How a Statue Can Shape a City
Sydney’s First Monument, Governor Sir Richard Bourke.

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Abstract
Sydney’s inaugural commemorative bronze was unveiled above Farm Cove in 1842. It was dedicated to Sir Richard Bourke, Governor of New South Wales from 1831 to 1837. As there were no foundries in the colony, the work was designed and cast in England by Edward Hodges Baily, Royal Academician. Although Baily’s portrayal (from his London studio) of Bourke is worthy of comment, more significant is the statue’s orientation in public space. Sited on an eminence, a huge plinth raised Bourke further above the ground, allowing him to survey the Governor’s domain and residence, whose construction he had initiated, and Sydney Harbour, gateway to the colony. Providing scale to the monument was an adjacent stand of casuarina, regrown after the 1788 clearing to make the Colony’s first public farm, providing the figure with the necessary scale. The memorial also implied usurpation, since Farm Cove, called Wuganmagulya by the Cadigal, had been a place of initiation and corroboree for the Eora nation. The Bourke monument was the first point on what would develop as an axis of civic sculpture that defined the eastern side of the city. The paper sets a public monument in the context of city building and the colonizing process.
Introduction
The first sculpture in Sydney, indeed Australia, meant for outdoor exhibition in a public place is that of Governor Richard Bourke, now standing in front of the State Library of New South Wales, unveiled on 12 February, 1842. The circumstances of the statue’s commission and execution were well told by Max Waugh in his biography of Bourke. What remains to be explored, however, is the significance of the original siting of Bourke near the entrance to the Governor’s Domain, overlooking Farm Cove. This is a signal moment in Sydney’s civic story, skewering the placement of future public sculptures and indeed the city’s broader orientation. Moreover, the memorial’s siting spoke of dispossession, since the area was of the utmost significance to the Eora, and it is poignant that what clinched the choice for the spot within the Domain was the scaling presence of trees that had survived the land clearing after 1788.

The Statue and Sculptor
The memorial was a direct response to the resignation of Richard Bourke from the Governorship of New South Wales at the end of January 1837. His supporters claimed that he had been undermined by the “exclusives”, minority Tories who wished to hamper the advance of emancipation, the rule of law, and the progress of free society. On 3 December 1837, two days before Bourke departed Sydney forever, a meeting of the Friends of the Administration made a call for public donations for the purpose of erecting a statue to Bourke, with suitable inscription, in some conspicuous part of town. Within a month, The Australian reported on the healthy state of subscriptions, and enthused that the erection of statues was “the mode by which the ancients honored their distinguished men [...] It, moreover, creates a spirit of emulative excellence in the minds of the rising generation”. For a community that had inherited the Scottish Enlightenment view that civil society was the highest stage in the progress of mankind, the statue was a symbol that the process was on its way, remarkable fact given that only fifty years before Port Jackson had been “undisturbed by the busy operation of industrious and civilized man”.

However, there were no sculptors in Australia who could fabricate a large-scale bronze, let alone a foundry in which to make it. The subscription committee therefore appointed Governor Bourke’s son, also called Richard (1812-1904), as the procurement agent in London. In August 1838, Bourke the younger informed the committee that he had commissioned the Royal Academician Edward Hodges Baily, citing the pleasing memorial Baily had recently made for Lord Grey in Newcastle upon Tyne. The commission could not have come at a better time for Baily, who had recently been released from prison for insolvency; Baily would continue his resurgence when in January 1839 he won the competition for a statue of Lord Nelson in Trafalgar Square.
The younger Bourke had lived with his father in Sydney, and his memories of the city would have been recalled for the briefing he gave Baily in London. The statue was to be placed outdoors; it was to be viewed from all around; it was to stand on an exceptionally high granite plinth - which would also have to be imported from England - both so that it could be seen from afar and so that there would sufficient space for a long inscription detailing the Governor’s achievements; it was to be fenced, with a railing made, again, in England; most importantly, it was to show Bourke gazing into the distance. As to the outfit and pose, the younger Bourke wrote from London:

Allegory has long since sunk into the contempt it deserves, and the only question is, what description of drapery is the best [...]. We [Baily and Bourke] have, therefore, decided on uniform [Order of the Knights of Bath, to which Sir Richard had been elected in 1835], the background formed by a cloak.

