

A woman's place is in the house ... museum: Interpreting women's histories in house museums.

If women's presence is evident anywhere in the record of historic material culture and heritage places, then surely it ought to be in house museums. Dwelling places constitute a very large segment of the national heritage estate: from palaces to mansions, villas to townhouses, and cottages to huts — in Australia, more than two hundred of them. (Young, 1994: 167) Australia has a handful of 'famous woman' sites and a couple of heritage properties specially associated with women, though not necessarily assessed as having intrinsically female significance. But there are very few houses presenting much beyond conventional references to women in kitchens, drawing rooms, bedrooms and nurseries. The low profile of women in heritage presentations of all kinds has been a topic of concern among feminists and professional historians for many years and ways to redress women's relative absence have often been canvassed. (Anderson, 1993: 6-11; Black, 1999: 8-9) Yet the revisions and insights of the thirty-something year-old specialisation of women's history have made little impact on historic houses, even where the subject is sympathetically treated. (eg, Bickford, 1987: 18-32) This paper surveys some reasons why there has been so little change, and reviews directions for extending the field.

The potential for presenting women's histories in house museums is huge. The domestic space where private life is lived was traditionally, and continues to be today, the special place of women. Houses are where women do reproductive work as mothers, and where the provision of sexual services to the male head of household was until quite recently a legal obligation of the female married state. Women carry out people-maintenance tasks such as cleaning the house, laundering clothes, and feeding the family, and emotional maintenance work ranging from giving solace to receiving violence. Historically, women

brought in important household income via sundry kinds of cottage labour, from dress-making to selling eggs to keeping boarders, and via outwork, mainly sewing. In the post-World War 2 years, women have increasingly held down waged jobs in addition to the entire round of domestic tasks. Such a span of categories of women's work and lives has been identified, discussed and analysed since the 1970s thanks to feminist revisions of social history (eg Vicinus, 1972; Branca, 1975). Why haven't such big themes of female experience and female culture, as documented by what is today a multitude of historical studies, emerged into the public presentation of history in museums and sites?



Is that all there is? Blundell's Cottage, Canberra (Linda Young, 1994)

The short answer turns on society's continuing sexist devaluation of women, essentially the covert attitude that women's business is not really important. This is both true and untrue: the academic and popular interest in women's history shows that it *is* a topic of interest to many people. But in the small domain where money is assigned to the development of heritage and museum presentations, women's place or role is just one topic among many, and it is rarely seen as a priority field for investment in public interpretation.

Why this should be so opens up the second explanation of the absence of women's history in house museums. In line with their commemorative roles, heritage agencies tend to be conservative in their assessment of places and objects (with honourable exceptions), and follow fairly old-fashioned ideas about history. (Hewison, 1987: 51-8; Clark, 1990: 36-7) Thus the style of history that recounts great men and great events shaped the identification of most early heritage listings, and continues to form plenty of modern listings. This is quintessentially the history/heritage of the public world, which almost always excludes women other than the permissibly famous, such as authors. The social history revolution of the 1960s developed in reaction to this old historiography, in order to give voice and recognition to the mass of ordinary people, the private sphere of life, and the presence of society's marginalised or suppressed. Women's history is a subset of social history, and carries it forward in many directions, though it might be said that some directions are so heavily theoretical as to be unintelligible to non-specialists.



Writing desk of famous Australian author Henry Handel Richardson (nom-de-plume of Ethel Richardson), retro-inserted into her childhood home, Lake View, Chiltern, Victoria. (Linda Young: 1992)

But although social history now predominates as the interpretive style of professionally operated history museums, it is not so apparent in house museums. This is at least partially a function of the management-agencies of house museums, amounting to a third reason why women's experience tends not to be a major theme there. House museums are overwhelmingly creatures of the National Trust and individual historical societies. Both kinds of agency tend (again, with exceptions) to have expectations of their house presentations that are more antiquarian than historical, more focused on antique furnishings, or fantasies of ancient life as either elegantly aristocratic or cosily cute, or on commemorating a Great Person, than on the interpretation of contemporary life. (Morris, 1992: 114, 121; Barker, 1999: 208-13) As the founders of the house museum genre, National Trust and historical society agendas shaped the popular public vision of what should be shown in a historic house,

and it didn't include the nasty realities which often seem to be the substance of much social and women's history (admittedly, there are some recent exceptions to this rule).



