The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory

The Unfinished Bombing tells the story of the aftermath of the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 19 April 1995. It caused the death of 168 people, as well as injuries to numerous others and damage to nearby streets and buildings. Until 9.11.2001, the Oklahoma City bombing was the largest terrorist event in the United States and a watershed in conceptual thinking about terrorism and its effects on the community. Linenthal recounts events from the bombing to the dedication of the Oklahoma City National Memorial on the anniversary in 2000, focusing on the 'cultural afterlife of the bombing' and the creation of a 'bereaved community'. He describes the immediate aftermath of rescue, grief counselling, building demolition etc., and the ways in which people responded to and memorialised the event and the dead.

The author is Professor of Religion and American Culture at the University of Oshkosh, Wisconsin. He has several publications around the theme of preserving memory, including books about American battlefields and the creation of Washington's Holocaust museum. For the Oklahoma City project, begun in 1997, his contact with people affected by the bombing convinced him that its impact is on-going and 'unfinished'. This notion is very familiar to Australians, particularly through the experiences of Indigenous people such as the 'stolen generation' and groups related to historic massacres. The corollary of the unfinished nature of violent tragedy is that the process of creating a memorial is as important as the memorial itself.

Some of the Oklahoma City experience was shared by Australians in the aftermath of the massacre at Port Arthur in 1996 and the Bali bombing in 2002. Responses in common included immediate, informal memorialisation at the site and the determination of family, friends and the community as a whole that the lives lost would be remembered in a public way. Both the Port Arthur and Oklahoma City events prompted actions at a federal level aimed at increasing security: in Australia, the gun buy-back scheme, and in the US, anti-terrorism legislation and increased security at public buildings. While the processes of selecting an appropriate memorial were very different, many of the issues were the same, such as the desirability or otherwise of preserving evidence of the building; fragmentary evidence was kept in both cases.

Both the Port Arthur historic site and the Murrah Federal Building were chosen by the perpetrators for their public nature and symbolic importance. (The date of the Oklahoma City attack was the second anniversary of the controversial FBI raid on the Branch Davidian centre at Waco, Texas, which resulted in the death of 84 Branch Davidians and four federal agents.) For both disasters, government ownership enabled the creation of an on-site public memorial to the tragedy. It has been a different case for memorial responses to tragedies at privately-owned places, such as the Bali night club, or the Strathfield shopping centre, where economic imperatives hampered the creation of on-site memorials.

The difference between the responses to mass killings in Australia and the United States are as interesting as the similarities. One relates to the death penalty and the appropriate fate of Timothy McVeigh, convicted in 1997 and executed in 2001. In a postscript, Linenthal summarises community attitudes towards the death penalty, including the popular media approach that 'execution was a form of therapy, or closure', which prompted the US Attorney General to allow family members and survivors to watch the execution on closed circuit TV (p. 240). Part of that 'closure' was that 'death would silence his voice' and newsworthiness. Australia does not practise judicial murder, but there is no doubt that public interest in the Port Arthur murderer – incarcerated as he is – persists in a sensational way.

Beyond comparison of responses to violent tragedy, The Unfinished Bombing is valuable for its analysis of the language and vocabulary used to describe, comment and reflect on such events. Of particular relevance to heritage practice is the discussion of the different narratives for describing the bombing and its aftermath and their co-existence. Linenthal relates his concern about the development of narratives that soften the story in order to help people engage with horrific events (p. 41) and his 'suspicion about comforting stories that dilute the realities of violence' (p. 235). This is salutary stuff for heritage consultants, often subject to the temptation of their own, or other people's, interpretation of events, to the exclusion of other viewpoints.

The character of Linenthal's writing is noteworthy in itself: for each generalisation or conclusion he quotes examples from writings, speeches or interviews, and lengthy endnotes provide further detail. The effect is a book that speaks strongly of the meaning of the events to people.

His research was made possible through the Oklahoma Humanities Program, other research fellowships and the good will of many people. It is reminder of the importance of maintaining a strong academic community, with the potential to reflect upon cultural life beyond the space and time and proprietary limits of the news media and beyond the confines of reports by professionals engaged to provide advice.

