

# From 'Place of Misery' to 'Lottery of Life': Interpreting Port Arthur's Past

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For more than a century Port Arthur historic site has attracted visitors curious to see the former convict settlement. Recently, management has devised novel ways to entice people to the site. The new visitors centre, designed by Philip Lighton Architects and completed in 1999, has a bold modernistic design which has received high praise from architectural experts. Although it sits within the historic precinct it looks nothing like the other buildings on site. Architectural designer Tim Penny declared that the building's 'contemporary character blends in well with the historic buildings without replicating the original colonial architecture.'<sup>1</sup>

Casual observers do not always appreciate design concepts that seem obvious to experts, however. One unimpressed Tasmanian visitor complained: 'spend some money on restoring the buildings instead of building a monstrosity like this.'<sup>2</sup> And a site employee griped: 'it looks like it was plunked down in the middle of the site from a park somewhere in America' (Roche interview, 1999). In spite of such misgivings, visitors services staff report that customers are overwhelmingly pleased with the facility that features a sit-down restaurant and snack bar, plenty of restrooms, wheelchair accessibility, a well-stocked gift shop, and an information and ticketing counter.

The major component in the new visitor centre, a gallery that interprets Port Arthur's past, has received comparatively little critical attention. While the blatantly new building provides a new way of entering the historic site, the gallery's purpose-built representations of transportation and convict life depart from orthodox approaches to museum interpretation. Unlike the artefact displays in the site museum, which remains open to visitors in the former Port Arthur town hall, the interpretation gallery unabashedly uses the new to represent the old, the fake to interpret the real. Aside from a few artefacts tucked inside sealed cabinets, the gallery's displays are constructed entirely from new materials.



Many replicated items, such as a ball and chain, are meant to be handled, and other features, such as a colonial court sentencing 'wheel,' are designed to allow visitors to initiate soundscapes and set animated figures into motion. Like the building in which it is housed, the gallery presents a vista on the past without integrating its residual material components.

The establishment of an interpretation gallery at Port Arthur is the latest transition in heritage management strategies at a place that touts itself as 'Australia's premier historic site.' In both style and content, the gallery rejects the museum's approach to Port Arthur's past but borrows from the site's animated means of interpretation, such as tour-guide story telling and costumed interpreters. Management planning documents as well as interviews with gallery designers confirm that the interpretation gallery was meant to counter the old museum's version of Port Arthur as 'Hell on Earth.' By introducing individual convicts' stories of triumph and not just tragedy, the gruesome image of dehumanising punishment was modified and moderated. More than a stylistic gesture this interpretative strategy supports a new political economy interpretation of convictism. In the interpretation gallery Port Arthur appears as an unfree labour site, albeit one in which the coercive apparatus that extracted that labour is comparatively less visible or audible than work itself.

Although there are obvious differences between the museum's and the gallery's format and message those differences cannot be described in absolute terms. Both venues frame Port Arthur's history in accordance with the historiographical trends and museological principles that have influenced Australian heritage interpretation since the mid-1970s. The new gallery (like the museum before it) is marked by the intellectual, curatorial, and political context of its production. As Tony Bennett argues, all heritage practices define the past as distinct from the present but the ways in which those distinctions are drawn inevitably express present-day preoccupations. Heritage sites never display everything of the past; therefore all forms of historical interpretation entail making choices about material selection and arrangement in relation to each other and to interpretive texts (Bennett 1995: 109; 129). The key distinction is that interpretation galleries, through their overt constructedness, make those curatorial considerations obvious, whereas museums present the undisputedly real remnants of the past, a practice which reinforces the truth effects of artefacts while diverting attention from curatorial predilections.

Free from the strictures of selecting artefacts that were accessible and intact, the designers of the interpretation gallery literally made things up. As well, the gallery's setting in

a new building, rather than an historic edifice meant: ‘you don’t have to worry about the building being the exhibit... You have total flexibility in there’ (Romey interview, 1999). Nevertheless there were practical and interpretive constraints on the stories and perspectives that the gallery could present. Some of those strictures were logistical and beyond the control of gallery planners: a tight budget, a limited amount of space in which to cover significant issues; managerial pressure to open to the public. Yet firmly held conceptual convictions – particularly the decision to interpret the convict experience at Port Arthur the industrial labour site, rather than trace the long and multi-hued history of Port Arthur the *place* – significantly narrowed the range of stories that could be told in the interpretation gallery.

Through the design and planning process some aspects of Port Arthur’s past were inevitably muted whereas other elements were amplified. As it transpired, the convict site’s coercive mechanisms, as well as its pre- and post-convict history received less attention than its significance as an early industrial complex in a wider imperial regime of forced migration. Furthermore, by concentrating on the early convict period (the 1830s and ‘40s) and devoting the greatest amount of display space to representations of convict gang and artisanal work, the interpretation gallery perpetuates the site’s historic practice of leaving questions of race and gender unasked. And while it boldly rejects both right and left-wing versions of convict history it avoids taking risks when it comes to interpreting sensitive moral issues, such as homosexuality. The gallery certainly confronts and counters visitor assumptions about Port Arthur as a place of misery but it does not challenge popular perceptions that male convictism and European history are the only features of the site worth remembering.

What follows is the result of on-site ethnographic work, interviews with site staff, and an excavation of site records concerning the planning, design and implementation of the interpretation gallery. In addition a small qualitative survey and informal discussions with site visitors were conducted to establish what patrons make of this new approach to the interpretation of Port Arthur’s history. Rather than review the gallery (by asking, ‘does it work?’ or ‘how well does it work?’) I examine and analyse the effects of the interpretive processes – intentional, improvised, and unplanned – that combined to produce this latest rendition of the past at Port Arthur.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, I respond to Sharon Macdonald’s call that critical museum studies’ object is to analyse the ‘context, contest, and context’ of exhibitions (Macdonald and Fyfe 1996: 13)

## Betting on the Lottery

The decision to invest a large sum of money (4.5 million dollars in total) in a new interpretation gallery was more than a managerial commitment to keep up with the times; principally it was a bid to attract more customers and to serve them better (PAHSMA 1996: 3). From 1995, Tasmania's Government Business Enterprises Act required the site to conduct not only sound fiscal policies but profitable operations. Although heritage managers insisted that preserving Port Arthur's authentic historical fabric remained a priority, luring more visitors and marketing more products and services became a necessity.<sup>4</sup> Port Arthur was far from unique in this respect. Heritage workers around the world lament that marketing concerns became paramount once state public sector funding began to shrink in the 1980s. As a result public historians have had to approach culture as an industry that must meet the bottom line (Harris 1990; Walsh 1992). In Tasmania as elsewhere history is increasingly commodified and sold to the fee-paying public. For history to sell, site management stressed, it must appeal. And history does not need to be artefact-based to sell well.

