Chapter One

The 1888 Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition

[W]here but a few years ago were only the nomadic aboriginal savage, the kangaroo, the emu and the dingo...[there are now Australian cities] vying in wealth and comfort, in architecture, commercial activity, and the cultivation of the arts and sciences, with many of the leading cities of the old world.189

Thus the evolution of the Australasian colonies was summarised in ‘A Century’s Progress’, the introduction to the Official Record of Melbourne’s 1888 Centennial International Exhibition. The commemorative motivation for the Exhibition was NSW’s inauguration as a British penal colony under Captain Arthur Phillip’s Governorship one hundred years previously.190 International Exhibitions were about symbolic self-definition, and especially the evolutionary placement of one’s self. For Victoria and other Australian colonies, relatively ‘new found’,191 they were key forums for expressing their credentials in civility through culture, and provenancing their taste and antiquity in British imperialism. The commemorative basis of the 1888 Melbourne Centennial Exhibition intensified temporal discourse, and it provides a rich study for comprehending respective colonial imaginings of Australia’s past.

This chapter investigates the Exhibition’s object lessons in history. Notions of time passing, progress, antiquity and specific historical actors and acts permeated the Exhibition in a complex web of themes and forms. For the viewer, they were everywhere and interwoven, implicit and explicit. They ranged, hierarchically, from designations of the world’s order and the centrality of the discipline of history to it, to specific local histories, around which local sensibilities were also enacted. The chapter aims to pinpoint the historical themes and forms in this exceptionally ambitious and especially self-conscious moment in the establishment of public history-making in Melbourne.

189 Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, Official Record, p.60.
190 As above, p.129.
191 See footnote 10.
In November 1886, Melbourne's politicians and businessmen, an often indistinguishable web of boosters,192 learnt that NSW was not holding an Exhibition as part of its centennial celebrations, and determined to hold one themselves. Duncan Gillies, Victoria's Premier, wrote to the Premier of NSW, Sir Patrick Jennings:

For some time past I have thought that your younger sister, Victoria, might be able to aid you materially in your efforts to make your centennial commemoration worthy of the occasion...There appears to be one thing wanting to crown the event, and that is a grand exhibition showing the vast strides which New South Wales and the colonies then forming part of her have made in developing the great natural resources of this continent, and in cultivating the arts and manufactures since the hour when the colony of New South Wales was founded a hundred years ago...we too have an interest in the memorable event that you will celebrate, as it marked the beginning of our Australian history as well as of yours.193

The letter showed both deference and assertion, signalling Victoria's ambivalent political relationship with NSW. It also set the precedent for the historical terms in which the colonial relationship would played out in the Exhibition, particularly regarding the question of respective colonial ownership of the 'primal moments' of Australian history. Melbourne had held its first International Exhibition in 1880, and both Victoria and NSW knew well from this and other international exhibitions that they entailed massive financial risk,194 as well as other public critiques. But Melbourne was riding on an unprecedented, if precarious, economic crest,195 and it appeared that the benefits would outweigh the risks.

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193 Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, Official Record, pp.128-9. See also Dugan, Dennis, 'Victoria's Largest Exhibition', p.2; Dunstan, David, Victorian Icon, pp.189-90.
194 Indeed, NSW decided not to hold the Exhibition because of time and cost constraints, as well as lack of a suitable venue (its Exhibition Building, erected in 1879 to host its and Australia's first International Exhibition, burnt down in 1882.) NSW Parliamentary Debates, 22 September-25 October 1886, p.5060.
195 See footnote 18. For a fictional account which includes, inter alia, references to the land boom and its ominous collapse, see Cambridge, Ada, A Woman's Friendship, Elizabeth Morrison (ed.), New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1988, pp.33,55.
Melbourne’s boosters were well-acquainted with the advantages of participating in the exhibition circuit, and their main end in holding the Exhibition was to further the colony’s trade. (Illustration 4) Imperialists and colonists—including the 10,000 ‘leading public men of the colonies...[and] many private citizens of standing in the different colonies’ at the Exhibition opening—used it as a strategic forum to consider mid- and long-term trade and investment opportunities. The Exhibition was also a direct trading forum, to the point where its ‘shoppy’ status aroused controversy. The pseudo-factory environments in the Machinery in Motion Courts made products on-site and sold them, there was a large trade in Exhibition souvenirs, and some of the non-competitive galleries such as the art galleries sold their wares. The Exhibition was also an advertising forum, foretelling of the admixture of commerce, art and theatre which characterised twentieth-century point-of-sale display techniques.

