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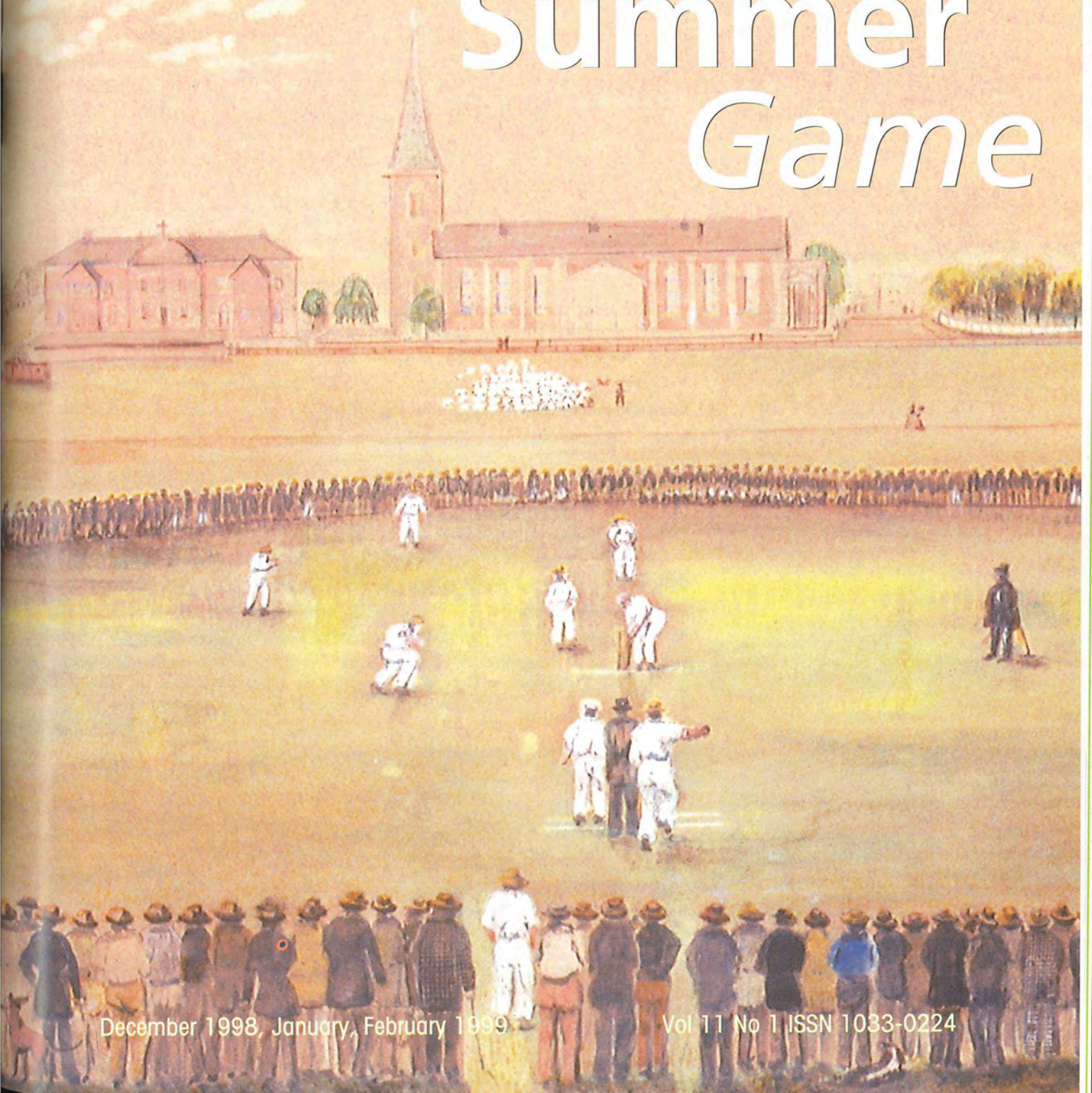
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LORD NELSON'S HISTORY

BY MICHAEL MANGOLD

IT IS NOT AS arresting as the stark black piano on the beach in Jane Campion's film but it carries with it the same sensibility of history: a modest little washstand not so much washed up by the tide of time as carried along with it. Beginning on the Baltic Sea in the cabin of the then Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson's flagship *Victory* this washstand crossed the oceans to the wilds of the Hunter River in the Colony of New South Wales, and later journeyed through untamed wilderness along the Clarence River further north, returning to Sydney, then more recently to a property near Goulburn, and now finally to the State Library.

At the State Library the layers of history surrounding Nelson's washstand are destined to be unwrapped over and over again with the same expectation and excitement with which State Librarian & Chief Executive, Dagmar Schmidmaier, greeted it early this year. In February 1998 The former Chief Justice of New South Wales, The Hon. Sir Laurence Street and his brother, Mr Timothy Street, officially made this, the latest in a long line of gifts to the Library from their family. 'The washstand is a beautiful object and will be treasured and cared for by the Library,' Dagmar wrote in her letter of thanks to Sir Laurence. 'It will be noted that it has been presented by the Street family in accordance with the wishes expressed by Lady (Jessie) Street in her will.'

Tracing the passage of the washstand from New South Wales back to Nelson's cabin is a journey combining the aspects of the history of this State with world events involving powerful and fascinating personalities. Horatio Nelson entered the British Royal Navy in 1770 and over the next decade inflicted decisive and swashbuckling



defeats over the Spanish and French fleets, adding to his heroic stature along the way with the loss of his right eye and right arm in battle. Having returned to Naples following his triumph over the French fleet in the Mediterranean in 1798 'the Queen welcomed him with ardour'.

