

## ‘Of the hut I builded’: The Maxwells’ slab structures in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales

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*Slab huts are a quintessential feature of older rural properties, although they are disappearing at a worrying rate. Like most vernacular buildings, they are notoriously difficult to date, since old techniques can be very tenacious. The two groups of slab structures which were built by two generations of Maxwells in a remote corner of Kedumba Valley in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales are exceptional in three ways. Precisely dated professional inspections of the sites and their developing structures survive from 1886 until 1903, giving a dynamic overview. Securely dated photographs of both sites also survive from January 1927, when a field hospital was set up in the earlier huts after a shooting accident. The third significant aspect of the Maxwell huts is the late date of the surviving house (1925–1926) and its affinities to the huts built nearby in the 1890s, which in turn were using old techniques learnt by William Maxwell in the 1850s. These physical, documentary and graphic sources combine to give the Kedumba complexes an unusually high potential for detailed exegesis without any disturbance of the sites.*

When Graham Connah first published his timely book on ‘the archaeology of Australia’s history’ in 1988, he chose as its title ‘Of the Hut I Builded’ (Connah 1988). Graham’s literary flourish came from a poem by Henry Lawson called ‘Reedy River’. This poem tells how, after a bush courtship on horseback along the river:

*Ten miles from Ryan’s Crossing  
And five below the peak,  
I built a little homestead  
On the banks of Rocky Creek;  
I cleared the land and fenced it  
And ploughed the rich red loam;  
And my first crop was golden  
When I brought Mary home.*

...

*But of the hut I builded  
There are no traces now,  
And many rains have levelled  
The furrows of my plough.*

(H. Lawson, extract from ‘Reedy River’ in Connah 1988: vii)

In 2001 I was commissioned by an architect to document the history of a ‘little homestead’ which survives deep in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, close to Kedumba River. The land in Kedumba Valley close to this slab hut had been developed by an Irish-Australian, William Maxwell, after he brought his Mary there in 1889 or 1890. Maxwell’s wife was a good Catholic Thompson girl, while Lawson’s Mary was a Campbell (Lawson 1944:66). The loam was not rich and red in Kedumba, nor were there many golden crops, and the hut which Graham Edds and I were assessing was built not by William but by his son, William John, in 1925–1926. William and Mary’s home in Kedumba had been built more than thirty years after they married: this was not the place to which William Maxwell had brought his bride home in 1855. William and Mary’s slab cottage of the 1890s was burnt down in the 1930s, along with its remarkable outbuildings, and, as with Lawson’s hut on Rocky Creek, ‘there are no traces now’ above ground. The furrows of the elder Maxwells’ plough in their small paddock sown for subsistence crops have similarly been levelled, although their remnant orchard is still extant. On Kedumba River, as on Reedy River,

*The waterholes still mirror  
The pictures in the sky;*

*The golden sand is drifting  
Across the rocky bars;  
And over all for ever  
Go sun and moon and stars.*

(H. Lawson, extract from ‘Reedy River’ in Connah 1988: vii)

Slab huts are notoriously hard to date with any precision on material evidence alone (cf. Lewis 2000:41–2, 46–9). Like other old buildings, however, they ‘tell tales’ (Coutts 1977:200) and William John Maxwell’s cottage is no exception, but the tale which gradually emerged in uncommonly rich detail owed a great deal to historical happenstance. The way in which the colonial government handled Conditional Purchases of land makes possible a detailed understanding of what happened in the first decade of Maxwell occupancy, while, thirty years further on, an accident in the valley in 1926 generated press interest and an exceptional treasure trove of photographs. Very few slab huts in Australia can be chronicled in comparable detail.

The documentation for Conditional Purchases of crown land is radically different in type from the familiar land-grants from the crown or purchases from private landowners, which are documented in New South Wales from the registers of old title deeds and the later registers of Torrens title. Under the Crown Lands Alienation Act of 1861 and subsequent acts, rural land, not too close to centres of population, was available for conditional purchase. Conditional Purchases were registered separately in bulky volumes. The volumes covering the years up to 1936 have been deposited in State Records New South Wales.

The two fundamental conditions which the purchaser had to meet were that the buyer had to be resident (with the corollary that a house should be built) and that tangible improvements must be made regularly, such as constructing out-buildings, fencing and clearing the land. The fulfilment of these conditions was to be monitored by visits from inspectors employed by the Department of Lands (State Records New South Wales [SRNSW] 2005a, 2005b). These on-the-spot reports were filed, cross-referenced and retained. Retrieving them from the vast correspondence files which survive is always a tedious matter and the paper-chase through the registers of correspondence can be time-consuming and frustrating. Many reports were moved from file to file among the various branches of the Department of Lands over the

years and not infrequently the search simply peters out. But where the inspectors' reports can be retrieved and where the inspectors had done their work conscientiously, the rewards are uncommonly handsome. The Maxwells' properties in the Kedumba Valley offer exceptional examples of the value afforded to the historian and the archaeologist by the labour-intensive activities of the land-management bureaucracy in Victorian and Edwardian New South Wales.

The comprehensiveness of the documentary and visual evidence for the Maxwell complex of slab buildings in this isolated site is a salutary antidote to over-confident assumptions about slab huts which survive in rural Australia, but are documented primarily by their physical fabric. The interplay of material, documentary and visual evidence is characteristic of Graham's exploration of more substantial buildings at Regentville or at Winterbourne or at Lake Innes House (Connah 1986; Connah, Rowland and Oppenheimer 1978; Connah 1997). It seemed to me that the unravelling of the significance of the humble and old-fashioned slab hut at Kedumba would be a suitable contribution to any tribute to Graham Connah. It does not give striking new insights into theory, but it is an excellent instance of the combined use of history and non-intrusive archaeology.

## THE PHYSICAL CONTEXT: BURRAGORANG AND KEDUMBA

Kedumba Valley lies in the heart of the Upper Blue Mountains, some 80 kilometres from the centre of Sydney (Figure 1). The valley lies about seven kilometres south of Wentworth Falls and now occupies a northern part of the immediate catchment area for Warragamba Dam and Lake Burragorang, the principal water supply for Sydney. Although Kedumba is very close to Wentworth Falls as the kookaburra

flies, it lies far below the town. The long escarpment called Kedumba Walls, which forms the westerly edge of Kings Tableland, forms a highly effective barrier (Figures 1, 2). As a result Kedumba throughout its European history has belonged to the development of the Burragorang Valley, which before the flooding of its waterways by Warragamba Dam looked towards The Oaks and Camden to the southeast, not towards the villages of the Blue Mountains along the Great Western Highway and the western railway line. The Maxwells' property in Kedumba was at the farthest extreme of European settlement in the Burragorang area and remained 'a very out of the way corner' indeed (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7350, 93/1647).

