

SUE HEFFERNAN

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH
HELEN TAYLOR
AT
TANILBA HOUSE
ON
13TH AUGUST 1989

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

LECTURER: MARGARET HENRY

WEDNESDAY NIGHT: 7.00PM TO 9.00PM

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198

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Signed *Helen Taylor*

Date 13. 8. 89

Interviewer SUZANNE HEFFERNAN *S. Heffernan*

My name is Suzanne Heffernan and I am interviewing Helen Taylor at Tanilba House on 13th August 1989.

SH: Just for the record would you please state your name and when and where you were born?

HT: My name is Helen Taylor and I am what was in the 40's and 50's called a new Australian. I am born in Europe in Czechoslovakia and I have been here since 1949.

SH: What age were you when you came to Australia?

HT: Thirteen.

SH: Do you remember much about your homeland?

HT: Of course I do. Yes.

SH: Would you like to describe some of it, please?

HT: Uh, very old cities, beautiful rivers, a different way of life all together; but I must say I have been back to Europe so it's not difficult really to describe.

SH: When did Tanilba House come into your family?

HT: Um, my family leased Tanilba House in the 1950's and when a demolition order uh came onto it in 1968 I think, '68 yea my family bought it.

SH: Was it for historical reasons or...?

HT: Oh, probably sentimental reasons.

SH: Uh. Can you please tell me who and when Tanilba House was built?

HT: Uh, Tanilba House, Tanilba House itself dates to the early 1830's. Lieutenant Caswell came here in 1831, but this is the third Tanilba House. So the first one would have been built in 1830 which was a slab hut. The second one was a basic cottage and this particular property probably dates to 1834 to 1836. But the dates are always given as 1831 because that was the first Tanilba House, but this is number three Tanilba House.

SH: Do you know why Caswell came to Australia?

HT: Uh. Possibly because no dole existed and once he retired from the Navy he didn't know what to do with himself and um, um also a decree came out if a retired officer would immigrate he would be given certain amount of land under what was then called a "peppercorn rental" and this was judged by how much money he had saved, how much he also made during his career. So Caswell felt that perhaps this was a new life for him, a new future. He was only forty when he arrived, so he would have retired at the age of thirty eight, thirty nine and his wife Susan was sixteen years his junior so she would have been about twenty four when she arrived here.

SH: Um. Was Caswell from a well to do family or did he see Australia as giving him more money, more prestige?

HT: Uh, I don't think so. I think he was a very, he was a gentleman who was busy all his life. Um, and he liked to keep active, he was not from a particularly wealthy family. His parents owned an inn, so possibly it would be called what was what would be looked at, at that time as um, middle class lower middle class, but all of his sisters or brothers had some form of education. Uh, he also had two brothers, who were naval commanders, the same title as he had and they also emigrated to Australia. So there must have been many reasons why they came. I felt one of them was because his brother-in-law who was a Robert Hoddle and um, Robert Hoddle was responsible for planning the city of Melbourne. Robert Hoddle was here since the mid 1820's. He had been here for some time. So possibly he wrote back glowing letters and some members of the family followed.

SH: Um. Did convicts actually build all of Tanilba House?

HT: Uh. Probably yes. Yes, they did. I may have to answer the telephone. (She laughs). Stop that. Sorry.

SH: Would you please describe Tanilba House?

HT: Tanilba House is a fairly basic building but uh, it is very well designed in many ways and that is that uh Caswell who would have probably had a lot of say in the original plans, even though he was not an architect or builder. Caswell was known as an excellent

navigator and he planned the building in a manner that it seems to face um the correct kind of sun and whatever and that also he has taken into consideration the winds, the different winds that come from the sea. So the setting itself which probably is of great importance and it was the first house on the peninsula, the setting is wonderful, it is excellent. It's also the only hill on this side of the Tilligerry Peninsula. He chose the only hill, possibly because uh, the early English settlers were interested in summer breezes. They were, was very much affected by the heat, particularly the women as they wore corsets and long dresses and whatever; and they wanted breezes from the sea, the summer winds. So, uh the setting is perfect. The house is simple but spacy but it seems to work well. It is convict built. Was that what I was asked. (She laughs). Yea.

