OXFORD AUSTRALIA WORD OF THE MONTH



Grass Castle

- *noun:* 1. the homestead on a wealthy pastoral property; this as a symbol of the ephemerality of pastoral wealth. 2. a large and ornate house purportedly built on the proceeds of marijuana growing or dealing.

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The story behind the Word of the Month

The term **grass castle** is first recorded in Australian English as the title of Mary Durack's 1959 work *Kings in Grass Castles*, which traces her family's pastoralist history. From that title, the term is commonly understood to mean 'the homestead on a wealthy pastoral property', especially one in an older style, as in this passage:

Queensland's kings no longer live in **grass castles**. While the old moneyed establishment with its pastoral roots clings to its gracious timber colonial mansions on stilts ... the *nouveau riche* erect massive edifices in air conditioned, electronically fenced brick and glass. *National Times*, 21 February 1986

Durack's point, however, was that the money on which the pastoral families based their grandeur was dependent on the vagaries of climate and markets, and the line that generated the book title is: 'We are kings in **grass castles** that may be blown away with a puff of wind.'

A new sense of **grass castle** developed in the 1970s. Grass in the sense 'marijuana' developed in the United States in the 1940s. In the 1970s, the Riverina area of New South Wales became known as a marijuana-growing area, and in 1977 the Griffith-based anti-drugs campaigner Donald Mackay was murdered. The elaborate houses of the area, purportedly funded by the growing of marijuana and dealing in it, became known as **grass castles**. The term emerged strongly in the 1978 NSW Royal Commission on drugs:

Allegations that profits from marihuana growing financed the construction of palatial **'grass castles'** have been a prominent part of evidence before the inquiry. Sydney Morning Herald, 21 May 1978.





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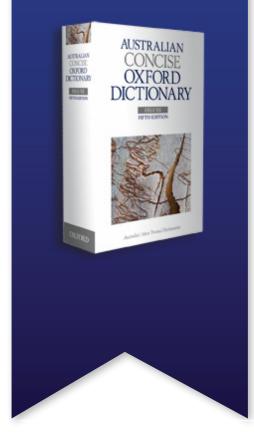


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The term is still very much linked to the activities and stereotypes of the 1970s and 1980s, as explained in this recent article:

The Griffith-based MP wrote a column a few years ago in the form of an open letter to Lebanese Australians about the marginalisation and abuse that Italians used to cop. He recounted how they were stereotyped as Mafiosi assassins and drug dealers, with every Riverina home derided as a **grass castle**, even if their family had worked their fingers to the bone growing vegetables in Australia's food bowl. *Advertiser* (Adelaide) 30 April 2010

The term has also widened in reference, so that living a luxurious lifestyle based on the profits of any kind of crime can be described as living in a **grass castle**:

Criminals no longer will be able to live the high life in their 'grass castles', under tough draft laws aimed at beefing up the fight against organised crime. Legislation introduced to Federal Parliament yesterday proposes the creation of a scheme which permits targeting of people who derive profit from crime and whose wealth exceeds the value of their lawful earnings. Advertiser (Adelaide), 25 June 2009

While the meaning of **grass castle** is almost invariably now associated with crime, there is no doubt that the existence of the term derives from Mary Durack's original use of it in association with the pastoral industry.



