

Speaker Series – *The Ways of the Bushwalker* with Melissa Harper

Interviewer: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series. We'd like to start by acknowledging the Gadigal and the Wangal People of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced. Today, we are joined by Dr. Melissa Harper to discuss her book, *The Ways of the Bushwalker: n Foot in Australia*. Melissa is a senior lecturer in Australian Studies and Cultural History at the University of Queensland. She has published widely on the history of walking in Australia, including the acclaimed first edition of *Ways of the Bushwalker*. Welcome, Melissa.

Melissa Harper: Hi, thanks for having me.

Interviewer: Bushwalking is very much embedded in the social history of Australia. The incentives for taking a walk in nature have developed over time reacting to changing social influences and attitudes. Can you speak a little bit about the evolution of bushwalking in Australia?

Melissa Harper: [00:00:46] I mean, one of the things that I think it's just important to begin with is to say that when I'm looking at bushwalking in Australia, obviously indigenous Australians walked here for thousands of years for their own cultural purposes, for their traditions, for trade and interacting with other groups. So in the book, I'm not looking at indigenous walking practices because I am focusing on walking for recreation. So when we're looking at bushwalking, we're not looking at the development that term for quite some time. But those first settlers, when they arrived here, you know, they found the environment very, very different to that to which they were used to. And there's a real perception, I think often that people from Britain didn't necessarily enjoy the environment that they were in. But one of the things that I found when I was doing the research for the book was that settlers were walking from the very beginnings of when they arrived. So one of the people that I start with is a surgeon, George Morgan, who talks about walking for pleasure in 1788. So you've got that tradition from where people are coming from Great Britain. And of course, they were inveterate walkers ramblers there for pleasure. You know, that simple romantic movement was something that was so embedded in the culture in the United Kingdom.

And when people are coming here, their sort of engaging in short walks, walks on their properties, walks to just experience nature, I guess, to experience that new environment that they're in. So curiosity, scientific curiosity, too, is incredibly important, but it does take time before people are sort of really choosing to walk for pleasure in Australia because the distances that people have to travel were often very great. And so if you walked off and that was a sign of poverty.

[00:02:32] So it's really when we get to say the 1880's-1890's that we start to really see the development of what we might think of now as walking for pleasure in places like the Blue Mountains. After example, you start to get the development of guest houses and boarding houses, walking tracks, often on private property. But people might allow people to walk for pleasure. So you're starting to get that more sort of idea of going for a weekend away to the Blue Mountains, very popular, or destinations, again, places close to Melbourne. And the development of clubs is another really important thing that happens in the 1890's. But one of the interesting things I think about walking in that time is the walk's still are often quite gentle. It tended to be upper middle class gentlemen that are often walking in that early period and they're often walking in clothing that we would just find very difficult to walk in now. So often, you know, they're long pants, their suit coats and shirts and women in that we're walking in along volumous dresses. So it would have been much, much more difficult to walk and often going, I suppose, on country roads rather than the narrow sort of Bush track that we might associate with walking today. Yeah, that starts around that time as well, but really takes off in the 1920s and 30s.

Interviewer: [00:03:54] That was my next question, actually, and it's a section in the book that depicts the heyday of bushwalking in Australia in the 1920s and 30s and bushwalking was experiencing the height of its popularity. So popular, in fact, that businesses such as film studios and department stores were capitalizing on this, using commercial bushwalks as a very effective marketing tool. Mystery hikes were all the rage across the country. Here in Sydney, thousands of locals were participating in these events. I was quite fascinated by this and the fact that it's largely disappeared from our collective memory. Why did bushwalking capture the public interest so comprehensively in the 20s and 30s?

Melissa Harper: [00:04:34] It is quite incredible. And that's actually where I sort of really started initially thinking, OK, this is where it sort of really happened before I went back and found that we've been walking for so much longer. But I think in the 20s and 30s, what we're really starting, what we're really seeing there is a whole range of factors sort of leading to that huge popularity. So I think some of it comes into play because of post-World War One.

