

Aside a dreamy Sydney shore:

Manly's Fairy Bower and the origins of its name

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Located on the north-eastern tip of Sydney Harbour, Manly developed as a tourist location in the 1850s as a result of English entrepreneur Henry Gilbert Smith's attempts to create a coastal leisure suburb modelled on English resort towns such as Brighton and Scarborough. Smith purchased an area of land around the low isthmus between the harbour and ocean coast side and built a wharf on the harbour side and hotels at each end of the isthmus. While bathing in the Harbour in daylight hours was banned under the New South Wales (NSW) Government 'Police Act' in 1833, which led to similar bans on swimming in developing coastal suburbs, visitors flocked to Manly to promenade, picnic and eat and drink in hotels in increasing numbers in the 1860s. Tourism expanded further in 1875 when the Port Jackson Steamship Company was established, providing reliable high-capacity vessels travelling between Circular Quay and Manly Wharf. The ban on swimming was widely flouted in the 1890s and early 1900s and was rescinded in Manly in 1903, leading to a boom in water sports and beach culture in the area. This research note addresses a particular aspect of this history with regard to the establishment of the Fairy Bower attraction in 1858 (which gave its name to the nearby Fairy Bower Beach) and the likely origins of its name.

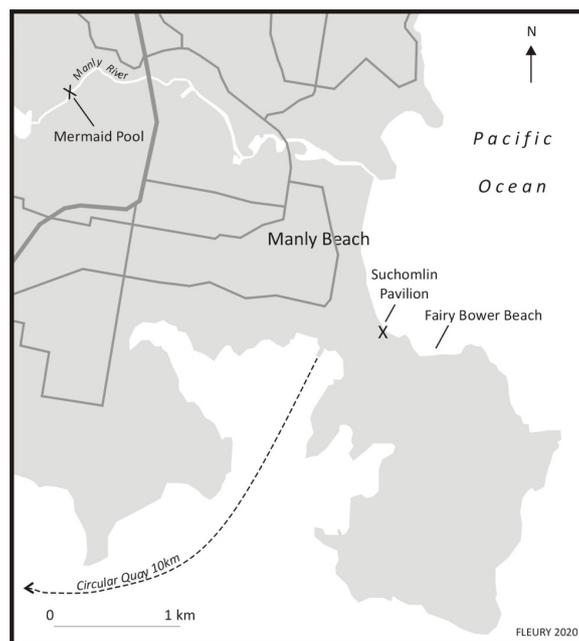


Figure 1 – Map of Manly area showing location of Fairy Bower Beach (Christian Fleury, 2020).

The Fairy Bower: potential inspiration

The Fairy Bower was a privately-owned picnic and refreshment area located in a wooded gully between Manly's surf beach, to the north, and Shelly Beach, to the south, bisected by a small creek that enters Cabbage Tree Bay. The enterprise was established by local entrepreneur Charles Hemington in 1858 and enjoyed considerable patronage in the late 1800s. As chronicled by MacRitchie (2008), the facility underwent various developments at the hands of successive owners before the area was subdivided into housing lots and with its name being gradually adopted for a small, sandy area near the creek's mouth (Fairy Bower Beach) and, later, the adjacent Fairy Bower Rock Pool, constructed in 1929.

The term 'Fairy Bower,' appears to have enjoyed something of a minor vogue in NSW, being adopted for two other locations in New South Wales around the mid-late 1800s, a waterfall in Morton National Park, south of Sydney and a creek and glen in the Blue Mountains. Somewhat later the name was also given to an area (then) outside (and now a suburb of) Rockhampton in Queensland, later described as a "place of leafy glades and enticing pools" (Unattributed, 1938: 6). While there is no recorded information concerning Hemington's choice of name for his attraction it is possible that he was inspired by Hannah More's poem 'Inscription: in a beautiful retreat called Fairy Bower', originally published in 1778 and included in various subsequent anthologies of her work in the early-mid 1800s.¹ More (1745-1833) was a prominent figure in late 18th and early 19th Century Britain. While she is best known for her philanthropy and for writing moral tracts, she also wrote a body of less overtly polemic poetry and drama. Judging from its title, More's poem appears to celebrate an actual location (perhaps a named feature in a country house garden in the West of England, where she was raised and frequently visited in later life). The poem is an unqualified paean to its locale and the first four verses, in particular, also provide references appropriate to the small creek and glade that ran through Hemington's property:

*Airy spirits, you who love
Cooling bower, or shady grove;
Streams that murmur as they flow,
Zephyrs bland that softly blow;*

