

DUBBO STORIES people place possessions

SENSE OF PLACE

What is Dubbo's sense of place, that elusive quality that makes us feel we belong to a place? This was the question we set ourselves when invited to make an exhibition about Dubbo in the Western Plains Cultural Centre. An exhibition is a good way to explore the meaning of place. We experience an exhibition, like a place, by moving through it with all our senses alive to its shifting shapes and moods. It's a cultural landscape constructed from material objects and photographs but also from intangible things like myth and memory. Books, on the other hand, tell the history of places as a chronology, like a town biography from birth to maturity. This has been done well by local historians Marion Dormer and Bill Hornage. Also, an exhibition cannot be isolated from the place itself, from its setting in Dubbo today. We haven't tried to duplicate the experience of other significant places like Old Dubbo Gaol, Dundullimal, Western Plains Zoo or the pleasure of walking the heritage trails of Dubbo streets, bushland and riverbanks.

TREE OF LIFE

As designer Jisuk Han and I were driving to and from Dubbo wondering about its 'sense of place' we became intrigued by the distinctive solitary dead trees in the landscape. They are not only familiar landmarks but symbols of nature's duration, the cycle of life and death, decay and renewal. We decided to make the tree the exhibition centrepiece, a symbol of the embodied memory of place, its tree of life. The intangible qualities of environment are enlivened by the soundscape that envelopes the tree. These evocative environmental sounds were recorded in Dubbo and composed by the highly acclaimed Wax Design Studio.

THUBBAGAH DREAMING

Aboriginal landscapes breathe with the sighs and spirits of ancestors whose presence is celebrated in story and performance. The exhibition acknowledges the Thubbagah people as the traditional owners of country. The Dubbo Museum collection has a significant group of marrarra, the distinctive carved trees of the western plains marking initiation and burial sites. But they cannot be shown in public until Thubbagah elders determine where they belong, past and future. Instead an 1800s drawing of a carved tree is reproduced on the large gallery window. The Thubbagah showcase displays many fine stone and wooden objects from the collection. These material traces of ancestors are important as tangible links with continuing lore and culture.

PASTORAL LANDSCAPES

Giant agricultural relics seem eerily out of place in this old school hall: Wilkins and Kennedy's racy red buggy, Paxton's ponderous portable steam engine, Koerstz's timeless Terramungamine woolpress. But these relics of an older pastoral industry are symbols of the continuity of the western plains pastoral landscape. The Australian Hero wagon is heroic in many ways: it's in exceptional condition and we know it was owned by local Dubbo identity George Buck. But more, it's a symbol of the Australian bush legend. The Centre was also very fortunate to have on loan for its September 2006 opening another icon of Australian identity: George Lambert's splendid painting Across the black soil plains 1899 (Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales).

STREETSCAPE DREAMSCAPES

Stretched through the exhibition like an unfolding panorama Dubbo streetscapes reveal the changing facades of buildings and their stories within. This display draws on the extensive research by Barbara Russell and Sandra Smith for the 150 Anniversary Celebrations in 1999. The remarkable photographs from the museum collection are now in the Macquarie Regional Library. The aim was not to tell a history of Dubbo from village to city, although all the ingredients for this are there, but to convey a sense of change and continuity. People stand proudly outside their shops and offices amongst a profusion of signs, goods and other enticements. Sometimes the shopfront opposite is reflected in the gleaming windows. 1955 was a watershed for the main streets of Dubbo, not only because of the big flood of that year, but a Council ordinance removed all verandahs in case posts were hit by cars. Some called it progress, others heritage vandalism. My favourite image is 'Castlereagh Hotel aflame 1926'. The slow camera exposure has caught ghostly traces of people running in panic from the blaze.

