Introduction

Islands of Vanishment

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The papers in this volume are selected from those given at the Islands of Vanishment Conference held at Port Arthur Historic Site in Tasmania in June 2002. The theme of the Conference was 'exploring, conserving and interpreting heritage places which commemorate painful or ambivalent themes in the history of our societies'.

The Islands referred to in the title are conceptual rather than real, but the title of the Conference reflects both the origin of many of these places and our treatment of them today. The Conference invited us to examine this particular paradox through case studies and scholarly reflection. The Conference was held at Port Arthur, a remote establishment where the rejects of society were sent and expected to disappear, and which has played a complex and ambivalent role in Australia's evolving identity. This was a very appropriate and stimulating venue for such a conference.

Conference presenters brought forward many examples of such places both in Australia and overseas, relating to both settler and indigenous history. They tell us many fascinating things about our origins, history and past way of life, but they also resonate with strong emotional themes of tragedy, injustice, endurance and sometimes redemption.

There is often a dissonance in our attempts to understand and conserve such sites. Many people resist or have difficulty in recognising and emotionally connecting with the significance of such places and their implications for society today. Contemplation of such themes is sometimes unfashionable and our approach to such places has often had elements of denial, selective amnesia or nostalgia, which obscure and distort our ability to see our history steadily and frankly. Equally, we have sometimes in the past lacked the professional skills and sensitivity to properly appreciate and study the nuances and subtle values of such places. Yet a proper understanding of these places, and an authentic emotional connection with their multiple layers of meaning can immensely enrich our lives and challenge the more complacent paradigms of our society.

The papers in this volume explore these issues over many types of sites, teasing out their perceived values and meanings, exploring the range of attitudes held by different sectors of the community to such sites and examining our responses to them. It is apparent from many papers in this volume that the exploration of these themes often goes 'against the grain' of the majority view of our history and requires new and subtle tools and approaches.

The complex and often contested meanings and resonances of such places make particular demands on those responsible for their conservation which this Conference was also able to explore. Such sites have profound emotional value which needs to be expressed in multiple ways. The Conference through exploring a multidisciplinary approach to significance assessment and conservation brought different aspects of these complex heritage places to light and allowed them to be viewed in a manner which integrates our intellectual and emotional experience of them.

The Conference attracted wide interest in Australia and overseas and we are very proud to have such a distinguished group of authors for this volume of Historic Environment. The papers taken together are a fascinating and enlightening exploration of a very important topic. This is Part 1 of the papers from the Conference. A future volume of papers will cover the theme as it applies specifically to Port Arthur Historic Site.