

The Tacit Semantics of ‘Loud Fences’: Tracing the Connections between Activism, Heritage and New Histories



Figure 1: St Patrick's Cathedral, Ballarat (October 2016)

Introduction

The image in Figure 1 shows the front fence of St Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral, the largest church in the rural city of Ballarat, Victoria, Australia, as it has looked since late 2015. It is an exemplar of the so-called 'Loud Fence' campaign. This campaign, involving the cumulative installation of coloured ribbons on selected fences as a form of protest and, in particular, as a counter to decades of institutional silence, was begun in 2015 by a small group of Ballarat women. They were responding to revelations of horrific childhood abuse and trauma suffered by those close to them, at the hands of priests and other personnel working within institutions purporting to be for the care, protection and/or education of children. These revelations arose out of the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2013-2017), which identified a number of specific institutions as having been culpable in perpetrating and/or covering up the abuses. In many of those institutions it has been shown, at both local and macro-administrative levels, the culture of cover-up effectively nurtured accretions of abusers into protected groups that preyed with impunity on those in their care over generations. For various reasons Ballarat was a haven for such groups, and among the institutions implicated was the bishopric of which St Patrick's is the hub, along with various other Church organizations, schools and orphanages, as well as several secular Government schools.¹

¹ The geographically extensive Ballarat Diocese provided scope for the routine relocation of offending priests, allowing them to freely re-offend over decades. Konrad Marshall, 'Faith in the Church was Lost, Faith in Justice Returns to Ballarat', *The Age* (Melbourne), 19 May 2015. Ballarat institutions (both faith-based and secular) named in the Royal Commission are: St Alipius Christian Brothers School; St Alipius Junior School (effectively a kindergarten); St Patrick's Cathedral (former resident priests and diocesan administration); St Patrick's Christian Brothers; St Patrick's Secondary College; St Paul's Technical College; St Joseph's Boy's Home; Nazareth House Orphanage; Macarthur Street, Queen Street and Dean (State Government) Primary Schools. Fiona Henderson, 'Child Sex Abuse Victims Name 17 Institutions for Royal Commission Submission', *The Courier* (Ballarat), 23 May 2014.



Figure 2: St Alipius Catholic Church, Ballarat (October 2016)

From its modest local beginnings in a single rural city, the Loud Fence campaign quite quickly went ‘viral’ and has since been seen performing a similar function of signifying the suffering of victims of institutional abuse in numerous locations across Australia, and as far

afield as Bali, London, Rome, China, Galway Bay, Boston and New York.² In many cases, the ribbons adorn fences of institutions that are entirely blameless; they have been installed to signify sympathy for, and solidarity with, the abuse victims commemorated in the original campaign.

As its title implies, the Royal Commission's terms of reference focus specifically on historic abuses of a sexual nature, and how the institutions in question dealt with (or failed to deal with) those abuses; but it should be noted, for the sake of retaining a properly rounded and realistic picture of the overall scope of the issues underlying the Loud Fence campaign, that the abuses were by no means confined to sexual improprieties. A multitude of children who did not attract the explicit attention of the paedophiles among their guardians nevertheless suffered terrible hurt and harm from the gratuitously punitive and/or outright sadistic behaviour of other staff, of the sort that all too often prevails in institutions characterized by significant power disparities. Many of these instances have emerged as adjunct testimony in the course of the Royal Commission hearings, and many more have been recounted elsewhere.³ It may be seen, therefore, that both the potential numbers of Loud Fence stakeholders (whether or not they have actually installed a ribbon themselves), and the degree of their affective investment in the campaign, are very high.

It is not the intention of this paper to address in any detail the abuses the ribbons actually represent; that task has been ably dealt with by others in various forums. What is of concern here is the significance of the ribbons as historiographic artefacts, as 'texts', with both performative and dialogic facets whose historical nature needs, as far as possible, to be defined and in some way recorded. Of particular interest is the ribbons' disruption of the established historical narrative of the institutions involved, especially where those institutions

² M. Cunningham, 'Loud Fence Movement Goes to New York', *The Courier* (Ballarat) 18 November 2015; M. Cunningham, 'Loud Fence Throws Support Around Survivors', *The Courier* (Ballarat) 7 November 2015; P. McClellan, 'Addressing the Needs of Those Who Have Experienced Abuse in Care as Children: Implications of Findings of the Royal Commission', paper to the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies Conference, Sydney, 15 August 2016.

