

‘The Ruins Caused a Catch in the Throat as Memories Came Flooding in’

Melbourne’s Bread and Cheese Club and Postwar Literary Urban Conservationism

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The origins of a conservation ethos in the urban Australia of the late 1960s and early 1970s is commonly assumed to stem from international influences. Yet there is also a local cultural element to this urban conservationism, the recognition, celebration and preservation of historic environments, which pre-dates the 1970s popular heritage movement. A generation of postwar urbanists espoused ties between the preservation (or creation) of monuments and the purposeful promotion of nationhood and “national character”, proposing fresh understandings of the value of the Australian urban environment. This paper considers the mid-twentieth century and the nascent recognition of the potential value of urban-historic environments in Australia. It examines the role of Melbourne’s prolific and diverse Bread and Cheese Club, which was at its most active in the 1940s and 1950s. In publishing and otherwise discoursing on issues not just of urban decay and the loss of nineteenth-century city fabric, but also of the broader urban experience, the Bread and Cheese Club’s membership provide a record of the polarised attitudes toward the city among literary nationalists in the mid-twentieth century. The literary suppression of Australian urban life, that of Sydney’s “Bush Bohemians”, was largely overcome by this Melbourne literary set. The Bread and Cheese Club’s archives illustrate an older ambivalence, but also a new-found affection, felt by women and men in mid-century Melbourne towards “progress”, “modernisation” and “heritage”.

Keywords — *urban heritage; interwar and postwar Melbourne; progress and modernisation; literary societies.*

INTRODUCTION

“The face of Melbourne is changing every day,” Maie Casey observed in her seminal 1953 co-authored book *Early Melbourne Architecture*, a survey of “some of the early buildings that still exist in Melbourne.” (Casey ix) A loving photographic overview of structures small and large from the first century of Australian colonisation, books like Casey’s do not conform to our expectations of the way mid-twentieth-century Australians felt about their cities. Indeed, Casey’s plea for the preservation of buildings from the previous century – in a city which, like all Australian capitals, had taken postwar modernisation as its watchword – seems like a peculiarity for the time.

Casey’s text formed the basis for the Victorian Trust’s first classification list, which took shape in the late 1950s. However, at the periphery, networked into this body and its leadership, influencing their activities and involved in their

own activism, were groups such as the Bread and Cheese Club (active 1938–58, disbanded 1988). The concerns of this prominent postwar literary society, an organisation of self-styled “bohemians”, provides additional insight into the social, cultural and heritage interests of a particular type of Australian man – women were not admitted to the club – in this period. It was also one significant (if fledgling) organisation in combining calls for recognition of cultural heritage and place preservation, particularly in the 1950s. At the core of urban heritage activities in Melbourne was the nascent National Trust. As the latter parts of this paper reveal, the heritage interests of the Bread and Cheese Club, which conflicted with the National Trust, reveal a plurality of perspectives around conservation at this time.

The Bread and Cheese Club met regularly at places around Melbourne to discuss its member’s wide-ranging interests: broadly, Australian (and Melbourne’s) culture. It also made its own contribution via its involvement in Melbourne’s cultural life and by publishing texts. The first five years of the club were commemorated in a small, handsome, copiously illustrated volume, *Fellows All* (1943), resonant with the restrained good humour of members. The club was modelled on a short-lived 1850s collective of the same name and its journal, *Bohemian*, was patterned on a 1890s magazine; the two shared at least one contributor in Robert Henderson Croll. The twentieth-century *Bohemian* is a useful historical source, and we also consider the activities of prominent club members like J.K. (John Kinmont) Moir (awarded an OBE in 1952), Croll and John Lynch, who shared an interest in Melbourne’s urban history and historic environments.

THE MILIEU

How did the Bread and Cheese Club, and by extension Melburnians and Australians understand urban heritage in this mid-century period? Certainly, the 1970s Australian Heritage Movement, the Whitlam Government’s Inquiry into the National Estate, and the subsequent forming of an Australian heritage industry have various postwar impetuses that demand examination (Davison, 1991). Although defining itself in reactionary terms, as countering modernity and progress, the Australian heritage movement drew on numerous “postwar modern” urban heritage ideas, including activist, classification and conservation processes, whereby the total number of heritage places could be known and thence protected (Whitcomb and Gregory, 11). These practices reflected the broader context of postwar urbanism and urban life. Obviously, there was no consensus about how to “do” urban heritage or to “raise” a heritage consciousness. If there was a recognised idea of built environment preservation in the 1950s it was closer to aspirations to conserve individual “best types”, stunning or telling works of architecture, commonly identified at moments when such places were threatened by demolition.

