This research will focus on the social aspects of the area - in order to explain why it is that such a strong community feeling has developed in the Redfern/Waterloo area, why it is that a person from Redfern is so easily distinguished from a Paddington or Woollahra resident, and why has the area become synonymous with the Indigenous people of this country. We aim to explore these contexts within the broader settings of the pre and post-colonial history of Redfern. — T. Attajarusit, D. Burdon, A. Burgess, R. Boyle

I. PRE COLONIAL

Many theories have been put forward to explain the first human existence in Australia. Present evidence suggests that an ancient Aboriginal population existed in northwest Queensland as long as 60,000 years ago.

It is also suggested that apart from the early occupants, Australian Aborigines may have also migrated down from Asia, driven perhaps by more powerful races to the north, or simply due to population pressure as tribes became too large and clans split up.

As they spread through the continent, they absorbed, integrated with, or exterminated the original inhabitants, until only pockets of these first Australians remained in Tasmania and dense rainforests of North Queensland. During the 50,000 years of occupation of this land, all memory of the great migration faded, until the people believed they had lived here always.

Aboriginal Australians lived a hunter and gatherer life. The men hunted large animals such as kangaroos, emus and turtules and the women and children hunted smaller animals and collected fruits, berries and other plants. On the coast people caught fish and collected many types of shellfish including mussels and oysters. They had an oral tradition, which included music, song, dance and graphic expression - all of which contained rich symbolic meanings.

Each clan marked out their territories, and evolved their unique, ordered social pattern. Through kinship and marriage laws (and practices such as infanticide) no tribe outgrew the land that sustained it. Each group was content with its tribal grounds. They believed features of the Earth were made up of the hero ancestors from the Dreamtime who had themselves become rocks and hills and watercourses. The land was theirs irrevocably, and held a deep spiritual connection. They were complacent and integrated with the land without ever questioning or wanting to alter it. They only knew this one world - all else belonged to the spirits, resulting in extreme confusion when the Europeans arrived.

The traditional owners of the Redfern area were the Gadigal (also spelled Kardigal or Cadigal), whose land extended from South Head to Botany Bay out to Petersham, taking in the areas we now know as Redfern, Erskineville, Surry Hills, Darlinghurst and Paddington. They spoke the coastal Eora language and are often referred to as the Eora people. (However, some experts argue that the Gadigal may have been part of the Daruk Nation which occupied the land south of Eora Nation.) At the time, there were an estimated 300 different Indigenous languages being spoken in Australia.

It is evident that the area was supplied by a waterway that drained from Paddington and Surry Hills via the Cocks River to Botany Bay passing through the various swamps and wetlands such as the one at Redfern. The richness of animals fish and birds provided abundant food supply for the indigenous people. Before the white men came this would have been close to an Aboriginal's idea of paradise.

By the time of the first European settlement, the Indigenous population in Australia probably numbered between 250,000 and 750,000.

II. 1788-1817: EARLY CONTACT WITH COLONISTS

The arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 saw the looming end of the original Indigenous society in the Redfern area.

Early Aborigines did not know what to make of the early Europeans. As Keith Willey suggests in his book When the Sky Fell Down:

"...The first few years around Sydney Cove were similar to all other early European/Aboriginal contacts all over the continent. First, the initial shock, curiosity and wonderment, a growing eagerness to possess the new goods, to taste the new foods; then hostility as the Aborigines realize the newcomers' power and the fact they have come to take the land; a few years of resistance; the ravages of introduced diseases, and Aboriginal power breaks. Unable to retreat because of the presence of hostile tribes, equally unable to exist on the shrunked remnant of their hunting grounds, the people flock into the settlement. This was followed by a rapid descent into caricature, sexual and other degradation and ultimate, in the case of the Sydney Blacks, extinction..." (When The Sky Fell Down, 1993, p.10)

As a result of violence and the 1799-1799 smallpox epidemic, the Gadigal population, believed to be of 62 families, in the area now known as Redfern was devastated, with those that did survive being forced to move out of their traditional area and join neighbouring groups. (Smallpox was contracted from early Europeans and killed around 50-90% of the Aboriginal population. Some argue the disease was strategically deployed.)