³ See, e.g., The Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 'Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children', Canberra: Australian Government, 2004; P. Ashton & J.Z. Wilson (eds), *Silent System: Forgotten Australians and the Institutionalisation of Women and Children*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014; B. Djuric, *Abandon All Hope: A History of Parramatta Industrial School*, Perth: Chorgan, 2008; J.Z. Wilson & F. Golding (2015) 'Caring about the Past or Past Caring: The Contested Narratives of Memory', in S. Swain & J. Skold (eds), *In the Midst of Apology: Professionals and the Legacy of Abuse amongst Children in 'Care'*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2015.

have significant cachet as embodiments of ‘heritage’. This raises pertinent questions as to the potential role of the historian and archivist in relation not just to Loud Fences but to other examples of grass-roots activism, and the ways in which these aspects intersect with heritage.

The city’s Catholic heritage

The first point to note in this regard is that, as one of the earliest white European settlements in the region (founded in 1838, a mere three years after the ‘village’ of Melbourne was founded), and subsequently as the geographical focus of one of the largest gold rushes of the nineteenth century, the City of Ballarat is highly conscious of its historical role as a major regional centre, and of the historical nature of its architecture and urban culture. It is heavily invested in the concept of ‘heritage’. This investment is evident at both the ‘official’ level, in the form of City Council regulation on what can be built, modified and/or demolished, and where these things are permitted to happen — a so-called ‘heritage overlay’ administered and protected by the Council’s Town Planning Department⁴ — and in the less clearly defined but nevertheless deeply significant area of cultural memory and community identity.⁵ It is with this latter area of conceptualisation of heritage that the present discussion is centrally concerned.

National attendance at mass by avowed Catholics has been in steady and marked decline for some years (along with most other religions).⁶ The Diocese of Ballarat, although sharing the decline, is one of a handful of dioceses across Australia whose percentage of mass attenders exceeds the national average.⁷ The diocese takes in a very large area —

⁴ The concept of ‘heritage overlay’ as an overarching historical framework and guide governing planning is peculiar to the State of Victoria, and is administered by local governments across the State. For an overview of the State Government’s role, see Victorian Government, Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, ‘Heritage Overlays’, 2014: <http://www.dtpli.vic.gov.au/heritage/local-government/heritage-overlays>; for the Ballarat example, see City of Ballarat, ‘Heritage Overlay’, n.d.: <http://www.ballarat.vic.gov.au/pbs/statutory-planning/overlays/heritage-planning-protection.aspx>.

⁵ E. Crooke, ‘The Politics of Community Heritage: Motivations, Authority and Control’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 16, Nos 1-2, 2010.

⁶ P. Wilkinson, ‘Who Goes to Mass in Australia in the 21st Century?’ *Catholica: A Global Conversation*, 2013: http://www.catholica.com.au/gc4/pw/005_pw_print.php; see also Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Census Fact Sheet: Religion’, 2011: [http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/mediafactsheetsfirst/\\$file/Census-factsheet-religion.doc](http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/mediafactsheetsfirst/$file/Census-factsheet-religion.doc).

⁷ Wilkinson, *op. cit.*

approximately one third of the State of Victoria — and its overall percentage of baptized Catholics conforms closely to the regional and national average.⁸ However, the percentage of Catholics resident in the City of Ballarat itself is noticeably higher than the average (while the percentage identifying as Anglican, the next-most popular Christian denomination, is significantly lower than the average),⁹ and these indicators reinforce a long-held general conception of Ballarat as something of a ‘Catholic town’.

In a community in which the Catholic Church has historical roots both deep and broad, a number of Church-based institutions figure significantly in the city’s societal matrix. Of these, by far the most prominent is St Patrick’s Cathedral, which stands as a major cultural and architectural icon. Australia’s oldest consecrated cathedral,¹⁰ it is the seat of the Bishop of Ballarat, and is thus the mother church of the diocese. Located in the centre of the CBD, it fronts onto Sturt St, the city’s main street, and, for Catholic and non-Catholic residents alike, is a highly significant urban landmark. In the context of the ‘heritage overlay’, the church (including adjunct and subsidiary structures in its grounds plus its perimeter fence) is described in the City’s official heritage listing as ‘of great architectural and heritage visual importance to the city of Ballarat’.¹¹ The heritage embodied in such an edifice is not confined to the ‘visual’; the subtext of any heritage-based perception of a structure or institution is the historical narrative it embodies (whether explicit or implied), and which is thus regarded as a component of the community’s narrative. This is especially true of an entity such as St Patrick’s, whose heritage dimension is intrinsically linked to community identity.

