

Dora Creek in the 1930s: Place Imagery and Identity in Childhood

Abstract

The role of communities, places and institutions in shaping formative childhood years has captured much attention from geographers in recent decades, evident in the formidable research output published in journals, notably in *Children's Geographies*, founded in 2002. Much debate has focussed on identifying the supposedly negative circumstances associated with the 'lifescapes and lifeworlds' of contemporary childhood. In this debate, one strand has highlighted 'controlled time and controlled space' with schools and other institutions exerting a growing dominance over children's time and spatial range. Pivotal to the 'destruction of the childhood realm' has been not only the 'loss of free-flowing, self-directed, relatively uninhibited outdoor lives' but, critically, the loss of 'embodied encounters with nature'. Given the exceptional qualities of Dora Creek in the nineteen-thirties as a nurturing and stimulating childhood natural habitat and community, this writer offers strong, admittedly biased, endorsement of a lifeworld rarely encountered in the formative years of today's children.

Dora Creek in the 1930s: Place Imagery and Identity in Childhood

For every adult there dwells the child who was and in every child there lies the adult that will be. (John Connolly, *The Book of Lost Things*).

As a very senior geographer, fast approaching my tenth decade, thoughts increasingly dwell on a lifetime of experience and, unsurprisingly, on the pivotal role of the childhood locale in shaping a life course. Given the exceptional qualities of Dora Creek as a nurturing and stimulating childhood environment, it is unsurprising that I fondly reminisce about 'The Creek' as it was in the nineteen-thirties, also pondering the ways by which this 'homeland' may have influenced life directions.

By no means am I a loner in this quest. The role of communities, places and institutions in shaping formative childhood years has captured much attention from geographers in recent decades, evident in the formidable research output published in journals, notably *Children's Geographies*, founded in 2002. Since the 1990s, a number of books have been published, including Holloway and Valentine (2000), Aitken (2001) and Blundell (2016). I can only offer a modest, localised contribution whose chief merit is that it is founded on real-life experience, happened in a distant past and in a habitat rarely encountered by today's children.

Early Dora Creek

As a Dora Creek native, spending ten of my first eleven childhood years there, I have an abiding interest in its history, enlivened by its chequered fortunes. First settled in the 1830s, and initially given the place-name Newport, Dora Creek and upstream Cooranbong were expected to become the pivotal settlements servicing the hinterland of Lake Macquarie in an era when heads of navigation for small coastal vessels were pivotal nodes (Figures 1 and 2). Gazetted, surveyed and quickly settled in 1840, Newport (or Stingaree Point) became Lake Macquarie's first township, boldly depicted as the only significant 'urban' settlement on the 1841 cadastral map of Lake Macquarie (Clouten 1967, 81). Over the next two years glowing reports about splendid crops and contented cattle appeared in the *Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. 'Early Newport achieved its peak of uncertain fame and short-lived prosperity two or three years after its establishment. After that, the town of promise declined rapidly in both significance and population and its name practically disappeared from the records for the next twenty years. Then the place re-emerged gradually in the more humble role of a small agricultural and fishing village.' (Ibid, 115)

By chance, the recently-arrived explorer Ludwig Leichhardt stayed overnight at Newport during its short-lived 'boom' on his 1842 walk from Newcastle to Brisbane Water. 'We tramped along the little used bush track to Newport or Stingy Ray Point...It is a peculiar feeling to find oneself in a town right in the middle of a virgin forest.' (Darragh and Fensham, 61). Leichhardt was impressed by the scenery '...not grand, but attractive... (Lake Macquarie) would perhaps surpass the much praised Lake of Zurich thanks to the diversity of its bays and the constant variation of its views'. He was optimistic about Newport's prospects '...conditions for (the colonists) will be considerably improved if Newport should really become a town one day, which seems rather certain because of its good position.' He was less impressed by the realities of frugal pioneering. 'The poor colonists around Newport had only damper made of Indian corn.' Of his hosts, Leichhardt notes.... 'Mr. Carter, who like so many other young men brought money to Australia only to lose it, lived in a humble cottage together with his very well educated wife. I pitied the poor creature who had certainly been brought up to a better life of greater comfort.'

For well over a century, frugal, semi-subsistence livelihoods remained the lot of the inhabitants of the renamed Dora Creek. Over this time, the village relied on fishing, timber-getting and sawmilling, experiencing a boost with the opening of the railway in 1883. Small-scale fruit and vegetable cropping for home consumption and/or local sales was widely undertaken. Small numbers of beef and dairy cows, pigs and hens also provided for local needs. Carts, sulkies and riders required horses and log jinkers required bullocks. The 'cash economy' was modest. By the 1930s 'The Creek' was a small village of about 500 persons. Houses were strung along the northern bank of the creek for about three kilometres, with those downstream scattered along a narrow natural 'jetty', a strip of land with the creek on one side and Lake Eraring on the other (Figure 3). All roads were either gravel or dirt. There were very few cars. In any case road access to the outside world was very poor, with twisty corrugated gravel roads following roundabout routes north via Wangi and south and north-west via Cooranbong. Until the 1960s the only direct access to the southern shoreline was by boat or by the walkway on the rail bridge.

Arrival at Dora Creek

In 1923 my father, John, arrived in Dora Creek to take ownership of the general store. Dora Creek was a surprising destination for a 1913 commencing undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin, training to become a Presbyterian minister. His university years were cut short by army service during the First World War, luckily in a regiment sent to India, training Sikhs and Gurkhas for frontline service. For four postwar years he served in Mesopotamia as repatriation officer resettling the Assyrians back to their northern homeland and then as intelligence officer assisting in the challenging (and dangerous) task of peacekeeping among the feuding Kurds. His British Ordnance Survey Manual was an early present to me, with its excerpts of topographic maps triggering my early addiction to cartography and map interpretation. Unsurprisingly my futuristic childhood imaginary maps conformed to Leichhardt's prognostications about The Creek's centrality and grand urban futures.

