FEATURE ARTICLE

BLUESTONE AND THE CITY:
WRITING AN EMOTIONAL HISTORY

Stephanie Trigg

Melbourne’s relationship with bluestone is a passionate one. The city is built at the edge of one of the largest volcanic basalt plains in the world, so there has always been a steady supply of this heavy, dark stone for buildings, foundations, kerbs and laneways. This essay introduces a new research project: an affective, emotional history of Melbourne’s changing relationship with bluestone, from convict labor to contemporary heritage culture. It takes Pentridge Prison and the murder of John Price, Inspector General of Prisons, in 1857, as a case study.

Melburnians see and touch bluestone every day. Our streets and pavements are edged with it; and some of our most iconic buildings—churches, cathedrals, art galleries, colonial prisons—are built from it, or rest on its solid foundations. On a more domestic scale, bluestone houses and shops, both modest and grand, are still to be found in our older suburbs. Bluestone pitchers mark out sections in our gardens; our trains ride over bluestone ballast. Our city and many of our inner suburbs are built around grids of bluestone laneways that are now celebrated as distinctive features of our urban heritage. Our rivers are bridged with bluestones that have been dug up out of those same riverbeds. The city is framed and lined with dark bluestone squares and rectangles. Some of these stones are cut into sharp and square lines; they are edged so evenly and laid so precisely that you can glide over them on a skateboard. Other stones are curved and uneven, or sit up awkwardly, presenting an unstable challenge to high heels, bicycles, wheelchairs and prams. Some stones are smooth and without mark: others are threaded with lines of porous bubbles or dotted by pock marks, or feature larger dips and indentations that hold the rain in small pools.

1 University of Melbourne.
2 I would like to express my grateful thanks for the research assistance of Helen Hickey and Anne McKendry on this project. This research was conducted under the auspices of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (project number CE110001011). Thanks to James Lesh, too, for his advice and suggestions.
Melbourne is a bluestone city, in the same way Sydney is perceived to be a sandstone city. Such historical, social and cultural identifications have a strong emotional and affective component. In 1981, for example, Norman Day contrasted the ‘id’ of Sydney’s brick and sandstone buildings (‘slippery and fluid, like an upturned jar of honey’) to the ‘ego’ of Melbourne’s architecture and its ‘sawn basalt block which is grey and porous—so that it turns an ugly wet black when it rains’. Melbourne’s relationship with bluestone has not always been an easy or comfortable one; it is an ideal topic for a research project informed by the study of the history of emotions.

The interdisciplinary Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions (2011–18) has framed and inspired this project. The Centre’s work is focussed on medieval and early modern Europe from 1100–1800, but one of its four research programs, ‘Shaping the Modern’, also embraces the settler and postcolonial history of Australia, especially in relation to environmental studies. The history and transformation of European attitudes to fire, to land, to home, to agricultural and marine practice when they are brought to Australia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have

played a major part in that program. Material histories and heritage culture also find a place here. This research strand featured strongly in our initial bid for the Centre of Excellence. It was important for us—as well as for the ARC—to show that the history of medieval and early modern emotions might have something to say to Australian history and culture.

Most of my own work for the Centre is concerned with the way literary texts represent human emotion on the face, with a particular focus on medieval English literature, my primary area of expertise. But the Centre and the topic of the history of emotions has provided a capacious and collective framework for interdisciplinary work, and while I am far from being an expert in ecocriticism or urban history, I have found it relatively easy to conceptualise a book project that would trace—or write—an emotional history of Melbourne’s and Victoria’s changing affective relationship with its distinctive stone. My approach is unashamedly centred on human responses, although I will pay some attention to the pre-human history of volcanic basalt in southern Australia.

In this short essay I present some of the research questions and issues that have arisen as I contemplate the writing of a book—an ‘emotional history’ of bluestone—that I hope will be of interest to Melbournians and Victorians, but that might also contribute to the wide range of writing and thinking about ecology, environmental and urban history on a global scale.

