, but their capacious nature was apparent. Climbing to the roof, we were rewarded with a glorious view of the surrounding country. To the left stood the group of low white buildings comprising Hotel Canberra. Over to the right rose a large structure which, we were informed, was intended to house the secretariat, when the Parliament is removed from Melbourne to Canberra. Here and there at scattered intervals were to be seen small buildings, but apart from that the great open space was as yet void of any activity. Yet it will never be a crowded area. Probably no city was ever designed on broader or more generous lines.

As explained to us, the hill on the slope of which the Parliament House has been erected stands near the centre of the area set apart for the site of the city. That area is rectangular in shape, and about twelve square miles in extent. After the exact site for the city had been selected, it was decided that an international competition for its design should be held so that the best possible plan might be obtained. The competition took place in 1912; many fine designs were submitted, and to that of W. B. Griffin of Chicago was awarded the first prize. Construction has since followed generally the plan prepared by Mr. Griffin. Its principal evidence to the visitor lies in the system of roads or avenues which have been built, and a certain progress in the planting of trees. Yet one can see in the contour of the land possibilities for the construction of what will in time become an attractive garden city, with a system of splendid avenues, winding streets, broad parks and charming lakelets.

The city proper lies towards the north-east corner of the Federal Territory of Canberra, which has an area of approximately 900 square miles and contains much fine mountainous scenery. The land is, however, very lightly timbered, partly from natural causes and partly as a result of destruction by settlers. The country is chiefly pastoral, and agricultural development is to be

encouraged. Several rivers cross the Territory, of which the most important is the Murrumbidgee. Its tributary, the Cotter, is utilized as the source of the city's water supply. This river has a catchment area of about 170 square miles on which there has been no settlement, and this has been included in the Federal Territory in order to give the authorities complete control of the water. A storage reservoir on the Cotter, near its junction with the Murrumbidgee, has been constructed with a capacity of 380,000,000 gallons. This is regarded as sufficient to supply 70,000 people, on a 100 gallons per day basis, over the most critical period of flow. Later, other streams can be utilized should the city expand and demand an increased water supply.

Canberra at present gives the visitor an impression of remoteness. It is over 200 miles distant from Sydney and 429 miles away from Melbourne, the principal cities of the Commonwealth. Eventually it may be on a main line of railway between these two great centres, but at present the traveller reaches it over a branch line. There are no cities in its neighborhood, and for many miles settlement is sparse. It was even contended by some that its isolation would be a deterrent to membership in parliament, and might tend to reduce that membership to men who were influenced mainly by the pecuniary advantages attaching to it. Be this as it may, Canberra is now definitely established, and time will probably remove such disadvantages as attach to its location.

To the intense rivalry between the cities of Sydney and Melbourne, the capitals of the two most powerful and populous States, New South Wales and Victoria, may be attributed to a large extent the existence of Canberra. The final agreement reached at the time the Commonwealth was formed in 1900, and embodied in the Commonwealth Constitution Act of that year, was that the seat of government should be in the State of New South Wales but not less than 100 miles from Sydney and that, until the new seat of government was established, parliament should sit at Melbourne. There followed a long period during which many sites were examined, the relative merits of various competitive points debated, votes taken, negotiations between governments conducted and legislative measures enacted. Finally, on Jan. 1, 1911, by proclamation of the Governor-General, the Territory as at present set apart for Federal use was vested in the Commonwealth.

There are two points of special interest in connection with Canberra,—one the form of administration of the Territory, the other the land policy adopted. Of the former it may be said that up to Jan. 1, 1925, the control was directly in the hands of

the Federal Government. At first the Minister for Home Affairs was in charge. General administration work was placed under an administrator; lands and surveys under the Director of Commonwealth Lands and Surveys, and works and construction under the Director-General of Works. Then in 1916 the Home and Territories Department became responsible for administration, and the Department of Works and Railways for all matters connected with construction. This joint control continued until the end of 1924, when it was superseded by that of the Federal Capital Commission, appointed under the authority of the Seat of Government Administration Act, 1924.

The Commission, consisting of J. H. Butters, C.M.G., M.B.E., chairman, Sir John Harrison, K.B.E., and C. H. Gorman, assumed control of the Territory on Jan. 1, 1925. Its powers and responsibilities include the management of lands, the levying of rates, the construction of the various works and buildings, and generally the municipal government of the Territory. Subject to parliamentary and ministerial authority it has been empowered to raise loans for all purposes of its administration, and it is held liable for the whole expenditure by the Commonwealth in connection with the establishment and administration of the Territory. Since assuming control the Commission has passed several ordinances taking the place of a great deal of obsolete or unsuitable State law which still applied to the district. Meanwhile, New South Wales courts are being used and the State has detailed its police force for the protection of the Territory, the Commission defraying the cost. The State also continues to supply teachers and the organization of public schools, though the Commission is developing schemes to provide for technical and higher educational facilities.