Burragorang, which had been familiar country to the Gundungurra people for millennia before 1800, became an extension of the early pastoral settlements around Camden and The Oaks in the nineteenth century. Already before European settlement was permitted, wild cattle from the Cowpastures had found their way into Burragorang (Woods 1982:4-5). When Governor Macquarie visited southern Burragorang in 1815, he encountered a few of the wild cattle in small herds of a dozen or less, mainly bulls, and remarked that 'it certainly would be most desirable if it were practicable, to drive the whole of the Wild Cattle across the Blue Mountains to graze on the newly discovered Country to the Westward of them; but unfortunately No Pass or Opening has hitherto been discovered to lead thither from the Cow Pastures' (Macquarie 1979:117; Jervis 1934:171-2).

Macquarie's observation remained essentially true and once Burragorang was settled by graziers and stockmen from 1824 onwards, cattle had to be brought out over the southeast escarpment, via The Oaks, to the Camden sale-yards (Jervis 1934:189). There was accordingly a close relationship between Burragorang and The Oaks district throughout the nineteenth century and the settlement of the Kedumba Valley

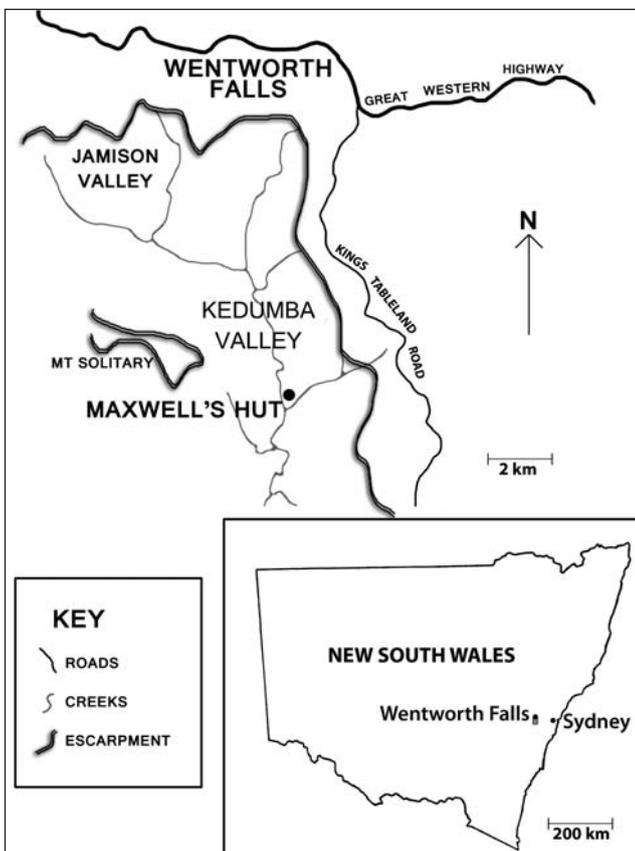


Figure 1: Location map of the Maxwell hut deep in Kedumba valley, showing its relationship to the Great Western Highway and Wentworth Falls (Nicholas McHardy, cartographer, 2009).



Figure 2: The various portions in Kedumba parish, county of Cook, acquired by William Maxwell and his son, William John (Billy), between 1889 and 1931. William Maxwell's portions 2 and 46 are in the middle. Above and below them are the five portions (1, 105, 106, 108, 109) gradually acquired by his son. Portion 4 at the bottom was held by Thomas Dawson, an earlier occupant of portion 2 (Kedumba parish map, 8th ed., 1929, Department of Lands, PMap MN02 14026401).

came from the southeast and not from the Upper Mountains to the north and northeast.

## WILLIAM MAXWELL AND HIS FAMILY

As the Burratorang Valley came to be extensively exploited in the 1850s and 1860s, two of the principal cattle-ranching families were the Dunns and the Lakemans. T.M. Dunn took up land on the Wollondilly River within Burratorang in the 1850s and his son Charles Dunn was buying land around Kowmung River in the 1860s, while being principally settled at The Oaks. Dunn and Lakeman formed the 'largest cattle syndicate in the Blue Mountains' and had stockyards all over the Burratorang area, along the Kowmung, Cox and Kanangra river systems (Jervis 1934:194; Barrett 1990:7, 52).

Dunn and Lakeman employed many stockmen. Among these was William Maxwell. Maxwell had been born in Sydney on 27 April 1832 to two Irish convicts. His father was Thomas Maxwell from county Roscommon, transported in 1823 for counterfeiting. Thomas was given a ticket of leave in 1828 and went to Burratorang to work for James Reilly, the emancipist constable there.

Elizabeth Osborne from county Monaghan arrived in Sydney on 31 July 1831, transported for stealing woollen yarn. Thomas and Elizabeth must have met very soon after her arrival and on 27 April 1832 Elizabeth gave birth to twin boys in Sydney. The elder of the twins was named John Joseph, the younger William James (although he never used the middle name). Both boys took their father's surname. Thomas and Elizabeth were finally married at Burratorang in August 1839, according to a surviving copy of the marriage certificate (Pearce 1991:643–646, 656, 661).

The twins, John and William, and their younger siblings (three brothers and two sisters) grew up at The Oaks and in Burratorang. In 1843 their father, Thomas Maxwell, was drowned in the Wollondilly River. Three years later his widow, Elizabeth, married another Irish Catholic, James O'Brien of Picton, and the couple settled on the Nattai River in Burratorang, starting a new family in 1847 (Pearce 1991:672).

Elizabeth's twin sons, William and John Maxwell, were now in their early teens. John moved away to establish a modest pastoral property and township at Bimlow in Lower Burratorang, where he and his German wife, Teresa Seckold, had seven children in the 1860s and 1870s (Pearce 1991:646–656). William married earlier than his twin brother, within the powerful Catholic community of Burratorang and The Oaks. He married Mary Anne Thompson of The Oaks at St John's Catholic Church at Campbelltown in 1855. Both William and Mary were illiterate, although much later in life William learnt to write his own name with extreme difficulty (Pearce 1991:656–657; SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7347). The couple lived initially at The Oaks, while William established a pastoral footing in Burratorang. He and his father-in-law, James Thompson, were indicted for horse-stealing at Brownlow Hill in the Cowpastures in 1861, but were found not guilty (Pearce 1991:656).

As well as running his own cattle, Maxwell worked as a stockman and by the 1860s was with John Lakeman. Thomas Seymour, another Burratorang stockman, was a 'mate' and the two men went together on one of Seymour's explorations of Kanangra Walls. Seymour claimed in 1864 to be the first white man to climb Kanangra Walls and in 1866 he again scaled the walls, this time with Maxwell and another cattleman, Timothy Brennan, and explored the area further. As a result of this trip, the three eminences on Kanangra Tops were named Maxwell Top, Seymour Top and Brennan Top and

still retain these names as a tribute to the intrepid stockmen (Barrett 1990:72; Barrett 1994:66; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 May 1930:10).