By allegory was meant ancient dress or perhaps nudity, a practice lampooned by London satirists in the 1820s. Instead, contemporary clothing had become the norm for monuments, and for colonial governors this meant military costume, such as Richard Westmacott’s Sir William Cavendish Bentinck (1835, Kolkata, India). Baily further exploited the fact that the cape made for a ready-made niche by using the epaulets as a sort of architrave that capped the entire body. Like another work by Westmacott – the 1834 Duke of York in London (also the inspiration for Baily’s Nelson Column) - Baily enhanced the military tone by showing Bourke with his left hand curled over the pommel of a sheathed sword. In fact, Bourke had seen conflict in his youth, smashing his jaw so badly that thereafter he couldn’t speak properly, a physical defect that Sydney-siders knew well and that Baily faithfully captured when Bourke entered his studio for a life modeling following his return to London at the end of 1838. Battled-tempered and decked in regalia, light-footed yet staring down the future, Bourke would be rendered as a soldier of Empire.

Siting

The primary issue that the concerned the locals was where the sculpture would be sited. The choice was critical because it would express which part of the city was considered to be the best for an audience with Governor Bourke; it might also determine where future monuments would be placed. A sub-committee meeting at the end of January 1838, which included the Colonial Government architect, Mortimer Lewis, nominated the north-east corner of Hyde Park. The site was in front of The Sydney College of Arts (from 1856, Sydney Grammar School), whose foundation inscription on College Street declares Governor Bourke to have opened in 1832, and it may have been that the building and monument were seen as a couple legacy. Hyde Park itself was known for loitering and sports, and thus a apt venue for a monument that came not from the Governor’s office, but direct from the people.

The commissioners intended Governor Bourke to address the water, and the key factor in favour of Hyde Park was that the sloping land to the north offered views to Woolloomooloo Bay. As the Australian reported, “the statue may thus be seen by a ship entering the heads of Port Jackson; and it will be the first and most prominent object to attract the notice of all persons approaching our metropolis by its various avenues”. Ten months after the location had been nominated, the new Governor George Gipps insisted that the statue be placed in the centre of the park. His enthusiastic intervention signaled a readiness to concede to the claims of Bourke’s disgruntled Friends, while simultaneously absorbing the monument’s populist rationale into official commemoration.

Hyde Park remained the site for Bourke right up until the statue arrived aboard the Agnes on 15 February 1842. It was then announced that it would instead be erected near the entrance to the Governor’s Domain. The change of mind followed the advice of the Mortimer Lewis, who had come to regard Hyde Park as too barren. As a classicist versed in the decorum of site, Lewis knew that the eye perceived scale relative to the width of view and to other objects: the flat emptiness of Hyde Park would
have denied the statue a fore and middle ground, making it difficult to comprehend. In short, Bourke would drown in open space. By contrast, the entrance to the Governor's Domain from Bent Street was a high point in the town, with land sloping away to the north and east. The monument would therefore be framed by the sky, or from a lower vantage, as the culminating element of a rise. Bourke would still face the water, but via Farm Cove and not Woolloomooloo. An unstated consequence of changing the location was that Bourke would also appear to command its terrain, with a view to the Governor's stables and residence. The social staging of the monument was thus altered. Whereas Hyde Park was an unregulated place of sport, the Domain was intended for leisure that edified, such as the contemplation of nature and, soon enough, official statuary.

