



The refurbished ground floor of the Baillieu Library was officially opened in May and named the William Buckland Information Access Centre.

At the ceremony, the honours were performed by the Chairman of the William Buckland Foundation, Ian Roach, above, with (from left) the Vice-Chancellor, Alan Gilbert, Sarah McKay, Patron of the Better Baillieu Library Project, and the University Librarian, Helen Hayes. The new information desk (pictured left) is a feature of the new arrangements, along with better access to information technology for the Library's customers.

# Eight Hour Day Tradition and The University of Melbourne Archives

by **Suzanne Fairbanks**, Labour Archivist,  
The University of Melbourne Archives

**O**n the 21st April, 1856, stonemasons who were building The University of Melbourne downed tools and marched to the building site at Parliament House collecting fellow Stonemasons along the way. Their demand was for the eight hour day — eight hours labor, eight hours recreation and eight hours rest — and they became the second Union in Australia to achieve it, being beaten only by Stonemasons in Sydney in 1855.

In the decades which followed the stonemasons' victory, the eight hour day became the ideal of the nineteenth century labour movement. Unions adopted April as the month in which they commemorated the Pioneers of the Eight Hours Movement with a procession from the Trades Hall through the streets of Melbourne, followed by a picnic celebration and sports events in parks including those surrounding the Royal Exhibition Buildings. These processions attracted thousands of spectators, with union members marching and resplendent in their membership badges and official insignia, often carrying their tools or the products of their trade. The Operative Bakers marched holding aloft models of bread, and the Tinsmiths fashioned full suits of armor to demonstrate their skills.

Unionists displayed both their ideals and their pride in their skills by commissioning banners which were carried in procession mounted on horse drawn drays. It has been estimated that there



were at least 200 identifiable banners in Victoria from the 1850s until the demise of the celebration during the 1930s depression and after World War Two. After the war, most artifacts associated with the Eight Hours Movement, including older trade union banners, were either lost from sight or destroyed.

In the mid-1970s The University of Melbourne Archives commenced col-

Operative Bakers' Society banner, Eight Hour Day, c. early 1900s. (photo: The University of Melbourne Archives)



Above and left:  
 United Tinsmiths in Eight Hours Day  
 Procession, c.1910–20 and Sheetmetal  
 Workers Society of Victoria (Collection,  
 The University of Melbourne Archives.)  
 (photo: The University of Melbourne  
 Archives)

Opposite:  
 United Tinsmiths and  
 Sheet Metal Workers Union Armour  
 United Tinsmiths, Ironworkers and  
 Japanners Society of Victoria (Collection,  
 The University of Melbourne Archives.)

lecting trade union records from Victorian unions in order to build its research collection on industrial relations. At the same time, the then Labour Archivist, Andrew Reeves, began to uncover artifacts associated with the Eight Hours Movement, including the Bakers' loaves and the Tinsmiths' armour, and to accept them into the custody of the Archives on behalf of their owners.

The most spectacular of these artifacts accepted into Archives were 11 trade union banners once carried in Eight Hour and Labour Day processions. This small number represents the largest remaining collection of union banners in Victoria. All of the banners were fragile and in need of expensive conservation work. Despite many attempts by Archives' staff to raise funds, the banners remained in storage and were displayed only rarely due to the possibility of further damage.

In 1996, however, funds were obtained through the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union

(CFMEU) from INCOLINK, The Redundancy Payment Central Fund Ltd, in order to conserve two building union banners. A joint project between The University of Melbourne Archives, the University's Ian Potter Art Conservation Centre, and the Museum of Victoria Conservation Centre was commenced in July 1996 and completed in February 1997. Space was provided by the Victorian Trades Hall Council in its historic Lygon Street building for the duration of the project.

The two banners conserved were: Operative Painters and Decorators' Union of Australasia (OPDUA), Victorian Branch, painted on canvas by W. Dunstan, 1915 (c.3.6 metres x 4.2 metres).

Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASC&J), Victorian Branch, (forerunner of the Building Workers Industrial Union), painted on canvas by W. Dunstan, 1914 (c.3.6 metres x 4.1 metres)

The Operative Painters and Decorators' Union of Australasia, Victorian Branch Banner, which was painted on canvas by the Melbourne

painter, decorator and OPDUA member, W. G. Dunstan in 1915, was rediscovered in the Ballarat Trades Hall in 1975, having been last displayed in 1951 after many decades of use.

The Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, Victorian Branch Banner, which was conserved first, was also painted on canvas by W. Dunstan in 1914 and was rediscovered at the Victorian Trades Hall in the late 1970s. The ASC&J was the forerunner of the Building Workers Industrial Union, which joined the Operative Painters And Decorators to form the Construction Division of the current CFMEU in 1993, thus continuing the 140 year lineage of building unionism in Victoria.

In the early 20th century, Australian banners in general combined the banner-making traditions, ideals and symbolism of Britain with more Australian concerns and symbolism. The two banners conserved show this combination of themes as well as the skills of their creator. They are a monument not only to the early concerns of the Australian labour movement, and the building trades in particular, but also to the skills of the craftsmen protected within the Painters and Decorators' Union.

W. G. Dunstan, who created these two banners, painted many Victorian banners between 1912 and 1915. Andrew Reeves describes Dunstan and banner-makers like him as:

skilled tradesmen, trained painters, decorators and signwriters, usually members of the Operative Painters and Decorators Union with considerable experience on the workshop floor...While they were not overly concerned to debate the aesthetic differences between decorating and picture painting, they did share...other banner painters' appreciation of craft and skill as a source of both identity and work satisfaction...Many such painters or signwriters were not small entrepreneurs but workshop employees...<sup>1</sup>

Reeves argues that it was Dunstan's craft and workshop experience which



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gives such power to his finest surviving banner, the OPDU Victorian Branch Banner, which was the second conserved in this project. Reeves says that the OPDUA Victorian Branch Banner:

successfully integrates Australian emblems into traditional British themes. [I]ts undoubted power depends upon the banner's central panel, depicting the painters, decorators and paperhangers in the process of completing an elaborate reception room, ornately finished with murals, frescoes and decorative frieze-work.<sup>2</sup>

The reverse side of the banner depicts various painterly muses surrounding a sign praising the virtue of Unity. The Eight Hour symbol decorates the corners.

The ASC&J Victorian Branch banner celebrates the international character of the ASC&J, as one side depicts the membership certificate of the Carpenters and Joiners, designed in England in 1868 by William Warby, illustrating many aspects of carpenters' work. This device was used on Carpenters and Joiners banners in Britain, Brisbane, Kalgoorlie, Sydney and New Zealand as well as Melbourne. On the other side Dunstan depicted allegorical figures representing Victoria, the United States, New Zealand and Canada acting as handmaidens to Britannia above the slogan "United Throughout The World". There is little Australian imagery other than the entwined figures of eight representing the Australian demand for the Eight Hour Day.

The aim of the conservation project on these two banners was to halt deterioration by stabilising and consolidating the paint and fabric to the point where they could be safely moved, stored and viewed in a museum environment. The banners will remain fragile and handling outside a controlled environment would place them at significant risk once again.

Sadly, in the judgment of staff at the Archives, the Museum of Victoria will be better able to provide the environment and expertise needed to preserve

the banners into the 21st century. The successful completion of the Building Union Banner Conservation Project marks the end of the Archives' association with these two banners. They were transferred to the Museum following display at the Victorian Trades Hall on Labour Day, 11th March. Negotiations are now in progress to transfer the further nine banners remaining in the custody of the Archives.

The Museum of Victoria celebrated the acquisition of the Banners with a launch on 22nd May, 1997 at the Royal Exhibition Buildings. The launch was an occasion for both regret and pride amongst staff of The University of Melbourne Archives as they formally handed the responsibility for preserving these now rare and treasured artifacts to their colleagues in the Museum. It will nevertheless be exciting to see the two banners displayed in the splendor of the historic Exhibition Buildings because of the association of Eight Hour Day celebration with the surrounding gardens, and because the structure and decoration of the Buildings attest to the skills of the carpenters and joiners, painters and decorators who participated in its construction.<sup>3</sup> ❖

1. Andrew Reeves and Ann Stephen, *Badges of Labour Banners of Price: Aspects of Working class Celebration*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, p.22.

2. *ibid.*

3. Our thanks to all of the staff of Administration Services in The University of Melbourne Library for assisting with the conservation project.

OPERATIVE PAINTERS & DECORATORS



W.G. Dunlop

VICTORIAN ] OF AUSTRALASIA. [ BRANCH



Outside and inside back cover:

Two sides of the track union banner of the *Operative Painters and Decorators' Union of Australasia (OPDUA)*, Victorian Branch, painted on canvas by W. Dunstan, 1915 (c.3.6 metres x 4.2 metres).

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