Maxwell clearly knew a great deal about the byways of Burratorang and in 1859 he may have sought to obtain a land grant in the remote Kedumba Valley, which had not yet been surveyed. Thomas Evans, acting on instructions from the Surveyor-General, surveyed a 53-acre (21 hectare) rectangle of land immediately south of Waterfall Creek and east of Kedumba River, with its northwest corner the confluence of the two waterways. This was portion 2 in Kedumba parish, in the county of Cook, but there is no documentary evidence to link this initial survey with Maxwell. At the time of the survey there had been no improvements of any sort on the 53 acres (Department of Lands, plan C164.1507, 1859.1096; SRNSW, 10/19487, 04/7347, 86/2986).

It has been claimed that Maxwell proceeded to build a homestead on portion 2 around 1860 (Hill pers. comm. 2001; Pearce 1991:657). Certainly he needed a home for his growing family in the 1860s. William and Mary had a son, James Thomas, in 1856 and then a string of seven daughters between 1858 and 1873. The family was neatly rounded off when a second son, William John, was born in October 1876, followed two years later by a final son, Robert, who died young (Pearce 1991:657–658; Sabine pers comm. 2001).

The place of birth for all these ten children was given as Cocks River, Burratorang, so it is clear that William Maxwell was settled in the more northerly part of Burratorang. But if he had taken up land on Kedumba River, a northern tributary of Cocks River (and there is no documentary evidence that he did), he had certainly abandoned it by 1884. It is more likely that the Maxwells lived near the Cox. Their son, William John, was born at Black Gooler in 1876, the only Maxwell child to have a specific birthing location on the river. Black Gooler was the river flat (now flooded by Lake Burratorang) opposite the confluence of Cocks River with Butchers Creek, in an area dominated by the McMahan family. The McMahans were another Catholic group, descendants of John McMahan, who had come to Burratorang as an assigned convict in the 1820s (Barrett 1994:86). Later in the century John McMahan's two grandsons were settled on the Cox, Thomas at Strathmore north of the river, Reg to the south at Black Gooler station, with the river flats between the two properties used as a racecourse. This area had been a cattle run for McMahan stock ever since the 1820s (Barrett 1990:58–59). It is likely, therefore, that in the 1870s William and Mary Maxwell and their family were living down on the Cox, more than twelve kilometres away from their later home, although they may well have run their own stock in Kedumba and elsewhere.

There was, however, some interest in Kedumba Valley by others than the Maxwells. A bark hut had been erected for occasional use on that portion 2 which was surveyed in 1859. It is not impossible that this had been built by William Maxwell, but it is likely that it had been erected by some other stockman. In 1884 this hut was occupied by Thomas Dawson junior who in 1886 sought to acquire by Conditional Purchase the 53-acre (21 hectare) portion. Its location is marked as 'gunyah' on the surveyor's 1886 annotations to the 1859 plan. Whoever had sought the survey of 1859 was clearly no longer in occupation. Dawson was a single man of 36, sixteen years younger than Maxwell, but he did not fulfil the twin conditions of residence and improvement on the land. When Surveyor O'Hara went to Kedumba in October 1886 to inspect the property, he found no signs of recent occupation. 'There were', he reported, 'the remains of a fire outside the hut, probably 6 months old. Grass was growing all across the entrances to the hut. There has been nothing done on the land or any track in or out of the land.' When O'Hara returned in

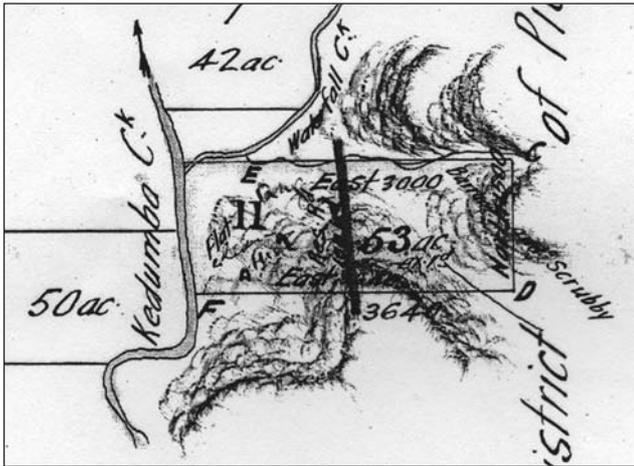


Figure 3: William Maxwell's first hut marked in 1890 by Surveyor J.B. Brown on the south-west of portion 2 (marked as II), Kedumba parish. The flat beside Kedumba River is marked and the land on the east side is described as 'Barren and Scrubby' (Lands, plan C 164.1507, by Surveyor Evans in 1859, copy annotated by Brown in State Records New South Wales, 10/19478, 04/7347, 90/5622).

January 1888 there were some signs of activity in the form of ring-barked trees, but the bark gnyah was empty and there were 'no marks of traffic to show that it was ever occupied' (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7347). As a result Dawson's Conditional Purchase was forfeited on 18 July 1888, although he did succeed in taking up portions two kilometres to the south (*NSW Government Gazette*, 18 July 1888:III, 4952; Kedumba parish map 1891; Figure 2).

In October 1889 William Maxwell applied for Dawson's portion 2. By then Maxwell was 57 years old, working for Charles Dunn rather than Lakeman, but clearly anxious to have some land of his own. All his surviving children except William John were now sixteen or more and had probably left home. Certainly the teenage boy is the only child mentioned as being in Kedumba after 1889 (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7350). William, Mary and William John, known as Billy (Pierce 1991:659), settled down conscientiously to fulfil the conditions of purchase beside Kedumba River. By 1890 the Maxwells had built a new hut, ring-barked 10 acres (4 hectares), partially cleared two acres (0.8 hectare) and built 700 metres of three and four-rail fencing. They had also planted the first fruit trees and established a garden (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7350; Figure 3).

In October 1892, three years after taking up the 53 acres (21 hectares) of portion 2, William Maxwell also acquired on Conditional Purchase the newly surveyed portion 46, containing 40 acres (16 hectares) immediately to the south of portion 2 (Figure 2). He at once proceeded to build a new slab house on portion 2, south of the old gnyah, and enlarged it in 1894 to six rooms. He installed a three-rail fence along the southern boundary of portion 2 adjoining his new portion 46 and by 1897 had constructed a stockyard, shed and enclosure on portion 46 (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7347).

The Maxwell family holding was increased by another 42 acres (17 hectares) in 1893 when the son, Billy, now sixteen years old, took up portion 1 to the north, in the triangle where Kedumba River and Waterfall Creek meet (Figure 2). 'I took it up', the young man said in May 1893, 'with money I had earned working for different people about. I was living with my father and am living with him now.' (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7347).

Billy immediately built a slab hut for himself in 1893, in a style very similar to his father's work on portion 2 (Figure 4). He also began to clear portion 1 by ringbarking 10 acres (4

hectares). By the end of 1894 he had half the 42 acres 'rung and scrubbed' and had erected a cooking shed beside his hut. There seems no doubt that he was now resident there. The northern boundary of portion 1 was now enclosed with a two-rail fence. By 1898 Billy had established a garden and fully cleared an acre for cultivation and had partially cleared 20 acres (8 hectares), while further extending his two-rail fencing (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7350).