[00:04:59] So WW1 really obviously had dramatic impacts on Australians in terms of the numbers of the war dead, the numbers of people who came back and were maimed and that sort of visibility of maimed ex-servicemen was really confronting for people. And we'd been a nation that by so much of our kind of emerging identity around the physically fit male body in particular. And so there were real concerns in that period about national strength and fitness that was linked to WW1, but also linked to just broader concerns about modern life. That idea that modernity, that living in the cities, urban life and working in offices rather than sort of life on the land was having a sort of impact on people's health and fitness. So there was a real sort of enthusiasm to get back to nature.

[00:05:48] And again, this is something that was in train before the war and also you see in across Europe and in North America. So that just set out, again, linked to that sense of modernity impacting on our health and fitness. So you sort of really see this emergence of a celebration of nature and of being outdoors. You see it in things like the emergence of Boy Scouts movement, the enthusiasm for nature study and nature study starts to be implemented in schools in Australia. So, you know, getting young people really involved and invested in appreciating their local environment, appreciating the Australian bush. You see authors like May Gibbs. Ethel Pedley with *Dot and the Kangaroo*, really encouraging that love for Australian nature. And so, yeah, just a desire to really foster the idea of the modern body as well. And that the modern body was fit. It was taught, it was lean. So you see physical culture really developing in too. So I think those sort of factors come together and really encourage people to want to get outdoors. And so they are exploring Bush and that's when bushwalking clubs in the 1920s really proliferate. And so in Sydney, there is a range of clubs before this, but the first really big club that caters for men and women, because clubs will often single sex, was the Sydney Bushwalkers, which formed in 1927. And it's from that the Sydney

bushwalkers forming at that time that you get the word bushwalker or bushwalking or bushwalk.

[00:07:20] People had used that or used those words together, perhaps when they were writing something. But it's the putting of them together with that club and then that sort of repetition over time that really actually starts to become the term that we use. So it's an Australian word we can claim for the kind of walking that was taking place at that time. And bushwalkers in clubs had quite specific ideas or developed over time, quite specific idea of bushwalking, so that it was where you were able to find your way, you able to carry a pack, you could read a map, could be self-sufficient. You stayed out overnight in the bush. And so that's that sort of idea of serious bushwalking really takes hold in the mid to late 20s and 30s. And what's so interesting about the mystery hikes that you've referred to that take place in 1932 in, as you say, in cities across Australia, the Short-Lived phenomenon. But yes, the railways put on these trains go to Central Station, you hop on the train, you've bought the ticket to go on the mystery hike. You don't necessarily know, well you don't know where you're going when you get on and you go a distance in the train and then you hop out at that station and then you go for a walk with, as you say, in some instances in some cities, that was hundreds of people. In some of the instances in Sydney, it was thousands of people.

[00:08:35] So, again, they're on often quite wide bush roads and there's entertainment often in the middle of the day. They might be led by a radio personality. And they were very controversial because they were held on a Sunday. And so the churches were up in arms because at this time and it's something that I think so alien for us to think about now, but at this time, Sunday was seen as a day of rest. I mean, if you didn't go to church, it was it was a day in which you just spent quiet family time. It wasn't a day in which the shops were open, for example. So it wasn't a day where people were supposed to make money.

[00:09:14] So the fact the railways were using this enthusiasm and fostering this enthusiasm for hiking as a money making venture was really controversial for the church. But also bushwalkers, serious bushwalkers that I've spoken about found these mystery hikes, and even that word was sort of stressing the importance of the term bushwalk because it had become something that serious walkers started to become quite protective of. And hiking was seen as a different kind of walking, it was seen as

much easier. You didn't need skill. I mean, again, that the term used very differently today. But in the 1930s, hiking was a term that some people associated with American culture. So there were debates about the term, you know, where did that come from? And unresolved usually. Something that, yes, there is bushwhackers, really, many of them really wanted to hang on to the idea of bushwalking and bushwalking as a as a word.

