Watermarks

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Joint editors
Water, as an element, is elusive but essential to all life on earth. Water covers 71% of the earth’s surface and constitutes 60% of our bodies. Water, as a subject, has no home. It travels intellectually from one field of knowledge to another, collecting its identity equally from geography, anthropology, archaeology, engineering, government and management, architecture, ritual and religion.

The 2011 Watermarks Conference was a confluence of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) and Australia ICOMOS. Through water, professionals, academics and community came together to define and explore this elusive compound that offers so much. Water gives life to dry land; it divides countries and nations; it gives pleasure and recreation; it refreshes; it quenches; and it can symbolise spiritual life.

The Watermarks conference focused attention on the importance of water to Australia’s heritage, from the diversity of Aboriginal occupation and the subsequent European colonisation, through to the most recent flood events and cyclones that had followed more than a decade of drought. Australia’s geographic and climatic spread ranges from tropical to sub-Antarctic, yet it is the driest continent on earth. The timing of the conference highlighted the great challenges of our time; climate change alone heralds more extreme weather events which will likely threaten our very existence; life on earth will not be the same for any species. The focus on water as heritage was timely, not only to understand its significance in the past but to consider its role in the future.

The three keynotes offered varying perspectives and ways of understanding the value of water as heritage. Professor Gray Brechin, in his highly relevant keynote address, emphasised that water is not just a commodity to be bought and sold on an open market. Water is a right. Joe Ross, a member of the Bunuba people in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and Chairman of the Indigenous Water Policy Group for the Northern Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance (NAILSMA) among other positions, argued in his keynote address that land, water and people are not separate. Ross proposed that cultural values should be centre stage and suggested that we consider ‘cultural flows’. In her keynote presentation, Dr Helen Doyle crystallised colonial settlers’ approach to water in the arid Australian landscape highlighting their constant desire for “rain and engineers”, and outlining the public processes that shaped water supply in this country. Many at the conference saw the value in the keynotes, noting in particular how timely it was to recognise Indigenous cultures’ profound respect for water.

As rapporteur, Chris Johnston ‘recited’ the watercourse that conference delegates had travelled. She described a journey of discovery with many themes, places and stories: ‘We have crossed Australia – the Kimberley, the coasts, the inland, the cities—as we heard about water: water country, water places, about too much water and too little’. Presented papers outlined the way in which water plays so many roles: water is essential for life, for food production, for transport
in canals, canoes, and walking along waterways. Water is needed for industry (think mining), for infrastructure (think bridges and sewers), for beauty both natural and cultural, for spirit and ceremony, for fun (at the pool!). Water is used for energy, as a form of power and a kind of ownership. Water is a symbol of control and progress.

So which of water’s many values will we choose to commemorate? What aspects of water do we choose to recognise and which ones do we ignore? For example, is Bendigo’s Vahland Fountain, currently undergoing restoration, of greater heritage significance than the ‘empty’ bluestone-lined basins left barren at Preston Reservoir near Melbourne? How will these complex water stories be told? From the oft-heard narratives of pioneer settlers to the untold recognition of Aboriginal water country water is central to the great Australian national narratives such as the Snowy Mountains scheme and to the simple pleasures of a child stomping in puddles.

Most of the earth’s water is saline. Most of the Watermarks conference papers focused on freshwater. Water became a means of slipping between existing disciplinary boundaries, and of pooling collective experience and knowledge. The conference enabled an appreciation of different ways of knowing and revealed the spiritual meanings of water. The importance of cultural protocols in caring for water was emphasised in the creation stories from Budj Bim to Cape York. Passionate community connections with water were highlighted in campaigns to conserve and maintain swimming pools, those great local places where we’ve all hung out! Multiple ways to record people’s connections to water – to place, story, knowledge – were offered, creating opportunities, methods and new technologies to document water’s many layered meanings.

The papers included in this issue of Historic Environment cover some of the wide-ranging themes from the Watermarks Conference. These six papers encompass a variety of approaches, both academic and professional. We note that the papers focus on south-eastern Australia and thereby leave many areas uncovered. Their value, however, is in their contribution as models or approaches, which can be applied in other places and contexts.

In the first paper, ‘Melbourne Water’s Approach to Heritage Asset Management’ Paul Balassone describes the experience of Melbourne Water over the past fifteen years in coming to terms with its heritage assets. Practically, this resulted in the development of Melbourne Water’s Cultural Heritage Strategy encompassing both Aboriginal and historic assets. Balassone’s key message is that heritage assets need to be assessed in the context of the overall system of which they form part, and then they should be managed accordingly. The argument, presented in this professional paper, is that such an approach works for the owners of heritage assets in terms of economy and efficiency, as exemplified by Melbourne Water, and also results in the best outcome for the heritage assets themselves.

