ONCE UPON A PLACE: ILLAWARRA LITERATURE IN EARLY NEWSPAPERS

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My MA (Hons) research thesis, which I am about to complete through the English Studies Program at the University of Wollongong, is titled ‘Once Upon A Place – Writing The Illawarra: searching for the literary identity of The Illawarra in prose fiction, verse, scripts, journals, autobiographies and reminiscences’. I have also edited an anthology of early Illawarra poetry, which will be published in 2000.

During the research for this thesis I have had to consult the files of numerous Illawarra newspapers on microfilm, including the *Kiama Independent*, its predecessor the *Examiner*, the *South Coast Times* and the *Kiama Reporter & Journal* (both now defunct) and the *Illawarra Mercury*. These regional newspapers are valuable to me as sites for retrieval of early Illawarra verse and prose fiction, from which an emotive history (as opposed to a statistical one provided by the bulk of these publications) and an Illawarra literary identity can be constructed. To illustrate these aspects, this paper will look at some verse from what I term the Early Period (1856–1922). I will also share some of what I have discovered along the way.

The earliest poem about the Illawarra I have been able to recover was published in the *Illawarra Mercury* of 28 January 1856:

**AN ADIEU TO WOLLONGONG**

An adieu to the beauties of nature, I go,
Far from the haunts where the sweet flowers grow,
Far from the meads where the streamlets flood on,
Far from the groves where the birds pour their song!

I leave all their beauties with many a sigh,
I feel my heart ache as I pass them by,
I think that perhaps I’ll ne’er again see
Them, save in my mind’s true memory.

Soon different scenes will meet my view,
As dear to some and as pleasant too;
But to my heart they’ll not bring the charm
That Wollongong’s pleasant fields have done.

Some love the town with its haunts of vice;
I love the country where our Maker’s voice
Is heard above, about, around us every hour,
Alike in plant, or bird, or tree, or flower.

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Oh! Nature, glorious essence of the Eternal One;
When viewing thee, we fain our eyes would turn
From those dark scenes where art and sin entice
The yielding soul to every hurtful vice.

On every side we view the power of God;
Gaze we on mountains raised to meet the eye,
Or peaceful valleys that in silence lie.

Still, still, we find the same Almighty hand,
That form'd the daisy, made the mountains stand;
This power is found alike in all things, great or small,
He only who has made them can preserve them all!

Walk on the sands by yonder sea,
And there the Eternal's impress you may see
Graved upon sea, or rock, or sand, or shell;
Nothing too great or small His power to tell.

Then cast our eyes upon the land,
Where near the shore the grave yard stands;
We own that naught created can withstand,
The power of nature's God's all powerful hand.

'Advance Wollongong,' in things good; in your tale
Let amity kind and union prevail;
That so, when the beauties of nature we scan,
We may find the same calmness and peace in man!

S.K. 1

It's interesting (ironic, perhaps) that the earliest poetic glimpse of the Illawarra available to today's readers is written from the point of view of somebody who is leaving it and is looking back at it nostalgically. A lot of the Illawarra verse from this early period was published in the *Kiama Independent*. A succinct history of this newspaper can be found on its website:

**Our roots run deep**
The Kiama Independent is now reputed to be the oldest continuous family owned and operated newspaper in Australia. It has served the Kiama Municipality for over 135 years, being established in 1836 by Joseph Weston. The business was consecutively passed into the next two generations, John McLean Weston then Bert Weston. In 1963, Bert Weston died and the business passed to his widow Marjorie Weston and her three sons, John, Colin and Bruce.

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Today, John Weston is now the general manager, Colin the company paymaster and finishing department manager while Bruce is the company's computer system manager.\(^2\)

The Kiama Independent's predecessor was the Kiama Examiner, and, through a series of editorials on the one hand and letters on the other, which appeared in both the Examiner and the Sydney Morning Herald, a battle between the editor of the Examiner and powerful Illawarra landowner, Alexander Berry, is revealed. In this exchange the Examiner attempts to expose Mr Berry's alleged illegal activities. Threats of legal action come from both parties. The editorial confidence which permeates the Examiner side of the argument suggests that, because of its status as the only newspaper in the Illawarra, it would be immune to the threats of closure which came from Mr Berry. At the height of the exchange the Examiner did, in fact, close, and there are strong suggestions that Alexander Berry bought it and closed it down, or, at the very least, exerted his considerable influence in the process of its closure. Shortly after the demise of the Examiner, the Kiama Independent came into being, and no mention of the allegations against Alexander Berry ever appeared in its pages.