We do not, in this paper, seek to make a case for the Bread and Cheese Club as central players in the nascent heritage “scene”, dominated by the National Trust and figures like Casey, Robin Boyd, Brian and Hilary Lewis and David Saunders. Nor was the Bread and Cheese Club a serious literary movement, much less a high-brow society (Fitzpatrick 2012). Rather than elevate it or its members, we intend to locate this organisation as one of a range of interest groups which serve, in hindsight, as a bellwether for the changing understanding of the function and value of the Melbourne historic environment, older buildings, spaces and places. As a particular kind of heritage public, holding sectional interests, it empowers a study into community-orientated heritage values many decades before such ideas were articulated, much less formalised, by the heritage management field.

Fortuitously, the Bread and Cheese Club has left behind a significant archive that enables such an inquiry. Its activities were reported on by metropolitan newspapers. Its members maintained a healthy output of diverse publications. Its organisational records are deposited at the State Library of Victoria. In this group’s journal and its minutes, we see the strengthening of the perceived nexus between nationalism in its cultural and artistic manifestation; “local” political agency outside conventional party (and class-based) politics; the appreciation and furtherance of Australian history; and preservation of the built and natural environment. If we are to find the roots of a “consciousness” regarding innately valuable Australian urban fabric in the context of the wider urban environment, it is in organisations like this.

THE INTERWAR CONTEXT

Dedicated to “Mateship, Art and Letters”, the Bread and Cheese Club was formed in 1938. Historian John Arnold calls it “the urban manifestation of the “Walkabout” school of Australian nationalism” (Arnold 1991). This characterisation suggests its interests were both urban and the rural though inflected towards the former. Similar interrelationships between city and bush figured in the group’s literary precursors in Sydney, intersecting with Australian luminaries such as Henry Lawson and the Lindsays, and surfacing again in the postwar period in Russel Ward’s writings. Graeme Davison has suggested that the self-styled turn-of-the-century bohemians, the Sydney literary sect, with their emphasis on non-urban subjects, lived urban lives on the outskirts of Sydney, their apparent rejection of the Australian city for the bush notwithstanding (Davison, 1978). The same cannot be said for the Bread and Cheese Club. Although interested in what lay beyond Melbourne, the group did not perpetuate myths of regional or bush origins for themselves or by extension the Australian nation. Nevertheless, the Club shared some similarities with earlier Australian bohemians, with their attempts (albeit pithy) at being avant-garde (Moore, 2012). These were self-styled urbane figures, possessing a strong interest in both cities and regional Australia, which manifested in a multitude of ways.

The Bread and Cheese Club was organisationally playful. Its office-bearers were comically designated “Knight Grand Cheese”, “Worthy Scribe,” “Trusty Bagman” and “Honorable Trencherman” – the first of these being Croll (Malloch, 33). The founder Knight Grand Cheese was Moir, typified in *Fellows All* as a “high executive in a bustling commercial firm” (Malloch, 5), and who is reputed – as per historian Richard Haese – as having never written “a literate word in his life” (Haese, 106). The small group began meetings “with the definite aim of fostering Australian art and literature” (Malloch, 10). Its original meeting place was at a terrace house-cum-worker cottage at 132 Cubitt Street, the home of club member and artist Ted Turner, in one of Melbourne’s most notoriously down-at-heel suburbs, Richmond (McCalman; Grant and Serle, 251). Mapping Richmond clockwise, it is surrounded by the better-heeled suburbs of Kew, Hawthorn, Toorak, South Yarra and East Melbourne. Located in the middle, perfectly positioned yet predominantly working class, Richmond seemingly became a de-facto inner Melbourne bohemia for the club. The group soon outgrew Cubitt Street. It moved to 270 Post Office Place – close enough to “Arcade Alley” for either street address to suffice – in central Melbourne in 1940, close to the Bourke Street shopping district.

