The Making of Typhoid Valley
Water, disease and environmental injustice in colonial suburban Sydney

By Paul Munro

In the sweltering summer heat of the year 1898 an esteemed crowd met on the main street of Erskineville, then an outer-suburb of the growing city of Sydney. They were there to celebrate the installation of a public drinking fountain. Present in the crowd was the barbate and balding Edmund Molesworth, the local state member of parliament for Erskineville (formally known as the Division of Erskine). Molesworth had paid for the fountain, and was now gifting it “to the residents of Erskineville” to thank them for the kindness and courtesy with which he had been treated by them during the many years … he had been a resident [and presumably a politician] of the district. It was a somewhat disingenuous statement: Molesworth, both literally and metaphorically, lived on the other side of the tracks in the wealthier suburb of Newtown. Indeed Molesworth, a devout protestant who was a member of the ant-communist, laissez faire Free Trade Party, was a curious representative for the poor working class neighbourhood of Erskineville. And perhaps his patronage of a drinking fountain can be best read as clever politicking, a strategic means of maintaining political power among constituents of a differing ideological disposition.

The drinking fountain ceremony, and the preceding months of its planning, were reported in detail on the pages of Sydney’s two main newspapers: The Evening News and The Sydney Morning Herald. Among other things, they had documented a conflict that had emerged between Erskineville’s Mayor, Robert Anderson, and a number of Erskineville council’s aldermen. Much to chagrin of some members of the council, Mayor Anderson had opposed the installation of the drinking fountain, claiming that there was no space for it in Erskineville due to the suburb’s narrow streets. A position that was successfully overruled by aldermen who were keen to support the Molesworth’s initiative. The Mayor’s drinking fountain scepticism, however, appeared to have evaporated on its ceremonial installation day. He attended the ceremony along with five other Aldermen, declaring in a speech to a “large attendance of spectators” that “he hoped others would be induced to imitate” the generosity of My Molesworth, as the suburb needed more fountains, as well as been in urgent need of “free public baths” which would “be appreciated by bricklayers, railway men

1 The Western Australian, (1898) “Hot Weather in New South Wales: smoke from Gippsland Fires Reaches Sydney” February 7; p. 5.
2 Evening News, (1898) “Erskineville Drinking Fountain” 8 February, p. 2
3 Sydney Morning Herald Monday (1923) “Death of Mr E W Molesworth” 4 June; p. 8; Australian Town and Country Journal, 1897 “Suburbs of Sydney” 30 Oct; p. 21
4 Evening News, (1898) “Erskineville Drinking Fountain” 8 February, p. 2
5 See The Australian Star, (1894) “General Election” July 16, p.8; Molesworth lived on Wilson street, Newtown, which is near the railway bridge of Macdonaldtown Station, a landmark frontier between ‘respectable’ Newtown and ‘poor’ Erskineville for a number of decades: Newtown resident, Grace Schewebel, recalled growing up in the area (on Newtown-side) during the 1920s and 1930s, and how as children they were “were forbidden to go over past Macdonaldtown Station” into Erskineville for their “own safety [and] moral reputation.” Erskineville was seen to be a place of sin. See S Rosen(Interviewer) (1995) “Grace Schewebel Interview Transcript’ City of Sydney Oral History Program: Newtown.
6 Sydney Morning Herald Monday (1923) “Death of Mr E W Molesworth” 4 June; p. 8;
7 Molesworth would eventually suffer electoral defeat in 1901; and from that point the Division of Erskine (until its abolishment 1951) was a political stronghold of the working class Australian Labor Party. REF Bill Schewebel, who grew up in the area during the 1920s and 1930s provides some insights into these politics: “In those days in Erskineville a Labor bloke [would] stand up on a box and he’d be cheered and cheered and cheered. Whether they knew what he was talking about, I don’t know, but if a UAP, United Australian Party [a later reincarnation of the ‘Free Trade Party’], … he’d get pelted with tomatoes; they wouldn’t listen to him.” See S Rosen (Interviewer) (1995) “Bill Schewebel Interview Transcript’ City of Sydney Oral History Program: Newtown.
8 See Sydney Morning Herald (1897) “Erskineville” 21 October p.8; Evening News (1897) “Fountain for Erskineville” 24 November, p.6; Evening News (1897) “A Fountain Wanted: an alderman’s mistake”, 8 December, p. 3.
9 Evening News, (1898) “No site for fountain: An Erskineville Trouble” 4 January, p. 2; Ironically enough, the fountain was moved in 1936 to make way for the widening of the ‘narrow’ Erskineville Road. It was re-erected in the nearby Camperdown cemetery in Newtown; see Sydney Morning Herald, Presentation Drinking Fountain, 9 May, 1936, p. 14.
10 Evening News (1898) Erskineville Fountain, 11 January, p. 3
and others, who, after leaving their work, needed a bath but had no convenience of the kind at the their homes.” The Mayor even offered to write a cheque for seven pounds to help fund future initiatives. Public access to clean water in Erskineville, it would seem, was in short supply.