In this early period, poetry was so much a part of newspaper publishing that it even appeared as a substantial component of advertising. In my *Anthology of Early Illawarra Poetry* I have recreated an advertisement for Knight's Bankrupt Store which appeared in the Kiama Reporter & Journal. This verse is a major part of the item:

B Thoughtful and buy at Knight's Bankrupt Store,
B Saving as you're sure to want some more;
B Careful and buy yourself a Dress,
B Watchful lest it get in a mess.
B Attentive and always endeavour to strive
To get this swarm of B's a hive.

B Thoughtful and study your husband's wants,
B Watchful and see if he wants new Pants.
B Careful and buy him Socks without seams,
B Saving and buy Parachutes lest it teems.
B Attentive and always endeavour to strive
To get this swarm of B's a hive.

B Thoughtful and buy your wife a Skirt,
B Watchful and see that she does not flit.
B Careful and see that she's got good Hose,
B Saving lest they wear out at the toes.

B Attentive and always endeavour to strive
To get this swarm of B's a hive.
B Thoughtful and buy the girl a Frock,
B Watchful and see she has a good stock;
B Careful and buy her things fully big,
B Saving and buy her a first-class rig.
B Attentive and always endeavour to strive
To get this swarm of B's a hive.
B Thoughtful and see your children are warm,
B Watchful lest you get a big swarm.
B Careful and save all the money you can,
B Truthful and admit I'm the cheapest man.
B Attentive and always endeavour to strive
To get this swarm of B's a hive.
B Thoughtful and come to Knight's Bankrupt Shop,
B Watchful as from Reid's it's a skip and a hop.
B Careful and buy all the goods that you need,
B Saving as from Kiama we'll soon be freed.
B Attentive and always endeavour to strive
To get this swarm of B's a hive.

It is at once clever word play and a reinforcement of patriarchal values.

Though much of Henry Kendall's work was published in Sydney journals such as the Empire and Sydney Morning Herald, a number of his poems initially appeared in Illawarra newspapers. 'Kiama', for example, was first published in the Illawarra Mercury of 12 April 1861. In connection with Henry Kendall's work, a poem titled 'Kembla' was published in the Empre of 13 August 1861 with the author as Basil Kendall, Henry's untrustworthy brother. The same poem, with only the name of the mountain changed, appeared later the same year under the title 'Keira' (the mountain next to Kembla) in the Illawarra Mercury with the author's name given as Henry Kendall. Could Basil, who was known to have forged cheques in his brother's name, have stolen the manuscript and have it published? Or does this simply represent an editorial error? More investigation is required, and early Illawarra newspapers may be the place to investigate.

The poetry of Nettie Palmer, Phillip D. Lorimer and E.J. Brady represents the beginnings of a truly Australian voice in the poetry of the Illawarra, in which the emulative style and alien, inadequate expression apparent in most earlier (and some later) Illawarra poetry is absent. In Lorimer's poetry, especially, there is a familiarity with the landscape which is reflected in the Australianness of the language. A.G. Stephens, the sternest of critics of early Australian literature,

wrote that 'Brady is almost solitary in his field, and intimate, and strong.' All three poetic voices were unique for their time. The literary work which is Australian in spirit, as well as in scene or incident,' wrote Stephens in 1901, 'is only beginning to be written.'5 Lorimer is represented by sixteen poems in my collection, and these are only the poems which deal overtly with the Illawarra.

There is a series of five poems about the so-called 'Bulli disaster' (a mine explosion), from which a history can be constructed, independent of any other newspaper reportage of it. The first poem in these was published in April 1887:

THE BULLI DISASTER
Hark to that sound, o'er the rising wave!
Mocking the thunder with the shock it gave;
The stout heart paused, the timid quail'd to hear,
And women's cheeks were blanch'd with mortal fear,
When belch'd from out the tunnel's mouth so dire,
On Bulli's heights, a flame of gaseous fire.