On his return to Donegal he was advised that his life expectancy was low during this time of troubles. Australia could act as sanctuary, none safer than Dora Creek. Coming from a line of storekeepers, this vocation could be predicted. Eighteen months later, Kathleen, his betrothed, arrived by ship on Christmas Eve, 1924, and they were married on the front lawn of my great-uncle John's house in the Sydney suburb of Epping followed by the customary honeymoon at Katoomba. As proprietor of the Creek's only substantial store, my father (and mother) quickly became closely integrated into the local community where everybody knew everybody else. Tennis, boating, card games, alfresco concerts and dances in the local hall, regular church on Sundays all seem to have contributed to a vibrant social life.

In short time, we four children arrived: Gordon (1926), Tom (1928), John (1930) and Olive (1934), all name-sakes of significant family members. The arrival of myself and Olive required team work, including the final task undertaken by bush nurse Lowry in nearby Morisset. 'Team work' is not used lightly. My 1930 arrival coincided with a flood requiring rowboat journey to the railway, assisted walk across bridge and along rail embankment in heavy rain, and final car pickup along bush track to reach the destination. A challenging arrival into the outside world.

Dora Creek in the thirties: A habitat inviting exploration

Childhood is the most intensely governed sector of personal existence...The modern child has become the focus of innumerable projects that purport to save it from physical, sexual or moral danger, to ensure its 'normal' development, to actively promote certain capacities or attributes such as intelligence, educability, and emotional stability. (Rose 1999, 124).

Childhood experience can vary markedly over time and place, but with an inexorable trend within affluent western societies towards being 'intensely governed' as reported by Rose, with 'controlled time' and 'controlled space' (Blundell 2016, 67).. While most evident in urban habitats, there is a parallel if less pronounced trend in many rural and semi-rural settings, as documented in local case studies of generational change such as in rural Norway (Skar and Krogh 2009). See, for example Valentine (1997, Aiken 2001, Blundell 2016). In the thirties, Dora Creek still offered a

childhood habitat ideal for exploration, discovery and colonisation, markedly different from that described by Rose but comparable to that presented in classical Australian autobiographies including Albert Facey's 'A Fortunate Life' and Jill Ker Conway's 'The Road from Coorain' and in quasi-autobiographical novels, such as Tim Winton's 'Lockie Leonard', 'Cloudstreet' and 'Breath'. Central to this learning was independent, unfettered, self-directed mobility, rarely possible for children today. This child-friendly locale presented few threats, real or imagined: two or three fierce dogs requiring detours; occasional snakes; swooping magpies when nesting in spring; mosquitoes in summer.

Learning was almost entirely based upon first-hand observation and knowledge acquisition from the local environment and the local people. Non-local sources, mainly books and school magazines, were mediated by local persons, teachers and parents. Other than in our readings and our imaginations, we had few direct encounters with an 'outside' world, nowadays over-delivered via radio, television, cinema and, more recently, increasingly intrusive 'social media'. Radio arrived at our house in the mid-thirties, enabling us to listen to a few children's serials. Occasionally we were able to go the movies at the Morisset hall. This involved a three mile walk, partly along a bush track to Morisset and an early-evening return journey in a carriage attached to a goods train on an unreliable timetable. Because of the serials, featuring either Tarzan or The Phantom, we were keen to attend as frequently as circumstances allowed.

It is unsurprising, then, that memories of 'The Creek' contains clear images of everyday contacts with both people and place. Equally strong was their shared role in shaping a life-course such that neither can readily be awarded precedence. As ever, it is helpful first to describe the physical setting, the more so in this case because of its exceptional landscapes inviting childhood self-direction, exploration and adventurism. This experience prompts yet another modest intervention into intense debates focusing on contemporary childhoods, namely whether 'children are predisposed primarily towards natural or pastoral settings' (Aitken 2001, 42) supposedly leading to contemporary 'nature deficit disorder'. Aitken argues that there is a 'structural fragility to these mythic constructions...the good life is attainable in specific places.' My childhood experience ensures that I am a biased observer in this debate, qualified only by close ongoing, positive experience in 'natural settings.'

Dora Creek's distinctive habitat is partially portrayed in satellite imagery (Figure 2). It was our good fortune that our two childhood homes were on prime sites for encounters with diverse, exciting natural arenas. From my birth to age 5 our home was at 'Lisnagarvey', located at (1) on Figure 2 and from age 5 to 11 at 'Riverdale' (2), save for one year in County Donegal, Ireland in 1938-9. Both homes were on the northern of the two riverine 'jetties', elongated, narrow strips of alluvium extending into Lake Macquarie with only a narrow channel linking shallow Lake Eraring to the main lake. Along almost the entire northern creek-bank a public road had been gazetted. Fortunately, an early decision had been made to relocate road traffic to the rear of the elongated creek-frontage lots and the former road converted to a narrow grassy foreshore park extending almost from The Point to the upstream river bend (and perhaps further). Rows of native trees were planted in the 1930s. An alfresco meandering bare-earth 'path' enabled young bare feet to avoid the plentiful bindi-eye prickles. Only the first 200 metres downstream of the railway bridge remained open to

vehicles, enabling access to the hall, post office and riverbank fishermen's boats, nets and tar cauldrons.