Complementing the attending political elite was the ornate construction of the fountain itself. Designed by a local Erskineville resident, at over two metres in height it was “an imposing structure, designed and built in the early English Gothic style” and was constructed from local sandstone with drinking basins and cups made from gunmetal (red brass) – the latter being supplied by wealthy merchants in nearby Newtown. It even had a basin at the bottom that provided a continual supply of water for dogs, cats and other animals. A reminder of Molesworth’s generosity was emblazoned on a plaque at the top of the fountain, reading “Presented by E W Molesworth to the Residents of Erskineville.” On the other side, the brazen Mayor even managed to gain some personal recognition with the inscription: “R Anderson, Mayor, 1897-8.” Residents walking the narrow streets of Erskineville could now appreciate the Mayor’s token ‘contribution.’

This Erskineville drinking fountain event provides us with a poignant glimpse into some of the dynamics of urban water supply in peri-urban Sydney during the late nineteenth century. The eminent crowd, the baroque design of the fountain, and the choice of a water supply structure as a political gift to curry favour with his local constituents, all emphasise just how important urban water access was an issue at the time in Sydney. Erskineville’s drinking fountain was a case in point, just over a decade earlier, in 1884, newspapers had labelled the suburb as being ‘a typhoid valley’ due to the disproportionate number of water-borne disease deaths occurring the locality. There had even been a government enquiry into Erskineville’s typhoid plague, with the investigators sadly concluding that “we regret that there are no means of ascertaining how many valuable lives have been swallowed up in it during the past few years.” The drinking fountain might have been ornate in its design, but its more prosaic function of providing clean drinking water was certainly a critical need in the area.

The drinking fountain water scene, beyond just indicating the dilemma of water issues, also provides some insights into the politics of water solutions. The drinking water crisis was to be resolved through the contributions by wealthy benevolent citizens and innovative technologies, with the local government playing the role of a facilitator. There was no discussion about the underlying structural reasons behind why Erskineville suffered such water deprivation, except vague indications from the Mayor that it was a poor working-class suburb and therefore lacked the ‘convenience’ of adequate water supply. The water crisis was essentially presented as an apolitical issue that needed to be solved through generosity of the affluent residents. In this late-eighteenth Erskineville drinking fountain story, it would appear that polluted water is the villain, its poor residents are the victims, and the suburb’s political and economic elite are the heroes. It is a simple story. And it is a story that we should question.

In this paper, I retell the story of 19th century water issues in Erskineville, with a specific focus on trying to understand why and how Erskineville became a veritable ‘typhoid valley.’ I do so from the understanding that “urban water is part and parcel of the political ecology of power that structures the functioning of a city,” and therefore the urbanisation of outer Sydney during this period can be best understood as a process of socio-ecological change. That the typhoid valley of Erskineville was created through an entanglement of social and environmental processes. By paying attention to the underlying political economy processes, this reframed history reveals that Erskineville’s political and economic elite, those who presented themselves as saviours during the drinking fountain ceremony, where in fact partial progenitors of the

---

11 Evening News, (1898) “Erskineville Drinking Fountain” 8 February, p. 2
12 Evening News, (1898) “Erskineville Drinking Fountain” 8 February, p. 2
13 Evening News, (1898) “Erskineville Drinking Fountain” 8 February, p. 2
14 The Dawn Poor Doggie 1 March, 1898, p. 9
16 J. A. Thompson and G. H. Stayton, (1889) Report to the Honorable the Minister for Public Works upon an Outbreak of Typhoid Fever in the Municipalities of Newtown and MacDonaldtown; with description of the cause and modes of spread of this disease, and suggestions for its prevention, NSW: p. 2
17 The underground piped water supply for the fountain, was a relatively innovative use of technology at the time.
water-borne disease crisis itself. They were ‘solving’ a problem that they had helped to create. This Erskineville water story is thus a story of environmental (in)justice.