All then was told, the shouts of madden'd men
For comrades dear they'd never meet again;
The shrieks of women rending through the air,
For husbands loved, and hopeful sons so fair.
Was pitiful, and gave unto the day
A glance of frenzy - madness - who shall say?
And while the speed of electricity
Wing'd through the land the dread calamity,
True men stood forth, the enterprise to dare
Of entering in to brave the gaseous air;
All knew 'twas hopeless, yet they led the van
To "do or die" as only true men can.

But who can battle with the odds they fight?
Senseless they're borne again into the light
By trusty hearts that follow close at hand.
Another effort with a second band!
Await the moment's conquering of gas;
'Tis done! In through the black'ning gloom they pass.
Oh, who shall paint the sweating hours of toil,
Of anxious hearts, amid that sable soil,
As to each mutilated form that lay
In death they came, and gently bore away

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A weary mile unto the light of day?
Oh God! It was a touching sight to see
The fearful depth of human agony,
As some torn corpse, all blacken'd, singed, and bare
Was recognised by wife or mother there,
And wrung from hearts the accents of despair.

A mother gazed upon her mangled son,
Struck mute with grief to see what death had done;
She'd kissed him with the kiss that clings,
Then bade him go forth to learn the strife of men
But yester mom, and now today he lays,
The death gloom on his brow, beneath her gaze
Her hewess gaze - oh, call it stony glare!
This must be grief, or else 'tis wild despair.

Tread softly, mourners, round the graves that keep
The Bulli miners in their last sad sleep;
Tho' simple toilers underneath the earth,
Such are the sinews of a nation's worth.

M.J. Shannon's poem - also titled 'The Bulli Disaster' - offers a similarly emotive viewpoint, with an appeal for donations for surviving widows and children:

'Twas on the 23rd of March the wires flashed the fatal news around,
That eighty gallant miners were lost beneath the ground,
And that the Bulli Colliery was but a heap of ruin,
And that widows and their orphans were without a way of doing.

6. Kiama Independent 4 April 1887: 4
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They left their humble homes to toil hard the hours away,
And little dreamed that death was near or danger round them lay;
But hopefully looked forward to return to those most dear,
To give their wives a greeting and their little ones a cheer.
But ah, alas! 'tis sad to say that this was all denied,
For without a moment's notice they were called upon to die,
And by a terrible explosion it makes our heart's blood creep,
They lost their precious lives and this country for them weeps.
'Twas a lovely summer's evening, children playing round the door,
Thinking all no doubt of the absent ones to gaze upon once more;
When suddenly they were startled by a noise upon the street,
With a sound of many weeping and the tramp of many feet.
Up they leaped and gazed on a sad and mournful crowd,
That through the street came rushing people crying long and loud;
Oh! how their hearts went leaping as they gazed upon the scene,
Oh heavens! it was a dreadful sight - it seemed just like a dream.
There were crying women with their children who were now their only joy;
While others almost frantic for they had lost their darling boy.
There were sisters sobbing and wailing for the brother they adored,
All thinking of the dear ones they'd look upon no more.
The sight it was heartrending, quite terrible to behold;
Funerals going in all quarters; people burying young and old;
Persons almost frantic, with grief and in salt tears,
Taking a farewell of those they had cherished for years,
Many years may pass away but still will the tale be told,
By young and old throughout the land when days are warm or cold;
And years may pass and flowers fade, and summer leaves turn brown,
But MacCabe, Green and Evans' fame shall never die in famous Bulli town.
Those gallant three worked with all their might both night and day,
To rescue those poor miners that lay dead beneath the clay.
They soothed the sorrowing widow, patted the little ones on the head,
Saying you will all be provided for, but all within are dead.
You tender hearted people of Victoria, and sunny New South Wales,
Who know nothing of the dangers of mines, or even noxious gales,
Think with pity on those now destitute, and left so sad and lone,
And cheerfully subscribe your mite, to make for them a home.9

J.O. Tucker wrote other poem connected to the event, 'An Appeal for the Widows and Orphans of the Bulli Disaster',10 It dispenses with details about the disaster, concentrating on the aspect of donations for family members:

10. *Illawarra Mercury* 14 April 1887.
In ‘Pre-Eminence in Grief’, which appeared in the Bulletin, there is much anti-royal sentiment being expressed. This poem is a response to a news item about the mayoress of Sydney, who was soliciting signatures for a card to be sent to Queen Victoria offering condolences on the death of her husband. It is a wonderful example of the wit and venom of the early republicans and it uses the deaths of the eighty miners in the Bulli Disaster as a comparison point of grief, thus exposing the obsequiousness of the mayoress’s plea:

