

Elegy for an era

Gill Bell

The magpies are warbling their delicious song as I step out of the shade of the trees lining Windsor Crescent into the joyful brightness of a summer morning. It is my last year at school, and this place and I are on the cusp of change.

In the small park the oak leaves are still a soft green, and the tender grass has not yet been dried by summer heat. The air is fresh, but there is the heady hint of warmth to come.

I settle on to a seat and the morning wraps me round. I hear the distant breath of the city, which sounds like a giant mother hushing her baby to sleep.

‘Husssh,’ she says.

This park by the station is a magic place. This is the beating heart of Surrey Hills.

The magpies have watched over this place for millennia. They have seen the Dreamtime and lifted the veil of darkness from the earth. The first peoples slipped through the trees, protected by Bunjil, and obedient to the voices of the wisdom keepers. A blink of an eye ago, tall ships sailed up the bay to lay claim to this land. The sounds of sawing and hammering pierced the bushland calm.

The undulating slopes of wiry grass, carefully cultivated for thousands of years, are churned up by lumbering fat animals. They are easy prey for hunters.



Iron rails are laid across the countryside, and monstrous black machines hiss and roar their way along them. The kangaroos take flight and retreat ever further inland. The kookaburras laugh in despair as trees crash to the ground. And the first nations people, bewildered, abandon their lands.

The Windsor Park estate is pegged out in generous housing allotments. There is plenty of land. This in the bush, that mysterious area ringing the young city. Stringybark and messmate are replaced by saplings of oak and plane trees brought across the seas from 'home'.

The train line follows the course of a pretty creek thick with maidenhair fern. Travellers from Melbourne catch the train from Princes Bridge to Camberwell, where they alight and catch the little country train to Surrey Hills. As the train makes its way up the incline, passengers are often called on to dismount to lighten the load, and on frosty mornings their feet slide on the icy rails.

In summer the day trippers carry with them packets of sandwiches wrapped in cool cabbage leaves for freshness, and they picnic on the grassy slopes. Children, intoxicated by the fresh air and the bird song, splash in the creek and play on the fringe of the scrub.

'Don't go into the bush!' warn their parents. 'Stay close!'

The story of little Clara Crosbie, lost in the bush east of Melbourne a few short years ago, is fresh in their minds.

Violet farms flourish along Warrigal Road, and I like to think of the day trippers buying little posies to take some country freshness back to the city with them. Almost one and a half centuries later, violets still spring up in neglected flowerbeds in gardens around the district.

In a few short decades Surrey Hills is settled. The houses are decorated with pretty ironwork in the Victorian style, and behind the scenes nightmen travel down the bluestone laneways to remove their waste. The rag and bone man makes his rounds with his mournful call, and the milkman's horse clops dreamily along the route it knows by heart.

The Great War casts its shadow over the world. New street names recall the foreign conflicts: Lille, Verdun and Amiens. Returned soldiers raise their families with hopes of a peaceful future, but just twenty years later war comes again. The sons of survivors of the Great War set out again to do their bit. Trains bring loads of eager young recruits who disembark at Surrey Hills and tramp to the barracks and parade ground beside the track. They sing as they march. Their destination late in the war is northern Australia, where they will play mostly a waiting role.

After the war the pace of life accelerates. New smart red brick houses, with modern luxuries like kerosene heaters, fitted carpets and even indoor toilets, spring up. The streets fill with chattering children. They roam over the suburb and play games in the street until dusk, when their aproned mothers call them home.

The last of the steam trains are phased out and red rattlers reign...

In the sunlit present bells start ringing and the railway crossing lights flash. The heavy white gates are pushed across Union Road, barring the path to the morning traffic. The stationmaster in his navy uniform sternly shuts the gate in the face of latecomers panting across the footbridge. He blasts his whistle and waves his flag and the train pulls out, letting silence rush in.

I sit dreaming in the park.

The Victorian timber station with its solid panelling and decorative brass work will soon be demolished. A brownish pebbledash station will replace it.

Eventually this station too will be found wanting and sacrificed to the god of traffic. It too will be demolished. Earth-moving equipment will move in and tear down trees to create a great gash across country. A white metal and glass unit will be dug deep into the earth and named 'Union'.

I will mourn the gash torn in the earth. I will mourn for the little park with its graceful trees. I will mourn for the pretty station with its fringed veranda. I will even mourn for the ugly-duckling pebbledash station.

Somewhere in the Dreaming, people of the first nation still move silently through the trees. Somewhere the creek still gurgles over stones, and the magpies sing.

I step back into the present day and set off into the morning.



Gill and old Surrey Hills station ca 1971