'Nostalgia or Nostophobia?: Trends in the interpretation of Australia's railway industrial heritage'

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Introduction

This paper examines trends in the interpretation of Australia's industrial railway heritage by focusing on four specific sites, notably the Eveleigh Railway Workshops in New South Wales, the Inveresk Railway Workshops in Tasmania, the Midland Workshops in Western Australia and the Ipswich Workshops in Queensland. All four of these sites are recognised as heritage places, and all have undergone redevelopment and adaptive re-use since the 1990s. In the following discussion I aim to show how the combination of these two factors has affected not only the preservation of their tangible remains but also the approach taken to the interpretation of their intangible cultural heritage. Beginning with some introductory remarks, which highlight some key issues, I proceed to define the concepts that provide the framework for my discussion, before proceeding to examine developments at the four case study sites.

Railways have a long history of being valued dating back to the nineteenth century when the romance of steam captured popular imagination all around the world. Its current popularity can, however, be more precisely related to the slow death of steam since the late 1950s, the subsequent decline of railway services and the more recent closure of railway facilities in Australia as well as in other countries. These changes played an important role in transforming many railway facilities into sites of heritage and nostalgia. Yet I would argue that industrial railway heritage has an ambiguous position in our national consciousness.[i] While it is certainly true that growing numbers of people have begun to recognise that the relics of industry are not necessarily 'synonymous with ugliness',[ii] few defunct industrial railway sites have been transformed into museums or heritage centres. Most of the industrial sites that have escaped demolition are government-owned and prominent among these are railway workshops that operated as state-owned enterprises from the late nineteenth century. The significance of such railway facilities has been recognised through listings on various Heritage Registers and at least some of their built fabric and material culture has been retained. Over the last decade State Government administrators and policy makers have allocated funds to manage the conservation of their tangible remains in response to pressure from heritage architects and engineers, among others, who have highlighted their aesthetic and technological value. The interpretation of these industrial landscapes has not, however, attracted the same degree of support or funding.

The result, my view, has been either a neglect of or a narrow, celebratory approach to their intangible cultural heritage, which is particularly evident in the approach taken to preserving and presenting the memories of industry's sacrificial lambs. The second major result is a gap between heritage interpretation policy and practice. For example, the NSW policy (endorsed in August 2005) states that 'interpretation is an integral component of conservation and management, which is undertaken for both educational and recreational purposes', particularly when the use of a heritage place undergoes change as is the case with industrial heritage. According to this policy 'people and their stories are the vital elements of heritage interpretation'. Yet as it recognises, some heritage items are associated with more than one group and may therefore have 'a variety of meanings, some of which may appear to be conflicting'. In such cases, continues the policy document, 'it is desirable to interpret a variety of meanings'.[iii] To what extent does this policy reflect current trends in the interpretation of railway industrial heritage?

To answer this question I draw on the concepts of nostalgia and nostophobia, which are like the two faces of Janus – the Roman deity of gates and doorways, of beginnings and endings

– whereby one looks forward and the other looks backwards at the same time.[iv] The Janus metaphor provides a valuable conceptual device that can help to make sense of what often appear to be the contradictory imperatives of heritage conservation, interpretation, and site redevelopment. As I see it, using Janus makes it possible to suggest that *nostalgia* and *nostophobia* are not mutually exclusive but in fact united in practice at the 4 case study sites.

Now most people are familiar with the idea of nostalgia and most of us remember how popular it became during the mid-1980s. Such 'nostalgic evocations' were not new, according to Lowenthal, who found their antecedents in late 18th century English history and literature. Is it any surprise to find that this was precisely when industrialisation began to alter landscapes and lives? Is it any surprise to find that nostalgia gained virtual cult status against the backdrop of what is often referred to as the information revolution? For Lowenthal, this cult status reflected a 'growing rebellion against the *present*' and 'mistrust of the future'.[v] From this perspective, nostalgia performs a compensatory function for members of fast-moving societies suffering from 'future shock'.[vi] But as sociologists point out, although nostalgia may draw on the past, it is a product of the present. As Strangleman puts it, nostalgia demonstrates how 'contemporary concerns … lead to a particular annexation of the past'.[vii]