It appears that Linenthal sought to avoid becoming part of the events himself. Y et it is obvious from the support he received that his research was regarded as another, important, way of ensuring that the people and events were not forgotten, and that it has become part of the community's healing process. In this respect, The Unfinished Bombing is useful background reading for anyone involved in disaster preparedness, especially in relation to impacts on people.

Meredith Walker
Creating Colonial Williamsburg


Colonial Williamsburg must be the mother of all heritage sites – not necessarily the oldest, perhaps not even the biggest, but arguably the most famous. It is certainly the most thoroughly analysed.

In this light, Anders Greenspan’s account of Williamsburg offers a workmanlike account of its foundation in 1932 and subsequent development into the 1990s. The story is solidly set in the context of the shifting politics of United States history and of the history of US politics. Australian readers who know little of this larger backdrop will find that such contexts illuminate both the apparent clichés of Revolutionary representation and the radical interpretive innovations of the late twentieth century, for which the institution is famous.

Colonial Williamsburg (CW, for short) was designed to incarnate the ‘spirit’ of the 1776 American Revolution. It manages to be both charmingly English-colonial and yet anti-English: Georgian, but American. This is not its only contradiction, but it is central to understanding ‘the restoration’ and its place in American life.

Americanism – the booster-culture of ‘the land of the free and the home of the brave’ – inspired CW’s first 40 years. To begin, it was an Americanism reacting to great surges of European immigration, perceived in the early twentieth century to risk diluting Anglo traditions. Come World War 2, the institution took on a role to educate the military in the rationale of what they were fighting for. After the War, CW adopted an explicit policy of countering international communism by featuring the virtues of republican democracy, epitomised in the orientation movie, ‘The Story of a Patriot’ (1956).

At the same time, the contradictions of denying representation (and even visitor accommodation) to black citizens stirred some consciences in CW management. Greenspan’s history, drawn from internal records including letters from visitors, highlights this thread with the perspective of hindsight, but his account is disturbingly apologist. The temptation to identify with one’s subject can bewitch historians, and it requires more detachment that Greenspan musters.

However, his account of pressure from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the social history movement of the 1970s makes chapter 6 a fascinating study of convergence between social and museological changes. So is chapter 7, recounting the arrival of historian Cary Carson and his development of a new interpretive framework for CW: ‘Becoming Americans’ would follow the lives of both black and white Williamsburgers through the later eighteenth century.

The strains of retrofitting critical social history onto CW’s tradition of Americanist patriotism showed up in many aspects of the site’s management. Even employing an appropriate proportion of black interpreters (52% of the Williamsburg population had been black in the 1770s) would be a major human resources effort, and it seems that more than 20% has never been achieved.

Then there were effects on visitors. Black history programmes, launched in 1979, soon outgrew merely presenting black presence, but the emotional drama of acting out a slave auction, introduced in 1994, shook both black and white audiences. This kind of confronting history rocked the ongoing marketing image of genteel charm, to the alarm of those responsible for bringing in the customers. Cary Carson had to agree that there are limits to how much an old institution can accommodate new history. Thus ‘The Story of a Patriot’ remains in the orientation program, albeit with a caveat about shifts in historical understanding.

Critics had attacked CW’s presentations since the 1960s. Ada Louise Huxtable, the famous architecture commentator, often lambasted it for fakery. The simple old verities of white patriots invited regular deconstruction in the 1970s. And even after social history arrived, CW went under the microscope again, this time considered by anthropologists. Eric Gable and Richard Handler published their ethnography of CW’s presentation and interpretation, The New History in an Old Museum, in 1997, showing gaps between the site’s historians, behind the scenes in suits, and those on the front line, in costume. It is the kind of scrutiny most heritage sites need, but do not enjoy.

Yet Creating Colonial Williamsburg is not an ideal alternative. The book barely discusses the content and style of interpretation through the years, referring to practice only incidentally. Nor does it trace a clear genealogy of management policy – or perhaps it never existed... Greenspan draws heavily on statements by the two generations of Rockefellers who bankrolled the site, and on the comments of visitors, journalists and occasional pundits. But the story needs a more detached overview of heritage management in the United States to be really satisfying. There’s room for yet another book on Colonial Williamsburg.

