Introduction

Port Arthur: selected papers from the Islands of Vanishment Conference

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This is one of two volumes of Historic Environment derived from the Islands of Vanishment Conference. It deals entirely with Port Arthur, fittingly so since Port Arthur was the venue for the Conference and offered participants visible examples of almost all of the issues raised at that conference. However, this volume and its companion include only a small selection of the many excellent papers that were presented. The other conference papers will be available in their entirety on the Port Arthur website and the reader is urged to use the website to complement this journal.

Port Arthur is a highly significant historical site and, as several authors point out, is now deriving additional significance from its role in the development of good heritage management practice in Australia. Brian Egloff’s paper highlights the importance of ICOMOS to this process and describes the fluctuating ménage à trois between ICOMOS and the federal and state governments. His paper incidentally foreshadows the forthcoming special issue of Historic Environment dedicated to the 25th anniversary of the Burra Charter. That issue will analyse the writing of the Charter, its revisions and the way in which it is used both here and overseas.

In this volume Richard Mackay explains the current heritage approach and the consultation process which determined values and procedures for the Port Arthur Conservation Plan of 2000. Peter Roney explains what is happening as a result of this plan and how it differs from earlier ones. In a very detailed paper Jane Lennon takes us step by step through the community-values consultations about the memorial for the victims of the Broad Arrow café massacre. All of the issues of concern to the community surfaced in various ways throughout the conference in relation to this site and others. Port Arthur can thus be seen to represent not just its own Australian values, but also to be emblematic of horror sites anywhere in the world.

Every visitor perceives the disjuncture between the beauty of Port Arthur and the horrific events that took place there. Regrettably this contrast is not uncommon on the planetary scale and was indeed a portent of things to come. In the last 200 years new horror landscapes have been created, at an accelerating rate: 50 years of highland clearances in Scotland, 10 years of famine in Ireland, less than 10 years of massacres in the American west have left starkly beautiful emptiness; it took less than four years to change Flanders’ and Cambodia’s smiling landscapes into killing fields; a few weeks or months for Rwanda or Bosnia. The Broad Arrow Café massacre, the Dunblane school massacre, the September 11 explosions and the Bali disco-bombing took only minutes. How are these places to be remembered and represented? Both this volume and the actual site of Port Arthur invite us to reflect on the way in which successive generations remember and interpret the past.

Within Port Arthur itself there are absences. Where are the Aboriginal people? Where are the convicts? James Semple Kerr speculates on the convict legacy, while Nicola Goc describes Tasmania’s attempts to ignore it, in two very different but equally individual papers. How to represent the lost people is a major task, as Julia Clark explains in her elegant contribution to the debate. The heritage manager has to deal with practicalities, with that which exists, and cannot fake or re-create that which has been lost. But the manager cannot control what the visitor perceives, the ‘tourist gaze’, which Richard Morrison discusses in his analysis of published comments on Port Arthur.

Some of these issues are also raised in the books reviews which deal, among other things, with the Oklahoma bombing and with the problems of inclusiveness at Williamsburg. It seems that Port Arthur is not just a picturesque evocation of the bad old days but rather a place that, properly understood, can encapsulate much of human experience over the past 200 years. In her closing paper Margaret Scott reflects on the condition of imprisonment and memory with the same grace and hope as does Joan Domicij in the companion volume. It was a pleasure to hear these authors speak at the Islands of Vanishment Conference and I am sure you will find their written presentations equally illuminating.