Interviewer: [00:10:07] Hmm. It was quite fascinating. And it led to like a division in the disciplines. Didn't the true bushwalkers sort of look down on the whole discipline. There was a hierarchy in the whole bushwalking thing, which is really interesting to me because I wasn't aware of that, and especially names that are so familiar to people in Sydney even today, like Paddy Pallin. I bought my first backpack to go overseas from Paddy Pallin when I had no idea who he was.

Melissa Harper: [00:10:39] That's right. Absolutely. And he starts his business in the midst of the Depression. So it seems like, yeah an odd time that you would start an equipment business, but it took off slowly. So, yes, I think that's you're right. Those names that we don't know the history behind, they are real people, you know. Paddy Pallin was a real person, enthusiastic bushwalker who came here from the UK and fell in love with walking in Australia and was just instrumental, you know, hugely instrumental in its popularity.

Interviewer: [00:11:09] And he was quite moderate in his attitude in that bushwalking slash hiking divide, wasn't he?

Melissa Harper: [00:11:15] He was. So he was initially enthusiastic with the term hiking, but he sort of got a little bit know a little bit of trouble from some of his more serious bushwalking colleagues. But he was sort of very much wanting a wide range of people to enjoy bushwalking that it didn't always need to be those really hardcore, serious walks. So, yes, he was also responsible for forming a club with Marie Byles that was aimed at encouraging a gentler sort of style of walking, because, again, one of the things that happened here that was important was that you had people coming from Europe who weren't necessarily used to walking in densely forested environments. They were more used to sort of open country and tradition of rambling or even from parts of Europe. So he was wanting to sort of make it a broader church.

Interviewer: [00:11:59] So as we've sort of alluded to in the previous questions, that bushwalking has long been associated with conservation of the natural environment. And you include a quote in the book from CDA Roberts, who was the president of the New South Wales Federation of Bushwalkers, who argued in 1938 "*that every experienced walk and knows that the places of greatest charm are those which have been left quite untouched by the hand of man. We should therefore always do our utmost to leave the bush exactly as we find it. Even a few broken twigs spoil its pristine loveliness to some extent, however small, and the slightest trifles multiply quickly into something serious*". You mentioned in the intro that is updated edition of your book, which the first edition was written 13 years ago. You've added a section in response to the recent devastating effects of climate change to our natural environment, most notably the fires that's raged across the country in recent years. How have these developments changed our relationship with the Bush and impacted the future of bushwalking in Australia?

Melissa Harper: [00:13:01] Yeah, so it was interesting when I was re or updating the book that we had the devastating fires, as you've said. And for me, I mean, I grew up in Sydney, but I live in Brisbane now. And one of the earliest places to be impacted was Binna Burra, which is just a beautiful part of south east Queensland with a very historic accommodation there that emerged in the 1930s.

[00:13:25] So to see that and then to see the devastation that followed, obviously incredibly tragic, the lives that were lost in those fires that we had the end of 2019 and early 2020. And they really, I think, impacted. I mean, the devastation on the environment and the animals just being terrible. And I think it again, just makes us incredibly aware of the fragility of the environment and what we need to do to protect it and that we need to be active, all of us in in doing what we can. I mean, as you say, bushwalking early on became very important in encouraging that kind of conservation and preservation consciousness among Australians. Bushwalkers were really early advocates for environmental protection.

[00:14:12] And that's a thread that has continued through the sort of the bushwalking movement. But more broadly, you know, those fires just really brought home to people who might be more occasional users of the bush as well. How important these places,

all of us can walk somewhere. You might only walk that very occasionally, and if only walked there once or it might be a place that you go to again and again when they're impacted in that way by fires it is devastating and has, I think of an impact on your own sort of sense of identity in a way, when you actually know when you have that strong connection to a particular place. I mean, I think to one of the amazing things about the environment is the regeneration that can occur relatively quickly. So there's that sort of visibility to that. But I think when that happens too, you know, and we do see those environments returning it's wonderful, but I think we need to remember just how easy it is for us to lose those really important places. Yeah, that's what we're so really grappling with now. And of course, some places still haven't reopened. You know, there are tracks in Australia that haven't reopened since the fires because they've just been so devastated.

