

MECHANICS' WORLDWIDE 2009 – BATH, ENGLAND

MECHANICS' INSTITUTES IN AUSTRALIA

by Bronwyn Lowden.

Mechanics' Institutes. We know they started in Glasgow in 1796 with the establishment of the Andersonian Institution, and then later in a different form with the establishment of the Edinburgh School of Arts by Leonard Horner and Robert Bryson in 1821. With these early origins, you would think that there would be very little time for such a diverse spread of ideas and ideals to develop permanence, but if the Institute variation found throughout Australia is anything to go by, it was more than just a passing craze.

The Mechanics' Institute movement evolved from aiding in the education of the working classes and provided them with a meeting place. Later it spread to the instruction of middle class people as well, so it was no longer seen as just a working class revolt. It truly was a place where everyone could meet and learn.

The Mechanics' movement throughout Australia from the outset was not just for the working classes. It was for all. Everyone was new to the country and they saw the need for an Institution to not just further themselves intellectually, but also as a place to socialise. With the settlement of rural areas, came the establishment of remote rural Institutes. People felt a need for a place to get together, a place for entertainment, and only after this were they used for educational purposes, libraries, churches, schools, council chambers and law courts.

Australia's first Mechanics' Institute began in Hobart, Tasmania in 1827. The Van Diemen's Land Mechanics' Institute, founded by George Augustus Robinson, held the aims of promoting 'useful and scientific knowledge' through the establishment of a library, museum, reading room, experimental workshop and laboratory and the delivery of lectures.

The next Institute established in Australia was the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts in 1833. As Sydney was mostly settled by the Scots, it is believed that the name 'Mechanics' School of Arts' was agreed upon in acknowledgement of the Edinburgh School of Arts and Glasgow Mechanics' Institute. This was then followed by the establishment of other Institutes in capital cities around Australia: Adelaide, 1834; Melbourne, 1839; Brisbane, 1849 and Perth, 1851. However, many Institutes were established in major rural centres throughout this time, and it was mostly these earlier Institutes which named their buildings Mechanics' Institutes. It was only when you headed further out into the rural areas that the variations on names really occurred.

Victoria alone had in excess of 1200 separate Mechanics' Institutes established. These were not always in existence at the same time, but the sheer number of single entities is astounding for such a small population. It can be seen that there was a general lean towards the 'Mechanics' name. People spread the ideas throughout the State; they saw what was out there, and thought it would be a good idea to have one of their own, and encouraged the local public to adopt the idea. Yes, sometimes this was due to district rivalries, and many an

Institute has taken the brunt of vandalism by an opposing town, but we can see how this idea has travelled – an idea keen to be passed on.

In Queensland and New South Wales, the name more popularly adopted was School of Arts. This could be due to Scottish influence from the Edinburgh School of Arts or because the people believed that the term ‘mechanic’ was too specific and that these buildings would be used by people practicing all art forms – from engineering and agriculture to sewing and dance. Queensland had over 450 Institutes established and New South Wales had over 700.

The establishment of Institutes in South Australia is rather different. A group entitled the ‘National Colonization Society’ was formed in 1830 in London. Members of this group were all to be part of the new settlement in South Australia. This society was later called the South Australian Association. It is from this organisation that many members spread the idea of the ‘Mechanics’ throughout South Australia, and why the South Australian Institutes Association managed to keep track of many of the 400-odd Institutes in the State.

The South Australian Literary Association, later to be changed to Literary and Scientific Association was established in 1834 in Adelaide. This Association issued copies of its constitution, modelled on some of the very best found in the United Kingdom, thus influencing the values of any Institutes established consequentially. On the other hand, many Institutes decided to drop the term ‘Mechanics’ from their Institute’s name, showing that it was a place of learning for all, not just the working class. They were for anyone who would like to learn and further their knowledge in their chosen field.

In Western Australia, having some 300 Institutes, the most abundant name is Agricultural Hall. This is due to the buildings mostly being in rural areas and used by the farmers for various agricultural related practices. These Halls have been used for anything and everything in these communities ranging from produce fairs and markets to the teaching of livestock handling and husbandry to the correct operation of farm machinery.