What then is nostophobia and how does it relate to nostalgia? The idea was raised by organisational theorists who were interested in the corporate restructurings of the 1990s and who argued that nostophobia was clearly expressed in those change management initiatives that actively distance restructured organisations from their long-standing traditions.[viii] For these scholars, nostophobics construe an organisation's past as something 'to be escaped from',[ix] and promote the view that the future belongs 'to those that can adapt to the new emphasis on the market and its demands'.[x] Now this narrow dichotomy between nostalgia and nostophobia may have some merit but it also has limitations. According to Strangleman, it fails to take into account the way that organisations and their managers 'make use of nostalgia' to promote change. Indeed, he argues that we need to recognise that 'management and politicians actively' employ both nostalgia and nostophobia 'to win consent for change, or at least to marginalise criticism' against change and to isolate 'resistance based on attachment to the remembered past'.[xi]

How is this relevant to heritage interpretation? I would argue that this connectedness between nostalgia and nostophobia is manifested at industrial heritage sites by:

- the use of the past predominantly for present and future commercial outcomes
- the active distancing of the past from the present
- minimal concern and attention to the psycho-social, community benefits of connections between past and present
- the concealment of multiple (and often conflicting) stories.

Appreciating and managing railway industrial heritage

The closure and/or downgrading of all of Australia's largest railway workshops from the late 1980s, undertaken in the name of rationalisation and efficiency, left respective State Governments with responsibility for managing immensely large, derelict and vacant sites with huge potential for redevelopment and adaptive re-use and the need to make decisions about future uses. As we will see, all the State Governments in question financed conservation of built fabric and tangible material culture at these sites in ways that have supported adaptive re-uses ranging from facilities for new commercial ventures to cultural tourism. As we will also see, the degree of funding for interpretation has been fundamentally shaped by the type of use selected, which I would suggest, reflects the degree to which governments have valued commercial outcomes over community heritage values, and as a corollary, responded positively to lobbying from various community stakeholders. This state of affairs raises two important questions. First, given that tangible material culture has been retained, does it matter whether adaptive re-use involves heritage tourism or other cultural and economic pursuits? And second, does it matter whether interpretation is marginalised or funded extensively? From the perspective of those who have personal attachments to heritage sites, as for those who are concerned that young and old alike need to understand why certain sites are deemed to hold social value and heritage significance, then the answer to both questions must be yes. From this perspective heritage tourism invariably results in more funding for the preservation and interpretation of the intangible cultural heritage contained in memories and histories of past uses. However, if we look to Janus

for help in answering these two questions, the answer is less clear cut. As I will demonstrate, regardless of the type of new use selected and the degree of interpretation undertaken, the creation of a whole new cycle of post-industrial development at the four sites in question has consistently been legitimated by an emphasis on the steam era of industrial development. At worst, this emphasis provides lip service to interpretation. At best it forms a drawcard for a focus on railway technology for the purpose of cultural tourism. Either way, the distancing and segregating of the past from the present reflects the use of nostalgia for nostophobic ends, an outcome that has a direct bearing on the stories that are told and interpreted.

