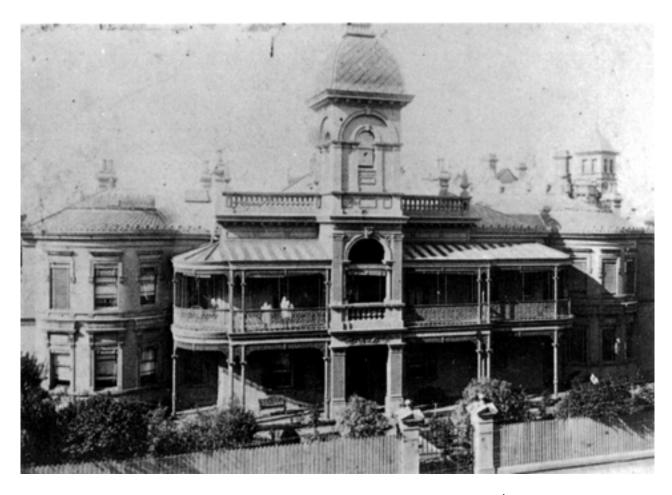# The Squatting of Maramanah

Less than a year after the end of WWII, a group of returned servicemen and their families began squatting in Maramanah, a 20-roomed mansion in Kings Cross, Sydney. The house had been bought two years earlier by the City Council, who had imminent plans to demolish it at the time of the occupation. For three months the squatters successfully lived there rent-free, before being charged hostel rates as a result of fierce campaigning by local politicians. Examining newspaper reports and letters to the editor from the time, the story of the Maramanah squat can be pieced together. In its first week it was subject to national media coverage, with the inhabitants often being portrayed in a surprisingly sympathetic light. Reports of donations and working bees as well public expressions of admiration for the squatters' controversial response to the very real problem of a lack of housing in post-war Australia reflect a high level of public support. However, their actions were largely condemned by politicians, some of who sought to paint the squatters as lawless communists and vandals. When two more squats started up in Sydney during the week following the seizure of Maramanah, fears of a squatting "epidemic" were expressed by politicians and real estate agents, followed quickly by reports of communist activity in the squat, the veracity of which was dubitable. Media coverage of Maramanah petered out soon after and it is uncertain who lived there during the eight years that it functioned as a hostel before being demolished in 1954.

On Wednesday 20 March 1946, between eight and ten people began squatting in Maramanah, a council-owned mansion of 20 rooms in King's Cross, [1] Sydney, which was in danger of being demolished to expand the neighbouring Fitzroy Gardens. The occupation of the building was not without precedent, as Australia had seen extensive anti-eviction campaigns as well as instances of people squatting new houses during the Great Depression of the early 1930s. [2] The original squatters of Maramanah, at times referred to as the "invasion force" by the media, [3] were described by The Argus as "two

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[1] Maramanah's locality is most often reported to be within King's Cross, but some reports say Darlinghurst.

[2] Iain McIntyre gives a concise and fairly extensive history of this movement in his pamphlet, I. McIntyre, *Lock Out The Landlords! – Australian Eviction Resistance 1929-1936*, Melbourne, VIC, Homebrew Books and Active Distribution, 2008.

[3] 'Invasion Force Grabs £52,000 Home,' *The Daily News*, 21 March 1946.

Maramanah mansion, date and photographer unknown.[4]

young married couples, with two other men, all carrying hurricane lamps, stretchers, blankets, and candles" as well as "four other homeless people."[5] The Argus' sympathetic portrayal of the squatters revealed that they were two law students, a chemical worker, an airman, an ex-soldier, and an ex-RAAF serviceman.[6] One of the law students, 21-year-old Alexander Dunlop, explained that "We have done everything to find a home, but it is hopeless, so we decided that this was the only way out [...] We can sleep here. We cannot sleep in parks,"[7] probably referring to the City Council's plans to demolish the building to make more room for the park next door. Other reports do not pay much attention to the voices of the squatters, but still reflect the necessity behind their actions, describing them

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[4] Photograph found at the website of M. Waite , *Why stop time?*, 5 October 2011, <http://www.whystoptime.wordpress.com>, (accessed 10 October 2014).

[5] 'Stir Over Seizure of Vacant Mansion,' *The Argus*, 22 March, 1946.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

as "house-hungry,"[8] "home-hungry,"[9] or "homeless,"[10] and lent them a level of legitimacy by stating that among the squatters are returned soldiers, such as Ted Loughran, an ex-RAAF member, who was widely reported to have promptly begun an application for legal tenancy at the mansion. These same reports from the first days of the squat quoted Lord Mayor Bartley as saying "the city has not yet been given over to jungle law,"[11] an unwavering censure of the squatters' actions.

THIS IS THE PARTY which took possession of Maramanah, an empty two-storey mansion at King's Cross, Sydney. The property, formerly a Royal Navy canteen, was purchased for demolition by the City Council, which plans to make extensions to an adjoining park.