Where the Aborigines were permitted by the whites to remain, they were generally forced to accept an economically dependent and socially subordinate position, a position that many Aborigines still feel subjected to today. By the time Governor Gipps arrived in 1838, much of the traditional culture (eg. Corroborees - Aboriginal song and dance, adult tooth incision practice) of the Sydney Aborigines had disappeared - trackers had to be sought from areas such as Liverpool as those in Sydney had lost their 'native gift' i.e. hunting skills, medical skills and rituals.

III. 1817-1840s: LAND GRANTS & THE SETTLEMENT

In 1817 William Redfern, a surgeon convicted of naval mutiny, and his wife were granted 100 acre of land, which became Redfern Estate (bound by today's Cleveland, Regent, Redfern and Elizabeth streets).

1819 William Chippendale and William Hutchinson were both granted land around the area now known as Redfern. Hutchinson had been appointed in 1814 by Governor Macquarie as principal superintendent of convicts and public works, and in 1844 he purchased land in the southern part of the original Chippendale grant. This land came to be known as "Hutchinson's Paddock" and was leased for market gardens.

Following Hutchinson's death in 1846 the land came into the possession of John Rose Holden, Hutchinson's son-in-law. In the late 1840s in the area now known as 'The Block', Holden built Eveleigh House (named after his mother's maiden name).

IV. 1840s-1900s: REDFERN & EVELEIGH - A COMMUNITY

Early businesses in the area included mills, wool-washing, market gardens, nurseries, and brick making, as well as businesses such as boiling downs, fellmongers and tanners and the associated trades of candle and soap makers, bootmakers and saddlers. Many of these businesses came to be in the area owing to the presence of good soil and a constant water supply, whilst others were forced into the area following the government's 1849 legislation that required all "noxious traders" to eventually move out of the city for environmental reasons. Current residents have not forgotten this history, and still believe Redfern is the convenient "dumping ground" for that which the city doesn't want.
In 1855 however, a decision was made that was to define the social make-up of the Redfern community to this day, as the government passed legislation and took over railway and workshop construction on purchased sites. Hutchinson’s paddock had been virtually dissected by the new railway which first ran in NSW from Redfern (officially named Sydney station, later renamed to Central Station) to Parramatta in 1855, and by 1859 Redfern had been proclaimed a municipality. In 1870, railway workshops were established at Redfern. This site later proved inadequately, and by 1886 the Eveleigh Railway workshops, the largest of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere covering 61,400m² on a 2ha site, had been established.

Such development saw the population of the area double each decade, from 1200 in 1851 to 22,000 in 1901. Upper classes had moved to outer suburbs as a result of improved transport systems, while the poor, aged and working class remained. This increase necessarily resulted in the area being built-out and the development of a group-consciousness in the area, with the railway employees sharing not only employment experiences, but also personal relationships with the same institutions such as churches, hotels and sports teams.

As Lucy Taka pointed out, “...such integrating tendencies provided sources of unity that not only enabled industrial, but also social and political action and collaboration...” (Social Capital, Community and Citizenship at the Eveleigh Railway Workshop in Sydney, March 1998, p. 8). The formation of such a close-knit community fostered a high degree of social trust, a situation that many residents still feel exists today and which many cite as a reason for moving to the area.

V. 1920s-1940s: DEPRESSION & THE RETURN OF THE ABORIGINES

During the 1920s, Redfern became a Mecca for unemployed rural workers (including Aborigines), thanks to cheap rents and the possibility of regular work.

This trend continued into the 1930s due to the Great Depression, with unemployed Aborigines seeking refuge with their Redfern relatives or in the makeshift camps that had formed around La Perouse. In the relative prosperity that followed World War 2, Randwick Council was pressurised by more affluent residents to move the La Perouse squatters, resulting in a further migration of Aborigines to Redfern.

From the 1940s as... the large Indigenous population began to find strength in unity, a number of protest meetings and rallies have since taken place in Redfern (including the Bicentennial protest in 1988 by 40,000 people).

VI. 1950s-1960s: ASSIMILATION & LOSS OF IDENTITY

In 1950s Diesel power were introduced to replace steam power. On a wider scale, the 1950s saw the introduction of the government’s ‘assimilation’ policy.

Under the new policy, only officially defined in 1961, Aborigines were supposed in time to: “...attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians...” (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 20 April 1961: 51)

Such policies naturally led to a loss of identity among the Aborigines, a feeling that was compounded by the exclusionary provisions within social security legislation and industrial awards – even the Constitution contained two provisions specifically excluding Aboriginal people.