Finding Janus

1. *Eveleigh*

The NSW Government built the Eveleigh workshops in the 1880s on a 40 hectare site, 4 kilometres south of Sydney's Central Business District where they operated continuously for just over a century until the site's main railway functions were terminated as part of far-reaching changes to government public transport policy.[xii] In this context, the reality of owning valuable real estate imposed immense pressure on the Government to promote economic revitalisation to which it responded by approving the transformation of the two locomotive workshop buildings and Works Manager's office into a Technology Park. By the mid-1990s, remediation, conservation and adaptive re-use had begun. Only Bays 1 and 2 of the main locomotive workshop building were excluded from redevelopment by an order of the Heritage Council of NSW in July 1996.[xiii] Subsequently, immense community lobbying led to government funding for the conservation of Eveleigh's machinery collection. The refurbishment of the three buildings cost well over $40 million. The newly established Australian Technology Park Ltd. (ATP) then also raised an additional $25 million for adaptive re-use, and $300,000 to match a State Government grant for the conservation of Eveleigh's remaining machinery.[xiv] Meagre funds were provided for oral histories with retired employees and for interpretation, which was limited to design proposals and signage on heritage machinery.[xv] The remaining machinery and tool collection continues to gather dust in Bays 1 and 2. The site's history has been reduced to a few photographic and text panels and some explanatory plaques on the various machines and around the buildings. Unfortunately, most retired Eveleigh workers who visit are disoriented and disheartened by what the ATP website describes as a 'Unique confluence of heritage, research, business and education in Sydney – Australia's main economic centre for information and communications technology', and an 'Energetic business environment with an unparalleled mix of established and emerging Australian technology companies'.[xvi] Neither the deluxe office spaces inside this building nor the large machines that stand like gravestones in and around them provide the sense of 'a familiar landscape'.[xvii] The collective identities of those who worked in the loco shops have been lost as conclusively as those who worked on the site's northern side in the carriage shops, which were transformed into a Performing Arts Centre by the Government. [xviii] Nowhere do we find mention of the massive contribution made by Eveleigh employees to our industrial and political culture; the struggle and attainment of the eight hour day, the formation of the Australian Labor Party, the support for Aboriginal rights and citizenship to mention a few of their activities.[xix]

The absence of any heritage interpretation here, coupled with the Government's creation of a new redevelopment authority for the South Sydney region with powers to override the State's heritage laws and regulations has further severed the site from its past. From the Redfern Waterloo Authority's perspective 'adaptive reuse will generate significant new community and cultural activity on a currently dilapidated industrial site' and provide 'a major impetus for renewal of the remaining areas of North Eveleigh'.[xx] This patently nostophobic view is also evident in the Government's refusal to renew the lease over Eveleigh's Large Erecting Shop held by the volunteer railway heritage conservation operator 3801 Ltd for the past decade, allegedly on the grounds of costs and safety concerns.[xxi] Yet alongside this nostophobia we find that the NSW Government's adaptive reuse relies on nostalgia for the industrial era. In short, Janus peers through the doors of the new $45 million Carriageworks Performing Arts Centre. Opened in January 2007, this development is touted as 'an exciting addition' to Sydney's cultural life, a place where 'the physical beauty and scope of the' Centre's 'cathedral-scale foyer' and the 'distinctive nineteenth century industrial atmosphere of the former railway carriage and blacksmith workshops' will provide 'an environment which pulses with a unique spirit of creativity and innovation'.[xxii] Eveleigh might well be construed as a

theatre of memory, but it has become little more than a stage full of props, devoid of historic drama and actors.

2. Inveresk

In stark contrast, redevelopment and adaptive re-use proceeded far more smoothly in Tasmania. Built in 1870 on a 14 hectare site in Launceston, the Inveresk workshops operated until 1993 and two years later they were transferred to the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery (QVMAG). The largely intact Blacksmith Shop and the still workable machinery in the Smithy's three buildings were all conserved and an interpretation strategy was adopted for the historic workshops and Traverser. Like Eveleigh, the site now provides an outpost for the University of Tasmania. Unlike Eveleigh, the Launceston City Council and the Tasmanian State Government contributed funds for a museum at the site. As the Museum's marketing and the State's tourism promotion information describes it, 'This extraordinary industrial heritage site … has been transformed into a new cultural precinct for Launceston', whose 'Star attraction is the Blacksmith Shop, an intact relic of the state's industrial past.'[xxiii] Here 'amidst the array of forges, hammers, furnaces and the earthen floor, it becomes possible to comprehend the raw energy and forces of the Industrial Revolution'.[xxiv] Here, at Launceston's 'tourist attraction of distinction', it is claimed that 'proper recognition' is being given 'to the working lives of its people'.[xxv] Certainly, this outcome compares favourably to Eveleigh. But in my view this allegedly 'realistic' work setting romanticises, sanitises and aestheticises industrial processes and conceals workers' collective experiences and memories of industrial life. The failure to deal with the re-colonisation of this site as part of the story of industrialisation and de-industrialisation cordons the past off from the present,[xxvi] an outcome also evident in Western Australia.

