South Africa in Sydney

In 1901 a group of British colonies entered into a federation as the Commonwealth of Australia, and in 1910 four British colonies became the Union of South Africa. New South Wales and Victorian soldiers who set out for Durban or Cape Town in 1899 to defend the Empire in its “South African War”, returned three years later as Australians. The connections between these two countries began long before that and have continued long after.

At least since white settlement in 1788, there has been more or less continuous traffic between the two antipodes. Under the title “Cape of Good Hope”, a few years ago, an exhibition at the Museum of Sydney, of treasures from the Oppenheimer Brenthurst Collection, explored in some detail the exchange of people, natural goods and commercial products between New South Wales and the Cape in the early days of British settlement. The merino sheep which were at one stage the backbone of the Australian economy were brought from the Cape by the Macarthur family to Elizabeth Farm near Parramatta.

At the census of 1921 South Africa was among the top ten countries of birth of the total overseas born Australian population. Of the nearly 100,000 South African-born settlers who have come to Australia since World War II about 30,000 arrived in the 1980s and another 30,000 in the 1990s.
This means that in Sydney every now and then a South African accent can be heard on the radio or the bus. There are pockets of ex-South Africa in many parts of Australia: Sydney’s is St. Ives, a northern line affluent suburb, where shops carry signs like “South African groceries” or “kosher goods available”. You can find Mrs. Ball’s or Royal Instant Pudding or boerewors. Springbok Foods is open for business in Lane Cove. For a South African visitor or temporary resident or student (about 60,000 visited in 2019) who feels homesick, just about everywhere in Australia there is a taste of home to be found.

But for both visitor and settler the South African connection with Sydney runs deeper, and can give a tourist or a resident a distinctive handle on the city, leading to much of artistic, cultural and historical interest.

Occasionally a reminder surfaces that Australia might have become a Dutch colony as the Cape did. A well-known story is that of the VOC ship Batavia (the Dutch name for the colony of Indonesia), wrecked on an island off the coast of Western Australia in 1629. There followed a bloody mutiny, and there were few survivors. A replica of the Batavia occasionally visits Sydney. Indonesia is now Australia’s closest neighbour, an important ally and partner, and when “informasi” or “polisi” or “reformasi” crops up in news from Indonesia, there is an echo of Afrikaans. In Kensington, a southern suburb of Sydney, near Royal Randwick race-course, there is one of Sydney’s Indonesian restaurants, Pondok Batang, “our house”: “pondok” still means house for too many South Africans.

But it was the British Empire that eventually in a sense joined Australia and South Africa. Near Circular Quay, on Sydney Harbour, and one of the city’s hubs, stands the Old Customs House (now the site of an impressive City library). Between its first floor windows, the building is decorated with cartouches carrying the names of imperial ports: Cape Town and Durban appear with Hong Kong, Bombay, Montreal. And on the eastern edge of the Botanical Gardens, another great Sydney attraction, not far from Circular Quay, there is a succulent garden, with a South African corner, where can be seen a variety of vygies, aloes and other desert plants. On the western edge of the Gardens, near Macquarie Street (one of Sydney’s finest) there is a
patchwork plantation of grasses, spread out for the information of gardeners: one of them is “Durban grass”, which may not be the green stuff you’re thinking of.

But South Africans are not welcome everywhere in Sydney. One of the features of the city is the proximity of national parks: Ku-ring-gai in the north, Royal in the south, and many more. In these restricted areas certain familiar South Africans are undesirable aliens: the Bitou Bush, or bush-tick berry, for example, is a “Weed of National Significance”, despite its bright yellow flowers.