Accordingly, Billy Maxwell was confirmed in his purchase and his title to the property was gazetted in August 1898 (*NSW Government Gazette*, 24 August 1898:IV, 6763). By 1903, however, he had ceased to occupy the house he had built on portion 1 and had moved down to his father's portion 2, occupying a hut 'adjoining with his parents'. Billy declared in the following year, 1904, while seeking a reduction in the valuation of portion 1, that 'it would not be possible for me to make a living off the 42 acres [of portion 1], I have to engage in bush work [for other people]' (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7350).

By 1904, when the surveyors reported on the value of the joint Maxwell holdings they concluded that 'all improvable land has been improved to its highest capacity on the natural grasses ... On the improved land most of the scrub has been destroyed, but on the poorer parts there is what is locally known as "boggy apple".' (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7347 and 04/7350). The cultivated land along the river was used for subsistence only, because of the difficulty of access to the markets at Wentworth Falls.



Figure 4: Billy Maxwell's huts on portion 1, Kedumba parish, photographed in 1927 from the east. The southern end of his 1893 hut, still with a bark roof, is on the far right, behind the cooking shed of 1894, reclad with a corrugated metal roof. The 1925 hut, which survives, with its skillion extension and chimney of 1926 on the north, occupies the left half of the image (*Daily Guardian*, 10 January 1927:7).

The periodic visits by the inspectors provide an authoritative record of the Maxwells' progress on their initial 135 acres (54 hectares) for a decade up to 1904, when the purchase price was halved to only 10 shillings an acre. Inspector R.J.A. Roberts commented in 1903 that Kedumba 'is a very out of the way corner and communication with the outside world is not easy' (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7350, 03/1647). Roberts and his long-suffering colleague, Inspector J.B. Brown, had to take the train to Wentworth Falls, walk the six kilometres to Kelso King's property on Kings Tableland (where the Queen Victoria Memorial Hospital was later sited) and then clamber down a precipitous track, which they described as 'dangerous in places ... and the descent in about 2 miles is about 1500 feet ... The track ... is only used for obtaining mails or provisions and the goods are often carried down by hand.' (SRNSW, 10/19478, 04/7347, 03/1648).

This route down the escarpment, known to Europeans as the Goat Track, was one of the Aboriginal people's access routes between the Katoomba area and Coxs River. The Gundungurra story of the dreamtime journey of Gurangatch and Mirragan describes how Gurangatch excavated the bed of

Kedumba River from its southern extremity where it joins the Cox as far north as Reedy Creek, two kilometres south of William Maxwell's farm. Kedumba Valley was important to the Aboriginal people for these dreamtime associations, as well as for its hunting potential and the fish in its waters (Smith 1992:9, 55; Stockton 1993:111–113).

The track had been known in the mid-Victorian period by bushrangers who used Kedumba Valley as a secure refuge, confident that the police would not follow down the precipice. Billy Maxwell recalled in 1927 how as a boy in the 1890s he had met one of these bushrangers in the valley. This bushranger, called Walters, had been in prison for many years and on release had returned to Kedumba and lived on there until he died in the early twentieth century. The other bushrangers whose names were recalled by Maxwell, presumably from his father's stories, were called Mark Wood, Russell and Sullivan (*Daily Guardian*, 10 January 1927:7). Kedumba has also been proposed as an identification of Captain Starlight's secret valley in *Robbery under Arms*, Rolf Boldrewood's novel about bushranging (*Blue Mountains Gazette*, 15 November 1995).

With regular legitimate use by the Maxwells and other small farmers, such as the Kills and Seymours, who lived further down the Kedumba River, the Goat Track became rather easier to negotiate and John Seymour used to carry eggs up to Wentworth Falls markets regularly in the 1880s and 1890s (Barrett 1990:63).

But the track was never easy. One steep face could be negotiated only by using a fixed rope (Barrett 1990:63). A party of Sydney University students walked down in the winter of 1899 and found the track 'a revelation to any visitor, for its abruptness and curious habit of always turning a corner at the most awkward place. When least expected the bottom of the slope was reached and the party struck across the almost level ground for Maxwell's house', where Mary Maxwell gave them dinner and hot water (*Mountaineer*, 16 June 1899).

A hunter who knew the valley well in the 1890s commented on the quantity of 'Black Fish, Black Bream and Herrings' in the Kedumba River (Smith 1992: 55), which no doubt enhanced the subsistence diet of the Maxwell family. The fish ponds north of the Maxwells attracted visitors from Katoomba-Leura, who clambered down Leura Falls, or after 1895 took a new path from Katoomba partly constructed by a concerned and fish-loving Council, but the Fish Pond Track was in no way a viable alternative for the likes of the Maxwells or Seymours going about their weekly business (*Mountaineer*, 23 August 1895, 16 June 1899).

Soon afterwards, in 1900, the Goat Track was partly widened by twenty unemployed men from Sydney in the hope of making it trafficable for vehicles (*Mountaineer*, 13 July 1900). This took a great deal of time and four years later the top section of the track had still not been widened (*Mountaineer*, 22 January 1904). Nonetheless, a dare-devil teamster took a wagon and a bullock-team down in 1904. The unwidened section, two metres across on a grade of 1 in 4 with an unfenced Z-bend at the foot of the short incline, was negotiated only by unhitching the bullocks and leveraging the laden wagon around with the help of men from Burratorang, no doubt including the two Maxwells, father and son (*Mountaineer*, 24 June 1904). But no other four-wheeled vehicle tried the descent until a new road was blasted out down Kedumba Walls in 1953 (Keogh pers. comm. 2001; Farmer pers. comm. 2001; Hill pers. comm. 2001).

As a result the Maxwell property was the most remote of all the Burratorang farms. Access to Wentworth Falls and the railway was impossible for heavy goods and stock. The Maxwells were cattle-men and their cattle could be driven only southeast through Burratorang over the Cox and the

Wollondilly Rivers to The Oaks and Camden. This route was, however, improved after the Yerranderie silver mines opened in the south of the valley in the 1890s, although it still took a horse team three days to get from the mines to Camden in the 1910s and motor lorries could not get through regularly until 1921 (Den Hertog 1986:35-38). But the Maxwells' mail and weekly provisions had to be collected from Wentworth Falls and the only access was the Goat Track up Kedumba Walls.