Linda Young

Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought


Peter Hay teaches a postgraduate unit at the Centre for Environmental Studies, University of Tasmania, called ‘Environmental Values’. The scholarship necessary to do that well — if not the teaching from the cohorts of students to whom he dedicates his text — shows magnificently, for his book is a tour de force, a grand parade of environmentalist thinkers and their critics since the 1970s.

The volume is intentionally encyclopaedic, albeit in somewhat qualified fashion, lest its pages were to multiply beyond the present 400 or so to accommodate ‘strands of thought that have frayed into a myriad sub-strands’[p. viii]. No doubt some contributors to strands have escaped attention, and many readers will inevitably bemoan the omission of a favourite or two, as this reviewer did, but that is not the point. What readers can expect is a vastly knowledgeable coverage as follows: the origins of environmentalist impulses; ecophilosophy; ecofeminism; relations between the green movement and religion/spirituality; green critiques of science and knowledge; the key environmental concept of being grounded in place;
green political thought, including relations with authoritarian and conservative traditions, socialist traditions, and democracy; economics and environment, including sustainability debates and the many ways of conceptualising economies more attuned to good ecological behaviour; and, last but not least, confrontations with post-modernism. Of itself this litany suggests the artful organisation of a baffling array of theory into a comprehensible package.

The word ‘coverage’ with respect to these strands is inadequate to describe the flavour of this book. Peter Hay sets out more often than not to put his own view as well — sometimes contrary to that of well-known authorities. For example, early in he disputes environmental historian Donald Worster’s claim that romanticism constituted the equivalent of an ecological vision. Hay’s arguments come out at many points throughout, of the least of which is his overall plea, along with the Canadian Douglas Torgerson, for environmentalists ‘to adopt open dialogue between a plurality of voices ... as an end in itself’ (p. 317). I don’t always agree with Hay’s conclusions, but one great virtue of this book is that it encourages the reader to go back to the authors whose positions he presents to see for themselves. Thus, while Main Currents can be recommended highly to students wanting to make first (and subsequent) inroads into one or more of its topic areas by treating the text as a reference book, it is much more than that, and will undoubtedly provoke further critical thought in its own right.

To this reviewer, the earlier material on ecophilosophy seems somewhat laboured, despite Hay’s obvious enduring excitement at ecocentrism’s challenges ‘to centuries-old assumptions concerning the scope of the moral commonwealth’ (p. 26), thus extending consideration of ethics beyond humanity. Notwithstanding the key importance of this huge point, on which so much else is built, the chapter-ending offers its own explanation, namely, a recognition that some dissatisfaction has grown with ‘pure theory’ (p. 71), and that the focus of environmental thought has been shifting to more applied philosophical endeavour. The ecophilosophical arguments are systematically marshalled, however, and there are good dot-point summaries in the chapter to guide the reader through complexity. Though this technique might make the whole too much of a textbook if it were to be continued, I actually found myself missing such lists in subsequent chapters. I wanted to be told from time to time in this form of precis what range of theory had been adopted by, say, ecofeminists, and in various streams of environmental politics and economics.

It is in these last-mentioned fields that I think the work becomes particularly alive. Part of the political realm is accorded primacy. ‘[T]o re-theorise democracy ... is currently the epicentre of green intellectual preoccupation’, says Hay (p. 319), and it shows. Certainly, if the volume of recent thought from a diverse range of authors counts, then this material occupies centre stage. A lively and thoughtful treatment over several chapters deals with authoritarian, conservative, and socialist traditions, leading to the penultimate chapter’s considerations of democracy. Summing up at the end of each of the earlier political chapters, Hay usually provides his take on the promise, or otherwise, of the particular set of traditions at hand to further green aims. Perhaps it should go without saying, given the reference above to many voices, that the arguments are seldom simple. Certainly, the interest in the discussion that comes out is so often expressed in the nuances that Peter Hay recognises.

On the other hand, I think he runs the risk of exaggerating some positions and the threat that they pose, such as post-modernism’s implied encounter with wilderness in William Cronon’s Uncommon Ground: Towards Reinventing Nature. To me there is always the need to reinvent our views of reality. Hay argues: ‘Opponents of the environment movement are already citing academic pronouncements that there is no objective meaning or value in nature’ (p. 37) The fact that some ‘exploiters can find comfort in all sorts of claims will never be new, can never be prevented — and should not be prevented.

