

Beyond the limits of location

In 1826, Governor Darling decided he must do something about the rum goings on in NSW. According to Gretchen Poiner, “It was largely an attempt to reduce the brutal and lawless behaviour happening out in the bush.”

The Governor’s limits were imposed – beyond which settlers were not supposed to settle – but as the southern limit was at Yass, we now know the constraints didn’t work for long. What the limits have provided, however, is a loose framework for a magnificent new book, *Limits of Location – creating a colony*, co-edited by Poiner with Sybil Jack.

There are a number of things to say about *Limits of Location*. The first is that it is thoughtfully illustrated with letters, drawings, paintings, photographs, maps and documents from the Mitchell, Dixson and State Libraries and the Dixson Galleries Collection.

The text is the second notable element. The editors have identified eleven subject areas and writers to explore them. Jack contributes opening essay, *Surveyors and the Creation of Location in New South Wales*. The state’s unique plant life is Helen Hewson’s topic in *Flora in View* (a botanic drawing of a Waratah makes her point).

Belonging: the meaning of place for women in the early settlement of NSW is Poiner’s contribution and it’s followed by Marilyn Dodkin’s surely ironic *A Very Benevolent Society*.

Portrait of a Family: the lost art of letter writing, by Audrey Tate and Margaret Bettison, is a poignant and telling account of early NSW. Illustrated here is one of the letter writers: Nelly, a daughter of Eleanor Lady Stephen and Chief Justice Sir Alfred Stephen.

Like many contemporaries, Nelly did not have a long life. She was, by all

accounts, a kind and delightful girl. What is arresting, to the modern reader, is the discovery that her mother had married Justice Stephen when she was 27 and he a 35-year-old widower. His first wife had died in childbirth the previous year aged 33, leaving seven living children (two died in infancy).



Nelly Stephen from the Mitchell Library Collection

Not only did Eleanor take on the seven children but went on to have nine of her own.

And of course, they all wrote like demons. The letters between various members of family and friends are among the most vivid accounts of colonial life; the eye watering numbers of children and the letters are among the most striking differences between then and now.

The similarities between then and now are evidenced in lateral ways: *Early Indian Workers in the Australian Colonies*, by Marie de Lepervanche,

echoes with later treatment of immigrants and the importance of labour supplies; *Make a Light: Aboriginal economic contributions to the emerging nation*, by Gaynor Macdonald, should be required reading for the Terra Nullius brigade; while Ian Keese’s *Baiami and the Bible: Religious encounters in early colonial Australia* is a fascinating account of the early efforts of the Church. Christine Jennett’s *People and Place: Terms of inclusion in a colony’s history* is a searching exploration of how perceptions and reality changed over time for settlers and indigenous Australians.

Finally, *An Other World: Albert Tissandier at Jenolan Caves*, by Susan Steggall, is illustrated with the traveller’s drawings and, as well as being atmospheric and beautifully executed, they show the European eye for the exotic landscape. It is unconsciously made over into something like the familiar European landscape.

Limits of Location is a digital, print-on-demand, book and proves that this method does not necessarily mean low quality.

It was printed on a Xerox Docucolor 5252 and as Susan Murray-Smith of Sydney University Press says, “After the first 300 are sold, we will decide whether to continue to print the parilux version at the higher price, or do an edition on white paper for the same price \$49.95.”

The unsubsidised “higher price” is only \$89.95 for beautiful creamy paper and luscious imagery. It will make a perfect Christmas, birthday or self-indulgence gift and an absorbing read.

Limits of Location: Creating a Colony, Gretchen Poiner and Sybil Jack, editors; Sydney University Press, \$49.95+ postage: www.sup.usyd.edu.au ■