[00:15:20] So I think that's sort of yeah, that's the change that we're seeing. And I hope it's just creating a much greater awareness of how special and how lucky we are to live in places that we do where we have such - Many of us have such good access, relatively easy access to these beautiful places in nature.

Interviewer: [00:15:41] Yes, that actually leads into my next question. So here in Sydney, where we're recording from, we're lucky to have many trails in national parks at our doorstep. I know you're based in Brisbane at the moment, but as you mentioned, you were originally from Sydney. After reading the book, it's obvious that you've done a lot of bushwalking yourself across the entire country. Do you have any local bushwalking recommendations for our listeners who might be looking to indulge in a little bushwalking over the summer break?

Melissa Harper: [00:16:12] Yeah, and hopefully cooler conditions then. Obviously you're going to have some hot days ahead. But I mean, you can't get past the Blue Mountains. I absolutely miss them a lot living in Brisbane now. They were somewhere that I did not as often as I like to go when I when I did live in Sydney, but at the Grand Canyon track that starts at Evans Lookout at Blackheath, I think it's a fabulous trek, you know, a bit of a climb out, even though it's not a very long trek. But yes, bit hard on the knees. Govett's Leap, I think, fabulous. But also, I mean, I think to the other thing that's so easy to forget is a number of tracks that might be around places like, you know, you can go to Hornsby and get off of the train there and relatively quickly

find yourself in some fabulous bushland there around Cowan and you can or you can sort of do the parts of the Great North walk as well, which are great. I was in Sydney earlier this year and did I'd done the Manly to the Spit Walk several times, which I think is always a beautiful, beautiful walk down in here. But I did the North Head walk with my son, which was great. And the other place I love is the walks down in the Royal National Park. And good for summer too, because you can get that access to the beach with some of those.

[00:17:25] I mean, the coast track's a long walk. You don't want to do that in a day but going to those beaches at Era and Burning Palms and the walking there. So there's just so much.

Interviewer: [00:17:34] So lastly, and this is a library podcast we always like to finish by asking for reading recommendations. Do you have any reading suggestions for our listeners who are looking to take some books on holiday? It can be on bushwalking, guide books or otherwise?

[00:17:50] I think if people are interested in reading a bit about walking, John Blay, who is the author of a book about the Bundian Way, which is Aboriginal pathway between Mount Kosciusko and Twofold Bay by on the south coast of New South Wales. So he wrote that book, I think about five years ago, but he's just written a book called *Wild Nature: walking Australia's South East Forests*, which looks at the history and significance of the forests there. That's a lovely one. And this one I haven't read, but I'm really looking forward to is Anthony Sharwood's book where he walked the Alpine Walking Trek by himself. Yeah. It's called *From Snow to Ash: one man's 500 kilometre trek through an iconic Australian landscape* because he you know, he had blizzards and then he experienced the fires. So, yeah, I'm really looking forward to that one.

Patti Miller's *Joy of High Places*. Again, that's more about her long distance walking that she's done in Europe. But also it's a memoir sort of connecting with her brother who has a paragliding accident. And so this sort of this story about the high places and different forms of love and the sort of relationship after that accident.

[00:19:02] And these aren't walking books. But they two that I loved and read sort of earlier this year on holidays, *The Weekend* by Charlotte Wood and *Bruny* by Heather Rose. I highly recommend both of them.

Interviewer: [00:19:14] And get the paperback editions. They fit in the backpack. Thank you so much for your time, Melissa. If you'd like to hear more from Melissa, a new edition of *The Ways for the Bushwalker* has recently been published by New South Wales Press and is available at all good local booksellers. If you'd like to take advantage of some of Melissa's summer reading suggestions, you can find many of these titles available for reservation in that online library catalogue. Thank you for listening and look out for more upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library What's On and social media channels.