Pushed to become profitable, Port Arthur's management was simultaneously pulled toward interactive modes of historical interpretation. A variety of on-site initiatives, including an education package called 'Port Arthur Alive,' a summer open-air theatre, and costumed dramatisations of convict life were introduced in the 1980s in an effort to educate visitors engagingly. The sober side of site interpretation remained locked in the museum, however. Installed in 1975 and entitled 'Port Arthur: A Place of Misery,' it seemed not only old-fashioned by the 1990s but dreary. (Nuske interview, 1998) In keeping with dour pedagogical styles of the period in which it was conceived, the museum uses long blocks of didactic text to accompany an eclectic assortment of convict-era paraphernalia. As shifts occurred in museological theory, and as Port Arthur management responded to fiscal pressures, the museum's hands-off artefact approach fell out of favour and managers warmed to the idea of interactivity. The site management's decision to fund a new gallery was less a departure from existing approaches to the Port Arthur's interpretation than an absorption of the site's existing interactive modes of representing and interpreting history. If the old museum informed without entertaining, the interpretation gallery would do both.



While new for Port Arthur the interpretive display approach had been used for decades elsewhere (Vergo 1989). Beginning in the 1920s, interactive science exhibits and children's museums invited audience involvement and hands-on learning. (Caulton 1998: 3-4). More recently in Australia, fabricated open-air villages, including Sovereign Hill and Timbertown, have offered visitors a 'you are there' experience (in these examples, of the nineteenth-century mining and the forestry industries). Some museums that display historical artefacts also include newly-fashioned items, such as the hammocks strung up in Sydney's Hyde Park Barracks. And historic houses frequently act as stages in which items 'similar' to those used by historical figures represent the spirit of times past in period rooms. (Sorensen 1989) Thus Port Arthur was hardly venturing into uncharted territory in Australian historical interpretation conventions when it opted for an interpretation gallery. Significantly, though, the possibility of turning Port Arthur into a Disney-fied convict theme park was never a serious consideration. As we will see, planners meant the interpretation gallery to stimulate and educate, not to shock or amuse.

Drawing on elements of the site's established interactive practices as well as design concepts from hands-on displays used in other heritage projects, planning for a new gallery began in 1993. Site management, heritage advisers and the architect wrangled over the location of the new building for several years until a final decision was made to house the gallery in the visitors centre and to construct it near the centre of the site – where convict history really happened. What remained to be determined, and what became a thorny issue for gallery planners and their critics, was 'when' in Port Arthur's past (the pre-convict era? the early or late convict period? the post-penal years when it was a free settlement?) the interpretation gallery would situate site visitors.

Deciding on the gallery's format was less contentious. Qualitative and quantitative surveys, commissioned by the Site Authority in 1998, indicated that visitors felt it was boring to view material displayed in glass cases (as the museum did). Visitors of the late-1990s expressed clear preferences for interactive facilities. Not only did they expect something livelier than the traditionally-styled museum, but they also ranked historical learning as a low priority. Many indicated that they did not want the gallery to be 'overly educational as they were visiting while on holidays and did not want to be overloaded with information at that time.' On the one hand, they hoped the prospective interpretation gallery would include

photographs, videos, touchable displays, eerie sounds and moody lighting. On the other, they felt that flashy technological devices, such as computer touch screens and animation would be inappropriate for an historic prison site (Witcomb 1993). The main point was that an interactive gallery at Port Arthur ought to produce *feelings*. As one respondent explained, 'You need it to be emotional to relate to it. You don't bother to come back if nothing touches you' (Environmetrics 1998: 10).

Interpretation gallery planners, including historians and designers, stepped up to meet this challenge. Like a growing number of public history interpreters, they validated visitors' complaints that reading didactic text was boring. The contemporary visitor, they believed, seeks choice, colour, contrasting media, interactivity, and quick delivery of information. If the old site museum lulled visitors with information and dazed them by laying out objects before visitors' eyes, the new interpretation gallery would do the opposite. As the project manager, Dorothy Evans anticipated, the gallery would 'encourage active participation, i.e. will make [visitors] *do* something rather than just passively look.'<sup>5</sup> 'Visitor friendly,' a common catch phrase in recent public history mission statements, was a recurrent term in the working group's plans to interpret Port Arthur's past. As an early brief seeking expressions of interest in designing the gallery had projected:

the displays must be historically and factually accurate but should appeal to the emotions through involvement of the senses. Text should be kept to a minimum and the experience should immerse visitors making them feel part of the action rather than passive onlookers reading text and looking at pictures (PAHSMA 1996: 7).

Following those objectives, work began in 1998 on a tactile multi-media display designed to 'enhance the experience of visitors to the Port Arthur Historic Site' (PAHSMA 1998: 1).

After months of debating how best to make visitors engage actively the planning group decided to assign each ticket-holder an identity. Numerous other museums, such as Washington's Holocaust Museum, use this device in order to help visitors relate to major historical events and forces at an individual level. Playing card tokens fit the interpretation gallery's over-riding objective: to show that Port Arthur was not a place of misery for every man assigned there. The deck allowed for fifty-two convict biographies to be assigned to add a human element to a place which had subjected convicts to dehumanising conditions. By

distributing the card identities randomly (save for the boy prisoners' cards, given exclusively to child visitors) gallery designers replicated the regime's vicissitudes: just as convicts endured 'the uncertainties and injustices of being part of the prison system of those days,' so visitors would have to take their chances in the gallery's identity card lottery (Evans interview, 1999).

Although the gallery working group hoped that everyone would play the game they realised that some visitors might opt out (a choice that convicts could only dream of). Planners anticipated that 'those who cho[o]se not to play will still pass a series of story boards, sound scapes and interactive displays which will tell the story of transportation, Port Arthur and Carnarvon, and deliver them to the present day' (PAHSMA 1998: 2). In this respect, the dominant goal of interactivity hinged on the assumption that the gallery would prepare visitors for viewing the actual historic ruins and grounds. Throughout the planning process designers saw the interpretation gallery as a spring-board for the real Port Arthur's appreciation. After touring the gallery visitors could proceed outside, view the ruins, and pick up the story on a self-guided tour or with the help of a walking tour guide. 'Guiding staff will have to field a fresh set of questions which the [interpretation gallery] will generate,' planners expected.<sup>6</sup> Once the interpretation gallery was open, guides could sprinkle their tales with biographical details: here's where the six of hearts worked; there's the sort of cell where the ten of spades was locked up; this is the king of diamond's grave.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the interpretation gallery working group bet on the lottery, hoping that the card identity game and interactive displays would successfully engage visitors, appeal to young and old, and introduce the site's convict history in a manner less heavy-handed than the stale museum offers. Inevitably compromises occurred as work began on the project, however. As Mike Wallace observes, 'all history is a production – a deliberate selection, order, and evaluation of past events, experiences and processes' (Wallace 1996: 24). Yet such an argument downplays the unanticipated problems, the disappointments, and the reluctant alterations that transform heritage projects from their original plans. With both of these general observations in mind – the deliberately devised as well as unanticipated means and modes of historical interpretation in heritage projects – I describe the gallery and analyse the processes that produced the version of Port Arthur's history that greeted visitors in March 1999 when it first opened.

## Interacting with the Past

Gallery visits begin with instructions from the ticketing staff.

Visitors learn that their playing card is tied to the story of a real convict, and that his identity can be discovered if they follow directions in the gallery below. The game does not begin immediately, however; nor does it commence with Port Arthur.

