Guest Editor’s Introduction

There is no doubt that roads tie us together as a society and hold great cultural significance. Their significance is found in both tangible and intangible qualities. Some Australian roads are of national significance, such as the Hume Highway, the Great Ocean Road and the Birdsville Track. At a much more local level, there are the roads which unite the nation’s communities, large and small. The identification, management and interpretation of these roads require a cross-disciplinary approach which is the responsibility of us all.

Historic roads have been defined as those ‘which through design, experience, or association have contributed to our culture in a meaningful way. This quality may be based on the road’s aesthetics, engineering, or cultural significance’. (Rural Heritage Program, US NTHP) State road authorities and other road managers, often municipal councils, face an increasing challenge in managing and maintaining physical infrastructure with heritage value. The parallels between Australian and North American road history and construction are clear, direct and continuing. It seems timely to test those links and to test the capacity of the Australia ICOMOS ‘Burra Charter’ for the proper conservation of our road heritage. Should their hard, real fabric or their soft, romantic values be conserved and, if so, how?

Australia ICOMOS, with support from the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria VicRoads and ConnectEast, held its annual conference called ‘Corrugations, the Romance and Reality of Historic Roads’ in November 2005. This first Australian conference on the topic built on innovative work done in the USA and followed earlier ICOMOS conferences dealing with heritage routes and heritage tourism. It explored the diverse tangible and intangible heritage of our historic roads.

The two keynote speakers at the conference, the Australian Dr Max Lay and the American Paul Daniel Marriott are particularly distinguished in their fields. The former focused on the ‘reality’ of historic roads and chaired the first day, devoted to planning, building and maintaining roads. Finding, Making, Marking and Working the Road were investigated as sub-themes. The latter focused on the ‘romance’ and chaired the second day devoted to using and experiencing roads. Cruising, Romancing and What Lies Beyond the Road were investigated on the second day. Dr Lay’s paper was published in Routes/Roads, (2007, 334: 88-91), the journal of the World Road Association under the title ‘Preserving Historic Roads’. Dan Marriott’s paper in which he recounts his most memorable drive at midnight along Hawaii’s historic Hana Road on the island of Maui – delivered on the day in a Raymond Chandler style complete with Hawaiian music – and offers other deeper reflections – leads this issue of Historic Environment.

Thirty other papers were presented at the conference. It was not easy to choose a representative sample of seven for publication. As well as having to meet the strict requirements for a refereed academic journal, the editorial committee was keen to include a practical range of sub-themes and countries.

Jane Lennon’s paper, ‘Tracking Through the Cultural Landscape’ provides a broad overview and an insightful consideration of the application of the Burra Charter to historic roads. She includes a useful matrix cross-referencing criteria, thematic categories (including the tangible and intangible), physical attributes and possible examples. Other papers by Sue Rosen and Nancy Cushing contrast convict-built roads and modern highways. Ursula de Jong’s paper provides a whimsical understanding of the road to Point Nepean as it passes through its landscape physically and chronologically. Two very practical papers by Diane Kane and Michael Kelly focus on management, with a strong message that management is for the users, the community, not the managers.

The ICOMOS International Scientific Committee CIIC, the International Committee on Cultural Routes deals with historic roads but within a broader conceptualization of itinerary and international exchange. Perhaps Australia is different in having no international connections by road. We do have a shared international experience at least of British and American legislation and know-how. We should also look to our much deeper past, the aboriginal tracks and trading routes that crossed the continent, a theme first explored in the ICOMOS conference ‘Making Tracks’ held in Alice Springs in 2001. The cultural significance of routes and roads was also explored at the 2006 US ICOMOS conference held in Newport, Rhode Island.

I hope that the process of identification, protection, management and interpretation of historic roads continues to grow in Australia. We should strive to maintain our various links with the rest of the world community. Our national network of roads, tracks and dreamings does unite us and can provide access to both the tangible and intangible of our cultures.