SH: The house itself. What about the interior?

HT: Yes. Interior, well there have been some slight changes in in the interior and that is we now seem to have one room less than we uh originally had and that was only discovered a fairly short time ago. We had one extra room, one extra, extra fireplace which possibly fell into disuse or something happened anyway. Um, one room has been enlarged and the interior is again as I said before simple. There are not as many bedrooms as one would think but then again in Victorian days uh you would have possibly had four children per one room and two children per bed. So it was not necessary to have so many bedrooms and actually the two bedrooms uh towards the gaol are rooms for servants. They were not even for the family. They are servant rooms.

SH: Can you describe the significance of the heights of the doorways in the house?

HT: Well, it's probable that um the wing where the kitchen stands and the two adjoining bedrooms were meant for servants, therefore you have doorways which are a foot lower. You also have windows which are smaller. Um, the Caswell family would have saved on glass and on labour, possibly it means some sort of a class distinction. Yes.

SH: I understand that there is a resident ghost.
Who is the ghost?

HT: Yes. Well we have to have a ghost. It is an old house. (She laughs). And since the only person besides two Caswell children who died here, the only other person who is buried in the grounds is uh the governess that came here to teach and uh so we presume it's her.

SH: Was she old or young?

HT: I have no idea how old she was but possibly the mid thirties.

SH: Have you seen the ghost yourself?

HT: I have seen something here twice.

SH: Uh. As you said there were graves on the property.

HT: Yes.

SH: Who are they of?

HT: The graves were of two children, um one child named George who was four and a half or five and another infant that died of Typhoid. George died in an accident and the infant died of Typhoid and so did the governess at that particular time, but there are no more headstones, the headstones were removed in the 1920's. So these graves have ended up in somebody elses backyard.

SH: How many children did the Caswell's have?

HT: Uh. We first thought ten then it grew to eleven and now it seems twelve. Uh, there was one child who was very seldom spoken of and this particular daughter whose name was Elizabeth was an invalid and uh I don't know whether she caused some embarassment to the family but she is very seldom mentioned but it seems that there were twelve children. Only two died in infancy.

SH: And were they born in Australia or in England?

HT: Ah, two in England, ten in Australia.

SH: Under the house there's dungeons. Were they for the convicts?

HT: No. There are no dungeons. Uh, what was thought to be a dungeon was a wine cellar and the wine cellar was here of course for storage of wines because there were ten acres of vines here and wine which was made at Tanilba House was sent by sea to Sydney or Newcastle. So you had to have cellars and a lot of people think that they were for storage of convicts but they were not, they were for storage of wine.

SH: There is a gaol on the property.

HT: Yes there's a small gaol and the gaol here was to reprimand convicts but again people misinform them they think that convicts normally slept there. Well they couldn't have fitted in there because it is very small and they were only put in when they misbehaved. Convicts had their own housing which would have been fairly basic, it would have been built of wood and uh I believe that by the end of the century there was no trace of that house at all, it had disappeared.

SH: And was it common to have convicts on properties?

HT: Of course! Uh, it was very difficult getting free labour. Um, convicts were assigned ~~4000~~ depending on how much land and how much uh a person applying for the convicts would have, so originally Caswell had sixteen but this number by the early 1840's had dwindled to two. Convicts were being recalled to work on government projects in Sydney so eventually there were only two convicts and Caswell brought in men from Germany to work in the vineyards and these men came from Germany strangely enough but these were not convicts these were people who were paid barter.

SH: Hmm. He also had a vineyard. Was it profitable?

HT: He had the vineyard here. He also had a vineyard at Balickerra near Seaham. I am not quite sure how profitable that was because Caswell was bankrupt in the early 1840's so, obviously it was not profitable. Um, but he did remain in the colony for thirty years, all the children were well educated. Um, they did not have an easy life, but um, I think that the property at Balickerra it seem probably was the money maker and this was always called by him "his beautiful white elephant", so uh I don't think much profit came from Tanilba.