The creek-bank was lined with sturdy eucalypts and casuarinas, with over-water branches available for lengthy knotted rope swings inviting competitive games of multiple creek-bank returns and also the neatest, biggest and furthest splashes. The longest swings attached to the highest branches were most challenging (and popular). A lengthy hooked branch was needed too retrieve these swings from their distant resting point. Small wooden jetties and near-horizontal water-hugging casuarinas were available for diving and underwater swimming events with floating logs acting as 'canoes'. As we grew we became proficient log-paddlers, skimmers of flat stones across the water surface, boat-rowers and cross-creek swimmers.

The creek-side 'parkland' also invited varied activities, including skipping, high jumps, broad jumps and hop-step-and-jumps. Patches of bare ground were used for hop-sotch and for ever-popular marbles (both small-ring and big-ring). Twigs were needed to scratch boundary lines.

Equally inviting for outdoor escapades was the 'backstreet' shoreline fronting shallow Lake Eraring. Its low, swampy foreshore was a strikingly different habitat (and adventure terrain) compared with the much higher creek bank. The silts and clays, partially inundated by the lake's very slight tidal range, invited various excavating and other construction activities, including canals, dykes, harbours, twiggy bridges, wharves and boats. Shallow ponds became 'aquaria' for small easily-caught toadfish released at end of activity-time. The mildly salty pigface succulent was an occasional treat.

On a few occasions we ventured far into the lake, wading heavily through its dense beds of seaweeds and endeavouring to count the often-numerous swans afloat above their favourite, easily accessible smorgasbord.

Almost across the road from our back gate was a triangular patch of lakeside bushland comprising casuarinas, eucalypts and low shrubs, offering further diversification in nature-based recreation and skill-acquisition. This bushland offered generous materials for building cubby-houses, for hide-and-seek and for fuel-supplies for biennial bonfires on our neighbouring vacant lot. This was also the prime venue for alfresco swings and for challenging tree-climbing of she-oaks (casuarinas), superior to the creek-side leaning eucalypts or the Henderson's camphor laurels or the popular hoop pine above the roofless boys' schoolyard lavatory. (No such activity allowed across the grassy schoolyard above the girls').

Viewed retrospectively, we three boys, Gordon, Tom and John had an exceptionally privileged childhood. Our father was always busy for five days and a half, managing his one-man store. Our mother was also busy with housework and community responsibilities, also with Olive, four years younger than myself and too small to share in our adventures. As free-ranging children, we could wander at least a few kilometres from home, provided we always turned up for meals. As we grew older (perhaps after I turned six), we acquired bicycles, extending our range. When allowed to take sandwiches and water on school holidays we could laboriously cycle on corrugated gravel roads to Cooranbong, Morisset and Eraring.

The sights, sounds and smells of Dora Creek

While memories of childhood are inevitably focussed on people (parents, siblings, relatives, neighbours, teachers, schoolmates and significant others), these memories are also associated with their settings. So it is with Dora Creek where, unsurprisingly, visual imagery predominates while sounds and smells occupy localised, restricted niches. Dora Creek's distinctive assemblage of natural and partially humanised landscapes offers focussed visual memories of creek-banks and their assemblage of trees, rickety wharves, small boats of variable shapes, sizes and states of disrepair; of fishermen's slipways, boat-trolleys, nets on long, horizontal poles supported by waist-high stumps and of the tar cauldrons; of the expansive views across swan-sprinkled Lake Eraring towards the western ranges of Brokenback and Mount Sugarloaf, almost matched by the views at The Point across the main lake to Wangi, Pulbah Island and Shingle Splitters Point; of the loosely spaced modest weatherboard houses along creek-front and back roads; and the sense of anticipation as the local train rounded the bend on its downhill run from Morisset.

Memories of Dora Creek also include a few distinctive sounds rarely heard elsewhere: the melodious putt-putting of the small sturdy, locally-crafted fishing boats, the rhythm of rowlocks on rowboats, the distant rumble of trains crossing the bridge, the mournful keening of the casuarinas (she-oaks) in the breeze and the soft cries of the swans, frogs croaking, mosquitoes buzzing, kookaburras laughing and school bell ringing. Equally so with remembered scents and smells: salty tang of shorelines and scaled fish, tarry nets, crushed leaves of eucalypts and camphor laurels, scents of honeysuckle, roses and many other flowers, hay and chaff, fresh baked bread, smoke identified by source, whether from railway engines, indoor wood or coal fires and outdoor fires or cow manure used as a mosquito repellent. Less appealing smells emanated from the lavatory pit and its replacement...the sanitary can truck.

Les Murray, Bunya and Dora Creek

My identification with 1930s Dora Creek enhances my appreciation of Les Murray's odes to Bunya and its borderlands. The late Les Murray is recognised as Australia's unrivalled poet laureate. Equally merited, if not yet acknowledged, is his eminence as a regional and rural geographer with a rare capacity to breathe life into rural landscapes and into people within landscapes. Unsurprisingly, as I presently traverse Murray's voluminous works in the recently published *Collected Poems*, I keep returning to the Bunya poems, with their reminders of 'The Creek', notwithstanding their strikingly different natural landscapes and rural economies. In his classic 'The Bulahdelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle' intimate vignettes of special places evoke strong memories of childhood locales. ...the place of the Swampy Paddocks,,,of the Sleeper Dump...of the Rail Fence....of the Seagrass...and of the Pelican....the places of sitting down near ferns, the snake-fear places'. All these passages resonate while also prompting a personal list from childhood memory: the place of the Mournful Swans (Lake Eraring)....of the Pelicans (on navigation posts at creek entrance to lake)...of the Seagulls (fishermen's wharves)...of the Magpies (school grounds)...of the Kingfishers (creek bank)...of the Herons (Muddy Lake at back of school paddock) ...of the Tar Cauldrons (fishermen's nets) and so on.