The Exhibition opened in the Royal Exhibition Building on 1 August 1888, and God was called upon to ‘grant that it may advance the interests of trade and commerce’. The Building, designed by Joseph Reed, had hosted the city’s first International Exhibition. (Illustration 5) It needed massive extensions to show the ever-

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197 Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, *Official Record*, p.179.


201 Willis, Elizabeth, ‘Souvenirs from the Great Exhibition’, p.5.


203 Indeed, the critical *Bulletin* parodied it solely as an advertising forum. See *The Bulletin*, 18 August 1888, p.8.


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
accumulating ‘economic picture of the whole world illustrated by objective examples’.

(Illustration 6) Thirty-eight countries of the ‘civilised world’ participated, collectively exhibiting 60,000 items. The Exhibition’s modus operandi was an elaborate competitive award system, which significantly boosted the commercial prospects of winners. It was the diplomatic face of the fierce trading competitiveness underlying the Exhibition. Twenty-thousand of the 60,000 items were entered competitively, in twelve main groups and ninety-two sub-classes of exhibit, including the pure arts, education, applied arts and manufactured products, machinery, manufacturing materials and processes, primary resources, industries and products and public works and services, while the remaining 40,000 exhibits were non-competitive.

But the Exhibition was more than a trading forum. The Age noted the necessary nexus between evolution and trade in the Exhibition, commenting that ‘commercial prosperity and human progress appear to be marching onwards hand in hand’. Boosters saw the Exhibition as a unique opportunity to deliver object lessons to both international and local audiences about the colony’s evolution in order to establish its contemporary desirability and maturity. The colony’s contemporary status and future depended on the particularity and extent of its historicity. Trade was the end, and the Exhibition was the symbolic means. International Exhibitions aimed to symbolise a world order, in which temporal arguments were fundamental.

The Exhibition had a wide local audience, most obviously incorporating women and children, and the forum offered a unique and spectacular opportunity to symbolise a world order for a general population in the hope of gaining broad commitment to that

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208 Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, Official Record, p.57.
209 As above, p.337.
210 It is in this context that Graeme Davison cautions against over-estimating trade as a motive for participation in ‘Exhibitions’, p.5.
211 The Age, 1 August 1888, p.4.
212 Davison, Graeme, ‘Exhibitions’, p.5.
Illustration 6
Plan of the Exhibition Buildings
Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888
Courtesy Museum of Victoria
order. Indeed, Eileen Hooper-Greenhill argues with regard to associated institutions of object lessons that ‘state campaigns’ attempted to ‘transform the population into a useful resource for the state...without people being aware of it’,\(^\text{213}\) evoking a Marxist false consciousness of sorts, a problem to which we will return. Regardless, object lessons needed to work symbolically, rather than in the literal sense of the exhibition circuit’s methodological origins.\(^\text{214}\) Their effectiveness relied on the idea of self-governance, as elaborated by Tony Bennett.

