

# Swimming HOME



WORDS David Watson

When Rozelle-based artist and writer David Watson set out to meander west on foot across suburban Sydney, he had only a vague inkling of the ‘municipal odyssey’ he was about to undertake. His journey through the postcodes of his youth and a return swim down the Parramatta River culminated in a series of works inspired in part by the large collection of Rex Hazlewood glass plate negatives in the Mitchell Library.

It began as a hunch, a suspicion that there were important things I did not appreciate about where I lived. Discombobulated and increasingly remote from the local at a time of ever-faster global connectivity and ‘continuous partial attention’, I had felt the need to re-acquaint myself with my country: the relaxed and comfortable mortgage-belt municipalities of the Parramatta River corridor. Walking west via Victoria Road, I’d immersed myself in a suburbia laced with three generations of my family, seeking out seams of lost and lesser-known cultural fabric. At the core of my journey lay a search for memories I felt that I *should*, but did not possess.

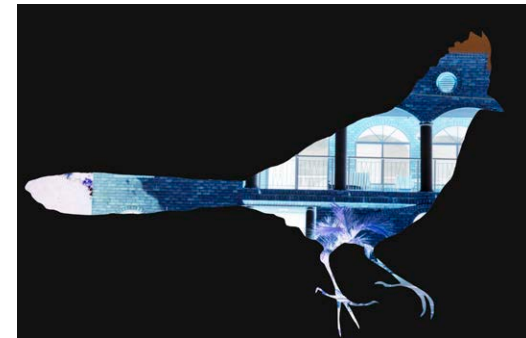
My ‘landlope’ had been inspired initially by the languid bush poetry and gently eccentric life of John Le Gay Brereton (1871–1933), a bohemian confrère of Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson and Christopher Brennan, who in the late 1890s stepped out of his front door onto what is today Victoria Road in Gladesville, and walked to Jenolan Caves. The illustrated account of Brereton’s adventures, *Landlopers: The Tale of a Drifting Travel and the Quest for Pardon and Peace* (1899) had appealed particularly to me. En route I’d found myself, whether by gravity or good fortune, drawn down to the harbour’s liminal zones, which for much of the preceding century had been battered and besieged by industry and automobile. In slowing down, wandering and wondering beyond the fast lane and the aircon, I’d searched for and found fuller immersion within the municipal folds of my youth, in the lands of the Wallumedegal. Gladesville, Tennyson, Putney, West Ryde, Meadowbank — suburbs through which I’d beetled with barely a second glance for 50 years — had become charged zones.

Over 19 walks and 100 or so kerbed and guttered kilometres, my wanderings led inexorably to the home of my frail and ageing parents in Marsden Road, Dundas, where I grew up and they had lived for 60 years. The exhibition *Walking With Cars* at Brush Farm House in 2008 marked the completion of that outward leg.

In 2009 both of my parents died and soon after the house was sold. My project became infused with filaments of memory and absence. In 2011, I determined to swim home down the Parramatta River, Sydney’s ‘original highway’.

I’d estimated that it was about 14,000 strokes from Ermington to Rozelle. Not far for Ian Thorpe or Susie Maroney, but far enough for a 54-year-old — around 14 kilometres. I’d swim it in four stages, over a week.

My return by water to our home in Rozelle marked the completion of a cycle. Following water, flowing with it, was a way of getting under the skin of things, of learning something new. The river’s upper reaches are flanked by poorly remediated 20th-century industrial sites and I felt that somehow — at least symbolically — I should take my medicine, acknowledge some small responsibility. After all, my father had run a heavy earth-moving equipment franchise in Silverwater for a decade, and our neighbour Bill had been a chemist at a paint factory on the Rhodes foreshore.



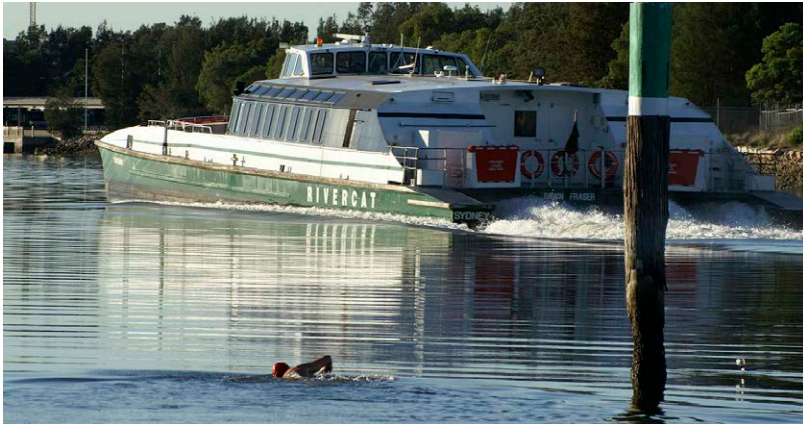
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- 01 GEORGE EVATT, DAVID WATSON: SWIMMING HOME, ROZELLE [IRON COVE BRIDGE], 2011
- 02 DAVID WATSON, ‘LOST’ – COACHMAN [EASTERN WHIPBIRD], 2008  
THE WHIPBIRD WAS A FAVOURITE THAT ONCE HOPPED BENEATH OUR HAWTHORN HEDGE — 70% OF THE SPECIES IN MY PARENTS’ 1965 BIRD LISTS NO LONGER FREQUENT THESE CLIMES
- 03 DAVID WATSON, STATIONERY BOAT, 2008  
A ‘TREASURE’ (SMALL PIECE OF CRUSHED STATIONERY) GLEANED FROM THE ROADSIDE ON MY WALK, REDOLENT OF A MARITIME PAST





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04 DAVID BLACKWELL, *DAVID WATSON: SWIMMING HOME*, ERMINGTON, 2011

05 DAVID BLACKWELL, *DAVID WATSON: SWIMMING HOME*, MORTLAKE, 2011

06 BROADHURST POSTCARD PUBLISHERS, *GASHOLDERS, MORTLAKE*, c. 1910, FROM 'SCENES OF BUILDINGS AND INDUSTRY, MORTLAKE NSW', c.1900-1927, HAND-COLOURED POSTCARD PXA 635/597  
WILLIAM HENRY BROADHURST PRODUCED POSTCARDS IN AND AROUND SYDNEY EARLY LAST CENTURY — HIS DAUGHTERS OFTEN HAND-COLOURED THE IMAGES.