Dora Creek in the thirties: a child-friendly community

Not only were The Creek's natural resources seemingly designed for children's wants and needs, so also with the modest livelihoods, frugal lifestyles and visible interdependencies of its small human community, far removed from the anonymity and transactional exchanges of contemporary urban lifestyles. Viewed retrospectively Dora Creek seemed to have been caught in a time-warp, where the only apparent changes were within ourselves as we 'grew up'. Apart from the return of Professor Henderson, described later, I cannot recall newcomers or leavers among fellow school pupils or households. The 'built environment' also remained unaltered, save for the arrival of electricity in the late thirties

There was a high level of self-sufficiency at both household and community levels. Many households kept a few hens, maintained vegetable patches and harvested and preserved their own fruit, mainly plums, peaches, nectarines, apricots and lemons. Apart from fellow pupils and close family friends, our regular contacts were with members of the business community providing our everyday needs. These businesses were single-person, multifunctional enterprises engaged in manufacturing, storage, retailing and, for bread and milk, direct delivery of their products to households. The butcher, Mr. Taaffe had a small shop with a large tree-trunk chopping block. His limited selection of meat was sourced from his 'abattoir', a small building with holding yard just beyond the village limits. The ovens of baker, Mr. Lean, were alongside his home. His delivery cart, decorated in the customary livery, contained small rear-door compartments for a modest range of bread, biscuits and cakes.

There were two regularly-functioning stores. Mrs. Weppler kept a modest stock of groceries and specialised in lollies, soft drinks, newspapers and magazines. Our father owned the main general store, a roomy brick structure, described later. Another small store, poorly stocked with trinkets and clothes, opened sporadically

Pivotal public sector infrastructure included the school, post office, railway station and School of Arts. This latter building was located between the Weppler store and the post office. In spite of its name it really was a modest wooden hall with two small rooms at the front and a wooden stage at the far end of the gloomy main hall. I recall it for two rather different activities. One was the inoculation sessions for smallpox, diphtheria and various other maladies. The other was for the fancy dress 'balls' organised by the school parents. Mum did her best on these challenging occasions, including once dressing us as clowns. I must confess to having mixed feelings about the result.

Mr. Watkins, the station-master was also our neighbour at 'Riverdale'. He was assisted by a part-time porter/station attendant. The goods yard was located well below the rail embankment, involving time-consuming shunting by the engine while the goods train remained blocking the main line track towards Newcastle. Rail goods customers had to act as labourers portering their own items in the goods yard and shed, while occasionally manually pushing rail-wagons along the tracks. The other public transport arteries, the gravelled roads must have received some less conspicuous attention. Perhaps Lake Macquarie Shire employed a casual roadworker or two but we remained unaware of their existence.

Integrated postal, telephone, telegraph and banking services were provided by the postmaster, Mr. Kimberley. With no deliveries to houses, we often collected the mail on our homewards walk. Incoming mail had been sorted and placed into pigeon-holes alphabetically ordered. With few private phones, people made calls at the post office on the wall phone with the manual ringing handle, fixed speaker and separate listener at the end of a cord, all attached to a wooden box. Any incoming call could be taken by Mr. Kimberley, who would relay a handwritten message to the appropriate pigeon hole. Urgent messages could be handed to any customer walking in the right direction. The federal government's Commonwealth Bank was integrated with the post office, servicing savings accounts with deposits and withdrawals recorded in your bankbook. Cheque accounts were rare, used almost solely by businesses. Some single-person enterprises relied on hand-written IOUs. Out-of-town payments were made by postal notes and money orders. Mr. Kimberley was kept quite busy.

Mr. Bergeran was available for carpentry and for occasional builders jobs. Mrs. Bergeran was the part-time hairdresser. At her isolated house on the south-bank, widow Denny provided board and lodging to occasional, mainly single male, visitors and casual workers. The Rayfield family supplied eggs to those who lacked their own chooks. The doctor lived at the far limits of the village. We rarely visited his surgery, a small room in his house.

I recall that we children knew only the family names of these significant adults, always addressed as Mr, Mrs or Miss. I had no idea of the first name of teacher, Mr. Dunleavey, until a recent discovery via Google, yet another John. There were only two young adults we knew by their first names: Cec Parker and Merv Heaton. Cec was a scion of the influential Parker family, who owned more fishing boats and nets than any of the other three or four families engaged in this vital sector of Dora Creek's economic base. Regularly after a trip to the lake, Cec would drop off freshly netted whiting, flathead or bream for us to behead and scale. Merv's early-morning milking of his small herd was followed by fresh delivery to our waiting billies and jugs. His cows acted as lawn-mowers along the elongated creekside park. Scattered cowpats were in strong demand for gardens. Merv also provided the weekly horse-and-cart delivery of groceries from the Holmes store. During school holidays, one or two of us could travel with Merv on his main delivery circuit down to The Point across the waist-high narrow entrance of Lake Eraring then around the Eraring farmlets.

The most visible economic activity was net-fishing, undertaken by well established locals, the Parkers, Wilsons and Wynnes. Nets were regularly re-tarred in cauldrons heated by wood fires on the riverbank. Alongside were parallel sets of long horizontal poles supported by stumps at a height of about 130 centimetres above the ground, with nets spread over these poles to dry. Fish-netting was done in Lake Macquarie, from small wooden boats, some with low 'cabins' at the front but most without. Steering was done at the back using a long wooden handle attached to the rudder. Fish were headed, scaled and placed with ice into wooden boxes, with wooden slats then hammered on the top for transport by local passenger train to the Sydney markets.