Yet again, however, Peter Hay is also right to warn of dangers. He predicts a long-lived burgeoning of environmental thought of many varieties on the basis of grief. ‘The phenomenon of biophilic grief is already potent with us’ (p. 343). This reminds me of Delia Falconer’s essay on ‘The Books of Last Things’, where she hints that environmentalism has become unfashionable in the face of post-modern relativism, whereas in truth we need to mourn for so many lost species and landscapes. Peter Hay has written out of this kind of consciousness: though a worthy reference text, his book is also passionate.

For cultural heritage practitioners in particular, the chapter on the meanings attributed to ‘place’ is an obvious direct connection (though a major preoccupation there is the association of Martin Heidegger, foundational thinker on dwelling authentically in place, with the Nazis). Interesting discussions in other chapters are devoted to the culture-nature divide, but it remains true that environmental thought has concentrated heavily on theory ‘to underpin defence-of-nature activism’ (p. 25), even though ecofeminist and ecological thinkers have highlighted relations amongst people as causing ecosystems to be under siege.

Nevertheless, I suspect that we have yet to see major systematic efforts to celebrate humanity and culture in specifically environmental thought. The kind of effort in the arts and humanities discussed by Mark Sagoff, for example, portraying the development of nature as habitat as ‘the traditional work of human culture’, has not yet appeared as a main or even lesser strand in the literature covered by Peter Hay.

In the meantime, those whose interests lie in the conservation of culture through heritage will have to be content with appreciating the breadth and depth of environmental thought to date — yet patiently wait for the excitement that will surely be attendant upon a major focus in such thought on the integration of western culture with nature. Hopefully that will be not only a fresh new current for discussion, but may herald a major turning point in relations with the rest of the biosphere.

Jim Russell

References


Uncovering Australia: Archaeology, Indigenous People and the Public

Uncovering Australia looks at the interaction between Australian archaeology and current Indigenous and cultural heritage debates. It joins the products of a decade of studies recognising the political dimension of archaeology in Australia (eg du Cros 2002, Smith 1996, Moser 1995).

The book is not merely a history of archaeological research in Australia. Rather the aim is to ‘explore and explain questions about the recent practice of archaeology and its relation to Indigenous Australia and the wider public’ (p.190). In doing so, Colley discusses themes in semi-chronological fashion, moving to the introduction of heritage legislation and cultural heritage management (ch. 2), the relationship between archaeologists and Indigenous people (ch. 3-5), and how archaeology is understood by the public (ch. 6) and presented by the media (ch. 7). As the title suggests, her main focus is archaeology related to Indigenous Australia; she sometimes draws on historical and maritime archaeology, and even overseas cases, to illustrate a point she is making.

In covering these topics, the book’s essential story is of a power struggle. This is depicted in the two key issues to confront archaeologists in Australia: the constraints imposed on archaeological research by cultural heritage management and increasing Indigenous control; and the struggle about whether the archaeological (scientific) values or the values held by Indigenous people should be paramount. This conflict has occurred during a shift to postmodern interpretations of cultural history.

Colley states that her book is a personal view, not an objective one, but her position often seems ambivalent. In describing the introduction of legislation to provide blanket protection to archaeological sites in the late 1960s-early 1970s - brought about by the lobbying of archaeologists - she appears to bemoan the statutory limits placed on formerly unconstrained archaeological research. Colley appears to resent such restrictions on research freedoms, noting the pressure on archaeologists to take non-scientific values into account. At the same time, she recognises the plurality of interpretations in these postmodern times in the section ‘Censorship, academic freedom and intellectual property rights’ and elsewhere promotes archaeologist Judith Field’s consultation strategy at Gudgie Springs as a successful model for consultation with Indigenous people.

Colley’s position regarding the constraints placed on archaeology by cultural heritage management is much clearer. She appears consistently negative. It is a curious position given the synergy in Australia between leading research archaeologists based in universities or museums and leading cultural heritage managers, who were predominantly archaeologists in the past and still often are. Leaving aside a strange old chestnut that only the less academically bright work in ‘public archaeology’, Colley appears to have little sympathy for cultural heritage aims.