A vision of genteel living at Ayers' House, Adelaide, South Australia. (Linda Young: 1990)

The horrid revelations of oppressive work, sexual abuse and blighted lives are rather enjoyed by academics as correctives to nostalgia, but are resisted by amateurs as undermining the pleasures of the past. (Lowenthal, 1985: 23-8) However, the history of heritage management in the late twentieth century shows a steady passage towards professionalisation, marked (among other characteristics) by a determination to incorporate recent scholarship

into public history products such as house museums. In this vein, a taskforce of academic and professional historians, brought together to produce guidelines for the integration of women's history into US National Park Service sites in 1993, wrote that the new history required 'no less than a reconceptualisation of the framework – questioning old categories, acknowledging new varieties of significance, and embracing the multiplicity and complexity of human experience.' (National Park Service, 1996: 1) This conclusion is yet further evidence why women's histories have not made much headway in house museums: it is a very demanding program to dump previous interpretive frameworks and content and start again.

With so many conditions militating against it, what are the realistic possibilities of implementing a women's history perspective in house museums?

The limits of the interpretive conventions of house museums

House museums are specially constrained by the genre's conventions of interpretation. Classically, the arrangement of furniture, decorations and domestic equipment in more-or-less historic settings is considered sufficient to present the significance of the house, demonstrating why it is worth conserving and opening to the public. But closer analysis of types or sub-sets of house museums, such as the typology developed by Charlotte Smith, show that the 'classical' convention is not intrinsically meaningful. (Smith, 2002) Smith identifies four types of house museum: the Great Man shrine, where the numen of the hero (or sometimes heroine) infuses original fabric and furnishings with meaning; the Collector's house, where an aesthete's or intellectual's collection is preserved in its entirety and (sometimes) original arrangement; the Aesthetic house, preserved as an exemplary specimen of style or design; and the Social History house museum, a house representing the lives of ordinary and sometimes anonymous people. To these might be added the Janus-faced form of the Stately Home/Pioneer Folk Cottage type of house museum, where the inhabitants were

not particularly famous, and their furnishings are the usual for their kind. This form tends to be amorphous in focus, which enables visitors (and staff) to use them as settings for their own fantasy projections of a golden past, whether elegant or homely.



A fantasy of old world charm at Newstead House, Brisbane, Queensland. (Linda Young: 1991)

There is often overlap between the categories, and traces of the Great Man type frequently underlie other house museums. The convention that furnished settings communicate meaning springs largely from the veneration of the Great Man's relics and from admiration of the Collector's collection in situ. Authenticity is the rationale of both kinds of house, where 'authenticity' means a guarantee that the place and the material on show contain the special magic or aura of greatness. Secularising the religious tradition of the virtue of contact with holy things, the period room or period house contains integrity because viewers believe they are in the presence of great objects, relics or artworks. In this way, meaning is constituted by sheer presence. This idea oozes into the presentation of other types of house

museum, such that even a put-together collection of contemporary furnishings in an anonymous cottage is taken as sufficient interpretation of the place. Other types of house museum acquire the same gloss by presenting audiences with the same format of furnished settings. Hence Smith suggests that Social History house museums, even though premised on presenting the history of the marginal, do so by covertly promoting them to heroic, but vernacular, status: common men and women made great through the display of their domestic environments. (Smith, 2002: 161-162) In this way the house museum trope of furnished settings subverts alternative meanings that interpreters might intend.

The expectation that viewing important, venerable things is the purpose of visiting house museums sets up a passive expectation, which the static, frozen-moment nature of period rooms fulfils only too well. This convention militates against communicating the experience of living in the house as a complex process, or indeed as the sum of many processes. Introducing the consumption systems that produced, say, a dining room, or the sexual politics that governed a bedroom, requires more of a display than furniture and more of visitors than passive gazing. An additional difficulty in the communicative efficacy of the furnished house setting may be the subliminal expectation among visitors that, just as they know how to 'read' a modern house setting to understand its occupants' socio-economic and cultural standing, so they can recognise it in a historic setting. This can be a great strength of house museums, in enabling visitors to make immediate connections with their personal experience, a critical condition for extending knowledge. The trouble is that despite similarities in room usage and furnishing conventions, the differences between then and now may not be recognised correctly. A frequent example is the visitor overvaluing historic furnishings which today carry the expensive, high culture aura of antiques, but which were much more standard items in their own time. Historically reliable presentations in these circumstances need additional interpretation.

