

## Sitings and Soundings

Jenny Lee

It is a clear, still day, and I am sailing across Port Phillip Bay on *A. M. Vella*, the dredger that patrols the shipping channels of Melbourne. The dredger is on its way back in from the spoil-ground, about ten kilometres out from Point Gellibrand. In the last few hours I have learnt a lot about the hidden contours of this bay, with its shifting sand-banks and narrow channels. Many of those channels are old river-beds; at the bay's mouth is a drowned gorge. Only 8500 years ago this was all dry land.

I look around the skyline. From here the spine of Melbourne's landscape is visible as from nowhere else. A ring of hills extends right around the horizon, marking the boundary of a large, shallow bowl. And at the bottom of that bowl there is a river.

For over 1600 generations the people of the Kulin nation have lived around this river, which they named Bar-ray-rung, 'river of mist'. They were here during the last Ice Age, when the river flowed out through the gorge and far across the southern horizon, emptying into the sea off the west coast of Tasmania. They were here when the ocean rose again to form Bass Strait, and surged in through the gorge to cover the low-lying country in the river's middle reaches.<sup>1</sup> The sea spread far into the river valley, then fell back to its present level. Close to the coast the river remained salt, but a little way upstream there was a waterfall, above which the water ran fresh.

The country around this waterfall had an abundance of food. The river was clear and full of fish. Towards the bay the wetlands teemed with waterbirds. On the other bank were woodlands, where insects secreted a sweet gum that fell so thickly from the trees that in places the ground was frosted white with it. Edible plants grew around the water's edge, and shellfish on the rocks. This was a natural gathering point, a place for ceremony, negotiation and exchange, a place to be cared for.

It was also difficult to find from the sea. Shielded by the forbidding mouth of the bay, tucked away out of view from the shore, the country around the waterfall escaped notice for some years after the British set up their convict outpost at Port Jackson. An overland survey expedition in 1803 was the first to note the existence of a 'Freshwater River'. Later the same year another expedition was sent out to establish a convict station on the bay. They searched for the river by boat but failed to find it, and went to Hobart instead. The colonial authorities lost interest in the area.

It was not until 1835 that John Batman came to reconnoitre Port Phillip, and even then he too almost overlooked the river. Where it ran into the delta the stream was screened by dense scrub, and it was a battle to get a boat through the overhanging vegetation. When he came across the waterfall Batman recognised it as 'the place for a village', but made no move to shift his base camp there.

Batman's partner John Wedge reached the site a few months later, only to find a rival party of adventurers already in place. John Fawkner had sent an expedition to the district with instructions to 'go and find good water'. His ship *Enterprise* was moored in the tidal pool below the falls, and the crew were setting themselves up on a grassy knoll beside the northern bank. There was an argument. Wedge told Fawkner's men to leave, but they refused. Before he trudged off, Wedge named the river Yarra Yarra – loosely, 'flowing water' – the term his guides, Wathaurung men from the south-west of the bay, had used to describe the waterfall.

Freshwater, Yarra Yarra – inadequate though they are, both names have a special meaning on this dry continent. Yet Melbourne has not been kind to its river. Until the

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Presland, *Aboriginal Melbourne* (McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1994), pp. 4–5, 11–12.

end of the nineteenth century the city poured its wastes straight into the stream. Within twenty years of that first landing the water was undrinkable, and by 1870 the banks were covered with dead and dying fish.

The authorities' response was to shift the city's 'noxious trades' downriver.<sup>2</sup> There they joined the engineering, shipbuilding and ship repair works that had sprung up along the shore. Many other industries followed, among them rope works, soap and candle factories, chemical and fertiliser plants, a sugar refinery, a gas works and a power station. The lower reaches of the river became Australia's most industrialised waterway, and possibly its most polluted.

The area around the waterfall was also transformed as the city centre grew up beside it. Today there is only a slight widening in the river at the bottom of Queen Street to suggest the outline of the tidal pool where the *Enterprise* moored. The wetlands to the south and west have gone. The grassy knoll on the north bank was beheaded to make way for the Spencer Street railway yards. In the mid-1880s the rocky barrier that formed the falls was blasted away, turning the river brackish far upstream. It is hard to think of another city that has been in such a hurry to cover the traces of its early history, to obliterate the reason for its being where it is.