For international readers, I need to clarify my use of the term ‘bluestone’. Locals know what it means and can easily visualise our ‘bluestone laneways’ and our iconic buildings and streetscapes. In this context, bluestone refers to volcanic basalt, from eruptions and lava flows. In South Australia, though, ‘bluestone’ refers to a kind of slate; and in the United States it can mean a form of sandstone. Both of these are the results of very different kinds of geological formation. ‘Bluestone’ is thus both a popular and a very general term, but I will adopt local usage and deploy it to refer only to the dark basalt stone that was produced by volcanic activity to the north, west and southwest of Melbourne. For example, eruptions at Hayes Hill and Mt Fraser in the north, eight hundred thousand years ago, sent lava flowing down the Darebin and Merri Creeks, as far as the junction with the Yarra River at Dights Falls in Collingwood. These were relatively recent eruptions in comparison to volcanoes in the Western District of Victoria (between two and 4.5 million years ago), but much older than the volcanic eruption at Mt Napier (only thirty thousand years ago) or...
Stephanie Trigg

Tower Hill (about twenty-five thousand years ago), near Warrnambool, where a stone axe was found buried under volcanic ash.4

That stone axe serves as a powerful symbol of the long and intimate relationship between the natural and cultural worlds in this project. It also reminds us that ‘bluestone’ has a much longer human history than that of European settlement, even if the urban environment in Melbourne now carries little trace of indigenous use of bluestone. By contrast, in the west of Victoria, there are remnants of bluestone eel races and fishponds built by the Gunditjmara people eight thousand years ago at Lake Condah.5 We may also note the arrangement of volcanic basalt stones in several places, such as Wurdi Youang, near the You Yang ranges southwest of Melbourne: these stones are thought to have been set in place as astronomical markers as many as eleven thousand years ago.6

European settlers brought their own traditions and adapted them to local conditions. Pastoralists in the 1860s and 1870s used traditional drystone wall-making techniques from England, Scotland and Wales, bringing out specialist tradesmen or ‘wallers’ to build stone boundaries. Work on these walls involved clearing pastoral land of the basalt stones to make for easier management, while the walls themselves helped to keep rabbits out of farm enclosures. There is now a heritage trail of walls in the Corangamite and the Western District, and a national association that supports and cares for drystone walls.7

Such affectionate interest in and care for the bluestone past has become a defining feature of much of our contemporary urban engagement with these stones, which are often regarded very warmly as a symbol of Melbourne’s distinctive heritage. Local residents campaign for the preservation of their bluestone laneways in the face of council proposals to replace them with

---

asphalt and concrete. I have started collecting stories, too, from people who treasure individual building blocks or stone pavers, and tell the stories of their acquisition. These stones are regularly transferred as objects of social or commercial exchange (the going price on websites like Gumtree is currently three to five dollars per stone). One correspondent marked her move from the western to the eastern suburbs by taking a bluestone pitcher with her as a symbolic reminder of her move from the edges of the basalt plains into the sandy east.

Bluestone has not always enjoyed this popularity, however, and has certainly moved in and out of fashion as a building material. Prior to the 1850s, it was sometimes seen as rather too utilitarian in association, or too dark and inappropriate for churches; so door and window frames often featured sandstone or white stucco to lighten or relieve the darkness of bluestone. Miles Lewis suggests that bluestone was ‘regarded as too sombre for serious

---

8 See, for example, the article by Nick Toscano for The Age, 5 September 2013, reporting on resistance to the Moreland Council’s proposal to concrete over forty-seven kilometres of bluestone laneways that were not heritage listed. One of the submissions in favour of preserving the laneways appeals to a range of arguments from heritage, social, commercial and environmental grounds: http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/moreland-may-lose-bluestone-laneways-20130905-2t7kz.html [accessed November 2016]; Save Moreland’s Bluestone Lanes, ‘Save Morelands Bluestone Submission,’ https://www.scribd.com/document/155441544/Save-Morelands-Bluestone-Submission [accessed 11 December 2016].

architectural treatment’ and that while it was sometimes used for mansions, this was ‘mostly with the intention that they would later be stuccoed’. But during the building boom and great prosperity that followed the discovery of gold in Western Victoria in the 1850s, when the cost of building increased dramatically, the plentiful supply of bluestone, and the availability of convict labour to do the heavy work of quarrying, cutting and breaking up stones for building and road works ensured its popularity at least as a foundational stone. Bluestone was used especially in the city of Melbourne, in suburbs close to the quarries in the north and west, in the harbour city of Williamstown and also on the Bellarine Peninsular in Geelong. Preliminary mapping reveals an indicative pattern; most of the churches built to the north and west of Melbourne in the nineteenth century are made of bluestone: most to the south-east are made of brick. The history of Melbourne and Victorian bluestone is regional, as well as social, economic, cultural and emotional.

Figure 3: Catholic Church, Axedale, near Bendigo (dated 1902, using stones from the earlier building of 1862), 2016 © Stephanie Trigg.