Her case studies are particularly apt when discussing the relationship of archaeology to both the public and the media. Perhaps too much space is given to New Age and other untested explanations of the past. The public’s misperceptions of what archaeology is, and the media’s focus on bizarre interpretations and very early dates, highlight the ignorance that persists and is the context in which Indigenous heritage conflicts are played out in Australia.

Colley notes that there has been a persistence in explaining Indigenous culture as the ‘oldest continuous civilisation’, which risks ignoring the great cultural diversity across the continent and the great differentiation in material culture through time. Her case studies on the media furores about the very early dates claimed for Jimmum and the conflicting notions of human origins in the Mungo Man dates case show the media’s continuing ignorance. This does not inform public debate.

Colley’s book was started in 1996 and completed in early 2002. Certain sections have not been updated prior to publication, leaving errors primarily relating to changes in legislation. For example, she fails to refer to the final revised version of the Burra Charter accepted by Australia ICOMOS in 1999. This is a pity given the Charter’s relevance to a central theme of her book, the tension between conflicting heritage values. She also misunderstands the central thrust of the Charter. It is true that Western heritage management philosophy has concentrated on physical fabric, such as archaeological physical remains. Colley is, however, in error when she states that ‘the Burra Charter...promotes particular historic or scientific values associated with fabric as being more important than other elements of place’ (p. 38). In fact, the Burra Charter states: “take into consideration all aspects of cultural and natural significance without unwarranted emphasis on any one value at the expense of others” (Article 5).

Nonetheless, Colley presents a vivid account of archaeology and its current role within Indigenous, land and heritage debates. Her last chapter hints at a positive future, one that will assist understanding the story of archaeology’s past in Australia. Her book should therefore be on the required reading list of all heritage managers, Indigenous leaders, and archaeology students in Australia.

Marilyn Truscott

References
Du Cros, Hilary Much More than Stones and Bones: Australian Archaeology in the Late Twentieth Century, Melbourne University Press 2002.

On Doing Local History.

Carol Kammen’s On Doing Local History amplifies a publication of some 20 years ago for practitioners of local or community history and should continue to fill a useful niche. Australians and Americans may not express themselves in the same way but the historical questions we pursue are similar. Kammen is
concerned to explore what history is and what it is not. She begins with a history of local history writing, citing H.P.R. Finberg in 1962: 'Local history is not only a challenge to the most highly trained master of historical techniques; it is also – and long may it remain! – the last refuge of the non-specialist' (p. 11).

As a non-specialist I warmed to this woman who could start her book with such a politically incorrect statement. But Kammen is no maverick. She is a serious student of the local and knows as much of the shortcomings of her subject as its potential. There is a coda to this first chapter, called 'Revising what is true'. Here she points out that historical moments can be recorded in physical memorials. Occasionally these official-seeming notices, which may mark the site of a battle or raid against Indigenous people, clash with our current understanding of the past. She suggests erecting new interpretations to inform the subject and spends pages explaining that careers of great men which may mark the site of a memorial.

The book with such a title has occasional moments that you want to quote and agree with. There are matters raised in this book that Australians who work in the field have seen and can empathise with. However a number remain who have 'inherited' the position in their community from a parent or from a teaching role (pp. 156-159). Her intention is to assist these practitioners and she writes didactically. The United States is studded with villages and small towns, apparently well supplied with neighbourhood newspapers, radio and television stations that often require a column or a statement from a local historian. She has useful advice about dealing with telephone calls that expect the historian to have instant and complicated knowledge and to be willing to impart the same immediately.

Kammen assumes that many local historians have yet to notice that labour issues, race, gender and class are part of their subject and spends pages explaining that careers of great men or big events are but one view of the story. In the United States, as here, provincial historical associations long held the local history genie in the bottle, asking him only questions that served the purposes of the great and the good. History had to be patriotic, Whig and celebratory. But, as we all know, historians have moved on, and this book attempts to show a few directions we have taken. In her last chapter she notes the influences of E.P. Thompson, the Annals school, and the emergence of the 'new' social history, but these were 1970s innovations. Here we see the difficulty of amending a book first published 20 years earlier. More recent work in cultural studies, heritage and tourism is barely mentioned, much less problematised or critiqued. The examples she gives of the local historian's role are down to earth and practical. There are matters raised in this book that Australians who work in the field have seen and can empathise with. Who has not met the person who thinks that history is a subject that gives answers rather than questions? The literal-minded flourish among us, finding nourishment in the dusty pages of archives, historical photographs and newspaper files. They frequently argue that a fact is a fact. They are unhappy with the idea that it might be an element of an argument, or even that it could be 'interpreted'. Who has not been contradicted in a community meeting by someone who 'remembers' the particular incident or place under discussion, and who claims priority for that memory above all else? Kammen relates several American controversies, including the Smithsonian Institution's failure to present a layered and contextual exhibition of the dropping of the atom bomb on Hiroshima from the B52 'Enola Gay' (pp. 59-60).