In short, the simple presentation of a furnished interior is not enough to carry big historical themes about the lives and experience of women. To introduce these ideas is to take a determined social history approach to the house, which almost always requires further interpretive techniques such as a guide, audio-visual or text panels. Explicit spoken or written text in the house museum represent a conscious shift away from the tradition of presenting items in the house as relics, antiques or artworks. To avoid subversion by the sacred conventions of the period room/house, the shift has to come about through a management decision: by reinterpretation of an existing site (as recommended by the US National Parks Service experts cited above). The new interpretation need not exclude elements of the traditional categories of house museum presentation. However, there can be public or stakeholder opposition to introducing social history/women's history themes into the popular vision of a Great Man's house or the fantasy function of a Stately Home/Pioneer Cottage. For instance, I recently worked on an interpretation plan for a Stately Home, where stakeholders simply did not want to recognise the convict labourers who built the house, worked the estate and made the fortune that enabled the family to live genteely. The interpretation plan was cancelled, though also for the familiar reason that the money earmarked for interpretation had been spent on building works. (cf Morris, 1992: 113-4) Especially among amateur house-managers, the social history remedy of reinterpretation can be so uncomfortable or threatening that it requires a careful campaign among all stakeholders to make it acceptable, as in a case described by Herbst. (1989: 101-4)

Reinstating women in house museums

Unsurprisingly, house museums are rarely identified with the women who lived there. They are predominantly given simply a family name ('Blundell's Cottage'), or a house name ('Werribee Park'), but the large sub-group that commemorate famous men is frequently

known by his name alone ('Charles Sturt's House'). The most obvious way of asserting that women lived here too is to reinstate them by including their names in the public titles of house museums, thus: Flora and George Blundell's Cottage; Charles and Charlotte Sturt's House. It's long and clumsy for graphic purposes, but merely by identifying and naming invisible people, we acknowledge their presence. At the same time, some house museums go under women's names, or at least, women's jobs. At Ubobo, Queensland, is 'the station-mistress's house', reflecting the female half of a married-couple job in the Queensland Government Railways, where a man was employed as fettle on the local railway line and his wife acquired the part time job of station mistress. It is not clear how in this case the house acquired the generic connection with the woman of the pair, but it may reflect a local habit of thinking about the place, given that railway workers lived fairly transient lives.

The questions that frame the problems of women's small presence in house museums are more fundamental. Surnamed houses, though conventionally suggesting the presence of a nuclear family, skip over the possibilities that a single man, or more than one man, occupied the houses that are now museums: Langenbaker's house in the Queensland town of Ilfracombe is a specimen of the former; and the span of other possible resident males includes varieties of relatives, friends and servants. Attention is rarely given to such 'others' who inhabited the museum houses: in historical reality, they included children, older relatives, extended family members such as unmarried or disabled siblings and cousins, and of course, house and estate staff. All these groups share with women a marginal status in the grand narratives of popular history, and it's one of the great strengths of feminist history that it restores them to the historiographic record. They merit representation in house museums as much as women.

The fact is that women inhabit practically every human situation, which means that almost every cultural heritage place could be identified as having female heritage

significance. This is one prosaic reason why the official heritage apparatus tends to commemorate the unique, the first, the oldest; in other words, a single expression of a theme or type. But it isn't impossible to find a workable strategy to identify what is representative; museums make such selections all the time on the basis of provenance and condition. Ideally, to identify women's heritage places would be a proactive process of establishing a theme concerned with women and looking for good specimens to represent it, rather than a reactive process of being presented with a potential heritage site and struggling to justify it as representing women's history. But another consequence of the universal applications of women's history is that places which have already been identified as having heritage significance can usually find women's experience within their history via reinterpretation. Women's presence is not always apparent in public sites like meeting places or parliaments or workshops which were occupied predominantly by men. Yet in bluntly displaying the gendered use of such places, we can highlight the absence of women and the bifurcated character of society, enabling us to consider its impact and meaning, then and now.