Lady Hamilton, the wife of the English ambassador, was also present and according to *Chambers's Biographical Dictionary*, welcomed him 'in a paroxysm of rapture'. She is described as 'a woman of extreme beauty, winning manners and shady antecedents, she enslaved Nelson by her charms, and the two became bound by a liaison which only death severed'. After refusing an order by Lord Keith, commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean, to defend Minorca, Nelson resigned his command and 'made his way home overland with Lady Hamilton and her husband, arriving in November 1800. His meeting with his wife was not a happy one, and after an angry interview they parted for good'.

A year later, Nelson's private life and censure by the Admiralty for disobedience were overlooked when

he 'was promoted to vice-admiral and appointed second in command of the expedition to the Baltic'. Nelson turned certain disaster in the Battle of Copenhagen into a devastating victory over the Danish fleet by holding his telescope to his blind eye to avoid seeing his commander, Sir Hyde Parker's order to withdraw. Following Parker's recall Nelson became commander of the fleet and a viscount upon his return to England. It is reputedly in the aftermath of this battle that Nelson awarded the washstand from his cabin on the *Victory* to a young officer, William Ogilvie, who was serving under him at the time, although research by the State Reference Library indicates the washstand may have been acquired by William Ogilvie's brother, David, a midshipman on HMS *Victory*, after the Battle of Trafalgar.

Below: Edward D.S. Ogilvie in his 81st year, by Tom Roberts, 1895. Mitchell Library



WASHSTAND



Right: 'Yulgilbar Castle', Clarence River, NSW. Mid-1890s. taken by W. Stevenson.

Left: Theodosia Ogilvie, 1859. Painted in Italy on her honeymoon.

Captain William Ogilvie, R.N. was the ancestor of Lady (Jessie) Street, Sir Laurence Street's mother, who wanted the washstand to go to the State Library of New South Wales as part of a series of gifts and bequests from the family to the Library, including letters, diaries, photographs, paintings and Tom Roberts' portrait of Captain Ogilvie's son and heir, Edward Ogilvie. Whatever the exact circumstances, Captain Ogilvie did not take possession of the washstand until after the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805 when Nelson died from a gunshot while in command of the annihilation of the French fleet. The washstand travelled to Sydney in 1825 aboard the convict ship *Grenada* with William Ogilvie, his wife Mary (née White) and children who were emigrating as free settlers.

They took up land on the upper reaches of the Hunter River with a grant of 2000 acres, which they called 'Merton' after the village in Surrey where Nelson and the Ogilvies had lived. William and Mary had three sons and one daughter and as recorded by Sir Laurence Street's father, Sir Kenneth Whistler Street, in his *Annals of the Street Family of Birtley*, August 1941; 'Edward David Stuart Ogilvie, with his brother Frederick, were the first to penetrate the Upper



Clarence River, and having explored a great deal of this country, he decided to remain there and not return to Merton'. This was in 1840 and E.D.S. Ogilvie soon had a combined freehold and leasehold property, on both sides of the river, consisting of nearly half a million acres with over 60 miles of river frontage.

Edward Ogilvie's holding was called 'Yulgilbar'; it began as a sheep station but was later transformed into a cattle station. Whether it was because an Aboriginal had assisted him and his brother on the original journey to the Upper Clarence or because of some unique combination of personality traits, Edward Ogilvie was able to establish cordial relations with the indigenous people in the area. He became fluent in the local dialect and negotiated hunting rights for the Aboriginals in return for grazing his livestock. Aboriginal rights, suffragism, social justice and international peace were to become overriding themes in the remarkable life of his granddaughter, Jessie Mary Grey Street (née Lillingston).

While adapting to his environment in quite profound ways, Edward nevertheless continued to treasure the culture and traditions of Europe. He travelled widely throughout the continent from 1854-59, visiting the war front in Crimea, recruiting German craftsmen, delighting in Florence, and buying a rich assortment of artefacts including an Italian marble fountain. This item became a centrepiece of his vision for a Moorish 'castle' at 'Yulgilbar' which he planned to furnish by transporting his European acquisitions up the Clarence in

scenes reminiscent of Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*. He described some of the experiences of his European travels in his *Diary of Travels in Three Quarters of the Globe* published in London in 1856 under the pseudonym 'An Australian Squatter'.

After his marriage in Dublin in 1858 to Theodosia, daughter of the Reverend William de Burgh, Edward returned with his new bride to Australia in the following year. Following Theodosia's death in 1886, Edward returned to Europe with his family. He remarried in 1890 to Alice Tottenham and they lived in Florence for several years in close friendship with the poet Robert Browning. Due to the economic pressures of the 1893 depression, they returned to 'Yulgilbar' where the crenellated roof and two towers of the 'Big House' had been completed in 1866. Edward died on 25 January 1896, leaving 'Yulgilbar' and a third of its income to Mabel Lillingston (née Ogilvie), the sixth of his eight daughters.

Mabel Lillingston's first child, Jessie, was born in India on 11 April 1889 (and died 2 July 1970); she married Kenneth Street on 10 February 1916 at St. John's Church, Darlinghurst. Sir Kenneth Street was to follow in his father, Sir Philip Street's, footsteps by becoming Chief Justice of New South Wales, as did Sir Kenneth's youngest son, Sir Laurence Street. The heraldry, ancestry and accomplishments of the Street family are woven into the fabric of the legal and social history of this country and beyond to William the Conqueror, King Alfred the Great and Emperor Charlemagne. 'Yulgilbar Castle', as it came to be known, became the antipodean link to this past, and sentinel to the passage of history was Nelson's washstand.