Almost in the Dark: The Reinstatement of a Lost 19th Century Window

The restoration, by the ANZ Banking Group, of the complex of buildings on the northeast corner of Collins and Queen Streets, Melbourne, included the reinstatement of a large stained-glass window which once illuminated the room in the old Stock Exchange, now known as the Cathedral Room. This window was removed in the renovations of the 1920s, when drastic changes were made to both the old Stock Exchange and the ES&A Bank. The main body of the window had been replaced by panels of plain white glass, leaving only coloured fragments in the headwork.

The challenge facing the architects was to provide an accurate replica of this window - but at the outset of this project virtually nothing was known. Where was the evidence going to be found? Archives, old newspapers and journals, and collections of historic photographs were an obvious place to start. Repositories of such material include the ANZ's own archives, the State Library of Victoria (and its special collections such as Manuscripts, Newspapers, and the La Trobe Library picture collection), the Public Record Office, and the Royal Historical Society of Victoria. Researchers from Allom Lovell & Associates combed these records. However the results, with respect to the stained-glass window, were meagre; one photograph of an exterior wall during construction, showing a close-up of the upper portion of the window; one photograph of the interior of the Cathedral Room during a scrip sale at the time of the Great War; and two newspaper reports, written when the building opened in 1893.

None of these documents provided a complete picture. The photograph of the exterior, taken in rather bright sunlight, shows only vague shadowed details. In the photograph of the interior, the lower half of the window only, is seen in the background, at an oblique angle and somewhat out of focus. The newspaper reports, one in The Argus and the other in The Age, are long and descriptive, and furnish a seemingly reliable guide to the imagery and layout of the window, but are no help with the exact details of colour, pattern and figuration.

The newspaper reports, however, did provide the most important basic facts. Foremost among these was the mention of the maker, Ferguson & Urie. This firm was the most important local manufacturer of stained-glass windows in the second half of the 19th century. Their work is well known and often encountered in churches, private houses and public buildings throughout Victoria as well as interstate, even as far afield as New Zealand. They went out of business in 1899, and no records from the firm have yet come to light.

Nevertheless, the identification of the maker was a great advance, as it provided some clues as to what sort of colour scheme was used and enabled the figures to be redrawn in the manner of the original. Together with the photographs and newspaper reports, this formed a basis on which a design could be produced with a great deal of accuracy.

The 1917 photograph showed the overall design, layout and pattern of the window, but the details were very indistinct, and so the descriptions in The Argus and The Age formed the basis for working out the imagery and the
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The central light held a female figure representing Labour. The outer lights contained coats-of-arms of Great Britain and Australia, as well as depictions of the four Continents. The oculus at the top contained a scene with figures, and the field in the main area was made up of patterned and textured glass.

The section of the photograph containing the window was enlarged several times. This revealed the field as a repeating pattern of diamond quarries decorated with a standard leaf motif. The colours in the field were derived by tonal analysis of the photograph, together with an examination of the fragments remaining in the head of the window, and a study of their repetition pattern. This was the easy part.

The enlargement also provided a very good image of the figure of Labour, showing her pose and dress quite clearly. The coats-of-arms were less distinct, but they were not really problematic. The British coat-of-arms, as it was in 1893, is well known and a model was not difficult to obtain. The Australian coat-of-arms, however, was not yet in official use and therefore was not standardised. There were many different versions in general currency, and it took some time to assemble a range of models from which an acceptable design could be derived.

The most perplexing aspect of the reconstruction was determining the origin of the four Continents, and working out their disposition in the window. They were mentioned in the newspapers, but not described in detail. It seemed likely that Ferguson & Urie had had recourse to some model, since the concept seems beyond their ken, and it was their habit to use the designs of others if they could, in preference to spending time and expense in evolving their own. An example of this can be seen in the north transept of Christ Church, St Kilda, in the Nicholson window. In the base panel is a roundel depicting the incident in which the Nicholson brothers lost their lives, the wreck of the British Admiral, which came into contact with King Island in May 1874. A week after the event a wood-engraving of it appeared in The Australasian Sketcher; and this illustration is reproduced here in stained glass with absolute fidelity. The artist has simply placed the glass roundel over the illustration and traced it. The suspicion was that precisely the same method had been employed for the four Continents: but what were the models, and where had Ferguson & Urie obtained illustrations of them?

The idea of the four Continents seems to have evolved in the 19th century, replacing an earlier concept of the four Rivers. The four Rivers originated in biblical times, as the four Rivers of Paradise which flowed from the fountain in the centre of the Garden of Eden to the four corners of the world. However, by the 18th century European exploration and expansion had rendered this interpretation obsolete, and it was superseded by a concept based more on geographical reality. The Continents were numbered at four, to correspond with.