Despite the fact that almost every house that is now a museum was home to a woman or women at some time — and even in houses with a known family provenance — it is standard practice to present a generic story of 'life in the old days', based on the available assortment of furnishings, equipment and decorations. This claim needs some qualification: it is common amateur practice, often carried out on the proverbial shoestring. Usually, only house museums with formal sources of funding can afford professional staff to develop academically informed perspectives and collect authentic material and stories (not that this guarantees any more awareness of women's history). But the reduction of house museum interpretation to a conventional assemblage of 'the warm parlour of the past' merely reinforces stereotypes. The more creative and reliable alternative is to get specific: to search for and identify the women (and others) who inhabited the house and thus to use real people's

experience to introduce the big themes. This may reveal such varieties of experience as long widow(er)hood, infant death, disabled children, cottage industry and alcoholism — startling, but very human, challenges to the myths of good taste and antique furniture that typify house museums as a species.



The warm, but idiosyncratic, parlour of the Curley family: Mugga Mugga Cottage, Canberra.

(Linda Young: 1995)

Historical women's lives are often impossible to recover in detail, but records often survive about marital status and the births of children, the number of house-occupants at particular times, and famous or infamous events that affected the household or the area. Combined with data about the construction of the building, the introduction of new services such as gas, and analysis of the physical layout of the place, it can become possible to reconstitute the particular conditions of life for individuals in specific times. This degree of fine-gained history makes stereotypes less relevant, because the idiosyncrasy of real people's lives requires explanation. Thus, say, the presence of a long-time widow or widower suggests interpretation of mortality statistics; or a famous court case brings up the question of how an

estate was distributed among heirs; or the introduction of a piped water supply can be shown to have had effects on the survival of children in the house.

Fitting the big themes into house museums

Two broad categories constitute the big themes of female experience and female culture that modern women's historiography could introduce into museums and sites: the range of women's work and the influence of the female body. I now turn to review some of the themes of feminist history as filters of the kind of stereotypical displays to be seen in house museums, and as themes for showing a potentially more representative presence of women.



The stereotype of women's work, presented at Carbethon, Crow's Nest, Queensland. (Linda Young: 1997)

Women's work is central in the project of feminist history, focusing on enlarging the concept of 'work' as performed by women. (eg, Matthews 1987; Cohen, 1983) Dredging up

the social ramifications of unpaid domestic-based labour has recast trivial stereotypes of idle, pampered women at home. It undergirds the radical political claim to wages for housework by showing that men's waged work depends on the hidden labour of women who maintain and reproduce male labour. It can also frame depictions of the work of women in houses that are now museums in terms beyond the characteristic female labour of housework. One might think that it would be impossible to ignore housework in house museums — yet it still happens, described in Porter's phrase, 'homes without housework.' (1988: 114) Sometimes housework isn't ignored, but it takes particular forms that distort the character of that work to accord with sexist conventions and ideologies. For instance, food preparation is overwhelmingly presented as the work of servants, and house cleaning is invariably told as a tale of progressive, labour-saving technology. Alternatives that explore the symbolism of meals as social rituals and the implications of nutrition for health and growth suggest alternative themes in dining room and kitchen displays, challenging the inevitable vast dinner service and polished copper saucepans. Laundries often survive, complete with large, built-in equipment, but it is notable that they are rarely set up with props such as textiles (as in nurseries), which would demonstrate the sheer ironing challenge of tablecloths and frilled pinafores. The fact that women often earned cash through outwork in or from the home is (to my knowledge) uniquely presented in the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, where the Gumpertz apartment is presented complete with the treadle sewing machine on which Mrs Nathalie Gumpertz supported her fatherless family in the 1880s. Even in house museums representing nuclear families, it is very rare to see a sewing machine surrounded with the articles that made it so popular and desirable among nineteenth century women: the endless hems of sheets, the long seams of skirts and trousers, the decorative pleats and tucks the sewing machine enabled in fashion clothes. The presence of rent-paying boarders is virtually non-existent in house museums, though the possibility of a boarder is implied in

guided tours of the Tenement Museum, Glasgow. Managing a boarder was simply an extension of standard womanly housework, and so was a common means of bringing cash into the family economy, often cash that was under the control of the housewife.

