Newsletter Vol. 1, No. 3 Summer 2000

Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria Inc.

Book Launch - If The Walls Could Speak

Over 150 people gathered in the Melbourne Athenaeum Library for the launch of Pam Baragwanath's long awaited book and the wait was worth it.

The Melbourne Athenaeum's Vice-President, Wilma Stubbs, welcomed everyone for the evening by pointing out that Mechanics' Institutes were one of the first public organisations to have women amongst their membership and that dates from 1830. Women first joined the Committee of the Melbourne Athenaeum in 1984.

Actor Brian James gave his memories of country MIs and former State Auditor-General 'Ches' Baragwanath recounted his days at the Brunswick MI. Dr Leonie Foster spoke of the unique and widespread MI movement in Victoria and speculated on the religious and personal reasons for almost a quarter of the world's Institutes being located in Victoria. The book's co-launcher, National Trust historian Dr Celestina Sagazio described the vast architectural range of styles covered in Mechanics' Institute buildings.

A beaming Pam Baragwanath at the book launch.
(Kristina Holdaway photo)

This handsome hardback volume of 360 pages with some 600 pictures is a bargain at $55.00 ($62.00 posted), and copies can be had by contacting the Secretariat or over the counter at Prahran MI or the Melbourne Athenaeum Library, First Floor, 188 Collins Street, Melbourne.

Birkbeck Bicentennial

It's now 200 years since a youthful Dr George Birkbeck launched his lecture series in Glasgow. He returned to London to establish the London Mechanics' Institute in 1824. Here, before a crowd of around two thousand people, he launched his 'Education is Freedom' slogan.

Birkbeck worked tirelessly to further the MI movement up until the time of his death in 1841, by which time his movement had spread around the world.

Dr George Birkbeck
(1776-1841)

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Remembering the Mechanics'
A Travelling Exhibition That Could Soon Be Near You

"The MIV is calling for MIs and Historical Societies or other groups who would like to stage the exhibition in their area."

The MIV's application for Public Record Office of Victoria Local History Grant has been successful. The names of lucky recipients were announced at a function in Castlemaine on 5 December by the Minister for Local Government the Hon. Bob Cameron.

Of the 486 applications lodged, 145 were successful. We are grateful to our secretary Cathy Milward-Bason and Pam Baragwanath for the time spent in preparing the application.

The display material will be prepared over the next three months. The exhibition will comprise some forty 510mmx640mm panels of laminated board, which can be either hung on Velcro display screens or hung from strings or wires. The panels will feature a wide variety of Institutes with internal and external shots, functions in progress, programs of events, plans of buildings and copies of legal documents.

There will be an administrative charge for having the exhibition and this will cover an associated exhibition kit which includes a banner, supply of exhibition guide leaflets, poster and launch invitation masters, media release and exhibition guide. The borrower will also need to pay for forwarding the exhibition onto the next exhibitor.

The loan period for each venue will be around two weeks and the MIV is calling for MIs, Historical Societies or other groups who would like to stage the exhibition in their area. Please write or phone our Secretariat.

A happy Cathy Milward-Bason with sharpened pencil. *(Kristina Holdaway photo)*

Murals Commemorate MIs

A recently unveiled mosaic mural at the Council of Adult Education headquarters at 256 Flinders Street, Melbourne shows a typical country Mechanics' Institute front aptly arranged around the ground floor lift door.

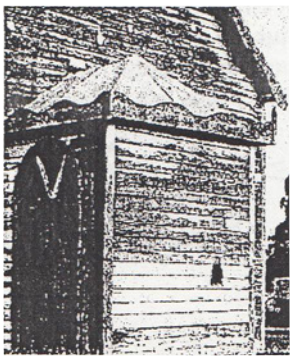
Then there's the mural painted on the three walls in the cafeteria which is located down the ramp at the rear of the lift which features a range of Mechanics' Institutes both large and small.

It shows our links with the now well-developed adult education movement in Victoria. The CAE now hosts the Victorian U3A (University of the Third Age) Network. This association has over sixty affiliated branches scattered throughout Victoria.

The CAE presently have redevelopment plans at draft stage and these include the provision for a library which could service the Melbourne CBD.