3. Midland

The Midland Workshops operated on a 68 hectare site, 16 kilometres outside of Perth from 1901 until 1994 after which they remained vacant for five years.[xxvii] In 1999, after the Western Australian (WA) Government began setting up the administrative structure for the site's redevelopment, the local community was spurred into action. Perth's labour historians launched the Westrail Midland Workshop Labour History Project and organised a Visitors' Day on 21 March to collect memories and memorabilia that attracted over 2,000 people.[xxviii] Local mobilisation by a range of stakeholders successfully influenced the Midland Redevelopment Authority (MRA), which was formally established on 1 January 2000. The latter's initial focus on commercially viable occupation, which resulted in a call centre and a Computer-aided Dispatch and Communication building for the WA Police at the site, soon expanded to include support for the oral and social history project, a heritage centre, local arts activities and even a Workers' Wall.[xxix] The Midland Railway Workshops Interpretive Centre was established with Government funding in 2004 in the restored and refurbished former Time Keeper's office.[xxx]

At the same time redevelopment and adaptive re-use continue; the site's eastern half is earmarked for a 400 bed hospital, about 20 bulky retail outlets have been built, new Police Central Investigation Bureau offices are planned and 'about 40 housing lots are being built on the site's western side. Training programmes are earmarked for the pattern shop and the foundry. Unlike Eveleigh and Inveresk, the material culture associated with the railway workers' industrial and political activism, including the flagpole and also the area in the machine shop known as Red Square where workers' held their stop work meetings, have been preserved. Yet like the other cases already examined, the profitable, commercial development at the site is physically segregated from those parts where the past is acknowledged, celebrated and interpreted, and where the machinery of the steam era has been retained.[xxxi]

4. Ipswich

The Ipswich Railway Workshops in Queensland were built on a 22 hectare site in 1885 and designated for closure in the early 1990s. In 1999, however, the Queensland Government responded to growing interest in industrial railway heritage by providing $20 million to establish a branch of the Queensland Museum at the site. The opening of the Workshops Railway Museum on 1 September 2001 in the original Boiler Shop provides an exceptional case of adaptive re-use for the simple reason that it is integrally linked with the adjacent

operational workshop in which the maintenance and conservation of Queensland Rail's heritage rolling stock can be viewed by visitors.[xxxii] More than at any other railway heritage site Janus's two faces are in synch here. The site's entire devotion to railway heritage ensures a greater intimacy between the past and the present. [xxxiii] Yet even here we find a Janus in action.[xxxiv] On the one hand, the museum promotes nostalgia for 'the romance of steam locomotives' to provide 'reflections of the past'.[xxxv] On the other, the museum's goal, according to publicity material, is to develop a 'world class tourist attraction'. [xxxvi] No mention is made of the psycho-social benefits of preserving and interpreting this site for current and future generations'. No mention is made of the industrial struggles undertaken by Queensland rail workers against poor conditions at Ipswich nor of their hard won improvements.[xxxvii]

Conclusion

The transformation of these workshops into marketable cultural assets is based on the fabrication of entirely new environments 'in which workers and citizens become volunteers, consumers [xxxviii] and co-conspirators in representations of 'various pasts' as 'unproblematic givens', as 'dead events … segregated from the present'.[xxxix] We see little evidence of the many different groups that occupied these sites, the variety of meanings that these sites hold for different people and the possibility that there are stories and meanings that contradict the celebration of the steam era. Despite varying degrees of attention to intangible cultural heritage and history at Inveresk, Midland and Ipswich, there is no real interpretation of what life was like for those who worked there. Connections between the past and present are ruptured by the discarding of workers' stories of their collective struggles to improve their working lives and to preserve the places in which they worked. The failure to deal with such matters through heritage interpretation excludes individuals and whole social groups from public memorialising, while also denying the problematic nature of social inequalities, conflict, oppression, danger and industrial pollution that were, and continue to be, part and parcel of industrial life.[xl] Under such circumstances interpretation provides little help in educating future generations about the significance of the railway's industrial heritage.

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