Further well-identified aspects of women's work which rarely appear in house museums are childcare, sick-nursing and death-tending, even though all three generate a considerable quantity of material culture. (eg, Jalland, 1996) Here we deal not only with a reluctance to see the emotionally-charged dimension of women's nurturing role as authentic *work* in the home, but also with resistance in the form of inexplicit standards of what is acceptable to show in a museum. Sickness and death are taboos in modern western culture, indicating grey areas of experience that are strategically suppressed in the popular imagination, despite their enduring presence today. The easy chairs, day-beds and patent flexible furniture which are the antecedents of modern relaxed furniture bear witness to the presence of long-term invalids in many households, also demonstrated by the persistent chapters of 'invalid cookery' in recipe books: all are telling domestic evidence of women's work and experience, barely known since modern drug therapies developed after World War 2. An element of the popular reaction against the medicalising of modern life makes it likely that today's audiences could be interested in presentations of the traditional lore of healing, often a field of female knowledge. At the same time, such interpretation would need to be contextualised in the brutal reality of much shorter average life spans, thanks in part to the ineffectiveness of traditional medicine. One aspect of women's responsibilities regularly presented in house museums is the care of children, albeit via a single interpretive form: the nursery, a dedicated room filled with baby and toddler equipment, though never nappies. Visitors could be forgiven for thinking that children did not grow beyond the age of four in historic houses, but that they were superbly toilet-trained, which is not the conclusion evidenced by systematic study of the material culture of childhood. (Calvert, 1992)



The material culture of babies at Clarendon, Evandale, Tasmania. (Linda Young: 2001)

Caring for the family is among the constants of women's lives from the past to the present, and its historical products are generally recognisable by modern audiences. A field that has required determined redefinition by feminist historians is the arena of showy performance in the drawing room, which post-Victorians tend to see as purposeless, time-filling frippery. (Armstrong, 1987; Langland, 1995) Yet the techniques of entertaining guests and practising ladies' arts can be understood as representational work to establish and keep up the family's status-honour among peers and above inferiors. The apparently unemployed middleclass woman demonstrated her husband's capacity to support a family in some comfort. She enhanced his economic capital with the cultural capital of refinement in the form of drawing room music, boudoir crafts and neighbourhood visiting, all undertaken with an air of being born to aristocratic style but often recorded in practice as tedious rituals. The disjunction between this frame of mind and today's attitudes towards respectability

demonstrates an acute possibility for reinterpreting the parlours of historic houses. The elegant little items known as work tables were deliberately so-named to prove that the ladies who used them were legitimately occupied within the moral framework of bourgeois industry, and the woolwork, beadwork, featherwork, and so forth which they produced was the proof of it. This kind of reinterpretation can rescue yet another aspect of women's lives from trivialisation.

Feminist investigations make some of their boldest claims to relevance to the modern human condition through the study of historical expressions of living in and with a female body. By recognising the impacts of ideas about beauty, fashion, sexuality, childbirth, contraception, health and ageing, we understand how social conditions shaped and continue to shape individual women's consciousness. (Greer, 1971; Firestone 1974; Banner 1984; Martin 1987; Featherstone et al, 1991; Banner 1992) All such ideas have a major presence in the private-life realm of the house — yet make minimal showing in the interpretation of house museums, despite a raft of material objects.

Too often, such material culture is employed ignorantly and pruriently to suggest that women in the past were sexually naïve, exemplified in the trope of displaying items of historic underwear spread out on a bed. Corsetry and other items that gave shape to fashionable clothing, such as crinolines and bustles, are almost invariably presented as absurd, bearing no comparison with the female body-shape fetishes of our own day. Bulky underwear in the form of chemises makes no connection with the practical technologies of cleanliness, in its role as protector of valuable clothing textiles from bodily soiling which could be managed via the washability of plain white cotton. Open-leg drawers have lost their original turn-of-the-nineteenth-century character as 'garments of class distinction', indicating both new modesty and subtle appropriation of male trousers, and instead suggest modern lasciviousness. (Cunnington and Cunnington, 1992: 111) Outer clothing tends similarly to be