The Bulli sacrifice of eighty lives
Where orphans join the wall of widowed wives
Will mock ‘pre-eminence in grief’ with V.,
Who, fat and rich, has reached her Jubilee.
But Jingoes won’t compare a miner’s wife
With Vic., therefore bring forth an equal life -
Eugenie lost a husband, throne, and son,
Nor yet ‘pre-eminence in grief’ has won!
Sad tide of ‘pre-eminence in grief’!
Why not have said – ‘Pre-eminence in Beef’?
Pre-eminence among the Brunswick’s brood
Who never knew the yearning pangs for food;
Pre-eminence in mighty money-bags,
While sisters toiled to death in want and rags?
And was there not a case in London town
Surpassing all the grief she felt for Brown?

The Bulli Widows’, in the Illawarra Mercury, is inspired by a report which states ‘The Bulli widows are not satisfied with the proposed distribution of the Relief Fund by the Executive Committee’ – a relief fund I like to think was inspired by the pleas of poets. It gives us detailed insights into the class structure of a nineteenth-century Australian mining village, while at the same time reinforcing a patriarchal viewpoint about the emotional state of women:

Ye’re not contented, are ye not? Well then
Ye’re deuced hard to please, let us admit.
What shame for these awkarnd committeemen
To hold from ye ye’t ’widdies’ rights; to wit,
To make ye bankers of the whole bang lot;
We know ye’d ‘put it to the best of use’
And save them all the trouble they have got
In shelling round what ye won’t dream profuse.
Of course ye’d distribute it fairly, too,
Amongst ye’r selves! We know ye’d never dream
Of blacklegs or of white ones; no! – not you –

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Ye never did; nor does it likely seem
Ye'd do so now. Ye'd make equality ye'r basis
On which to build ye'r philanthropic plan,
And overlook sectarian cases
As Bulli always did and always can.
We have not the slightest doubt but what ye'd
Make sacrifices for your sisters' sake —
Forget all self and all pertains to greed,
And very models of ye'selves ye'd make!

And, as a "wind-up" to the whole affair,
Ye'd likely give a picnic as a test:
Of wholesale satisfaction, and declare:
"That this procedure was the very best
That could occur; for in money dealing
Men are dotards when compared with females,
And in this case betray too much feeling —
Too much compassion to adjust the scales'
Of Justice rightly, and to scatter round,
Without respect to persons, all 'our dues.'
But women we are by our conscience bound
To do the right and all the wrong refuse.'
And as we've said ye'd likely give a picnic,
And ask us out to where the waves of blue
Strike the green headland. It would be a big trick,
But no bigger than we know ye can do;
Ye'd send an invitation, with command
To leave our girl at home and 'bring a friend.'
A noble thought – most excellently plan'd!
But, thank ye, mesdames, we cannot attend.
Was it for this we hurried on that night?
(Dead, dark, and dim, with clouds that threatened rain.)

And got blind spills on slushy roads, where light
Ne'er shone to show the dang'rous spots; where drain
And rut, and watertable, lay to snare
Our feet; to give the "little speech" we wrote
The day before; so thinking, then and there
To half astound, without slip or nae,
Some score of 'spouters' and a hall of folk.
Was it for this that 'Parsons' so-and-so,
And 'Fathers' this-and-that, vehemently spoke?
Dilating broadly – heavens only know –
To rouse the people to fork out their 'stuff.'
Was it for this that made men rush the stage
12

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With tens and twenties and five pounds enough?
(Of all complexions and of ev'ry age.)
Was it for this that men scooped out purses
Of their dear wives the very day before?
To outdo their neighbours in 'disburses'
In planking down their 'little' stock and store;
Till red gold was flung upon the table,
A very glitt'ring shining shower behold;
Like what they 'pitch' of the brawny sable
Sabines, who croaked, Tarpeia with their gold.
But this is just enough; let us retire;
We speak to women as we speak to men;
We'd sooner sling our hats into the fire
Than ever cast them in the air again.