Apart from fishing, casual sleeper cutting, transport services to its modest hinterland (Figure 4) and sporadic exports of fruit and vegetables, it was difficult to discover any other contributions to Dora Creek's economic base. The local economy experienced a

setback at this time, not only from the depression but with the decline in timber resources, forcing the closure of the Hely timber mill. School enrolments declined falling from over 80 pupils down to less than 60. There was no timber-getting apart from a few casual efforts at sleeper-cutting. Most people were engaged in 'taking in each other's washing' or very modest farming activities, such as a dozen citrus trees or about the same number of cattle or an occasional small patch of tomatoes. A few worked on the roads or railway. It appears that during the depression years of the thirties, incomes were low in almost all households and there was significant increase in self-sufficiency and non-monetary exchange of labour and produce.

Recycling newspapers, clothes, corrugated iron, fuel drums and hessian

Self-sufficiency also involved a high level of recycling and minimal disposal. Newspapers and magazines may well have been the products with the most versatile uses. In the absence of television and limited use of radio, newspapers and magazines were read from front to back and then recycled to serve a multitude of purposes:, regularly as sturdy wrapping for groceries, meat, books, parcels and gifts, while also cut into strips for use as toilet paper. Some were suited for colouring with paints and crayons. Following long years of service worn-out clothes were recycled as dishwashers, shoe polishers and brass-shiners. Flattened fuel drums or old, leaky corrugated iron from house-roofs was used to build modest tool-sheds. Hessian offered itself for various uses, including al fresco curtains and coverlets. Potato bags were converted into hooded raincoats. Bottles were saved, awaiting irregular pick-up into large hessian bags by the itinerant bottle-o.

One visible indicator of the economic depression was a small scattering of temporary bushland dwellings squatting on crown land or on occupation licences outside the village. Locally harvested eucalypt saplings provided house-frames and roof-supports, second-hand corrugated iron provided the roofs, a mix of weatherboard, plywood, flattened fuel drums and hessian served as external walls, while newspapers and magazines were glued to the walls as insulation and decoration. Their occupants scraped a living from casual work while accumulating modest debts for flour, potatoes, sugar and suchlike from the Holmes store.

Dora Creek School

The school was located well over two kilometres from our home at the far north-western edge of the village, on a low ridge. It had a large playground extending as a grassy paddock down to the shores of Muddy Lake which invited occasional after-school exploration. There was plenty of space for all sorts of activities. At one time a very extensive cubbie warren of low grass-lined rooms was constructed using tomato stakes from the adjoining paddock. It was an ongoing enterprise until the irate tomato-grower caught up with the action. Beside the boys toilet block was a handy hoop pine, with well-placed branches encouraging climbers to great heights.

During our time, it was a two-teacher school with headmaster, Mr. Dunleavey teaching grades 4 to 6 and Miss Davidson grades 1 to 3. My recollection is that there were about eight pupils in each grade, with a total enrolment just under fifty. We seem to have had the same pupils and teachers for almost our entire time at school...no arrivals or departures until we left in 1941. In my grade, I recall Phillip

Brooks, son of the Anglican Minister, who vied with me to top the class in exams. Also Dorothy Rayfield, the most attractive of the girls, Clarrie Fitzsimmons and 'Tuppy' Watkins as the two rogues. Highlights were the monthly school magazines and the red, green and brown school readers. Some of us, myself included, were not too good at keeping things tidy, particularly with the pens and inkwells set into the rows of fixed desks. In contrast to leisure time, our classroom time was more 'regimented' than nowadays but in acceptable ways in unison; alphabet, sums, multiple times tables, marching, physical exercises, parade before classroom entry and so on. I do not recall any pupils ever wearing shoes to school.

My main recollection of Mr. Dunleavey's class is of the many traditional songs we were taught. I still remember the words and tune of songs such as 'The minstrel boy to the war has gone', roisterously sung and supposedly in key with Mr. Dunleavey's tuning fork. There was a very limited library, so books had to be read a second or third time just to satisfy the appetite for reading. An expansive world beyond Dora Creek was revealed to us in select readings: 'Grimm's Fairy Tales', 'Robinson Crusoe', 'Treasure Island', 'Gulliver's Travels', 'Rip van Winkle' and 'Huckleberry Finn'. We identified with Australian children's classics, notably May Gibbs's 'Snugglypot and Cuddlepup', Dorothy Wall's 'Blinky Bill' volumes, Norman Lindsay's 'The Magic Pudding' and Henry Lawson's short stories ranging from the farcical 'The Loaded Dog' to the pathetic 'The Drover's Wife'. Perhaps surprisingly, supposedly universal English classics such as 'The Wind in the Willows', 'Alice through the Looking Glass' and 'Winnie-the-Pooh' appear not to have reached such remote places as Dora Creek.

Inter-school sports between small schools were always great events. I recall that we competed against Mulbring, Mt. Vincent, Brunkerville, Awaba, Eraring, Morisset, Wyee, Cooranbong and Martinsville. The event was held at Dora Creek because of its "good position"...the sole activity confirming Leichhardt's prediction almost a century earlier. The venue was Mery Heaton's small cow paddock near Lake Eraring used only for overnight agistment. For a week or two the cows were exiled to sundry vacant lots by rotation, allowing the cow-pats to dry out for easy removal and replacement by small quantities of sand. Races were run on grass from a starting rope (on ground) to a finishing rope (hand-held) probably about 40 metres apart. There were no lanes. Relays were also held in the same way as swimmer relays...the field could not accommodate a circular track. The most unpredictable events were the sack races, three-legged races and wheelbarrow races. In addition to the relays, team events included tunnel ball and overhead ball. At school an occasional 'sport' was the organising of fist fights by the dominant boys to be held on a vacant lot after school. I recall having to fight Phillip Brooks...no way we could get out of it. It ended in an inconclusive draw after a few pulled punches. Phillip and I were good friends.