As the diocese headquarters and the spiritual centre of Catholic life in the region, St Patrick’s gives its name to several subsidiary institutions, while a number of others come under its aegis. One of the oldest and most prestigious schools in the area is St Patrick’s College, a day and boarding secondary school for boys run by members of the Congregation of Christian Brothers since 1893; its chief feeder school is St Patrick’s Parish Primary

⁸ Catholic Diocese of Ballarat, ‘Our Diocese: Our Diocese at a Glance’, 2014: <http://www.ballarat.catholic.org.au/our-diocese/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=103>

⁹ City of Ballarat, ‘Community Profile’, n.d. [data as at 2011]: <http://profile.id.com.au/ballarat/religion>

¹⁰ Catholic Diocese of Ballarat, ‘Our Diocese: Cathedral’, 2014: <http://www.ballarat.catholic.org.au/our-diocese/dsp-default.cfm?loadref=133>

¹¹ City of Ballarat, ‘Ballarat Heritage Precincts: Statements of Significance’, 2006: p. 46: <http://www.ballarat.vic.gov.au/media/222010/ballarat%20heritage%20precincts%20-%20statement%20of%20significance%202006.pdf>

School.¹² Other major Catholic institutions include St Alipius Christian Brothers Primary School and St Alipius pre-school; St Joseph's Orphanage for Boys, and Nazareth House Orphanage for Girls. (Both orphanages are now no longer operational in those roles.) All these institutions have long histories within the community, all occupy or occupied sites of heritage significance, and all have been identified by the Royal Commission as venues of abuse of those in their care, and complicity in covering up that abuse over decades.

It is unsurprising that the revelations that emerged on a daily basis over a period of months from the Royal Commission, implicating some of the city's most venerated institutions in hitherto hidden histories of egregious, systematic and long-term moral wrongdoing, had the potential for significant social impact, and concomitant effect upon the heritage narrative embodied in the institutions. Herein is revealed a degree of uncertainty, of contestation, within the conceptual paradigm of 'heritage', for heritage itself is not merely the stories traditionally attached to august establishments, nor the sites on which they reside, nor the built fabric that houses them; as has been widely noted, heritage is an interpretive process, an ongoing societal exploration of what Denis Byrne (speaking in another context) terms 'the instrumental continuum between the tangible and the intangible',¹³ and is thus equally bound up with transformation, transition and dynamic processes of 'performance' that underlie and potentially undermine familiar, 'established' heritage qualities.¹⁴

Loud Fence action and reaction

It is in the realm of performative transformation that the ribbons of the Loud Fences have their potency, and in which is revealed their own role and status as heritage entities in their own right. Their sudden appearance effects a (partial) transformation of the

¹² The primary school, which is co-educational, also provides enrolments for St Patrick's College's 'sister' school, Loreto College for Girls (founded in 1875). It should be noted that Loreto is one of the few Catholic institutions in Ballarat that has *not* been named or implicated in any Royal Commission testimony.

¹³ D. Byrne, 'A Critique of Unfeeling Heritage', in L. Smith and N. Akagawa (eds), *Intangible Heritage*, London: Routledge, 2009, p. 246

¹⁴ N.A. Silberman, 'Heritage Interpretation and Human Rights: Documenting Diversity, Expressing Identity, or Establishing Universal Principles?', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2012, pp. 249-50; D.C. Harvey, 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, Meaning and the Scope of Heritage Studies', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2001, p. 226; Byrne, *op. cit.*, pp. 240-41, 243; Ahmed Skounti, 'The Authentic Illusion: Humanity's Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Moroccan Experience', in L. Smith and N. Akagawa (eds), *Intangible Heritage*, London: Routledge, 2009, p. 75.

establishment heritage entity — previously a relatively static repository of familiar and ‘comfortable’ narrative — into an entity whose narrative is in flux, an entity of uncertain history and thus of less tangible heritage. Thus as an unwilling participant in a performance which itself has an undefined but real heritage role, the establishment entity finds itself caught up in heritage as a process.