*Babbling echo, or the tale
Of the love-lorn Nightingale;
Hither, airy spirits, come,
This is your peculiar home.*

*If you love a verdant glade,
If you love a noon-tide shade,
Hither, Sylphs and Fairies fly,
Unobserved of earthly eye.*

*Come, and wander every night,
By the moon-beam's glimmering light;
And again at early day
Brush the silver dews away.*

The final verse rounds proceedings off in a manner that could have been easily served as promotional copy for Hemington's Manly pleasure gardens:

*Come, ye happy virtuous few,
Open is my bower to you;
You, these mossy banks may press;
You, each guardian Fay shall bless.*

In between these verses, the remaining ten combine references to British nature and the beneficence of the divine design that provided such a pleasurable locale for the righteous (see whole poem as appendix.) It is notable that the poem, overall, focuses on the bower as opposed to the somewhat marginal fairies that are characterised as inhabiting it. The fairies appear as magical ornaments to a sylvian glade whose overall atmosphere is conveyed as magical.

The idea of the fairy bower as an idyllic, secluded space which is enchanted, and enchanting can be traced back to Elizabethan literature in two distinct versions. Titania's bower in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

¹ Another, less likely source of (direct) inspiration is Harriet Mozley's novel *The Fairy Bower, Or, the History of a Month: A Tale for Young People*, published in 1841. The novel is set in London and revolves around a room charmingly decorated and described as "The Fairy Bower" by children and adults' attempts to ascertain which child had originated the name, which child had the legitimacy to be crowned 'Queen of the Fairies' within it and, thereby, which had the right to use the name to refer to a similar space. The novel is highly moralistic, in a manner akin to More's own work, and the fairy bower featured in it may well have been inspired by More's eponymous poem.

(1595/96) is described by Oberon in Act 1 Scene 2 as “bank” “over-canopied” by honeysuckle where she can sleep safely “lulled in these flowers with dances and delight”. In contrast to the simple safety of the Fairy Queen’s Bower, the Bower of Bliss, described in great detail in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen* (1590), is an excessive, sensually intoxicating space, “abound with lavish affluence” Book II 12.42) that threatens to divert the poem’s hero from his quest (much like Circe’s abode on the island of Aea in Homer’s *Odyssey*). The bower was subject to various inflections and interpretations in 17th and 18th Century literature before being deployed in Romantic period (c1800-1910) literature. In contrast to the somewhat prim, fay and morally virtuous tone of More’s poem, Crawford has asserted that by the 1800s:

The bower’s enclosed but accessible green space was identified with female sexuality and the questing subject that entered the space with masculinity. Indeed, in a slang terminology, the word “bower” became a graphic euphemism for female sex... In popular usage, the term bower was not even a particularly subtle metaphor, but presumed a common association between enclosed, interior spaces and the female body and linked that presumption to a heterosexual imperative. (1999: 255-256)

In these regards, for those aware of its various inflections, the term “Fairy Bower” might have conveyed something of a *double entendre*. It is unclear whether any of the euphemistic aspects alluded to by Crawford either informed his choice of the name (on a conscious or unconscious level) or patrons’ associations with the venue.

Mermaids, Fairy Bower and Manly’s Beach Culture

The initial flouting and subsequent lifting of the ban on swimming in the Harbour and on coastal beaches in the 1890s and early 1900s led to increased use of Manly’s beaches during Summer seasons and weekends. New attractions, such as an elevated water chute with water toboggans opened in the early 1900s (Cama and Edwell, 2013) and, around the same time, trams began to operate between Manly and the ferry service at the Spit, which connected the Northern Beaches area to Sydney’s North Shore suburbs. As a result, Manly’s harbour and ocean beaches and the approaches to them were often crowded at peak times in the 1900s (see, for instance, images reproduced in Cama and Edwell, 2013) and the area ceased to resemble the remote and idyllic locale promoted by the Port Jackson Steamship Company with their widely used slogan ‘7 miles from the city and a million miles from care’. While business operators were no doubt pleased by increased patronage, the over-crowding provoked diverse reactions, including the story referred to below.

