

## **Sally Nansen's Welcome Speech**

I want to start today by saying that I am standing on Aboriginal land. I feel grateful to the graciousness of the Wurundjeri Elder here today, and to those Elders who couldn't be here today, for the fact that we are permitted to stand here at all. Thank you for your welcome.

I also want to say thank you to Collingwood College for the opportunity to create this fence for them. I was given a brief by Collingwood College Principal, Dale Perichon, to tell the history of the school, but when I dug beneath the foundations of the school to also tell the history of the land, he was affirming and always very interested. I am very grateful to you for this, Dale.

The archeologist and historian, Gary Presland, uses a phrase, *Lost Landscapes*. It refers directly to the impact of European settlement in Melbourne from 1835. Those of you who have seen the fence or read its narrative will know that there was once a great red gum forest that stretched from the Richmond flat to the area once known as Yallabirrang, now the Collingwood flat, where we are standing today. Some of the trees were probably 500 years old. This forest was quickly felled with the demands of settlement. As one eyewitness remembered, "the axe rang early, all around Melbourne."

Researching social and ecological history for the creation of a piece of modern public art is always a very moving thing to do. The artist cannot help to make connections between the human motivations, longings and losses of the past with the similar condition of humanity today and our current relationship to the land. It quickly became apparent to me that the story of this school, built in 1882, had its roots firmly entwined with the land's story and that this entwining continues.

The very early history of the school showed it taking a leading role in offering humanitarian relief to thousands of local school children caught in a desperate cycle of poverty and disease as a direct result of the industrial exploitation of the

land. Since the 1950s and continuing today the school has also realised the land's role as sanctuary for children of migrant and refugee families from countries experiencing war and trauma and opened up its doors to a beautiful cultural diversity. In 2002, the school tore up large areas of concrete and planted the very first Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden. Collingwood College is defined, and continues to be defined, by such values and by its interconnectedness with the land. More of the story of this wonderful school can be read on location at the fence and on the school website.

Evocative images, fleeting and true of a larger story, are a great beauty for the artist researching the past. Some of these images made their way into the artwork and narrative of the fence, and others informed its spirit. As I worked on the fence design I learnt of billabongs of Birrarung, the Yarra River, being drained by settlers and finding Wurundjeri red gum canoes at their base. I read of wisps of smoke rising from an occasional early cottage near the area of Vere Street and Cromwell street, where the sawyers were at work cutting the red gum forest down. I learnt about the gold in a very ancient bed of Birrarung, the Yarra River, mined by hungry miners near what is now the school's frontage. I read accounts of frequent flooding from the rainwater rushing down from Clifton Hill and the Smith Street Ridge, with the waters covering two square miles of the flat, "*within an hour.*" And I read of fancy blending with fact, when human beings were awed by these natural elements. This is what the writer, Patricia Wrightson, called "the edge of vision". "At the edge of our vision", she said, "...are the areas that have always been haunted by magic." So I read apparently eye witness accounts, presumably from grim Collingwood factory workers hardened with poverty, nevertheless speaking of mermaids playing in the flood waters on the Collingwood flat.

However, it was the image of the eternal child that I most used in the artwork of the fence. This child can be seen in the depiction of Wurundjeri children, settler children, school children and migrant and refugee children as they interact with their changing and complex landscape. It can be seen in the little child, Lilly May, daughter of the Blacksmith who once lived in the tiny house just there, who died

from what we presume was one of the infectious diseases of the flat. We have returned a Blacksmith to this site today to remember her. Ultimately the child is depicted as the bearer of a future restoration.

My deep thanks to Wurundjeri Elders, Aunty Julieanne Axford and Aunty Gail Smith for consulting with me in the journey of the fence. It was Aunty Gail who hoped to share the original name of the Collingwood flat with the school for this project. Tragically that knowledge had been lost. Then one week before the designs for the fence were finished Aunty Gail presented us with the name Yallabirrang. Only a few days prior the Melbourne Museum had returned to the Wurundjeri community some of the original place names of Melbourne. These had finally been discovered in a notebook of the anthropologist Alfred Howitt, who had spoken with the great Wurundjeri leader, William Barak. In many ways the place name, Yallabirrang, is the finding of lost treasure.

There are many many people who held, and continue to hold, this project. I am very grateful to you all. A final thanks also goes to John Young, author of the marvellous book about Collingwood College, *The School on the Flat*, to David Pisasale from ABC Cutting who worked closely with me in the cutting of the fence, to Trevor Andrews and Simon Andrews who had the huge task of putting the fence up, and to Collingwood College parent, Yukima Cameron. Yuki, you elbowed me into this project and have been a constant in its growth. I want to say thank you.

S. A. Nansen.

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