That this development can evoke tensions of the sort commonly associated with contested histories is evident in the varied responses of the institutions marked by Loud Fences. The first Loud Fence, created at the St Alipius Primary School shortly after it had been identified in the Royal Commission as one of the former offending institutions,¹⁵ was tolerated by the school and has remained in place for, at this writing, well over a year. This response is consonant with many other Catholic institutions in the region that have, it seems, accepted the incontrovertible ‘shaming’ arising automatically from having been named in the Royal Commission. Likewise, the ribbons on the fence of St Patrick’s Cathedral in Ballarat are still in place almost a year after their placement, and the current Bishop of Ballarat, Fr Paul Bird, has gone so far as to tie his own ribbon to the fence, in January 2016, in a show of public support for the campaign and its cause.¹⁶ In some instances, however, the first response of the institutions’ administrators was to remove the ribbons as soon as they were installed. In the regional Victorian town of Castlemaine, approximately 60 kilometres north-east of Ballarat, the fence of St Mary’s Catholic church was bedecked with ribbons by a woman whose husband had been abused as a child in a different institution. St Mary’s was not implicated directly, and the installation was intended as a generalized protest at the Catholic Church overall. Mere hours after the ribbons went up, they disappeared. It is not clear, however, who was responsible for their removal: the parish priest declared his support for abuse victims but stated that when the ribbons appeared, he did not know what they signified and that parishioners had expressed their concerns about them.¹⁷ (Given the amount of publicity both the Royal Commission hearings and the Loud Fence campaign had been receiving over preceding months it might be thought surprising that a parish priest in a

¹⁵ M. Burin, ‘We Support You: Loud Community Message for Child Sex Abuse Survivors’, ABC Ballarat, 22 May 2015: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2015/05/22/4240723.htm>.

¹⁶ M. Cunningham, ‘Bishop Ties Ribbon of Hope’, *The Courier* (Ballarat), 13 January 2016.

¹⁷ The installation was documented on the Loud Fence Facebook page (dated 17 January 2016) at <https://www.facebook.com/loudfence/posts/1224790677580135>. On the removal see Power FM, ‘Sexual Abuse Ribbons Removed’, n.d.: www.powerfmballarat.com.au/news/49702-sexual-abuse-ribbons-removed; and E. Handley, ‘Child Abuse Ribbons Stripped from Castlemaine Church’, *Bendigo Advertiser* 30 December 2015.

neighbouring regional town would be unaware of the ribbons' purpose; the significance of parishioners' involvement will be discussed below.)

Likewise, at St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne, the mother church of the Melbourne Archdiocese, ribbons installed in January 2016 were removed without notice late the following month, an action explained afterwards only by a brusque statement from an archdiocesan spokesperson that there was no intention to be 'antagonistic', it was purely a matter of 'policy' that no such adornments were permitted.¹⁸ The Archdiocese did not explain why it took almost six weeks to determine that this was the policy, or to carry it out. At least one media outlet noted the 'irony' in the fact that the removal coincided with the symbolic installation of a ribbon in support of the abuse survivors by Melbourne's former archbishop, Cardinal Pell, at the Vatican.¹⁹ Loud Fence campaigners, on the other hand, were quick to observe that the removals preceded by a week the Cardinal's scheduled testimony before the Royal Commission (on medical advice by video link from Rome).²⁰

Another Ballarat Catholic institution named in the Royal Commission, Nazareth House (a former orphanage which now operates in its other long-term role as an aged-care facility), became host to the Loud Fence campaign in late 2015. In April 2016 the ribbons were removed by the institution's administration, to the consternation of the Loud Fence campaigners.²¹ Nazareth House officials stated that after leaving the ribbons in place for some months 'as acknowledgement of victims of abuse', they had taken the decision to remove them for the sake of their current aged residents' wellbeing, after offensive signage had been installed on the fence.²² (Signage, offensive or otherwise, forms no part of the practice or ethos of the Loud Fence movement.) What the Nazareth House nuns did not mention was that a number of demonstrators had been protesting outside in recent days, in response to the institution taking in and providing succour and comfort to the former Bishop of Ballarat, Ronald Mulkearns, who was dying of cancer. Mulkearns had in his last weeks admitted to the Royal Commission that he had protected a number of paedophile priests, and

¹⁸ M. Dixon, 'Church Removes Ribbon from Loud Fence', *The Courier* (Ballarat), 26 February 2016.

¹⁹ *The Courier* (Ballarat), 'Cardinal Pell Joins Loud Fence Movement', 28 February 2016.

²⁰ Loud Fence Facebook page, 26 February 2016: https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=1247235842002285&id=1106437572748780&p=20&v=100002185735451&refid=52

²¹ M. Dixon, 'Loud Ribbons Removed', *The Courier* (Ballarat), 14 April 2016.