Practitioners will recognise similarities to other issues that Kammen presents, particularly the seemingly intractable one of self-censorship. In the United States the potential difficulty of describing or analysing recent events appears to be largely one of taste (pp. 60-63). If you live in a community, you don't want to rock the boat by upsetting the establishment. Moreover your funding will disappear if you do. In Australia the same can hold true, but government funding often protects the writer. Who we work in the community are fortunate in having established professional organisations 20 years ago where these matters can be discussed. Professionals have become accustomed to submit proposals, win their contracts and directly negotiate with employers. Applied history is now taught at tertiary level so, for many practitioners, this book holds little that is new, although much that could be of use to the neophyte.

Carol Kammen also thinks about the future. She encourages holding workshops, visiting schools and liaising with librarians to further the cause of well-researched local history. She even suggests recording our interpretations of the present as a gift to future local historians (p. 184). Now there's a challenging thought.

Michal Bosworth

The Heritage Strategy Planning Handbook: An International Primer

By Marc Denhez, Toronto, Dundum Press, 1997


This slim volume is not new, though recently advertised again around the traps of the WWW. It's author is a Canadian lawyer with international experience of his topic. It was published in Toronto in 1997, only two years after our own M. Pearson & S. Sullivan, Looking after heritage places (Carlton: Melbourne University Press 1995) and six years after the G. Davison & C. McConville, A Heritage Handbook (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin 1991).

As a handbook, this nonetheless differs quite profoundly from the Australian ones in offering a broad, generic approach to the analysis of legal structures available for heritage protection at the national level. What is unusual and stimulating is its consideration of the impact of discussions and documents at the international level, from formal multilateral conventions to less binding agreements and recommendations and on a great range of topics: world heritage to sustainable development. As Herb Stovel states on its back cover, 'This book unravels an essential subject which, in the minds of too many, is considered overly complex and is hence ignored'.

As its title implies, this is a practical reference guide, focused on the international scene. Yet it is too slim (to say shallow is too harsh) in tackling a topic of such potential breadth and depth. It resembles the good outline for a thesis, begging to be explored more fully.

It deserves praise for the much needed broadening of context for heritage work and for the sound bones of its informative charts and listed sub-topics. Yet the layout remains raw. It
refers to international discourse in the glorious fields of socio-environmental-economic responsibilities - yet a-historically and somewhat under-referenced, with a legally-based focus on policy linkages and instruments. The topical distance between the theme and its context is too great and not completely bridged.

At first reading I must admit to disappointment; the second reading was more rewarding.

That initial disappointment was foreshadowed in the opening words of the Preface: ‘How does a country design its strategy for the protection and rehabilitation of buildings?’ The precursor to that question (within which lies the source of a logical reply) appears to be missing: Why does the country wish to protect and rehabilitate certain buildings? This is the heart of the problem. Strategies must be drawn from a clear sense of purpose and, without that, little passion will be forthcoming in their implementation. And why so precisely confined to buildings? How can they be distinguished nowadays from their settings of settlement, landscape or route? We are led straight into the ‘nitty gritty’ of recognition, protection and financial support.

And yet, on second reading, there it is! 5.5 The Shift towards Sustainable Development: ‘The abiding feature of this approach... is that it invites populations to reflect on their development patterns systematically. The question is not how we introduce a veto on a negative feature of development; but instead is whether society can identify and remedy the causes of such negative features before they even start’.

The most delightfully contextual statement one can imagine. Blessings, Marc Denhez. Please go and write the full book.

Joan Domicelj