The most unusual memorials recorded in Victoria during the last 50 years surely must be the sugar memorials produced in 1934 by the Melbourne confectionery firm, the House of MacRobertson, to commemorate four of the five Centenary gestures made by its multimillionaire founder, Sir Macpherson Robertson. (1)

These sugar models were built to scale and depicted four new Melbourne structures completed in that year. They had all been financed by Robertson, whose princely gift of 100,000 pounds would be equal to $3,150,000 today. (2) The models were replicas of the National Herbarium in the Royal Botanic Gardens, the MacRobertson Girls’ High School, the MacRobertson Bridge across the Yarra at Grange Road and a fountain in the Domain near the Shrine of Remembrance, itself a notable 1930s building (Figures 1-4). (3) All these structures remain and are used still for their original purposes.

Not only were the sugar sculptures memorials to Centenary achievements in architecture and building techniques, they also commemorated the successful growth of an important local industry. By the 1930s, the House of MacRobertson was an acknowledged leader in the confectionery trade and its founder had joined the select ranks of Australia’s small group of multimillionaires. (4)

The uniqueness of the 1934 sugar memorials can be estimated when one compares them with other culinary artifacts produced during the Centenary year. They were considerably less traditional in concept and design than the two special cakes made for that occasion and, unlike these works, were crafted for community edification rather than public consumption.

The Centenary birthday cakes

The Centenary birthday cake had some claim to fame and at the time was said to be the biggest cake ever made in the world. It was 50 feet high and 300 feet in circumference, weighed ten tons and was made from 36,000 eggs. George Rath of the Astoria Cafe was its designer and maker, and it was displayed first at the Joyland Fair in Batman Avenue. Each of its five tiers depicted an era in Victorian history. However, it was eventually cut up into 250,000 pieces and sold for charity. One lucky buyer was supposed to win a second culinary triumph, the Centenary birthday clock made for Sidney Myer (another Melbourne multimillionaire) which followed the design of the Birthday Cake. (5) Presumably it, too, was eaten by a patriotic public.

Although the structures faithfully copied by MacRobertson confectioners have survived into the 1980s, their sugar mementoes have not. Nor has anything been confirmed concerning the ultimate fate of the mementoes - whether a patriotic munching, sucking or ritual melt-down, or slow decay and demolition by ants. Although the firm’s headquarters, the group of Fitzroy industrial buildings once known as the ‘Great White City’, remains, (6) the firm itself ceased to exist some years ago. Despite an exhaustive search by Melbourne archivists, the records of the House of MacRobertson cannot be traced. (7)

Fortunately, however, some useful documentation survives in two publications of the time - the official 1934 biography of Sir Macpherson Robertson, Making it Happen and a volume simply called The MacRobertson Gestures. They contain a series of excellent black and white photographs of all four sugar models as well as a model of the ‘Great White City’. We are told that all these models were ‘exactly to scale (and) made entirely of sugar by MacRobertsons’. (8)

There is detailed information about each of the structures they depict. (9) We do not know, however, whether these models were colored, with the Yarra tinted blue and the grass verges green, or if the sugar...
craftsmen preferred the gold and brown colour scheme chosen for the prestigious Old Gold MacRobertson delivery vans.

The MacRobertson story

The rags to riches story of Macpherson Robertson makes interesting reading, as do the stories of a number of other self-made Victorian men of the same era.

Macpherson Robertson was born on 6 September 1860 in Ballarat, Victoria, the son of David Robertson, a Scottish immigrant builder. Macpherson began his working life at a very early age. As a ten-year-old, after the family's return to Scotland, Macpherson delivered newspapers and worked in a barber's shop. However, his vocation lay elsewhere. According to his biographer, 'Fate led him to Miller's, a manufacturing confectioner in Leith, and it was the confectionery trade which caught the imagination of the young Macpherson... The destiny which guided his footsteps towards manufacturing confectionery in Leith in 1871 and certainly had much to do with the development of Australian confectionery,...'(11)

When the Robertson family returned to Melbourne in 1873 Macpherson worked at first for a butcher, but the following year was employed as an assistant in the firm of Owen, Strachan and Muhr, one of Melbourne's six or seven confectionery manufacturers during that decade.(12) He began a five-year apprenticeship learning all aspects of the trade in the pan room, the boiling room, the lozenge room, the liqueur room and the jube room.(13)

During that time Macpherson observed with curiosity the secrecy which surrounded the experimental work of skilled foremen in the trade. In 1879 he was astute enough to discover and master one of the most carefully-guarded secret techniques, a technique which fascinated him throughout his working life. Macpherson learned the art of making sugar toys and models from hollow castings of animals such as horses, cats and dogs(14) - the humble forerunners of the spectacular 1934 Centenary sugar memorials.