²² M. Dixon, 'Loud Ribbons Removed', op. cit.

hence effectively facilitated their predations, during his twenty-six years as Bishop of the Ballarat Diocese.²³ Many survivors of abuse were outraged that any Catholic institution would take him in.²⁴ (That the Church was listening to those protests was reflected shortly afterward when it announced that he would not be interred in the crypt within St Patrick's Cathedral, but in a common grave — the first bishop of the diocese to be denied a place in the crypt.)²⁵

Institutions' removal of the ribbons without notice or consultation with those who installed them has become both newsworthy and a source of vexation among Loud Fence activists and their supporters. Activists commonly express their 'disappointment' at such actions, with this subtly barbed sentiment duly included in media reports. The sudden disappearance of the ribbons at St Patrick's Cathedral Melbourne provoked a significant verbal backlash on the Loud Fence Facebook page, with some comments urging retaliation in the form of a renewed installation.²⁶ This did not eventuate at St Patrick's, but in at least one other case of sudden removal, the ribbons were replaced — in this instance not at a Catholic institution, but a secular government school.

The Macarthur Street Primary School, in the Ballarat suburb of Soldiers Hill, was named in the Royal Commission in 2014 as a venue of historical sexual abuse by a teacher, prompting the installation of ribbons on its fence by one of the victims in late January 2016.²⁷ The school's response, which it enacted within hours, was simply to remove the ribbons. Over the next few days a kind of 'duel' ensued, beginning with an immediate burst of 'social media outrage',²⁸ and the consequent re-installation of ribbons (in even greater numbers), followed by their removal yet again. The ribbons were installed once more, and removed once more. At that point, with the evidence suggesting that the activists were unlikely simply to 'go away', the school council announced that they sympathised with the Loud Fence

²³ Royal Commission Case Study no. 29, Transcript 25 February 2015, p. C16155.

²⁴ J. Lee, 'Former Ballarat Bishop Ronald Mulkearns Dies at 85', *The Age* (Melbourne), 4 April 2016.

²⁵ C. Cluff and M. Dixon, 'Exclusion: Bishop Mulkearns Denied Crypt Burial at St Patrick's Cathedral', *The Courier* (Ballarat), 9 April 2016.

²⁶ Loud Fence Facebook page, 26 February 2016, op. cit. (note 18).

²⁷ M. Cunningham, 'Loud Message of Support for Sex Abuse Victims Won't Be Silenced', *The Courier* (Ballarat), 1 February 2016: <http://www.thecourier.com.au/story/3700379/loud-message-of-support-for-sex-abuse-victims-wont-be-silenced/>

²⁸ M. Cunningham, 'Loud Message', op. cit.

campaigners' cause, and, in consultation with the Education Department, would meet with them to negotiate a resolution to the impasse.²⁹ By way of explaining their initial reaction, the school council stated that 'when the ribbons first began appearing the school had been unaware of the purpose of the movement behind them, and there had been no time to determine how to address the complex issue with the children'.³⁰

This statement disavowing any prior knowledge of the Loud Fence campaign echoed the announcement made by St Mary's in Castlemaine. Such a declaration of innocence-cum-ignorance, it must be said, is even more lacking in credibility than in the case of St Mary's. Macarthur Street is a Ballarat school; the ribbons had for months been noticeably evident in a host of prominent places around the city including the frontage of most of the local Catholic schools *and* the city's largest church; and as the media reportage observed, Macarthur Street's negative reaction to the ribbons contrasted with the public announcement in the previous week that Ballarat's Catholic schools intended en bloc to actively support the Loud Fence campaign.³¹ The city was alive with discussion of the issues, including the fact that the Royal Commission was due to arrive in three weeks' time to hold public hearings in the local courthouse; and as noted above, just two weeks earlier the Bishop of Ballarat had tied his own ribbon to the gate of his church (with attendant media publicity).

In its final measure — the proposal to meet with the activists in an atmosphere of 'mutual respect' — Macarthur Street took a step that would become something of a trend in certain quarters. Unwilling to grant the activists licence to freely express their cause, yet presumably mindful of the potential public-relations disaster if persistent removal came to be widely interpreted as denoting support for the perpetrators of abuse, the institution sought a compromise involving a show of 'respect' for the abuse survivors, in exchange for not being required to display that respect in their 'shopfront', as it were. Echoes of this approach — albeit rather more diplomatically nuanced — are discernible in the announcement, in March 2016, by the headmaster of St Patrick's Secondary College (Ballarat), that the multitude of ribbons that had graced the school's front fence for many months were to be removed, not by way of rejecting or negating their message, but rather as a gesture of respect for what the Loud Fence represented, *and* for the ribbons themselves as material objects deserving

²⁹ M. Cunningham, 'Loud Message', op. cit.