STORYTELLERS OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

A museum collection is a repository of the collective memory of a place. This Dubbo collection is special, not only because things are in great condition, they've been cared for, but they have 'provenance'. This means they have story, we know who made, owned, loved and lost them. That wedding dress was worn by three generations of Serisier brides, and another not worn because her fiance did not return from the war. That handmade Willow cake tin banjo was made

and used by taxi-driver Jacky Chong. That artificial arm was worn by Bill Cross after he lost his own at Gallipoli. There are trophies and medals galore, each won by a Dubbo talent for skill and know-how: Cullen for the fattest lamb, Currie for the flawless piano recital, Spears the fastest cyclist, Alam the finest shop display and more. Here is a collection of memory fragments.

The past remains mysterious because it's so fragmented. Museums like this help us remember by bringing the fragments of everyday experience back with a sense of familiar cohesion, like telling a story makes us share experiences. We make connections, imagination stirs, memory and emotion flow. We like these people, we know them, we empathise. We're part of this place now, we have a history here. We sense place, we feel like we belong. That's the 'sense of place' – the feeling of belonging. This old school hall is now Dubbo's storytelling place. By telling story we share private memories and so collect public memory. The museum becomes a repository of collective memory, the ties that bind community. The stories here are not only the subject of the story – a Chinese taxidriver, a French entrepreneur, an English pastoralist, a Lebanese shopkeeper, a Scots banker, a novelist, cyclist, farmer, fruitseller - but they are the storytellers themselves. It's like a conversation across time and place. Of course there are many other stories of pioneering families, sports heroes and valued citizens but these are not represented in the existing collection. Perhaps family and friends will contribute by loaning their possessions for the adjunct gallery Stories from the Western Plains. This is how it will grow and make new stories to reflect Dubbo's expanded collective memory.



POSSESSIONS ON OPEN STORAGE

At the end of the exhibition is a giant glass-fronted store of objects from the collection. There are many stories hidden here, in the worn edges, stains and chips that made an object loved and used. They are presented on open storage, brought into the light from the darkness of the storeroom and forgetfulness. The idea is that in the future an object can be chosen from this open store, or a new one added, researched and made into a story for a new storyteller showcase. In this way the exhibition will evolve as an ongoing conversation about Dubbo people, place and possessions.