Hemington’s establishment and naming of the Fairy Bower in 1858 occurred at a historical moment when the Fairy Story genre was becoming popular through the work of Hans Christian Andersen, in Denmark, and the Brothers Grimm, in Germany, and through the translation of their work into multiple languages. These stories diffused to European colonies where they prompted the production of localised inflections of such tales that were set in colonial locales and/or adapted Indigenous stories into an established European literary format (Rozario, 2011). The first such Australian tales emerged in the 1890s (Wall, 1995) - after Manly’s Fairy Bower had closed - and gained traction in the early 20th Century, often as short stories published in newspapers and minor literary magazines. This corpus of work has largely ‘flown under the radar’ of Australian children’s literature researchers. One author yet to receive critical attention is Harriet Stephens.² Little is known about her aside from that she wrote a number of fairy stories published in the ‘Young Folks’ section of the *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* in the period 1906-12, several of which were illustrated by emergent artist Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, who became well-known in her own right in 1915-35 (Langmore, 1988). While most of Stephens’ stories were set in an indeterminate fairy land, one, in particular, is significant for the discussion advanced in this research note. Stephens 1909 story ‘The Queen of the Mermaids’ was one of three with a mermaid theme published in the newspaper (the others being 1911a and 1911b) but was the only one to be given a specific locale, being set around Manly’s ocean beach and Fairy Bower Bay.

Stephens’ story begins with two little mermaids hiding behind a rock on a warm evening and surveying the aforementioned crowds that thronged Manly’s ocean beach. Dismayed and deterred from coming ashore, they complain to the Queen of the Mermaids, who asks the aged Sea King to get the humans off *their* beaches. The King calls on the King of Sharks to scare the bathers away from the ocean beach but the latter doesn’t follow his command, resulting in the following exchange:

‘Well,’ said the King impatiently, ‘have you done what I told you?’ ‘Your Majesty,’ stammered the shark, ‘I— —I— I bit a little boy at Fairy Bower.’ The King stamped his foot as violently as the Queen had ever

² Not to be confused with the earlier US writer Harriet Marion Stephens (1823-58) who also wrote children’s literature.

done. 'Who told you to touch anyone at Fairy Bower? You were ordered to frighten the people on the Ocean Beach. Have you done it?' The Shark stammered more than ever. 'There were so many people,' he said, 'and— and— and they made such a noise. We were afraid to go too near.'

While the Fairy Bower itself doesn't feature in the narrative aside from this reference, the beach named after it does, creating a link between the folkloric and poetic associations that informed the naming of Hemington's pleasure gardens and Stephen's Australian fairy-themed literature.

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Appendix

Henrietta More 'Inscription: in a beautiful retreat called Fairy Bower' (1778)

*Airy spirits, you who love
Cooling bower, or shady grove;
Streams that murmur as they flow,
Zephyrs bland that softly blow;*

*Babbling echo, or the tale
Of the love-lorn Nightingale;
Hither, airy spirits, come,
This is your peculiar home.*

*If you love a verdant glade,
If you love a noon-tide shade,
Hither, Sylphs and Fairies fly,
Unobserved of earthly eye.*

*Come, and wander every night,
By the moon-beam's glimmering light;
And again at early day
Brush the silver dews away.*

*Mark where first the daisies blow,
Where the bluest violets grow,
Where the sweetest linnet sings,
Where the earliest cowslip springs;*

*Where the largest acorn lies,
Precious in a Fairy's eyes:
Sylphs, though unconfined to place,
Love to fill an acorn's space.*

*Come, and mark within what bush
Builds the blackbird or the thrush;
Great his joy who first espies,
Greater his who spares the prize!*

*Come, and watch the hallow'd bower,
Chase the insect from the flower;
Little offices like these,
Gentle souls and Fairies please.*

*Mortals! form'd of grosser clay,
From our haunts keep far away;
Or, if you should dare appear,
See that you from vice are clear.*

*Folly's minion, Fashion's fool,
Mad Ambition's restless tool!
Slave of passion, slave of power,
Fly, ah fly! this tranquil bower!*

*Son of avarice, soul of frost,
Wretch! of Heaven abhor'd the most,
Learn to pity others' wants,
Or avoid these hallow'd haunts.*

*Eye unconscious of a tear,
When affliction's train appear:
Heart that never heaved a sigh
For another, come not nigh.*

*But, ye darling sons of Heaven,
Giving freely what was given;
You, whose liberal hands dispense
The blessings of benevolence:*

*You, who wipe the tearful eye,
You, who stop the rising sigh;
You, whose souls have understood
The luxury of doing good.*

*Come, ye happy virtuous few,
Open is my bower to you;
You, these mossy banks may press;
You, each guardian Fay shall bless.*

*Come, ye happy virtuous few,
Open is my bower to you;
You, these mossy banks may press;
You, each guardian Fay shall bless.*