The land policy adopted in connection with the establishment of the Federal Territory has as its main feature the retention of title in the hands of the Crown and development by means of leases. All Crown lands in the Territory were transferred from the State of New South Wales to the Commonwealth without any payment. There remained, however, in the hands of private owners, a number of freeholds, either completely alienated or in process of alienation under the State law existing at the time of the transfer. These, it has been the policy of the Commonwealth to acquire. Up to September, 1925, 209,500 acres of privately-owned land had been redeemed at a cost of approximately \$3,645,000, while there remained at that time about 43,000 acres of alienated and 65,500 acres of partially alienated land to recover.

To encourage development outside the city area a Leases Ordinance was passed which provided for leases, not exceeding 25 years, for agricultural and grazing purposes. The leases contain special conditions in regard to the extermination of weeds and noxious animals. At present some 40,000 acres are under lease to returned soldiers for periods ranging from 5 to 25 years.

In 1924 the Government decided to lease lands in the city area, and an ordinance for the purpose was passed. This provided that the terms for such leases should not exceed 99 years, and that the rental should be at the rate of 5 per cent. per annum on the unimproved capital value as ascertained by bids at auction, or assessed by the Government. This rental is subject to re-appraisal after a term of 20 years and, thereafter, every 10 years. The lessee is required to commence the erection of a building within two years and complete it within three years of the date of the lease, the building to be in accordance with plans previously submitted for approval. No leases may be transferred until buildings have been erected as prescribed. The first sale of leases was held on Dec. 12, 1924, when 289 residential and 104 business sites were offered. Of these, 147 sites were sold at prices representing from £6 to £8 per foot for business, and from 10s. to £3.4s. for residential sites. Since then the remainder of the business sites and most of the remaining residential sites have been leased. A scheme for the registration of land on the lines of the Torrens System has been adopted, and leasehold certificates are being issued. The object is to render the leases safely negotiable and facilitate commercial dealings with land as much as possible.

There was little evidence at the time of our visit of any construction by private enterprise. That would come later with the near approach of the transfer of parliament from Melbourne to Canberra. But we did see the location of what would in time become the business centre of the city, and also the sites of residential areas. During a day of almost constant movement, broken at noon by an official luncheon arranged by the Commissioners at the Hotel Canberra, we were hurried about from one point of interest to another. There was a visit to be paid to the foundation stone of the Capitol laid by the Prince of Wales on the hill behind the Parliament House and an examination of the future site of the permanent buildings. There was an inspection of Australia's Royal Military College at Duntroon, just beyond the City District to the east, where a splendid lot of tall, well-set-up young Australians went through a number of smart evolutions. There was a run out fourteen miles to the big dam on the Cotter River, which

impounds the city's water supply. There was a climb up a curving road to the summit of Mount Stromlo, site of the observatory and incidentally vantage ground for a comprehensive view of the far-flung Federal Territory. And lastly there was a visit to the nursery where were being nurtured thousands of trees and shrubs for the beautification of the city's streets and parks.

As we were whirled back in the evening to dinner and our waiting train, across the whole semi-circle of the western sky there radiated a glorious sunset, shot with blue and gold, a revelation of nature's beauty, viewed to the fullest advantage from the open rolling country traversed by our road. It was a fitting climax to the day's events, an augury of the splendid future which awaits this unique new city now emerging into a position of prominence among world capitals.

Night fell, and with it the chill of early spring descended on the valley of the Molonglo. In the darkness, our farewells taken, we made our way back to the railway station. Its tiny platform was well-nigh deserted. A few lights flickered feebly. Quietly as we had come, as quietly we departed. Canberra, a name, had become to us Canberra, a reality.

HATH HOPE KEPT VIGIL?

CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

Frail lilies that beneath the dust so long
Have lain in cerements of musk and slumber,
While over you hath fled the viewless throng
Of hours and winds and voices out of number.

Pulseless and dead in that enswathing dark
Hath hope kept vigil at your core of being?
Did the germ know what unextinguished spark
Held these white blooms within its heart unseeing?

Once more into the dark when I go down,
And deep and deaf the black clay seals my prison,
Will the numbed soul foreknow how light shall crown
With strong young ecstasy its life new risen?