Also in 1879 Macpherson secured and then lost a job as second sugar boiler for the firm of Walter Lucas in A'Beckett Street, West Melbourne, because he signed a petition for shorter hours.(15) This seems to have been his first and last identification with unionism. Later, in his own works, he bitterly opposed the spread of unionism, especially the feminist Female Confectioners Union.(16)

Macpherson next worked as a lozenge maker and chief sugar boiler for Black and Spence in Victoria Street, North Melbourne, supporting his entire family when his father, an asthmatic, became too ill to work.(17)

On 10 June 1880, a date Macpherson afterwards liked to remember, he gave notice and then days later began business on his own account, 'making models for the production of sugar toys'.(18) He made them in the small bathroom with its galvanised iron bath at the Robertson home at 219 Argyle Street, Fitzroy. Macpherson's only stock was one bag of sugar. He always kept his original nail-can and pannikin used at the time as a reminder of wealthy Victorian's humble beginnings.(19)

Macpherson followed a routine in which he made lolly horses, dogs and mice from Monday to Thursday and sold them on Fridays and Saturdays, delivering at first by hand and walking long distances, as far afield as Richmond, Windsor, Malvern and even Northcote. He carried his wares on a tray on his head.(20)

It was during the 1880s that the young confectioner adopted the signature "MacRobertson" as his trade name, because it was shorter and less clumsy than his given name.(21)

The House of MacRobertson owed much of its success in the Victorian confectionery market to the introduction over the years of a number of novel lines, some of which Macpherson dreamed up during trips abroad. In the early 1880s there were MacRobertson's...
Figure 1: The National Herbarium. 'Their model, exactly to scale, was made entirely of sugar by MacRobertson's'.

Figure 2: The Girls' High School.
Figure 3: The bridge at Grange Road, Toorak.

Figure 4: The illuminated fountain.
Cough Drops and prize packets. In the late 1880s arrived MacRobertson's Silver Sticks, chocolate creams with silver paper over one end, combining the flavors of caramel and coconut. The firm at this time still made all its confectionery by hand.(22)

During the 1890s Macpherson discovered how Frye, the great American manufacturer of caramels, mixed his ingredients. He came back from his first trip abroad to his Fitzroy factory to produce the 'Cream Caramels' which later became the still-popular 'Columbines'.(23)

It was in the same decade that MacRobertson's copied another American confectionery fashion, the United States gum-chewing craze using paraffin wax usually colored pink and flavoured with vanilla and lemon. This line was sold to Wrigley's in 1918. (24)

The firm was responsive also to British social events, and when Edward VII was crowned introduced 'Coronation' sticks - long, twisted, brown and fawn sticks of lolly which tasted of cinnamon.(25)

Other popular lines were the 'Jubilee' chocolate mixture, advertised as 'cheap but good', and 'Milk Kisses', a best-seller, copied from Philadelphia's 'Quaker Kisses'. A less up-market product was 'Milk Poles', introduced at the same time.(26)

By World War One MacRobertson's had expanded its business premises, was partly mechanised and was using a fleet of delivery vans drawn by Macpherson's famous grey horses, Saladin and Caesar, Blossan and Dolly, Wattle and Price.(27)

A new six-storey factory was built during 1916 to launch the prestigious 'Old Gold' line of chocolates.(28)

By the 1920s Macpherson had already amassed a fortune and, although always dedicated to the development of the confectionery trade, could indulge some of his personal taste for luxury. From the 1890s he bought many fine horses, including a number of pet Arab ponies like Sultan and Captain, and enjoyed teaching them tricks.(29) He was a fitness fanatic and into old age carried out a strict exercise regimen. He owned some splendid Packard cars and loved travelling.(30)

Macpherson also became well-known for his many charitable activities. In 1935 an article in Who's Who in Australia told how Sir Macpherson Robertson, manufacturer and industrialist and head of a great confectionery business, had given 20,000 pounds to two Antarctic expeditions led by Sir Douglas Mawson. By this date Macpherson was married with one daughter, although neither wife nor daughter figures prominently in his official biography. Macpherson died just prior to World War Two.