In the first display area (a mock British criminal court) a judge and witness, both mannequins dressed in nineteenth-century costume, tower above visitors while a sound scape of excerpts from 1830s criminal trials dramatises cases that resulted in transportation to Australia. Suspended all about this area are

semi-opaque hanging panels of life-sized nineteenth century English country folk. Printed on those panels are short texts that outline the social and economic dislocations of the industrial revolution in the British Isles and the impact of those changes on crime rates. From that display stairs lead down to the cut-away entrance of a transportation ship, *The Enchantress*. In this space a silhouette surgeon figure sits at a desk inscribing text about conditions aboard ship. Visitors hear a rendition of his report as they walk through, read texts about transportation, and inspect the convict quarters in reproduced cabins. It is only after passing out of the ship and into the colonial court chamber that the Lottery of Life identity game begins.



Upon entering the colonial court room, visitors can read texts that explain Port Arthur's role as a place where male convicts, already sentenced for transportable offences, were consigned if they were convicted for reoffending after they had arrived in Van Diemen's Land.<sup>8</sup> A large roulette-style wheel, fitted with knobs to permit spinning, sits in the middle of a miniature court setting in which a series of small cartoonish cut-out defendants literally pops up while convicts' stories are told through excerpts from colonial court trials. In this room visitors are also meant to peek behind small doors labelled with playing card images in order to learn their individual convict's identity.

Once visitors have discovered their identities, they may begin the identity game. Children carrying low cards are to proceed straight ahead to a bare classroom chamber whose walls are covered in texts and images about life at the Point Puer juvenile convict site. This is where information about the fates of individual boys is displayed. To the left is the gang-work area where life-sized silhouettes of modern-day men, dressed up as convicts, are posed to depict the types of work that the most miserably treated adult men would have performed.



Biographical information and details of each convict's work assignments are printed on each figure. Lower-numbered card holders end up with men who were assigned to the harshest work: back-breaking labour on timber gangs, the 'human' railroad, and in the coal mines. To the right of the colonial court chamber is the area sectioned off to depict the various trades practised at Port Arthur. The convicts in these areas (represented by higher face card values) were men with skills that allowed them to work more comfortably and independently, such as blacksmiths or store clerks. Finally at the end of the work areas two overseers, men recruited from the convict population to police their fellows, are shown laughing and playing cards in comfortable quarters. At that point 'the game of life' ends.<sup>9</sup>



Proceeding off from the workers' display area is a room set aside for a slide show that combines 1860s photographic images of real convicts with voice-over fictional recollections of real-life convict Bewley Tuck. Inspired by the experiences of this man, who served sentences at Port Arthur between the 1830s and 1870s, the script is a salty tale about the penal regime and the changes at the site (particularly the introduction of the separate silent prison) in the post 1840s era. Visitors can learn more about the post-convict period (the 1880s to the present) if they move beyond this bare chamber to a story board area that explains how Port Arthur was transformed from a somewhat shameful curiosity into a carefully preserved historical site vying for world heritage status. One last game awaits: a puzzle composed of images of Port

Arthur artefacts which visitors are meant to 'collect' and assemble. Only steps away from this last display area, the tour guide meeting post acts as a collection point and the site itself beckons.

### **What's in, What's out**

These images, texts, displays, articles, and sounds were assembled to engage Port Arthur's visitors. Initial surveys indicate that planners have successfully geared their gallery to suit audience tastes. In a qualitative survey of fifty visitors, for instance, eighty-four percent of respondents complimented the gallery's content and style, commenting that it was both educational and engaging.<sup>10</sup> One woman answered with a comment typical of those who appreciated its presentation of history: 'extremely informative. A lot was learned from the one hour we spent there.' Others simply enjoyed the experience: 'Fantastic. Great fun and very interesting' (Visitor Survey 2000). What visitors do not see, however, are the interpretive processes of selection that produced the gallery in its current form.

Historical interpretation inevitably involves making critical decisions about what to include and what to exclude. In Port Arthur's case the interpretation gallery could theoretically have focussed on anything from the site's natural history to the history of architecture. Planning documents, correspondence, drafts of texts and displays as well as interviews with site staff reveal the ways and means by which the interpretation gallery's version of Port Arthur's history was constructed. As we will see, some interpretation choices have challenged commonly-held notions (principally the site's historic reputation as a place of misery) while others, notably the decisions to exclude the site's pre-European history and to leave issues of gender and sexuality unaddressed, have reinforced the image of Port Arthur as a place that matters because male convicts were made to work there.

The interpretation gallery was designed not only to interpret the past differently but to tell a different story, one that would contrast the existing museum's interpretive approach and challenge both left and right wing schools of convict historiography. (Garton 1991) The gallery's historical consultant, Hamish Maxwell-Stewart felt that ideological preoccupations have skewed Port Arthur's interpretation: 'on the one hand,' he observes, 'it has been viewed as a place of misery and on the other as an industrial training school where convict experiences were relatively benign.'<sup>11</sup> At the site itself, the museum conveys the former view: Port Arthur was a ruthless experiment in a wider scheme of imperial penal policy.

Liberally illustrated with images and artefacts associated with punishment and discipline, the explanatory texts and primary quotes lead visitors on a rather glum journey from the beginning to the end of Port Arthur's history as a penal settlement. On the final panel a ray of sunshine enters with a display about a convict whose grandson joined the ANZACs and died serving his country. A product of nationalist shifts that began to stimulate Australian historiography in the 1970s and 1980s, the museum presents the trope of heroic Australian nation-building against all odds (Bennett 1995: 135-45). In this rendering the nineteenth-century convict (ideally a handkerchief thief) is the raw material for the twentieth-century Aussie battler, the plucky bloke who comes to stand for all that's best about the Australian character (Nuske interview, 1998).

Rather than cling to the opposite historiographical position, consultants wanted to present Port Arthur unapologetically as a place where some convicts fared poorly but others did rather well. In the interpretation gallery's Port Arthur, men's fates were determined in a lottery-like way, in which skilled and valued workers had the odds on their side. 'To label the whole thing just miserable I think detracts from the complexity that is Port Arthur,' project manager Dorothy Evans reflected: 'I wanted to be able to show that there were many stories to tell, including the miserable ones' (Evans interview, 2000). Reacting against earlier melodramatic accounts, such as Robert Hughes' block-buster *The Fatal Shore* and Marcus Clarke's classic 1874 novel *For the Term of his Natural Life*, both of which depict Port Arthur as a place of punitive excess, gallery designers wanted visitors to see that convict workers were more than pawns in an imperial regime. 'Our aim was to try to create the impression that convicts have their own agency, and they played a role in helping create the establishment as well.' (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999) Thus while the museum freezes the left-wing nationalist historiographical perspective dominant in the 1970s and 1980s (Garton 1991) recent revisions in convict historiography (Duffield and Bradley 1997; Nicholas 1998) (with the notable exception of feminist perspectives) refocused Port Arthur's story a decade later.

The planning process for the interpretation gallery was guided by a vision of Port Arthur as 'an unfree labour system that was set up to extract labour from labour power' (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999). All subsequent decisions about the stories that would be told flowed from this understanding. Although the working group faced opposition from internal and external critics concerned about this interpretive tack, this formative labour-

oriented mindset determined the gallery's time frame, the selection of convict biographies, the contrasts between information conveyed in a passive versus interactive manner, and the visual emphasis on convict labour. In contrast the penal ideologies that motivated and maintained that scheme, and the repertoire of coercive techniques and physical punishment that provided the necessary threats were granted smaller space and subtler display techniques. Finally, the decision to focus on men's labour and convictism side-lined women and left out Aboriginal people altogether.

