Object Lessons
Public History in Melbourne 1887-1935

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Table of Contents

Declaration of Authorship

Abstract

Acknowledgements

List of Illustrations

Introduction

Chapter One
*The 1888 Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition* 45

Chapter Two
*Statues and Monuments* 74

Chapter Three
*The 1934 Centenary Celebrations, the Shrine and Cooks’ Cottage* 107

Conclusion 138

Bibliography 142
Declaration of Authorship

I declare that this thesis comprises only my original work, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used. This thesis approximates to 30,000 words in length, exclusive of lists, bibliographies and footnotes.

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Abstract

The thesis studies history-making in Melbourne’s central civic sphere, from its emergence in the 1880s to its decline in the 1930s. It identifies public history’s major themes and forms, and the relationships between them, based on four main cases of history-making: the articulation of the past and history in Melbourne’s 1888 Centennial International Exhibition; the historical backgrounds, development, unveilings and partial after-lives of Sir Redmond Barry’s statue, unveiled in Swanston Street in 1887, and the Eight Hours’ Day monument, unveiled in Carpentaria Place in 1903; and history-making around Victoria’s 1934-1935 Centenary Celebrations, with special emphasis on the Shrine of Remembrance and a detailed study of Cooks’ Cottage.

The thesis proposes that from the 1880s to World War One, Melbourne’s history-makers developed public histories in a monumental, settler frame, in both form and theme. Along with arguing for an abstract allegiance to imperial classicism, they articulated a chronological, geo-political hierarchy of historical themes, largely consisting of explorers, statesmen and the more amorphous, ambiguous theme of pioneers. The public experience and legacy of World War One, however, saw local communities reassert local, mass contribution to the nation-building project, in a language of mourning and reflection. After the War, metropolitan history-makers also began to moderate their monumental project, devolving their history-making efforts politically, geographically and institutionally.

The 1930s Depression upset the notion of progress upon which monumental history depended, but the timing of Victoria’s Centenary Celebrations demanded the resurrection of the central civic sphere for history-making. While Melbourne’s history-makers distanced history, they allowed some attenuated incursions by groups who had hitherto been disenfranchised, and they articulated history in more playful, popular and materialist forms, removing history’s gravitas
in the present. The Shrine and Cooks' Cottage, the Centenary's two accidental but most enduring projects, entailed major shifts in theme and form, and, coupled with the Centenary's other history-making endeavours, reflected the shift in public history's language from settler to modern.
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List of Illustrations

Illustration 1
Monument of Burke and Wills, c.1870, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 2
Public Library, Museum and National Gallery, Valentine and Sons Publishing Co., c.1909, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 3
Obelisk on the Major Mitchell Trail, Western Highway near Buangor, Victoria, Erected March 1930

Illustration 4
Germany Congratulates Australia, Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 5
Front view of the Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1889, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 6
Plan of the Exhibition Buildings, Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 7
Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Ground Plan of Permanent Buildings and Annexes, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 8
The German Beer Court, Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 9
The ‘Colossal’ Bust of Captain Cook in the NSW Court, Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 10
Tableau, Landing of Captain Cook and Model of Port Jackson, Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 11
Captain Cook Taking Possession of the Australian Continent on Behalf of the British Crown, AD 1770, by Samuel Calvert and John Gilfillan, 1865, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria
Illustration 12
Official Presentation of New South Wales Awards to the Executive Commissioner for the Colony, the Honorable R. Burdett-Smith, CMG, MLC, 1888, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 13
Henry Cowen conducts the Orchestra at the Opening of Melbourne’s Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 14
Fine Art Court No.3, Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 15
Executive Commissioners’ Reception Room, Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 16
Melbourne in 1888, from Fitzroy Gardens, Thomas Edmund Photographer, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 17
Promenading at Melbourne’s Centennial International Exhibition, 1888, Courtesy Museum of Victoria

Illustration 18
Sir Redmond Barry, Literature, Science, Music, &c.

Illustration 19
Sir Redmond Barry, by John Botterill, c.1860

Illustration 20
Sir Redmond Barry, c.1875

Illustration 21
Judge Redmond Barry, The Australasian Sketcher, 20 February 1875, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 22
Barry Hall, Public Library of Victoria, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 23
Sir Redmond Barry’s funeral, The Australasian Sketcher, 4 December 1880, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria
Illustration 24
Statue of Sir Redmond Barry, Charles Rudd Photographer, 1887, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 25
Original Eight Hours’ Day banner, 1856

Illustration 26
Eight Hours’ Day Procession passing Federal Parliament House, 23 April 1906, Courtesy the University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 27
Percival Ball’s Original Design for the Eight Hours’ Day Monument

Illustration 28
General Gordon, the Eight Hours’ Day Monument and the Grand Hotel, not dated, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 29
Eight Hours’ Day Monument, not dated, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 30
Three 8’s Street, by Alan Sumner, 1945, Courtesy National Gallery of Victoria

Illustration 31
In the Pioneer Women’s Memorial Gardens, Melbourne, not dated, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 32
The National War Memorial of Victoria, Aerial View of Dedication Ceremony, 1934, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 33
Russell Grimwade, Oil painting by Paul Fitzgerald, c.1950

Illustration 34
Captain Cook, by Gordon Woodhouse, not dated, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

Illustration 35
Captain Cook Statue on St. Kilda Foreshore, c.1920

Illustration 36
History Under the Hammer, 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives
Illustration 37
‘Value from historical point of view—problematical’, 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 38
Obelisk Made of Granite from Point Hicks to be Erected in Great Ayton, 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 39
Ancient Documents to Authenticate Cooks’ Cottage, 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 40
Cooks’ Cottage Being Dismantled in Great Ayton for Export, 1933

Illustration 41
The Key to Assembly of Cooks’ Cottage, 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 42
Cooks’ Cottage Superimposed in Gordon Square, 1933, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 43
Cooks’ Cottage Superimposed near Cook Statue in St. Kilda, 1933, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 44
Cooks’ Cottage Superimposed in Front of Public Library, 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 45
If Cooks’ Cottage Gets Placed in Front of the Library, Where Will it all End?, 1934, Courtesy University of Melbourne Archives

Illustration 46
Captain Cook’s Cottage, 1939, Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria