

# Provenance 2005

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Public Record  
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# About Provenance

## The journal of Public Record Office Victoria

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The purpose of *Provenance* is to foster access to PROV's archival holdings and broaden its relevance to the wider Victorian community.

The records held by PROV contain a wealth of information regarding Victorian people, places, communities, events, policies, institutions, infrastructure, governance, and law. *Provenance* provides a forum for scholarly publication drawing on the full diversity of these records.

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Please direct any queries, comments and submissions regarding *Provenance* to the editor, who can be contacted by email at [provenance@prov.vic.gov.au](mailto:provenance@prov.vic.gov.au) or by telephone on (03) 9348 5600, or post to:

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*Provenance* journal publishes peer-reviewed articles, as well as other written contributions, that contain research drawing on records in PROV's holdings.

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- the peak bodies of PROV's major user and stakeholder groups;
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# Editorial

## Provenance 2005

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Welcome to the 2005 issue of *Provenance*, the journal of Public Record Office Victoria. Issue number 4 contains three articles, each drawing on the rich sources of Victorian history that can be found in PROV's holdings. In quite different ways, these articles demonstrate how records can furnish the raw materials for reviewing or contesting our collective memory.

Focusing on the possum-skin trade in early colonial Victoria, Fred Cahir argues for a significant revision in our understanding of the ways in which Aboriginal people responded to the new economy the Europeans brought with them. The records of the Aboriginal Protectorate and other official documents, as well as personal letters and diaries, reveal that a cultural relationship between these very different communities developed through trade. Cahir presents a strong case for further historical research into the records of these early encounters, which are some of the earliest records that PROV holds. He also suggests that a careful re-reading of the public record regarding Aboriginal people is needed. Researchers need to be aware that Europeans reporting on their trade (and other) relations with Aboriginal people tended to diminish the latter's capacity to grapple with the ways of colonial society. Cahir's article is part of a recent trend in historical research investigating how Aboriginal people exercised their agency and pursued their own interests within the limited range of options that colonization permitted them.

The Catholic community is the focus of Jill Barnard's article on the development of orphanages in Victoria in the nineteenth century. There was deep concern felt by Catholics that the faith and welfare of their children would not be properly catered for under the arrangements provided by the Protestant churches or the government, and this led them to establish their own institutions. The article also explores the links between the higher proportion of Catholic children in orphanages and the greater share of poverty and hardship that the Catholic community experienced in early Victoria. In addition, the article provides a fascinating glimpse into the highly circumscribed and austere lives of Catholic orphans in the nineteenth century that resulted from the eagerness of Catholic Religious to provide thorough discipline for their charges.

Writing on a more contemporary topic, Louise Blake's article examines the history of the Regent Theatre and the campaign to save it from demolition and developers, a battle which culminated in the 1970s with the passing of legislation by the Hamer government. Blake documents the struggle of a committed group of campaigners and the strategies they employed to change both common and expert understandings of the heritage value of buildings. The article shows how records can be used to tell stories such as this one, in which a grass-roots movement was able to change social outcomes.

Issue number 4 of *Provenance* is the first issue that I have been responsible for as editor. It is our intention at PROV to expand future issues of the journal to include case studies and popular articles in addition to the more scholarly papers that are peer-reviewed. We hope that you enjoy the current issue of *Provenance* and look forward to receiving your contributions.

**Sebastian Gurciullo**  
Editor

# Refereed articles



# Dallong – Possum Skin Rugs

## A Study of an Inter-Cultural Trade Item in Victoria

Fred Cahir

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‘Dallong – Possum Skin Rugs: A Study of an Inter-Cultural Trade Item in Victoria’, *The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 4, 2005. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Fred Cahir.

This article has been peer reviewed.

Fred Cahir is a PhD candidate and Eco-Tourism teacher at the University of Ballarat. His previous publications and MA thesis have centred on the history of inter-racial relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of Central Highlands Victoria in the colonial period. His PhD thesis focuses on the role of Aboriginal people on the goldfields of Victoria between 1850 and 1900. His industry partner is Sovereign Hill Museum and Parks Association.

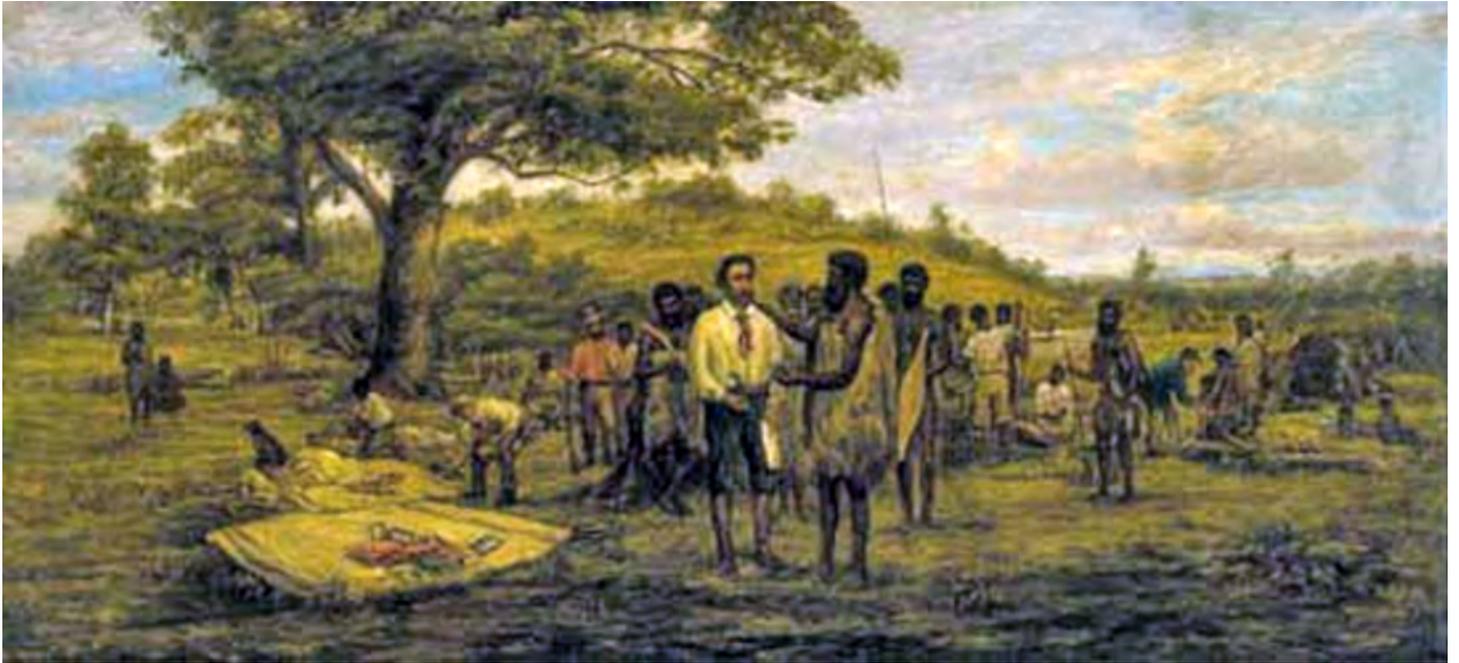
### Abstract

**The purpose of this article is to describe and understand the ethno-historical evidence for inter-cultural exchange, specifically in possum skins, that existed between some Indigenous groups and the non-Indigenous colonists of Victoria between 1835 and 1900.**

### Introduction<sup>[1]</sup>

In June 1835 John Batman, popularly acknowledged as the founder of Melbourne, recorded one of the first times that possum skin cloaks were traded by the Aboriginal people of Victoria with the European arrivals. Before he held the formal treaty meeting with the Woiwurrung clan heads near present-day Melbourne to purchase a tract of their country, Batman had distributed gifts including blankets, beads and knives. After the meeting he wrote in his journal: ‘the chiefs, to manifest their friendly feeling towards me, insisted upon my receiving from them two native cloaks and several baskets made by the women, and also some of the implements of defence’.<sup>[2]</sup> For the remainder of the nineteenth century these indigenous cloaks or rugs were clearly sought after by the white settlers.

The extent of inter-cultural exchange in colonial Victoria, whether between individuals or between groups, has received scant attention until now. Noted anthropologist WEH Stanner believed that systems of inter-tribal barter were widespread across Australia, while acknowledging that they had been ‘inadequately studied’.<sup>[3]</sup> Most of the ethnographic research on Aboriginal exchange models in northern Australia has been carried out by Stanner, Donald Thomson, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt, and focuses primarily on the trade in manufactured valuable goods in terms of inter-tribal networks.<sup>[4]</sup> Further research on pre-colonisation and nineteenth-century Aboriginal economic organisation in Victoria has been carried out largely by Isabel McBryde, whose aims were to establish what was traded, and its context and its significance within Aboriginal communities in the south-east. McBryde has clearly demonstrated that ‘Diversity and pervasiveness characterise exchange in the life of the Aboriginal societies of south-eastern Australia as revealed in the historical records of contact’.<sup>[5]</sup> But what do we know about trade between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this period?



John Wesley Burtt, *Batman's treaty with the aborigines at Merri Creek*, 6th June 1835, 1875, oil on canvas, painted wood. La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Discussions about the continuation of 'payment in kind' in colonial Victoria in this context are too often limited to the occasional use of Aboriginal labour and sexual services.[6] At the same time, considerations of the inter-cultural exchange of goods are usually constrained by defining exchange solely in terms of consumable material items. Moreover, historians have generally overlooked the existing historical record of widespread and significant inter-cultural trade and applied a nineteenth-century filter when discussing 'economic activity' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.[7] That is to say, the vocabulary used by historians to describe the role of Aboriginal people in the economic life of colonial Victoria tends to perpetuate the distortions of nineteenth-century chroniclers, who merely contrasted 'transactions appropriate to the savage with those of civilised society'. [8] Some historians have assumed, incorrectly in my view, that Western-style economic transactions were a bewildering phenomenon for the Aboriginal people, or that the white colonists were not interested in the material culture offered by Indigenous people.[9] Others infer this by their failure to deal with it.

This paper focuses on the ethno-historical evidence for inter-cultural exchange, specifically in possum skins, that existed between certain Indigenous peoples and the white colonists of Victoria between 1835 and 1900. It has two main aims:

1. To survey the processes and contexts involved in the exchange of possum skins, and to demonstrate the degree to which Indigenous 'natural economies' articulated with capitalist economies in nineteenth-century Victoria.
2. To confirm manufactured products derived from possum skin as the pre-eminent inter-cultural trade item in Victoria in the nineteenth century.

In terms of the reconstruction of Aboriginal people's place, role and contribution within labour and economic sectoral histories in Victoria, the practice of historians has perhaps been naïve, and their discourse has gone largely unexamined. An empiricist methodology has been adopted in this paper and consequently a close examination of a large number of oral, visual and tactile sources has been undertaken in order to study the dynamics of inter-cultural trade and the extent to which it occurred. I also hope to provide a micro-revisionist narrative which evokes multiple voices, different angles of vision and diverse disciplinary frameworks.

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## Thousands of Skins for Sale

Possum skins and their various uses are referred to extensively in the ethno-historical records, but there has been little discussion of their considerable economic importance to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Whilst numerous writers and historians have discussed in general terms the importance of inter-tribal trade, and some have examined the role of specific items such as greenstone axes in the Aboriginal economy,[10] few studies have looked closely at the trade in possum skins in particular.[11]

The ethnographic sources suggest that tribes were normally linked together in some kind of complex exchange system. McBryde however emphasises the social, political and judicial nature of large inter-tribal gatherings, which were a prominent feature of Aboriginal societies in Victoria, and argues that meetings held primarily for exchange 'seem to be rare'.[12] Nonetheless a number of notable occasions were recorded by whites in which inter-group exchanges did not appear to have been performed in the shadow of more impressive (ceremonial) events.[13]

The considerable range of ceremonial as well as purely utilitarian goods that were derived from possum skins demonstrates the importance of this commodity to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Indeed, its significance as a material cultural item may be gauged from the many diverse purposes it was used for, both before and after European contact. A list of uses would include sleeping rugs, cloaks, musical (percussion) instruments, spiritual amulets, ornamentation, handles for tools, footballs, medicines, pouches for tools, housing, water bags, baby carriers, yarn, initiation dress, and burial shrouds for deceased clans people.[14]

Trading networks between the Aboriginal people of Victoria and the predominantly British colonists prior to pastoralism in 1835 are well documented. Indeed the recorded instances of inter-cultural trade (often initiated by Aboriginal people) are numerous.[15] The context of these bilateral transactions may have had as much to do with peace-keeping overtures, cementing a new trade network and intense curiosity about exotic goods as they had with the simple exchange of valued goods for valued goods. William Buckley, an escaped convict from a short-lived British penal settlement at Sorrento, Victoria, in December 1803, recounted being the unwilling recipient of an inter-cultural exchange offer, somewhere on the Bellarine Peninsula. Three unidentified Wathawurrung men of the Bengallat Bulluk clan, after rescuing Buckley from perishing, requested that he give his stocking to them 'as an assurance offering'. Buckley steadfastly refused to comply and was left unmolested.

Some time later he was accepted into the Bengallat Bulluk clan near Indented Head and described how exchange in Aboriginal societies involved more than just economics:

That night there was another great Corroberree, with shakes of the hand, and congratulations at my return. When these ceremonies were over, I went with my new relations to their hut, where they regaled me with roots, and gum, and with opossum roasted after their fashion ... They presented me also with an opossum-skin rug, for which I gave my new sister-in-law my old jacket in exchange...[16]

The diverse and complex patterns of Indigenous production and exchange served both symbolic and concrete functions, and this was also observed in the ways in which Aboriginal people approached inter-cultural trade. Indeed, at times the economic aspects of the exchange seem to have been secondary to the social function of establishing a relationship with the Europeans, in both the pre-pastoral and pastoral periods.[17]

From the outset of British colonisation in the Port Phillip region in 1835 there were attempts to open up formal trading networks with the Indigenous people. Squatters from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), who had occupied land around Indented Head (on the Bellarine Peninsula), sought to employ local people in making baskets.[18] Members of the Port Phillip Association hoped that if a significant bilateral business relationship could be established, then inter-racial relations would be more conciliatory at Port Phillip than they had been in Van Diemen's Land. At the same time, it appears that the colonists' trade in possum skins and other Indigenous manufactures was not solely to establish and cement rapport. The Europeans greatly admired the ease with which Aboriginal people procured the possum skins[19] as well as the aesthetic nobility the possum skin cloaks afforded the wearer. They also acknowledged the outstanding qualities of the possum skin rugs. William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines in the Western Port District, saw many Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung people 'dressed comfortably' in possum skin rugs, giving them a 'majestic appearance'.[20] Newspaper reports also confirmed Thomas's view. The *Illustrated London News* described the manufacture of 'very warm and beautiful cloaks of opossum skin, which they wear with the hair side inwards, the other side ornamented with geometrical patterns drawn with wonderful accuracy'. [21]

Moreover, many white people rapidly developed a keen appreciation of the usefulness of possum skins. Official reports and personal correspondence describe the colonists using possum skins for a range of different purposes, most of them mimicking the traditional uses. Edward Curr, a young squatter at Port Phillip in 1841, wrote of a typical overseer's hut having an 'opossum-rug' spread over the bed.[22] In January 1838 Matthew Tomkin, a mounted police constable, was murdered near Mt Macedon (north-west of Melbourne). Tomkin's friends 'buried him, having wrapped him up in an opossum rug'. [23] Katherine Kirkland, one of the first white women in the Ballarat district, described how she hung her baby at her side in a basket as she had seen the local Wathawurrung women do.[24] On some occasions the settlers made innovative adaptations of the possum skins traded to them. A number fashioned fur-lined caps and jackets for themselves,[25] whilst others made pocket books out of 'opossum skin'.[26]

The demand by pastoralists and their servants for possum skins and especially possum skin rugs was widespread. So popular were the latter that a small number of white entrepreneurs established a lucrative trade in the skins. GA Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District, observed how a number of pastoralists and merchants in Melbourne and the 'settled districts' had become wealthy from the considerable inter-cultural trade in artefacts, possum skins and lyrebird tails.

The natives state that white men in the country and residents in Melbourne supply them principally for the purpose of shooting bullen-bullen ie native pheasants and squirrels, the skin of the latter and lyre tails of the former being given as an equivalent for the use of guns and ammunition. These skins and tails are I understand of valuable consideration and have by some been turned to very profitable account.[27]

Robinson also noted the considerable trade in possum skins in the Goulburn district. In November 1842 he recorded that George Bertram, an overseer at the Goulburn Aboriginal Protectorate, profited by trading in possum skins in large quantities and that 'sometimes the skins were made into cloaks'. [28]

It is infinitely harder at this distance to determine exactly why Indigenous people entered into this venture with the colonists, but the acquisition of guns, the lure of exotic foods and a societal emphasis on maintaining kin relationships are some of the probable incentives for their active participation in inter-cultural trade. It is also extremely difficult to determine who was instigating and institutionalising the trade, though a number of first-hand reports clearly point towards Indigenous people making the first approach. Very little discussion

has focused on the role of money in the early period of acculturation at Port Phillip, which is surprising given the significant number of Aboriginal people described in the historical records as receiving money in exchange for goods.[29]

Possibly the first record of the sale of possums in Victoria comes from the Melbourne area. John Pascoe Fawkner, the first European to occupy land in the vicinity, recorded in February 1836:

Mr Henry Batman sent blacks out to get parrots, got [William] Buckley to abuse William Watkins for buying squirrel skins for me and I find him forbidding the natives to sell us any skins or birds. He wants them all himself. [30]

Several months later Fawkner repeated his complaints about Batman trying to gain exclusive rights to the possum skin trade: 'both Buckley and himself [Henry Batman] ordered the blacks not to sell us any squirrels or baskets'. [31] It is of interest that Fawkner used the terms 'buy' and 'sell' when discussing locally manufactured items as it suggests a very early use of money in transactions with the Aboriginal people on the Port Phillip frontier.

George Langhorne, a missionary in Port Phillip (1836-39), also noted that a substantial monetary trade was well established in 1838:

A considerable number of the blacks obtain food and clothing for themselves by shooting the Menura pheasant or Bullun-Bullun for the sake of the tails, which they sell to the whites.[32]

Langhorne was convinced that the Kulin people (a confederation of at least five language groups) frequenting Melbourne were intrinsically involved in the colonial monetary system: 'Money they obtain readily in the town in return for the trifling services they perform, and the bakers in Melbourne assure me they are their best customers'. [33] Moreover, one of the reasons Langhorne submitted to the Colonial Secretary to explain the mission's failure was the Kulin people's disdain for charity and their rapid acculturation of the principles of buying and selling. He lamented that on account of the Kulins so readily earning money from a labour-exchange relationship with the Europeans he was unable to attract them to the mission:

The blacks might earn a comfortable subsistence in the town [Melbourne], were it only as hewers of wood and drawers of water, and indeed some few who were constantly working here are now employed in Melbourne, having attached themselves to individuals there from whom they obtain money in part payment for their services. On this account they generally refuse to labour here...[34]

Broome's discussion of the attitudes of Aboriginal workers in south-eastern Australia to the workplace has emphasised the importance of reciprocity, yet Broome acknowledges the opportunity taken by some Aboriginal people to actively engage in the job market for financial gain.[35] Thematic and regional research by Clark and Fels also reveals a small but significant number of Aboriginal people exchanging their labour for money.[36] By 1844 the trade in possum skins was so lucrative that large volumes of skins were now being offered for sale to white settlers.[37] Assistant Protector of Aborigines Thomas reported that he had been canvassed by the Aboriginal people to the north of his district: 'Loddon blacks arrive, bringing in some thousands of skins for sale'.[38] Similarly, Dr James Horsburgh, the medical officer at the Goulburn Protectorate Station (1846-53) noted that the 'natives also obtain both money and food for opossum skins, about 2 [sterling] pounds of the former article being laid out in my presence to hawkers'. [39] The rapidity with which the Aboriginal people of Port Phillip entered into monetary commerce is a subject worthy of more attention by historians.

As the squatters penetrated beyond the Melbourne and Geelong regions, the inter-cultural trade continued unabated, though not always using money as a medium. [40] George Gilbert, a bullock driver in the Goulburn district, witnessed 'large quantities of skins' being procured from the Aboriginal people in exchange for flour.[41] EB Addis, Commissioner of Crown Lands (Port Phillip District, 1836) considered that the 'Barrabool tribe' [Wathawurrung] was attracted to the Geelong township chiefly because of the ease with which they were able to trade possum skins and lyrebird tails for the new foodstuffs:

... the town of Geelong attracts them greatly, partly from curiosity and otherwise by the facility they procure offal meat from the sheep and cattle killed at the butcheries, and rice, flour or sugar, in exchange for birds and skins... [42]

Assistant Protector Thomas recorded in May 1840 that the people in his Western Port District were eager to work on the station and to exchange 'Aboriginal manufactures' for food rations.[43] Aboriginal hawkers also became a regular sight for the squatters and their pastoral workers. Katherine Kirkland, a 'lady' pastoralist in central Victoria (Trawalla) regarded these trade encounters as one of the pleasures of bush life:

Occasional adventures with the savage aborigines streak the homeliness of the picture with something like the hues of romance ... We sometimes got some skins of the opossum and flying squirrel, or tuan, from the natives. It was a good excuse for them to come to the station. I paid them with a piece of dress, and they were very fond of getting a red pocket handkerchief to tie round their necks.[44]

James Nealer, a shepherd employed by Thomas Learmonth at Buninyong (15 kilometres south-east of Ballarat) reported that a group of Wathawurrung had tried to hawk some possum skins in exchange for a sheep: 'On the 25th of July [1838] four natives came to [me and] my flock of sheep and wanted one, offering some squirrel skins'.[45] GF Read, a pastoralist also at Buninyong, was the subject of an earlier business visit in April 1838: 'A great many natives came here today and exchanged skins for flour'.[46] The rate of exchange on the inter-cultural network varied, but Charles Griffiths, a pastoralist near Ballan (60 kilometres west of Melbourne) reported on one occasion that two unidentified Wathawurrung men received flour and sugar for a kangaroo tail and skin, and on another occasion noted that he was busy tanning 'a number of opossum skins and touan skins, the latter is the flying squirrel ... which we have got from the natives in exchange for flour'.[47] In March 1845, John Cotton, a squatter on the Goulburn River, west of present-day Yea, had adopted a similar trade and exchange rate:

... they know very well that we never give anything unless we receive something in return, so they generally come provided with opossum skins, for which we give them rice, sugar, bread or anything of the sort that we can spare; they generally prefer rice and tobacco.[48]

Clark posits that the trading of Aboriginal manufactures such as baskets, skins (kangaroo and possum) and buckets was common and that Chief Protector Robinson frequently obtained such items for his own collection or sold them on to George Lilley, a produce merchant in Melbourne who also had a stall at the Melbourne market.[49]

## Trading on the Goldfields

According to Clark, Aboriginal people moved quickly to 'grasp the economic opportunities presented to them by the miners flooding to the Central Victorian gold diggings' in the 1850s.[50] The influx of prospectors and subsequent social upheaval led to significant changes in the pastoral economy. Walter Bridges, a miner at Buninyong near Ballarat in 1855, described how a local clan of Wathawurrung people carrying possum skin rugs approached his wife and made a request, framed within the ties of reciprocity of neighbours, for some steel needles and thread: 'So up they come yabbering good day Missie You my country woman now. My Mother had to be spokesman the Blacks said You gotum needle Missie you gottum thread...! [51] It seems likely that the demand for Western means of sewing their rugs stemmed from the high volume of possum skin rugs being sold on the goldfields.

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It is clear that many diggers engaged in trade with Aboriginal people to obtain these much valued items. JF Hughes, a Castlemaine pioneer, described how possum skin and kangaroo skin rugs were 'sold to settlers and lucky gold diggers at five pounds a-piece'.<sup>[52]</sup> Miner James Arnot bought a possum rug in Melbourne made of 72 skins sewn together with sinews, also for 5 pounds sterling.<sup>[53]</sup> Aboriginal people from the Mitta Mitta and the Little River districts, to the east of the Ovens goldfield, paid regular visits with possum rugs for sale.<sup>[54]</sup> Miners and others writing in this period have left glowing reports about the benefits of obtaining possum skin rugs from the Aboriginal people. As Annear describes it: 'One rug imparted as much warmth as a dozen blankets and in summer they were stored until colder months returned.'<sup>[55]</sup> George Henry Wathen, a visitor on the Victorian goldfields, also extolled the virtues of possessing a possum rug and acknowledged, if grudgingly, that the settlers considered them to be undoubtedly the most highly valued inter-cultural trade item in Victoria:

... I was soon asleep on the ground, by the fire, under an overbearing banksia, wrapped in the warm folds of my opossum rug. For a night bivouac, there is nothing comparable to the opossum-rug; and it is perhaps the only good thing the white man has borrowed from the blacks.<sup>[56]</sup>

With thousands of miners congregating in towns across Victoria, the volume of trade in possum skins increased exponentially. Frequent references in miners' accounts attest to the acumen of Indigenous people in the colony. Edward Tame, a traveller on the goldfields, noted that the skins of possums 'form good articles of commerce' for the 'Aborigines' he frequently encountered.<sup>[57]</sup> HW Wheelwright confirmed Tame's opinion, writing in the 1850s: 'for of all the coverings in dry cold weather, an opossum-skin rug is the best, as I can well testify'. He recommended that, 'If any blacks are handy, it is best to get them to sew the skins, for a black's rug beats any other'.<sup>[58]</sup> Reports from a number of Aboriginal Station Managers across Victoria describe the lucrative trade being conducted. In December 1870 the manager of the Condah Mission in Western Victoria wrote: 'Some of them earn a little money by making and selling baskets and mats, and occasionally an opossum rug'.<sup>[59]</sup> According to John Green, the manager of Corranderrk, the Aboriginal station in Healesville, the high quality of the rugs, and the speed with which the Aboriginal people could manufacture them, combined with their ready sale, enabled some Indigenous Victorians to achieve a degree of economic independence:

In the course of one week or so they will all be living in huts instead of willams [traditional housing] ; they have also during that time [four months] made as many rugs, which has enabled them to buy boots, hats, coats etc., and some of them has [sic] even bought horses.<sup>[60]</sup>

Similarly, Andrew Porteous, an Honorary Correspondent for the Aborigines in the Ballarat District (1860-77), reported that the demand by Europeans for Indigenous manufactured goods continued to be economically sustainable in 1866, 1867, 1869, 1871 and 1872:

[1866] The tribe still continue to make possum rugs, and, if steady, might make a good living by it, as they generally get 20s. to 30s. for each rug, which they can make in 14 days. The women also employ themselves in making baskets and nets, which they sell to the European.

[1867] They continue to hunt such game as can be found in the district. The opossum is plentiful, and they make rugs with the skins. They sell the opossum rugs, and sometimes offer fish for sale, with the proceeds of which they supply themselves with rations, and sometimes with clothes, such as hats, handkerchiefs, and some of them with boots ... they have been travelling amongst the stations, only a few calling for rations.

[1872] they still fish when fish can be got, and hunt the opossum, and make rugs of the skins. The women continue to make baskets and nets, but unfortunately, they still indulge in intoxicating drink.<sup>[61]</sup>

Newspaper reports both at home and abroad also reveal a strong interest in Indigenous manufactured goods, particularly in possum skin rugs. An 1865 report in the *London Times* noted a request by a Welshman for a possum rug to be made (by Wathawurrung people of the Ballarat district) so he could show his country people what 'the pioneers of the goldfields frequently used to sleep in'.<sup>[62]</sup> A Wathawurrung couple obliged and were paid 30 shillings. In 1861 the *Ballarat Star* carried a satirical article supposedly attributed to 'A Blackfellow' which beseeched the Colonial Government to provide market protection for the Indigenous trade in possum skin rugs:

... You write gov'nor and ask him why protection on the wallaby track looking for grubs 'mong whitefellow? You say whitefellow no make um blankets this colony, blackfellow make 'possum rug, which whitefellow ought to buy 'stead of blanket; possum rug all along same as whitefellow's blankets;- why not give blackfellow monopoly of making and selling 'em and protect real native industry.<sup>[63]</sup>

## Two Sides of the Coin

There was often a fear, certainly after 1860, that the Aboriginal recipients of money might spend it on alcohol. Honorary correspondents such as Andrew Porteous was one who ascribed to this view:

A few of the young men are generally employed on stations, and receive a small remuneration, but all they receive, both for labor and opossum rugs, is spent on intoxicating liquors, and I fear they will not leave off this evil habit unless prohibited from visiting the gold fields and are allowed to settle on some portion of land where they would take an interest in improving it.[64]

Porteous's concern was not isolated. The same issue had been debated during the Aboriginal Protectorate period (1838-50), but reached its zenith during the gold rush. Trade in possum skin rugs, baskets and primary produce, and employment on pastoral stations after 1850 afforded Indigenous people a new degree of economic independence. Damaging social effects, in the form of alcohol abuse and absence of paternal control, were a concern reiterated many times by well-intentioned Correspondents and Guardians.[65] In his June 1871 report Porteous advocated a pass system, as he found the local Wathawurrung people could not be restricted and regulated sufficiently to keep them from their commercial activities in the towns:

The tribe still follow their occupations of fishing, hunting and making of opossum rugs, which they barter for stores, but often for grog. It is almost impossible to keep them from visiting the towns, and yet they have no business to transact in those towns except begging for grog and making themselves liable to be arrested under the Vagrant Act. They have no hunting field nor fishing river within these towns, and if they have anything to sell let them apply to the local guardian for a pass for that day, to be within a town to be named in that pass. Most of the tribe are old and feeble and unable to do any work. The young men are able and willing to work, and some of them can do work as well as any white man, but they are like many of the white men, and would spend every shilling they earn upon grog, if they can possibly get it done.[66]



Eugène von Guérard, *The barter*, 1854, oil on canvas. Collection: Geelong Gallery. Gift of W Max Bell and Norman Belcher, 1923.

It was not only a degree of economic independence that the sale of possum rugs brought to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Eugène von Guérard, a renowned artist on the Victorian goldfields, documented an inter-cultural transaction in 1854. His oil painting, *Aborigines on the road to diggings* or *The barter*, now in the Geelong Gallery, depicts Wathawurrung people offering possum rugs for sale to white miners on their way to the goldfields. What is of particular interest about von Guérard's painting is the centrality of the Wathawurrung men and women. Unlike many artists' depictions of Aboriginal people during the nineteenth century, in which they are peripheral players cast off to the background or figures relegated to the sidelines, von Guérard has focused the activity around confident Aboriginal salespeople who are clearly directing the business at hand. Moreover, the white 'consumer' desiring to purchase the possum rugs is painted in a subservient pose, kneeling down, whilst the Aboriginal 'manufacturer' assumes an upright, dominant demeanour. A number of commentators writing on Aboriginal society in the nineteenth century conceded that the Aboriginal people of Victoria possessed a good deal of business sense.

They barter with their neighbours; and it would seem that as regards the articles in which they deal, barter is as satisfactory to them as sale would be. They are astute in dealing with the whites, and it may be supposed they exercise reasonable forethought and care when bargaining with their neighbours.[67]

## Conclusion

This paper has uncovered a substantial body of evidence that clearly demonstrates that inter-cultural economic activity between white colonists and Aboriginal people in Victoria in the nineteenth century was widespread and that a greater degree of monetary trade existed than was previously thought. Accordingly, it can be argued that new paradigms are required in any discussion about the degree to which Aboriginal economies articulated with the colonial capitalist economy of the nineteenth century.

.....

The implications of further research in this area are significant. If historians aim to include Aboriginal people in Australian history 'on terms of most perfect equality'[68] and to tell the same stories of wool and gold from broader perspectives, then it is necessary to re-appraise the historical sources and see that Indigenous Australians were not outside the landscape in the development of modern economic institutions. More research is needed to determine the extent to which Aboriginal people kept control of the money that passed through their hands, but the evidence thus far would suggest that they very quickly grasped the few economic initiatives available to them and exploited them skilfully – at least until the imposition of Missionary and Governmental controls, especially after the 1880s.

## Endnotes

[1] Charles Griffith, a pastoralist who took Wathawurrung land near present-day Ballan, recorded a glossary of Port Phillip, Corio, Weirabee and Barrabul tribes' lexicon, which included 'flying squirrel: *toan*, opossum: *wollert*, rug: *dallong*'. C Griffith, 'Diary', manuscript, State Library of Victoria, 1840-41.

[2] CP Billot, *John Batman and the founding of Melbourne*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1979, p. 118.

[3] Cited in I McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia: an ethnohistorical study', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 8, nos. 1-2, 1984, pp. 132-53, p. 151.

[4] I McBryde, 'Where do the axes come from?', *Mankind*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1978, pp. 354-82; McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'. There exists excellent academic research on trading relationships in northern Australia, and the scope of this research has been significant. However, the parallels between that research and this paper are limited as the former focuses on a different geographic location and does not examine the processes by which locally manufactured (indigenous) goods were adopted by the dominant culture. For further discussion refer to I McNiven, 'Enmity and amity: reconsidering stone headed club (*gabagaba*) procurement and trade in Torres Strait', *Oceania*, vol. 69, no. 2, 1998, pp. 94-115 and D Russell, 'Aboriginal-Makassan interactions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in northern Australia and contemporary sea rights claims', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 1, 2004, pp. 3-17.

[5] McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia', p. 151.

[6] See I Clark, 'Nineteenth century capitalist expansion and the Aborigines of Western Victoria: a Marxist problematic', Working Paper, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University, 1989.

[7] McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 132.

[9] See R Broome, *Arriving*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney, 1994, p. 32 and W Bate, *Lucky city: the first generation at Ballarat, 1851-1901*, Melbourne University Press, 1978, p. 1.

[10] See P Coutts and R Miller, *The Mt William archeological area*, Victoria Archeological Survey, Melbourne, 1977; McBryde, 'Where do the axes come from?'; H Lourandos, 'Intensification: a Late Pleistocene-Holocene sequence from south-western Victoria', *Archeology in Oceania*, vol. 18, 1983, pp. 81-94; McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'; H Lourandos, 'Swamp managers of southwestern Victoria', in *Australians: a historical library*, vol. 1, *Australians to 1788*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Sydney, 1987.

[11] See F Blacklock, 'Aboriginal skin cloaks', National Quilt Register, 2002, viewed 2 September 2005 at <http://amol.org.au/nqr/fabri.htm>; Anonymous, 'Opossum skin rugs', *Illustrated London News*, 24 April 1852, p. 314; R Wright, 'A modicum of taste: Aboriginal cloaks and rugs', *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Newsletter*, vol. 11, 1979, pp. 51-68; Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement, 'Snug as a bug', *Archaeology Papers*, vol. 11, 1984, pp. 1-8; M Chisholm, 'The use, manufacture and decoration of possum skin cloaks in nineteenth century Victoria', typescript, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] Library, Canberra, 1990; M Lakic, *Women's work: Aboriginal women's artefacts in the Museum of Victoria*, The Museum, Melbourne, 1992.

[12] 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia', p. 140.

[13] See A Howitt, *The native tribes of south-eastern Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1904, pp. 717-18 and McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'.

[14] Blacklock, 'Aboriginal skin cloaks'; Anon., 'Opossum skin rugs'; Howitt, *The native tribes of south-eastern Australia*; C Daley, 'Reminiscences from 1841 of William Kyle, a pioneer', *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol. 10, 1925, pp. 158-72; J Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: the languages and customs of several tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1981, pp. 8-25; M Cannon (ed), *Historical Records of Victoria*, vol. 2A, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1982, p. 435; 'Snug as a bug'; Chisholm, 'The use, manufacture and decoration of possum skin cloaks'; Lakic, *Women's work*; I Clark (ed), *The journals of George Augustus Robinson*, vol. 1, *January 1839 – 30 September 1840*, Heritage Matters, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 42, 45; I Clark, *A history of the Goulburn River Protectorate Station at Murchison, 1840-53*, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Melbourne, 1999, p. 190.

[15] On 1 May 1802, Captain Matthew Flinders RN and two of his crew met with three unidentified Wathawurrung balug clansmen just west of the You Yangs, approximately 20 kilometres north-west of Geelong. The three Wathawurrung men approached Flinders' party 'without hesitation' and traded their weapons for tobacco and other unspecified gifts. Flinders and his men were well received by the Wathawurrung, shared a meal with them, and discovered rice – evidence of earlier trade with white travellers (probably sealers) – in one of their huts. See M Flinders, *Voyage to Terra australis*, facsimile reprint, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1966 [1814], 30 April – 2 May 1802. See also J J Shillingshaw (ed), *The historical records of Port Phillip: the first annals of the colony of Victoria*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1972; A Andrews (ed), *Hume and Hovell: 1824*, Blubberhead Press, Hobart, 1981, p. 220; *Journey of discovery to Port Phillip, New South Wales, by Messrs. W. H. Hovell and Hamilton Hume in 1824 and 1825*, manuscript, Hovell Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra; D Cahir, 'Conciliation and conflict: the Wathawurrung, 1797-1849', MA thesis, University of Ballarat, 2002. Peter Corris notes that sealers gathered wallaby and possum skins for export in the period 1810-34: *Aborigines and Europeans in Western Victoria*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1968, p. 52.

[16] J Morgan (ed), *The life and adventures of William Buckley*, Australian National University, Canberra, 1980, pp. 25-6.

[17] For further discussion about trading relationships and exchange of goods on the frontier see R Broome, 'Aboriginal workers on south-eastern frontiers', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 103, 1994, pp. 202-20; R Broome, 'Aboriginal victims and voyagers: confronting frontier myths', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 42, 1994, pp. 70-7; H Reynolds, *Black pioneers*, Penguin, Ringwood, 2000, p. 249f; R Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: a history since 1800*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, pp. 10-11.

[18] CP Billot (ed), *Melbourne's missing chronicle*, Quartet, Melbourne, 1982, p. 62.

[19] Assistant Aboriginal Protector James Dredge noted on one occasion that 'the Aboriginal men went hunting possums, and returned with between 40-50, one man had caught ten'. PROV, VPRS 4410/P0, Unit 2, Folder 47, James Dredge (Assistant Protector, North Eastern District), report of operations for the period 1 July 1839 – 29 February 1840.

[20] William Thomas, January 1839, cited in M Cannon (ed), *Historical Records of Victoria*, vol. 2B, *Aborigines and Protectors 1838-9*, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1983, p. 436.

[21] 'Opossum skin rugs', p. 314.

[22] EM Curr, *Recollections of squatting in Victoria from 1841 to 1851*, Melbourne University Press, 1965.

[23] Melbourne Court Register, January 1838, in Cannon, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, p. 465.

[24] The majority of visual and written sources recording the child-carrying devices used by Aboriginal people in Victoria describe a possum skin. See K Kirkland, *Life in the bush, by a Lady*, Chambers, Edinburgh, 1845, p. 16; Chisholm, 'The use, manufacture and decoration of possum skin cloaks'; Lacic, *Women's work*.

[25] An overlander noted: 'Mr Ebdon [a pastoralist who occupied land near Mt Macedon] appeared dressed in possum jacket and cap'. J Cross, *A month in the bush of Australia*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1965, p. 35. Chief Protector of Aborigines for Port Phillip, GA Robinson, noted on October 1839 an unidentified white man wearing an 'opossum rug'. *The journals of George Augustus Robinson*, vol. 1.

[26] Cannon, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, p. 435.

[27] GA Robinson to Assistant Protectors, 8 July 1839, cited in Cannon, *Aborigines and Protectors, 1838-1839*, p. 726.

[28] Three statements relating to the sale of possum skins by George Bertram are found in PROV, VPRS 4398/P0, Unit 1, Folder No. 1, Papers relating to the sale of skins by Bertram. [Includes] one letter from John Purcell to Le Souef with duplicate and statutory declaration of George Gilbert, border policeman, 1842.

[29] Broome is one of the few historians to discuss the degree to which Aboriginal people in Victoria during the nineteenth-century adopted aspects of Western monetary principles. See 'Aboriginal workers on south-eastern frontiers'.

[30] JP Fawkner, *Melbourne's missing chronicle: being the Journal of preparations for departure to and proceedings at Port Phillip*, ed. CP Billot, Quartet Books, Melbourne, p. 41.

[31] *ibid.*, 2 May 1836.

[32] Cited in Cannon, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, p. 229.

[33] *ibid.*, p. 236.

[34] *ibid.*, p. 233.

[35] 'Aboriginal workers on south-eastern frontiers'.

[36] I Clark & T Heydon, *The confluence of the Merri Creek and Yarra River: a history of the Western Port Aboriginal Protectorate and the Merri Creek Aboriginal School*, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Melbourne, 1998, p. 42; M Fels, *Good men and true: the Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District 1837-1853*, Melbourne University Press, 1988.

[37] Robinson noted on 4 November 1844 that William Phillips arrived in Melbourne on the Goulburn cart with a load of possum skins for sale. *The journals of George Augustus Robinson*, vol. 4, 1 January 1844 – 24 October 1845, Heritage Matters, Melbourne, 1998, p. 245.

- [38] PROV, VPRS 4410/P0, Unit 3, Folder 82, William Thomas (Assistant Protector, Western Port District), quarterly report, 31 November 1844, for the period 1 September 1844 – 30 November 1844.
- [39] PROV, VPRS 44/P0, Unit 484, James Horsburgh, General Report of the Goulburn River Aboriginal Station, 6 January 1849.
- [40] By 1839 Aboriginal people in Central Victoria were asserting that the introduction of sheep and cattle had severely depleted their staple food sources. It is probable that the environmental destruction that accompanied colonisation led Aboriginal people to seek out increasing amounts of white carbohydrate food sources as well as money. See Cahir, 'Conciliation and conflict: the Wathawurrung, 1797-1849'.
- [41] PROV, VPRS 4398/P0, Unit 1, Folder No. 1, Papers relating to the sale of skins by Bertram. [Includes] one letter from John Purcell to Le Souef with duplicate and statutory declaration of George Gilbert, border policeman, 1842.
- [42] EB Addis, 'Report of the Crown Lands Commissioner for the County of Grant', manuscript, Mitchell Library, Sydney, 1842.
- [43] Thomas recorded that the Boonwurrung people traded 17 possum and kangaroo skins and seven baskets for flour and other unspecified goods. PROV, VPRS 4410/P0, Unit 3, Folder No. 67, Periodical Report for the period February to August 1840.
- [44] *Life in the bush, by a lady*, pp. 1, 20.
- [45] Cited in Cannon, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, p. 307.
- [46] Cited in P Griffith, *Three times blest*, Buninyong Historical Society, 1988, p. 4.
- [47] *The diary of Charles Griffith*, manuscript, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, 1840-41, pp. 287-8.
- [48] Quoted in Clark, *A history of the Goulburn River Protectorate Station at Murchison, 1840-53*, p. 95.
- [49] Clark & Heydon, *The confluence of the Merri Creek and Yarra River*, p. 65.
- [50] ID Clark, 'The northern Wathawurrung and Andrew Porteous, 1860-1877', unpublished paper, University of Ballarat, 2005, p. 5.
- [51] 'The travels of Walter Bridges', manuscript, Ballarat Library, Australiana Collection, 1855, p. 10.
- [52] Cited (undated) in Castlemaine Pioneers Association, *Records of Castlemaine pioneers*, Rigby, Melbourne, 1972, p. 220.
- [53] R Annear, *Nothing but gold: the diggers of 1852*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1999, p. 92.
- [54] Pepper & De Araugo cited in I Clark, 'Aboriginal people, gold, and tourism: the benefits of inclusiveness for goldfields tourism in regional Victoria', *Tourism, Culture and Communication*, vol. 4, 2003, pp. 123-36, p. 133.
- [55] *Nothing but gold*, p. 95.
- [56] G Wathen, *The golden colony, or Victoria in 1854: with remarks on the geology of the Australian gold fields*, Longman, London, 1855, p. 131.
- [57] E Tame, 'Reminiscences of Melbourne and gold diggings 1852-6', manuscript, National Library of Australia, MS 8964, Box 925.
- [58] HW Wheelwright, *Bush wanderings of a naturalist*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979, p. 44.
- [59] [Manager] Shaw cited in I Clark, *Aboriginal languages and clans: an historical atlas of western and central Victoria, 1800-1900*, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University, 1990, p. 49.
- [60] Cited in S Wiencke, *When the wattles bloom again: the life and times of William Barak, last chief of the Yarra Yarra tribe*, the author, Woori Yallock, 1984, p. 52.
- [61] *Report of the Central Board appointed to watch over the interests of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria, 1861-69 and Report of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria, 1871-95*, quoted in Clark, 'The northern Wathawurrung and Andrew Porteous, 1860-77'.
- [62] Anonymous, 'The decaying race', *London Times*, 1865, p. 5.
- [63] Curoc, 'Protection to native industry by a blackfellow', *Ballarat Star*, 16 July 1861, pp. 7-8.
- [64] *Report of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria, 1871-95*, quoted in Clark, 'The northern Wathawurrung and Andrew Porteous, 1860-77'.
- [65] E Netell, 'Town Clerk's correspondence', manuscript, Buninyong Historical Society Files, 1867, pp. 2-3.
- [66] Quoted in Clark, 'The northern Wathawurrung and Andrew Porteous, 1860-77'.
- [67] RB Smythe, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1878, p. 180. See also discussion in McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'.
- [68] Henry Reynolds in I Clark, *Sharing history*, Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Issues Paper no. 4, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994, p. 10.

# 'A Secure Safeguard of the Children's Morals'

## Catholic Child Welfare in Nineteenth-Century Victoria

Jill Barnard

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### Abstract

**Catholic orphanages developed as a separate strand of child welfare from Protestant and Government-provided institutions in nineteenth-century Victoria. This paper examines the reasons behind the establishment of these Catholic institutions, the relationship between Catholic charities and the Colonial Government, and the experience of life in Catholic orphanages in the nineteenth century.**

On 14 March 1855, a 'large concourse of people' gathered to watch the Mayor of Geelong, William Hingston Baylie, lay the foundation stone of the Geelong Orphan Asylum. Although the mood was distinctly celebratory, one of the many speakers struck a sour note. The Marshal, Mr Wright, lamented the complete absence of clergymen on such a Christian occasion. [1] Two days later the *Geelong Advertiser* published a speedy response to this accusation from Father Patrick Dunne, Catholic Pastor at Geelong. Father Dunne explained that no Catholic clergy had attended the stone-laying ceremony for the orphanage

... not because they were not invited to take part in any religious ceremony ... but because we consider that there is not sufficient guarantee that the faith of poor Catholic Orphan Children will be respected, or that they will be educated in this institution in the religion of their sainted forefathers.[2]

Father Dunne acknowledged that there were many worthy citizens on the orphanage committee, but pointed out that 'there is no Catholic amongst them, and no one but a Catholic can conscientiously guarantee to us the education of Catholic children in their own religion'.[3]

Almost two years to the day after Father Dunne's letter was published, the foundation stone for St Augustine's Catholic Orphanage was laid at Newtown, Geelong. Like the Catholic orphanage established earlier in Melbourne, St Augustine's was a product of the fear expressed by Father Dunne that Protestant-run orphanages would proselytise Catholic children away from their faith. Given that Father Dunne, and most of his brother priests in Victoria, had recently arrived from Ireland, where generations of Catholics had struggled to practise their faith under official oppression, this was possibly not an unreasonable fear. Furthermore, the new colony to which they had come was also showing serious signs of sectarianism.[4] Public debates, played out in the colony's newspapers, went so far as to argue the merits of allowing Irish Catholic immigrant girls into the colony, with Catholicism depicted as a religion 'unfavourable to the development of liberty, of safety, of public happiness or progress'.[5] Victoria's first Catholic Bishop, James Alipius Goold, publicly voiced his concern over the correct religious education for Catholic children when he argued in 1855 that 'every religious body should have children under their own guardianship'.[6]

As Victoria's Parliament began to debate the merits of State aid for religious education in the 1850s, Goold anxiously set about trying to encourage Irish Catholics to migrate to the colony and establish Catholic schools and charitable institutions. The desire to educate Victorian Catholic children in their own religion meant that, despite all the other demands on the resources of the Catholic church in Victoria, four Catholic orphanages had been established in the colony by the early 1860s, compared with three Protestant orphanages in the same period. It also contributed to the Catholic institutions' divergence from trends in both government welfare policy and the administration of charity in the second half of the nineteenth century and coloured the experience of substitute care for generations of Victorian Catholic children.



St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage, Emerald Hill, 1862. Engraving by Arthur Willmore. Courtesy MacKillop Family Services Archives. The *Catholic Directory* of 1858 described the orphanage as 'like some of the old Irish Abbeys ... the sole shelter of many a poor little child, who otherwise might be cast away hopelessly upon a sinful and treacherous world'.

Gold-rush turmoil in Victoria had exacerbated the perception amongst many concerned citizens that Melbourne was in need of an orphan asylum. In the 1840s, church-based charitable groups (both Protestant and Catholic) had made some efforts to accommodate orphaned or abandoned children in the Port Phillip District. The Anglican St James' Visiting Society had established a shelter for children in 1849 and was soon joined by other Protestant charities to form the committee of what became known as the Melbourne Orphan Asylum.[7] A Catholic lay organisation, the Friendly Brothers, also offered aid to orphans, as well as other destitute individuals, in both Geelong and Melbourne. A few months before Victoria officially achieved separation from New South Wales, the government reserved ten acres of land at Emerald Hill

for an orphan asylum. The discovery of gold in Victoria in the same year, however, left the building of the asylum in limbo until late November 1854, when the land was handed over to the committee of the Melbourne Orphan Asylum. By then, immigration, dislocation, death and desertion had greatly added to the number of apparently 'orphaned' children in the new colony and the asylum was sorely needed. Not long after the Melbourne Orphan Asylum was granted its site, the Catholic Vicar-General sought land for a Roman Catholic orphanage in the neighbourhood of Melbourne. Two acres were granted, not far from the Protestant Orphanage in Emerald Hill, and the foundation stone for St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage was laid on 8 October 1855.

The driving force behind the establishment of this orphanage was Father Gerald Ward, who had arrived in the colony with Father Dunne in 1850. Early in 1854, Ward had established Victoria's first branch of the St Vincent de Paul Society, a lay charitable organisation. Soon after, he had become aware of the case of five Collingwood children whose parents had drunk themselves to death. The court had appointed a Presbyterian minister as guardian to the parentless children. But when it became apparent that they had been baptised as Catholics, Father Ward lost no time in successfully applying for guardianship, although the two youngest children, both girls, were eventually allowed by the Supreme Court to remain with a neighbour who had cared for them since their parents' deaths. The three eldest children, all boys, however, were placed with a 'respectable' Catholic woman in Prahran, until they were moved, along with four other children, to the new St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage early in 1857. In August of the same year, the first twelve children moved into St Augustine's Orphanage.

## Under the Care of Religious Staff

Initially the two Catholic orphanages operated in similar modes to their Protestant counterparts. Housing girls and boys in separate dormitories, they were staffed by lay overseers and teachers and managed by committees of management. But even as they opened, Victoria's first Bishop, James Alipius Goold, was achieving minor success in persuading Religious to come to his aid in Victoria. In 1857, three Irish-born Sisters of Mercy, led by Ursula Frayne, agreed to leave the Mercy Foundation in Western Australia and establish Victoria's first Religious community. The Sisters took charge of St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage early in 1861. A few months earlier another group of Mercy Sisters, who had travelled directly from Ireland, took charge of the Catholic orphan girls at Geelong. An almost immediate effect of the Sisters' assuming control was a separation of the sexes – 'a most desirable regulation'.<sup>[8]</sup> At Geelong, the orphan girls moved out from under the wing of Daniel O'Driscoll, St Augustine's supervisor, to the convent/boarding school/orphanage that the Sisters of Mercy established at a nearby mansion. At Emerald Hill, where the Board of Management had applied for extra land for a separate girls' orphanage in the late 1850s, the Sisters set about building St Vincent de Paul's Girls' Orphanage in 1863 and began moving the orphan girls into it before it was even completed. Although it was separated from the boys' orphanage by only a laneway, the girls' orphanage soon became an enclosed world, with no contact, even for siblings, with residents in the adjacent orphanage. The Sisters of Mercy continued to teach the orphan boys at St Vincent's until 1874, though they were anxious to hand them over to the care of a male religious order. Finally, Bishop Goold was able to prevail upon the small band of Christian Brothers who had arrived in the colony in 1868 to take charge of St Vincent de Paul's Boys' Orphanage in 1874. In 1878, following the death of long-serving superintendent Daniel O'Driscoll, the Christian Brothers also assumed management of St Augustine's, Newtown, to the relief of the *Advocate*, the organ of the Catholic hierarchy which had long argued the benefits to Catholic orphaned boys of the Christian Brothers'

mild paternal discipline by which the affections of the child are cultivated, and through which his obedience is won. The children are plastic in the hands of their kind rulers, and are found to readily learn the several trades in which they are instructed.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Increasing Numbers of Catholic Children in Care

In the early years of operation, the children at the Geelong orphanage were different from those of St Vincent de Paul. Almost half of the Geelong children had lost both parents and all but one of the children living in the Geelong orphanage in 1860 had at least one parent deceased. By contrast, the high number of children who passed through St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage in the early years (less than half of whom left the orphanage for employment or apprenticeships) suggests that this orphanage was providing temporary relief to widowed or deserted parents who could reclaim their children as circumstances improved.<sup>[10]</sup> By the late 1860s this seems to have been the pattern at all four Catholic orphanages, with only a small proportion of children having lost both parents. More commonly one parent was deceased, incapacitated or had deserted the family.

The numbers of children in both Protestant and Catholic orphanages rose during the 1860s and 1870s. Certainly children formed a greater proportion of the population than they had in the 1840s and 1850s. While many of the earlier immigrants had been single men, now more women were migrating to Victoria and more new families were being formed. But the percentage of Catholic children in the total Victorian orphanage population was out of proportion to the percentage of Catholics in the Victorian population as a whole, which stood at about 20% in the second half of the nineteenth century. By 1869 and from then until the end of the nineteenth century, Catholic children represented almost half of the orphanage population of the colony. The Rev. Matthew Downing, Treasurer of St Augustine's Orphanage in 1866, suggested one reason for this. Urging larger grants for his institution, he linked the high number of Catholic children in care to the poverty of Victorian Catholics:

It should be borne in mind that the comparative poverty of the Catholic Body and the indigence in many instances of the relatives of orphans preventing them from standing to them 'in loco parentum' force into our Orphanages a number of these helpless little ones in excess of the proportion, our position on the Census Roll would entitle to be expected, thus compelling us to provide for a greater number of orphans than falls to the share of the Protestant Asylums though supported by four fifths of the population and who are more prosperous in means.<sup>[12]</sup>

### Increases in residents in Victorian orphanages 1860-1890<sup>[11]</sup>

	1860	1869	1886	1890	1900
Total in orphanages	390	978	1,151	1,170	1,088
Percentage of those in care in Catholic orphanages	35%	46%	44%	45%	48%

Downing's view that Catholic poverty accounted for their over-representation in the orphanages is supported by the number of Catholic children committed to the care of the State as 'neglected' children after the Victorian Government passed the *Neglected and Criminal Children's Act* in 1864. The Act allowed for the establishment of reformatories for juvenile offenders and industrial schools for neglected children. The industrial schools were to be residential institutions where children up to the age of fifteen would be housed, educated in secular and religious subjects, and trained in 'industrial' skills appropriate to their station in life. This meant domestic work for the girls and trades for the boys. At the expiry of their term in an industrial school, if their parents did not reclaim them, they would be apprenticed out to work for approved employers. The legislation was motivated by the fear that uncontrolled children would become a menace and later a cost to society. Many were thought to be living in slums, brothels or on the streets, where they could become 'schooled' in crime. According to those who supported the legislation, it was inevitable that such children would grow up to fill the colony's gaols with a dangerous criminal class, instead of becoming the industrious, obedient and sober workers that the new society needed.

The *Neglected and Criminal Children's Act* defined neglected children as those found begging or with no place to live, or living in a brothel or with a thief, prostitute or drunkard. Police were given the power to bring these children before the courts to be charged and committed to industrial schools. Parents could also ask for their children to be committed to such a school if they were 'uncontrollable', but they were, in that case, liable to pay for the child's maintenance.[13] However, one unexpected result of the legislation was that many parents who had difficulty supporting their children sought to have them admitted to industrial schools. The schools were therefore flooded with the children of the poor. In 1864, 653 children were admitted. By the end of 1866, 1,750 children, many of them under six years of age, were living in industrial schools.[14] Although the schools were intended to cater for a different class of children from those who entered orphanages, analysis of the backgrounds of 486 children admitted to industrial schools during 1867 showed that many were in similar circumstances to the orphanage children. Only twenty-nine were the children of prostitutes and nine the children of drunkards. Just under one-half had only one living parent and only a tiny proportion (17) had both parents deceased. One hundred and fifteen of them had been deserted by one parent, but only twelve by both. More than half of them had parents who were unable to support them.[15] By 1873, about half of the total number of children in industrial and reformatory schools were Catholics.[16]

### **Blurring the Lines Between Neglected Children and Charitable Cases**

With the establishment of industrial schools, the orphanages were expected to no longer accept children who had two living parents and only take 'true orphans', such as those with no parents or without a father to provide for them. The Catholic Church established two industrial schools for girls. A small one, St Joseph's, was located at Our Lady's Orphanage in Geelong. A larger establishment was founded by the Good Shepherd Sisters at Abbotsford. But the other Catholic orphanages continued to accept children with two living parents or with working fathers, to the annoyance of the Government-appointed Inspector of Charities, who argued that 'if [the children's] natural guardians are unable to take care of them, they come within the scope of the Neglected Children's Act'.[17] The Inspector pressured the Catholic orphanage managers to refuse to accept such children or, at the very least, to make parents pay something toward their maintenance. Mother Sebastian Whyte, who had ultimate responsibility for St Vincent de Paul's Girls' Orphanage, explained her reluctance to comply with this policy in benevolent terms:

It is true there are children in the Institution having one parent, and in some cases both parents living, but who are more destitute than many orphans in the strict sense of the word. The cases being as follows, Father dead, mother bedridden, father dead, mother obliged to go to service, father dead, mother dying, mother dead, father without anyone to mind his children while he is working, mother dead, father in hospital, father insane, mother dying, mother drinks, father unable to mind his children, father whereabouts unknown, mother destitute.[18]

The fear, on the part of authorities, that parents would take advantage of charitable institutions encouraged a harsh attitude even to those with a genuine need for assistance to raise their children. At the 1870 Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions, the superintendent of the Melbourne Orphan Asylum testified that the rules of the institution were, that 'before any destitute mother, shall have any child in the orphanage she must have three left with her after the one taken before any one be taken in'. Fathers could only place children in the Orphan Asylum if they were 'sick, or under very special circumstances'.[19] The Catholic orphanages appear to have taken a more humane approach. Sister Ursula Frayne, on behalf of the St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage, testified that a widow would be 'relieved' of all of her children if she were 'in poor circumstances', while a working father would be relieved of the care of his children if he paid something toward their upkeep.[20] Evidence suggests that, until badgered into it by the Inspector of Charities in the 1880s, Catholic orphanage managers were not always diligent about ensuring that parents were made to pay for the maintenance of their children in the orphanage.

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## Protecting Children

Religious managers of the Catholic orphanages were also placed under pressure over the matter of keeping older children, above the age of thirteen, in the orphanages when their place was really out at service (for girls) or as apprenticed farm labourers (for boys). The Sisters of Mercy, in particular, attracted such criticism. In Melbourne, the Sisters established an 'industrial training school' for older orphan girls at their convent and school (now called Academy) in Fitzroy. Here older girls were 'trained' for domestic service by acting as servants at the boarding school. The Inspector of Charities strongly objected to government funding being expended on the maintenance of these girls and waged a long battle to have this funding suspended. The Sisters responded that they had found the system of sending young, untrained girls out to domestic situations to be

in every respect defective, the children were found to be as useless as we know they are when first they join the training class, with the additional discomfort of trying too much the patience of strangers – the poor children were beaten and otherwise maltreated in several cases they absconded from their employers. Some of them found their way back to the Orphanage, while many drifted away from one place to another until they were heard of no more. All this was the result of children being sent amongst strangers, unexperienced in the world's ways and ignorant of domestic service, which for want of proper appliances they could not be taught at the Orphanage.[21]

## Resistance to Boarding Out

Keeping the girls in the institution, albeit as unpaid servants, was the Sisters' way of delaying their exposure to the dangers of domestic service until they were trained and, presumably, old enough to withstand any ill-treatment or seduction at the hands of employers. But while this, and other humane policies adopted by the Catholic orphanages, helped to swell their resident numbers, it is also true that Catholic authorities considered that their orphanages, particularly those under the supervision of Religious staff, were the safest way to guarantee that Catholic children in colonial Victoria would be educated 'in the religion of their sainted forefathers'. [22] This concern, first voiced when the issue of the abolition of State aid to religion was being discussed in the 1850s, became even more of a threat after the Education Act of 1872, which cut off government financial assistance to denominational schools. In the same year as the Act was passed, a Royal Commission on Penal and Prison Discipline had concluded that large institutions did not provide appropriate care for children and recommended that Victoria's industrial schools be replaced by foster care

or 'boarding-out' for State wards. Foster families were to be paid a small sum to take children in. Local visiting committees would inspect these private homes and children were to be sent to the nearest State school. The State-run industrial schools were rapidly emptied and even the Melbourne Orphan Asylum adopted the 'boarding-out' system from 1876, boarding out about three-quarters of its charges by 1888. [23]

The Inspector of Charities tried to encourage the Catholic orphanages to adopt the boarding-out system as well. Commenting on a request for funds for additions to the buildings at St Vincent's Girls' Orphanage in 1887, Inspector Captain Evans ventured 'to express an opinion that the erection of additional accommodation for the orphans should be discouraged rather than encouraged. All modern ideas are in favour of boarding out. In NSW the Government has refused to assist in supporting children retained in Orphan asylums...! [24]

Evans did have some success in convincing the Christian Brothers at Emerald Hill and Geelong to board out some of their younger boys, but, on the whole, the Catholic orphanages strenuously resisted the move. The Catholic hierarchy opposed boarding-out primarily because children would be sent to the State school nearest to their foster home. There was also anxiety that foster parents might have unscrupulous motives for taking children in. Brother Patrick Canice Butler, Superior at St Augustine's, explained to the 1892 Royal Commissioners that his orphanage had not

*adopted the boarding-out system except in the case of very young children. After careful examination and consideration, I would say that persons suitable and fit to take charge of such children do not, as a rule, care to take them; whereas, those who might not be considered the most suitable are anxious to get them, perhaps as a means of livelihood for themselves or as cheap little servants. [25]*



Artist's impression of St Augustine's Orphanage, sketch by unknown artist, Newtown, 1892. The two-storey extension on the right was added in 1885. The orphanage buildings now form part of St Joseph's College, Newtown. Courtesy MacKillop Family Services Archives.

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In 1884, putting the case against boarding-out, the Advocate argued that the cleanliness and healthiness of Catholic orphanages made them far superior to many private homes. Furthermore, there was less opportunity for orphanage children to miss out on schooling because of truancy, parental illness, neglect or inadequate clothing. But the main advantage that the orphanages offered was that they provided a 'secure safeguard' of the children's morals. 'The nuns alone can give the children such assistance in this direction as Catholics desire and in the nuns alone can Catholic parents place their confidence.'<sup>[26]</sup> Whether it was this point, or the fact that they resented other families looking after their children, some Catholic parents obviously agreed. Of the 23 young boys boarded out from St Vincent de Paul's Boys' Orphanage between 1888 and 1890, seven were reclaimed by their parents soon after the Brothers had placed them in foster homes.<sup>[27]</sup>

### The Fabric of Life in the Catholic Orphanages

How did the Religious staff manage to provide this 'secure safeguard' of the orphanage children's religion and morals in the nineteenth century? Education in the Catholic orphanages was intended to train the children to be virtuous, hard-working and pious. Religious education was a high priority, especially for the girls. It would train them to act 'faithfully and habitually on solid principles of virtue.'<sup>[28]</sup> The boys' religious training, including 'practices usually taught by good Catholic mothers to their children', was also meant to stand them in good stead as they went out alone into the world.<sup>[29]</sup> Clergymen visited the orphanages to instruct and prepare children for their first communion and confirmation, but daily life was also interspersed with prayers, and lessons were 'infused' with religion, as they were in all Catholic schools. In Ireland, the Christian Brothers had developed a series of 'school books' that had gained wide acceptance by educationalists beyond the Brothers' own schools. The same books were introduced by the Christian Brothers to Victoria and presumably used by them in their orphanage schools. After the passage of the 1872 *Education Act*, the Sisters of Mercy, at Emerald Hill, also began using the Christian Brothers' school books.<sup>[30]</sup> This ensured a thoroughly Irish and Catholic tone to the material presented to the children in reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography and singing.

Moreover, the children were kept busy. Although the Sisters of Mercy at Emerald Hill vowed that the children had three hours of recreation, with which 'nothing is suffered to interfere', it is difficult to see where they fitted this in. The boys spent their evenings mending

boots, while the girls made and mended clothes and knitted stockings. In addition, the boys cultivated the garden and worked at 'such domestic works as are suitable to them' and the girls were taught to 'wash, cook, etc as far as their strength permits.'<sup>[31]</sup> Older children, both girls and boys, were also required to give 'all the assistance in their power, out of school hours' to helping staff with domestic duties and caring for the younger children.<sup>[32]</sup>

Physical or emotional ties among the children or with their carers were discouraged. The Sisters of Mercy followed the Irish-published manual, *Guide for the Religious*. While the Guide advised them to be 'maternal' and 'kindly' to the children, it frowned on emotional ties, for 'the habit of such foolish attachments weakens the mind, strengthens a dangerous tendency and accustoms the heart to receive impressions which may be dangerous at a future time.'<sup>[33]</sup> Similarly, the Christian Brothers were forbidden to touch the children under the *noli me tangere* rule. But, while relationships were distant, there was constant supervision of the children. An 1882 circular letter from the Christian Brothers' Superior-General in Ireland emphasised the need to watch carefully over boys in both schools and institutions in order to 'maintain a healthy state of morality'. Brothers were advised to keep boys under surveillance in the playground and especially in the 'water-closets' (toilets) where 'much harm may be done, and sin not infrequently committed... if necessary precautions be not taken and if wholesome discipline be not strictly enforced.'<sup>[34]</sup> Likewise, a staff member was encouraged to sleep in each dormitory to prevent the dangers of masturbation or homosexual activity at night.

The strict separation of the sexes into different institutions, and into dormitories segregated according to age, meant that children were frequently separated from siblings. Parents were not overly encouraged to visit their children. St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage Annual Report for 1870 advertised that parents were able to visit the orphanage on only four Sundays throughout the year. Nor was there any guarantee that children would be reunited with siblings once they had gone out into the world to work, as there was scant exchange of information between the managers of the Catholic orphanages, and 'the ties of relationship between children [might be] still further severed by their being sent to parts of the colony far distant from each other.'<sup>[35]</sup> To the Inspector of Charities, the segregation of the sexes was hardest on the younger boys in all-male orphanages, without the maternal care of the Sisters or even female siblings. Though they seemed happy, he felt it was a shame that they were growing up without 'female influence and oversight'. 'Big boys are but rough companions for infants', he commented.<sup>[36]</sup>

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Rigid timetables and cramped conditions left little room for personal space. The managers of the institutions consistently argued for building grants on the basis of overcrowding and their complaints were borne out by the reports issued after the annual visits of the Government Inspector of Charities. The Inspector found that in all of the orphanages dormitory space was inadequate, while, in some, bedsteads were actually touching. At times, children were obliged to share beds or sleep on the floor.[37] New facilities did not necessarily improve the amount of space allotted to each child, for as soon as extra space was provided, more children arrived to fill it. A new wing added to St Augustine's Orphanage in the 1860s included a dining-room on the ground floor, while the upper storey was entirely taken up by a dormitory 'sixty feet by twenty-five feet' (18 metres x 7.5 metres). Thirty beds were arranged around the walls of this dormitory, with thirty 'block tin hand basins' occupying the centre of the room.[38]

There is scant documentation of how children viewed their experience of orphanage life in the nineteenth century. In the early days, some showed their disapproval by 'absconding', but as high fences and walls began to surround the orphanage buildings (in the case of St Vincent de Paul's Boys', complete with a topping of broken glass), the opportunities for escape became limited. Because the children were educated within the institutions and also participated in most of their religious rituals within the orphanage grounds, there was little opportunity to break the monotony of daily life through outings. The boys at least enjoyed some opportunities to move beyond the walls. At Geelong, they participated in Catholic picnic and sports days, while the boys from St Vincent's Orphanage enjoyed the occasional treat, such as a trip down Port Phillip Bay offered by benefactors. Some of the boys also experienced the benefit of belonging to brass bands, which the Christian Brothers instituted at both orphanages in the early 1880s. But there was little respite from life behind the walls for the girls of either St Vincent's or Our Lady's. And, though inspectors' reports usually recorded that the children seemed happy and healthy enough, Royal Commissioners examining charitable institutions in 1870 noted that 'the most rigid economy is apparent throughout the Catholic Orphanages, perhaps to a somewhat undesirable extent'.[39]

### **Discrepancies in Funding the Catholic and Protestant Institutions**

The necessity for 'rigid economy' was partly due, as Father Downing had suggested, to the relative poverty of nineteenth-century Victorian Catholics. In comparison with the Protestant orphanages, the Catholic institutions struggled to attract donations and bequests. Between 1860 and 1869, for instance, while the Melbourne Orphan Asylum was able to attract £15,400 in subscriptions and other 'locally-raised' funds, the neighbouring Catholic orphanages managed only £9,491. At Geelong, private contributions were a little more evenly matched. The Geelong Orphan Asylum raised £5,541 for this period, St Augustine's, £4,981 and Our Lady's Orphanage only £2,399. The amount raised privately by each orphanage affected the government charity grant they received. The law allowed a charitable vote of two-thirds for every one-third raised by the institutions. However, even allowing for the matching of funds, the Catholic orphanages, particularly at Geelong, were hard done by. While both the Protestant orphanages received slightly more than two-thirds of their income from government sources in the 1860s, more than a third of the two Geelong Catholic orphanages' income came from non-government sources. The 1870 Royal Commission found that the 1869 grant per child to each of these orphanages was 2s 6d, while that to the Protestant Orphanage was 5s 9d, and concluded that 'the Catholic Orphanages of St Augustine and Our Lady had not received the support from the State, in the shape of annual grants, in proportion to other institutions of a similar character'. [40] An 1862 Royal Commission had suggested that government nominees sit on the committees of management of charitable institutions in order for them to qualify for their charities vote. But once Religious took over the management of Catholic orphanages there were no committees of management and perhaps this is one reason why they fared relatively poorly until Inspectors of Charities were introduced to assess each institution on an annual basis. The Inspector nagged at the orphanage managers to attempt to collect support money from parents who could afford to pay something towards their children's maintenance. But, at the same time, government funding for building programmes at the institutions was reduced.



Dormitory, St Vincent de Paul's Boys' Orphanage. This photograph, taken in the early twentieth century, shows the dimensions of one of the two original dormitories constructed in 1857. Courtesy MacKillop Family Services Archives.

For some of the Catholic orphanages, particularly those for boys, support from the Catholic community started to increase in the latter decades of the nineteenth century as benefactors began to bequeath small amounts to the institutions in their wills and subscription lists broadened. But Our Lady's Orphanage continued to struggle until the early decades of the twentieth century, when a small group of Geelong Catholics attempted to raise funds for the Orphanage, and when a change of name to St Catherine's differentiated it from the girls' college on the same convent site. By that time other Catholic children's welfare institutions – garnering no government funding – had been established. With the passing of legislation to introduce a Charities Board in 1922, fairer funding models, which generally lifted the standards of care in institutions, also came into being. And, in the 1930s, when 'boarding-out' for State wards began to decline and the Victorian Government had to turn to the denominational homes to accept Wards of the State, the proportion of funds from government sources began to increase. But by then hard work and education had produced a broader Catholic middle class and, under the influence of Archbishop Daniel Mannix, a network of parish social clubs, sodalities, friendly societies and support groups had developed. As Victorian Catholics adopted an 'inturned and isolationist posture'[41] in the decades after World War I, the Catholic charities reaped some benefits. These included greater voluntary financial support through fund-raising events and philanthropy, and also a wider public awareness of the lot of children in Catholic institutions. Voluntary holiday host programmes, sewing circles and special 'treats', such as Christmas parties and picnics, began to offer more relief from the blandness of life behind orphanage walls.

While the strengthening of a sense of Catholic community in the inter-war period helped to improve the lives of children in Catholic institutions, it probably also contributed to an expansion and consolidation of the Catholic system as a separate strand of child welfare in Victoria. Father Dunne's concerns that Catholic children be educated in the faith of their forefathers were, if anything, accepted even more widely by the Catholic community, guided by the charismatic Archbishop Daniel Mannix in the extremely sectarian climate of his time.

## Endnotes

- [1] D Jaggs with C Jaggs, *Advancing this good work: a history of Glastonbury Child and Family Services*, the organisation, Geelong, 1988, p. 6.
- [2] *Geelong Advertiser*, 16 March 1855, p. 2.
- [3] *ibid.*
- [4] Geoffrey Serle argues that 'suspicion and fear of Roman Catholicism and prejudice against the Irish were deep-rooted in almost every British migrant' in Victoria in the early 1850s. *The Golden Age: a history of the colony of Victoria 1851-1861*, Melbourne University Press, 1968, p. 63.
- [5] *Argus*, quoted in P O'Farrell, *The Catholic church and community in Australia*, Nelson, West Melbourne, 1977, p. 110.
- [6] *Argus*, 8 October 1855, p. 5.
- [7] S Bignell, 'Orphans and destitute children in Victoria up to 1864', *Victorian Historical Magazine*, vol. 44, nos. 1 & 2, February-May 1973.
- [8] PROV, VPRS 1207/P0, Inward Registered Correspondence, Unit 104, File 4834.
- [9] *Advocate*, 27 July 1872, pp. 5-6.
- [10] Information about children in the orphanages is derived from early registers of St Augustine's Orphanage and annual reports of St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage, located at MacKillop Family Services Heritage and Information Service Archives.
- [11] Figures derived from 'Statistics on charitable institutions in the colony' in the various reports in the *Votes and proceedings* of the Victorian Legislative Assembly.
- [12] PROV, VPRS 1207/P0, Unit 349, File 4969.
- [13] Jaggs, *Advancing this good work*, pp. 25-6.
- [14] 'Industrial Schools. Report of the Inspector, for the year 1866', *Votes and proceedings. Papers presented to both Houses of Parliament ... Session 1867, Legislative Assembly*, vol. 4, pp. 941-51 (949).

[15] 'Industrial Schools. Report of the Inspector, for the year 1867', *Votes and proceedings ... Session 1868*, vol. 3, pp. 873-882 (879).

[16] *Advocate*, 22 August 1874, p. 10.

[17] PROV, VPRS 1207/P0, Unit 1281, File 11267.

[18.] Superior, Convent of Mercy to Under Treasurer, 10 April 1889. Mercy Congregation Centre Archives, Fairfield, Victoria, Australia.

[19] 'Charitable institutions. Report of the Royal Commission', *Votes and proceedings ... Session 1871*, vol. 2, p. 57 (p. 33 of the report).

[20.] 'Report of the Commissioners appointed to enquire into the municipalities and the charitable institutions in Victoria', *Votes and proceedings ... Session 1862-3*, vol. 4, p. 569.

[21] Mother Ursula Frayne to Under Treasurer, 28 January 1882, (copy), Mercy Congregation Centre Archives.

[22] *Geelong Advertiser*, 16 March 1855, p. 2.

[23] PROV, VPRS 1207/P0, Unit 1229, File 10934.

[24] PROV, VPRS 1207, Unit 11336, File 7314.

[25] 'Royal Commission on charitable institutions', *Votes and proceedings. Papers presented to Parliament ... Session 1892-3*, vol. 4, p. 744.

[26] *Advocate*, 29 March 1884, p. 9.

[27] PROV, VPRS 1207/P0, Unit 1313, File 6959.

[28] *Guide for the Religious called Sisters of Mercy*, London, 1888, p. 19.

[29] *Circular Letters of Superiors-General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools of Ireland*, the Brothers, Dublin, 1882, p. 92.

[30] K Twigg, *Shelter for the children: a history of St Vincent de Paul Child and Family Service, 1854-1997*, Sisters of Mercy, Melbourne, 2000, p. 42.

[31] *Annual Report of the St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage Emerald Hill*, the Orphanage, Melbourne, 1868, p. 18.

[32] *Report of the St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage Emerald Hill for the year 1870*, the Orphanage, Melbourne, 1871, p. 19.

[33] *Guide for the Religious*, p. 20.

[34] *Circular Letters of Superior-General*, p. 97.

[35] PROV, VPRS 1207/P0, Unit 1313, File 6959.

[36] PROV, 1207/P0, Unit 919, File 9379 and Unit 912, File 7567.

[37] PROV, VPRS 1207/P0, Unit 335, File 1672.

[38] *Advocate*, 16 January 1869, p. 7.

[39] 'Charitable institutions. Report of the Royal Commission', *Votes and proceedings ... Session 1871*, vol. 2, p. xiii.

[40] *ibid.*

[41] O'Farrell, *The Catholic church and community in Australia*, p. 352.

# Rescuing the Regent Theatre

Louise Blake

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## Abstract

Melbourne's Regent and Plaza theatres opened in Collins Street in 1929. For more than forty years, these grand picture palaces were among Melbourne's most treasured cinemas, favourites together with the Capitol Theatre in Swanston Street and the State Theatre in Flinders Street. Often called 'palaces of dreams', they were part of a glamorous entertainment era, when a night out at the movies was an event, and an afternoon matinee was a treat. Not even the Regent's two-year closure, as a result of the fire that destroyed the auditorium in 1945, could dampen the enthusiasm of its Melbourne audiences. By the 1960s, however, the grand picture palaces were no longer in vogue and were becoming uneconomical to run. The State Theatre closed in 1962 and was later converted into two theatres. The Capitol closed in 1964, but when it re-opened eighteen months later a shopping arcade had been built in the lower part of the auditorium. After investigating the option of converting the Regent into two theatres, its owner, Hoyts, opted to develop a smaller multi-cinema complex in Bourke Street instead. The company sold the Regent and Plaza theatres to the City of Melbourne in 1969 and in 1970 the doors of the Regent and Plaza closed for what many people thought was the last time.

Melbourne City Council bought the Regent and Plaza in order to control development around the site of the proposed City Square on the corner of Swanston and Collins Streets. The theatres seemed destined to fall victim to the wrecker's ball. But if the 1960s was the decade of development, the 1970s was the decade of preservation. Protests against the demolition of historic buildings occurred around Australia, often with the controversial support of the building unions. The architectural profession debated the issues of preservation versus development of dynamic modern buildings. Both the State and Federal Governments were forced to introduce legislation to protect the nation's built heritage. In Victoria the Liberal Government, under then Premier Rupert Hamer, introduced the Historic Buildings Act in 1974. The campaign to save the Regent and Plaza theatres was one of the battles of this preservation war.

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## Introduction [1]

When the Regent Theatre opened in Collins Street, Melbourne in 1929, the *Australian Home Beautiful* magazine published an article on the elaborate architectural features of the new picture palace. The author, known only as 'Architect', noted at the time that 'a book might easily be written – and probably will be – describing this building in detail'. [2] While a book focusing on the Regent Theatre's architecture is still to be written, the tumultuous history of the Regent – and its companion theatre, the Plaza – has been told more than once – in books (most notably in the book produced by Frank Van Straten and Elaine Marriner, *The Regent Theatre: Melbourne's palace of dreams* [3], in the press, in parliament, and at public meetings – over the last thirty-five years. 'Architect' could not have imagined in 1929 just what a complicated saga the story of the Regent and Plaza theatres would become. But just how did this saga evolve? Of all the former picture palaces and theatres in Melbourne, why, in the 1970s, did the threatened demolition of the Regent and Plaza cause such a public outcry? Were the theatres outstanding examples of the glamorous Hollywood era of entertainment, far too significant to Victoria's heritage to be lost? Was it the renewed interest in preserving the State's heritage that ultimately led to the theatres' survival? Or was the theatres' proximity to the City Square to blame for prolonging the saga – a saga worthy of the films the theatres once screened? Next year is the tenth anniversary of the re-opening of the Regent and Plaza theatres: what better time to consider these questions and explore what the building meant – and continues to mean – to the people of Melbourne?

## A Gala Opening

The Regent was the flagship theatre of Francis W. Thring's Hoyts chain. While Managing Director from 1924 to 1930, Thring (father of actor Frank Thring) opened a number of 'Regents' in Australia and New Zealand – the first in Sydney in March 1928. The Regent in Melbourne was the third in the chain, but by far the most elaborate. Designed by Cedric Ballantyne and built by James Porter & Sons, as many of Thring's Regent theatres were, the Melbourne Regent with its Gothic grand foyer was said to resemble a cathedral. [4] The inspiration for the auditorium came from the Capitol Theatre in New York. 'Architect' described watching in wonder as the builders and artists put the finishing touches to the theatre – the stage curtain being sewn, the pictures being mounted, the elaborate chandelier waiting to be winched into place above the auditorium. [5] When it opened the Regent was the second-largest theatre in Australia with

over 3000 seats. The opening on 15 March 1929 was a gala affair featuring an in-house orchestra conducted by Ernest G. Mitchell, Stanley Wallace at the console of the magnificent Wurlitzer organ, a ballet performance, and, finally, the screening of the silent film *The two lovers* starring Ronald Colman and Vilma Banky. [6] Thousands of people attended the event. The Plaza theatre, which opened two months later, was originally designed as a ballroom, but when a liquor licence was refused the plans were modified and the Plaza became a smaller theatre, with a distinctly Spanish atmosphere.

The 1920s heralded the beginning of the golden years of film-making – the Hollywood era. A theatre built during this time was often described as a 'palace of dreams'. [7] Initially silent films were screened, but soon theatres were being converted to accommodate the 'talkies'. The Plaza was the first new Australian cinema to open in the era of sound film. The opening on 10 May was another gala affair to match the style of the smaller, but luxurious cinema. While many of Melbourne's theatres were in Bourke Street, the Regent and Plaza were located at the 'Paris' end of Collins Street. With the Town Hall, the Athenaeum and Georges' department store located opposite, the Regent and Plaza became part of what Frank Van Straten has called 'the Collins Street experience'. [8] Such was the interest in the escapist world of cinema that when fire destroyed the Regent's auditorium in 1945, Hoyts obtained special permission from the State Government to enable the theatre to be reconstructed, despite wartime restrictions on building materials. [9] The reconstruction of the Regent, which included new plasterwork undertaken by James Lyall, would later become an issue in the debate concerning the architectural and historical merits of the theatre. In 1947 audiences were just grateful to see the theatre re-open. Their affection for the Regent and Plaza continued into the 1950s and 1960s, but television gradually changed the entertainment landscape.



The Regent Theatre auditorium after the fire of April 1945. PROV, VPRS 9963/P2, General Records, unit 1.

In 1969, when Hoyts sold the Regent and Plaza theatres to Melbourne City Council (MCC), there were many who felt that the golden years of the picture palaces were over. In the television age many of the larger theatres were becoming uneconomical to run. The State and Capitol theatres had both closed in the 1960s, and re-opened with reduced capacity. The State Theatre was converted into two smaller theatres, while the Capitol was reduced to one smaller theatre and a shopping arcade built in the area once occupied by the stalls. Hoyts briefly examined the possibility of converting the Regent into two smaller theatres, but opted instead to sell the Regent and Plaza and open a smaller multi-cinema complex in Bourke Street. MCC purchased the theatres for \$2.25 million and subsequently called for tenders for development of the site. The Regent closed on 1 July 1970, followed by the Plaza on 4 November.

## The City Square

Since the early 1960s Melbourne City Council had been considering the development of a city square. Councillor Bernard Evans first suggested the idea in 1961, but a formal proposal was not accepted until 1966. The Council then began acquiring property near the corner of Swanston and Collins Streets, including the Green's building, Wentworth House, and the Cathedral Hotel. When developers expressed an interest in the Regent Theatre site, MCC decided to purchase it in order to control development around the future City Square.

Before the theatres had even closed, the Council accepted the tender of British development company Star (Great Britain) Holdings Ltd, who planned to build an international hotel overlooking the Square. Newspaper articles published at the time depict a 53-storey rectilinear building towering over the Town Hall and St Paul's Cathedral. The 445-bed hotel would occupy 24 storeys, with the remaining floors to be used as office space. The money MCC would receive from Star would assist in its funding of the City Square project.[10] Looking at the structure as depicted in the newspapers, it is not surprising that some people were outraged by the proposal.[11] But despite this opposition the public campaign to save the theatres did not begin in earnest until 1973, after MCC's deal with Star Holdings had failed. Star blamed the Federal Government's new foreign investment laws on its failure to raise the necessary capital, while the Council announced it would 'make a clean break and, freed of the restraints it suffered in the past, embark on a new concept'.[12]

MCC's decision to purchase the Regent and Plaza theatres as part of the City Square project was one of the factors that, ironically, ensured the theatres' survival. The Council's plans for the City Square were dependent on the redevelopment of the Regent site; while the future of the Regent remained unresolved the Council was unable to move forward with the City Square. Community groups seized on the opportunity presented by the Council's 'clean break' and the campaign to save the Regent and Plaza theatres began.

## The Decade of Preservation

The campaign to save the theatres could not have come at a better time in the history of the preservation movement. The 1970s were characterised by a renewed interest in historic buildings, not only by members of the wider community but also by some in the State and Federal Governments. Membership of the National Trust had expanded to include younger professionals, and some residents groups had formed in an effort to protect their streets and suburbs from what they perceived to be unnecessary development. In an effort to encourage the preservation of the nation's built heritage, the Victorian branch of the National Trust had drafted a heritage bill in 1969 and presented it to the State Government. When the Government failed to act on this bill, the Trust put pressure on the State opposition. In 1972 Rupert Hamer became Premier and Minister of the Arts, and by the end of 1973 an amendment to the Town and Country Planning Act, known as the Historic Buildings Bill, was introduced into State Parliament and passed in May 1974. In an article on the development of heritage legislation, Sheryl Yelland has argued that this Victorian legislation was far from perfect.[13] But it was important as the first of a series of acts passed in State and Federal parliament aimed at protecting sites of architectural significance. On a Federal level, Prime Minister Whitlam, whose Labor Party had come to office in 1972, announced the formation of a Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate. Submissions were received from individuals and groups around the country and the subsequent report recommended greater government involvement – to match the interest of the community – in issues of preservation.[14]

In Melbourne, 1973 was a tumultuous year in the preservation wars. When the Commercial Bank of Australia (CBA) announced that it intended to redevelop its building in Collins Street – which included an historic banking chamber dating back to the 1890s – the National Trust mounted a public campaign to prevent its demolition, beginning with the listing of the chamber on its register of historic buildings. The Trust encouraged supporters to sign petitions objecting to the proposal, and in a three-week period had gathered the support of more than 150,000 people.[15] The Australian Building Construction Employees & Builders Labourers Federation, under the leadership of Norm Gallagher, lent its support to the campaign by placing a black ban on any demolition of the building. As a result of the Trust's campaign, Premier Hamer announced a Committee of Inquiry in October 1973 to investigate the feasibility of retaining the banking chamber. To the relief of the Trust's supporters, the inquiry recommended that the banking chamber remain.[16]

While the National Trust took a proactive approach to the preservation of the CBA banking chamber, it was less vigorous in its response to the fate of the Regent and Plaza theatres. As Graeme Davison writes, the Trust 'vacillated on the issue' by adding, removing and then reinstating the theatres on its register of twentieth-century buildings. Davison argues that the Trust 'struggled to reconcile its belated support for the Regent with its traditional adherence to canons of "good taste"'. [17] It was not the Trust who fronted the campaign, he writes, but

a wider coalition of trade unionists, especially theatrical and building industry employees, show business celebrities and interested members of the public.[18]



One of the first films to screen at the newly re-opened Regent Theatre in the 1940s. PROV, VPRS 9963/P2, General Records, unit 1.

The Save the Regent Theatre Committee was the key group within this coalition, having formed in the early years after the closure of the Plaza and Regent in 1970. The group comprised former employees of the theatres and members of the Theatre Organ Society of Australia (TOSA), including industrial designer Robert Laidlaw and Ian Williams. Williams, like Laidlaw a member of TOSA, began his career at the Regent Theatre in May 1949 and later became Assistant Manager of the theatre. Although not part of the initial group, Loris Webster was the only woman on the Committee and soon became its public face. Webster, who together with her husband ran the Wild Cherry restaurant a few doors up from the Regent, was prompted by the public response to the closure of the theatres and offered her assistance to the Committee. People would often comment to her, she said, that they had never been asked for their views about the Regent. The public didn't want to see it go. Webster believed the only way the theatres could be saved was as the result of a political decision.[19]

.....

To this end, she enlisted the support of Norm Gallagher. At one of the Committee's audio-visual nights, which was organised to gather support for the campaign, Gallagher agreed to put a black ban on the demolition of the Regent and Plaza, commenting that he had once worked at the Regent as a 'lolly boy'.<sup>[20]</sup> Union bans also extended to other buildings on the site, including Wentworth House.

The building unions played a prominent role in the preservation battles of the 1970s. In Sydney, the Builders Labourers Federation, under the leadership of Jack Munday, had instigated a 'green ban' campaign. In a history of this movement, Meredith Burgmann states that the union's guiding principle was 'that workers had a right to insist that their labour not be used in harmful ways'.<sup>[21]</sup> In 1972 the union became involved in a campaign to save two of Sydney's theatres – Francis W. Thring's Regent, then owned by JC Williamson Ltd, and the Theatre Royal. The Save the Regent Theatre Committee and the Save the Theatre Royal Committee joined forces from 6 November 1972 to form a group known as Save Sydney's Theatres Committee. The campaign to save the Sydney Regent was initially successful, but by the 1990s the theatre had fallen victim to development and was demolished.<sup>[22]</sup>

Press reports regarding the fate of the Melbourne Regent criticised the involvement of the union. The editor of the Melbourne *Herald* argued that

Mr Gallagher seems less concerned with the fate of the Regent than with a power play. There is no room in our society for such strong-arm tactics.<sup>[23]</sup>

The Regent was not the only site affected by a union black ban. A booklet announcing a 'green ban' gallery at Trades Hall lists numerous buildings in Melbourne, including Tasma Terrace, the Windsor Hotel, the Princess Theatre, and the City Baths.<sup>[24]</sup> During a Committee of Inquiry in 1975 the MCC questioned Gallagher's motives for getting involved in the campaign, claiming that the union had placed the ban on the Regent because the Council had closed a swimming pool in Batman Avenue.<sup>[25]</sup> The union booklet doesn't dispute the connection. Whatever the union's motives, it can be argued that the black ban Gallagher placed on the Regent's demolition, together with the efforts of the Save the Regent Theatre Committee, were responsible for the theatre's initial survival. Without them, demolition may well have gone ahead and the battle would have been lost before it even began.

In August 1973 the Save the Regent Theatre Committee received unexpected support from Premier Rupert Hamer. According to Frank Van Straten, Hamer had commented that he wished to see the Regent preserved,

'recalling fondly that it was at the Regent that he and his wife had courted'.<sup>[26]</sup> Supporters, including Committee members Laidlaw and Williams, immediately began writing to the Premier thanking him for his comments and urging him to resolve the issue.<sup>[27]</sup> At the time that Hamer made these remarks, discussions were taking place between MCC and the State Government over the location of the proposed concert hall for the Arts Centre. The Council-owned site at Snowden Gardens was favoured, but, as Vicki Fairfax notes, difficulties with the Council prompted Hamer's suggestion that the Regent Theatre be converted into a concert hall instead.<sup>[28]</sup>

In October 1973 the Secretary of the Premier's Department, KD Green, wrote to George Fairfax, Executive Officer of the Victorian Arts Centre Building Committee, requesting that the Committee prepare a report on the concert hall proposal for the Premier. Green stated that

it has been pointed out to the Premier that the Regent Theatre is in a bad state of repair and that considerable work would be necessary to restore it to its former condition, quite apart from the effect on the City Square project of leaving the Theatre where it is.<sup>[29]</sup>

Green commented that the Premier 'would be prepared to reconsider his views if an appropriate report could be prepared' regarding the two sites. After receiving reports from architect Sir Roy Grounds and other consultants, the Building Committee recommended in favour of the Snowden Gardens site. The Council finally gave its approval for the use of Snowden Gardens and the Premier formally announced the location of the new concert hall.<sup>[30]</sup>

With the concert hall proposal no longer an option, debate surrounding the future of the Regent Theatre waged on. Throughout 1974 the Save the Regent Theatre Committee continued its campaign, gathering letters of support from performers such as Sir Robert Helpmann and Gladys Moncrieff. In a letter to the Committee, Helpmann commented on the lack of theatrical venues in Australia, stating that

it is terribly sad that with a beautiful Theatre like the Regent that anyone should even have thought of demolishing it and I think that everything that possibly can be done should be done to save this for the future of the Australian Theatre.<sup>[31]</sup>

Another patron of the Committee, Dame Joan Hammond, also referred in her letter to the lack of theatres in Melbourne, arguing that it 'is a sad indictment on its people'.<sup>[32]</sup> Melbourne City Councillor David Jones, who had previously managed the Regent Theatre, was also a voice of support for the Committee, despite his position on Council. In March 1974 the Committee presented Gough Whitlam with a submission to the Federal Government's Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate during his visit to Doncaster City Hall. Although the submission was too late to be considered for the Inquiry, the Prime Minister commented that the Committee had a 'good case' for saving the theatre and referred the matter to the Minister for Urban and Regional Development, Tom Uren.<sup>[33]</sup> Uren had previously expressed his support for the campaign to save the theatres.<sup>[34]</sup>

The Committee's determined campaign, led by Loris Webster, was a source of frustration for MCC, which had commissioned a number of reports into the City Square development. New Lord Mayor, Councillor Ron Walker, had made it his mission to resolve the issue and shared the desire of his predecessors to demolish the theatres. Architectural firm Clarke Gazzard Pty Ltd had undertaken a feasibility study into the City Square development, which it presented to the Council in August 1974. The report suggested three alternative developments for the City Square, one of which included the retention of the Regent Theatre. The report stated that the theatre was

suitable for a wide range of theatrical activities and [had] a definite role to play in Melbourne's theatrical life.<sup>[35]</sup>

In response to the recommendation that the theatre be preserved, the Council commissioned a report from chartered accountants Fell and Starkey into Clarke Gazzard's proposal. The accountants concluded that the architectural firm's costings were not sound. Despite MCC's reluctance to consider Clarke Gazzard's controversial third alternative development, the report was a boost to the Save the Regent Theatre Committee and would prove to be helpful during the forthcoming Committee of Inquiry.

In late 1974 Lord Mayor Walker wrote to the Premier requesting that he appoint a Committee of Inquiry to resolve the Regent Theatre issue, as the Premier had done the previous year with the CBA banking chamber inquiry. Walker's letter reveals his frustration over the issue, writing 'all I am trying to do is get on with the job'.<sup>[36]</sup> The letter also alludes to the Council's views on the Regent's supporters, stating that the 'most responsible parties in this dispute are the National Trust and my Council'. The union had lifted its black ban on the

demolition of Regency House and Wentworth House, but its ban remained on the Regent Theatre.

The National Trust meanwhile had reinstated the Regent Theatre on its register of twentieth-century buildings in August 1974. In its October newsletter, the Trust argued that the Regent Theatre had been removed from, and then restored to the register because of concerns regarding its condition, not because of its importance, or lack thereof. The newsletter article defended criticism of the Trust

for not being more active in the evaluation of 20th century buildings but it is determined only to register a building after the most detailed evaluation by experts.<sup>[37]</sup>

The Trust's belated support for the retention of the theatres, while welcomed by the Save the Regent Theatre Committee, was not of overwhelming concern to the Council. Unlike the Trust's public battle over the CBA banking chamber, which forced the Premier to appoint a Committee of Inquiry, the union ban and the campaign by the Save the Regent Theatre Committee were largely responsible for forcing MCC to request a Committee of Inquiry to resolve the issue.

### Committee of Inquiry

The Premier announced the formation of a Committee of Inquiry into the Regent Theatre in February 1975. Louis F Pyke, Chairman of Directors of Costain Australia Ltd, acted as Chair. Pyke was accompanied by architect Ronald G Lyon, theatrical producer Harry M Miller, and consulting engineer R Milton Johnson, who had served on the committee of the CBA banking chamber inquiry. FT Cron, from the Premier's Department, was appointed Secretary. Records in the inquiry files reveal that discussions had taken place between Louis Pyke and Norm Gallagher about the possibility of Gallagher appearing on the Committee. Cron considered this to be a 'dangerous move', and suggested that Gallagher be approached to provide a written submission instead.<sup>[38]</sup> There is no evidence on file to suggest that Gallagher or the union did so; nor did Gallagher appear at the public hearings, despite being invited.



The Regent Theatre in 1975 at the time of the Committee of Inquiry. PROV, VPRS 9963/P2, General Records, unit 1.

Unsolicited letters in the inquiry files indicate consistent support for the Regent's survival from members of the general public who remembered attending the theatre in its heyday. One correspondent recalled 'the terrific orchestra and pianos of Isador Goodman'.<sup>[41]</sup> Another suggested that the theatre 'should be reopened for the showing of old beautiful and timeless classics'.<sup>[42]</sup> And surprisingly, two letters were received from a thirteen-year-old boy from Niddrie who composed a poem in support of the Regent.<sup>[43]</sup> But some members of the public were not in favour of saving the grand old picture palace. A correspondent from Emerald suggested the theatre

is not in anyway noteworthy as an architectural masterpiece, being simply and solely an ordinary picture theatre similar to many more in the city and suburbs [...] there is far too much mere sentiment about both conservation and the preservation [sic] of buildings.<sup>[44]</sup>

One wonders, given the description of the Regent as 'an ordinary picture theatre', if this correspondent had ever been inside the theatre! Many of its supporters would have argued that there was nothing remotely 'ordinary' about the Regent.

As this last letter indicates though, the architectural style of the Regent and Plaza theatres was not highly regarded by everyone, particularly those in the architectural profession. In 1975 a letter from a group of architects appeared in the newspapers, claiming that the 'important matter' of the Civic Square

the desirability and technical and economic feasibility of retaining the Regent Theatre as part of the future City Square project, having regard to its present condition and any architectural or historic merit it may possess.<sup>[40]</sup>

had such historical or architectural importance that its addition to the Register of historic buildings could be recommended.<sup>[39]</sup>

The terms of reference for the Committee of Inquiry firmly linked the future of the Regent Theatre to the City Square project. The Committee was directed to investigate

the desirability and technical and economic feasibility of retaining the Regent Theatre as part of the future City Square project, having regard to its present condition and any architectural or historic merit it may possess.<sup>[40]</sup>

is perhaps not understood by those who feel the Regent Theatre, which would limit this development, should be preserved if only for sentimental reasons, because there can be little architectural and obviously no economical reasons.<sup>[45]</sup>

The architects argued that the theatres had served their purpose as cinemas and were not suitable as live venues.

While some progress had been made in changing society's attitudes towards the preservation of historic buildings, there was still a strong bias in favour of nineteenth-century buildings. The glittering architecture and plaster ornamentation of a twentieth-century picture palace were not considered worth saving. It would also take some time before the social or cultural significance of a building made it worthy of preservation. This attitude was reflected in the Council's evidence to the Inquiry. Town Clerk, FH Rogan argued that

we submit that there was nothing innovatory about the Regent Theatre, that externally it is not attractive. There were no aesthetic values, in fact it could be generally agreed that the bulk of that building is ugly when viewed from the outside. It was built by commercial people, for commercial reasons, to maximise their return.[46]

MCC argued that 'in their present form both buildings are little more than shells'.[47]

This description was adamantly contested throughout the Save the Regent Theatre Committee's campaign, which was supported by the National Trust's submission. The Committee argued that the Regent was structurally sound, had excellent stage facilities, large seating capacity, first class acoustics, and was in an ideal location in the city. It

is one of the finest – if not the finest – examples of the great picture palaces. [It] represent[s] an era in the lifestyle and entertainment of the people of this State.[48]

Both the Committee and the National Trust referred to the recent trend of converting old picture palaces in the United States and commented that the same could be done with the Regent.[49] In her closing address Loris Webster even suggested that a Board of Commission comprising the Council and the State Government be established to retain ownership and management of the theatres.[50] Ironically, the arrangement Webster suggested is similar to the deal negotiated in the 1990s that finally enabled the Regent to reopen in 1996.

The public hearings concluded on 11 July. At a meeting with the Premier that afternoon, the Committee advised Rupert Hamer that it 'was of the opinion that the Regent and Plaza should be retained despite the likely cost of approximately \$6M for restoration'. The Premier acknowledged that 'he would not like the Regent to be demolished if there were appropriate uses for the building'.[51] In the Committee's report it argued that

the problem cannot be reduced to one of tear down or leave, cost or profit. The simple fact is that the combination of the buildings are, in our opinion, a RESOURCE which is indeed a valuable one not only to the City of Melbourne, but to the State as a whole.[52]

Just as Clarke Gazzard had proposed in its feasibility study the year before, the Committee recommended that 'the Regent Theatre complex should be retained and integrated in the design of the City Square'.

The results of this inquiry reveal that the Regent and Plaza theatres were spared from demolition not necessarily because of any significant architectural or historic merit, however justified, but, as the Save the Regent Theatre Committee cleverly argued, because the theatres were a resource for the community. The HBPC investigation, with its limited scope, found that the theatres had some architectural or historical merit, but not enough to warrant inclusion on its register of historic buildings.

Thirty years on from the inquiry, Loris Webster recalls feeling emotional giving her concluding address on the last day. It had been a tough battle at times, fighting to get their message across against the well-resourced Council. Not only had she been personally attacked, but her children had also been harassed because of their mother's stand. But the fight was worth it, she says. It was the perfect example of a community working together.[53]



The dress circle of the Regent Theatre, c.1946. PROV, VPRS 9963/P2, General Records, unit 1.

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The successful outcome of this inquiry was, indeed, an example of the community working together. The Regent and Plaza theatres would not have survived this long had it not been for the efforts of the Save the Regent Theatre Committee and its supporters. But despite the recommendation that the Regent and Plaza be retained, the theatres would remain empty for the next twenty years.

### Plans and Proposals

In the years immediately following the inquiry, criticism of the decision to save the theatres continued to appear in the press, and union bans on the site remained.[54] It wasn't until 1980 that the City Square, designed by the competition winners Denton Corker Marshall, finally opened. The Plaza was absorbed into the City Square project, with the interior of the theatre replaced with shops, bars and restaurants. Members of the Save the Regent Theatre Committee continued to keep a close watch on these developments.

Throughout the 1980s numerous suggestions and proposals were made for the development of the theatres. The Ministry for the Arts paid close attention and its files reveal the continuing developments in the Regent Theatre saga. In 1985 other community groups emerged, such as the Regent Arts Alliance, which put forward a proposal for the Regent to become a community arts complex that could include rehearsal venues, events and exhibitions, children's activities, retail space, and office space for arts organisations.[55] Keith Scoble submitted a proposal to Council suggesting that the Regent could be developed as a live theatre, with offices, restaurant, a tavern, retail and public space. Michael Edgley Holdings Ltd would manage the live theatre component.[56] There was even a suggestion from the 'Unemployed Musicians Union' suggesting that the theatre could become a venue for 'underexposed and unemployed bands, sound technicians, and lighting technicians'.[57] In 1987 the Chase Corporation won the tender for redevelopment of the site, planning to refurbish the Regent and 'make it the major theatre of Melbourne and a complex of international renown'.[58] But like so many proposals for the site, this too faltered.

Amidst these discussions were other developments in the live theatre industry in Melbourne, which foreshadowed a final resolution of the Regent Theatre saga. In 1986 Her Majesty's Theatre was listed on the Victorian Heritage Register, after threats of demolition and protests by the unions and theatre community. [59] The author of the report for the Historic Buildings Council commented that the opening of the Arts Centre

in 1984 had complicated the use of existing theatres. Although the Arts Centre provided additional venues, they were State Government-run and had shifted 'resources and influence from the private to the public sector in the live entertainment industry'.[60] Despite this, the author argued that Her Majesty's Theatre was still a viable option as a live theatre venue. Following the theatre's successful listing, Her Majesty's was refitted to accommodate the production of *Cats*. Two years later the Regent Theatre was finally recognised as a significant heritage building and was listed on the Victorian Heritage Register. The statement of significance makes for interesting reading. Despite the arguments in the 1970s, the Regent was considered to have architectural significance

as one of the best surviving examples of an inter-war period picture palace in Australia [with an] imaginative combination of styles and sumptuous and spectacular interior spaces.[61]

The building had historical significance for its part in the development of cinema in Victoria, and for its association with Francis W Thring. But of particular interest to this story is the Regent's social significance as 'the subject of Melbourne's longest running conservation debate'.[62]

The story of the Regent's survival had a happy ending in 1996, when the former picture palace re-opened as a live theatre. After purchasing and refurbishing the Princess Theatre in 1987, Marriner Theatres negotiated a deal with the State Government, MCC and the building unions that resulted in the refurbishment and re-opening of the Regent. The project was expected to cost \$25 million. The Plaza theatre, which had been gutted by the City Square development, re-opened as a licensed ballroom, reflecting Thring's original plans. Allom Lovell and Associates undertook the multi-million dollar restoration and Marriner Theatres took over the lease of the building. The opening night on 17 August 1996 was an emotional event for many, particularly those members present from the Save the Regent Theatre Committee. Ian Williams called it 'the happiest night of my life'.[63]

## Conclusion

Graeme Davison has argued that the Regent Theatre survived

not because the experts said the building was important, but because the trade unions, and many members of the public, cherished the fake opulence and celluloid illusions of an old-time picture palace more than the magnificent emptiness of a City Square.[64]

It's a fair assessment of the saga. The Save the Regent Theatre Committee was instrumental in gathering community support and forcing the Council to request a Committee of Inquiry. Committee member Loris Webster credits Norm Gallagher with saving the theatre,[65] but others would argue that it was Webster and the Committee who had the far greater impact. The Regent Theatre saga is a lesson in the history of the preservation wars of the 1970s and the power of community support. But more than that, the longevity of the debate allowed attitudes and circumstances to change so that the Regent's significance could be recognised and its viability as a live theatre embraced. In the nine years since its re-opening, audiences have been treated to musicals such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *Man of La Mancha*, *We will rock you* and, now, *The lion king*, as well as live music from performers such as Brian Wilson, KD Lang and Jackson Browne. Although some of the buildings around them may have changed since 1929, the Regent and Plaza theatres remain an important part of the Collins Street landscape.

## Endnotes

[1] Thanks are extended to Frank Van Straten, who was a valuable source of information and contacts and who kindly provided feedback on my initial draft. The book he and Elaine Marriner produced, *The Regent Theatre: Melbourne's palace of dreams*, is an excellent source on the entire history of the theatre. Thanks to Elaine Marriner who gave me access to some of the Regent Theatre archives. And finally, thanks to Loris Webster and Ian Williams who kindly shared with me their stories of the Save the Regent Theatre campaign.

[2] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Save the Regent Theatre Committee submission, 'Architect', 'The building of the Regent Theatre', clipping from *Australian Home Beautiful*, 1 April 1929, p. 63.

[3] F Van Straten, *The Regent Theatre: Melbourne's palace of dreams*, ELM Publishing, Melbourne, 1996.

[4] 'Architect', p. 68.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 63.

[6] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Save the Regent Theatre Committee submission, Regent Theatre Gala Opening inaugural programme, 15 March 1929.

[7] S Brand, *Picture palaces and flea-pits: eighty years of Australians at the pictures*, Dreamweaver Books, Sydney, 1983, p. 78.

[8] Frank Van Straten, interview, 13 April 2005.

[9] Van Straten, *The Regent Theatre*, p. 43.

[10] PROV, VPRS 9444/P1, Unit 1, 1969-70, '\$40 million tower goes up in 1971', unsourced newspaper clipping.

[11] PROV, VPRS 9444/P1, Unit 1, 1969-70, 'Save our City Square' flyer.

[12] PROV, VPRS 9444/P1, Unit 1, 1973-74, Melbourne City Council press release, 21 June 1975.

[13] S Yelland, 'Heritage legislation in perspective', in G Davison & C McConville (eds), *A heritage handbook*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, p. 45.

[14] Commonwealth Government of Australia, *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1984, pp. 28-9.

[15] National Trust of Australia (Victoria), *In Trust: the first forty years of the National Trust in Victoria 1956-1996*, National Trust, Melbourne, 1996, p. 46.

[16] *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into feasibility of preserving the Banking Chamber, Commercial Bank of Australia Ltd, Collins St*, Melbourne, 1974.

[17] G Davison, 'The battle for Collins Street', in *A heritage handbook*, pp. 122-3.

[18] *ibid.*

[19] Loris Webster, interview, 27 April 2005.

[20] *ibid.*

[21] M & V Burgmann, *Green bans, red union*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1998, p. 3.

[22] *ibid.*, pp. 238-40.

[23] PROV, VPRS 12827/P4, Unit 10, 55/20/16, 'Overacting at the Regent', clipping from *Herald*(Melbourne), 17 November 1974.

[24] Australian Building Construction Employees & Builders Labourers Federation, *Builders' laborers defend the people's heritage*, Melbourne, 1975 (Regent Theatre archives).

[25] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, FH Rogan, Transcript of evidence to Committee of Inquiry, 11 July 1975, p. 229.

[26] Van Straten, *The Regent Theatre*, p. 66.

[27] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 177, 1750/13/1, Ian Williams to Premier Rupert Hamer, 18 August 1973.

[28] V Fairfax, *A place across the river: they aspired to create the Victorian Arts Centre*, Macmillan Art Publishing, Melbourne, 2002, p. 120.

[29] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 177, 1750/13/1, KD Green to George Fairfax, 9 October 1973.

[30] Fairfax, *ibid.*

[31] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Save the Regent Theatre Committee submission, Sir Robert Helpmann to TR Laidlaw, 8 July 1974.

[32] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Save the Regent Theatre Committee submission, Dame Joan Hammond to TR Laidlaw, 5 August 1974.

[33] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 177, 1750/13/1, 'Gough may save the Regent', clipping from *Sunday Press*, 10 March 1974.

[34] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Save the Regent Theatre Committee submission, Brian McKinlay, 'Fighting for an amazing pleasure dome', clipping from *Nation Review*, 8 March 1974.

[35] PROV, VPRS 12827/P1, Unit 143, 0/29-02-08-1, Clarke Gazzard Pty Ltd, *Melbourne civic square feasibility study*, August 1974.

[36] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 177, 1750/13/3, Lord Mayor Ron Walker to Premier Rupert Hamer, 2 December 1974.

[37] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Save the Regent Theatre Committee submission, 'Theatre splendour must be preserved', clipping from *Trust Newsletter*, October 1974, pp. 8-10.

[38] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 177, 1750/13/3, FT Cron, 'Regent Theatre', 19 February 1975.

[39] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Historic Buildings Preservation Council, *Report to the Minister for Planning, the Honourable A. J. Hunt, M.L.C on the application by the Save the Regent Theatre Committee for the Regent and Plaza Theatres Collins Street, Melbourne to be added to the register of historic buildings*, August 1975, p. 5.

[40] PROV, VPRS 12827/P4, Unit 10, 55/20/16, public advertisement, clipping from *Herald*, 8 March 1975.

[41] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 178, 1750/13/7, Mrs Del Pascoe to FT Cron, 9 March 1975.

[42] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 178, 1750/13/7, Mr CEL Horton to FT Cron, undated.

[43] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 178, 1750/13/7, Paul McCluskey, 11 July 1975.

[44] PROV, VPRS 7614/P1, Unit 178, 1750/13/7, Rev. JE Hull to FT Cron, 8 February 1975.

[45] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Melbourne City Council submission, John D Fisher to the Editor, clipping from *Herald and Weekly Times*, 10 April 1975.

[46] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, FH Rogan, Transcript of evidence to Committee of Inquiry, 9 July 1975.

[47] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, Melbourne City Council submission, p. 3.

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[49] PROV, VPRS 9963/P1, Unit 1, National Trust of Australia (Victoria) submission.

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