³⁰ Cited in M. Cunningham, 'Loud Message', op. cit.

³¹ M. Cunningham, 'Loud Message', op. cit.

preservation.³² The headmaster expressed concerns about the ribbons' capacity to endure the approaching winter without becoming visually degraded, and hence potentially losing their symbolic potency. He proposed a properly reverent ceremony, involving the Loud Fence stakeholders, in which the ribbons would be carefully removed, one by one, and placed indoors within the school, there to be permanently held (presumably on display) in a manner to be decided that would do honour to the cause they symbolised. This plan was indeed enacted three weeks later, with the promised forms of respect and with the participation of Loud Fence activists and abuse survivors.³³

Narrative performances and difficult heritage

It is apparent that institutional responses to the Loud Fences range across a spectrum of reactions. In some cases one gets a sense of prevarication, with the ribbons being apparently accepted for a time, only to fall suddenly to a pragmatically timed 'policy' revelation or 'safety' concern; some tend (initially, at least) toward a kind of denial, in the form of professions of ignorance by which they imply some justification for the negation of the installations; some go in for a censorious purging; while some, whether driven by conscience or pragmatism or a mixture of both, side with the angels and endorse the campaign. Disparate as they may seem, however, all these responses have key facets in common.

Those points of common ground are most apparent in the cases of the three institutions that reacted with the most confronting negativity to the ribbons: St Mary's Church, Nazareth House and Macarthur Street School. In each case, the institution's clientele — whether parishioners, residents or pupils — were invoked as a factor in the reasoning behind the removal of the ribbons. This highlights an aspect that applies to *all* the institutions in question, which is that although the sites are perceived as having 'establishment' heritage status of the sort that resides in their iconic, and essentially static, presence within the community, they are in fact engaged in an ongoing narrative performance, and as such are mindful of their implied, and largely unseen, stakeholder-audience, which comprises not merely their clientele, but others with a personal stake in the institution's cultural, functional and/or ideological purport.

The case of Macarthur Street School is of especial interest, in that it demonstrates a

³² J. Crowley, 'Headmaster's Message', St Patrick's College website 18 March 2016: <http://www.stpats.vic.edu.au/en/news/article/headmaster-s-message-march-18-2016/>

³³ M. Dixon, 'Permanent Display on Cards for Loud Fence', *The Courier* (Ballarat), 6 April 2016.

further component of the Loud Fences' potency as a form of grass-roots activism: if one regards the initial installation of the ribbons as a 'statement', then their immediate removal may be seen as a 'reply'. This is followed by a reiteration of the statement — with an implicit connotation of refusal to be silenced — and a further reply, prompting yet another statement. Thus has been created a form of 'dialogue', a silent, yet highly overt, performance embodying contested notions of moral responsibility, community image, and the capacity (and newly asserted right) of those who had been rendered silent and 'outcast' by the community to have a 'voice'.

Key to this exchange is its disparate implied audiences. In terms of the activist 'dialogue', broadly speaking these comprise two main groups: those sympathetic to the protest, and to the activist position generally; and those whose sympathies lie primarily with the institution. Both the campaigners in their original performative action and the institution in its subsequent responses envisage their own respective audiences; thus is engendered not only a contestation of 'message', but contesting audiences as well. And all the protagonists in the exchange, along with their respective partisan audiences, are aware of a third audience: the members of the general public who do not identify as stakeholders in the issue either way, but who are seen by both sides as potentially swaying one way or the other. To these three, it could be argued, should be added a fourth: the professionally disinterested historian-viewer-archivist, whose role it is to discern and preserve a balanced account of the phenomenon.

Not all, nor even most, responses to the Loud Fences have been so adversarial; but every institution that has received the attention of the Loud Fence campaigners has had to deal with the implications of the ribbons' very obvious displays. The visual irony of using brightly coloured ribbons, adorning the often sombre peripheral built fabric of a venerable institution, to signify deeds dark enough to permanently blight the lives of many of their victims, seems to contradict the inherent gravitas of the 'classic', or establishment, heritage site. In each case, the institution's mission becomes one of somehow restoring its own narrative in the face of the contradicting one, for the narrative embodied in the establishment heritage entity is presumed to be — is in effect *required* to be — safe, uncontroversial, unchanging and unwavering in its affirmation of community values and identity. Hence it may be argued that, with the exception of those entirely blameless institutions that voluntarily join the campaign in support of the activists, *all* responses to the Loud Fences across the spectrum described above stand as attempts of one sort or another to reclaim, re-appropriate and/or assimilate the Loud Fence performance into their own 'traditional' heritage identity.