### **Plotting the Past**

The interpretation gallery could easily have covered any period of history. That it concentrates on the early decades of Port Arthur's history as a site of secondary punishment was the outcome of months of debate. The working group started with the assumption that transportation was the key to Port Arthur's story. Consequently they decided that the gallery ought to concentrate on the early 1800s, when buildings at the convict site had been hastily constructed out of wood. The material evidence of the early nineteenth century has largely disappeared and so, it was thought, the gallery could bring a sense of that period of Port Arthur's history to life. In contrast the buildings that do survive, the most notable being the penitentiary and the separate prison, were constructed out of stone and brick over the mid-to late-nineteenth century. The initial idea was that gallery visitors would start their journey back in Britain in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, then learn about the transportation scheme and Port Arthur's role in it, play the game of tracing stories of particular convicts and the conditions under which they laboured in the 1830s, then proceed outside to view the surviving buildings.

Excluding references to Port Arthur's later history seemed to make sense, as Maxwell-Stewart explained: 'the post-1877 story is very rich, but there's so much of that that is connected out there' (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999). And the history of Port Arthur prior to European settlement had nothing to do with convictism so it did not register as an interpretation objective in the initial planning stages. Thus the gallery's *raison d'être* was to represent the no-longer visible history of convict labour in the gallery and allow visitors to complement their visit by strolling around Port Arthur's ruined remains, taking a self-guided tour or listening to a guide tell stories about the site's history. As Dorothy Evans explains the

relationship, 'the primary function of the Visitor Centre is to prepare visitors for their experience on the Site itself. It was never intended for it to replace the real thing.'<sup>12</sup>

Other participants in the planning process disputed that logic of periodisation, in particular the gallery's inattention to the latter years of the convict system at Port Arthur, as well as its post-convict history. Staff debates over the gallery's chronological sweep raised issues that perennially vex historic site management. In a place where built, photographic, archaeological and textual evidence of the past stretches across long periods of history, should any one particular period be privileged? Alternatively, should site interpretation encompass the full span of time? At Port Arthur these debates have been raging for decades (Young 1996). Purists have complained that preserving the buildings from decay or collapse artificially stopped Port Arthur's clock, locking it out of real time. Stabilising buildings and making the ruins and grounds look picturesque, some complain, created a false and anodyne image of convictism (Berry 1995; Daniels 1983). Nevertheless the 1970s and 1980s saw major restoration efforts radically slow the natural decay process in the convict-era buildings. In the 1990s attention to the preservation of the edifices constructed or modified in the period after which Port Arthur became a free settlement, turned several dilapidated buildings into charming cottages. Although this conservation work expanded the material base in which site interpretation could be based visitors continued to come to Port Arthur for the 'Australian Convict Experience' (Young 1996; Environmetrics 1998; Romey interview, 1999).

Some site staff saw the interpretation gallery as an opportunity to do the museum and the historic buildings one better – to tell the full history of the site, from the time of its occupation by Aboriginal peoples to the present. These critics of the planning process argued that focussing the gallery on the 1830s failed to challenge the average visitor's narrow perception of Port Arthur as a convict site:

Whilst it may be desirable for every visitor to leave with a comprehensive understanding of convictism in Australia, it is essential they at least leave with a basic understanding of Port Arthur... In effect the history and development of Port Arthur is confined to a couple of chapters in the interpretative story rather than being the plot.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, the gallery's initial narrative and temporal time frame crowded out critical aspects of Port Arthur's past while incorporating issues extraneous to the physical site's history.

In spite of these interpretive differences a compromise on chronology and content was reached late in 1998. The convict identity game would remain tied to the 1830s but the Bewley Tuck slide show script and story board panels, on the emergence of Port Arthur as a tourist site, would interpret the period from the 1840s to the present. Unfortunately budgetary constraints at this late stage (the gallery was slated for opening early in 1999) meant that the post-convict period was compressed and grafted onto the end of the original display area. Although the Tuck script, peppered with excerpts of convicts' writings and illustrated with the photographic portraits of real convicts, provides a vivid impression of convict life, staff were forced to take short-cuts on sound and visual quality (Evans interview, 2000).

The result, planners concede, is that few visitors enter the slide show presentation chamber, thereby missing the story of Port Arthur's latter years as a site of punishment and penal experimentation. The 'cold and uninviting' nature of the bare-walled roofless room, supplied with crude stone slabs for seating, also seems to put people off (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999). Another factor in its disfavour is the time and patience it takes to listen to the story. '[Visitors] need to sit down in there for a few minutes ... whereas the other stuff is a real quick grab and you move on, and if you're not interested, move on to the next bit' (Romey interview, 1999). Ironically, this area, grey and flickering with ghost-like projected images of real nineteenth-century prisoners, effectively creates a gloomy atmosphere that comes closer than any other section of the gallery to evoking a sense of the bleakness of imprisonment. Early in the gallery's planning stages, when the site authority had conducted polls to determine what visitors might expect, respondents had indicated overwhelmingly that they hoped to feel what prisoners had felt. Invited to experience stirring impressions of the penal past in the actual gallery (but free to wander at will) most visitors side-step it.



Agreeing to add a post-convict period display area also compromised the planners' interactive objective. In contrast to the main gallery's life-sized displays on convict labour, the post-convict era interpretation is non-interactive: traditional wall-mounted texts and images tell the story of Port Arthur's life as a free settlement that began to attract tourists as early as the late-nineteenth century. In spite of the designers' original aim to keep written materials to a minimum this area is as text-laden as the old museum. And, confirming the early surveys of visitor preferences for visually appealing displays most visitors devote little attention to this

area. Sandwiched between the convict identity game and the site itself, the slide show and the post-convict display fail to compel.<sup>14</sup>



For some heritage consultants, covering Port Arthur's history also required an effort to relate historic penal issues to present-day debates about punishment. According to members of the Port Arthur Heritage Advisory Panel the visitor centre functioned as a physical conduit between the present (the car park, the gift shop, the restaurant, the ticketing counter) and the past (the

historic site) but the gallery's original conceptual set-up failed to connect the site's history to its on-going relevance to criminal justice issues. Their concerns mirrored recent criticism of the Fremantle Prison's unfrontational interpretation (Brake 1997) and echoed wider attacks against the heritage industry over the last two decades (Hewison 1987). As Kevin Walsh complains, depicting the past 'as that which is entirely complete and removed from the present... serv[es] to neuter the past and permit its manipulation and trivialisation in the present' (Walsh 1992: 4). In March 1998 the Panel complained that the planned displays did not explain 'what the site means today,' particularly in relation to the eternal problems of punishment and justice. (Port Arthur Heritage Advisory Panel 1998: 2).

