

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

CONTEXTS

NEWCOMERS TO HILL END agree on the essentials of this elusively poetic place. Some 150 years of travellers' accounts attest to their interesting conjunction of opinion. Five themes have received especial attention: history, distance, colour, sound and community.

HISTORY

For the last half a century, Hill End has triggered visitors' historical imagination. They look for signs of what cultural heritage publicity promises: the gold rush of the early 1870s. Tourists today buy vials of Hill End gold in the old timber-slabbed Great Western Store. They visit the Bald Hill Tourist Mine. Most probe the town's history at the NPWS Museum and Visitor Centre. Some call in at the History Hill private museum. Others hire gold pans and shovels and try their luck at the public fossicking area. In 1947 the artist Donald Friend was among the first wave of visitors whose imagination was excited by Hill End:

It began when at [Russell] Drysdale's I read a newspaper article on the deserted ghost-towns left empty after the gold-rush of the '60s. Then I began to think there must be lovely old stone houses in that district—the hills behind Bathurst—and in no time I was mad to go there . . . After driving 160 miles we got to Sofala—a lovely crazy old village—perfect. We stayed that night at Hill End, 30 miles further on. A town character showed us round—an old ruined village living

in the memory of its former 50,000 inhabitants & fabulous tales of gold-strikes. Now there are only a handful of rather sordid, jovial mad peasants who live by fossicking and rabbiting.¹

History and heritage, however, are relatively recent elements in Hill End's ambience. Other currents run throughout the years of European associations with the place.

DISTANCE

Distance is a key defining element. It is suggested in part by the majestic far horizons of upland forests and river valleys that fill the visitor's gaze from viewing points at Bald Hill, Kissing Point and Beaufoy Merlin Lookout.

A sense of distance—and remoteness—is also the result of the travelling time necessarily expended in order to reach Hill End in the first place. Hill End is off the beaten track. The roads to it are unsealed. For most of its European history, travel to Hill End has been time-consuming and uncomfortable.

The English geologist Samuel Stutchbury, who in November 1851 provided one of the first descriptions of the Tambaroora diggings (of which Hill End was initially part), remarked:

The great drawback to this place is its almost unapproachableness. Nothing in the shape of a vehicle except a flying machine or air-balloon would be of service in a country which is one mass of mountain crags, and precipices intersected in every direction by chasms, traversable only to the eaglehawk; or dry creeks hemmed in by almost perpendicular walls of rock.²

Seemingly little had altered when, over twenty years later, Stutchbury's gloomy assessment was tested by the New South Wales Governor Sir Hercules Robinson in March 1873. Alighting from his coach in Hill End after enduring a ten-hour journey along the rough track from Bathurst, he exclaimed, 'I have received such a buffeting and tossing on my passage . . . that . . . I arrived here with my body black and blue, and my brain addled'.³

The journey to Hill End is likewise etched into the recorded memories of visitors throughout the twentieth century. Marita McKenzie visited Hill End in 1953. As she ventured beyond Bathurst, the bitumen road

gave way to gravel, potholed and bumpy, which wound its way into the hills, its condition forever deteriorating. Twenty-eight miles on, at Sofala, the road turned westward and, now only a single track, clung giddily to the sides of the hills which undulated harmoniously with the broadly twisting River Turon . . . We had only said, 'Where the hell is this place!', a dozen times when . . . [we saw] our first view of the little town, sprawling down before us on the hillside, framed by the Hotel on our left and the general store on our right.⁴

Little had changed when Jean Jackson started visiting Hill End twenty-three years later: 'it is a very appealing place, but the access roads into and out of Hill End are a challenge to your body, your mind and your vehicle'.⁵

My own enduring first impression of Hill End, one summer's day during the early 1970s, is less of the town itself than the interminable dusty road to it from Mudgee. The journey is long and rough even today. My children remember the drive in from Bathurst in 2001 not so much for the scenery along the way as for the dust and pangs of travel sickness. Township routines are still conditioned by distance: by the daily delivery of fresh bread and the mails from Bathurst and Mudgee, for example, and the weekly shopping trips to either centre. A district nurse comes to town every day, and a doctor once a month. Emergencies require an ambulance to be despatched from Mudgee or Bathurst, or a mercy flight by a helicopter, which lands on the town's cricket pitch.

COLOUR

I stand on Hawkins Hill early one summer morning. The previous night's lingering coolness still gives definition to the forms and hues of the dawn. The darker green of stringybarks blends with the bluer hues of brittle gum. Wild goats—black haired, brown and white—scramble over the fractured grey shards of mullock slides that patchwork the forest

slopes. At the old Patriarch Mine site, greying weather-worn timbers are framed by the dense dark greens of the spreading blackberry clumps. In the background, across the escarpment, the russets and golds of grassland slopes merge with solid green bands of upland forest.

Tambaroora Street. Figs and pears briefly defy thieving fingers. Red plums carpet the ground, and their wild yellow cousins—colloquially known as shit plums—strain branches that hang heavily over the picket fences.

Valentine Mine. Beautiful monarch butterflies dapple the forest's afternoon light. Underfoot the drying leaves—draining from olive to yellow ochre—intermingle with the pinkish-brown of shed bark and the greys of dry twigs. The earth reveals itself in shades of orange and grey. Wildflowers offer miniature star-bursts in yellow and mauve, pink and white, orange, red and purple. The slender trunks of the brittle gums are festooned with strips of loose bark.