Dora Creek's Churches

Like many other locals, the Holmes family were regular churchgoers out of tradition or habit rather than conviction. Only two denominations were on offer, Anglican or Methodist. On two critical indicators the Anglicans were more established. Alongside the school, they had a weatherboard building that looked like a church, however modest and they also had a properly ordained minister, Mr. Brooks, father of my closest schoolmate. Rather than succumbing to these temptations, our family belonged

to the Methodists, notwithstanding their modest building set on low stumps in a grassy paddock and approached along a dirt track. We children first went to Sunday School and then joined our parents at services presided over by a medley of lay preachers. I cannot recall whether we sung 'The Lord is my Shepherd' with gusto comparable to that dedicated to 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. This was the only regular occasion for wearing shoes, which were promptly removed on the walk home. A major event was the Harvest Festival with pumpkins, corn, cabbages, beans and plums from local gardens as well as cakes and biscuits...a mini-show without any prizes. The other major church-related events were picnics to lakeside shores reached by a small flotilla of boats (some 'borrowed' from fishermen) and a Xmas party with a real Santa Claus.

The Holmes store

While Dora Creek had two other shops during the 1930s, they were small businesses when compared with the Holmes store. However, Dad's store was really a one-person enterprise with only occasional casual help. The store was across the road from the railway goods yard. The adjacent lots remained vacant. Of solid brick construction, 'The Holmes Store' now has heritage listing even though in rather poor shape, as a fish shop. There are some photos of the store showing the two front display windows and the muddy street (Figure 5).

On entering the store, to the left was a long wooden counter with a set of balancing scales with large weights shaped like elongated bells with handles on top and small weights, shaped like large coins. There were also large jars of various boiled lollies and a bacon and ham slicer. The rear wall had shelving for canned and packaged groceries and an array of Arnott's biscuit tins. Below the shelves were large wooden bins storing products such as sugar, flour, rice, sago, potatoes and onions, ready to be scooped into brown paper bags and weighed. The opposite space was available for basic clothes (mainly work clothes) and Madame Weigel's paper patterns. In the back corner, essential tools: rakes, brooms, tapes, spades, forks, mattocks, hammers, nails, axes, crowbars and suchlike. Nearby was a hanging scale with a clock-like dial indicating weight. There was a large wooden ice chest for perishables. At least once or twice a week, a large block of ice encased in hessian had to be trundled from the railway station, located nearby on the high embankment. Inside the ice chest would be the usual perishables, mainly butter. Also there could be wrapped parcels of meat, delivered from Taaffe's butcher shop, to be collected by some recalcitrant Seventh Day Adventists, living in Avondale, supposedly committed to a vegetarian diet and unable to be seen entering a butcher's shop. Their shopping took place while unloading raw materials from the railway siding over the road to be delivered to the Avondale factory for manufacture into wholemeal biscuits and breakfast cereals: Sanitarium Wheatbix (now Weetbix) and Wheaties.

At the back of the shop was a small store-room with the reserve stock in boxes and bags. Behind the store was a small tin shed on stumps at a height to allow direct loading to and from carts or trucks. It contained bags of chaff, bales of hay, wheat and other products which I cannot recall. Goods could be weighed on a large platform scale. The shed was well used meeting the needs of the large population of working horses, pigs and chooks. The store also acquired a petrol bowser with a volume pre-set

dial, measured in gallons, hand-pumped to a glass bowl up top and dispensed by a hose.

The store posed many challenges. During the depression, many customers ran up debts which were rarely repaid. There were several robberies. I recall that there were times that Dad slept at the shop, taking his revolver as a security precaution, in the hope of catching the thief (or thieves) but no-one was ever caught. The nearest police were at Morisset, three miles away. Floods were another problem, with at least three floods during the family's time at the 'Creek'. On one occasion, Dad almost drowned when the current trapped him against the railway fence across the road from the shop. I recall witnessing the only occasion when Dad deployed his revolver, with one shot disposing a snake in a neighbour's well. I suppose this was necessary given the alternatives. On one occasion we witnessed a neighbour beheading a large black snake by grabbing it by the tail and whip-cracking.

First home at 'Lisnagarvey': 1930-1935

Shortly after their 1924 wedding, our parents took residence at the house recently built by historian, Professor George Cockburn Henderson. Born at nearby Cardiff and graduated from the Universities of Sydney and Oxford, in 1902 at age 31, Henderson was appointed Professor of English and Professor of History at the University of Adelaide. 'Henderson quickly became prominent in the cultural, educational, social and sporting life of Adelaide. His celebrated public lectures on historical and literary topics attracted capacity crowds (including governors and premiers) to the Adelaide Town Hall...an austere, intense and demanding teacher...the effects of overwork and a disastrously ill-considered second marriage exacerbated his chronic depressive tendency to the point of collapse' (Prest 2012, 241-245). In 1923, Henderson resigned and retired to Dora Creek, building a home neighbouring his sister-in-law, Sarah and her daughter, Elsie. As shown below, all three played an influential role during our childhood years.

It was our good fortune that, shortly after his premature retirement, in 1925 Henderson was invited to resume his career as Research Professor of Pacific History at the University of Sydney. His Dora Creek home was leased to our family until Henderson's final retirement in 1934. Our first home had been built to meet the needs of Professor Henderson. At least half of the interior was a spacious single-room library-study with its walls entirely taken with bookshelves containing his magnificent collection of books and artefacts on Pacific Islands history and other related topics, donated to the Mitchell Library many years later. We were able to use this scholarly sanctum as our drawing room also for reading and quiet games. There was a veranda on three sides around this room, which we used as sleep-out accommodation. At the rear were three small rooms: kitchen-dining, bedroom and bathroom/laundry. This restricted space was occasionally confined by floods, which wrought havoc on the vegetable patch and required evacuation of the chooks, confined in a crudely constructed temporary residence of chicken wire with a wooden floor. Close by was a cement-domed underground tank with an elevated rough wooden scaffolding draped with a vine providing a rich harvest of tart grapes.