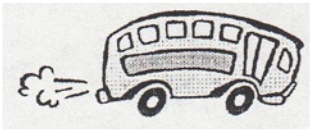
Institute Clean-Ups

A novel idea was floated at the last Committee meeting when it was suggested that we arrange weekend working bees at isolated country Institutes and report on their condition and future needs. These could be fun weekends drawing on the expertise of various MI members. They will be coordinated through the local historical society or Council. If you have a likely Institute please let the Secretariat know and we can put it on the agenda. We're lodging a grant application to fund this pilot scheme.



The Toongabbie Mechanics' Institute before restoration. *(Heritage Victoria photo)*

Goldfields Bus Tour



The Thursday, 17 November bus tour was book out with a 57-seater coach. Tour leader was well know media personality and conservation architect Allan Willingham. Able 'whips' for the day were two MIV vice-presidents, John Murphy and Richard Myers, who marshalled the group for the day.

The day started with a welcome 'cuppa' in the foyer of the Melbourne Athenaeum before boarding the coach. It was then express to the very small Taradale MI where there was a brief stop, then it was on to Castlemaine where we were met by historian Robyn Annear, who hosted our sumptuous morning tea. Then after drive bys at Maldon, Newstead, Clunes and Creswick we arrived at Ballarat for lunch were Clive Brooks took us on a guided tour of their fine building which now very much in renaissance.
The coach arrived back at the Athenaeum in time for Leila Winchcombe's unforgettable tour of the Melbourne Athenaeum.

There are plans to repeat the Goldfields MI tour sometime during 2001 for those who were unable to attend. If you are interested please let the Secretariat know so that you can be placed on the contact list.

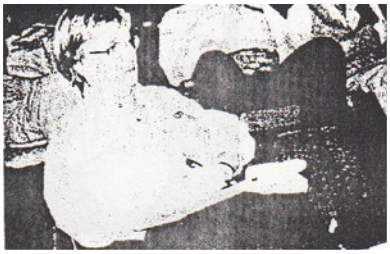
Host John Murphy and his wife Kath were kept busy during the conference weekend. *(Kristina Holdaway photo)*

Conference Draws Wide Crowd

"This is the time for the universal diffusion of the blessings of knowledge."
Dr George Birkbeck

Some one hundred and thirty delegates from across Australia gathered at the Melbourne Athenaeum for the first National Mechanics' Conference on 18 November. Included were Dr Michael Talbot from the State Library of South Australian and Carole O'Brien from Sydney Mechanics' institute and School of Arts.
The papers presented were excellent and copies of the proceedings are available from the Secretariat for $31.00 per copy posted or can be read online at www.doi.vic.gov.au
MIV Vice-President John Murphy hosted the day with various session chairs and the program went like clockwork.
We are most grateful to Sue Reynolds of the Victoria University and Peter Dimmy of the Council of Adult Education and Peter Lovell of Allom, Lovell & Associates for assisting with items of technology. Technology whiz, Alan Tonkin, coordinated equipment use during the day, worry free.
The theatre venue, complete with the *Jack the Ripper* set was made available by courtesy of AT Management and we thank their Glenn Elston, Greg Hocking and Guy Carrison for their assistance.
The Department of Infrastructure's Graham Dudley and Nada Bagaric provided tremendous back-up in every respect, and we are indebted to them for their great designs and wise counsel.
The eyecatching display board came from the Centenary of Federation State Committee.
Panel displays were provided by Ballarat MI, Information MI, Leongatha MI, Melbourne Athenaeum, Prahran MI and Port Phillip Library, Stanley Athenaeum.

Dr Michael Talbot, Chief Librarian State Library of South Australia. *(Kristina Holdaway photo)*



Carole O'Brien, Sydney Mechanics' Institute and School of Arts. *(Kristina Holdaway photo)*

Our International Visitor

Professor Patrick O'Farrell, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland.
(Kristina Holdaway photo)

Dublin-born and Trinity College, Dublin educated Professor Patrick O'Farrell jetted into Melbourne on 16 November in time for the National Conference.

Professor O'Farrell is the Deputy Principal of Heriot-Watt University, Riccarton, Edinburgh, Scotland.

