

By the People, For the People: The Evolution and Future of Mechanics' Institutes in Australia

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By the people, for the people. This phrase, an excerpt from the Gettysburg Address delivered by US President Abraham Lincoln in 1863, can suitably be applied to the Mechanics' Institute Movement throughout the world. Mechanics' Institutes have long since been established by the community, and maintained for the community, with the vision of not only creating a better life for people in the 'now', but for their descendants in the future. The Institute Movement in Australia particularly has helped to establish and carry the development of rural communities, and continues to do so 190 years after discussions began to establish the first Institute in Australia – Hobart's Van Diemen's Land Mechanics' Institution in Tasmania in 1826. Hobart was established with the objectives of: protection of trade, and the promotion of useful knowledge, among its Members in the various branches of science.

The Institute Movement began in 1796 with the establishment of the Andersonian Institution in Glasgow, Scotland. John Anderson, Professor of Natural History at the University of Glasgow, bequeathed the whole of his property, with a few trifling exceptions, 'to the public, for the good of mankind, and the improvement of science, in an institution to be denominated Anderson's University'. Eighty-one trustees were named on his will to manage the Andersonian. These trustees were of nine classes - namely, tradesmen, agriculturists, artists, manufacturers or merchants, mediciners, lawyers, divines, natural philosophers, and kinsmen. Most of them were quite well educated and wealthy and were able to use their knowledge and finances to run classes for the working classes. Today The Andersonian is part of Glasgow's University of Strathclyde.

The Mechanics' movement throughout Australia from the outset was not just for the working classes. It was for all. Everyone was new to the country and they saw the need for an Institution to not just further themselves intellectually, but also as a place to socialise. With the settlement of rural areas, came the establishment of remote rural Institutes. People felt a need for a place to get together, a place for entertainment, and only after this were they used for educational purposes, travelling doctors and dentists, libraries, churches, schools, post offices, council chambers, polling places, lawyers offices, music classes, lodges and law courts. They were often the first building in town, and now we are finding they are more often than not, the last building in town, the last sign that a thriving community was once there. Often in the UK the Mechanics' Institute was a group which tenanted space in another building in order to conduct their activities or classes as often there was a Village Hall or Subscription Library which had rooms available for hire. The Mechanics' in Australia were a bit different. Often there was nothing in the town for which they could use to conduct classes, and in the majority of cases, the Mechanics' Institute was established to have its own building which could then be used by the wider community. Institutes have always been an affordable source of education for those who choose to seek it.

However, there has always been a long-running debate among committees – improvement vs entertainment. Were they there to educate or amuse? The former was usually the path followed in the 19th century, with a side of entertainment in the name of fundraising. Venturing out after a hard day's work was not usually high on the priority list for most people of that time. But as technology and various entertainments were developed, the Institutes found themselves being used for a highly diverse range of activities. There has always been a healthy balance of education and entertainment in nearly every Institute, and when it comes down to it, entertainment can be educating as well. Everyone learns in different ways whether it is through the creative arts, reading a book, listening to a lecture or participating in a workshop. Everyone's lives are enriched somehow with nearly every activity held at the Mechanics'.

Lecturing has long since been an instrumental teaching tool in the Mechanics' Institutes. From the Institutes' beginning, lectures were being held on a diverse range of topics, from educational to ecclesiastical and everything in between, if there was a tale to tell or knowledge to share, it was more often than not told to an audience at the Mechanics'. Lecturers could be found from anywhere, both from within the community, or from further afield.

With further education not within reach of the general populous, those being gifted or wealthy enough to travel, gain formal education at school or university and had the opportunities to learn and experience more than the average working-class people of the time, saw it their duty to share their knowledge, so that others could better themselves as well. They often saw it as a responsibility to give back to the communities from which they came.

Records can be found of speaking tours where an individual would travel from Institute to Institute, tours often spanning several months, stopping at every town on a train or coach line, and every evening sharing their knowledge with the community. No doubt the lecturer would have been adding to their own talk as they went along the line as each town would bring a new range of ideas, questions and opinions to supplement their discussion.

There was not only visiting lecturers, but lecture series would often pop up in local communities where nearly everyone in town would have a chance to share their experiences or knowledge on their area of expertise or life. Suffice to say, that the topics covered quite a range - from the correct procedure of pulling a calf from a birthing cow to the right soil conditions for good pasture. However, these series were usually short lived, as once everyone had had their opportunity to speak, there was little left to tell.

With each newcomer to a community, often a new round of talks would begin again. School teachers, doctors, clergymen, bankers and other travelling professionals always brought a new bundle of knowledge to the community.