Photograph of "the occupation force," from newspaper article, 'Stir Over Seizure Of Vacant Mansion,' The Argus, *22 March, 1946.*

The group of squatters at Maramanah quickly grew by process of ballot and interviews with many potential new tenants,[12] and five days after the squat was established the number of people living at the mansion was reported to be 11 families with a total of 33

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[8] *The Daily News*, 21 March 1946, op. cit.

[9] 'Seized Home Gets 5 More Tenants,' *News*, 22 March 1946.

[10] 'Homeless Seize Big House – Stir In Sydney,' *News*, 21 March 1946.

[11] *The Daily News*, 21 March 1946, op. cit.

[12] 'Demolition Halted on Seized Home,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 1946.

people.[13] The new squatters included "a war widow, and her 12-years-old daughter,"[14] as well as "a man who plans to be joined by his wife and seven-month-old baby."[15] Nine days after the squatters moved into the mansion one of them gave birth in the house, although this seems to have only made news in one Perth newspaper, whose headline – "New Tenant (Daughter) For Seized Maramanah" – seems caught between warmly congratulatory and coldly disapproving.[16]

Within a week of the "seizure" of Maramanah, two more squats were established by ex-servicemen in Sydney. The media coverage of these new squats was similarly ambivalent in its tone. On the one hand, the squatters were ex-servicemen deserving of sympathy, including a veteran of two world wars and a returned prisoner of war in the first squat[17] – Taranna, a four-story building in Bondi Beach, reported to contain between 72 and 104 rooms. While on the other, the squatting of three Sydney properties in the space of just one week was being described as "the house-jumping epidemic" by "members of Parliament, municipal councils, and real estate agents."[18] The night after the Taranna squat was established, another sprouted up in a seven-roomed Ashfield cottage by six adults and their three children.[19] An article published the following day in the Sydney Morning Herald lays bare the ambivalence of the media's attitude towards squatting, wherein it is described as "the latest and most violent symptom of a social malady with which Governments have been culpably slow to grapple."[20] The report rebuked both the actions of the squatters – "Commandeering is no remedy for the housing shortage" – and those of the politicians – "In Sydney the astonishing spectacle has been witnessed of the City Council actually preparing to demolish, at the height of the housing crisis, a building capable of sheltering a number of families," making reference to Maramanah.[21]

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[13] 'Dwelling Seized,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 1946.

[14] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 1946, op. cit.

[15] Seized Home Gets 5 More Tenants,' *News*, 22 March 1946.

[16] 'New Tenant (Daughter) For Seized Maramanah,' 29 March 1946.

[17] 'Seized Mansion As Hostel,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 1946.

[18] '"House-Jumping" Causes Concern,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 1946.

[19] 'House-Grab Spreads,' *The Daily News*, 26 March 1946.

[20] 'The Tragic Cry for Homes,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 1946.

[21] Ibid.

The squatters of Maramanah seem to have enjoyed considerable community support from the beginning. On their first day there were reports of a man bringing them "a breakfast of tea and biscuits" and promising to return with a hot dinner, visitors knocking at the mansion's windows to wish the new inhabitants good luck,[22] and subsequently a volunteer working bee to clean up the house as well as offers of furniture, food, crockery and even money.[23] Two letters to the editor, published a week after the establishment of the Maramanah squat, expressed solidarity with the plight of Australia's homeless ex-soldiers, with one R. D. Hill writing that the "ostrich-like" attitude of all levels of government with regards to housing the country's homeless was "deplored by the community as a whole."[24] They went on to ask "how long will it take the responsible authorities to realise that the housing shortage is really serious, and that something must be done, not next year, not next month, but now."[25] The disappointment in and distrust of politicians was echoed by J. J. Condon of King's Cross, who criticised Lord Mayor Bartley's cry of "jungle law" as "unhelpful and unsympathetic," and argued for the very occupation of empty houses that politicians were afraid would become more frequent. An opinion piece in NSW's Southern Mail, written less than a month after the Maramanah squat began, further rebuked the actions of the City Council for having "thought for a moment of demolishing a building that could so readily be made to give shelter to wives and children of men who had risked their all to assure their children safety and happiness in their native land."[26] The author, H. Lamad, opined that the defiance shown by the squatters is what "English history [...] from Magna Carta to woman suffrage and later" is propelled by, writing "I lifts my lid to the soldiers who so flagrantly broke the law by occupying Maramanah and who brought home to every thoughtful man in the State the desperate plight of the thousands of homeless people within our midst."[27] Whilst citizens of the community expressed such vehement support and admiration for the squatters' bold actions, a counterweight is found in the public denunciations made by some politicians.

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[22] '*News*, 21 March 1946, op. cit.

[23] 'Big House Invasion – Party Planned To Thank Many Helpers,' *News*, 23 March 1946.

[24] 'Letters To The Editor,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 1946.

[25] Ibid.

[26] 'Bad Laws Must Be Defied,' *The Southern Mail*, 12 April 1946.

[27] Ibid.