The membership of the Exhibition’s management encapsulated the 1880s generation of Melbourne boosters, and the intensity with which positions were sought reflected the Exhibition’s place as a pivotal, comprehensive meeting-point between government, educationalists, trade and commercial interests and institutions of order and evolution.\(^\text{215}\) Ultimately, 276 men became Exhibition Commissioners,\(^\text{216}\) while the elite sixteen-member Executive included the President of the Legislative Council, the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Victoria’s Chief Justice, Melbourne’s Mayor, and the heads of peak bodies of manufacturing, commerce and the organised labour movement, amongst others.\(^\text{217}\) The Exhibition Commission collaborated with a London Committee of nineteen men with Victorian connections\(^\text{218}\) to arrange the Exhibition in an imperial


\(^{214}\) The materialist methodology of the international exhibitions had originated in the object lessons of the regional workers’ protective and self-improvement societies in Britain’s new industrial economy of the 1820s and 1830s. Bennett, Tony, *Birth of the Museum*, pp.81-2; Davison, Graeme, ‘Exhibitions’, pp.6-7. There was still some literal reminder of the methodological origins in the 1888 Centennial Exhibition. The Exhibition Commissioners stated, ‘More information can be acquired from practical illustrations...than from the most laborious book reading, because they leave a picture on the mind, and do not burden the memory only with hard, dry facts. The dead machinery had less attraction to the general public, but was full of interest to the mechanic’. Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, *Official Record*, p.210.

\(^{215}\) There was acrimonious public jostling for membership on the Executive Commission. VPRS 3992/P, Unit 261, Chief Secretary’s Office, Inwards Correspondence, J4870, Extract from *The Argus*, 14 October 1887 in Correspondence regarding Commissioners Deputation to Premier, 1887-1888.

\(^{216}\) Executive Commissioners for the Centennial International Exhibition of 1888, Report, *VPP*, p.6. This was too many in the opinion of some people. See Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, *Official Record*, p.339.

\(^{217}\) As above, p.1.

\(^{218}\) As above, p.132; Dugan, Dennis, ‘Victoria’s Largest Exhibition’, p.4.
‘family’ scheme\textsuperscript{219} of national and colonial Courts.\textsuperscript{220} The spatial lay-out indicated the Commissioners’ world order: the imperial world’s two most powerful traders, Germany and Britain, had the largest Courts, while the USA and France were also well-represented. Australia’s Courts were organised by colony; Victoria’s was the largest, followed by NSW. (Illustration 7)

The world’s spatial order was reinforced iconographically on the Dome interior, the Exhibition Building’s architectural centrepiece.\textsuperscript{221} The mural decorations were arranged vertically, beginning with the top of the gold Dome symbolising ‘the riches and glory of the British Empire’, beneath which allegorical female figures represented Truth, Justice, Morning and Night. Underneath, shields bore ‘the four main divisions of Empire’ while female figures symbolised the seasons. Next, ‘all the arts and manufactures’, ‘Commerce, Science, Art, Music, Architecture, Sculpture, Manufactures, Industry, Pottery, and History’ were represented, below which bronze reliefs of ‘Australia’s pioneers and explorers—Cook, Phillip, Flinders, Tasman, Bass and others’ featured. A female figure, Victoria, ‘Welcomes all Nations’, the semiotics of each national figure depicting how far each of them ‘had ascended in the scale of modern civilization’.\textsuperscript{222} Finally, the female figure of Literature was supported by the female figure of Fame.

This imperially-defined and classified outline of the ‘civilised’, predominantly Christian world, underwritten by a narrative of progress, was counterpoised against ‘object peoples’ and their alternative systems of time and space. Trade, sciences and the arts represented the inextricability of new and old—modern industrial economies and scientific disciplines, including the growth in industrial and military outputs, the ‘science of Man’, division of the sexes into apparently ‘natural’ spheres of operation, and the classification and subjugation of the natural world, were enabled by evolution. The arts contained implicit and explicit temporal narratives. At a general level they

\textsuperscript{219} Davison, Graeme, ‘Exhibitions’, p.5; Bennett, Tony, Birth of the Museum, pp.75-88.

\textsuperscript{220} Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, Official Record, p.54. The physical spaces in the Exhibition were generally referred to as Courts in formal descriptions, and as Galleries in less formal descriptions.

\textsuperscript{221} As above, pp.146-7. See also Davison, Graeme, ‘Exhibitions’, pp.13-14; Cornell, Joan M., ‘Interior Decoration and Aesthetic Styles’ in David Dunstan, Victorian Icon, pp.72-4.

\textsuperscript{222} Davison, Graeme, ‘Exhibitions’, p.14.
Illustration 7
Centennial International Exhibition, 1888
Ground Plan of Permanent Buildings and Annexes
Courtesy Museum of Victoria
distinguished the evolution of civilised taste, defined according to the racial and geopolitical contexts of its origins and its antiquity. The arts also offered object lessons in specific histories. The spectacular culmination of the evolution of the arts and sciences was the technology and materialism of the Exhibition itself.

As a ‘showcase of industrial society’, the Exhibition was remarkable in many ways: its sheer size and the number of objects packed within it spoke literally of commodity fetishism. But the Commissioners were not convinced that ‘the educational factor’ alone would seduce visitors: Victoria, Great Britain, Germany and the USA developed ‘Machinery in Motion’ Courts in order to ‘excite public interest’, producing a stunning theatrical courtesy to the power of technological innovation and attracting very large crowds. The Exhibition infrastructure itself pointed to technological progress as the pinnacle of industrial and artistic evolution: the building was lit electrically, internally and externally, and night-time visitors to the Exhibition met the sight with awe. The medium was the message, and newness in technical application of science demonstrated progress per se.

A major ‘cultural program’ was a highlight of the 1888 Exhibition, with boosters positing it as proof of the colony’s continued growth towards a more tasteful and erudite civilisation, as it were. The cultural program imported imperial music and art on an unprecedented scale. Contemporary novelist Ada Cambridge, who used the Exhibition in her novels, illustrated its impressiveness when her character Patricia Kinnaird sighed, ‘[S]ome people could never have enough of the music and pictures—never!’ Boosters had serious instructional intentions with the cultural program, and while temporal discourse underlay the whole of the Exhibition, it was in the arts that civilised

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223 Like Chris Healy in a related ‘exhibitionary’ context, ‘Histories and Collecting’, pp.36,50, several writers evoke both Marx and Freud when they comment on the necessity for ‘fetishisation’ of objects, in order to turn them into objects of desire. Davison, Graeme, ‘Exhibitions’, p.7; Bennett, Tony, Birth of the Museum, p.81.
224 Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, Official Record, p.175.
taste was explicitly equated with imperial culture and antiquity, and where specific historical themes and actors were most evident.

The Exhibition Commissioners also included more ‘trivial’ ‘amusements’ and ‘sideshow’, on the grounds ‘that the great majority came simply to be amused’. These included a fernery, an aquarium, a fisheries court and a switchback railway ride. It was as much a ‘fair’ or a ‘show’, as an exhibition. Bennett argues that the International Exhibitions provided a temporal, conceptual and methodological ‘zone of interaction’ between the popular culture of the eighteenth-century fair and the rationality of the modern disciplinary museum in the late nineteenth century. The message, to paraphrase Robert Rydell, was that imperial industrial capitalism could be fun.

Indeed, visitors were mesmerised with the result. For Ada Cambridge’s ‘Three Miss Kings’, it was:

an enchanted palace of delights...a storehouse of genuine samples of the treasures of that great world which they had never seen, [and it] laid hold of them with a grip that left a lasting impression.

Visitors could seek refreshments, including, for men, the popular German drinking court, (Illustration 8) and dining rooms, where women felt comfortable in numbers, although if they ate on their own, they feared they might be seen as ‘improper’. The leisured classes held ‘daily symposium[s]’ at the Exhibition, and wealthy country people ‘booked rooms’ in the city, in order to ‘do’ the Exhibition over several weeks.

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229 At times the Exhibition was described in these terms, as well as a ‘museum’, underlining both its carnival and disciplinary approaches. For use of the term ‘museum’ see VPRS 1095, Unit 28, Governor’s Office, Governor’s Special Files, Melbourne Exhibition 1888, Governor’s Speech at Opening of Exhibition, 1 August 1888. The other terms are cited in contemporary quotes in the chapter.
230 Bennett, Tony, Birth of the Museum, pp.5,83.
231 Rydell, Robert, World of Fairs, p.22.
233 Cambridge, Ada, A Woman’s Friendship, p.111.
234 As above, p.9.
235 As above.
Illustration 8
The German Beer Court, Melbourne Centennial International Exhibition, 1888
Courtesy La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria
Contemporary commentators remarked on visitors' social diversity. The public's enthusiastic embrace of the Exhibition signalled their sense of themselves as actors in one of Melbourne's most historic moments; that they were indeed participating in the future's past, as it were. With its international audience, its unprecedented methodologies, its complementary emphases on the novel and the antique, and its bringing together of the whole material world, the interplay between the present, past and future was nowhere more evident than at the Exhibition.

**Colonial Australia at the 1888 Centennial International Exhibition**

We now turn our attention to the articulation of colonial Australia's history in the Exhibition. Melbourne's presumption in holding an Exhibition that commemorated another colony's founding brought to the surface the considerable tensions in the inter-colonial relationship. As both colonies felt increasing economic strain, Victoria's continued dependence on tariff protection to maintain its status as Australia's 'manufacturing heartland' increasingly irked NSW, which had a free trade policy. NSW found it all the more galling because the Exhibition was supposedly 'devoted to the ideals of free trade'. The symbolic ownership of the Exhibition's commemorative moment, and thus the 'oldest chapter' of Australian history, became a major diplomatic arena in which questions of legitimacy, precedence and equality between the two colonies were contested.

The main question for respective colonial boosters was whether the establishment of the penal colony of NSW under Captain Arthur Phillip was the beginning of NSW's history, or of Australia's history. On the one hand, Victorian Commissioners acceded that NSW owned the moment. They described the origins of the idea of the Exhibition in NSW as 'natural'; and assured their NSW counterparts that they had been 'deeply sensible' of the Exhibition's commemorative event. They had 'endeavoured in every way to do honour to the Representatives of that Colony', allowing them to 'occupy

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236 Willis, Elizabeth, 'Souvenirs from the Great Exhibition', p.5.
the place of honour at all public ceremonies. NSW was given first choice of location in the building, and had the fourth biggest court. But Victoria’s was bigger, indicating the rightful status of both colonies. The Governor of Victoria, Henry Loch, treading a fine line between placation and assertion in his opening speech, arguing that regardless of the site of the Exhibition, ‘it is one in which all the Colonies may take an equal pride, as it is purely Australasian in its inception and in its representative character’.

Indeed, the rhetorical imperative of the Exhibition was consensus, and many argued that the Exhibition itself represented an important moment of national unity at a point when significant mechanisms had been put in place to enact Federation. Sir James McBain, President of the Exhibition Commission, explained that the Exhibition offered:

an opportunity to all the colonies of Australasia of combining their efforts to do honour to the mother colony by assisting in the celebration of her centenary, to demonstrate their progress in the arts and industries of life, to the sentiment of Australasian federation, and generally to exhibit the varied resources of this great country.

The NSW Commissioner and President concurred with these sentiments in their opening addresses.