VII. 1967: CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS

By 1966 the last provision excluding Aborigines was removed from the social security legislation (Act No. 41 of 1966), and in 1967 a constitutional amendment referendum was passed, removing the two exclusionary references to Aborigines in the Constitution.

The granting of Citizenship Rights brought a renewed confidence and a sense of freedom to the Aboriginal Community, and resulted in many rural Indigenous people coming to Sydney and Redfern in search of jobs, education and housing.

The AFC states: “...In 1966 there were 4,000 Aboriginals living in Redfern and neighbouring suburbs. By 1968 the Aboriginal population had increased to 35,000...” Needless to say, such an influx led to overcrowding and squattting, with widespread discrimination reported by Aborigines seeking accommodation.

VIII. 1970s-2000: THE REUNIFICATION

Despite these apparent problems, the 1970s was undoubtedly the most formative decade in Redfern insofar as the development of a socially cohesive indigenous population is concerned, as it saw the creation and development of a number of Australia’s first Aboriginal-run community services, including the first Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Medical Services, Community Housing Cooperative (Later became Aboriginal Housing Company), Aboriginal Children’s Service, an Indigenous Radio Station, and the National Black Theatre.

Such initiatives played an important role in the forming of the Whittam government’s Aboriginal policy of ‘self-determination’ allowing Aborigines to recollect and decide their own identity, faith and values.

The formation of such community services did little to alleviate the problem of overcrowding and squatting, however. Following the shutting down of the Catholic Church Hall accommodation over health concerns, arrangements were made with ILEB Construction and 45 Indigenous people moved into three houses earmarked for development in Louis Street.

With construction due to commence on these properties, it became clear that a long term housing solution for the area was needed. In 1973, amid much public protest, the newly-elected Whittam government purchased 41 houses and virtually handed them to the Aboriginal Housing Company, whose aim was to create a communal living environment with cheap rent that was run by Aboriginals, for Aboriginals. As a result, the Indigenous population of Redfern tripled between 1973 and 1981.

Residents have seen the withdrawal and reinstatement of funding from various governments, the closure of the Eveleigh workshops in 1988, an increase in drugs and crime, and the demolition of 20 the original 41 houses.

IX. 2001-PRESENT: MODERNISATION & UNDERLYING CONFLICTS

Since the turn of the century, the community-driven Aboriginal Housing Company has been developing award-winning revitalisation schemes for the area. However, they are yet to be realised, as there have been ongoing conflicts in the consultation process between the community and the State government.

In 2003, the State government proposed a developmental plan called RED (Redfern-Eveleigh-Darlington) Strategy, to be deployed through (then) South Sydney Council. Despite consultations with residents, the strategy was heavily criticised by the locals, who believed the strategy undermined the Aboriginal community and concentrated on profiteering from the area rather than solving the existing social problems.

The underlying social tension in Redfern as a result came to a fore on 14th February 2004 with the Redfern riots, which were major clashes between Indigenous locals and police. It was in response to police being blamed for the young teenager, TJ Hickney’s death. Hickney was impaled by a metal fence while being pursued by police on his bicycle.

In 2006, the State government superseded the RED Strategy with the new legislation of the Redfern-Waterloo Authority, giving Minister Frank Sartor planning powers over the area. The current Redfern-Waterloo plan is even more criticised by the community than the 2003 RED Strategy.

Details of the current issues are beyond the scope of this research. However, one can easily see that the common backgrounds and shared experiences of the Redfern people over the past 200 years has forged a close-knit community. As Professor Lucy Taka states it, “...effectively provided a landscape in which the politics of government converged with the politics of work, home and the street...” (Social Capital, Community and Citizenship at the Eveleigh Railway Workshop in Sydney, March 1998, p. 29)

As a final note, it is clear that Redfern has been a major benchmark in Australian history, not only for its political issues at present, or its strategic location during the colonisation and industrialisation, but also for it being once a piece of Dream, for thousands of years, long before time...


Eland, Judith. *South Sydney: Shaping the Future.*


Taksa, Lucy, *Social Capital, Community and Citizenship at the Eveleigh Railway Workshops in Sydney, 1880-1932, School of Industrial Relations and Organizational Behaviour, UNSW, March 1996.*


Australian Heritage Database (Register of the National Estate). *The Block, Redfern, NSW*, http://www.ahc.gov.au


The State Library of NSW's Microfilm Database