Although one name may have been favoured by a State, there can also be found variations due to community preference; each individual Institute fashioned its name specifically to its uses or local whim.

Every Institute was established with a few specific ideals some of these included having a library, newspaper and reading room, informative lectures, entertainment of the people, debates, technical classes and a meeting place. However, the general statement which can be found most often is for the diffusion of useful knowledge.

Some Institutes’ names were influenced by their location and what activities were taking place around the area. For example, Schools of Mines and Industries were found in mining areas, the buildings themselves often being used for the town or regional gold office, like in Creswick, Victoria. Shearing Shed or Station Schools of Arts were found on outback properties, often in the wool shed or workers’ quarters. Farm workers moving from property to property brought with them new ideas and sometimes even books to share amongst other travelling workers.

Other Institutes' names were used as a statement – This is what we have – we have a Mechanics' Institute and Free Library; or a School of Arts and Public Hall. Names which included such titles as 'Free Library' or 'Literary Institute', showed that this was a place of books, whereas those with 'Public Hall' or just 'Hall' showed that the building was for multi-purpose use which could accommodate larger groups.

It is more often than not a combination of these ideals and the occupations of the local population from which evolved the specific name of the Institutes.

The Lilydale Athenaeum, Mechanics' Institute and Free Library is one such Institute with an all encompassing name. Names such as this one show what this building has to offer. Not only does it have a Free Library, but also is a place for the working classes to be educated and somewhere for the community to practice all forms of the arts. Generally though, an Institute will just be known as one name at any one time. Lilydale is currently known as the Athenaeum Theatre.

These names were understood by the people of the day. Everyone knew the term 'mechanic' and how it was applied – none of this automobile business – just an artisan who uses his hands; simple enough. But in this day and age, we are finding that the original meaning of these words has been lost, leading to much confusion about the origins and purposes of these 'mysterious' organisations; more often than not, a Mechanics' Institute is confused with the Masonic Lodges common throughout the world.

The Institutes in Australia were predominantly used by both males and females, so there are very few of the exclusive Workingmen's and Women's Institutes. There were some clubs started in the capital cities exclusively for men, but these weren't really associated with the mechanics of the day. An organisation for women began after World War I, the Country Women's Association, and continues to have a strong association with rural Mechanics' Institutes.

Over the years, Institutes have changed their names for one reason or another. The State and Federal Governments have played a part in influencing these name changes mostly by providing financial incentives for building upgrades. They have offered grants to organisations which have a certain name, as opposed to the purpose of the organisation. In the 1930s the Victorian Government offered grants to Public Halls throughout the State, and to be eligible, organisations had to have 'Public Hall' as part of their organisation's name. This led to a massive decline in the number of Institutes in the State actually having Mechanics' Institute as part of their name, and has resulted in a lot of confusion about the origin of these buildings and organisations. Sometimes the buildings were re-named as a memorial, for example, after the first World War when many of the Institutes were given grants to be turned into Memorial Halls. But to this day, many Mechanics' still house the town's Honour Rolls, without changing their name. In Victoria, the Government issued Grants to libraries, namely Mechanics' Libraries which included 'Free Library' as part of their names. These Grants were quite significant from the 1860s to the 1890s, until when the Depression hit and limited funds were available. From 1907-1908, the Grants picked up again until the Second World War, when general funding to Mechanics' libraries ceased. There was

also reluctance to invest money into Mechanics' libraries due to the findings of the Munn-Pitt Report, which stated that Institutes 'have long since become cemeteries of old and forgotten books', which we all know is far from the truth.

There were other Institute buildings which were amalgamated with other community organisations. This could be due to financial reasons, or just mere commonsense. What was really the point in having two large halls in a town – one for public use, and one for an exclusive membership organisation? The Country Women's Association and Freemasons were often some of the first other large organisations to make the Mechanics' their home.