The *Vella* runs down the shipping lane. Ahead is the black mouth of Station Pier, where the passenger ships used to dock. A fair part of Melbourne's population came in through this pier.

Until the Second World War most of the passengers were British – displaced tenant farmers, craftsmen disgruntled at the erosion of their trades, adventurous young people in search of a new start, assorted black sheep from well-to-do families. Many stayed to work on the waterfront and the industries that surrounded it. After the war they were joined by large numbers of immigrants fleeing the aftermath of war and the partition of Europe.

The increase in population produced an acute housing shortage, and immigrants bore the brunt. When George Agius arrived from Corfu in 1950, he shared a four-bed room with two friends, and they had to pay extra rent to keep the fourth bed empty. Zvonka Pasara and her husband shared a three-bedroom house in Spotswood with two other families after she came out from Croatia in 1961.

If housing was short, jobs were not. Trade and industry along the waterfront were booming. Sam Camilleri came out at the age of 16 to join his uncle, and found a pick-and-shovel job at the gas works next day. George Agius arrived on Christmas Eve, and started as an assistant lead burner at ICI three days later. Over in Port Melbourne, Branka Pete was stacking biscuits at Swallow and Ariell about three weeks after disembarking.

Getting skilled work was not so easy. Australians hung on to the most desirable jobs, and immigrants got what was left. There was little effort to help new employees find their feet. Branka Pete spent her first tea break sitting alone in the locker room because no-one had shown her where the canteen was. Branka also remembers how the Australian girls wanted to be first to the canteen: 'They didn't want wogs to go before them.'

There were differences over attitudes to work as well. After the upheaval of moving to a new country, many immigrants were determined to save as much money as possible, to gain some security and a home of their own. Salvatore Brancaleone recalls the tensions that resulted at CSR:

When the Greeks and Italians started working, the Australians – what we call the Englander, because they were speaking English – they didn't work like us. They started to give up on the job, because we work for the dollar, we want to

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<sup>2</sup> John Lack, *A History of Footscray* (Hargreen, Melbourne, 1991), pp. 96–8.

work, we want the extra dollar, we wanted the free life, we wanted the house. They complained 'You are Dago, you are woggy, you are crawling to the boss,' because we work overtime.

But the picture was not only one of conflict. Bonds were formed through working together and living in the same neighbourhood. Pearl Grant and Ernestina Brincat were both married to shipwrights who worked on cargo up the river. Like many other women in the riverside communities, Pearl and Ernestina had to take sole responsibility at home while their husbands worked long hours. They both remember fondly the times they spent together when their children were young, swapping recipes, going to the beach and making clothes. Their husbands too became firm friends.

When he was on the waterfront, Jim Beggs took a special pleasure in working on the immigrant ships:

To see a ship coming in, with people recognising each other as the ship tied up – you'd see these marvellous reunions of people who hadn't seen each other for twenty years, perhaps. Then down into the ship's hold you'd go, and all their luggage would come. And there was every conceivable shape and size – handmade boxes, old trunks, bamboo cages, and some of them just wrapped up in hessian. It was interesting how the wharfies took a care about those bits of furniture, because they knew that was all they had.

Now the big liners have gone, and the dramas of reunion take place at the airport. Today Station Pier lies empty, a refuge for fishermen and seagulls.

The river delta opens up before us as we move in towards the shore. I have spent hours poring over maps, trying to work out the relationship between the geometrical lines of this new landscape and the lagoons and meandering streams it replaced.

In Melbourne's early years the big ships had to unload their cargo into barges at Williamstown or Port Melbourne, on either side of the river mouth, before it could be taken up to the Queen Street wharf. City merchants constantly urged that the port be brought closer to town. To this end, in the 1880s the West Melbourne wetlands were dredged out to form Victoria Dock, and a canal was dug to bypass the shallow river-bend known as Humbug Reach. The canal, and the artificial island it created, were both named after Sir John Coode, the eminent British engineer who had devised this master plan.