Paralleling club members’ attraction to gritty Richmond, the way in which this CBD premises is described in *Fellows All* relishes its squalid nature:

The view from the gallery is anything but alluring. Looking down into the courtyard one sees broken boxes and empty bottles. There are a few old tins here and there, little heaps of rubbish and several, in fact many, stray cats of all nationalities.

The roofs of the smaller surrounding buildings are rusty and are covered with debris of every imaginable description. The back premises of several factories obtrude themselves, and fail signally to lend picturesqueness to the scene.

Rising high above the smaller buildings are the rear parts of some of the massive warehouses and emporia adjacent to the Club’s premises. The view is anything but inspiring, but it is certainly Bohemian (Malloch, 27).

The urbanism redolent in this description is one that glories in its lack of respectability and its down-at-heel flavour. It represents a mid-century Melbourne rarely explored or espoused, except by reformers hoping to expose inequalities or injustice (Barnett, Burt and Heath, 77; Luscombe, 8). For the most part, the society’s initial interests were the fostering of a particular irreverent bonhomie as well as an impressive publishing schedule, doubly extraordinary given the wartime restrictions prevailing in its early years. *Fellows All* includes a list of 28 productions, ranging from a greeting card through books of verse and illustrated volumes such as Croll’s highly successful *Art of the Australian Aboriginal*. Its first run of a

thousand copies sold out in pre-order.

Moir’s activities were most indicative of the organisation’s nascent interest in the urban environment. In 1940, he published *Australia’s First Electric Tram*, a 28-page illustrated booklet examining the brief history of the Doncaster to Box Hill tramway (Moir, 1940). That this work was deemed appropriate to the interests of the club must surely suggest, more than anything, Moir’s significance as a figure in its ranks and his role in shaping the club’s interests. The pamphlet’s popularity is reflected in the fact that it was reprinted at least four more times, and read into the 1960s and 1970s. It suggests a wide interest in Melbourne and its transport history.

Perhaps more significant in urban terms was Moir’s use of the camera. He was an avid photographer, and over 100 of his images from the 1930s appear in the State Library of Victoria catalogue (and are available online). Moir’s photographic subject was Melbourne. He covers the CBD and inner suburbs: streetscapes, buildings and façades feature strongly along with monuments and even rubble and remains. Interested in old pubs – perhaps his drinking grounds – he recorded the demolition of the Standard Hotel (corner Little Collins and Exhibition Streets) in 1937 and the Junction Hotel (Yarra Glen and Steele’s Creek Roads) in 1936. Although not necessarily the most gifted writer, photographer or activist, Moir leaves a powerful record of fading interwar Melbourne heritage.

Moir’s passion for Melbourne’s history was equally pervasive (Griffiths, 172-3). In addition to his tramway booklet, the photographs testify to the attraction Victorian-era buildings held for him, particularly those once the residences of literary or other significant men. Paralleling the efforts of memorialist Isaac Selby, his interest in monuments and gravestones, including the Batman memorial, speak to well-established heritage activities of the period (Davison 2001). That these activities date to the 1930s was no coincidence. Melbourne itself marked its centenary in 1934, and celebrations reached fever pitch across the city (Centenary Celebrations Council). Moir was therefore instrumental in documenting and advocating for the value of heritage at a time when efforts were predominantly led by sympathetic individuals. Moreover, he put his heritage interests into practice: he facilitated the removal of a cottage once occupied by the seminal Australian writer Adam Lindsay Gordon from the grounds of a Ballarat hotel to the city’s botanical gardens (where it was subsequently classified by the National Trust) (Malloch, 81).

THE POSTWAR DECADES

For the Bread and Cheese set at the turn of the 1950s-60s decade, the contrasts between cultural outputs on offer were stark. The club in its initial decade had been primarily concerned with a proactive commemoration of the writers and other cultural producers it saw as significant Australian voices. Most of them were long deceased, though Moir had announced his desire to create a database of active Australian writers in the early 1940s. Its interests also extended to Indigenous history. In the early 1950s, the group moved a 1930s William Barak monument from Healesville main street to Barak’s grave in Coranderrk cemetery; three hundred people, including members of the Indigenous community, attended its re-dedication (Hanson, 2012).