The views from the newly chosen location had already been exploited by the artist Charles Rodius in a three-sketch panorama of Farm Cove, the Domain point, and Woolloomooloo (figure 2). His drawings show that much of the valley had been cleared of large trees, begun in 1788 when Governor Phillip declared the area a public farm. The farm destroyed most of the area’s land-based food sourced by the Cadi People, the traditional owners. Deeper injury occurred due to the ceremonial significance the area had for the Eora nation in general: corroborees were held on the western headland, later named Bennelong point, while the foreshore of Farm Cove (Wuganmagulya) consisted of a gigantic shell midden, by-product of indigenous aquaculture. It was here in 1791 and again in 1795 that Cameragal men from the north shore initiated fifteen boys on a prepared ground called Yoolahng. Moreover, the spot on the ridge chosen for Bourke was in the middle of a dense crisscross of Cadi tracks. Disease and dispossession meant the Cadigal were no longer walking these tracks by 1840. While contemporary journalists would exalt the Bourke monument as a sign that the camp had matured into a civilization, from a Cadigal perspective it stood for usurpation.

Scattered at the high-tide mark and along the banks of the creek entering Farm Cove were Casuarina glauca (swamp oak; Cadi, guman), an erect and fast growing tree that had been discovered by the First Fleeters as having a timber suitable for shingles. By the 1830s, most of Sydney was roofed with C. glauca, such that few mature trees were left in the Domain. Although the trees were felled above the ground, casuarina roots were left intact underneath, from which suckering occurs readily (two specimens, suckered from pre-1788 roots, survive in the Botanic Garden to this day). Rodius's drawing indicates that casuarina saplings were throughout the area, and indeed in the eastern foreground of the drawing, on roughly the spot where Bourke would be erected, there is a row of what appear to be small C. glauca. By the time Mortimer Lewis assessed the land in 1842 these would have grown to six or
seven metres, thereby providing the necessary scale for the plinth and statue that Lewis had found lacking in Hyde Park (figure 3).

The monument’s placement in front of trees meant that the front view looking south-east was closed-off by a backdrop, in contrast to the open view to the north. Moreover, casuarina trees are ideal windbreaks, a coincidental but significant fact given the exposure of the monument to the southerly buster, Sydney’s most violent wind. Finally, *glauca* means grey, and if the tree’s size gave scale, the wispy texture and matt hue of the its needles counterpointed the weight and dark shine of the bronze.

![Figure 3. Charles Pickering, *Sir Richard Bourke Monument* with *Casuarina glauca*, 1871, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, SPF/1056.](image)

**Representation from Behind**

Duly assembled, Governor Gipps unveiled the monument on 11 April 1842, in front of 7000-10,000 people, the largest crowd ever assembled in Sydney. In the speech that followed, Gipps praised the lovely site, suited to the auspicious moment. He also reiterated the sentiment of the newspapers when the monument had been first announced, namely that making statues of the great and the good was exactly what a civilized society was meant to do. *Bourke* was thus, “a promise of the way in which the fine arts will henceforth be cultivated in the young and rising land”.

Within a month or two of the unveiling *Bourke* was painted by Conrad Martens (figure 4). Over the preceding seven years Martens had built a steady trade among Sydney’s gentry for topographical views of the city, providing visions of nature tamed and often as not anchored to some sunlight classical building. One such patron had been Governor Bourke himself, who had purchased three of Martens’ watercolours in 1836. Martens was thus aligned to the commissioned purpose of the statue as both a heroic memorial to a great individual and as a larger symbol of a dawning civilization. He accordingly grasped the significance of site and aspect. First, he showed *Bourke* as a focus in a landscape, inviting passers-by to reflect on the foundation of the colony. Second, he was alert to the setting provided by the *C. glauca*, which were shifted to the side so that they operate like a natural coulisse. Third, he rendered the uncommonly large size of the plinth, further heightened so that it coincided with the ridge of the escarpment to the north, thus perfectly framing the statue in the sky. Finally, Martens established the convention of viewing the monument from behind, picturing it in terms of the views it commanded, above all the harbour and its ships. For Martens, *Bourke* stood like a sentinel at the entrance to the city, oriented to the north-east. It is a remarkable fact that following its unveiling Sydney's first monument was typically depicted not from the front but from behind.
An 1864 photograph of Bourke (figure 5) likewise shows the statue relating to the distant water. In addition, two Russian cannons have appeared on either side of the iron railing, trophies from the 1855 English capture of Sevastopol in the Crimea War. Sets of cannon had been sent to the most important cities of the British Empire; those in the photograph probably arrived in Sydney in 1860. The cannon militarized the statue, hardening an inflection already established by Baily’s choice of putting Bourke in uniform with sword in hand. The populist origins of Bourke continued to fade: he was now flanked by trophies of war.