As larger and larger ships came in, the bed and the banks of the river were nibbled away, and the surrounding lowlands were raised. In the late 1920s Appleton Dock was created, and what was left of Humbug Reach was finally filled in. The Coode Canal was now the only river course, and Coode Island was no longer an island.<sup>3</sup> During the 1930s depression, unemployed relief workers filled in the lowlands at Fishermans Bend. Then, in the 1950s and 1960s, Webb and Swanson docks were built, the first for ships with roll-on, roll-off loading, the second for container vessels.<sup>4</sup> This completed the main outlines of the port as it is now.

This new, constructed landscape has its own appeal, with its colours bright in the sun. Yet it seems rather desolate. The movement of the huge machines is the only sign of life.

It is a far cry from the old waterfront, with its thousands upon thousands of

<sup>3</sup> Olaf Ruhen, *Port of Melbourne, 1835–1976* (Cassell, Melbourne, 1976), pp.140–2, 239.

<sup>4</sup> See Susan Priestley, *Making their Mark* (Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Sydney, 1985), pp. 284–5.

workers. Well into the 1950s the wharves relied mainly on human muscle. Goods were trolleyed around the wharves by hand, or carried on men's backs. Horses were used for short hauls at Station Pier and on the sugar wharf. The cranes were tiny by today's standards; a fifteen-tonner was a 'jumbo'.

Cargoes came in all shapes and sizes. They had to be carefully stowed, and shipwrights had to batten out the hold with wooden frames to keep the cargo level and fill out irregular spaces. At sea a shifting cargo could capsize a ship.

Working under the hook was dangerous. Cargoes fell out of slings, rusty cables parted and dropped their loads on wharfies below, men lost their balance and fell from great heights.<sup>5</sup> There were more insidious dangers as well. The holds were dusty and airless at the best of times. They could become death-traps if noxious cargoes ruptured and fumes built up. And often the air would be full of drifting asbestos fibres. Like others, Jack Hovey did not realise the risk:

We used to lay on it – lay on the bags. They used to rip, yeah, but we'd lay on the square of the hatch in the sun, and it was like a mattress. We used to go for extra money on all that sort of stuff, and the boss would say 'Ah, that won't hurt you! You could put that in a sandwich and eat it!'

Men covered for injured or ageing workmates, knowing that they too might need help one day. Rex Skillen remembers: 'The foreman would say "Oh, put So-and-so on the wharf – it's easier down there," or "Shove him in the 'tween deck, out of the road. No-one will know, and he'll get paid just the same."'

The waterfront also had a long tradition of unionism. The waterside workers' union, however, made little headway for many years after a disastrous strike in 1928. Militants were blacklisted, and employers sponsored the formation of a rival union, which lasted until the mid-1950s. The effects of the strike were compounded by the 1930s depression. Corrupt foremen handed out jobs in return for kickbacks, and there was desperate competition for anything that was going.<sup>6</sup>

Even in good times, there was no certainty about waterside work. Trade in the port was seasonal, peaking in spring and summer when the flush of rural produce came in. Casual labour was almost universal. Painters and dockers, wharfies and shipwrights were hired from pick-up compounds around the docks. When there were no ships in, there would be nothing doing; then, when a big cargo had to be moved, men would be expected to work around the clock. The union fought long and hard to roster the work around, in the interests of its members' safety as well as their income security. The breakthrough came in the late 1960s, when the wharfies were made permanent. But by then it was also clear that there would soon be far fewer of them.

The mechanisation of the waterfront was proceeding rapidly. Containerisation, bulk loading, bigger cranes, roll-on, roll-off ships – all meant that the work of the port required fewer and fewer hands. The impact was softened by retirement benefits and redundancy pay, but many retired waterside workers are still profoundly ambivalent about the changes. As Jack Hovey puts it:

In the end we beat 'em, but then you look at it and you say to yourself, well, did we beat them? Because there was 28,000 men on the waterfront all over Australia, and now there's about 7000, maybe less. So they got rid of a lot of us. But they had to pay us to get rid of us.

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<sup>5</sup> See Wendy Lowenstein and Tom Hills, *Under the Hook* (Melbourne Bookworkers, Melbourne, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Rupert Lockwood, *Ship to Shore. A History of Melbourne's Waterfront and its Union Struggles* (Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1990).

Jim Beggs recalls how Robert Menzies used to joke that a depression would never reach the shores of Australia, because the wharfies would be too lazy to unload it. The witticism has a hollow ring today, as I look out on this streamlined port, where full containers come in and empty ones go out.