And there can be no doubt that whatever the institutions' motives, whether directly confronting or 'going with the flow', their responses quite decisively affirm the campaign's power. Power to, at the very least, be noticed.



Figure 3: In Solidarity, Uniting Church Doorway (Ballarat October 2016)

This suggests that Loud Fences are intrinsically inimical to the traditional concept of heritage, no matter how 'respectful' or 'sympathetic' the custodians of that heritage might be to the activist cause. A clue to this aspect of the relationship is apparent in the statement issued by the Macarthur Street School Council President, when in the course of proposing a negotiated accord, she envisaged a meeting 'to determine how the school could acknowledge the abuse in a way that would not upset current pupils, families and staff.'³⁴ Yet in this seemingly

³⁴ M. Cunningham, 'Loud Message', op. cit.

reasonable and conciliatory motivation is encapsulated a defining feature of the campaign, and of other ‘grass-roots’ campaigns that aim to give a voice to those silenced by institutional and/or societal pressure.

The Loud Fence is a reminder to the institution and the community of a plethora of narratives that have been silenced, hidden, precisely because they are ‘upsetting’. Those narratives — individual stories of flesh-and-blood torment embedded within the broader narratives of institutions that hosted them and a community that through indifference facilitated and effectively condoned them³⁵ — stand today as exemplars of ‘difficult heritage’.³⁶ These are the stories associated with specific sites that are routinely denied, contradicted, trivialised, negated, euphemised and/or ignored. The ‘difficulty’ arises when those imperatives to avoid ‘upset’ are seriously challenged. The Loud Fence ‘upsets’ also because of its subversive simplicity. Participants perform a ‘pop-up’ protest at low cost, with minimal effort and high public visibility. It is an irresistibly democratic idea — anyone can join in by buying a ribbon and tying it to an existing fence or built fabric. The impact-for-effort quotient is high. Loud Fences may be seen as an example of what Gay McAuley evocatively terms ‘feral memory syndrome’ — individual and small-group rememberings that cut across and/or contradict the established social denial/amnesia.³⁷ In a sense, then, it is arguable that their *raison d’être* is, in part at least, to ‘upset’ people.

In this regard Loud Fences have parallels with other ‘silent’ protests like that staged by the Care Leaver Australia Network (CLAN) at the entrance to the Ballarat courthouse during the Royal Commission’s hearings. CLAN members gathered to support survivors giving evidence and to confront clergy giving evidence, to draw the public’s attention to the events unfolding within the court (via such devices as placards saying ‘Toot if you support us’), and also to send messages about issues of redress, access to records, and other (i.e., non-sexual) forms of abuse. Loud Fences silently challenge the heritage sites by attaching symbols to property; CLAN raises awareness by human presence at the site where (perhaps) truth will be

³⁵ McLellen, *op. cit.* (note 2).

³⁶ W. Logan & K. Reeves, ‘Introduction: Remembering Places of Pain and Shame’, in W. Logan & K. Reeves (eds), *Places of Pain and Shame: Dealing with ‘Difficult Heritage’*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 5, 10-11.

³⁷ G. McAuley, ‘Place, Time and Performance in the Memory Process’, *Australian Studies* No. 5, 2013, p. 3.

spoken. **INSERT FOURTH IMAGE HERE (forthcoming) CLAN Members protesting outside Ballarat Courthouse**

After the tumult and the shouting?

What does all this mean in the context of heritage, of the City of Ballarat's 'heritage overlay', and of the archival imperative? There are few clear answers to these questions. The Loud Fence campaign resides, or rather performs, at an intersection of social history, public history, what may be termed 'establishment' or 'official' history, of heritage in its manifold forms, and performative activism that imposes its own layer of disruptive history. Categorising the campaign, and its signifying artefacts, the ribbons, is problematic, as is its relationship with its cultural and social environment. It would be simplistic, but nevertheless perhaps a useful beginning, to characterise that relationship as a dichotomy between the monumental and the ephemeral, or perhaps between the tangible and the intangible. Beyond that, one must consider the campaign's purport as a form of 'protest' or 'resistance narrative', an attempt to redress radical historical power imbalances between establishment entities and ordinary members of society, and in the process cast a light upon the disparate experiences of citizenship that society condones.

