

Dr Stephen Gapps

HRC Visiting Fellow

Mobile Monuments: Historical Re-enactment and Commemoration



Tuesday, March 13 at 4 pm
Theatrette, Old Canberra House
Lennox Crossing, ANU

This photo depicts two versions of Governor Bligh.
Re-enactor John Potter is the Bligh without pigeon droppings on his shoulder.

In March 1991, after some of the dust of the protest against the 1988 Bicentenary of the First Fleet had settled, a monument to the 1804 Battle of Vinegar Hill was unveiled by the ex-Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. On a hillside in a lawn cemetery in Western Sydney, Whitlam discussed the relevance and importance of Vinegar Hill to a gathering of fifty or so local politicians, history buffs and a handful of 'Friends of Vinegar Hill'.

In March 2004, two hundred years to the day, a re-enactment of the Battle of Vinegar Hill was staged to an audience of over 10,000 people. Unlike the unveiling of the monument, the promise of a re-enactment attracted national and international media attention and generated significant popular interest and awareness of a 'battle' in Australia's past that most people had never heard of.

This paper examines two quite different commemorative responses to a politically contested event with an insignificant historiography. Recently, reality history television, 'investigative re-enactment' and cathartic recreations of contested historical events have become increasingly widespread in both popular and more academic histories. Whilst 'anti-monuments' have offered one form of escape from a fascination with monumentalism, re-enactments have become more attentive to an experienced authenticity, and appear to offer a participatory and democratic form of history-making as remembrance.

Re-enactments and monuments have long histories as didactic outdoor history lessons for large public gatherings, often at anniversary moments. This paper is part of work in progress that examines the excessive memorialisation of Australian military history in particular, and in a broader sense, the constant attraction of the monument as the commemorative solution to focus remembrance. Drawing on examples from monuments in South African shantytowns, to Indian 'monument graveyards', to Australian War memorials, I wish to ask what might happen to commemoration if we think of re-enactors as 'mobile monuments'?

Stephen Gapps has taught Public History, Australian History, Colonialism and Cultural Studies subjects at UTS and worked as a professional historian in a wide range of heritage projects for government, industry and the media. Over the last two years Stephen has co-directed Australia's first History Events Management Company, called 'Historica'. 'Historica' conceive, design and conduct historical re-enactments and coordinate re-enactors for film and television such as the recent SBS 'reality history' series *The Colony*.