There was something pleasing about being in the river rather than on it. I could feel the keen-ness of the tide in the seemingly sluggish upper reaches in a manner I had never imagined. As I was swept gently under Ryde Railway Bridge, observing its massive steel supports (fabricated in the 1880s in the industrial north of Britain), history felt fluid, tangible, even dangerous. I was paying attention. Out of my comfort zone, I had to.

In Mortlake, east of IKEA and the site of James Squires' brewery, I steal a few strokes' solace in the opaque silky calm beneath the surface as my busy support craft team manoeuvres, keeps watch and photographs. I farewell and remember firstly my old ones, Valerie and Kenneth, and then Woollarawarre Bennelong, whose newly pinpointed gravesite we soon pass. Next to one high wooden navigation marker my foot touches the spongy river floor and I wonder momentarily whether I am standing upon the leisurely, leathery back of a stingray.

I gave thanks to family, friends and colleagues who'd refrained from dampening my enthusiasm, and to all the River Cat skippers who'd slowed their ferries to ensure my safe passage. I was grateful too to the good people at Maritime NSW, who had, after a couple of heart-stopping 'nos', approved my personal odyssey as an 'Aquatic Event', and issued me a licence.

My solitary progress on foot to Dundas in 2006-07 seemed — in retrospect and by contrast to the swim — a somewhat lonely and melancholy affair. In privileging the immersive poetics of serendipitous exploration, however, both walking and swimming had proved profoundly rewarding ways of entering the very bloodstream of home.

Interestingly, new technologies had also unexpectedly proved critical to my resolutely analog progress. Throughout the five years I'd spent slowly traversing and re-imagining the Parramatta River corridor, home access to freshly digitised archival imagery hugely illuminated my way. One holding in particular galvanised my writing and image-making.

Rex Hazlewood was a professional photographer in and around Epping, immediately before and after World War I. A large collection of his glass plate negatives survives in the Mitchell Library, and his record of early 20th-century rural life across the districts I traversed appears unsurpassed. Although I had on occasion heard local sportscasters refer to the Parramatta Rugby League team as 'the fruitpickers' (I knew them as 'The Eels'), I had not comprehensively understood, growing up in Dundas, that until the generation immediately prior to mine, the area had been predominantly rural.

The chasm in times and custom over such a short period beggars belief. My parents had purchased two bucolic acres on a Dundas hillside looking out to the Blue Mountains — from old Mr Hodsdon, a local market gardener — in 1947. For decades as they planted and pruned, mulched and mowed, my folks would buy their special rose varieties from Hazlewood Brothers Rose and Tree Specialists, over in Epping. This was the flourishing family enterprise to which Rex Hazlewood devoted his energies, having given up his photography business in the late 1920s.



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Although the suburbs of my youth, lacquered still with an indistinct family sheen, are remembered with fondness and familiarity, the river corridor is today a slowly recovering conurbation of disturbed environments — damaged zones where legacies linger.

Struggling to capture this duality, I began working with the cracks and missing shards from Rex Hazlewood's century-old glass plate negatives of the local area.

*Wild Ryde|swimming home* married suburban landscapes shot on my walk with the emblematic 20th-century damage sustained by Hazlewood's negatives. The weight and feel of my curiously archival but undoubtedly contemporary glass slides bestowed a uniqueness, a preciousness upon the nondescript and potentially overlooked wonder of now. The series suggested quietly too, that each moment, no matter how recent, is already history and at immediate risk of being lost, dropped, shattered or at the very least obscured, misrepresented.

The Australian environmental philosopher Val Plumwood (1939-2008) wrote about the 'increasingly place-denying' nature of global society. She argued passionately (and unfashionably) for decades that white Australia needs urgently to focus upon turning space into

place, as Aboriginal people have done for millennia. Lacking the nutrient of narratives, places remain unsung, neutral, interchangeable, and, as a result,

dispensable. US critic and author Lucy Lippard reminds us that, as 'envisionaries', artists can provide an alternative to the dominant culture's rapacious view of nature, help to restore mythical and cultural dimensions of public experience, and make connections visible.

07 REX HAZLEWOOD, *TIMBER DRAWING*, EPPING, c. 1911-16 ON 151/133-135

HAZLEWOOD'S FRACTURED GLASS PLATE INADVERTENTLY CAPTURES SOMETHING OF THE SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL FAULT LINE UPON WHICH OUR CENTURY STANDS.

08 DAVID WATSON, *DEFINOTYPE #17* [GLADES BAY], 2011

ONE OF 18 GLASS SLIDES DISPLAYED ON TWO FREE-STANDING LIGHTBOXES

09 DAVID WATSON, *WILD RYDE|SWIMMING HOME* INSTALLATION, SYDNEY COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, 2011

**This article draws on David Watson's dissertation, *Wild Ryde*, for his Visual Arts doctorate.**