Figure 3 The restored window in its setting.
the Rivers. The classical continents of Europe, Asia and Africa were joined by America (not yet differentiated into north and south, Australia was not important enough to be regarded as a continental land mass, and Antarctica was unknown).

The most famous 19th century depictions of the four Continents are the statuary groups which stand at the four corners of the podium of the Albert Memorial in London. The memorial, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, was erected in honour of the Prince Consort. It was built 1864-74, and soon became the most famous monument in the British Empire. Its fame made it the most likely candidate as the source of the images in the window. But the images themselves were not clear, and indeed only the lower two were visible in the 1917 photograph. Further enlargement revealed dark, blurry shapes within circular panels. After intensive study, one distinct shape began to emerge: that of a dark, shaggy ox-like animal, seen from nearly head-on. This was taken to be a bison. If a bison could be found in one of the statuary groups of the Albert Memorial, then the source of these images would be confirmed.

Fortunately, a very comprehensive and well-illustrated study of the memorial had been published in 1975 in *The Survey of London*, volume 38. A quick review of the visual material in this volume did reveal that a bison was the dominant element in the group America, sculpted by John Bell and put in position c.1872. Thus no doubt remained that here was the source for the stained-glass images. By comparing the photograph and the newspaper reports, the actual order in which they were arranged could be determined.

Ferguson & Urie would have known the Albert Memorial sculptures through wood engravings reproduced in periodicals of the day, such as *The Illustrated London News*. Unfortunately, not enough time remained to carry out a search through this material. Indeed, judging from the evidence in the photograph, the illustrations in *The Survey of London* appeared better to work from, and so the new roundels were copied from them. While not reproducing the original roundels exactly, the replicas were made using the same methods. That is, by copying from contemporary illustrations.

In reducing a large three-dimensional object to a small two-dimensional image, a certain amount of translation has to take place. The America group, for example, has been simplified to make it clearer and legible to the viewer. The sculpture consists of a native American Indian charging through the prairie grass on a bison; a standing female figure representing the United States; another female figure representing Canada and two other native Americans representing Mexico and South America. There was originally a beaver included in the group, but the Queen did not think much of it, so it was removed. In preparing the cartoon for the roundel, it became evident that the head of Canada would appear as some sort of growth emerging from the bison’s neck, so (with apologies to Canadians) that figure too was eliminated.

When it came to recreating the scene in the oculus at the top of the window, the
location of a source proved impossible. In both The Argus and The Age the
scene was described as depicting two prospectors panning for gold. A search
through 19th century illustrations, including S. T. Gill’s Goldfields Sketchbook,
proved fruitless. It seemed as if this scene would have to be made up from
scratch, and a cartoon was prepared. Then quite unexpectedly the original panel
was located – it had passed into private hands many years ago. The owner was
reluctant to part with it, but he did provide a fine colour print of it, so it could be
reconstructed. Upon examination, the scene turned out to be not as the
newspapers described it. Instead of two goldminers panning in a creek, it was
an allegory of Australia’s wealth. There is a gold fossicker on the right, but the
figure on the left is shearing a sheep, while on the right edge of the picture is an
Aboriginal, and a kangaroo disappearing into the forest. In the background the
brand new day of civilisation is dawning. Given the consistent inaccuracy of the
newspaper reports, it may be that the two reporters conferred after the grand
opening, and this does provide a cautionary tale about placing an uncritical
reliance on written sources.

The reconstruction of this window is perhaps the first of its kind in Australia.
Despite the difficulties and uncertainties, the exercise was worth attempting for
several reasons. First, the window contributes a great deal to the ambience of
the Cathedral Room, enhances and explains (in allegorical terms) the meaning
and function of the room, and therefore is valid in terms of the overall
refurbishment of the space. The window is a large public work, and was
probably the last major commission given to Ferguson & Urie. James Urie died
in 1890, and after his death the output of the firm declined dramatically, until
they closed their doors for the last time in 1899. The project also revealed
technical problems, such as finding a good glass painter who could reproduce
Ferguson & Urie’s style, and having the cartoons faithfully transferred to the
glass.

Uncertainties still remain: the colour scheme of the figure of Labour, for
example, is very much an educated guess, based on knowledge of Ferguson &
Urie’s other work. Perhaps the most constructive way of assessing the job is to
regard it not as an attempt at a slavish reproduction, but rather as an essai de
reconstitution. As is pointed out in the Burra Charter, what is lost cannot be
retrieved. But in trying to recapture the spirit of the past, this window may
hopefully illuminate the way.