As part of its literary nationalism, the Bread and Cheese Club’s loyalty to the British Crown was equally firm, and this was affirmed through its urban interests. In March 1954, the recently-coroneted Queen Elizabeth II visited Melbourne, and the group’s literary and urban interests collided. Getting into the festive spirit, the club gifted some books to the royal family. Among the nine selected – in addition to works on the Great Barrier Reef, wildflowers of Australia (a Moir interest), literary and children texts – the collection included Rob Hillier’s *Portrait of Melbourne* (1951) and Casey’s *Early Melbourne Architecture*. The group “received the Queen’s thanks”, and the next issue of *Bohemian* was proclaimed the “Royal Visit Issue”. By this time, the group had been moved on from Arcade Alley and was meeting in the basement of 44 Market Street on the corner of Flinders Lane.

From the perspective of the group, books on urban history and architecture were necessary for understanding 1950s

Melbourne and Australia. Paralleling Casey's book, Hillier's text presents a history of Melbourne, articulated as a Victorian (era) city, alongside sketches and photographs. Hillier's emphasis is more historical than contemporary, and older buildings dominate his pages. For Hillier, Melbourne had a worthy past, endowing the city with a legacy that operated to the present-day, producing a valuable urban heritage. During the 1950s, the Bread and Cheese Club sought to capture and disseminate this heritage to anyone that would listen, including along the networks of Empire. At this moment of rapid modernisation, the mid-1950s – the city fast-changing, whether for the 1956 Olympics or the development boom – Melburnians like those in this group began to both see and present their city, including its historic environments, with fresh eyes and via numerous mediums.

With its views on the value of the cityscape firming, by 1960 the Bread and Cheese Club was also keen to articulate what it was against. The challenge for them was what Robin Boyd termed in 1958 as "Austerica": the uneducated, superficial and consumerist taste-making in Australia along the lines of the United States (Boyd 1958). Equally, Boyd was concerned about the impact of American urbanism on the Australian city, concerns which were lyrically expressed by the Club's organs. Lynch berated vile Americans and their pernicious influence in a poem published in the club's journal of which he was an associate editor:

*The sated sadism, the sex excesses,
The suffering that spill from Mickey Spillane
By millions, sell ('J. K.')*

While Shirley Thomas, writing in an affiliated poetry journal, Kaleidoscope, celebrated the heritage of the old seaside suburb of St Kilda:

*From the church on the hill
The carillon floats a hymn
Over the roads and the streets and the houses
Down to the dreaming, listening air (Thomas, 1960).*

These two poems, published the same year, stand as examples of a worldview held by what might be benignly known as the cultural elite of mid-twentieth-century Australia. The first, in particular, was complementary to Ward's 1958 *Australian Legend* and Ward's pursuit of an intrinsically Australian outlook (even if its origins were to be found in the bush). *Bohemia* happily recorded the establishment of sundry historical societies and advocated for "more Australian items on the radio and T.V." (Anonymous 1959). In doing so, it was following a long-argued line for (probably, governmental) support for local cultural production that would not be heeded until the late 1960s.

The group also advocated against the despoliation of natural landscapes, such as the proposal to create a luxury hotel-motel Wilson's Promontory, on which threat Lynch wrote in 1963:

*Twenty-five organizations, hundreds of individuals and families, artists, writers, poets, photographers and
lovers of unsophisticated virgin bushland, object to this "project" ... make a big noise, write to your local
M.P., to the papers, make a Protest' ('J. L.')*

In this case, Wilson's Promontory was understood as an unaltered landscape, reflecting the contemporary belief that natural and human landscapes were distinct. A similar nascent environmental campaign existed for the Yarra River at this time, though the Bread and Cheese Club expressed no views on it. A broader environmental consciousness is nevertheless perceptible in the club, reflecting contemporary attitudes to natural conservation and development.

THE NATIONAL TRUST ON THE MELBOURNE SCENE

Concerned with Australian history, culture and landscapes, the club's members increased its interest in the built environment across the period. Often forced to change its venue, the Bohemian recorded sorrow amongst members at being obliged to leave premises behind, such as when in 1959 the club's first "real" premises, at Arcade Alley, was demolished for extensions on Buckley and Nunn's store ('Buckley's') "The ruins caused a catch in the throat," the club's organ recorded, "as memories came flooding in" (Anonymous 1960). The notion of a "city of collective memory" resonated for this group (Boyer).