In this case the Heritage advisers' criticism prompted the working group to devise an innovative display. Mounted on the walls on either side of the judge's dais in the entry gallery (the English criminal court area), several modern articles, including a flash light, a carton of cigarettes and a wood planer, are displayed alongside texts that detail the sentences which offenders received for thefts of parallel nineteenth-century items (bundles of candles, tobacco



pouches, tools). By reading convict's sentences visitors are prompted to compare the severity of convict-era criminal justice to contemporary sanctions for comparable crimes. As one visitor reported, 'it made me think of convicts as ordinary people – especially having learnt how slight the offence needed to be to be transported.' (Visitor Survey, 2000). Others of a

more punitive mind interpret the display in the opposite fashion, complaining that people of today would have more respect for the law if they received nineteenth century styled punishment. So successful is this display in connecting contemporary and historical penal issues that it has invited unintended interactivity. Evidently visitors are confused about which items are interactive and which are meant strictly to be observed. Staff report that some treat this display as a hands-on experience: current-day penalties for theft are so mild, apparently, that the mounted goods are regularly stolen and tampered with. Nonetheless, this 'then and now' theft panel effectively responded to the Advisory Panel's complaint that the initial gallery plans 'quarantined the meaning of Port Arthur in the 19<sup>th</sup> century' (Port Arthur Heritage Advisory Panel 1998: 2).

In contrast, concerns that the site's pre-convict history deserved attention failed to alter gallery plans. Consequently, as some staff pointed out, people strolling through the visitors centre would learn nothing about the site's Aboriginal history or its ongoing significance to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. This was not the sort of silence that the typical Port Arthur's visitor was likely to note, however. The 1998 Environmetrics survey had confirmed that visitors (overwhelmingly European Australians and overseas tourists) expressed virtually no interest in learning about 'Aboriginal times' at Port Arthur (Environmetrics 1998: 5). In this respect, gallery plans to concentrate on the mid-nineteenth century conformed to rather than disrupted visitor expectations. Furthermore, by establishing and maintaining the themes of convictism and transportation the gallery working party's frame of reference excluded the site's earlier uses and alternative cultural values. Although the visiting public was unlikely to complain, several staff members anticipated trouble. In an April 1998 critique of gallery plans, they noted that the interpretation 'missed reference to Aboriginal occupation.'<sup>15</sup> When they urged that this omission be rectified, in spite of the gallery's convict focus, they raised more than an historiographical quibble. Indeed, this internal debate mushroomed into an overtly political issue.

In other aspects of site interpretation Port Arthur's management had already begun to be more receptive to the Tasmanian indigenous community's search for a voice in heritage interpretation. Like other cultural institutions in the 1990s, such as libraries, schools and art galleries, the historic site was part of a wider heritage community scrambling to revisit their mission statements for sins of omission (Karp and Lavine 1991; Harris 1990). At Port Arthur a growing sense of obligation to appreciate the site's non-convict history prompted

management to commission a comprehensive conservation study in 1998. A key objective was to assess the relevance of Port Arthur to Tasmania's Aboriginal heritage and current-day Aboriginal cultural and social values. Before the project began site archaeologist Greg Jackman explained to the executive of the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council (TALC) the need for Aboriginal involvement in this process: 'Previous management documents have concentrated entirely on the European heritage values of the historic site; however it is recognised that to focus on a single period is out of step with current cultural resource management theory and practice.'<sup>16</sup>

Although members of TALC agreed to participate in the conservation plan, advising and acting as consultants from the outset, tinkering with the interpretation gallery in the final stages of the gallery's preparation was out of the question. Midway through 1998, two years after the initial proposal for the interpretation gallery concept was floated and its design and budget set, Port Arthur's management informed local Aboriginal representatives about the gallery and sought their advice about the possibility of interpreting Port Arthur's indigenous history. TALC members rejected the belated invitation to insert Aboriginal content where none had been planned originally. In a strongly worded letter addressed to the site's Chief Executive Officer in August 1998, TALC manager Jim Everett advised that neither he nor his organisation was prepared to assist in modifying the gallery's content: 'further Aboriginal involvement in the PAHSMA program is postponed from this date until all expectations of the Aboriginal community in the program are satisfactorily negotiated and confirmed.' Having also insisted that 'no further research or development on the Tasmanian Aboriginal aspects of the PAHSMA program...continue'<sup>17</sup> the interpretation gallery working group had little choice but to revert to its original plans to begin Port Arthur's story not with the Tasman peninsula's history but with transportation.

Visitors at present are unaware of the curatorial and political processes that resulted in the exclusion of Aboriginal history from the visitors centre; likewise, they do not realise that those processes continued in a more productive vein in the aftermath of TALC's complaints. Further negotiations produced an agreement that the gallery would open as slated in March 1999 but that plans for the interpretation of Aboriginal people be left in the hands of the local Tasmanian Aboriginal community. With varying degrees of success, this solution, to include voices previously excluded and to relinquish control over the interpretation of indigenous and minority communities' histories, has come about in other museums and heritage sites in

Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada (Macdonald 1996; Karp and Lavine 1992) At Port Arthur the prospect of floating their own ideas and participating from the early planning stages inspired Aboriginal representatives to work out a three-part compromise: an area in the lower gallery was set aside for the interpretation of Aboriginal history; a space adjacent to the ticketing area was reserved for representations of Aboriginal values (such as a time line, or a form of artwork); and the site management agreed to work jointly with TALC to seek funding for the required research and planning. Most significantly, the working party formally agreed to TALC's demand for recognition that 'there is a need to tell the wider history of this site, to include the long association of Aboriginal people with this area.'<sup>18</sup>

While the original decision to exclude the site's Aboriginal history might appear politically insensitive, the postponement produced unanticipated benefits. As TALC manager Jim Everett informed Port Arthur's interpretation manager after the compromise was reached, 'we feel a bit excited by the challenge[.T]his is a first in Australia I believe, where Aboriginal history and convict history come together in such a presentation.' From lagging behind newly sensitive heritage practices, Port Arthur could now aspire to position itself at the cutting edge of Australian historical interpretation (*Curatorship* 1996). Had Aboriginals agreed to be slotted in at the last minute, receiving little more than a small panel at the beginning of the display, they might easily have found themselves locked temporally and visually in Port Arthur's 'pre-history.' Recent Australian museum practice has been guided by a salutary sense that Aboriginals must be included somehow and somewhere. The trouble, Tony Bennett notes, is that 'the role assigned Aboriginal peoples is that of a mediating term connecting the history of European settlement to the deep history of the land...and of its flora and fauna' (Bennett 1995: 151). Left in the hands of site staff Aboriginals might easily have appeared in the interpretation gallery as *entrée* figures for the dominant narrative of transportation history and convictism.<sup>19</sup> Because local Aboriginals managed to gain creative control such an interpretation outcome is unlikely: TALC representatives insist that the visitor centre must incorporate 'a significant profile of today's Tasmanian Aboriginal community.'<sup>20</sup> After all, for ancestors of the people who lived at Port Arthur before it was a convict site, 'Aboriginal times' are not just yesterday but today and tomorrow. How effectively that transhistorical profile may be presented, given the uncertainty of resources and the challenge of fitting new displays and texts into existing spaces in the visitors centre, remains to be seen.