He joined the staff of Heriot-Watt in 1985 as the Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, and has seen the University grow dramatically since then. In 1994 Heriot-Watt received the Queen's Award for Export Achievement.

Their stated aims to '*To provide a stimulating environment for the creative study of technological and related subjects and to develop our teaching, learning and research to satisfy the needs of basic academic disciplines, of business and industry, and of society.*'

Heriot-Watt is the successor of the Edinburgh School of Arts which was established in 1821 and is believed to be the oldest Mechanics' Institute in the world.

Professor O'Farrell is working on a history of Heriot-Watt University/Edinburgh School of Arts. He was amazed at the resurgence of the MI movement in Australia and promised to return.

At the Book Launch he was able to catch up with Professor Jarlath Ronayne, Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University, a university which has a lot in common with Heriot-Watt.

And What Next?

At the end of the Melbourne Conference it was suggested that the next National Meeting should be held in Sydney in 2002 and we should aim for an International Conference in Melbourne in 2004.

Since then the MIV Committee have started to investigate another conference in Mildura in November 2001, with an open invitation to all Institutes with the aim or forming a national body.

Phoenix at Inverleigh

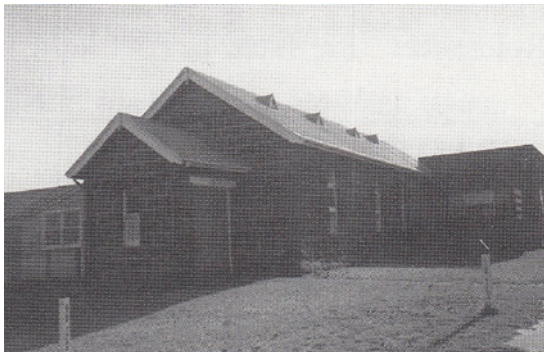
The Inverleigh re-opening "... promises to be a night to remember."

The hamet of Inverleigh, west of Geelong, has an old established Mechanics' Institute which dates back to 1865. Over the years the original bluestone building has had a number of additions in timber.

It is these additions which are undergoing a great facelift and two meeting rooms are being added for community use. Local tradesman giving freely of their time to undertake electrical, plumbing and buildings works and these works are being coordinated by long-time local resident Bruce McDonald.

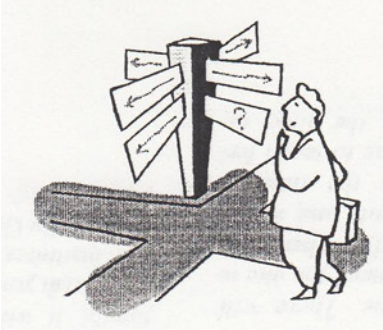
A euchre group was formed two years ago and now with about twenty regular players they are also attending regular local dances.

An official opening is planned for mid-2001 with a gala euchre and dance night and it promises to be a night to remember. The Inverleigh community said they would keep us posted of the opening date.



Inverleigh Public Hall presently undergoing renovation.

(Pam Baragwanath photo)



Interstate Institutes

Dynamic National Conference Speaker and South Australian State Librarian, Dr Michael Talbot, has provided us with a list of four extant SA Institutes: Brighton Institute Library, Gawler Institute, Glen Osmond Institute Library and Grange Institute. Their contact names and addresses have been added to the MIV website. Can anyone add to the SA list or that of any other state. These can then also be added to the MIV website.

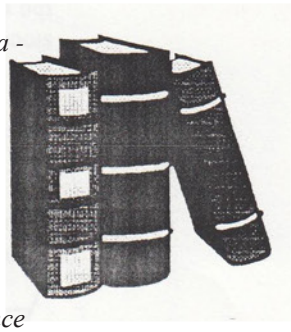
New Members

We welcome the following new members: Australian Institute of Genealogical Studies (Warrnambool), Box 607, Warrnambool, V 3280; Authentic Heritage Services (Lorraine Huddle & Dr David Rowe), 9 Aldershot Road, St Albans Park, V 3219; Ballan Mechanics' Institute, 23 Lay Street, Ballan, V 3342; Emerald Mechanics' Institute, Box 274, Emerald, V 3782; Ms Jennifer Evans, Mt Eliza; Tarwin Lower Mechanics' Institute, 11 George Street, Venus Bay, V 3956; and Warrandyte Mechanics' Institute and Arts Association, Box 150, Warrandyte, V 3113.