The following year the magazine noted with sadness the passing of Melbourne's Eastern Market, one of the city's three central nineteenth-century market buildings, to make way for the city's first modern international hotel, the Southern Cross. The market had been a popular destination for "Cheesers" particularly as it included Hanley's second-hand bookshop (on the Bourke Street frontage) ('Readers'). In expressing sadness at the Market's passing, the club and Bohemian seem to have contrarily out of step with convention. Few others mourned the demise of a building described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as "sinister" and "leprous" ('A Melbourne Observer'), "the city's ugliest landmark" (Jillett) and by the slightly more mild-mannered *Age* as Melbourne's "great white elephant" ('Muddled Dealings').

Such places were collateral damage in a city bound to progress. This was the era during which one highly successful demolition business, its signs announcing, "Whelan the Wrecker is here", were ubiquitous across the city (Annear). The demolition of the Fish Markets on Flinders Street in late 1959 equally yielded little public outcry ('Firemen Fight Smoke In Blaze', 1959). Indeed, the National Trust and its lack of intervention in many instances of demolition suggesting the extent to which this nascent heritage activist organisation was in step with conventional views on urban conservation (Spearritt, 253). For preservationists, heritage retention was part of achieving modern progress, but few buildings (by today's standards) were *worthy* of retention (National Trust, 1948). The Bread and Cheese Club's outcry over the Eastern Market and Post Office Place was, therefore, striking insofar as it questioned what might be considered heritage at this time.

Similarly, Casey's *Early Melbourne Architecture* and the early classification activities of the National Trust did not emphasise sites of consumption such as markets, arcades and shopping strips. This was despite dedicating considerable attention to other far more utilitarian, structures such as warehouses, rustic terraces and even the Old Melbourne Gaol (Casey). The Eastern Market's replacement, the Southern Cross Hotel, was a signal that Melbourne was moving into a new global era. What had come before at the site mattered little in this specific context. Notably, both buildings are now mourned as symbols of distinct eras.

The club was increasingly aware of the changes Melbourne was undergoing. In his capacity as Chairman of the National Trust, it welcomed Brian Lewis to address its 6 November 1960 meeting. Lewis, the Chair of Architecture at the University of Melbourne, was a name to contend with in the early heritage circles. His wife Hilary (who had worked for Patrick Abercrombie in England) was at least as vocal on the preservation of portions of Melbourne they deemed significant, such as Parkville, where they lived. She joined the National Trust classification committee in the 1960s (National Trust).

The club's interactions with Brian Lewis and the National Trust began a few months earlier when it announced a campaign for the preservation of the Lindsay family home, Lisnacrieve, in Creswick, "in recognition of the cultural achievements of the Lindsays" ('Club aims' 1960). The *Age* reported in September of this year that the club "sees the home primarily as a monument to the Lindsay family, and their very considerable contributions to literature, painting and the arts generally" – whereas the National Trust, including Lewis, saw the Lindsay paintings, and antique furniture, as components of a "unique" gallery (Radic, 1960).

The Bread and Cheese Club's approach to heritage was quite different to the National Trust's. Although both parties favoured agitation for the purchase and presentation to the nation of the Lindsays' heritage, only the Bread and Cheese

Club believed that their heritage was encapsulated by the home as a physical building and living place. Lewis, believing the architecture of the building was insignificant, took the view that the acquisition of the objects in the Lindsays' home was sufficient from a preservation perspective. The view of the Bread and Cheese Club was not forwarded to the National Trust classification committee for formal consideration. After all, this committee did not account for community sentiment in its activities: places were nominated by the committee, other National Trust members, or external experts in fields ranging from history to engineering to the public service, and then considered for classification. Perhaps accounting for its focus was the make-up of the committee, at first comprised exclusively of architects such as Saunders, who assessed places based on broad notions of historical and architectural importance.