The Kedumba property was appraised by the inspectors over the years as 'sound grazing land but not fattening country', suitable only for breeding cattle. It had a carrying capacity of one beef to eight or ten acres (three or four hectares), which allowed for a herd of less than twenty on the acreage held by the family before 1908. It is not known, however, how many stock the Maxwells actually ran in Kedumba. All the graziers of Burratorang, Megalong and Kanimbla used pastures far beyond their own lands. Bernard O'Reilly, who grew up fairly close by in Kanimbla Valley on the property now known as Wingebelalely, later wrote his reminiscences of the area as it was in William Maxwell's time. O'Reilly's celebrated memoirs, published as *Cullenbenbong*, give a vivid and intimate picture of the annual cattle drives which brought together the stockmen from all over that rugged country:

Away down in the river gorges were little grassy flats here and there, built by river silt: these and the stunted myrtle of the more hospitable ridges provided good feed for hardy cattle. It was the practice of some local landholders to make use of this no-man's land for winter pasturing; the gorges were very warm in winter, but anyone taking advantage of this free feed ran the risk of losing cattle in the vast labyrinth of ravines and ranges. Dad [Peter O'Reilly] always had cattle down there, as had the Carlons of Green Gully, and the Duggans of Bindo. The Maxwells [of Kedumba] and Grundys used to drive cattle up into that country from the Burratorang end. Once a year the cattle owners would meet at the mouth of Kanangra River and have a grand muster. First letters would come and others would be sent, arranging the time. Then we would see Dad getting ready and sorting his gear; sewing a broken buckle strap back on his old leggings; shoeing the flash black mare; rummaging about the cart shed to come out scratching his head and saying, "Jane, did you see where I hung those hobbles?" ... In the house Mother would be rolling his old camp blankets and his oilskin, and boiling corned beef and putting out his supply of tobacco, matches, and a spare pipe where they wouldn't be forgotten (O'Reilly 1944:134-135).

This was William Maxwell's life as much as it was Peter O'Reilly's. A.L. Bennett's valedictory poem to his old friend Maxwell in 1914 recalled these musters:

*Never more of [on] cattle muster  
Will his stockwhips sound again.  
Nor will Kowmung's golden slate bars  
Here [sic] his hopeful voice again.*

(Bennett 1914: stanza 7)

Maxwell died at the age of 82 on 28 July 1914. He died on his property, having survived his wife Mary by seven years, and his body was being transported by his family and friends to the Catholic Church in Burratorang when the party met the priest coming to Kedumba, so they turned around and buried William on his own land (Pearce 1991:658; Farmer pers. comm. 2001). William's old friend, A.L. Bennett, who lived near The Oaks and preserved much of what we know about the Gundungurra people of Burratorang (Smith 1991: 9), was

moved to write eight verses on Maxwell's passing. Bennett described the grave near the homestead:

*Within a ring of rough split pailings [sic]  
On a wooden cross we trace,  
By the crude cut letters, telling  
William Maxwell's resting place.*

(Bennett 1914: stanza 5)

The wooden marker was burnt in a bush-fire some half a century later and the present iron marker was erected by a later owner of Kedumba, Dan Cleary, in a meaningful gesture of respect (Farmer pers. comm. 2001).

## BILLY MAXWELL AND HIS SLAB HUTS

Billy Maxwell had worked and lived closely with his parents, while also selling his hire as a labourer to other Burragorang graziers. He had vacated his hut, built on his own portion 1 in 1893, after less than ten years and lived in one of the numerous huts on portion 2, next to his parents. The bark-roofed hut and the cooking shed on portion 1, very similar to the huts on portion 2, remained in some sort of use and were still intact in 1927 (Figure 4). After his mother, Mary, died in 1907 (Pearce 1991:658), Billy lived alone for a while with his father, who was now in his mid-seventies.

Billy soon acquired more adjacent land. In December 1908 he finalised the Conditional Purchase of 60 acres (24 hectares) to the north and the Conditional Lease of a further 124 acres (50 hectares) to the south (Kedumba parish map, portions 105, 106). This made a consolidated Maxwell holding of 319 acres (130 hectares) with good water frontages to both Waterfall Creek and Kedumba River. In August 1910 Billy married Olive Beatrice Smith, ten years his junior, the daughter of a Kempsey dairy farmer. It is not known how or when Billy and Olive had met, but they were married in Sydney and returned to spend their entire married life in Kedumba. Their two sons, Les and Jim, were born in 1916 and 1917 (Pearce 1991:659; Figure 5).

A year after his daughter-in-law came to Kedumba, old William Maxwell transferred to his son the legal title to his own 93 acres (37 hectares) (Department of Lands, Deposited Plan 751648; Vol.1925 fo.7). The old man died in 1914, cared for by Olive and Billy, who were still childless. In 1919, after

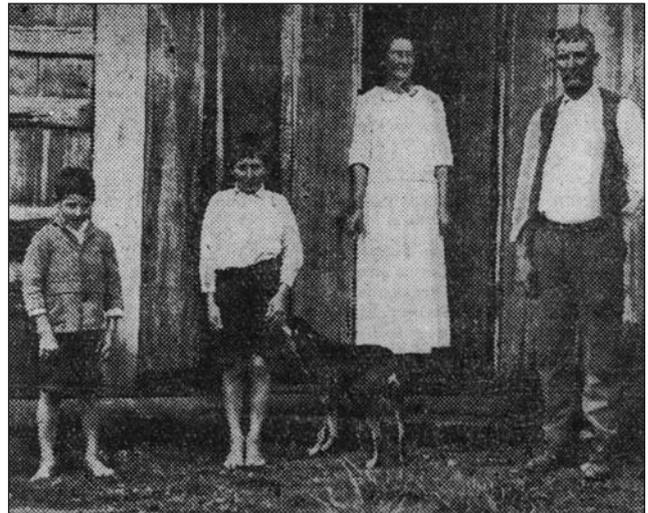


Figure 5: The second and third generations of Maxwells at Kedumba in 1927. From left to right, Jim, Les, Olive and Billy Maxwell, outside their hut built in 1925–1926 (Daily Guardian, 10 January 1927:12).

the birth of the two boys, Billy acquired a further 64 acres by Conditional Purchase. A final portion, containing 191 acres, was acquired in 1931. (Kedumba parish map 8th ed., 1929, portions 108, 109; Figure 2). The marginal farm had then reached its maximum extent of 574 acres (230 hectares).

The main homestead of the second generation of Maxwells initially remained on portion 2, south of Waterfall Creek, surrounded by William Maxwell's many out-buildings. It is likely that Billy and Olive occupied the main six-roomed hut built by William and Mary. Finally in 1925 Billy and Olive decided to move to the higher ground above Kedumba River, north of Waterfall Creek, where Billy had built his first hut in 1893. That hut and its adjacent cooking shed of 1894 were still standing and probably served some farming purpose. The 1893 homestead had looked out over Kedumba River from its western verandah. But in 1925 the new slab cottage on portion 1 was at right angles to the old house, with its front verandah looking south over Waterfall Creek to William Maxwell's original complex (Figure 6). Just as William had started in 1892 with a simple hut but added two rooms by the end of 1894, so Billy started with four rooms with no fireplace in 1925 and added two rooms with a cooking hearth in a northern



Figure 6: Billy Maxwell's 1925 hut in the middle distance, viewed from the south. The outbuildings in the foreground are at the northern end of William Maxwell's complex of slab structures. The land between William's complex and Waterfall Creek (just below Billy's hut) has been extensively cleared (Horace Milton, January 1927, Blue Mountains Historical Society, Wentworth Falls, Crago file: 46.13).

skillion in 1926. The date 1925 comes directly from Billy's son, Les, who in 1996 reminisced about seeing the hut's construction when he was a nine-year-old boy (Keogh pers. comm. 2001; Austin 1996:6).