The winds of change have been blowing hard around the factories as well. Industries that grew up under the umbrella of trade protection are finding the going tough. Some factories have simply closed. Old manufacturing firms have turned to importing, and lend their brand-names to goods produced elsewhere. Others have streamlined and simplified their operations, cutting out less profitable products, mechanising processes wherever possible, and integrating operations on a national scale. Transfield has established a division of labour between the former naval dockyard in Williamstown and the old State dockyard in Newcastle. Large ships are built in sections in Newcastle, then put together and made ready for sea in Williamstown.

Jobs have been shed throughout the manufacturing sector, and there is constant pressure to improve productivity. Workers are required to be multi-skilled. Old craft distinctions have been thrust aside, putting an end to the demarcation disputes that hamstrung so many local industries in the postwar period. In the process, however, many old skills have been lost.

The shipwrights were among the first trades to go. Shipwrights, who worked with wood, saw their role in ship-building being marginalised as more and more of the ships were made of metal – first the hulls, then the decks and fittings. The trade responded by going on the defensive. Tom Radford describes the result:

New work as it came in was always fought for. Insulation was the shipwrights' job, then the joiners might put over some wooden panelling, so there were always fights. . . . To go out on strike over demarcation was just crazy. You were losing money, you were making the whole industry inefficient, and really setting up the loss of all of your jobs while you protected your own patch. But for guys who'd grown up in the Depression and been out of work, demarcation was a really important issue. They'd say 'I sharpened my tools every day, Tom, and couldn't get work. It was dreadful.' And their view was that you fought tooth and nail, you gave up nothing.

In the end, however, there was nothing left to hold on to. Wood vanished entirely from the ships; with containerisation, the work up the river, battening out cargo, disappeared as well. The shipwrights' union amalgamated with the metalworkers in the mid-1980s. There are still men who trained as shipwrights working at the Williamstown dockyard, but they are called marine fabricators, and one of their main tools of trade is an oxyacetylene torch.

From down here on the water, the West Gate bridge seems impossibly, absurdly high. That bridge has an indelible place in the memory of the riverside community. Its collapse on 15 October 1970 was one of the worst disasters of recent times. Its completion has also had a powerful effect on the relationship between the waterfront and the city.

For many decades there was a sense of separateness about the dockside suburbs. Though Port Melbourne and Williamstown had railways from the 1850s, it was hard to get between the city and the west bank by road. There were few bridges, and many of those that did exist were so low-slung that they had to be opened to allow even small boats to pass. The ferry between Port Melbourne and Williamstown was the only link across the lower reaches of the river. Facing out to the water rather than in towards town, the waterside communities emerged as enclaves within the fabric of

the city, drawn together by networks of kinship and association, and by a powerful sense of place based on long familiarity with the landscape and the water.

Tribes of lads spent every spare moment around the shore. 'Perhaps we had a little bit of salt water in our veins,' says Lloyd Taylor. Bill Le Marquand, who was brought up on Coode Island when it was still an island, speaks of it as a place where ten minutes' fishing would get you a bream big enough for dinner, a place where you could watch the big dolphins following the ships up and down the river. Nellie Sharp remembers getting mussels off the piers:

We used to dive underneath to get the big ones. But Dad always used to say 'Don't take any small ones; leave them for next year.' There was a season for the mussels, and you'd go back next year and there would be the new crop.

Those who had come to know the river well experienced a sense of loss as pollution and overfishing took their toll. Victor Hill vividly recalls the changes since the 1920s: 'You used to drift over the rocks, and you'd see them all flowing with vegetation. You do that today, and all you see is black rocks. Nothing. Nothing's growing on those rocks these days.' In recent years the pollution has dropped off, and some of the fish are returning; the barracouta have come back after a long absence, and there are more bream up the river. But the losses still outweigh the gains.

In earlier generations, many of the children who were brought up around the waterfront stayed on. Youngsters found jobs by word of mouth, through relatives and friends. Jack Carter's father got him a job on the wharves; Edie Mallett went straight from school to Swallow and Ariell, in the footsteps of her mother, her sister and four aunts. Young couples set up house close to parents and siblings. Others, like Marlene Mitchell, left only to return.