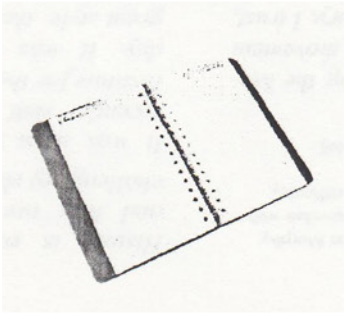
MIV Website

Listed on the MIV website are contacts for MIs in Victoria and further afield with links to several overseas Institutes. There's also planed a bibliography of MI histories in print and those known to have been done. If you can add to the list or an entry please e-mail pmiinc@vicnet.net.au

Bookshelf



If the Walls Could Speak: A Social History of the Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria - Pam Baragwanath. $55.00
Berwick Mechanics' Institute and Free Library - Richard Myers. $38.50
A Chance to Read: History of the State Library of South Australia - Dr Michael Talbot. $35.00
Going to the Mechanics': A History of the Launceston Mechanics' Institute - Dr Stefan Petrow. $16.50
A History of the Leongatha Mechanics' Institute - John Murphy. $7.00
Nothing But Gold: The Diggers of 1854 - Robyn Annear. $7.00
Rediscovering Mechanics' Institutes: Proceedings of the 2000 National Conference - MIV. $25.00



Calendar

2001
10 February - Committee Meeting, Melbourne Athenaeum, 10.30am.
10 March - Committee Meeting, Melbourne Athenaeum, 10.30am.
3 April - Copy Deadline for Next Newsletter
June - Annual General Meeting
November - State Meeting, tentatively Mildura
2002
November - National Conference, probably Sydney
2004
International Conference

MIV's First Life Member

MIV Vice-President John Murphy (right) presenting Jim Lowden with his Life Membership certificate.

(Kristina Holdaway photo)

At the conclusion of the National Conference MIV Vice-President, John Murphy, announced he had a special duty to perform and that was to confer Life Membership of the MIV on the former President of the Kilmore MI, Jim Lowden. Jim reformed the Kilmore Institute in 1994 and since then has been involved in the crusade for revitalizing MIs. The first State Conference was held in Kilmore in 1998.

The following is a copy of Jim's speech of acceptance.

"Fellow Mechanics' and Guests. I rise in this historic venue, the home of Victoria's first Mechanics' Institute, to accept this great honour on behalf of all those Mechanics who have gone before. It was their vision and energy which has left us such a great legacy.

Dr Frank Hurley and his Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria Committee are carrying on that great work and I congratulate them on organising this Conference.

It's good to know what it is no longer necessary to be lonely out there. You've got friends!

I should like to place on the record our gratitude to the former Infrastructure Minister Robert Roy MacLellan in agreeing to underwrite the sponsorship of this conference and for the generous 'settlement' on the Kilmore Institute. That support has been a great motivational force.

I also pay tribute to the indefatigable work of the Department of Infrastructure's Graham Dudley in assisting the Mechanics' Institute movement in this State. History, I trust, will mark him well.

It is hard to believe that just over a decade ago the then CEO of the Kilmore Shire, in a report to Council, stated that 'Mechanics' Institutes are no longer relevant to the 1990s'. Now there's fighting words.

And whilst the Kilmore Mechanics' Conference, held in 1998, may well have been the catalyst, this National Conference will, I predict, spur an International Conference in the foreseeable future.

Given that Australia had more than half of the world's Institutes, with Victoria around half of those, perhaps it should be held in Victoria or at least Australia.

In this bicentennial year of Dr George Birkbeck's first series of lectures in 1800, I wonder if George, beyond his crusading slogan 'Knowledge is Freedom', envisaged that his movement would eventually become global with perhaps 4000 Institutes worldwide.

Philosopher August Hare's works seem oddly appropriate here 'Thought is the wind, knowledge is the sail, and mankind is the vessel'.