SH: You're restoring Tanilba House, uh, how much have you accomplished?

HT: I'm not really restoring it. I am just trying to repair it. (She laughs). But uh, so far the major contribution of the last three or four years has been a new roof. Um, we are doing continual repairs because the minute one repairs one side the other side falls down and people have no idea what it's like to try and preserve and maintain an old property because you're looking after not at all three rooms, you are looking after eleven rooms and extensive verandahs and large grounds. Um, not much money is forthcoming from the Government, actually the only government money invested in the property is in the form of a new roof which came last year and the rest has been funded by me and um I am just doing my best.

SH: While you've been repairing it, have you had any discoveries that have come about?

HT: Not really. The only one was the one that I mentioned earlier that there had been one extra room, one extra fireplace which for some strange reason disappeared, possibly that was changed turn of the century because a lot of um repairs were made here at the turn of the century. The house was in bad order. It was left deserted between 1870 and uh the early 1890's. So you can imagine when a house is left totally unoccupied for twenty years, a lot of damage happens so um I don't know what it looked like in the early 1900's but um, a lot of the changes that happened were Victorian and they were 1900 Victorians. So you see some pieces that date to the 1830's, others to turn of the century and then again when Henry Halloran bought the property in 1920, he had probably up to half a dozen people living here for ten years and uh they created all the fantastic stonework which a lot of people think is convict built but it's not and this stonework is gates and temples etcetera. Um, I've missed the question haven't I. (She laughs). I am close to it.

SH: Halloran subdivided Tanilba.

HT: Yes.

SH: Was he successful with that subdivision?

HT: I think financially no, because he was fifty years before his time but the subdivision itself is quite interesting and uh we are rather fortunate to have Tanilba correctly subdivided and streets laid out in some sort of a formal manner. So it hasn't just happened a certain pattern has been followed but um, Halloran on both Tanilba Bay and Mallabulla um, one of his drawbacks was the fact when he first bought the house there was no road and the road to the turn off was built in 1920. But he possibly thought that something momentous was going to happen here but like Caswell it didn't. It um, really became um a satellite suburb of Newcastle only in the 1970's, only fairly recently. Is that enough?

SH: (The telephone rings). Um.

SH: I understand there's an olive tree on the property, is it the oldest olive tree in Australia?

HT: No. Uh, it's the second oldest olive tree. The most uh, now what am I saying. The oldest olive tree is at Elizabeth Farm in Sydney and these olive trees at Tanilba Bay were the second lot of olive trees planted in the country so, it's not the oldest olive tree. I think it was always written up as the oldest olive tree but it's incorrect.

SH: Then did Susan Caswell plant the tree?

HT: Yes. The one that's surviving, well it's always written in historical books that she planted it so I just like to believe it, possibly it's correct. Alright.

SH: What do you see in the future for yourself and the house?

HT: Uh, I don't know. (She laughs). I feel lots of things but whether I can accomplish them or not is another question so, I really have a lot of difficulty in commenting on that because uh things are not progressing as quickly as I would like them to be um, I really don't know.

SH: Do you think it will always be in your family or it would go out?

HT: That again I don't know because my children are too young to be interested so possibly after I can't hold the reins any longer it may pass onto somebody else.

SH: I would just like to thank you for this interview, it's been really great actually, there's a lot of information there I didn't know about.

HT: Ok. Thank you very much. Thank you. Ok.

SUE HEFFERNAN

500 WORD SUMMARY
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OF INTERVIEW WITH
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Helen Taylor was born in Czechoslovakia and emigrated to Australia at the age of thirteen in 1949. Her memories of Czechoslovakia are of old cities and beautiful rivers. Life there was different to Australia.

Helen Taylor's family leased Tanilba House in the 1950's. In 1968 Tanilba House came under a demolition order, so her family purchased it.

