

YESTERDAY'S TOMORROWS: THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND ITS PRECURSORS 1880-2005 EDITED BY GRAEME DAVISON AND KIMBERLEY WEBBER. SYDNEY: POWERHOUSE PUBLISHING IN ASSOCIATION WITH UNIVERSITY OF NSW PRESS, 2005; PP288, PHOTOGRAPHS, ILLUSTRATIONS, NOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY INDEX; PAPERBOUND \$54.95.

The Powerhouse Museum was conceived by the trustees of the Australian Museum in 1878. By 1880, Australia's first Technological and Industrial Museum was open to the public. Over the next 125 years, the museum experienced various metamorphoses and name changes, most notably its transformation into the Powerhouse Museum which opened during Australia's Bicentenary in 1988. On the 125th anniversary of the birth of this world-renown museum comes *Yesterday's Tomorrows: the Powerhouse Museum and its precursors 1880-2005*, edited by eminent urban and public historian Graeme Davison and Powerhouse Museum curator of social history Kimberley Webber.

This visually appealing book approaches the history of the museum from a thematic perspective, focusing on innovative exhibitions and bold personalities that have peppered the museum's past. Broken into three sections – 'Visions', 'Stories from the Collections', and 'Tomorrows' – this collection of essays covers a broad spectrum of topics in the museum's history. Quirky stories of past curators and popular objects ensure an entertaining read, with copious images providing engaging illustrations of bygone days. The book positions the Powerhouse Museum as an innovative educational institution providing a window on cutting-edge technological advances, bringing the world of technology to the everyday visitor. The history of the museum is dealt with in sufficient detail to ensure the general reader gains a comprehensive understanding of the vision, struggles and triumphs of this pioneering institution.

Contributors range from museum staff to academic historians, providing diverse approaches to the history of the museum. While, however, it is often stimulating to be presented with differing perspectives, in this instance the multiplicity of views and approaches fragment the end product. There is a lack of connectedness and continuity between the chapters. Perhaps this is unavoidable in a collection such as this given the diversity of the museum's exhibitions over the years. But the wide range of styles that appear in *Yesterday's Tomorrows* is also problematic. The book is at times too academic for the general reader and yet insufficiently critical for the student or scholar. I am left wondering for whom exactly was the book intended. The numerous colourful plates and 'pop' interludes between the chapters might suggest cultural tourists. But the price – \$54.95 – and size – almost 300 pages – would make this seem a rather large and expensive souvenir. The impressive line-up of historians as contributors suggests a more academic audience. But academic interest in the book may well stem from the public historian's interest in the way in which major public cultural institutions such as museums control, construct and present themselves. In

attempting to appeal to everyone – including political masters and institutional internal communicators – *Yesterday's Tomorrows* both satisfies and disappoints.

As history, the collection is found wanting. Good history writing is contextual; a book concerned with the history of a museum should discuss that institution's place within local, national and international arenas. Although *Yesterday's Tomorrows* attempts to do this, its approach is largely fragmented. While a number of contributors begin to discuss the museum in relation to broader, external events or issues, such as modernity or the push for technical education, the discussion is truncated and ultimately ignored. Numerous subjects are raised separately: Peter Spearitt discusses the physical site of the Powerhouse Museum with respect to its changing industrial surroundings; Lucy Taksa explains the museum's creation as a product of the industrial revolution; Richard White discusses the museum's role in the promotion of an Australian identity through the reproduction of native flora in art; and Megan Hicks and Martha Sear examine the relationship between sanitation and technical education. Yet the links these authors draw between the museum and the outside world do not permeate the book as a whole.

Yesterday's Tomorrows fails to develop many important issues associated with the history of the Powerhouse Museum. For example, despite a clear association between the museum's origins and notions of empire, modernity, progress and nationhood, these themes are insufficiently addressed in the book. The concept of class is ignored, although the museum is described early in the book as a 'working man's museum'. Similarly, despite drawing a connection between the museum's early focus on public health, the preoccupation of the NSW Government with sanitation, and the rise of eugenics in the 1920s, the discussion fails to move beyond that initial comparison, with no mention of the contemporary debates surrounding working-class slums, the ideology of suburbia, or the ideology of racial hierarchy. The almost complete absence of women from much of the museum's history is not even acknowledged, let alone discussed. Nor does the book address the relationship between the museum and indigenous Australians despite an obvious connection with respect to the early collection of ethnographic material, the museum's promotion of Australian art and its adherence to the ideology of progress. Finally, in his concluding chapter, current director of the Powerhouse, Kevin Fewster, discusses the need to showcase Sydney and Australia to the world without explaining which version the museum intends to promote or even recognizing the existence of competing interpretations. Too many things are left unsaid in this book.

Nevertheless, this is a handsome book, containing many stories that illuminate certain aspects of the history of the Powerhouse Museum. It is, indeed, comparable to the blockbuster exhibitions that have come to dominate its public offerings. While this reviewer would have enjoyed a more critical analysis of the position the museum occupied in society over the last 125 years, as well as a more detailed and consistent contextualization, what the reader will find within

these pages is a thoroughly entertaining, non-confrontational journey through the history of one of Australia's oldest cultural institutions.

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