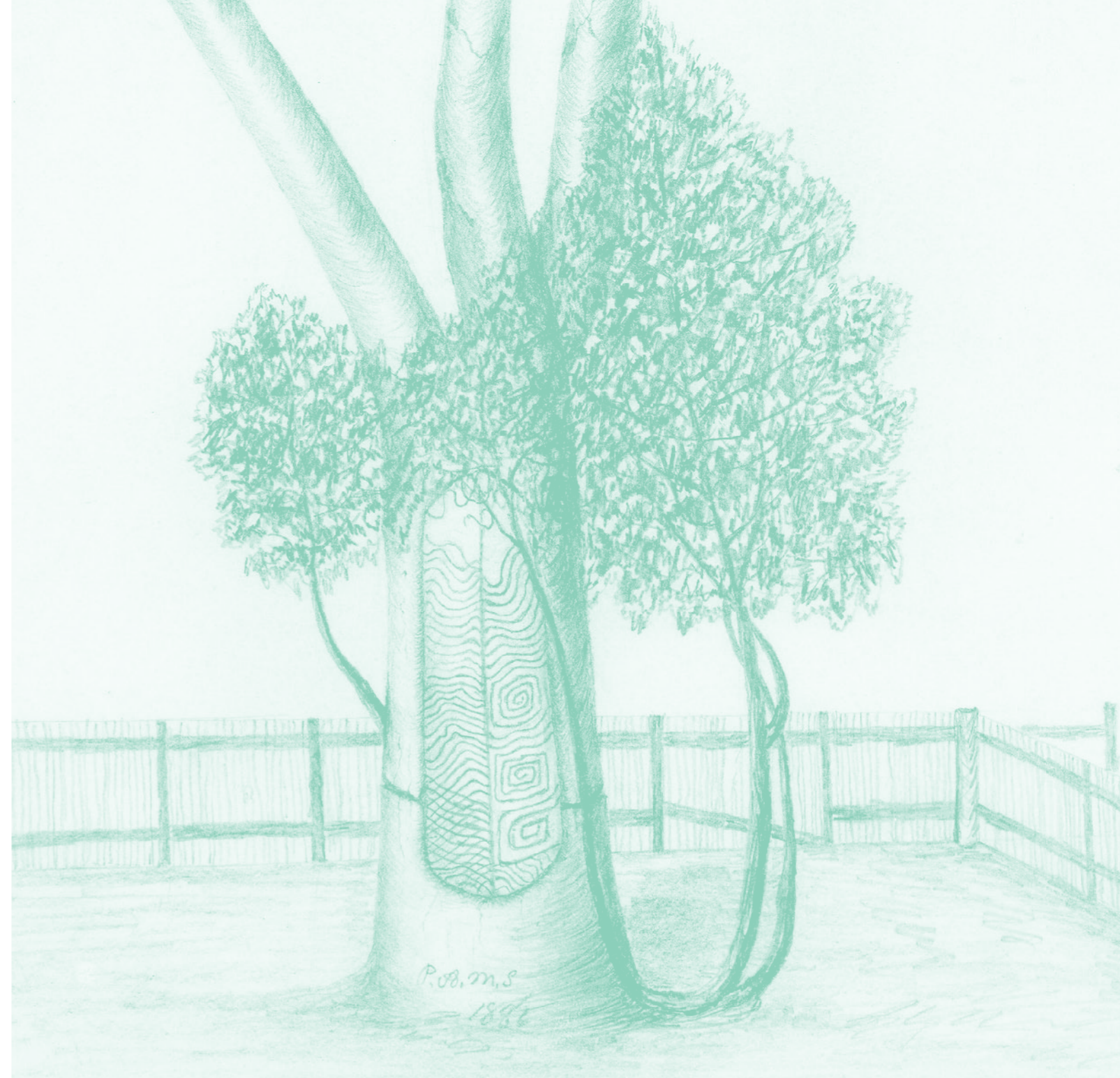
of Dubbo's passing parade. One photo stands out for me: Dubbo Carnival 1922. A cross-section of townspeople dressed up as their favourite celebrity: Charlie Chaplin, Dad and Dave, Bozo the clown, the Sheik, femme fatale, swashbuckler and bushranger. Who would be the favourites for a Dubbo Carnival 2006? This has always been a town that loves to dress up for fun and fanfare, for the street, stage or sports field. Dubbo proves that the elusive sense of place is in the irrepressible spirit of its people. For people make place and are shaped by it in turn.

PASSING PARADE OF PLACE

Photographs from the collection are on display to give glimpses

Peter Emmett
Curator
September 2006

Acknowledgements:
Exhibition design X Squared Design
Soundscape Wax Sound Design



IMAGES: Front Page: **Aboriginal Carved Tree** 1886. Illustration by Percy AM Sloane.
All objects & photographs Collection Dubbo Regional Museum
Image rear page: **Dubbo Olympic Pool** 1938. Photographer unknown

1	2	3	4
9a			

5	6	7	8
9b			

- Images Inside Spread:
1. Elizabeth 'Granny' Harper c. 1910 (photographer unknown)
 2. Cockleshell Corner Brick Mould
 3. Trophy won by A.H & R.M Cullen 1949
 4. Bernard and Elizabeth Cullen c. 1880 (photographer unknown)
 5. Jack Chong 1915 (photographer unknown)
 6. 'Willow' cake tin Banjo
 7. Bill Cross' wooden carved arm
 8. Mr William Cross (photographer unknown)
- 9a & 9b. Commercial Banking Cullen. 1867-1907
193 Macquarie Street (photographer unknown)
Objects photographed by Greg Piper

Dubbo Regional Museum is located at the Western Plains Cultural Centre, 76 Wingewarra Street Dubbo NSW.

Opening hours:
Wednesday - Monday 10.00am to 4.00pm
Closed Tuesdays, Good Friday, Christmas Day and Boxing Day

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