Rich colours permeate the landscape. The human interventions of introduced plants and mining incisions are highlighted in colour. The *Sunday Times* noted in 1924, 'As one swings along the road, Hill End first catches the eye as a rich patch of colour in a colourless land. The rich hue is provided by the red scars that mark the old gold diggings, over which the grass has not yet grown.'⁶ But it is the native hues of grass lands, shading from golden-straw to rust, and the pale olives to darker greens of the eucalypt forests, that permeate the landscape. Seasonal variations of colour complete the spectrum. The autumn yellows and reds of the massed deciduous trees along Beyers Avenue are famous. Donald Friend's cottage (he lived intermittently in Hill End between 1947 and 1957) was framed by them. He exclaimed in 1948, 'The colours of the autumn trees are now absolutely spectacular'.⁷ The seasonal colour displays are capped by the winter golds of wattle. Friend noted after an excursion from Hill End to Sofala in September 1947, 'The country looked lovely—the wattle is in full bloom'.⁸

SOUND

Hill End today is a silent place. Its enveloping quietude is enriched by a subtle undercurrent of harmonies: magpies warbling, currawongs cawing, cows lowing on the Hill End Common, flies buzzing, and the breeze

stirring the leaves along Beyers Avenue. The tranquillity is potent. Friend confided to Donald Murray in 1949, while he was travelling in Italy, that he felt 'so nostalgic of Hill End & the sort of peace one finds no where else'.⁹ Time seems suspended, as the tensions of the modern world are rolled back.

Other people are disturbed by the stillness of the natural world, and by the silence that surrounds the relics of past human activity. The qualities that attracted Friend had dismayed the *Sunday Times* when it described Hill End in 1924, at the end of the town's last sustained period of significant mining activity. The newspaper argued that 'as one approaches [Hill End] the quietness of death seems to pervade it all. The old mining towns have all the pathos but none of the dignity of death. They are dying, have died, most without gesture'.¹⁰

The silence of Hill End today contrasts with the noise that characterised the place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the first things that visitors noticed then was the thumping sound of the stamper batteries that crushed the ore. The batteries were 'the giant heart-beat of the mining industry'.¹¹ Local-born historian Harry Hodge remembered that in the early twentieth century 'The batteries were part of the life of the town and their off-beat clamour went on for the full twenty-four hours of each day during crushing. So used to this noise did the townspeople become that if the battery stopped for repairs or adjustment during the night, the whole town woke up at the unaccustomed silence'.¹² Bruce Goodwin, born into a Hill End mining family, was particularly attuned to the sounds of the place:

In 1922, I was six years of age and living in Hill End. One of my earliest memories is the hypnotic rhythm of the twenty-head stamper battery located near the Robert Emmett shaft and situated 200 metres from our home in Reef Street . . . Another constant noise was the clanging of the water carrying cage, as it went up and down the Robert Emmett shaft, drawing water to feed the insatiable appetite of the large Cornish steam boilers and the battery boxes of the ore crushing plant.

After our evening meal, my father often took me for a visit to the Robert Emmett battery . . . Once inside the battery shed I

entered an exciting world of hissing steam and the swishing sound of the giant, five-ton cast iron fly-wheels . . . The hissing sound of the escaping steam combined with the ear-splitting noise of the stamper battery gave a sensation of power that was breath-taking.¹³

COMMUNITY

Visitors to Hill End quickly develop a sense of peeping in upon the busy inside world of township activity. It is a small community today—no more than 150 people—but the apparent quietness of the place can be deceptive. The local cricket competition still mobilises the town, as it has since the gold rushes. The pub and the school remain active as social centres. Township dances continue to be held at the Royal Hall, with lamb-spit roasts that are locally famous. So, too, are the parties held at Dennington Cottage by the potter Lino Alvarez. For his last party, I am told, Lino had a lamb marinating in his bath. The festivities that are held during the Australia Day public holiday have become a treasured annual event.

Mark Hammond noticed similar qualities in township social life when he arrived at Hill End in the summer of 1868:

It was after dark when I sighted the Hotel lamps in Clarke Street . . . After I had had a wash and something to eat, I had a look around. There were only two hotels and two stores in the place. A few men were there and were standing in small groups. The street, for a Saturday night, looked dull enough, but in both hotels there was a dance on.

In Weir's Hotel I could see from the public bar into the dance room, and from the well-dressed appearance of the ladies and gentlemen taking part, I thought it must be a private party. There were no stained moleskins or men in their shirt-sleeves. The ladies were not got up in the high style that I had noticed on other fields, but they were all well-dressed. The men all wore coats and mostly white shirts. I was afraid to go in for fear of being an intruder.

Mr. Weir, seeing that I was a stranger, said to me:

'Won't you go in and sit down?' I thanked him, and did so. I soon found that the parties doing the fantastic were men, their wives and daughters, brothers and sisters, and their neighbours, and that these dance parties once a week had almost become an institution. The

persons taking part seemed to enjoy themselves thoroughly. Their conduct was exceedingly respectful towards each other. I noticed that Mr. Weir, his wife and her sisters, added to the enjoyment by their friendly intercourse with the visitors. In a word, it had but little appearance of the ordinary hotel gatherings. In short, it was a happy family.¹⁴

An apparently happy family. A heritage town. A remote place. A sensory space. These are among the first impressions of sojourners in Hill End. But how closely do they correspond with local knowledge, and the fine-grained textures of the local landscape?