To move from the bush (in the Australian sense) to the urban, no matter where you go in the Sydney suburbs you’re never too far from a street name with South African resonance. Carlingford, for example, in the north-west, boasts a neighbourhood of roads and avenues recalling World War II: Tobruk, Benghazi, Alamein, Tripoli, Montgomery, all names known to South Africans who can remember or have read about those years. Kimberley Road is also there, with another in Diamond Bay near South Head, as a reminder that Australians and South Africans have been enemies as well as allies in war. In fact it is the War of 1899-1902 that resounds most often on the Sydney map for South Africans: Durban, Pretoria, Natal. The battles and sieges: Colenso, Mafeking, Diamond Hill. The politicians and statesmen: Kruger, Rhodes and Milner, Rosebery, Salisbury and Chamberlain. British soldiers are there: Buller and Gatacre, White, French and Kitchener. There is one South African general commemorated, by Joubert Street in Hunter’s Hill: and one famous Australian who fought, and died, in South Africa: Morant Street in Edensor Park and the northern beaches suburb of Harbord acknowledge Henry Harbord Morant, the poet and Bushveld Carbineer, known as “Breaker” (of horses), a “Bushman” in the Australian rather than the South African sense. With his friend Peter Handcock, Morant had enlisted in the South Australian Mounted Rifles to fight in the war. Near Pietersburg/Polokwane on 27th February 1902, they were both executed, by a firing squad drawn from the Cameron Highlanders, having been court-martialled and found guilty of shooting down several Boer prisoners and a German missionary.
That war was one of the sad chapters of the history of the Australian-South African connection: many other diggers died far from home between 1899 and 1902. A journey to their memorials in Sydney would take a visitor to some of the city’s most interesting spots, from centre to outskirts, from north to south, and from east to west. In the foyer of the Town Hall a tablet commemorates Sergeant Major George Griffin, the first man enlisted in an Australian military force to be killed in a “foreign” war, who died at Stryersfontein. In Observatory Park, a Boer War memorial looks down on the Harbour Bridge.

The District Soldiers’ Memorial in Paramatta Park, west of Sydney, is dedicated to the Lancers, whose Barracks are still located in Paramatta: they were the first Australian troops to arrive in South Africa and in the east, near South Head at the harbour mouth, Australia’s first monument
to an Australian man in uniform rises to Lieutenant Gideon James Grieve, who died at Paardeberg on 18th February 1900. Lt. Grieve is also commemorated by an obelisk in Jamieson Street in the city.

A small display in the basement of the ANZAC War memorial in Hyde Park tells the story of Australia’s part in the war.

There are other public memorials to those who lost their lives in the Boer War. A broken column over a fountain on the East Esplanade, Manly, is dedicated to Troopers Budd and Lipscomb,
and another fountain in Copeland Road, Beecroft, to David John Willis, who died at Elandskop on 10th October 1900, aged only 20. Most of those who died are quietly and poignantly remembered in Churches all over the earlier settled parts of the city. In the churchyard of All Saints’ in Hunter’s Hill an obelisk stands to Corporal Walter Laishley Spier, of the NSW Citizens Bushmen, who died in Cape Town on 23rd January 1901. The gates to St. Thomas’ Church in North Sydney commemorate Lieutenant William Rupert Harriott, of the NSW Mounted Infantry, who was killed, aged 23, on 12th June 1900, at Diamond Hill, where Lieu tenant P. W. C. Drage, whose memorial is in St. James’ in the city, also lost his life.
Perhaps the most splendid memorial to an individual soldier, also in St. James, commemorates Lieutenant Keith Kinnaird Mackellar, the elder brother of the poet Dorothea, author of the iconic “I love a sunburnt country”. He died at Derdepoort, (his grave says Onderstepoort) near Pretoria, on 11th July 1900, aged 20. The young lieutenant was buried first on the farm Wonderboom, near Onderstepoort: his body was later moved to the military section of the Pretoria cemetery. But in 1905 the Mackellar family brought the body home to Sydney at a cost of £1,000, packed in a box marked “curios”, so as to avoid upsetting superstitious sailors. Mackellar now rests in Waverly cemetery in the family plot, under a white marble cross from South Africa. His other memorial is a Romanesque stained-glass window, in St. James’, in which his portrait likeness is said to appear in the figure of St. George in armour, with his spear piercing a dragon, carrying a white shield emblazoned with a red cross, depicted in the glass. Of the more than 1,000 Australians who lost their lives in South Africa, Mackellar is the only one whose body was brought home.
Simple memorials can be equally moving, like the plain white marble tablet on the font in St Alban’s Church, Epping, to Samuel Charles Atchison, who fell at Rensburg on 20th February 1900: or the brass plaques in two Woolahra churches: to Lieutenant E. Allaister Lamb, killed in action on 10th May 1901, in St. Mark’s, and to Thomas C. Robertson, killed in action near Kroonstad on 21st November 1900, in All Saints. St. Mark’s also has another memorial with South African connections, to Gordon Wyborn, a chorister of the church, who died in the S.S. Waratah, off Durban in July 1919.