In February 2013, the University of Melbourne's Baillieu Library held an exhibition entitled *Protest! Archives from the University of Melbourne*, which drew on a wide range of documentary records of the various protest movements and events that had involved the University from 1960 to 1980.³⁸ In mounting such an exhibition, the library acknowledged the significance of protest as an historical shaper of society, and therefore as a phenomenon worthy not merely of archival preservation, but of representation and interpretation as public history. It may be that the Baillieu Library's project presents a paradigm that could be adapted to the historiographical needs of archivists wishing to make historical sense of Loud Fences. There is potential for the Loud Fence campaign to form the foundation of a substantial and permanent museum exhibition, one which focuses not only on the Loud Fences and the cause for which they speak, but on other examples of analogous 'grass-roots' activism.

A beginning in this direction has in fact occurred, with a traveling exhibition mounted

³⁸ K. Dean, 'Introduction: Collecting the Archives of Protest', *University of Melbourne Archives*, Special Edition: 'Protest! Archives from the University of Melbourne', 20 February 2013, p. 1.

by the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in 2011, representing the very large group (in the order of half a million) dubbed the ‘Forgotten Australians’, who experienced out-of-home ‘care’ as children in the latter half of the 20th century. This group was the subject of a 2004 Senate inquiry into the wholesale deprivations and abuses they suffered.³⁹ The NMA’s exhibition was staged in a number of major museums across Australia over three years, finishing in 2014 (but with a continuing website).⁴⁰ It preceded the Loud Fences (and the Royal Commission), but it has an obvious affinity with key aspects of the Loud Fence cause, in that many of the abuse victims commemorated by the ribbons are members of the Forgotten Australians group, and the recognition accorded the Forgotten Australians through the Senate Inquiry and subsequent government Apology are long-term results of a grass-roots campaign begun in the 1990s.

Of course, there are inherent limitations in museum exhibits, as there are in all forms of recording, preserving, and otherwise archiving a performative phenomenon. As Diana Taylor succinctly puts it, ‘How can we think about performance in historical terms, when the archive cannot capture and store the live event?’⁴¹ It may thus be that any attempt to fully encapsulate the campaign and its manifold meanings will be in some degree inadequate. But if the attempt is not made, then there remains the probability that the campaign will be assimilated into precisely the ‘comfortable’ heritage paradigm against which it contended. Mindful, then, of the likelihood of imperfect and/or incomplete interpretation, in whatever form their archival representation takes, it is to be hoped, nevertheless, that some form of commemoration and preservation commensurate with the campaign’s fundamental purport is undertaken before the campaign runs its course.

In considering the meaning and societal role of the Loud Fences, and their intimately adversarial relationship with the edifices they adorn, one is reminded of Kim Dovey’s notion

³⁹ See: The Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians Who Experienced Institutional or Out-Of-Home Care as Children*, Canberra: Australian Parliament, August 2004. The Forgotten Australians received a bipartisan Apology from the Federal Government in November 2009.

⁴⁰ J.Z. Wilson, ‘Exhibition Review: *Inside: Life in Children’s Homes and Institutions*, National Museum Australia Touring Museum Exhibition, Melbourne Museum, 29 August 2013 to 27 January 2014’, *Museum and Society* Vol. 12, No. 2, July 2014, pp. 148-152. The website is at: http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/inside_life_in_childrens_homes_and_institutions/home

⁴¹ D. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003, p. xvi.

of architecture as providing us with ‘mnemonic hooks’ — iconic aids to cultural memory, and hence to meaning.⁴² Prominent public buildings of all sorts — clock towers, ornate school gates, town halls, prisons and churches, are all markers of colonialist institutional cultures, secular and sectarian, and as such stand as powerful reminders of our culture’s dominant values and inherent power structures. The ribbons may be viewed as contributing new layers of such meaning to the architectural edifices to which they are attached. Thus a building such as St Patrick’s Cathedral, whose cultural meaning within the community has been both long-established and long bound up with the establishment, acquires a new and divergent strand of historical narrative via the addition of the ribbons. It is by no means a stretch to view Loud Fences as an example of grass-roots activism that both exposes inequalities in citizens’ enjoyment of fundamental rights, and challenges the institutional cultures that stand as extant remnants of colonialism and edifices of historic institutional power — an activism that is itself history-making.

⁴² K. Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 17.