Never underestimate the power of one. There will always be a need for one to speak clearly when the cause is great, one to act boldly when the need is clear, and one to teach fervently when the time requires.

History is endless change and MIs are meeting the challenge of change.

It was most heartening to recently visit the Ballarat Institute for their 140th birthday. It was celebrated in great style, the result a lot of very hard work. In meeting the challenge Ballarat did us all proud.

The London Mechanics' Institute, now known as Birkbeck College, has gone global with internet based tutorials fitting in with the various world time zones.

The Edinburgh School of Arts, now Heriot-Watt University is into technology research and development and export. Radical change is even happening in this very building...the computer arrives next week.

Indeed we have the opportunity here today to think collectively how we might reinvigorate our various communities.

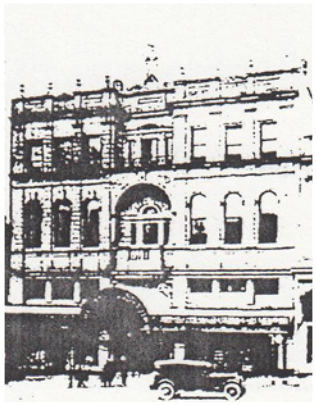
The final challenge I would like to throw out to you all is to develop a symbol, perhaps even a spanner with a book, to signify Mechanics' Institutes International. The Masons have one but the Mechanics' don't, for we too not a friendly society? It's s omething we could all proudly show on our lapel, stationery, websites, advertising, etc, as a symbol of Mechanics' solidarity. It would be our universal passport.

I thank you all again for this single great honour for my family, it will be cherished and I wish you and your various Institutes well into century 21. By George Birkbeck, I do!"

"It's good to know that it is no longer necessary to be lonely out there. You've got friends."

Around the Institutes

Ballarat



(illustration: Ballarat Mechanics' Institute)

The 140th Anniversary Party was chaired by Dr Frank Hurley and hosted by President Mrs Wilma Bridges. Guest speaker for the evening was Professor Weston Bate who regaled his audience of over one hundred from the Ballarat community and further a field.
Their refurbished search room, with donated shelving and new display cases came up a treat and congratulations are in order to all concerned.

Ballan

(Pam Baragwanath photo)

Ballan Institute was built in 1887 and was last renovated in 1922.
They have plans to instate library services for the community.

Bright

A successful campaign has resulted in the retention of the library in the Mechanics' Institute. Their skillful use of the media is an example to all.

Emerald

An eager group led by Ray Spencer, is presently reforming the Emerald Mechanics' Institute and plan to 'resurrect the aims and principles of the Institute', extend the Hall, and conduct courses in the future.
Ray believes that MIs 'are just as relevant today as they were in the past'.

Kilmore

A record sixth Gardens of Kilmore Open Day was enjoyed by a crowd which was up by almost 30% on the previous best year. The second One Night Stand, exposing local talent from recitation to juggling, brought the year to a close. The evening was organised by the Kilmorian 'a Capella Singers', a past recipient of the Institute's George Hudson Memorial Awards.

(Pam Baragwanath photo)

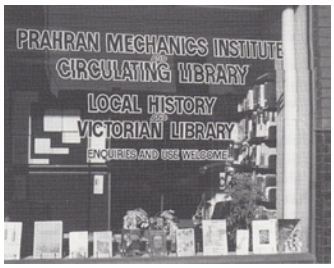
Kyneton

The Kyneton Mechanics' Institute is in the process of being reformed to utilise the existing Institute assets for Institute and community purposes.

(Kristina Holdaway photo)

Melbourne Athenaeum

Leila Winchcombe has been hitting the media for the movement with interviews in *The Age* and *Weekly Times* and interviews on the ABC Radio with Frank van Straten, Bruce Skeggs on Mid-Eastern FM and Wilma Hammond on Plenty Valley FM. In addition she coordinated the conference planning at the Athenaeum. Leila has earned a rest and is presently holidaying in England.



(Pam Baragwanath photo)

Prahran

Well-known journalist John Lahey gave a well-attended lecture on 30 November on the *Faces of Federation* based on his book of the same name which was published by the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.