This 1925–1926 cottage is the direct heir of all the Maxwell structures of the 1890s. Alone of all of the huts, it stands today, fully legible though barely habitable. This is the quintessential slab hut which prompted the Sydney Catchment Authority to commission a Conservation Plan. The hut is today a striking example of profound conservatism in vernacular construction. Often such conservatism can be generally attributed to isolation and poverty: examples include huts on the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia dating from the 1930s (Bell pers. comm. 2009). But the homes of the disadvantaged can seldom be placed in so detailed a historical context as the huts of the Maxwells.

The structure of the four-roomed section of the hut is a fully integrated post and beam structure. The construction is careful and judicious. To protect the building from decay, it is well raised on a sill, like its predecessors. Graham Edds has described how its round timbers were 'roughly squared with the broadaxe and adze', just as Billy Maxwell's 1893 hut close by had its corner posts hewn square with a broad axe from round timber embedded in the ground (Figures 7, 8). In the 1925 construction 'the corner and main structural posts are hewn square out of the circular poles above the floor structure ... The walls are timber slabs pit sawn or split from the log with a variety of widths and thicknesses (some slabs being over 400 mm wide).' All the main structural elements of beams and joists for floors and walls are held secure only by dovetail, butt or scarf jointing. The floor-boards of the south verandah are attached to the corner posts by timber dowels. Nails are used only to restrain the vertical slabs of the walls, which are held at the base by 'timber battens nailed on each side of the slabs'. At the top, however, the slabs are held within a grooved wall beam. Only the hipped roof uses nails to hold the split timbers of the ridge and the timber rounds of the rafters together. The corrugated metal roof is nailed onto carefully spaced roof battens which were 'split rounds adzed flat to top and bottom' (Edds 2001:3.31, 3.34, 4.9).



Figure 7: South-east corner of Billy Maxwell's 1925 hut, from south-east. The squared-off corner post is similar to the 1893 post shown in Figure 8. The south window uses part of the slab wall as its framework, while the horizontal sill, which has helped to preserve the hut, is held in place by mortise and tenon joints (Ian Jack, 2001).

The principal contrast between the 1893 and the 1925 homes is the roofing. Whereas the 1893 cottage had been roofed in bark, held down by logs, the 1925 hut and its south verandah were roofed in corrugated metal (Figure 4). Otherwise, the techniques for the construction of the 1925 slab building remained highly conservative, just as all the buildings erected in the 1890s, both by William and by Billy Maxwell, had themselves been significantly traditional. Billy Maxwell had learnt all that he knew about slab huts from his father and William Maxwell had learnt his bushcraft from the old Burragarang stockmen in the 1850s (Pierce 1991: 656–659). It is dangerous to date any of these structures from their physical remains or from early photographs alone. It is too easy to fall into an assumption that a hut was built in the mid nineteenth century because it looks 'old' and conforms to known norms. Often, of course, confronted with a vernacular building, one has no source available beyond the physical, but with the Maxwells there is an uncommon wealth of reasonably unequivocal documentary, oral and graphic evidence to add to



Figure 8: Two very similar corner posts, both hewn square by Billy Maxwell from round timber embedded in the ground. The post on the left belongs to the 1925 hut, the post on the right to the ruins of the 1893 hut nearby (Ian Jack, 2001).

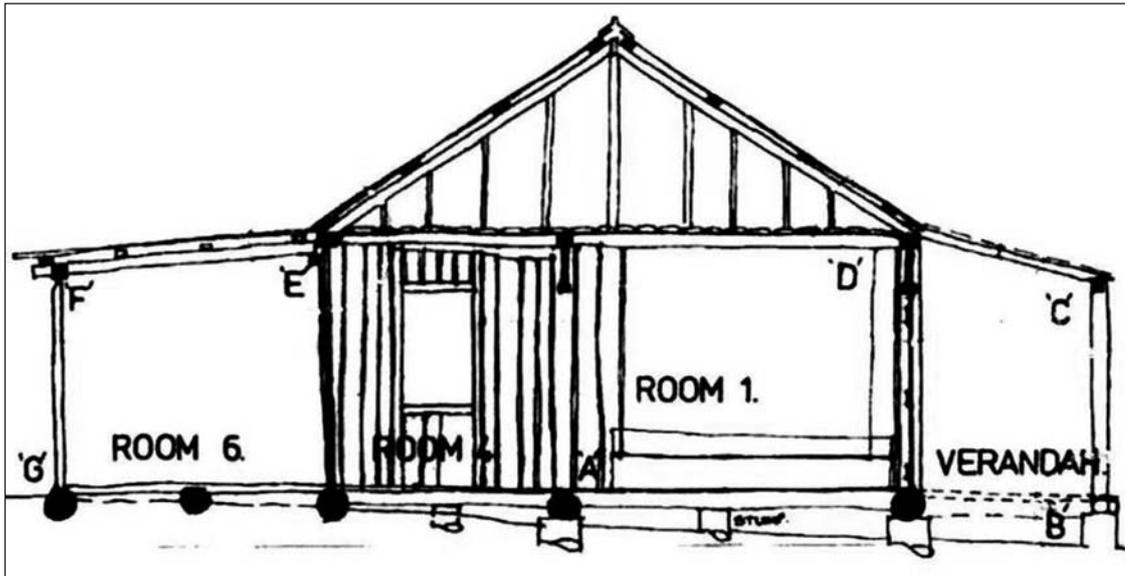


Figure 9: Section of Billy Maxwell's 1925–1926 hut, west side. Rooms 1 and 4 and the south verandah were erected in 1925; room 6 in the north skillion was added in 1926. The careful construction of the hut on its raised sill, supported on stumps and bed-logs, is shown very clearly (Graham Edds, in Edds and Associates, 'Kedumba Slab Hut' 2001:figure 3.16, p. 3.33).

the archaeological. What we are seeing in the 1925 hut is the last phase in a succession of vernacular skills spread over a hundred years and it is a salutary warning against facile judgments.

The hut completed in 1925, which had a verandah only on the south side, was soon extended with two skillion rooms and verandahs on the northwest and northeast (Figure 9). Physical and graphic evidence combine to show that the expansion of the hut from four to six rooms, with a cooking fireplace and new verandahs, took place in 1926. These extensions must have been built in 1926, because they appear in a photograph published in January 1927 (*Daily Guardian*, 10 January 1927:12; Figure 4) and the evidence that they are extensions and not original 1925 features lies in their fabric. The walls of the skillion are 'less refined in their structural bush carpentry techniques and utilise more modern fixings': bolts are used to fix beams to posts on the north wall. The rafters of the skillion are supported by small timber plates nailed to the wall slabs of the four-room section. The flooring of the skillion rooms was at right angles to the flooring used in the main hut and the floor itself was made of reused slabs (Edds 2001:3.34, 4.10). Billy's son Les recalled that some of the slabs used in 1925 came from the 1890s complex down on portion 2 and this is probably the source of the extension floor, although it certainly did not involve the demolition of William's original homestead as Les implied (Edds 2001:4.9).