## Identifying with the past

The working party's guiding objective, from the interpretation gallery's earliest planning stages in 1996 to its opening in 1999 was to enhance visitors' ability to identify with the people in Port Arthur's past. But whose stories would be interpreted? The thematic focus on convictism and the gallery's time frame excluded tales of Port Arthur's prior occupants but it left open the possibility of including thousands of male convicts, soldiers, officers, overseers, free and convict women, and boys with whom visitors might have identified. Even after the card game concept was chosen, gallery planners could have selected any fifty-two stories to represent the full range of Port Arthur's figures. Instead, they chose from among the male convicts who worked on the site in the 1830s. The selected biographies, as well as the intellectual bases on which they were chosen reinforced some conventional portrayals of Port Arthur while challenging others: the site remains a place where male convictism is the main story but one in which work, rather than punishment, is the dominant motif. The dispensation of visitors' convict card identities may occur in a lottery-like fashion, but the interpretation of the people in Port Arthur's past was constructed in a far from random manner.

The rationale that guided the choice of convicts flowed from the framing of Port Arthur as an early industrial site in which men had toiled at gang labour and in artisanal settings. Rather than selecting convicts on the basis of their crimes or the types of punishment they received, for example, convicts were chosen according to their work assignment. As Maxwell-Stewart explains, 'we actually had to look for people who worked in the blacksmith's shop, or three people we knew were in the boat crew – that was the first thing that we did.' In other words, work details superseded other possible criteria for selection. Surprisingly, considering the gallery theme is convict history, 'the offence that they were transported to Australia for, or to Port Arthur, for that matter, was actually the last thing on the list' of selection considerations (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999).

Given the popularity of Port Arthur as a tourist destination for families and school groups, the working party decided that a mix of boys' and adults' biographies would make it easier for visitors of all ages to identify with former convicts (Evans interview, 2000). Juveniles at Port Arthur were incarcerated at Point Puer, set off from the main convict site and the corrupting influence of adult convicts. Since they were taught trades and given a rudimentary education during their imprisonment, choosing biographies by work assignment was only one of several considerations. Deciding on boy identities entailed reviewing records of the work

they performed as well as their trades, their prior experiences, and their fates upon release (in some cases returning to Port Arthur later as adult convicts; in others, applying their acquired skills on assignment to free settlers). The melodramatic image of Marcus Clarke's Point Puer boys, driven to suicide by cruelty, was a notion that gallery planners expressly rejected. But a critical edge to the interpretation was blunted in the process. As Maxwell-Stewart concedes, the setting of boys' stories in a mock school room reinforces the liberal interpretation of Point Puer as a pioneering training school: 'it is a bit of a glowing account of their experience' (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999).

Without much fuss from internal or external critics, the interpretation of women's stories failed to register as a serious concern in the gallery planning process. An early management brief on the projected visitor centre had noted that 'female convicts and boys could be included' (PAHSMA 1996: 7), yet women disappeared from subsequent interpretation drafts while boys remained in the picture. Some site staff complained late in 1998 that the planned exhibit dealt with women in a clichéd manner and that the history of women at Port Arthur was 'too big an issue for one panel.' As it transpired, the topic ultimately received one panel on a poorly-lit wall.<sup>21</sup> A brief overview of the transportation of female convicts, it notes that small numbers of women were sent to Port Arthur not as a secondary punishment but on assignment, as servants. Accordingly, including biographies of women convicts, planners decided, would have been unrepresentative and tokenistic (Maxwell-Stewart interview 1999; Evans interview 2000). Such an argument, based on the demographics of convictism and the legal technicalities of punishment, contradicted the labourist logic that otherwise determined the selection of male convict identities. Given that the working party saw Port Arthur as 'an unfree labour system' it would have been consistent to interpret the stories of females who toiled at Port Arthur as unfree *domestic* labourers.

As a result of this interpretive logic, based on population figures and penal justice rationales, women's forced labour is invisible in the gallery. As feminist historians have observed, such strategies perpetuate the historic devaluation of domestic tasks as real work (Oxley 1997). Leaving women out of the picture was not an unconscious oversight, however. According to Maxwell-Stewart, focusing the gallery exclusively on men was meant to challenge other sites around Tasmania, where women convicts were imprisoned in large factories, to do a 'really good job' of interpreting the female side of transportation (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999). Unfortunately visitors are unlikely to perceive that intention.<sup>22</sup>

Considering that Port Arthur as a convict site was overwhelmingly a man's world, albeit one in which free and convict women circulated, the gallery does not draw attention to the convict system's gender asymmetry. Moreover it leaves broad questions about masculinity and the controversial issue of homosexuality unaddressed. Convict disciplinary regimes, work assignments and the forms of compliance, resistance and defiance they inspired all manifested prevailing characterisations and expressions of gender and sexuality. That Port Arthur was overtly and intentionally masculine in its design and operation was no accident or imperial convenience: rather it conformed to newly emergent penal ideas about the merits of gender-specific incarceration schemes. Overseeing the men of Port Arthur and extracting their labour meant governing a homosocial culture in which forced closeness could explode into violence, in which mateship could flower into open rebellion, and in which passions could turn into coercive and consensual sexual relations. Although gallery signage does recount stories of convicts' frequently indulged desire to escape it is mute on matters of sexual desire, its expression and suppression. The Bewley Tuck slide show does include a subtle reference to homosexuality, but none of the convict character profiles mentions sexual practices which certainly troubled Port Arthur's overseers, who saw homosexuality as a disciplinary infraction as much as a morals offence. And one Point Puer boy's convict biography was rejected specifically because he had been accused of committing homosexual offences (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999). If visitors hear about convict sexual practices, and the influence they had on the decision to incarcerate the boy convicts separately from the adult men, they glean this information from tour guides, not the interpretation gallery (Lee interview, 1999).

Perhaps the gallery's greatest departure from parallel interpretations of the site, in the museum, in tour guides' tales, and on Port Arthur's web site, is the dearth of information on



penal philosophy and the absence of visual representations of punishment. For instance, the website, updated six months after the gallery opened, includes a page on 'The Convicts' in which half the text refers to discipline and punishment, including flogging and stone-breaking, as well as convict violence toward overseers and fellow prisoners (www.portarthur.org.au/convicts.htm).<sup>23</sup> In the gallery these dramatic aspects of convict life are not foregrounded. The sound scapes of trials back in Britain and colonial court

assignments to secondary sentences at Port Arthur inform visitors that the site was a place of punishment. If they play the game and discover their convict identity, they learn that sentences of hard labour were imposed to make men pay for their crimes. But the eye-catching visual displays of convicts engaged in various forms of work provide no sense of the coercion that made the extraction of unfree labour possible. A small block of text and a graph, both in partial shadow, explain that miscreants were flogged at Port Arthur, and that serious offenders were sent to Hobart for execution. There are no images of men being flogged and no sounds associated with physical punishment, such as the swish and snap of the lash. In contrast, silhouettes of men at work and the sounds of industry – wood-sawing, hammering – float through the main gallery. Again, shying away from punishment was not an unconscious oversight. Gallery designers felt that depicting scenes of punishment would have trivialised the pain and humiliation of flogging, twisting it into a form of entertainment for some visitors. Alternatively more sensitive visitors might have been shocked or horrified by such displays, members of the working party worried. Consequently planners rejected the museum's emphasis on pain and privation but they also deliberately shrank from the notorious punishment-as-entertainment approach associated with other popular depictions of convict history, such as the Old Sydney Town theme park.<sup>24</sup> As Evans reflects, 'sensationalism was something we tried to avoid. We tried to give a complicated picture, rather than just the horror past' (Evans interview, 2000).

