Object Lessons
Public History in Melbourne 1887-1935

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A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by Research in the Australian Centre, Faculty of Arts University of Melbourne.

May 2000
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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.

Maryanne McCubbin

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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.
Acknowledgements

I extend my heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Dr Kate Darian-Smith, whose excellent advice and unceasing encouragement, understanding and tolerance kept me buoyed through difficult periods of the thesis. I would also like to thank Dr David Goodman, whose few wise words encouraged me to think through difficult areas of the thesis.

My gratitude goes to Dr Gaye Sculthorpe, who gave me important generic thesis-writing advice, and displayed ongoing interest in my progress. I would like to thank Nancy Ladas, whose whizz-bang technical skills gave me confidence in getting the thesis together, and Yolande Kerridge, who not only proof-read the thesis but offered some excellent advice on its arrangement. Thanks also to my work colleagues at the Museum of Victoria for their interest and encouragement. Thanks to the various librarians, archivists and others whose most obliging assistance made the preparation of this thesis much easier than it might otherwise have been.

Finally, I would like to thank Gordon Gadsby. His assistance, understanding and tolerance enabled this thesis. I would also like to thank my dear little girl Gabrielle, whose presence towards the end daily inspired me to complete the thesis. Sincere thanks also to Josephine McCubbin, who encouraged me to talk about the thesis, and maintained her enthusiasm and interest throughout the course of the project.
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Author/s:
McCubbin, Maryanne

Title:
Object lessons: public history in Melbourne 1887-1935

Date:
2000-05

Citation:

Publication Status:
Unpublished

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/39464

File Description:
Front

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