Civic development of the Site
Soon after the installation of the canon, Sydney’s character began to take definitive shape under the direction of James Barnet, Colonial Architect from 1862 to 1890. In particular, the harbor-orientation implied by Bourke was reinforced by government buildings on the eastern side of the city. According to Peter Kohane, Barnet’s plan was for a series of arcaded, domed, and towered structures that addressed the harbor, exploiting the terraced platforms provided by Sydney’s topography. In fact, the focus of Barnet’s vision was the region around Bourke. For example, a short distance north on the
same ridge, the Chief Secretary’s Office (1869-75) aims its Italian Renaissance style façade directly at the water. Likewise Barnet’s gargantuan Garden Palace (1879), erected immediately Bourke, presented itself as the entrance to the city when seen from a ship entering the heads. The Palace’s welcome was brief: on 22 September 1882 it burnt to the ground, fanned by a south-westerly wind that drove the flames away from Bourke and adjacent casuarinas. The Palace site was then absorbed into Royal Botanic Gardens, while the distinctive Macquarie Street gate was repositioned to the newly created northern entry to the Gardens, in exact alignment with Bourke. The statue thus became the hub of landscaped pathways that radiated through the Gardens to the north.

While Bourke was being belittled by the Garden Palace, the role of saluting the harbor passed to Thomas Woolmer’s Captain James Cook, unveiled in January 1879, on the very position in Hyde Park that had once been earmarked for Bourke. A decade later, a monument to Governor Arthur Phillip (Achille Simonetti, unveiled 1897), was commissioned on the site of the defunct Palace, plinthed to the same level as Bourke and similarly facing Farm Cove. Phillip, Bourke, and Cook thus comprised a north-south straight line of public monuments that like James Barnet’s buildings addressed the water from the parkland side of town. The line-up struck the official chord for Sydney’s orientation: facade to the north; backside to the south; workplace to the west; and leisure to the east. Moreover, the north-south sculptural axis continued to inform the position of public sculpture in Sydney right to the end of the twentieth century, from James White’s William Bede Dalley of 1897, to Hossein and Angela Valamanesh’s Irish Famine Memorial one hundred years later.

**Figure 6.** Bob Woodward, Sir Leslie Moreshead Fountain, 1965, Entrance to Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, on the original site of the Richard Bourke Statue (Photo: Wiki Commons).

**Removal and Afterword**

Bourke’s dominant presence over the Domain ended with the 1923 plan for the extension of the State Library, whose western wing had been completed to the design of Walter Liberty Vernon in 1909. The new plan proposed converting the area surrounding Bourke into a library forecourt. The centerpiece was to be Bertrand Mackennal’s Shakespeare Monument (unveiled 1926), sited between the proposed library entrance and the Royal Botanic Garden gate. To make way, Bourke was moved in 1927 to the corner bay of the west wing (figure 1), while the Russian cannon were carted to Centennial Park. In this new position, Bourke was intended to mirror the Matthew Flinders statue (unveiled 1925) that would be installed in front of the proposed east wing. Governor Richard Bourke was thus demoted to the status of being a secondary component of an ornamental ensemble.
Bourke’s companion trees, the *Casuarina glauca*, indigenous to the cove, were destroyed for the sake of open space. The view from behind as rendered by Conrad Martens was gone. Instead of being an active agent in the experience of place, the monument had become a passive object at which one would look. Its connection to the water was further damaged by the construction of the Cahill expressway in 1955, which stranded Bourke on the far side of a river of cars.

