



The front door of Closebourne House, within the Anglican Conference Centre, Morpeth, NSW – an excellent example of a two-storey colonial Georgian home.

AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE COMMISSION

CHAPTER 4

THE NATIONAL ESTATE

D. H. BORCHARDT

THE WRITTEN RECORDS, both published and unpublished, that have been discussed so far represent only a fraction of the material culture produced by the inhabitants of this continent over the last 50 000 years; indeed, they are overwhelmingly the product of the last two centuries. The use and interpretation of buildings, artefacts and objects have long been the preserve of such disciplines as archaeology, architecture and anthropology. Australian historians have only recently begun to regard evidence of this kind as a legitimate historical source.

The concrete objects that support Australian studies consist broadly of two kinds: those that have been left where they were placed originally, such as the buildings at Port Arthur, Tasmania, or Francis Greenway's St James' Church, Sydney, and hundreds of others; and those that have been preserved in specially designed institutions, such as implements, furniture, ornaments and so on. As well as such objects, which have been created by human beings, there are natural monuments which have attained historical significance through association, particularly through cultural practices and the marks left on nature by human activities. An obvious example is Ayers Rock, but there are many other sites significant as evidence of the prehistoric past or simply of geological evolution.

The National Estate includes a great variety of objects: artefacts, buildings, towns and other evidence of human ingenuity in conquering nature, as well as flora and fauna, mountains, waterways and the coastline. 'Places we should keep' is one of the more successful descriptions of the notion of the National Estate, of all that is worth preserving if future generations are to gain an understanding of the origins and history of Australia. The selection is based on subjective judgments particular to our time. But it is not an arbitrary judgment: places like the Great Barrier Reef, the Quinkan rock galleries or Port Arthur can be readily identified as unique in time or place or form; some places are representative of particular plant or geological relationships; others illustrate the development of cultural styles or movements.

The identification and registration of what is worth preserving is one thing; to ensure that conservation and preservation actually take place is quite another. Far too many people are careless if not outright destructive when at large in national parks, in old buildings or in the presence of interesting but misunderstood native flora and fauna. Children, young adults and all too often even mature adults have to be educated about the value of our heritage before they will exercise restraint and learn to preserve past and present assets for future generations.

Neither the Aborigines nor the European migrants used to show the concern for the

Australian environment that is now common among most Australians. The fact that the Aborigines were numerically few and did not have at their disposal implements of destruction such as agricultural machinery, explosives and earthmoving equipment did not prevent them from putting large areas of the country to the flame, thus endangering the survival of many species of flora and fauna. The influx of European settlers, land hungry and ignorant of Australian climatic conditions or anxious to extract precious metals from the soil without consideration of the effect on the environment, wrought havoc on the balance of natural forces throughout the continent. Subsequently, new generations tried to eradicate the evidence of the historical background of European settlement in Australia—the convict period—and then endeavoured to impose their own aesthetic notions on the urban environment, replacing monuments of the Victorian and Edwardian era with ultramodern palaces of cement and glass.

Fortunately there have always been some people whose appreciation of the past has been strong enough to make them want to preserve it. To this end conservationists in many parts of the world learned to band together to try and combat senseless destruction and the erosion of the built and natural environments. Between 1945 and 1975 National Trust organisations were established in all states, the national capital and the Northern Territory. Since 1965 the Australian Council of National Trusts has co-ordinated the activities of regional trust organisations and has undertaken independent projects including the publication of books such as the *Historic buildings of Australia* series and the journal *Heritage Australia*.

The council was a major force in persuading the Australian government to establish a committee of inquiry into the National Estate. Mr Justice R.M. Hope, chairman, presented his report in 1974 which led to the creation of the Australian Heritage Commission. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the preservation of the National Estate.

The establishment of the Australian Heritage Commission as a statutory body made it possible to prepare a preliminary catalogue of some of the places and artefacts which form the National Estate. It includes both Aboriginal and white history without qualification or distinction.

In creating a register of the National Estate the Australian Heritage Commission has taken the first and most essential step to ensure that we recognise what is worth preserving. Its register is being progressively published in the *Commonwealth gazette*. By issuing *The heritage of Australia*, the commission has provided a catalogue which is fairly easy to consult and will help alert Australians to the importance of preserving our past. The book lists 6600 places which, in the eyes of the commission have 'aesthetic historic, scientific or social significance, or other special value', and illustrates most of them. An extensive index facilitates retrieval of information about houses, places, regions and natural sites, and a glossary helps the non-specialist. The book also contains four surveys of the elementary categories of the National Estate: Professor J.N. Jennings on 'Landform, rock and soil'; Professor John Turner on 'Australia's natural legacy'; Professor D.J. Mulvaney on 'The Aboriginal heritage'; and Dr Miles Lewis on 'Architecture, from colonial origins'. Each of these surveys sets out clearly what the notion of the National Estate means for its particular aspect of the environment, the earliest inhabitants and the European settlements.

State editions of the *Heritage of Australia* are being progressively published. These will contain a good deal of material not listed in the 'master volume' because additional sites, buildings and objects are registered continuously.

National parks are also part of the National Estate and there are several specific guides to all Australian national parks. These differ in quality and emphasis but G. Hutton's *Australia's natural heritage* and V. Serventy's *National parks* are probably the most useful. In addition the tourist departments of all states and territories issue popular descriptions of these national parks and these are usually accompanied by walking maps, guides to flora and fauna, advice on sleeping accommodation, the use of fire, and a listing of restrictions. It should not need stressing that national parks include marine as well as land regions; indeed many people tend to forget that areas like the Great Barrier Reef have also been classified as national parks. These areas include significant and different types of land so that there will be in the future sufficient evidence of how the continent appeared to the first settlers and their descendants.