But in the Exhibition itself, consensus was not quite the imperative it was on the diplomatic stage. Mr R. Burdett Smith, the NSW Court’s Executive Commissioner, was determined to give the ‘mother Colony’ its rightful historical presence. It was only NSW’s ‘uns selfish and liberal spirit’ that enabled it to endorse the Exhibition being held in Melbourne. He commissioned three exhibits ‘on account of their intimate association with the first chapters of Australian History’. There was a ‘colossal bust’ of

240 Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, Official Record, p.134.
241 As above.
243 VPRS 1095, Unit 28, Governor’s Office, Governor’s Special Files, Melbourne Exhibition 1888.
244 Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, Official Record, p.204.
the ‘Illustrious Navigator’, Captain James Cook, (Illustration 9) ‘a tableau representing the scene of the landing of Captain Cook at Botany Bay’, and ‘a model in relief, to scale, of the Harbour of Port Jackson, the entrance only of which Captain Cook was fated to see’.246 (Illustration 10) These displays, known popularly as Cook’s rooms, became ‘objects of special study to every visitor’.247 The primacy of NSW’s claim to the first chapter of Australian history was evident in the pure ostentation of the display itself.

There was, however, a complete absence of narrative of the centenary event. Cook’s rooms heralded a consistent historical emphasis on Captain Cook’s imperial possession of the continent rather than the founding of the convict colony by Captain Arthur Phillip in 1788.248 (Illustration 11) On this matter, there was agreement across colonial, and indeed, national borders, as to which moments of Australian history could be publicly aired. It reflected a profound and deliberate national historical silence which had developed over the previous few decades.249 For history-makers the romanticism and moral legitimacy of the founders of the Australasian colonies depended on their possession of certain biographical qualities, including abiding by the law. If NSW’s officials had acknowledged the establishment of a penal colony for which the Exhibition was a commemoration, it may have defeated their purpose of claiming legitimacy and precedence through history. (Illustration 12)

Meanwhile, Victoria’s Exhibition officials were also suppressing that part of their history associated with criminality. Ned Kelly was a notorious Victorian bushranger who with his gang had murdered police. In 1880 Supreme Court judge Sir Redmond Barry sentenced him to hang, and from that point authorities had been concerned that public display of his unusual protective armour, made from plough shares, would

247 The Age Exhibition Supplement, 28 August 1888, p.3.
248 Dugan, Denis, ‘Victoria’s Largest Exhibition’, p.9; Dunstan, David, Victorian Icon, p.198.
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
encourage ‘disgusting Kelly-heroism’.

In November 1888 the Exhibition Commission requested to borrow Ned Kelly’s armour from the Police Department to exhibit in the Armaments Court, another special Exhibition feature which displayed the military strength of Britain and its dominions. A week later, however, the Commission ‘decided that it would not be advisable to exhibit it’.

Both its contemplated inclusion and the reversal of the decision raise many questions. Why, at one stage, did the Commission feel comfortable with displaying the armour? Did its proposed inclusion in the Armaments Court potentially ‘de-politicise’ it? That is, would its classification as an extremely unusual set of armour help dissociate it from its social context? But then did its associations yet make it too politically problematical for public commemoration? After greater deliberation, was it deemed too disrespectful to the memory of Ned Kelly’s sentencing judge, who had been integrally involved in all Victoria’s earlier exhibitions, and who therefore represented a direct forebear of the current Exhibition Commissioners? Redmond Barry was one of their own, and he had died only eight years earlier, days after Ned Kelly was hanged. Whatever the case, both Victoria and NSW were conscious that historical obliteration was as important as remembrance of parts of the past in order to maintain legitimacy.

At the Exhibition’s close, the symbolic terrain of history had failed to resolve the inter-colonial relationship, and the jostling continued over the disposal of the Cook exhibits. The Victorian Commissioners procured from the NSW Commission, *inter alia*, the three exhibits in order to set up a permanent historical display at the Exhibition Buildings. *The Age* reported on the speeches during the hand-over ceremony:

251 Executive Commissioners of the Centennial International Exhibition, *Official Record*, p.660
252 VPRS 3992/P, Unit 390, Chief-Secretary’s Office, Inwards Correspondence, File L11477. Correspondence between the Exhibition Commission and the Police Department regarding the loan of Ned Kelly’s armour, November 1888.
253 See footnote 63.
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