The statue of Governor Bourke began as a populist memorial, but was soon enlisted in the service of colonial symbolism and the shaping of Sydney’s identity. As the inaugural monument, Bourke set the tone for the burgeoning ceremonial address of the city, before becoming a movable component of its civic fabric. There is an afterword, however: in 1965, Bourke’s original position was re-claimed by a fountain dedicated to the war hero Sir Leslie Morshead, like Bourke a Knight Commander of Bath. The fountain was designed by Robert Woodward, who had worked in Finland under Alvar Aalto, renowned for emphasizing the relationship between architecture, site, and audience. In Woodward’s earlier *El Alamein Fountain* in Kings Cross, a spherical form was chosen so that it might present an aspect to any of the views from the tangle of streets that converged on the area. For the *Morshead Fountain* (figure 6), Woodward again responded to context: the bronze rods are arranged in the shape of a cylindrical hub, open at the side and spurting water from the top, a wistful shape of renewal that channels and disperses the meaning of place.
Endnotes


2 *The Australian*, 5 December 1837, 2. The monument was newsworthy, and dispatches, albeit briefer, also featured in *The Sydney Gazette*, usually on the same day as those in the *Australian*.

3 *The Australian*, 2 January, 1838, 2.


6 *The Australian*, 30 January, 1838, 2


9 A contract was thus made on 20 August 1838 for Baily to, “procure a pedestal for the said statue … made of the best Scotch granite, and after a model to be approved of by the said Richard Bourke, with all necessary bolts and fastenings for the fixing of said statue, for the additional sum of £400”. *The Australian*, 22 December, 1838, 2.

10 *Sydney Gazette*, 22 December, 1838.

11 Richard Bourke’s letter to the Statue Committee, 21 August 1838, published in *The Australian*, 22 December, 1838, 2. Bourke informed the committee that Baily would need every penny of the budget for himself, leaving nothing to cover the shipping cost, and the committee was urged to see if the statue could be shipped free of charge, which occurred following petitioning by Governor Gipps. ML A1225, 540; George Gipps to Lord Glenelg, 25 March 1839, ML A1225, 543; Admiralty instructed to provide necessary freighting from England, T Russell to George Gipps, ML A1281, 381-83. ML is the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.


13 A sitting whose first result was a toga-clad marble bust, inscribed with the date 1840, sent to Sydney as part of the approval process, and now in the collection of History House, Macquarie St. See, *History, Magazine of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 127, (March, 2016): cover.

14 *The Australian*, 30 January, 1838, 2. *The Australian* correspondent noted that the site had formerly been earmarked for a statue of Captain Cook.


18 *The Australian*, 22 December, 1838, 2, reporting on a meeting of the subscribers on 21 December 1838; Roger Therry to Colonial Secretary, 9 February 1839, ML A1225, 540-41.

19 *The Australian*, 15 February 1842, 2.

20 *The Australian*, 3 March 1842, 2, report of meeting at the Royal Hotel on 1 March.

The character of the Governor’s Domain after Governor Lachlan Macquarie is discussed in Karskens, *The Colony*, 216.

It is significant that perhaps the oldest photograph of the Bourke monument, taken in 1859 (ML Government Printing Office 1-11146), shows it encased in the viewing tower built for William Hetzer’s *Stereoviews of Sydney*. In other words, the statue marked the ideal spot from which to photograph the surrounds.


*The Sydney Herald*, 12 April 1842, 3.

*The Australian*, 12 April 1842, 2.

Martens account book records the sale of the painting on 27 June 1842 for 15 pounds. He buy was Phillip W. Flower, a merchant at 44 Hunter St: Elizabeth Ellis, *Conrad Martens, Life and Art*, (Sydney: State Library of NSW, 1994), 161.

Ellis, *Conrad Martens*, 37.

The 300-word inscription, which reads like a foundation document of nation, is transcribed in Waugh, *Local Hero*, 169.


Martens’s view was copied by an anonymous painter in 1843 (ML603) was adopted by George Peacock in the same year (ML239) and again in 1845 (ML657).


ML XVI/132. The library entrance was finished to a different design in 1942.

*Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 June, 1927, 14. The canons were set on either side of Tomaso Sani’s bronze monument to Australian Rules football, *We Won*, 1893.

Eventually installed on the south side of the Mitchell Wing.