Lieutenant Caswell came to Australia when he retired from the Navy. Under a decree known as a "peppercorn rental" a retired officer who emigrated was given an amount of land. The amount of land granted depended on the officer's savings and the money he earned during his career. Caswell was forty when he arrived in Australia in 1831 and his wife, Susan, was sixteen years his junior. Caswell was from a middle or lower middle class. He had two brothers who were naval officers who emigrated here. Caswell's brother-in-law was Robert Hoddle, who planned the city of Melbourne. Caswell had twelve children. Two were born in England and ten in Australia.

Tanilba House today is the third Tanilba House. The first Tanilba House was a slab hut and was built in 1830. The second was a basic cottage and the present house dates ~~from~~ 1834 to 1836. Tanilba House is convict built and is a basic cottage. Caswell designed it so that it received the correct amount of sun and the breezes that came from the sea. There have been slight changes in the interior with one room disappearing. The doorways are of different heights, possibly as a class distinction as the kitchen and servants' quarters doorways and windows are smaller.

A small gaol is on the property and this was to reprimand convicts. Convicts had their own housing. It was probably made of wood. By the end of the 19th century this housing had disappeared. Convicts were assigned to landowners depending on how much land and money they had. Caswell originally had sixteen but by the 1840's he had only two.

Tanilba House had a vineyard. Caswell also had a vineyard at Balickerra. Caswell went bankrupt in the early 1840's. He remained in the colony for thirty years and his children were well educated. Balickerra was possibly the money maker; it is doubtful Tanilba House was. Caswell referred to it as "his beautiful white elephant". Tanilba House has the second oldest olive tree in Australia. It was possibly planted by Susan Caswell.

A man named Henry Halloran subdivided Tanilba Bay in the 1920's. It was not a financial success mainly because there was no road from the turn off until Halloran put it in in 1920. Halloran had extensive stonework constructed around Tanilba Bay which immitated the convicts' stonework.

Helen Taylor does not know what future Tanilba House may have as her children are too young to have any interest in the house. As long as she can continue the house will stay in her family but if her family do not become interested then it may pass out of the Taylor family.

SUE HEFFERNAN

THIRD TERM ASSIGNMENT
REGIONAL HISTORY

"TANILBA HOUSE"
PAST TO PRESENT

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY
LECTURER: MARGARET HENRY
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Tanilba House is situated in Caswell Crescent, Tanilba Bay. The house that stands today is the third Tanilba House. "The first house was a slab hut built in 1830. The second one was a basic cottage and the present house dates to 1834 to 1836."¹

Tanilba House was built by Lieutenant William Caswell, who emigrated to Australia at the age of forty in 1829, when he retired from the Navy. He arrived in Australia with his wife, Susan, sixteen years his junior and their two children, Emily, aged three and William Stewart, aged two. Susan Caswell was the sister of Robert Hoddle, who planned the city of Melbourne. William Caswell was from a lower middle to middle class. His parents owned an inn. Caswell's naval experience helped him to design Tanilba House so that it captured the right amount of sun and the breezes that came from the sea that helped to cool the house in summer. This was particularly important for the women because of the clothing the women had to wear in the 1800's.

The house is convict built and made of quartz porphyry stone quarried on the property. A vineyard was established by Caswell at Tanilba Bay and in 1850 "was producing 1000 gallons of wine annually".² The wine that was produced was stored in the wine cellar which was situated beneath the house. The house bears the mark of class distinction. The doorways and windows in the section of the house where the kitchen and servants' quarters stand are smaller than the rest of the house. A small gaol also exists on the property and this was used to reprimand the convicts who were assigned to Caswell. Originally Caswell was assigned sixteen convicts but by the 1840's the majority ~~was~~ recalled to Sydney by the Government and he was left with only two.

The Caswell family had ten more children in Australia. Two of these children died in infancy. One child, George died in an accident at the age of four and a half or five. The other child, a baby, died of Typhoid.

¹ Transcript of interview with Helen Taylor, 1989, Page 1.

² Newcastle Morning Herald, Saturday Magazine, 3rd January, 1987, Page 11.