Most of the early photos show this house, including a rear view of floodwater lapping the floorboards (Figure 6). Many photos show the bougainvillea along the western

veranda as a background, while the front fence and cement path also figure in the photos, including three little boys in smart suits (with shoes!), ready to take the train for a holiday in Sydney (Figure7).

On the front veranda wall was the house-name, 'Lisnagarvey' after Kathleen's childhood neighbourhood outside Belfast. On his return in 1934, Professor Henderson renamed the house to "Ai Ro Ro", which is Polynesian for "Welcome Place". On two adjacent lots he tended a large orchard, mainly citrus, which he had earlier planted. While we were in residence, Henderson made frequent visits to attend to his orchard, dossing down in a tiny room in his orchard shed. He was regularly seen trundling an old wheelbarrow for long distances along the creek frontage, collecting manure supplied by Heaton's small dairy herd which grazed freely on public land. Our memories of Prof Henderson are of a kind, jovial man with an unlit pipe, cap, old plus fours, no socks and old shoes, who was always interested in our welfare...very much the attentive 'uncle' who took us boating in his old row-boat (Figure 8). He always joined us, supplying fireworks and chocolates, at our early evening bonfire on 'Empire Day', celebrating Queen Victoria's birthday on 28th May. The late sovereign's loyal subjects at Dora Creek, supposedly recognising their status as 'sons and daughters of a glorious empire', seized upon Empire Day as a once-a-year chance for pyrotechnic celebrations in a season of low bushfire risk.

Professor Henderson's home was built alongside the modest cottage of his widowed sister, Sarah, where also lived Sarah's daughter, Elsie. My childhood memories are that all the Hendersons were really part of our family. We called in regularly, even when we moved a few hundred metres upstream to 'Riverdale'. We enjoyed their cakes, scones, cordials and fruits, particularly grapes and red cherry guavas (to which I still retain a sentimental attachment). Also we helped with the hens and garden and climbed the spreading camphor laurels along the front fence. Elsie's bachelor brother, Tom, came almost every weekend to enjoy a break from his job at the Newcastle steelworks and do all the heavy work. Also a very kind, jovial, almost rotund person. We were lucky to have such generous people as neighbours.

Later childhood at Riverdale: 1935-1941

The move to 'Riverdale' was a great success. This was our last house in Dora Creek. Formerly a boarding house, this house provided plenty of space, including a large kitchen with an adjoining half-open dining area and a separate large laundry, with a fuel copper and tubs. It was on a large lot with plenty of plum trees (red and yellow), apricots, nectarines, apples and a loquat. There was plenty of space to dig holes in the deep alluvial soil to enable a periodic relocation of the transferable 'dunny' across to the next pit. I still have a small scar on my right big toe where I misdirected the spade during a dunny excavation. Before we left, a pan transfer system commenced, with a very smelly truck, supported by workers who carried away full pans and brought in empty replacements hoisted high, using some weird hooks and lids. These workers wore solid leather headgear and shoulder covers. Of course, under both systems, cut-up newspapers provided toilet paper.

As was customary in the 1930s, we children were expected to undertake our share of domestic chores, varying from those widely undertaken, such as making your own beds, keeping things tidy, sweeping the floors, washing the dishes, turning the

manual clothes wringer and hanging out the laundry on the line (with forked wooden props) to those more place-specific, not only helping to dig the afore-mentioned dunny holes, but also splitting fire-wood with axe or maul, scaling fish, delivering messages and small items. During one severe drought, when homewards-bound from school, we could pick up two billies of drinking water from a tank temporarily deposited at the station, enabling us to develop the skill of swinging a full billy in circles over our shoulder (with a disastrous outcome on one occasion). Also we enjoyed helping in the vegetable garden and climbing the fruit trees, whether as a recreation activity or for the more serious task of fruit-picking.

One of the most exciting (and rewarding) ‘chores’ was the mid-summer harvesting of the blackberries which proliferated on vacant lots. This childhood responsibility was pursued with enthusiasm, notwithstanding thorns and the occasional red-bellied black snake. Planks were deployed to assist entry to the interiors of large clumps. Abundant crops provided a surplus above on-the-spot consumption, available for pies, tarts, jam and preserving in vacuum bottles. Bottled fruit and jam were also occasionally the destinations for peaches, apricots and nectarines.

By chance our ‘Riverdale’ neighbourhood proliferated with boys among the most prominent being the stationmaster Watkins family also with three boys. I well remember ‘Tuppy’ Watkins, with whom we always got along quite well but who was always in trouble at school and elsewhere for serious misdeeds. Girls were in short supply. Our sister, Olive, had a few limited opportunities to join the group, constrained not only by gender but also by age. A gap of four years was too wide to be bridged.

Dora Creek’s distinctive environment offered a wealth of exceptional sites for outdoor activities. Unsurprisingly, picnicking was a leading social and recreational activity for families, friends and community groups, notably the school Parents and Citizens and the church congregation, with our family being willing participants. Picnics varied markedly across a spectrum of frequencies, logistics, participants and degrees of organisation. At the impromptu level, during school holidays, were our short-notice children’s creek-side and lake-side excursions with rations of cheese and vegemite sandwich, apple and bottle of water. More organised were family picnics to friends reached either by rowing boat or creekside walk with baskets of comestibles, swimmers and towels. Our childhood preference was for sites with the best over-water rope swings. Occasional lakeside picnics to Wangi, Myuna Bay and the highly favoured boulder spit at Shingle Splitters Point required the ‘hire’ of a fisherman’s boat. By strange coincidence, two decades later I directed National Fitness School Vacation Camps at our former Myuna Bay picnic site.