From 1925 until Billy's death in 1943 the Maxwell family of four continued to eke a livelihood out of the 383 acres around their new house. Despite some attempts to improve access, Billy and Olive continued to make their regular trips to Wentworth Falls on foot up the Goat Track. Their sons were receiving correspondence education and it was necessary to go to the post office each week in the 1920s. The trip was sufficiently arduous for husband and wife to take week and week about and an attempt to use a pack-pony ended in disaster: in 1927 a journalist's eye was caught by the 'bleaching bones of a packhorse which went over the side ... a mute warning to the wayfarer' (*Daily Guardian*, 7 January 1927:1). At some time the Maxwells built a cart-shed at the top of the track near Queen Victoria Hospital to make their regular trips into Wentworth Falls more congenial (Blue Mountains Library, Local Studies, Springwood: 1941).

Soon after the accident with the pack-horse, the Blue Mountains Shire Council and Wollondilly Shire Council acted jointly to make the descent fit for horses if not for vehicles (*Blue Mountains Echo*, 17 August 1928, 30 September 1929).

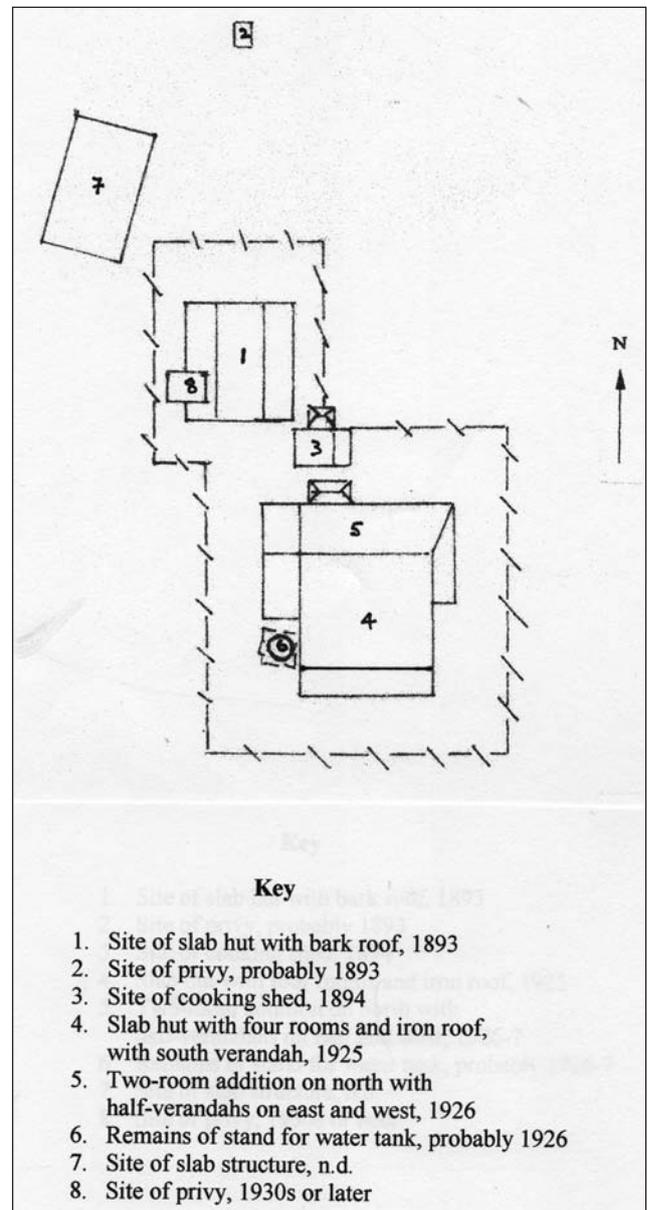


Figure 10: Footprints of Billy Maxwell's 1893 hut and privy, 1894 cooking-shed, 1925–1926 hut and later privy (adapted by Ian Jack, 2009, from Graham Edds, in Edds and Associates, 'Kedumba Slab Hut' 2001:figure 4.2, p. 4.8).

This Kedumba Pass Bridle Track of 1928–1929, which bypassed the worst of the Goat Track, remained in use until a proper vehicular road was blasted out in 1953, ten years after Billy Maxwell had died. The Clearys who had bought Kedumba were alarmed at the imminent flooding of part of the valley when Warragamba Dam was completed and created the new road using their own equipment and their own labour (Musecape 1998).

The two Maxwell complexes in the valley changed considerably in the course of the 1930s and 1940s. The cooking shed which Billy built in 1894 on portion 1 was removed, probably in the 1930s, and Billy's 1893 hut was allowed to become derelict. Its posts were still standing a century later and it is now a substantial horizontal ruin. The hut had perhaps been unroofed by Billy and Olive themselves, because a privy was built on its western verandah, with an elevated timber boarded floor. This replaced an earlier privy still discernible further to the north (Figure 10). The collapsed metal roof of the new privy is consistent with a skillion against the west wall of the 1893 hut. Since it is improbable that this would have been done while the hut was habitable, the inference is that the 1893 hut was allowed to decay in the 1930s and 1940s (Keogh pers. comm. 2001; Farmer pers. comm. 2001; Hill pers. comm. 2001; Edds 2001:3.54).

The older homestead complex south of Waterfall Creek, built on portion 2 by William and Mary in the 1890s, was burnt down in a bush-fire in the early 1930s (Keogh pers. comm. 2001; Farmer pers. comm. 2001). Although there are no obvious above-ground traces of any of the buildings, the appearance of the complex around the 1890s homestead is recorded. There were about ten slab buildings in a haphazard arrangement. Photographs taken in 1927 show that all of these, including the homestead, still had bark roofs, held down by the old-fashioned system of suspended logs (Figures 6, 11, 12). Their appearance is known because of a serious accident nearby to a well-to-do young man, Alan Crago.

The seventeen-year-old Alan had climbed down into the valley over Christmas 1926 with his elder brother and two friends to shoot for rabbits. On Boxing Day Alan was accidentally shot and received a dangerous wound in his kidneys. He was carried to Billy and Olive Maxwell's property. Because Crago's parents were wealthy flour-millers and his uncles were the Hoskins brothers, the ironmasters of Lithgow and Rhodes, a surgeon, three doctors and an entire field hospital with nurses were set up, not in the Maxwells' new homestead but in some of William's 1890s huts. There Alan's damaged kidney was removed and his convalescence supervised during January 1927 (*Daily Guardian*, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 January 1927; Figure 12). All the equipment for the surgeon, doctors and nurses had to be brought down the Goat Track on men's backs and when the youth was finally fit to leave the valley it took fourteen men, including Billy Maxwell, working in relays for five and a half hours to carry him on a litter up Kedumba Walls (Humphrey 2000:2).