Although the fictional narrative of Bewley Tuck provides a dramatic verbal account of the coercive tactics of labour control at Port Arthur, the interactive displays do not make those tactics visible or audible. Every form of historic display that interprets imprisonment or pain confronts aesthetic, ethical and political challenges (Heathcoate 1997: 58; Karp and Lavine 1991). In the case of the interpretation gallery, the emphasis on interactivity, the concentration on work processes, and the intention to counter Port Arthur's historic reputation as a place of misery dampened the interpretation of punishment. Men in the work gangs and artisanal areas labour without visible supervision or threat of chastisement. Although some are stooped over and grimacing each of the convict figures (in reality male site staff and local Tasmanian volunteers) is clearly healthy and well-nourished. The overseers do not appear until the final chamber where they sit enjoying their leisure time, not enforcing discipline, humiliating a convict, or keeping an eye out for a resentful blow. Although the text indicates that overseers were chosen from among the convicts and that ordinary convicts despised them for their

frequent and petty abuse of authority, these overseers (portrayed by the gallery's historian and the visitor centre architect) appear rather harmless and jovial. The only figure that portrays a sense of the force behind the labour process is a soldier silhouette, mounted on a pole that allows him to swivel between a cruel side and a side that could be bribed into doling out favours. Otherwise, images of work overshadow text about and visual depictions of punishment and discipline. Indeed, the gallery's only hands-on display of coercive techniques – reproduced leg irons – provides an ambiguous message about the pains of imprisonment. Although the irons were installed in the gallery to allow people to experience the physical burdens of convict work, the visitor's choice to latch them on and remove them was a privilege that no convict enjoyed.<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere on site (and virtually on the website) Port Arthur continues to cater to visitors' interest in carceral and physical punishment. The museum provides its tales of misery; tour guides recount gory stories of floggings carried out before convict gangs; night time 'ghost tour' guides spin spooky yarns about murders and troubled spirits; and the website cites nineteenth century documents relating to various forms of convict discipline, including 'the torture of the lash' and the 'unmitigated evil' of solitary confinement



([www.portarthur.org.au/convicts.htm](http://www.portarthur.org.au/convicts.htm): 18, 21). In the gallery only the Bewley Tuck slide show provides an emotional account of the coercive tactics that made Port Arthur work. Even with this narrative the initial script's 'warm language' was cooled with family audiences in mind. As both the interpretation manager and the gallery's historical consultant concede, including more displays, voice-overs, or texts about punishment 'would have given the visitors centre a hard edge that it lacks at the moment. That's something to think about in the future' (Maxwell-Stewart interview, 1999).

Without organised political pressure, such as TALC managed to exert over the interpretation gallery's future orientation, neither the interpretation of Port Arthur's gendered identity nor the treatment of its coercive regimes will likely develop further. 'Contestable though exhibitions may be,' Sharon Macdonald observes, 'they are not always contested' (Macdonald 1996: 10). Initial visitor survey responses indicate that most people are happy to swap identities with the male convicts whose cards they are handed. As one enthusiastic female respondent said of the interpretation gallery: 'it made you feel and understand more

about how the convicts worked and what the[ir] life was about.’ (Visitor Survey 2000)  
Perhaps this woman missed the Bewley Tuck show, for neither she nor any of the other respondents surveyed thus far has mentioned *what*, beyond working, convicts’ lives were about. And visitor complaints about the lack of attention to issues of gender and sexuality have yet to surface. Thus it would seem that the interpretation has effectively humanised the site for visitors without delving beneath or beyond convicts’ work identities.

## **Conclusion**

Developed out of a wider effort to enliven the site and to increase its marketability the gallery became a new and important means of enhancing the ‘Australian convict experience.’ With its dramatic voice-overs, folk tunes, and the clang and heaving of labour; with its subdued lighting, its mannequins and vivid silhouettes, its displays of contemporary and historic ‘stolen’ items; with its colonial court wheel, its doors to convict identities, and its puzzle artefacts, it draws visitors in a way that the old museum simply cannot match or manage. But these exhibitions are only two means of luring visitors. Both institutions exist within Port Arthur the site, the real place where visitors stroll around nineteenth century ruins and restored buildings. Not everyone makes it to the interpretation gallery or the museum but everyone who visits Port Arthur comes to the site itself, a mute, inert but compelling vestige of the past. As one visitor who skipped the gallery commented, ‘I prefer the real thing’ (Visitor Survey 2000).

The majority of visitors, however, are pleased with the pastiche and find that it complements the ‘real thing.’ When asked to compare the gallery visit to the guided tour one visitor replied: ‘combined [they] provide an excellent background. [W]ithout them, the knowledge gained would be less, and less atmosphere.’ Evoking a sense of atmosphere was the gallery planners’ aim, but so was the effort to challenge preconceived notions that Port Arthur was a ‘place of misery.’ For people who typically respond to the question: why did you visit Port Arthur? with answers such as, ‘on holidays,’ or ‘on a tour,’ historiographical debates and museological critiques are of little concern. As Port Arthur’s website enthuses, the visitors centre and interpretation gallery provide ‘a unique and interactive experience with easily accessible information’ and a ‘front door’ to ‘a fun day out for the family’ (<http://www.portarthur.org.au/visitor-centre.htm>). Visitors overwhelmingly agree.<sup>26</sup>

The lottery of life card token game encourages visitors to identify with convicts but the gallery does not identify how this particular way of interpreting Port Arthur's history came about, nor does it prompt viewers to consider how its viewpoint might be challenged. In this respect it retains the orthodox museum's authoritative voice even though it allows a wide variety of convict voices to be heard. Unlike more self-consciously post-modern museums, such as the Museum of Sydney, the gallery leaves out the historiographical and political debates that led up to its opening. Interpretive challenges to the curatorial agenda, such as the critique of the time frame and complaints about the exclusion of Aboriginals, are undisclosed. Yet these omissions do not preclude visitors from forming opinions and ideas that veer from or contradict the gallery's interpretation (Macdonald 1996). Some observers, such as the TALC executive, represent organised community interests in promoting alternative views, but individual audience members may respond to exhibitions with a variety of critical readings. Whether or not visitors question matters of gender, sexuality, punishment (or any other issue considered or ignored in the gallery) will be a matter for further ethnographic work to chart. Certainly the planned gallery areas on Aboriginal history, in concert with Port Arthur's new conservation plan, will recast the rest of the exhibit (and the overall site's interpretation) in a far different light (Gordon Mackay Context 1999: 36; 55).

The development and implementation of Port Arthur's new interpretation gallery bears out the observation that 'a museum is a process as well as a structure' (Karp and Lavine 1990: 1). And as public history and cultural planning processes go, this one was no less contentious than most (Curthoys and Hamilton 1992: 11). Time pressure, budget worries, space restrictions, concerns about audience tastes, internal differences between staff and external criticism all compromised the gallery planners' views of what the interpretation gallery might look like. With the exception of the garishly coloured colonial court wheel of misfortune, neither the original plans nor the end product produced a Disney-fied version of convict history: a 'fantastic spectacle, with an emphasis on titillation, rather than education' (Walsh 1992). If anything, the interpretation gallery is less sentimental than the museum with its emphasis on misery ultimately overcome with heroism. Eager to avoid both light-hearted and lurid ways of interpreting convicts' pains, the gallery planners offered Bewley Tuck's moving script of suffering, resentment, and bitter humour. And the stolen items display inspires visitors, both the liberal and conservative-minded, to think about changing penal rationales and values. As museum workers involved in other installations that deal with the history of

the troubling past recognise, evoking an atmosphere is easier in an interactive exhibit than in an orthodox museum; yet translating prisoners' feelings to a modern audience ultimately depends on visitors' imaginations and their willingness to stop, listen, look, and think (Walsh 1992).

