

Launch of *Melbourne's Twenty Decades*

The statistician and demographer Charles Henry Wickens once likened Australia's immigration policy to a boa constrictor, saying 'we were in the habit of bolting our immigrants and then resting until we had digested them'. That observation applies with particular force to this part of Australia. In particular decades, the 1850s, the 1880s, the 1950s, and then in this century, Melbourne has grown prodigally before consolidating ahead of the next hectic influx.

You can see results in the bar diagram that appears on p. 19 of *Melbourne's Twenty Decades* showing how long it took for the city to attain its first million inhabitants, 94 years, then 33 for the next million, 24 for the third, 21 for the fourth and just seven (from 2011 to 2018) to reach five million, with six years predicted for the next milestone.

This calibration masks changes in the **rate** of growth, which was fastest in the 1850s. The increase from 283,000 in 1880 to 482,000 a decade later was also proportionately greater than that of the current decade. It's the **volume** of the increase since 2010 that is unprecedented.

You can also see the patterns in photos that adorn this book: those remarkable public buildings made possible by the gold rush, then the ornate temples raised to Mammon in the 1880s, and the mix of high-rise office headquarters, the Housing Commission flats, the King Street Bridge and public facilities such as the Olympic Swimming Pool and the Myer Music Building that responded to growth after the Second World War. As Graeme Davison puts it in his piece on the 1950s, 'Tentatively, and on its own terms, Melbourne was opening up to the world'.

Finally, you can **experience** the consequences of the boa constrictor's latest intake as you attempt to make your way from one part of Melbourne to another. If it's by public transport, plan carefully and prepare to stand. If it's by car, you have to hope that a breakdown has not brought your freeway to a standstill; and apart from the level-crossing removals, there are almost as many men and women in high-vis jackets holding stop signs and more builders appropriating the roadway for their own purposes than there are traffic lights.

Melbourne's Twenty Decades is nicely book-ended by an upbeat Preface contributed by the Lord Mayor, where the value of appreciating Melbourne history is to assist us to 'grab opportunities in the coming decades' (as she puts it) and Chips Sowerwine's final chapters on the 2010s and 2020s, which are as sombre and as premonitory as you'd expect from the leader of the Society's heritage committee. To my mind the Lord Mayor uses the description incredible once too often to make her enthusiasm credible.

Melbourne's custodians have never lacked confidence. From Robert Hoddle's grid plan onwards, they have anticipated future growth. The difference is that they used to provide for it.

Hence the sewerage scheme engineered by William Thwaites in the 1890s – admittedly rather late, when Melbourne had a population of roughly half a million. It served Melbournians unchanged for the next sixty years until the population passed one and a half million.

Our public transport system coped with substantial growth over the same period. There were some new tram routes, to be sure, and closure of the inner and outer lines left Melbourne's railways with a radial system. At first some shops and other facilities would appear at outer stations along these spokes, and then the provision of services attracted housing. After the Second World War the interstices were gradually filled, the growing distance between the spokes bridged by car and bus.

Today's outer suburbs have far outpaced the public transport, and for that matter the schools, hospitals and other services needed to support them. They debouch to the nearest freeway from a service road that is choked with commuters. So, too, the constant addition of new freeway lanes is a belated attempt to catch up, each new project affording temporary relief at best. The same could be said of the Metro project. Who could think a single north-south line will suffice?

In his final years that genially dogmatic communist Judah Waten liked to come into Melbourne after the morning rush ended to wander the quarters he had known for more than fifty years. He would find that difficult today, the footpaths thronged with pedestrians, and I shudder to think what he would say about those walking with head down, concentrating on their mobile messages.

The book that prompts these reflections is organised into sections, one for each decade, consisting of a short essay and then six pages of photographs (with extended and informative captions) drawn mostly from the Society's collection. Each section has a title that characterises the decade. Some are generic ('Struggling with Depression', 'War and

Peace’, ‘Ambiguous Decade’), some specific (‘Gold Rush Town’, ‘Marvellous Melbourne’).

Richard Broome opens the volume with two essays on Melbourne’s Origins and Aboriginal Melbourne, and who better to write them? Richard lightly sketches the long history of occupation of this part of Australia and the ways in which the Woiworrung and Boonwurrung people responded to the newcomers. He has of course written the authoritative book on Aboriginal Victorians since 1800, though I hope that one day we will have a Port Phillip equivalent of Grace Karsken’s remarkably close and intimate evocation of early life on the Cumberland Plain.

The subsequent essays are concise, lucid and highly informed, as you’d expect from authors who have extensive knowledge of Melbourne and its history. The accompanying illustrations pick up points made in the essay that precedes them, some fairly well known and others new to me. I knew about Canvas Town on Emerald Hill during the gold rush but had not seen the striking depiction of it in 1855.

There are maps and elevated panoramas, and some striking street scenes such as the one of pedestrians in Collins Street in 1900 and the sick children outside the Exhibition Building during the influenza epidemic, the children on their tricycles in Brunswick in 1935, and the Italian labourers spreading ballast on the tramway outside the Melbourne Zoo.

There was only one illustration that gave me pause, that of the new Children’s Hospital opened in 2011, downhill from the original one in Royal Park. The caption observes that the site of the old hospital was

made an adventure playground, and so part of it was – but not the wing that is now a private hotel.

The filching of Melbourne’s public spaces has a long history. It was one thing to sequester parts of parks for sporting, medical and recreational facilities, another to allow CSL to continue its occupancy even after it was privatised, but this sleight of hand took misappropriation to a new level.

A page of acknowledgements notes the division of labour, Richard taking a lead role, Judith Smart editing copy, Richard Barnden and Elisabeth Jackson selecting the images, and a team helping write the captions, as well as others who contributed additional images. It’s handsome, accessible and engrossing book that will fill many Christmas stockings.

Stuart Macintyre 19 November 2019