The Centenary gestures

The most princely of Macpherson's philanthropic gifts were undoubtedly those made during the Victorian and Melbourne Centenary Celebrations, which ran from October 1934 to the following year, and were the occasion of many spectacular events. Money was tight, however, and after the Federal and State governments put in their 20,000 pounds each, the public appeal lagged badly. Luckily, two multi-millionaires came to the rescue, Sir Macpherson Robertson and Mr Sidney Myer, later knighted. MacRobertson gave the colossal sum of 100,000 pounds - 1,000 pounds for each year of Victoria's history. A sum of 15,000 pounds was allocated from this for the Centenary Air Race (Figure 5). It was a brilliant concept and resulted in the greatest air race in Australian history.

'The euphoria and interest the race created can only be compared with that surrounding Australia's recent victory in the America's Cup. Schoolboys assiduously kept detailed scrapbooks and it seemed as if the world's eyes were focused on the competitors as they raced from England to Australia. The winners, Scott and Campbell Black, made the journey in just under 72 hours. A few days after they arrived in Melbourne they were given a hero's welcome by a crowd of 100,000 as they drove down Swanston Street.'(31)

The rest of Macpherson's gift was used to
finance his four other Centenary gestures - the construction of MacRobertson Girls' High School, the MacRobertson bridge over the Yarra, the National Herbarium and a fountain in the Botanic Gardens. As we have seen, these gestures were the subject of four unique sugar sculptures.

Geoffrey Hutton in an article titled 'Looking Back Fifty Years' pointed out that Macpherson's motives were not purely altruistic; that it was also a massive publicity stunt. He commented:

'Old Sir Macpherson put the trade name of his lollies on everything he subsidised - the MacRobertsons air race, the MacRobertson bridge, the MacRobertson Girls' High School. It was a daring but successful PR venture.'(32)

Hutton continued:

'I was once sent to interview Sir Macpherson and I complimented him on getting his trade name stuck on these public works. "My boy", he said, "that's nothing. I once put up some money for exploration in the Antarctic and they put my trade name on the world map. Haven't you ever heard of MacRobertson Land?"'(33)

His official biographer put it in more high-flown terms when he claimed that:

'Today his name is printed on the map of the world, tomorrow it will be blazoned across the heavens, as great planes speed on their way; but forever it will be graven deep in the hearts of the Australian People.'(34)

As we have seen in 1986, although the unique 1930s MacRobertson sugar memorials have long since gone, the great air race is only a memory and the House of MacRobertson has ceased to exist, four prominent Victorian structures survive which still bear the famous name and which tell us something of the success story of the pioneer Scottish confectioner.

Figure 5: Sir Macpherson Robertson, donor of the prizes for the Centenary Air Race.

All photographs are reproduced from the brochure: The MacRobertson Centenary Gestures, held by Richard Aitken.

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3. Taylor, op. cit.

4. Ibid.

5. A Year in the Life of Victoria, p.26 and illustrations p.18.

6. Taylor, p.121.

7. Staff of Melbourne University Archives have made a number of efforts to locate these records.

8. Taylor, pp.211-222.

9. The MacRobertson Centenary Gestures, unpaginated.


16. Ibid, and p.122. Melbourne University Archives holds the records of this Union.


18. Ibid.


20. Ibid, p.43.


23. Ibid, p.78.

24. Ibid, p.79.

25. Ibid, p.94.


30. Ibid, p.103.

31. A Year in the Life of Victoria, p.9 and see Owen Cathcart-Jones, Aviation Memories.


33. Ibid.

34. Taylor, p.229.