By 1840 William Caswell was bankrupt and "he considered selling 'Tanilba House' but received relief under the Insolvency Act in 1842..."³ The Caswell family left Tanilba House and took up residence at the property known as "Balickerra" which was near Seaham. In 1859 Caswell was returning to England with his daughter Emily when he died at sea.

Tanilba House was leased from 1861 to 1871 by a Mrs. Catherine Linz, of Stockton, and her parents. The house then stood deserted until 1897 when Mrs. Elizabeth Holmes bought the estate from the executors of the Caswell family. The house had fallen into disrepair after standing vacant for more than twenty years. The Holmes family resided at Tanilba House for some years. Whilst Mr. Holmes was ploughing a portion of land for an orchard, an Aboriginal breast plate bearing the name "Tanilba" was unearthed. This breast plate belonged to the King of the Tanilba tribe. The house was partially restored by Mrs. Holmes and it is during this restoration it is believed that "one room disappeared".⁴ Tanilba House was then sold in 1905 to Mr. W. J. Ebbeck who converted the house to a holiday house for fishing parties from Newcastle and Maitland. In 1913 the house changed owners again and it became the residence of Walter W. Clift. He sold the property in 1920 to Henry Halloran.

Henry Halloran was an estate agent and developer. At one time he was the Chief Surveyor for New South Wales. The original Crown grant of the land to William Caswell bears Halloran's grandfather's signature as having been entered by him in the register of the county in the Surveyor General's Office. Halloran employed two Italian stonemasons in the 1920's to create pseudo-convict stonework around Tanilba Bay. This stonework included the "Temple", winding stone walls, the wishing chair, the pillars of the pagoda and the entrance gates to Tanilba Bay. On top of the entrance gates are two bollards from H.M.A.S. Sydney. This stonework was completed on 31st March, 1931. The entrance

³ Jean Caswell Benson, A Wide Spectrum, Tumut New South Wales, 1987, p.135.

⁴ Transcript of interview....., p.6.

gates are known as "the Centenary gateway to Tanilba Bay".⁵ Henry Halloran subdivided Tanilba Bay and Mallabulla to sell the land to make a profit and the stonework was to be used as an attraction to the area. This subdivision was not financially successful. For twenty years holiday makers enjoyed Tanilba House.

In 1940 Tanilba House was leased to the Gospel Fishermen Mission which was a religious sect. They leased the house for seventeen years as their headquarters and as a home for sailors. They in turn left Tanilba House to establish their headquarters at Tahlee.

The lease on the house was taken over by the Oberland family in the mid 1950's. They operated Tanilba House as a holiday farm and riding school. In 1968 Tanilba House came under a demolition order and to prevent the destruction of the historical house the Oberland family purchased it. In the early 1970's, Squadron Leader Douglas Edwards, who was an R.A.A.F. pilot stationed at R.A.A.F. Base, Williamtown with the Mirages and his wife Suzanne, formerly Miss Suzanne Oberland, and their two children occupied Tanilba House.

The New South Wales Government in 1980 placed a permanent conservation order on Tanilba House and on the stone gazebo known as "The Temple". This order means that the structures "must be preserved in their present form".⁶

The present owner of Tanilba House is Helen Taylor and she is of the Oberland family. Tanilba House is now a tourist attraction. Mrs. Taylor conducts tours through the house which displays furniture and clothing from the past. The house is under constant repair because as one side of the house is repaired the other side falls down, because of its' age. In November 1987 the ornate glass panelled cedar door was restored to its' former glory by having the centre door panel replaced which had been missing since the 1930's. Even though the glass is not as old as the house, it comes from the 1880's, so it is at least one hundred years old.

⁵ Raymond Terrace Examiner, 20th May, 1970.

⁶ Newcastle Morning Herald, 7th March, 1980.

A new roof was put onto Tanilba House in 1988. This was made possible by a grant from the Government. Mrs. Taylor hopes to keep the house in her family. ~~It~~^{she} will continue to do so while she is capable of looking after it.

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