The Mechanics' Institutes really were the all encompassing body for a community and generally occupied a key town centre site. They would always develop and grow to meet the needs of the community, adopting what ever name, title or management that would keep them serving the community, exactly like the many others of its kind. This adaptability played a key role in the Institutes involvement in Victorian bushfire meetings and recovery operations; always being ready to operate for whichever purpose they were required; be it for public meetings on fire awareness, refuge, storage or distribution centres, or even just as the local lunchroom for the fire fighters and emergency services personnel. The Institute and its members would always rise to the challenge. Sadly, there were a few Institutes lost during the fires, but up until the very last, they played a vital logistical part, and are well on the way to being rebuilt.

To this very day we are finding that the naming of Institutes can either be a hindrance or help to our study of them. The very name can draw the attention of historians and governments to try and preserve these historic Institutions, or it can severely harm their chances of gaining funding, because the aren't like all those other halls out there. But that's right! They aren't like all those other mass produced Community Centres out there. They haven't been established with the same values, values which have helped to shape the development of not only our nation, but the whole world. The naming of these Institutes, though extremely diverse, should be something to be proud of rather than being seen as a disadvantage.

The study of these wonderful Institutions is no easy feat, particularly in Australia. Although there were well over 3,000 Institutes across the country, there is no one way to find them all. South Australia and Queensland had an Institutes Association and School of Arts Association, respectively, but there is only so much that can be learned from their membership lists.

Due to the advances in technology, we have been able to easily access records more readily concerning the early establishment and management of Institutes, particularly in Victoria with the digitising of the *Government Gazette* from 1836-1997. We can see through this what the various communities were looking to establish as part of their Institute and how the naming was thus adapted. But not all research is that easy. I myself have struggled to find even the most basic details about the Institutes in Australia, but as there is no governing body, no government record compiled on every Institute that was established, no organisation which oversees all of these autonomous centres for self help, sometimes the only way to gather information is to go straight to the source. But this isn't how it should be. These Institutes should all be recorded together, in one place to make research easier, not only for

historians, but also for councils who would just like to know a little more about historic buildings in their region. These buildings may have all been very different, but they are all similar in so many ways.

The naming of Institutes can also prove to be a frustrating when it comes to research. There is no one universal term that can help you find them all. Sure you can find the majority of Institutes if you stick to the general, more common names. But often it is those obscure Institutes you are looking for. The one's that have the unique names, the one's that have passed through all other documentation unnoticed because they at first glance didn't appear to 'fit'. On one hand it is great that they have managed to go it on their own, they have managed to be so individual that they can't be classified, but in reality they all come down to being part of one movement; one idea; one philosophy. The one that has brought us all here today, what has helped us to be where we are today, not just as an individual, but as a community, as a State, as a nation. The diffusion of useful knowledge.

References

Baragwanath, Pam. (2000) *If the Walls Could Speak: A Social History of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria*. Prahran, Australia: Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria.

Butt, John. (1996) *John Anderson's Legacy: The University of Strathclyde and its antecedents 1796-1996*. Glasgow, Scotland: Tuckwell Press/ The University of Strathclyde.

Candy, Philip C/ Laurent, John. (1994) *Pioneering Culture: Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts in Australia*. Adelaide, Australia: Auslib Press.

Lowden, Bronwyn. (2007) *Mechanics' Institutes, Schools of Arts, Athenaeums, etc.: An Australian Checklist*. 2nd Edition. Donvale, Australia: Lowden Publishing Co.

Milward-Bason, Catherine. (1995) *Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts in Australia: An Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Sources*. Prahran, Australia: Prahran Mechanics' Institute.

Munn, Ralph/ Pitt, Ernest R. (1935) *Australian Libraries: A Survey of Conditions and Suggestion for their Improvement*. : Melbourne, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.

Nadel, George. (1957) *Australia's Colonial Culture: Ideas, Men and Institutions in Mid-Nineteenth Century Eastern Australia*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press.

O'Farrell, Patrick. (2004) *Heriot-Watt University: An Illustrated History*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.

Talbot, Michael R. (1992) *A Chance to Read: A History of the Institutes Movement in South Australia*. Adelaide, Australia: Libraries Board of South Australia.

Various Authors. (2004) *Buildings, Books and Beyond: Mechanics' Worldwide Conference 2004*. Prahran, Australia: Prahran Mechanics' Institute Press.

Whitelock, Derek. (1974) *The Great Tradition: a History of Adult Education in Australia*. St Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press.