The second paper by Steven Cooke is a welcome addition to an under-researched area of maritime heritage: that of terrestrial curtilage and the development pressures and planning agendas that increasingly determine the fate of maritime heritage in major cities. Using Melbourne as a case in point, “On the move”? Maritime heritage and urban redevelopment in Melbourne’ describes how the marginalisation of the Yarra and the Docklands area contributed to the compromise of the maritime heritage fabric. The paper critiques a disjointed ahistorical urban planning agenda that has manifested itself in the limited development and heritage outcomes that typify so much of Docklands, and sees it now as a site of missed opportunities. As a result of these flawed processes, the Polly Woodside, the vessel which is the focus of this paper, ended up being displaced somewhere between the Melbourne Exhibition Centre and Crown Casino, rather than being in an extended arts/museum precinct along the South Melbourne side of the Yarra. Thoughtfully and persuasively, the paper is able to make some broader heritage points from political and planning perspectives.

Peter Davies and Susan Lawrence, in the third paper, ‘Dams and Ditches: Cultural Landscapes of Colonial Water Management in the Central Highlands of Victoria’ consider the use of water on the goldfields in nineteenth-century Victoria. Archaeological remains are critical to the understanding of the role of mining companies in creating ‘an extensive cultural landscape of water diversion and management’. While the spatial extent of water networks during this
period is highlighted, this paper also points to their broader significance for landscape change, the development of infrastructure, and shifts in the cultural value of water. What becomes increasingly evident is the scale of ‘water manipulation’ and the profound impact this has had on the natural environment: local topographical transformations, deforestation, disrupting flows, and erosion on a grand scale. Davies and Lawrence argue that the case study of the Humbug Hill Sluicing Company provides ‘a prism through which to examine the landscapes of water management created on the goldfields, and the ways in which water was extracted from the natural environment and transformed into a measured and traded commodity’. They demonstrate that small infrastructure cumulatively has a large impact, especially when mining companies become water companies, commercialising water, and making water a tradable commodity.

The fourth paper in the volume, ‘Ebbs and flows: water and place identity on the Nepean Peninsula, Victoria, Australia’, by Ursula de Jong introduces readers to Place-Based Knowledge, whilst simultaneously utilising this theoretical framework to create a rich description of a waterscape she has come to know over time. Taking us on a meandering journey through waterscape and seascape, through history, through time and experience, de Jong both enriches and challenges existing ways of knowing significant places, such as the Nepean Peninsula. Her paper is framed by Maggie MacKellar’s definition of sense of place as relational, as something intangible that exists between the landscape (or waterscapes in this case) and the individual. Drawing upon her own personal history with the waterscapes on either side of the peninsula, de Jong describes the intimate connections formed over time. The role of waterscape and seascape in place identity is made explicit through the intermingling of description, history, scholarship, experience and argument. What might be seen as an intellectual account, is made relevant by de Jong’s concluding case studies where such an approach to assessing place significance can reveal the many hidden layers that make places, such as the Nepean Peninsula, significant to people.

In contrast, the fifth paper by David Jones, ‘Water security and heritage integrity: ‘regreening’ the Adelaide Park Lands National Heritage Place’ raises issues on the potential conflict between environmental policy and heritage values. Focused specifically on the Adelaide Park Lands, the paper draws attention to the tensions that arise between mitigating for climate challenges and protecting cultural landscapes. Jones argues that a major policy initiative that sought to ‘water-proof’ Adelaide has failings in its approach to balancing the at-times conflicting needs of natural and cultural values. Prompted by the recent cessation of drought, the ageing of the parklands trees and Adelaide’s likely climatic shifts, the paper asks whether the approach to water supply and irrigation outlined in the policy is indeed, the right one. Often water is only recalled when it is scant, yet Jones argues that the policy, which seeks to ameliorate this very circumstance, will likely place this significant landscape under an alternative stress by ensuring over-watering. Jones also argues that this policy will have other detrimental effects to archaeological aspects of the site – all in the apparently sound belief of enabling water security.

The final paper in this volume is a professional paper that focuses on infrastructure for water recreation. In ‘Eastern Beach, Geelong’s Aquatic Playground: Its Physical History, Context and Conservation’, heritage practitioner David Rowe documents the history of this place within the context of organised bathing in Australia. He touches on social history as he describes and documents these art deco structures that inspire imagery of 1940s swimmers clad from neck to knee. Rowe’s thorough examination of this ‘people’s playground for bathing’ outlines the cultural values of this water-place and discusses many of the heritage issues that are raised in processes of conserving such early 20th century infrastructure. This is a highly informative paper that is extensively illustrated with some wonderful aerial views of the baths. Whilst focused on one specific water-place, Rowe contextualises the Eastern Beach baths within numerous other Australian comparative examples, thereby demonstrating the applicability of the issues encountered at Geelong to other sites.

The volume also includes a relevant book review. Timothy Hubbard reviews Gray Brechin’s, 2006, Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin, published by the University of California. Hubbard describes Brechin’s stories of water’s relation to urban settlements as a
rollicking tale, yet founded on rigorous research and filled with insightful perspectives. Hubbard also offers a series of Australian parallels which will enable readers to easily contextualise Brechin’s North American focus.

This Watermarks volume and the 2011 Watermarks Conference from which the revised and updated papers are drawn, reveals the many facets of tangible and intangible heritage where water plays a central and at times ignored role. As editors of the volume we hope readers will recognise and respect the many forms of knowledge that contribute to new and better integrated understandings of water.