The Cragos' gardener, Horace Milton, a member of the rescue party, had kept a photographic record both of the hazards of the Goat Track and of the field hospital established in the 1890s buildings. These excellent photographs were sent to Horace's sister in England, but found their way back to Australia and a set of prints is now owned by the Blue Mountains Historical Society at Wentworth Falls. They show in remarkable detail most of the buildings on portion 2 and their relationship to Billy's two cottages up on portion 1 (Blue Mountains Historical Society, Wentworth Falls: Crago file, F 201; Figures 6, 11, 12).

The *Daily Guardian* took a particular interest in the story, not just because of its human interest but because its proprietor, Sir Joynton Smith, was closely involved with the Blue Mountains as the owner of the Carrington, the luxury hotel in Katoomba (Cuneen 1988:650–651). So a press photographer was also despatched down the hazardous path to the Maxwell farm. Among his shots was a close-up view of



Figure 11: Cluster of bark-roofed outbuildings on William Maxwell's 1890s farm (Horace Milton, January 1927, Blue Mountains Historical Society, Wentworth Falls, Crago file:46.14).



Figure 12: William Maxwell's 1894–1896 hut, when it was occupied in 1927 by the medical team nursing Alan Crago (Horace Milton, January 1927, Blue Mountains Historical Society, Wentworth Falls, Crago file: 46.5).

Billy's new 1925 hut with its 1926 skillion, the 1894 cooking-shed and part of the 1893 house. He also photographed Billy, Olive, Les and Jim outside their home, so that the principal players in this story have a face and a figure. The original prints and negatives do not survive, but the newsprint images, however fuzzy, are an essential historical source (*Daily Guardian*, 10 January 1927:7, 12; Figures 4, 5).

It is this combination of a rich graphic record with an exemplary set of inspectors' reports on land conditionally purchased and later revalued, which makes the Maxwell properties so exceptional. Of the huts the Maxwells build only one remains intact, but it exists in a firm context of its dozen siblings and in a chronology which is as clear as it is unexpected.

## POSTSCRIPT: LES MAXWELL AND THE CLEARYS

After Billy Maxwell's death in 1943, the three portions passed to his younger son Jim (James Paul), who promptly sold the property to Kedumba Pastoral Co. in 1951 (Department of Lands, Deposited Plan 751648; Vol.1925 fo.7; Vol.2363 fo.72). This company was owned by the Cleary brothers, the two sons of Dan Cleary, who had wide interests in various enterprises in the Camden district (Keogh pers. comm. 2001; Farmer pers. comm. 2001; Hill pers. comm. 2001).

Unlike the Maxwells, the Clearys were non-resident. Les Maxwell, the elder brother of James Paul, stayed on in Kedumba as caretaker, among Cleary sheep and cattle, cattle on agistment and the wild horses. Some of the free horses, the hairy ones with square heads, were the descendants of the pitponies from the nineteenth-century coal and shale mines of the Jamison Valley below Katoomba (Hill pers. comm. 2001). Les, who had once delivered the Nattai mail on horseback right across Burrarorang Valley, now drove a bulldozer, blazed fire trails and assisted in the destruction of what remained visible of his grandfather's slab complex south of Waterfall Creek and its replacement by the Clearys'

fibro buildings and their large, new stockyard (Pearce 1991: 659-660).

To assist their operations, the Clearys constructed a new but very steep vehicular road down Kedumba Walls in 1953. But Warragamba Dam was completed in 1960 and the back-up of Lake Burrarorang cut communications between Camden and Kedumba. This forced the Clearys to have a better vehicular track formed around the old Goat Track, Bridle Track and their 1953 road. They also built a small airstrip about two kilometres south of the main complex. The Clearys ran cattle, to the extent of one to six acres (2.4 hectares), but, unlike the Maxwells, they also introduced sheep, which could be stocked one to two acres (0.8 hectare). As a result they built a woolshed in their new complex (Keogh pers. comm. 2001; Farmer pers. comm. 2001; Hill pers. comm. 2001).

The problems of access and the constraints of the water catchment area made for difficulties in Dan Cleary's relationship with various government bodies. He embarked on substantial clearance of timber along the waterways and after his death in 1970 his surviving son Bill made substantial modifications to the banks of Waterfall Creek and Kedumba River to arrest serious erosion. The main cleared paddock around the Cleary homestead on portion 2 suffered considerable earth-moving in the mid-1970s, when its slope was partly realigned. Logging operations removed some highly significant stands of the rare *Eucalyptus benthamii* in the mid-1980s (Farmer 1992b).

The Sydney Water Board acquired the Cleary property in 1992 and, because it was water catchment, insisted on vacant possession. All cattle were moved from the property and Les Maxwell most unwillingly left his valley to live first with a friend, Jack Tolhurst, in Megalong Valley and then in a retirement home in Katoomba where he died early in 2001 (Farmer 1992b).

Since Les Maxwell was obliged to leave the valley, there has been no permanent occupation of his family's former farmland. The fibro buildings erected by the Clearys have

been systematically demolished and the asbestos removed, though the brick chimneys remain. The Cleary complex comprised: homestead (which had been brought in two halves from Camden aerodrome); caretaker's house; stockyard house; shearing shed; garage; workshop; two machinery sheds; and grain silo (Farmer 1992a). The Clearys had removed their stockyard on portion 2 when they left in 1985 and this helped further to eradicate traces of William Maxwell's farm, although there are potential archaeological remains around in the recent scrub and tree growth on the main 1892-1894 site. The quince orchard is the only visible survival from the Maxwells' original occupation south of Waterfall Creek in the 1890s. Wild horses still roam, but they are now mostly, perhaps exclusively, the descendants of stock-horses and not of the pit-ponies, which have been all too easy marks for sanctioned culling (Keogh pers. comm. 2001; Farmer pers. comm. 2001; Hill pers. comm. 2001).

Like the wild horses, Billy Maxwell's 1925–1926 hut, the ruins of his earlier buildings and the sites of his father's huts are tangible reminders of an older Kedumba, an older Burratorang. There are no other slab remains now visible along the Kedumba River. The only other hut in the area, the Smith house two kilometres south of the Maxwells, was built of stone and only the fine fireplace and chimney survive. The nearest slab hut, built by the Woollam family near the junction of the Cox with the Kedumba River, is intact but lies deep under the waters of Lake Burratorang off Policeman Point. As so often happens, the most remote has the best chance of survival and offers the best archaeological opportunities. The Maxwell hut has features quite uncharacteristic of the suites of slab structures in the Upper Hawkesbury Valley but shares some aspects of slab constructions in the Lithgow area and the goldfields built in the mid-Victorian period. The style, techniques and materials used in the 1925–1926 hut are uniformly old-fashioned, with a compelling attention to stability and protection against decay. The remarkable absence of nails, the integration of the floor and ceiling within the overall conception, the use of vertical wall slabs as the framework for the door and windows, the attention to stability and protection against decay, all combine to make the Kedumba hut a rare example of vernacular building which is well documented and richly illustrated despite the poverty and isolation of the Maxwell family.

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