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to reflect in closer detail about methodology. I am conceiving this book as relatively short, and heavily illustrated with photographs, maps, and drawings. It might also feature indented boxes highlighting informal or conversational comments and anecdotes from historical and contemporary sources. Some of these will be

---

drawn from comments on Facebook and Twitter, and from the blog I have kept, intermittently, as I work on this project, which has cultivated a modest profile on social media. The book will be organised around particular themes and uses of bluestone, and will narrate a number of discrete stories, but will be held together by an attempt to trace the history of human feeling about this stone in Melbourne and Victoria. Although the specific shape of that narrative has yet to emerge, it will involve three interwoven threads and themes: material and geological factors; economic and social considerations; and aesthetic and cultural associations.

One of the sites I am working on brings many of these associations together, but also opens up some indicative methodological challenges. The day I first opened a file to start drafting this book, I posted a happy announcement on Facebook as a way of committing myself to my bluestone writing project. Instantly a friend (a Melbourne woman now living in London) posted a response, ‘Are you going to write about Pentridge at all, Stephanie?’

Melbourne’s most iconic bluestone building is Pentridge Prison in Coburg, about nine kilometres from the city centre, on the road north to Sydney. It was first established in 1850 as a stockade (moveable log huts on wheels behind a wooden fence), conveniently close to the Merri Creek and its plentiful deposits of bluestone. Many of its early prisoners were convicts brought from New South Wales to help with Victoria’s building projects. They could be housed here, well away from the city. In the 1850s and 1860s prisoners quarried the stones from the creek, and were set to cutting up the stone into roadfill (a prisoner was expected to produce a cubic yard of road ‘metal’ in a day), while others chiselled and cut the heavy boulders and rocks into rectangular blocks to make further internal walls for prison buildings. At first the prisoners worked on the external walls, but after a Victorian parliamentary inquiry in 1856–7, amidst increasing concerns about security, the prisoners worked exclusively on internal walls. The first four large divisions were complete by 1865, and there were eventually over two miles of bluestone walls (some twenty feet high) around the perimeter and another two miles within the complex. The work of cutting and breaking stone was demanding, and the men sentenced to hard labour often refused to work.

In one sense, the emotional history here is not hard to discern: for a start, the irony of prisoners forced to build their own security walls is easily apparent.

---

11 I have kept the ‘Humanities Researcher’ blog (stephanietrigg.blogspot.com) since 1996, and for much of 2015 I blogged daily about my experiences with bluestone.
Alfred Buck, the Supervisor of Works at Pentridge between 1854 and 1885, is associated with the design for a moveable cage that could enclose prisoners while they worked on different sections of wall.\(^\text{12}\) Emotional language also abounds in descriptions of Pentridge, from the days of its first stone building through to the present. Here the associations of criminality, violence and a punitive prison system are regularly combined with impressions of the darkness of the stone and its gothic architecture. A 1931 article in *The Northern Miner* (Charters Towers, Queensland) freely evokes the pre-modern European past:

> Built of bluestone, Pentridge, Victoria, has always been harsh and forbidding to the eye; but when within its wall the full measure of its gloom is felt, then the likeness to one of those ancient dungeons of the torturing post is more than manifest.\(^\text{13}\)

Towers and dungeons are easily read as the powerful symbols of gothic medievalism, a mode which makes ready links to the medieval past and its customary associations with torture and repression.

---


\(^{13}\) ‘Portents from Pentridge: Description of a Prison’, *The Northern Miner*, 25 August 1931, 4.
These associations were formed very quickly. According to Richard Broome:

By 1860 the Stockade was a powerful symbol of evil, its physical dangers and blight on property values being now of secondary importance. Early photographs taken in the 1860s reveal Pentridge as a massive shape, without adjacent trees to soften its high walls, which could be seen from the most parts [sic] of the neighbourhood: a rising plain of grassy paddocks. Its bluestone construction was dark and alien to English eyes accustomed to light-coloured stone and the gothic allusions of its main gate and towers made it all the more forbidding [sic]. And when the prisoners rioted their rage could be heard beyond the walls, while the prison bells marked the day for nearby residents.14

As early as 1870, the violent associations of Pentridge were so strong that the residents petitioned to have the name of their suburb changed (from ‘Pentridge’ to ‘Coburg’).15 More recently, Sophie Cunningham describes the bluestone appearance of Pentridge and the Old Melbourne Jail as ‘deadly’.16 There are many other examples of this kind of evocative writing about Pentridge, and they will be an important part of my book.17 My chapter on bluestone prisons will also include discussions of the Old Melbourne Gaol, the ‘Collingwood’ stockade in North Carlton and the Geelong Gaol, but will focus on tracking the changing emotional discourse about Pentridge, which looms large in the city’s bluestone imaginary. The prison is still sometimes affectionately referred to as ‘the Bluestone College’, for example. I am particularly interested in tracing the transformation in emotional discourse after the prison was decommissioned in 1997 and the land sold to housing developers.