ATTICUS

The last poem in the series — and the next poem I have been able to recover about the Illawarra — is titled 'A Year Ago Today' and is by J. Wynn. It is a reiteration of the events of the disaster itself, probably composed for a memorial service at the graveyard. It serves to illustrate how traumatic the event was even a year after it had happened:

The Bulli Disaster has not survived into the present day as such a monumental event. Modern historians and writers (notably playwright Wendy Richardson with her play, Wabby Gully) have written more about the 'Kembla Disaster,' which rated only one poetic response when it occurred.

The early Illawarra newspapers are also important in the recovery of the previously-silenced output of poets such as Henry Kendall's mother Melinda/Matilda (even details about her name remain confused, though she wrote under the name Melinda), who is relegated to the footnotes of her famous son's story. Her poetic output was considerable, though in connection with my work only two of her poems contribute to the literary identity of the Illawarra:

FAIRY MEADOW
The fairies and elves from the meadow have gone
To some sylvan spot, where no railroads are known,
Where no miners will dig through the bowels of earth
To disturb them, and drive them away from their hearth.

They are gone, I am sure; I have searched every nook;
By hillside, by wayside, by green mound, and brook,

12. Illawarra Mercury 2 August 1887:3
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No trace of their footsteps will be here seen again
They are all trodden out by the footsteps of men.

No more can the sound of their tripping be heard,
As they dance in the moonlight around the green sward;
No; their music has ceased, and no more can be heard
To mingle its notes with the shy mocking bird.

Now, instead of the footprints of fairies, I see
The footprints of men, just returned from a spree,
With their pockets all empty, their heads reeling round,
While an army of bottles lie strewn on the ground.

Now drinking and squabbling seem so much in vogue
That each neighbour thinks his next neighbour a rogue;
And while such sad doings and feelings remain,
We need never expect to see fairies again.

MELINDA KENDALL

THE COLLIERS' STRIKE SONG

Come all ye jolly colliers, and colliers' wives as well,
And listen to my ditty, for the truth I mean to tell;
It's of a colliers' wages dispute, is the burden of my song;
I mean to cheer you up, if it won't detain you long.
For masters they are grumbling, in country and in town,
They want to starve poor miners, by cutting wages down;
But if you stick together, and every one be true,
You are sure to be triumphant - singing cock-a-doodle-doo.

CHORUS - For masters they are grumbling, &c.
The miners of Mount Kembla, oh! loudly how they shout
Against this drop of ten per cent., they're right without a doubt;
In this happy, glorious country, man is treated like a Turk,
Where the masters get the profit, and the miners get the work.
We only want fair wages, we only want fair play,
We know we ought to have a good dinner every day;
But what are we to do when the butcher he comes round,
If we let our masters drop two shillings in the pound.

Just ask a blessed woman what she is going to do, -
From the present price of wages we cannot save a screw -
With a lot of little children, with pieces, hungry teeth;
If they drop our wages, they must also drop the price of beef.

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From the present price of wages we cannot save a screw -
With a lot of little children, with pieces, hungry teeth;
If they drop our wages, they must also drop the price of beef.
For every woman knows the task she has to meet,
With a lot of little mouths, and nothing much to eat;
But it can't be very different, it's very plain to tell,
Where the masters get the oyster, and the miners get the shell.

I would have you stick together, and have a good go in,
Be true to one another, and I'm sure you're bound to win;
Though money is so valuable – and so is labour, too –
The working man is worth whatever he may do.
And I hope that every woman will tell her husband too;
She will do her very best to help him to keep true;
They will be sure to raise the wine, and make the masters say
"The devil's in the women, for they never will give way."

MELINDA KENDALL

I have recovered another ten of Melinda Kendall's poems from Illawarra newspapers, including 'Twelve Thousand Miles Away,' which first appeared in the *Examiner* of 21 November 1860 under her husband's name. It is indicative of the subordinate role of nineteenth-century women that Melinda Kendall's famous son's alcoholism was an accepted aspect of his creative urge, while she has been dismissed simply as a dypsomaniac. I am presently investigating the viability of a doctoral thesis on Melinda Kendall's work and role in nineteenth-century patriarchal society.

I have made many other discoveries while consulting the pages of early Illawarra newspapers. Time does not allow me to share them with you. It is enough here to say that early newspapers are crucial to my research on Illawarra literature, as I'm sure today's newspapers will be to researchers in the future.

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15. *Illawarra Mercury* 3 October 1885: 2.