Daring exhibitions provoke visitors and challenge them to think differently. Port Arthur's interpretation gallery confined its risk-taking, ironically, to downplaying the prominence of punishment and misery in Port Arthur's convict history. Emphasising the importance of work in the penal regime and devoting most of the display space to depictions of convicts at work effectively unsettles visitors' notions of unrelenting pain and horror. It may also unintentionally have produced what critics of the heritage 'industry' call the 'nostalgia effect,' that is the elicitation of uncritical emotional attachment to objects, such as costumes or tools (Hewison 1987; Walsh 1992). Visitors to the interpretation gallery congregate around the trade displays, where silhouette workers make shoes, gather ingredients for meals, and hammer metal. Observers often exchange remarks, such as, 'Grandpa used to be a blacksmith,' or 'that's how they used to make shoes.' What they do not discuss is how it might have felt to cobble knowing that an overseer might pop by, knowing that ruining a piece of leather might result in a flogging or a term in solitary confinement, knowing that this was your sentence, not your trade – or a stop on someone's future 'fun day out.'

How can an interpretation gallery recreate the experience of forced labour and fear of punishment? Moreover how can it ensure that visitors will take such encounters seriously? Future visitor studies may determine if the 'Lottery of Life' meets those challenges. However some museum critics argue that interactive display goals are morally



dubious, especially when they encourage identification with historical figures caught in difficult situations. As Kevin Walsh cautions, when considering 'empathetic re-creation, we need to consider the degree to which any kind of empathy is possible' (Walsh 1992: 102). But we also need to question the extent to which more orthodox forms of historical interpretation inspire serious engagement with the unsavoury past. Considering that Port Arthur's visitors often mug for the camera in the site's preserved solitary confinement cells, and given that youths sometimes skylark in the shell of the Broad Arrow Café, where twenty-two tourists

were massacred in 1996, no mode of interpretation or memorialisation can reliably induce anticipated emotional and intellectual responses.

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<sup>1</sup> Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (hereafter PAHSMA), media release, 21 July 1999

<sup>2</sup> PAHSMA voluntary visitor survey response, October 1999. Visitors are invited to record their impressions of the site and these responses are collected and reviewed regularly. I am grateful to Maria Stacey for permission to examine these comments.

<sup>3</sup> For reviews of the gallery, see Dorothy Evans, 1999 'The Lottery: the story of an Interpretive Gallery for Port Arthur' 16 *Interpreting Australia*: 14-16, and Peter Ward, 26 March 1999 'Making the Most of Ruins' *The Australian*: 44.

<sup>4</sup> The 1987 *Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority Act* sets out 7 elements of its role. The first three deal with convict heritage preservation and the physical maintenance of the site. The last four deal with tourism and the need to conduct the site 'with a view to becoming a viable commercial enterprise.'

<sup>5</sup> PAHSMA, Dorothy Evans to Robert Morris Nunn, Julie Payne, and Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, 12 August 1998, p. 1

<sup>6</sup> PAHSMA Internal memo, The Lottery of Life – an overview, 15 Sept. 1998, p. 9

<sup>7</sup> PAHSMA, Evans to Nunn, Payne and Maxwell-Stewart, p. 2

<sup>8</sup> There were exceptions, particularly among those convicted for political offences, such as treason.

<sup>9</sup> PAHSMA, The Lottery of Life, p. 8

<sup>10</sup> This survey was conducted on one weekend in February 2000. Visitors were approached at the point where guided tours typically end (near the separate prison and old asylum). I am grateful to Maria Stacey for supervising the survey process and allowing me access to visitors.

<sup>11</sup> PAHSMA, The Lottery of Life, p. 7

<sup>12</sup> PAHSMA, Dorothy Evans to review group, 30 November 1998

<sup>13</sup> PAHSMA, David Scott, Greg Jackman, Jennifer Nuske, Richard W? and Rosemary Hollow to Dorothy Evans, 20 April 1998. This advice challenged management's official

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requirement to ‘ensure that the preservation and maintenance of the Historic Site as an example of a major convict settlement and penal institution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.’

[www.portarthur.org.au/management-authority.htm](http://www.portarthur.org.au/management-authority.htm).

14 This assessment is based on two weeks of participant observation in the interpretation gallery, undertaken in November 1999. Approximately four of five visitors poke their heads into the slide-show chamber and glance at the text in the post-convict display area, but close to seventy-five percent pass by quickly or fail to stop and listen or read. Over ninety percent spend a significant amount of time (more than five minutes) to inspect the convict work displays.

15 PAHSMA, Scott et al. to Evans, 20 April 1998

16 PAHSMA, Greg Jackman to Steve Stanton, 27 February 1998

17 PAHSMA, Jim Everett to Neil Mackinnon, 12 August 1998, p, 1

18 PAHSMA, ‘Notes from meeting of 15<sup>th</sup> September 1998 regarding Aboriginal Interpretation at Port Arthur.’

19 The internal staff critique of the gallery’s design, presented on 20 April 1998, included a suggested lay-out of interpretation panels that included one small panel on ‘Aboriginal Context.’ PAHSMA, Scott et al to Evans.

20 PAHSMA, Everett to Evans, 22 September 1998

21 PAHSMA, Jennifer Nuske, Greg Jackman, Kim Simpson & Walter Pridmore to Dorothy Evans, 26 November 1998

22 Neither unsolicited visitors’ comments, dropped into a box in the visitors centre, nor comments collected in the qualitative survey indicate that any visitors have queried the lack of female identities in the lottery game.

23 A more detailed account of convict life, a downloadable forty-two page document based on historical research and writing by Lindy Scripps, is also accessible on the website. Only seven of those pages cover convict work assignments and even these devote considerable attention to the forms of punishment meted out to slack or defiant workers.

24 At this site, north of Sydney, a reproduced version of early-colonial Sydney features public floggings (complete with fake blood).

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<sup>25</sup> According to former curator, Jennifer Nuske, Port Arthur convicts were burdened with manacles, not balls and chains. Furthermore, the reproduction model in the gallery is lighter than the chain weight most convicts carried.

<sup>26</sup> This assessment is based on site observations and conversations with Visitor Services manager Maria Stacey and Marketing Director Lesley Kirby, November 1999. It is also based on a qualitative survey of fifty visitors' responses to the gallery, conducted over the first weekend of February 2000.

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**Interviews with current and past PAHSMA personnel and historical consultant:**

Dorothy Evans (1998; 2000); Lesley Kirby (1999); Ken Lee (1998; 1999); Hamish Maxwell-Stewart (1999); Jennifer Nuske (1998); Peter Roche (1999); Peter Romey (1999); Maria Stacey (1999)