

LONG MAY MINERVA REIGN FROM HER NICHE OVERLOOKING COLLINS STREET.

By Pam Baragwanath.

The Melbourne Athenaeum, arguably one of Melbourne's oldest Institutions and the most enduring Public Library in Victoria, continually open to the public, began life as the – *Melbourne Mechanics' Institution and School of Arts*.

Mechanics' Institutes were – the first adult education schools and libraries established in Victoria. Broadly, the Institute aims were:

“The Diffusion of Useful Knowledge”

And the credo was:

“For the Community, by the Community”

Implicit in those aims were – the provision of educational and library facilities for the wider community, self improvement, self help and the doctrine of mutualism, carried out with dedication and commitment.

Definition and context:

Just what is a *Mechanics' Institute*?

As the term '*Mechanics' Institute*' is marvellously anachronistic yet redolent of its origins, the meaning constantly requires explanation. This serves to assist in the understanding of the Movement as a whole

During the early 1800's the term – '*mechanic*' was a more general term than is used today, to describe tradesmen, artisans and manual workers.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and obvious necessity for trained workers for the newly invented machinery and factories, the term became more specialised to mean a connection with that machinery.

An -'Institute'- is a place of learning, hence Mechanics' Institutes were – providers of adult and technical education for the working classes. The provision of library services was viewed as essential.

The term '*School of Arts*' is more correctly used in this context to include the technical and scientific arts.

Origins in the UK:

Dr. George Birkbeck has been largely recognised as the founder of the movement. A lecturer in Natural Philosophy at the Andersonian Institute in Glasgow in the early 1800s, he began to give free tuition to rapidly growing groups of young men.

This radical action was most unpopular with the ruling classes of the time, they feared that, educated, the working classes may rise up and try to impinge on their long held power base, at a time when cheap labour was regarded as their privilege.

But the exciting new movement would not be stopped and by 1851 in the UK between 600 and 700 Institutes were established with a combined membership of over 600,000 members.

The first UK Institutes were in Glasgow, Edinburgh and London and became the contemporary Universities familiar today, i.e. Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh and Birkbeck College at London University. The early 1800's marked a time of considerable Commonwealth expansion and migration to many parts of the world.

The MI movement in Australia:

New ideas of self improvement, self help and the opportunity to improve their lot in life appealed to the adventurous new settlers so much so that the first Mechanics' Institute in

Australia was established in Van Diemen's Land in 1827, only six years after the London Mechanics' Institute was established by George Birkbeck in 1821. Many new settlers had been members of the Institutes in the UK and the ideas were eagerly taken up by early settlers in the burgeoning settlements.

All new colonies in Australia established Mechanics' Institutes with vigour and intensity and because each one was an individual and unique local community enterprise and as Australia was then, and maybe still is, more a collection of States, alternative names included:

School of Arts, Pioneer Library, Miners Literary Institute, Free Library, Literary Institute, Athenaeum, Library Institute etc.

Following the formation of the first Australian Institute in Van Diemen's Land later called Hobart Town, in 1827 other States followed:

Sydney 1833, Newcastle 1835, South Australia 1836, Melbourne 1839, Brisbane 1849, Swan River 1851 and the Palmerston Institute was formed in Darwin in 1877.

Overall approx. 2,500 Institutes were established in Australia with approximately 1100 of those being in the State of Victoria.

Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria:

It's interesting to note that along with Melbourne two more pre-goldrush Institutes were established at Geelong and Portland in the 1840's. Along with the gold rushes phenomenal growth ensued, Warrnambool in 1853, Sandhurst, Kilmore, Prahran and Emerald Hill in 1854, then in 1855, Castlemaine and Kyneton, Beechworth Athenaeum, Cheltenham, Footscray, Gisborne, Williamstown in 1856, Collingwood in 1857 and so on. In the 1860's alone, 127 Institutes were established all over Victoria averaging- one per month for that decade.

All these Institutes established libraries, meeting or reading rooms and a lecture space. That the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute and School of Arts was the model is not surprising as the

immigrants who came to Melbourne would no doubt have been introduced to the inviting home away from home upon arrival. In later times, books as well as advice was shared.

As far afield as near the Little Desert, Apsley, in North West Victoria, their Mechanics' Institute had typical aims:

“The diffusion of literary and other useful knowledge and the literary advancement and recreation of its members generally. The means to be employed are – the delivery of lectures, a library of references are circulation, a reading room and the formation of classes”.

Many visitors to the early settlement of the Port Phillip District, wrote that they could scarcely believe that a Mechanics' Institute existed, after all it was only five years since John Batman arrived with the party from Tasmania. The main streets were muddy tracks, riddled with ruts and tree stumps making negotiation difficult and the settlement was very much in its awkward infant stage.

The *Melbourne Mechanics' Institute and School of Arts* began its life in rented rooms in Bourke Street in 1839, but owing to the admirable initiative and drive of its first Secretary, Thomas Osborne, the present site was able to be purchased in Collins Street with a building erected by 1842.

The Melbourne Athenaeum, renamed in 1872 to celebrate its new larger premises, was the place where most of the important civic and social issues of the time were discussed, publicised and the subject of lectures.

In the absence of a Town Hall, the Athenaeum became the hub of Melbourne, people attended in large numbers to learn of news that may affect their lives. Some examples of important meetings held at the Mechanics' Institution and School of Arts, are:

1850 meeting

Following on the news of gold being found in NSW and reluctant to have the population desert the new colony a meeting was convened to offer a substantial reward for the

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The Melbourne Athenaeum: <https://melbourneathenaeum.org.au/>

discovery of the first profitable gold mine in Victoria. A year later gold was discovered at Warrandyte, and other places and the gold rushes began in earnest.

1854 meeting:

Following on the Eureka Rebellion at Ballarat and the Red Ribbon Rebellions at Bendigo and Chewton, a meeting was called to plan the defence of Melbourne with the result that 1500 special constables were sworn in.

1858 meeting

The Institute committee placed an advertisement in The Argus with the heading "Exploration of Australia". It was the beginning of subscriptions being canvassed for what was to become the Burke and Wills Expedition.

In time, the Institute's educative role was taken over by, for example, the Workingman's College now known as RMIT University and the Literary Institute at the Trades Hall.

With the advent of the Melbourne Public Library in 1853, there was less pressure on the Institute but the Athenaeum has continually and faithfully provided library facilities in the CBD area of the city for 172 years.

The Athenaeum has played an essential role in the narrative of Victorian settlement and culture. This Melbourne icon gives us a relationship that few contemporary structures are capable of, the provenance is undeniable.

That it has remained true to its origins for the last 172 years and continues to be relevant now is testament to all the selfless aspirations of well meaning Committee members, in whose debt we all are.

According to Robert Hughes in his National Trust Heritage Lecture, broadcast on ABC National Radio in 1998:

"We need to be able to say who we are from a deep memory, not just a stage set..... Architecture has played an essential role in the narrative of Australian culture, the relationship with our own history".

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It could be argued that no other historic structure served Melbourne so fittingly and constantly. As a comfortable, warm and welcoming library with lectures and soirees presented with an overlay of genuine heritage (as well as drama in the Athenaeum Theatre), the Athenaeum enjoys the unique position of being a constant provider of rational recreation and intellectual culture in Melbourne.

Pam Baragwanath June 2011