The South African Sydney connection is not all sadness and war of course. The museum at the Sydney Cricket Ground has some wonderful memories of sporting rivalry between the two countries. And perhaps many South Africans would be interested to visit the Australian Hall, which is a reminder of an unfinished story. On 26th January 1938 most of
Australia was celebrating 150 years of European settlement, but at the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street, Sydney, Aboriginal leaders called for a day of mourning and published a list of demands for full citizenship for their people. This occasion is generally regarded as the beginning of the first Aboriginal civil rights movement.

For me, the most resonant South African connections with Sydney are the memories of two men who came here as convicts. Laurence Hynes O’Halloran (1765-1831), son of a West Indian planter, was born in Ireland, orphaned young and raised by an uncle, who sent him to school at Christ’s Hospital. While serving in the navy he shot and killed a fellow-midshipman but was not convicted. He opened a school and later, having falsely claimed to have been ordained by the Bishop of Orrory, Halloran served as a Chaplain in the Navy and was present at the Battle of Trafalgar. In 1807 he was sent to the Cape of Good Hope as chaplain to the British forces. There he was appointed first Rector of the Latin or Grammar School.1 Halloran ran into trouble with the Governor over a duel involving his son-in-law, and was banished to Simonstown, but he resigned his chaplaincy and waged a war of words with the governor. (Halloran was a poet and seems to have been easily provoked). He fell into bankruptcy, was convicted of libel and sentenced to banishment from the Cape. He was jailed and sent back to Britain. In 1811 Halloran published Proceedings including Original Correspondence &c at the Cape of Good Hope in a criminal Process or a libel...against Laurence Halloran D.D., late Chaplain to His Majesty’s Forces in South Africa, a defence which runs to 700 pages. In England Halloran pursued his illicit career as a clergyman shifting from one remote parish to another, until he was found guilty of forging a signature in order to frank a letter. His previous forgeries were exposed, and he was sentenced to seven years’ transportation to New South Wales. While awaiting shipment he spent time in gaol, of which he gives an account in Newgate, or Desultory Sketches in a Prison, a Poem (London, 1819).

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1 Perhaps my interest in Halloran stems from the fact that I was a pupil at St. George’s Grammar School, which the Cape Town Grammar School became in 1848, under Bishop Gray.
In June 1819, on board the convict transport ship *Baring*, Halloran arrived in Sydney, where he met up with acquaintances and colleagues from the Cape, impressed Governor Macquarie and was almost immediately given his ticket of leave. He was appointed headmaster of a free Grammar school, the foundation of which he had himself proposed, and, as he had been at the Cape, was well thought of by his pupils and their parents, but the school failed, he fell into debt and his ill temper led him into intense quarrels and ostracism. His pew in St James’s Church was taken from him. Turning to journalism as a source of income, Halloran founded *The Gleaner*. He died in 1831 and was buried in a family vault in the Devonshire Street cemetery. Halloran was the father of many children with two wives and a mistress. He left a strong line of descent in Australia.