In October 1960, the Ballarat branch of the National Trust sent details to this committee about the "Joss House, the Ballarat East Library, Lindsay home at Creswick, and some aboriginal mounds"; however, the committee elected only to classify the Joss House ("D" for historical reasons) (Minutes, 1960). Ultimately, the National Trust had little interest in Lisnacrieve because it failed to meet the classification committee's historical and architectural thresholds. In this regard, Lewis' opinion prevailed: the objects were ultimately acquired, and today a simulation of the Lindsays' drawing room is a feature of the Ballarat Art Gallery. The home was demolished at the end of the 1960s.

When Lewis spoke to the club in October 1960, he shared with them such views on conservation. He gave a slide presentation and presented his opinions on the legacy of nineteenth-century Melbourne still around them:

He deplored the expedient activity in bulldozing so many old buildings of historical and architectural worth, and the industry fabricating antiques.

He said: It is impossible to hold all we would like to keep, but the grading of buildings by the National Trust according to historical and architectural worth was invaluable.

Echoing Lynch's distaste for postwar consumerism, Lewis was also reported denigrating prevailing design tastes in a way that gelled with Boyd's "Austerica". Lewis told his audience:

If the current phase of architecture were given a name it would be the magazine era, due to the effects of the ready circulation of glossy magazines the world over on building trends ('Victorian' 1961).

The Bread and Cheese Club reflected broader cultural attitudes towards Australian culture and, significantly, local urbanism and heritage. It disbanded in 1988, an event reported by the *Weekend Australian*. An exhibition about the club, curated by Arnold, was then held at the State Library (McKenna 1989; Bread and Cheese Club 1988). These events followed three decades of decline, beginning with Moir's death (from malnutrition) in 1958. Over its final years, the club had existed solely to endow the Litchfield Award for Literature, after Northern Territory author Jessie Litchfield, who died at Moir's Richmond home in 1956. Ironically, six of the seven people that dissolved the club were women.

CONCLUSION

While the Bread and Cheese Club has often made fleeting appearances in histories of mid-century Melbourne, its role in the city's urban history has never been emphasised. The Club possessed strong attachments to the city, reflecting a changing relationship between Melburnians and place, heritage and community. In addition to the society's writings, photography and other activities, the interaction between the National Trust and the Bread and Cheese Club in 1960 made such relationships especially salient. During this heritage encounter, this coming together of mid-century Melbourne networks, preservationist and literary, friction over heritage surfaced.

Both organisations were operating in postwar modernising Melbourne and possessed a shared belief in the ideology of progress and the important albeit limited role that heritage might play as part of that. Practically, the Bread and

Cheese Club sought the preservation of what we now identify as social and cultural heritage, of their meetings houses, of bookshops and markets, of the home of a celebrated literary family. The club believed that this heritage was embodied in place, but was unable to articulate the value of this place in ways that resonated with Melbourne's dominant mid-century preservationists. The National Trust's nascent approaches to classification simply did not account for a notable artistic family's home in Creswick, nor the Eastern Market or, for that matter, cultural or social hubs such as Post Office Place. While the Bread and Cheese Club probably agreed with what Lewis had to say in his lecture to them, the buildings in his slides, though of core interest to architectural preservationists, were perhaps of peripheral interest to this literary club, in comparison to the fast-disappearing everyday places where they visited and shopped, met and congregated.

Not content with being mere witnesses to the substantive urban change around them, the Bread and Cheese Club sought allies to protect the buildings that intimately impacted them. These included a wide range of places, dating from the early periods of colonisation onwards. Melbourne becomes represented as a city grappling with its Victorian-era heritage, attempting to redefine itself as a modern city without the destruction of its historic environments, particularly the stone, brick and vernacular buildings of the 1880s "Marvellous Melbourne" period. The perceived narrowness of urban preservationists' interests – which reflected the concerns of heritage protagonists and organisations across Australia and the Western World – ultimately contributed to a backlash and a popular heritage movement in the 1970s. The Australian heritage movement of academics, architects and planners, resident action groups, construction unions, sympathetic policymakers, a new generation of National Trust leadership, and others, felt that the heritage of their communities was not being represented, and formed and re-formed coalitions and networks to take matters into their own hands. The ageing members of the by-then faded Bread and Cheese Club would have been sympathetic to this cause.

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