It's hard to put into words. It's just inside you. When we went to buy our first house, we couldn't afford down here, so we bought a house at Springvale. Every time we came down to visit, the minute I could smell the sea I'd say 'I'm home! I've come back!' I did not really appreciate it until I went away from it. I just had to come back.

New patterns of movement eroded this sense of closeness and continuity. After the Second World War the rise of the car began to weaken the nexus between home and workplace. A younger generation moved out to new suburbs on the outskirts of the city. Then came the opening of the West Gate bridge, which brought the west bank of the river within a few minutes' drive of town. The waterfront suburbs soon began to move up-market. Well-worn houses were restored, and postmodern apartment complexes appeared on old factory sites.

Now, from Southgate to the river mouth, Melbourne's long-neglected waterfront is being 'rediscovered' by the middle class. Some are making an effort to understand and respect its complex, layered landscape, but many are only too ready to bring in the bulldozers. As factories are flattened and pubs renamed, the grid of local landmarks is being steadily erased, and with it the landscape's meaning to those who never had to rediscover it because they always knew it was there.

We are coming ashore in Williamstown. The dredging is finished for a while, and the ship is going into dock. The *Vella* was built for long hauls. It carries 400 tonnes of fuel, and can travel 10,000 kilometres at a stretch, stopping only for twelve hours once a fortnight while the water tanks are replenished. That translates into a lot of trips up and down the river, in and out of the docks, sucking up the silt and taking it to the spoil-ground.

For the permanent crew this is a welcome chance to have a holiday. For the casuals,

though, it is a different matter. Some will be kept on at other work ashore, but many will be discharged, and have no idea what they will do next.

When we disembark, cars are waiting in line to meet the crew. Women move across to give the men the wheel. Many will have a long trip ahead of them – to the Dandenongs, to Melton, or to the Mornington Peninsula.

I walk down Ann Street, get into my car, and drive off towards the West Gate bridge.

## About the Project

*Big River* uses images, sound and text to illuminate the landscape of the lower Yarra and reflect on that landscape's meanings to the people who live and work around it. The materials for the exhibition have been assembled over two years of work around the river, talking to people, taking photographs, recording sounds, and messing around in boats.

This is a collaborative project involving four people working in different media, sometimes together, sometimes apart. Each of us has approached the project from a different perspective. The exhibition itself includes many different voices and images – not only our own, but also those of people in the river community. The following statements outline what the project has meant for each of us.

**Vivienne Mehés:** Eight years ago I moved back to the western suburbs. Travelling around the river, I realised that it was through this river mouth that Melbourne was colonised. The nearby reclaimed wetlands seemed to indicate a spiritual reawakening to the river – something that had never been part of our collective psyche before.

As a documentary photographer, I was also challenged by the current critical debate surrounding my art form. My response has not been to change the way I take photographs or my relation to my subjects, but to become more aware of my work as an element in a subjective history of this area.

**Zane Trow:** When I worked at Footscray Community Arts Centre I would occasionally sit quietly amid the chaos of industrial Melbourne, looking at the river, with the city in the distance. This looking and listening was the genesis of the project.

The installation sound is simply a gathering of things that have emerged during the process of the project – snatches of conversations recorded by Vivienne and Jenny in their research, jeltje's poetry, and field recordings that I have made on sites of significance to the community we have been working with.

I have attempted to conjure the river's stillness and its perseverance – in the landscape and in people's lives. This is what I do as a composer: think, listen, gather, collaborate, make.

**jeltje:** For me the project has involved interpreting a landscape that is not my own immediate environment, and identifying it as part of the territory of the Boonerwung and Waradgeri nations. I have learnt to read weather patterns and seasons in terms of vegetation and wildlife by listening closely to what people who live in the landscape are saying. I also set out to identify people's imagery and rhythms of speech, and to weave these into the exhibition from the oral history tapes. I have been moving away from consciously applying established forms of performance art to trusting the forms of the oral history itself, and juxtaposing different forms and content within the exhibition to create a sense of living dialogue.

**Jenny Lee:** Although I am not a native of Melbourne, I am fascinated by the history of the city and the complex layers of its landscape. I also enjoy exploring how people come to understand their environment – the systems of navigation they use, the cultures that develop out of shared experience, and the ways in which they accumulate knowledge.



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