The other South African connection whose memory enriches Sydney for me was also buried in the Devonshire Street Cemetery. He was David Stuurman (1773-1830), ‘the last chief of the Hottentots.’ Born on the Gamtoos River, Stuurman worked on a farm in the area, where he was brutally treated by the farmer Johannes Vermaak. When Vermaak died David and his brothers left the farm and joined the revolt against the British colonial regime in which the Khoi united with the Xhosa. The revolt continued until 1803, when the Batavian regime took over the
Cape and David and his people were settled at Bethelsdorp, with the help of the London Missionary Society. By 1809 the accommodation between the Khoi and the surrounding Boer farmers had broken down. David, his brothers and many of his family members were shipped to Cape Town, charged with “suspicious conduct, living in a kraal near the boundary of the colony”, and jailed on Robben Island. Four of David’s children died in custody. By the end of that year the Stuurman brothers escaped with a group of prisoners, and David settled among the Xhosa on the Eastern Cape frontier, where he remained through the 4th (1811-1812) and 5th (1818-1819) Wars of Dispossession. He was only recaptured in late 1819 and returned to Robben Island in December of that year. After another escape in August 1820, David was recaptured and at a trial in Cape Town on 2 September 1820, sentenced to transportation to New South Wales for life. He was held in jail until February 1823 when the convict transport *Brampton* called at the Cape, with sufficient space to take David and another 13 South Africans, including one other Khoi, to Sydney. The *Brampton* anchored in Port Jackson on 20 April 1823.

According to the records David Stuurman stood 5’3”, his hair, eyes and complexion were ‘black’ and his ‘native place’ was identified as the ‘Cape’. His occupation was identified as ‘Hottentot’. By 1825 he was a member of a government gang labouring on public works and was housed in the Hyde Park Barracks. I wonder if we can also see David Stuurman in Augustus Earle’s painting of 1830. It looks to me as if the scene is on Macquarie Street at the entrance to the Hyde Park Barracks.
David Stuurman had not been forgotten in South Africa, where his family and others had petitioned for his release and repatriation. In 1827 on an eighteen-month visit to the Cape, Saxe Bannister the NSW Attorney General had met some of Stuurman’s surviving children at Bethelsdorp, which led him to help the family submit a petition to Sir Lowry Cole requesting David’s return. In 1826 Thomas Pringle had left the Cape and settled in London as Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society. The poet had visited Bethelsdorp soon after his arrival in Algoa Bay in 1820, and was aware of the dispossession and harassment of the Khoi. Back in London he took up David Stuurman’s case, with the help of Lieutenant General Sir Richard Bourke, by then Governor of the Cape, who gained consent for David to be repatriated if the Cape Government
did not object. Bourke also wrote to the Governor of New South Wales. Probably as a result, David Stuurman was granted his ticket of leave on 24 March 1829, by which time he had served only half of the twelve-year life sentence. By this time, the records show, David’s date of birth is established as 1773, his native place as ‘50 miles from Cape Town’, his height 5’3¼”, his hair had turned ‘black to grey and woolly’, his complexion ‘copper colour’ and his eyes ‘brown encircled in blue’. Although he was ‘lame of the right leg’ he was identified as a ‘labourer’.

In December 1831 Sir Richard Bourke settled in Sydney as the new Governor of New South Wales. When he asked after David Stuurman, he learned that ‘the last Hottentot Chief’ had died on 20 February 1830, in the Rum Hospital, near Hyde Park Barracks. (The Barracks still stand and the north wing of the Rum Hospital, so called because it was built by a consortium in exchange for a monopoly on the import of 45,000 gallons of spirits into the colony, is now the NSW Parliament House.)

David Stuurman, whose exoneration and repatriation order had come too late, was buried (in the Catholic section) of the Devonshire Street cemetery. Many records and graves were lost when the Central Station was built over the cemetery. In 2015 descendants of David Stuurman set about recovering his remains and returning them to South Africa, but no trace has been found. David Stuurman has now been symbolically repatriated and he is commemorated by a memorial in Hankey, in the
Eastern Cape, and in a splendid statue at the National Heritage Monument in Pretoria.

![David Stuurman statue](image)

It is sobering and thought-provoking to think of these two men, both convicts, but from either side of the colonial divide, and how their lives ended in Sydney. Much of the physical presence of the city survives to remind us of the Sydney they knew. These South African connections are part of what makes an immigrant Australian feel at home.

**Sources**

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