There is currently a distinct split between the gothic aspect of Pentridge that is a site for ‘dark tourism’ and the modern commercial promotion of a welcoming new residential community. You can do an informative daytime tour of the remaining H division and be invited to imagine the scene of Australia’s last execution, the hanging of Ronald Ryan in 1967; or go on a two-hour ‘Lantern Ghost’ tour and thrill to the stories of the forty-odd bodies buried on site; or shiver at the possibility that the infamous gangster Mark ‘Chopper’ Read (d.

15 Ibid., 10.
17 See, for example, Richard Broome, *Coburg: Between Two Creeks* (Melbourne: Lothian, 1987); and Jacqueline Z. Wilson, *Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).
2013) now haunts the prison. But you can also take a coffee in ‘The Boot Factory’ or ‘The Glass Den’ (the cafés on the former prison site), or buy an apartment or terrace house in ‘Pentridge Village’ or alongside the ‘Pentridge Piazza’, which is modelled on walled Italian villages in regions such as Abruzzo, the home of the developer Peter Chiavaroli. Teasing out these emotional resonances, as dominant gothic discourses give way to the emergent discourses of modern gentrification, will show us emotional history in the process of gradual but inexorable change around some of the same bluestone walls that are still standing, still part of the housing developments.

When there is no shortage of material from a range of sources, both official and informal, both public and individual, emotional histories like that of the last ten years around the Pentridge site are not so difficult to compile and write. There is a much greater challenge in providing a balanced account of past events and feelings, when only partial evidence survives, as many social historians understand.

I return, now, to the 1850s, to explore a typical problem in emotional history: the lopsided nature of the surviving evidence; and the temptations of constructing neat narratives. Again, the problem is a familiar one in historical studies.

We have a great deal of information about John Price, who was the Inspector-General of Penal Establishments in the Victorian colony from 1854 until his murder by prisoners at Williamstown in 1857. There is a full biography of Price, who had worked in the penal colonies of Hobart and Norfolk Island, and whose own infamy was compounded after Marcus Clarke used him as the model for Maurice Frere in For the Term of his Natural Life (1885). Price was a significant figure in Melbourne’s history, and we have an unusual wealth of information about him because he was so controversial, and perceived to be so cruel. Even his biographer, John Vincent Barry, uses the subtitle, ‘A study of the exercise of naked power’. I have been reading through the reports of the inquiry into the prisons by the Victorian Legislative Council in 1856 and 1857. Price’s responses to the committee’s questions are recorded verbatim, so they are a wonderful testament, but it is only because the system was so badly out

of control that the inquiry was necessary; and of course we do not hear directly from the prisoners.

Accordingly, we learn that when the prisoners at Pentridge refused to work, they were put on ‘lazy-ration’, a smaller food allowance. But we also hear that other prisoners would often supplement this with their own food through solidarity of feeling. So Price would separate the non-workers and make them sit on a large stone (presumably a large bluestone boulder). He complains to the Inquiry that the men will not work:

I will tell you instances of men sitting six weeks on a stone. They will not work. They tell me plainly, ‘I will see you damn’d before I go to work.’

Price reported to the Select Committee that their ‘temper is generally roused’ in this way, and when he was asked: ‘To what do you attribute that feeling?’ he replied, ‘They think they are treated like children, and they hate it.’ Price knew how to touch the nerves of the prisoners, and knew exactly what he was doing with this stone: a penal version of the ‘naughty corner’. Indeed it was so notorious it became known as ‘John Price’s stone’ and, according to John Vincent Barry, Price’s biographer, it was still at Pentridge in 1882, thirty-five years after Price’s death. Price does not mention that the prisoners did not simply ‘sit’ on this stone but were shackled to it. It could hold up to fourteen prisoners. In Barry’s description,

It weighed about a ton, and was flat on one side, with a bolt about 18 inches long in the centre. It was placed close to a wheel of one of the wooden huts, and a recalcitrant prisoner was chained to the wheel, sat upon the stone, and fastened from behind to the bolts.