displayed in house museums for quaintness rather than understanding. A favourite line in Australia turns on the supposed horror of wearing many layers of long clothes in the infamous Australian summer: ‘how could they bear it?’ Alas, the question is intended to be more rhetorical than enquiring. A historically informed answer would suggest that deeply felt standards of femininity, decency and fashionability enabled women to wear whatever was — and is — currently regarded as requisite. It is certain that modern women sweat as much in their loose cotton sun dresses as did nineteenth century women, and they are much more prone to skin cancer. This kind of comparative exploration of habits and tastes of the past offers perspectives that make familiar sense to the viewer, while stressing the differences of history. Beauty and fashion are further topics similarly ready for presentation in house museums.



Underwear exposed at Old Government House, Parramatta, New South Wales. (Linda Young: 1991)

The sexuality of women is another aspect of women's lives that makes no showing in house museums — perhaps an odd manifestation of absence, given that highly public performances of sexuality infest modern popular culture. (Lake, 1991: 48-9) Perhaps the late twentieth century idea of sex as pleasure could cloud interpretations of historical sex as procreation and wifely duty, but presenting the contrast opens up an avenue of understanding social change, and its costs and benefits. More likely, the radical analyses of the male colonisation of female bodies made by the first of the second wave feminists (Greer, 1971; Firestone, 1974) would still be unpalatable to most heritage visitors. The theme of contraception may be a less threatening vehicle with which to address the same issues, as shown by occasional museum exhibitions on birth control. Despite an air of nervous prudery created by looking at such topics in public, these exhibitions show that the public is vitally, personally interested in issues related to sexuality. Perhaps the house museum bedroom would be the perfect, appropriate location to address the history of sexuality, with its inevitable connection to contemporary values and practice.

In this context, the invisibility of childbirth in house museums is really mystifying. Thanks to effective contraception and women's desires to have careers before motherhood, babies are now special events, almost as prone to dressing up in nostalgic fantasy as cottage kitchens. The modern interest in traditional birthing lore skims over the bodily, emotional and economic stress of continual pregnancies and the fatal risks of childbirth, experiences which were absolutely fundamental to women's lives and, though still well in living memory, are today nearly unknown by people born after 1960. A period bedroom furnished for childbirth would be easy to re-create in most house museums, and would be likely to draw positive attention, stimulating instant discussion among visitors. House museums could provide a vibrant environment for visitors to recount to their visiting groups the kind of stories passed down by grandmothers, which have been identified as among the most frequent and popular

forms of daily 'use' or connection of the past in the present. (Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998: 15-36)

And they all lived happily ever after

The classical happy ending to the house museum visit warms all hearts, with wishfulness if not conviction. But is it what heritage managers should aim for in presenting and interpreting house museums? The new heritage professionalism posits that historic sites should present the heritage significance for which they have been preserved, but as noted above, female heritage significance is likely to be found in every house on the heritage register. The generic character of this fundamental condition of the human use of sites makes it easy to acknowledge in trivial ways: the 'just add women' solution to equity problems.

The challenge for house museums is to move beyond simple, conventional styles of house presentation to introduce more complex ideas of social and feminist history, as suggested above. It is well nigh impossible to present complex stories via furnished settings alone — house museum managers must recognise that other interpretive media are necessary, even in their specialised environments. The aesthetic dimension of many house settings does not welcome the most basic additional media, labels, but resistance could rather inspire house managers to seek more subtle media of communication. Well-informed guides are the obvious solution, especially in the kind of museum that is frequently available only in guided groups. This would require much more thorough historical education for guides than is common. It might discourage some current guides, especially volunteers who do it for love of the place and its style, or to put it more bluntly, who do it as a fantasy projection of gracious living. In light of the influence on house museums of conservative management organisations, the issue of the truly amateur approach deserves to be raised: tinged as it may be with elements of doll's house play, is it an equally valid mode of presenting a house museum? If house

museums are designed only for the traditional blue-rinse audience, the answer is yes; but in the present environment of museum economics, larger audiences are a necessity for survival. Competition for heritage visitors' attention and dollars is now ferocious. Women's history presents a dramatic and personally relevant field in which can be found many themes suitable to interpret in house museums.

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