The school and church organised the grandest excursions. My earliest memory is of our first seaside trip when I must have been two or three years old. Seated on chaff bags on the rear trays of two lumbering lorries, we travelled rough roads via Cooranbong, Morisset and Wyee to Budgewoi and Norah Head. As we disembarked behind the sand dune, I was immediately scared by the loud roar of the surf, expecting it to come surging over the dune. It took some time to appreciate beachside play. On another early trip I marvelled at the ‘grand’ ferry taking us past Wangi, Rathmines and Toronto to a special picnic to the lakeside park at Speers Point with its views of yachts, coal mines and coal trains...a different world.

On a few occasions, we would travel by train to Sydney, staying at the Salvation Army's Peoples Palace, near Central Station. By tram, ferry or foot we would visit Bondi, Manly, Taronga Park Zoo and the Botanic Gardens and marvel at short trips by electric train to Great Uncle John at Epping and Uncle Alf's newsagency at Parramatta. Our visits to Newcastle evoke mixed memories of beach and surf but also dentistry and tonsillectomy.

Leaving Dora Creek

In 1938 we spent the entire year in Ireland, mainly in the ancestral home of the Holmes family in Convoy, County Donegal, where we children encountered a strikingly different habitat and society, most notably in our schooling in an ancient building, where we were exempted from participating in the Erse language classes. Our sojourn in Convoy and Belfast could well yield yet another, very different, childhood memoir.

For the two years following our return to The Creek in early 1939 life resumed its established routines. We were back in home territory but this could not last. While Dora Creek in the 1930s was an ideal early childhood locale, by the early 1940s, there were various reasons for a move. Deficiencies as a career launching place for teenagers were most clearly indicated by the challenging logistics in pursuing secondary-level schooling, achievable only by boarding away from home. In 1939 and 1940, Gordon and Tom transitioned to secondary schooling in Newcastle, boarding with friends. In addition, in 1941, our father joined the army as Sergeant-Instructor. He made the sensible decision that it was time to sell the shop. In mid-1941, the family relocated to the Newcastle suburb, New Lambton, facilitated by bedrock house prices due to war scares. Instead of my former two-kilometre walk to school, I needed only to cross the road. This lasted only six months until I transitioned to the highly selective Newcastle Boys High School, where I was enrolled in the 1A class. The education at Dora Creek school must have been pretty good.

Whenever visiting Newcastle relatives, a journey to Dora Creek is a nostalgic highlight. The core ritual is the walk from the 'Riverdale' site along the grassy creekside under the railway bridge (now two bridges) past The Holmes Store and on to the school. Dora Creek has always appealed to me as a possible place of retirement, even though its population has trebled, now over 1500 residents, with an unbroken line of houses all the way to the point. It is a great residential location for the workers at Australia's largest power station, Eraring, and at adjacent coal mines. No more fishing boats putt-putting up the creek, but still the distant rumble of (electric) trains on the (new) bridge, the moaning of the she-oaks and the occasional soft cry of the swans. However, the retirement mode pursued by George Cockburn Henderson in the 1930s, with orchard, wheelbarrow, plus fours and pipe is no more than a pipe dream. The world has changed and so has Dora Creek.

Acknowledgement

This memoir is a modest tribute to family and to the people of nineteen-thirties Dora Creek recognising their pivotal role in shaping life's trajectory.

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Figure 1 Map of New South Wales central coast showing Dora Creek's good position (according to Leichhardt) on western shoreline of Lake Macquarie

Source: Newcastle, Central Coast and Hunter Street Directory: UBD



Figure 2 Google image of Dora Creek and its elongated jetty deposits separating Lake Eraring to the north from Bonnell's Bay to the south. Also shown are four significant childhood sites: A Lisnagarvey; B Riverdale; C Holmes store; D School. This image also shows the canal constructed in 1980 taking water from Bonnell's Bay by tunnel under Dora Creek then around Lake Eraring to Australia's largest power station. The canal was excavated across three significant childhood sites, described in the text: the south-western corner of Professor Henderson's former orchard (at A); trimming the lakeshore margins of our bushland adventure-ground and hideaway on the south-west shoreline of Lake Eraring (NNE of B); also Merv Heaton's former cow paddock used for the annual district schools athletics carnival.



Figure 3 Cross-creek view from 'Lisnagarvey' frontage towards Mrs Denny's boarding house, one of the few dwellings scattered along the south bank in the 1930s.



Figure 4 1920s photo of sacks of grain transported a few hundred metres by horse and cart from railway goods yard being loaded onto barge for upstream journey to Avondale for manufacture of Sanitarium Wheaties and Wheatbix. The pedestrian path attached to the railway bridge provided access to the south bank.

Source: Lake Macquarie City Library.



Figure 5 1930s photo of the Holmes general store.



Figure 6 Floodwaters in 1927 lapping floorboards of 'Lisnagarvey'.



Figure 7 Leaving 'Lisnagarvey' formally dressed for train journey to Sydney in 1934.



Figure 8 1930 photo of Gordon and Tom in rowing boat with Professor Henderson in his customary plus fours, unlit pipe, tie, blazer and cap.



Figure 9 Information-rich 1936 family photo, including confirmed bachelor Uncle Alf recently established in his Parramatta newsagency after a lengthy career as assistant in the Grong Grong general store. This is the only photo in the family collection showing all foreshore landscape elements downstream of the railway bridge: modest wharf for rowboat; eucalypts and casuarinas either upright or with pronounced waterside lean; plank seat on stumps (obscured); telephone pole (electricity came soon after); grass trimmed by Merv Heaton's cows; well-worn meandering dirt walking track (the main thoroughfare used by creekside residents).