Price was notoriously harsh and hated by the prisoners; a prison riot ended in his violent death in Williamstown on 26 March 1857. John Singleton, a doctor who had remonstrated with Price about his cruel treatment of prisoners commented, ‘The only expression of surprise that Price’s death caused was

---

21 Ibid., 29.
22 Barry, Life and Death, 84.
23 Ibid. Later in his deposition, Price says some of the men move from stone-breaking to stone-cutting, which is ‘a very favorite pursuit amongst them. It is not so heavy. There is not much exertion in sitting knocking a stone with a hammer’ (Report, 30).
that it did not occur long before.’” 

Convicts and prisoners (including Ned Kelly, later, in 1873) were housed in floating hulks in Hobsons Bay and brought ashore to build the bluestone seawall and carry out other works. There was mutinous unrest for several days amongst the prisoners, who were working on building a battery filled with rubble quarried from some way off. Price went to Williamstown to confront them, and an aggressive verbal exchange with a prisoner called James Kelly ensued. The prisoners started to throw clods of earth at Price, and then picked up rocks from the ground and threw them, and then finally one attacked him with a shovel. Price died of his injuries the next day. Fifteen prisoners were tried for the murder of John Price in front of Justice Redmond Barry; of these, seven were executed ‘in the most hideous week of hangings Victoria has known’.

At the inquest, James Calwell, sergeant of the shore guard at Gellibrand’s Point, reported finding several stones marked with blood near where the Inspector-General was found. The court record comments:

The stones were produced. They were ordinary pieces of bluestone, about five pounds weight the largest; the second about three; and the rest varying from two pounds to four ounces. All were stained with blood, and the one weighing three pounds had greyish-brown hair on a sharp angle, stained with blood.

My perspective here is very particular. Price’s biographer describes simply the ‘pieces of quarried rock of various sizes’ that lay at Kelly’s feet that day in Williamstown. I felt certain that they must be bluestones, and my desire to confirm this led me to the record of the inquest. Most witnesses mentioned only rocks or stones, and it is only when the bloodied stones are brought in to the courtroom as evidence that they are definitively identified as ‘ordinary pieces of bluestone’. A narrative of poetic justice now takes shape. Price is killed by a piece of bluestone, bringing his own cruel disciplinary bluestone regime to an end. The stones thus become actants, helping to shape their own narrative.

---

26 Ibid., 120.
27 Biographical Memoir of the Late Mr John Price, Inspector-General of Penal Establishments for Victoria, with an account of the Assassination, Inquest & Funeral; Also, a full report of the Trial of the Prisoners (Melbourne: W. Fairfax & Co., [1857?]), 24.
28 Barry, Life and Death, 106.
This is the kind of unashamedly slanted and partial narrative perspective that will thread through this book as I follow the bluestone trail through the material and historical archive. Sometimes the very materiality of this stone will be at the foreground of discussion: its specific geological qualities that make it suitable for this or that use. Sometimes its cultural associations or its aesthetic appearance will take centre stage. At other times, it will be hard to tell whether it is the material itself or the social, architectural or domestic use to which it is put that is at issue. At other times, as with the stones that helped to kill John Price, its nature will be only incidental. My approach may produce strangely shaped narrative conclusions and moments of closure, because my prime concern is to interrogate the history of feeling about this distinctive stone. In these moments, bluestone fragments seem to shape their own stories.

An emotional history of Melbourne and Victorian bluestone can be only a partial one: it makes no pretence to account for the entire history of the state, let alone the entirety of its emotional history. For a start, this history will be geographically and topographically oriented primarily to the north and the west, simply because that is where most bluestone is found and used. The book will also be shaped by the transformation of bluestone into a sign of heritage culture. This will be the main narrative that will link history and feeling, and will help direct my search for and selection of material. Throughout I will focus on examples that foreground strength of feeling, and changes in feeling about bluestone, particularly as these changes help us tell the story of our emotional relationship with the past, in both the natural and cultural worlds.

To conclude: my files and archives for this project are still wide open and the book will not be complete for several more years. I welcome comments, suggestions, anecdotes, photographs, paintings: anything that can help give further shape to this affective and communal history.
Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
TRIGG, S

Title:
Bluestone and the City: Writing an Emotional History

Date:
2017

Citation:

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/129561

File Description:
Published version