



The People's Park

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This year I saw a tiny baby eel at the head of a stream in Centennial Park. Just a few centimetres long, speckled and beautiful blue eyes, it had already swum 2,000km across the ocean before taking on the final stretch into the park. From Botany Bay to this little stream it had to navigate a slew of new obstacles that weren't there when its parents made the same journey half a century before, and after spending its long life in this stream,

I'm sure her journey back to the ocean to spawn will have changed once again. But come dams, roads, or storm grates, the eels keep coming. They may well be Centennial Park's most loyal visitors, and thanks to their long lifespans, just five generations of these long-finned eels could recount the entire history of Europeans in Sydney. If only eels could talk!

Talking eels aside, Centennial Park is an extraordinary place to visit. Its 189 hectares contain thousands of years of history, with stories going back much further than the 128 years since it was officially declared a park. From Australia's first people to its last duel (in which no one died), Centennial Park is a stunning outdoor museum.

Eels would be one of the best storytellers for the park, because much of the park's history revolves around water. Before Europeans arrived in Port Jackson in 1788, the Cadigal people had used and cared for the land for millennia. Originally a wetland, the area contained a sacred supply of fresh water provided by underground springs. A huge variety of plants used for medicine and food grew here, and attracted animals that could be hunted for food as well. For Aboriginal people, the swamp was a lush, wild garden, an important meeting place, and even a place for women to give birth. Rock paintings and engravings abounded in the area, with some still remaining in Queen's Park today.

When Europeans arrived they used the traditional Aboriginal songlines (pathways) to get from the new colony to the coast, which skirted the northern ridge of what is now Centennial Park. Today, that road is Oxford Street. The path avoided the swampy park, and thankfully so did European development. But Sydneysiders soon came to appreciate its usefulness when they needed a new source of freshwater to supply the growing town. The Tank Stream, flowing under what is now the CBD, was Sydney's only water source. It had been turned into a stinking sewer within only twenty years of occupation, and the townspeople had to find fresh water elsewhere. Legend has it that it was the Cadigal women, who knew the Centennial Park wetlands well, who showed the settlers where a stream bubbled up from the sandy ground underfoot. That stream remains today, nameless, but fuelling Lachlan Swamp, a thriving bit of living history hidden in the very centre of Centennial Park.

Once the discovery of fresh water was made Governor Macquarie made the area a common to be used for grazing and watering livestock, and so from 1811 into the 1880s, Centennial Park became the Lachlan Swamps and Water Reserve. Of course it wasn't just the cattle that needed water but the townsfolk too, so grand plans were made to build a tunnel leading all the way from the reserve to Hyde Park, which at the time was the racecourse.

In the interest of saving money convict labour was contracted to build the tunnel, but because none of the supervisors – who were free men – wanted to enter the tunnel with them, progress was slow. It wasn't until 1837 that clean water flowed once again into Sydney town, this time from what would soon become Centennial Park.

With the approaching centenary of the arrival of the First Fleet it was decided that the swampland should be

transformed into a proper Victorian park, and this is the event from which Centennial Park gets its name. But proper English gardens are not wetlands, and so the native bush was cleared, rocks were dynamited, water was funnelled into manmade ponds, ornamental gates were installed and grand avenues of trees were planted, all this by hundreds of formerly unemployed residents. At the opening ceremony thousands of people were in attendance, and thirteen Cooks Pines were planted to mark the occasion. Most of the original plantings throughout the park were of exotic species, and along with all thirteen Cooks Pines they perished one by one. It took thirty years of experimentation for gardeners to settle on plants that could survive in the sandy soil while still maintaining a British look. One of the most successful was the majestic Moreton Bay fig trees that still line Grand Drive today and feed the many animals of the park.

The creation of the park offers one of the most interesting snapshots into Sydney's history. One simply has to browse the park rules that were in place: "No picnicking", "No walking on the grass", and "No running" were just some of the rules that we flaunt with abandon in the park today. Back then, Centennial Park was set aside for "proper" enjoyment of the great outdoors, like playing tennis, strolling – but not on the grass!, or sailing model yachts (for which one of the ponds is still named). But it didn't take long for many of the strict rules to be repealed. In 1891, just three years in they began to allow cricket, and three years after that it was decided that perhaps picnics weren't the scourge on Victorian society they were once thought to be.

In 1901 Centennial Park hosted its most important event: the signing of the Federation Agreement. Thousands of people converged in Snake Gully to witness the birth of their new nation, all decked out in their Sunday best. An ornate plaster pavilion had been commissioned for the occasion, but being made of plaster it didn't last long. Today it is replaced by the Federation Pavilion, a grand domed construction of stone built to last. Many people today don't realize that the birthplace of Australia was right here in Centennial Park, although the pavilion is hard to miss as it dominates what is now known as Federation Valley and is easily spotted from the park's main road. The monument has just been honoured by being one of the features on the new five dollar bill, and it does get plenty of visitors, just of the four-legged variety, as the monument stands in a very popular field for afternoon dog walks.

If your walk takes you to the very centre of the park you might be lucky enough to spy what remains of Lachlan Swamp. Now only a fraction of the size of the whole park, it is still easy to stand in Lachlan Swamp and imagine what it was like before Sydney grew up around it. It's still fed by the same underground stream that gurgles up into Lily Pond, and that stream is perhaps the only reason the wetland still remains.

The area is quiet, a bit smelly from the gases that also come up from underground with the stream, and full of ferns, tall sedge grass, and towering paperbark trees. Flying-foxes sleep the day away in the topmost level of the trees, from where they head off every night to fly hundreds of kilometres in search of nectar and fruits. They are Australia's best pollinators and seed dispersers. In the wetland's mid-story hide possums and currawongs, while down below the shrubs secret away the superb fairy-wrens. Inside each tree live thousands of ants, grubs, spiders, and countless other invertebrates, and on the ground are blue-tongue skinks and buff-banded rails, elusive and rare. And of course, in the stream, upriver as far as upriver goes, you find eels: eels who've been living in this very same stream for as long as anyone can remember.

A visit to Centennial Park is not just a history excursion, it's an immersion into a place that tells the stories of history through geology, anthropology, botany, and zoology. In our Stage 2 HSIE Excursion "The People's Park", students journey through Lachlan Swamp, learning about the Aboriginal significance of the site, the uses of plants and what the whole park used to look like. They haul water from the stream just like children did 200 years ago. They visit Federation Pavilion and re-enact the day the Federation Agreement was signed. They even play at enjoying the park the way they would have had to when the park was first born. They cap it off by finding their way back to the Learning Centre and making a map of their route, practising cardinal directions, distances, landmarks, and wayfinding.

History excursions at Centennial Park can be booked and tailored to any stage, and add-ons like orienteering, kite-making, and eco-art are all available. And why not visit the park on the weekends yourself? Download the History App to guide yourself around the park, or take a guided wildlife walk! Contact our Education team to book an excursion, or check out our website to browse and see what else is happening in Sydney's own Centennial Park!

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