The outspoken Lord Mayor Alderman Bartley kicked off the attack on the Maramanah squat with his accusation that the occupiers' actions were governed by "jungle law," but that was not the position that all politicians took on the issue. While Bartley expressed opposition to the squat, the City Council decided not to proceed with the mansion's planned demolition, instead offering the building to the New South Wales government for use as a hostel for the homeless[28] – a plan that would succeed by June of the same year. After the occupation of the Ashfield cottage, Premier McKell argued in the Legislative Assembly that squatters "taking the law into their own hands and assuming occupancy of buildings to which they had no legal right," was unjustifiable.[29] However, a level of support – mild as it was – was expressed by politicians such as Alderman O'Dea, who "frankly wishes the party good luck," as well as then Minister for Housing, James McGirr, who did not support the "procedure" used by the squatters, but neither did he desire the demolition of buildings such as Maramanah, given the pressing need for housing at the time.[30] McGirr, only a fortnight later, was reported to have "made representations to Federal Ministers for the amendment of National Security Regulations to remove all legal difficulties preventing homeless families acquiring empty and partly used homes."[31]

Reports arose in late March that the squatters of Maramanah were not in fact "homeless waifs," but members of the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) who had used the ex-soldiers as "a spearhead to force an entry into a vacant house" before moving in other party members and ejecting otherwise homeless tenants in favor of housing communists.[32] It had already been established that there was a level of connection between the CPA and the new King's Cross squat, as the vice-president of the CPA's rehabilitation committee, Jack Wells, had spoken at a protest meeting held at the mansion on 24 March, denouncing Lord Mayor Bartley's proposition to demolish the house to annex the land to the neighbouring park as "criminal,"[33] and soon after the official organ of the CPA, Tribune, was reported to have claimed authorship of the plan to occupy Maramanah.[34] The

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[28] *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 1946, op. cit.

[29] 'Premier Condemns Illegal House Occupancy,' *The Canberra Times*, 27 March 1946.

[30] *The Argus*, 22 March, 1946, op. cit.

[31] 'Large Homes For Flats,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 April 1946.

[32] '"Coms." Turn "Squatters" – Vacant Mansion Invaded,' *Worker*, 1 April 1946.

[33] 'Maramanah Case – Allegations at Meeting of Tenants,' *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 25 March 1946.

[34] 'Communists Seize Mansion,' *Barrier Daily Truth*, 27 March 1946.

accusation that party members were being given priority of tenancy over the homeless, however, was unverifiable and unlikely. Four months later allegations arose in a City Council meeting that Maramanah – by that time charging its tenants hostel rates – was being used by the CPA to host party dances, and that other organisations wanting to hold events there were having their applications considered by "a special Communist-controlled committee," to which Alderman O'Dea "strongly object[ed]."[35] While the latter claim does not seem to have been proven, the former seems probable. However, a week later Lord Mayor Bartley conceded that the CPA was entitled to hold dances at the mansion as it "is not an illegal organisation, and it makes no difference whether the functions are being held for the Communist Party or for the Liberal Party."[36] While it was not an illegal organisation, it was certainly an unpopular one at the time. A referendum to ban the CPA was put forward five years later in 1951 by the Menzies government, only failing to pass by a hair-thin margin.[37]

From August 1946 the mansion's notoriety faded away and reports of the goings-on within were almost non-existent. Maramanah receives a small handful of mentions in the Sydney Morning Herald's 'Column 8,' whose author signs off as 'Granny.' She wrote in March 1950 that 25 people were living in the building, paying a total of £10/15/6 a week in rent, and that the City Council was again expressing desire to demolish it to make space for the neighbouring park.[38] In an article from October of the same year, the occupants were described as "a dozen families," and the council's plans were reiterated with stress placed on the importance of finding alternative accommodation for Maramanah's inhabitants.[39] The mansion was eventually demolished in August 1954.

Very little is known about post-war Maramanah after its first tumultuous days. Only one report in The Argus made a real effort to profile the squatters, and even that article's scope is limited to short descriptions and soundbites. The squat came about as a response to the

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[35] 'Communist-run Dances in City Hostel Alleged,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 July 1946.

[36] 'Maramanah Dances Investigation,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 August 1946.

[37] Votes in favour: 49.44%, against: 50.56%. Parliament of Australia, 'Part 5 – Referendums and Plebiscites,' *Parliament of Australia*, <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=HANDBOOK;id=handbook%2Fnewhandbook%2F2008-12-19%2F0067;query=Id%3A%22handbook%2Fnewhandbook%2F2008-12-19%2F0066%22>, (accessed 20 October 2014).

[38] 'Column 8,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 1950.

[39] 'Aldermen Move To Evict,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 October 1950.

severe housing shortage that affected the country after WWII, and earned a surprising amount of sympathy from the public and even some politicians. Although squatting is and was an illegal act, it was extremely difficult to paint the squatters – homeless returned servicemen, war widows and their families – as the sort of radicals threatening the very fabric of Australian society that local politicians like Lord Mayor Bartley alleged them to be.

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[40] All newspaper articles were found using Trove <http://trove.nla.gov.au>, (accessed between 14 and 20 October 2014).

%2F2008-12-19%2F0067;query=Id%3A%22handbook%2Fnewhandbook

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