Today, lecture series seem to be growing again in popularity. They certainly are an economic event only really requiring the booking of a speaker and maybe a round of light refreshments, set up and clean up and a couple of volunteers to usher and man the kitchen. A few dollars as a voluntary donation is usually well supported by attendees and getting people in the door to see your Institute can only be positive. Many Institutes in Australia now have a special dedicated series of lectures, or seasonal lecture series three or four times a year (often named after a prominent member of that Institute, or a pioneer of the Institute Movement in their region or State). Talks can be given by a range of people, whether they be long time researchers of a topic, authors, musicians, historians, artists... the list goes on.

But Institutes shouldn't have to feel as though they need to look far to find someone who has an interesting story to tell. Future lecturers can be found everywhere, and can talk about nearly any topic. Google street view may allow us to all stroll down the streets of Paris one 360 degree frame at a time, but little can compare to hearing the stories someone can recount of their walk down those streets – the sights, the sounds, the smells, the shops, the sunlight dipping below the horizon as the lights are turned on down the Champs-Elysees. Our imagination weaves a better tale of travelling when hearing a story from the heart, rather than a report from the latest destination tv program. Nothing can beat being able to have a walk through the memories of someone you know as they retell the tales of their travels.

It may be worth contacting the local school after their students have been on a trip interstate or overseas and offering your Institute up for an exhibition space of student's artworks and photographs so the community can see the opportunities their future Institute custodians have had and involve them in some activities at the Hall. If you don't get people, particularly younger people, coming through the door for their own events, how will you get them to turn up for yours? We might all know the Institutes are there for the use of the community, but few will turn up out of the blue without invitation.

Music performances are once again returning to Institutes as well. Choral sessions and music recitals can provide an evening of light entertainment for all music lovers, as well as giving valuable performance experience to musicians in a relaxed atmosphere. Back in the day, access to pianos which Hall committees accessed by hire purchase gave the Hall a ready source of income, by way of fundraising events for itself or community groups. It also ensured promotion of music in the community stimulating learning and accompanying instruments and singing or choral activity. Larger scale music performances and music festivals are becoming quite a hit in some communities now with music performers and appreciators travelling from all over the country, and even overseas, to spend a weekend in the country listening to their favourite music, and enjoying some small town hospitality, usually all centralised around the local Hall.

Libraries have been a great draw-card for Institutes since their establishment. Nearly all Institutes had in their constitution or objectives that they aimed to establish a library and reading room, but in some cases, this was easier said than done. Institutes did not always start off debt free, with the building or facilities to house and store a library and with enough money to purchase books of their own. They often relied highly on State Government grants, which allowed money for purchasing books and having them shipped, or the generosity of the community which would allow a shelf in the local store or State School to house books, or a room at the pub which could be used as a reading room until they could establish a place of their own. Workers on remote outback stations which had established a Station School of Arts often gave over space in the bunk or break room for a bookshelf or for lecture seating, debate and discussion. Library grants in Australia were fairly consistent for Mechanics' Institute libraries up until the 1930s and some continued until 1965, and even fewer received funding up to the 1980s. They were providing a very valuable resource for remote and rural communities, which the Government themselves did not then need to supply educational facilities for.

Institutes commonly offered daily newspapers from all over the country, and occasionally overseas as well. Some Institutes received dozens of different newspapers every week from all corners of the globe. They usually offered a free library and reading room, with subscriptions only required if you wanted to borrow items. Reduced subscription rates for youth and children encouraged reading at a young age, and the same should be applied today. Librarians even waived any fee for keen young readers.

State Libraries and Bush Book clubs also offered book boxes to be sent out to remote rural libraries which could be held for several months at an Institute and returned to be exchanged for a new crate of books. Travelling workers would occasionally bring books with them which could be exchanged for new titles at outback sheep or cattle Stations. A similar system has become quite popular the world over with little free libraries or book exchanges operating on a take a book, leave a book policy. These can be found in old phone boxes, bus shelters, train stations - any publically accessible rain protected structure has been found to be converted into a library of sorts. Some Institutes are even starting up this project in their covered front porches, or having a tub in the kitchen which operates on an honesty system. And it is not just books, a children's toy library can also be established for parents to trade toys with to keep their growing family ever entertained by something new without the cost of having it loved for a short time and put on the shelf, rarely to be played with again.

The South Australian Institutes Association, a membership umbrella group based in Adelaide, in the State of South Australia, was instrumental in the stocking and distribution of books among its members throughout the State. They were fortunate enough to secure generous grants for books which could then be distributed amongst their members. As part of its membership, should the Institute fold or no longer be able to operate, books from the Institute's library, and other assets like bookcases, tables, chairs and possibly even crockery

were redistributed amongst other South Australian Institute Association members, in the event no debt was outstanding on the Institute.

This was probably fairly common practice among Institutes in Australia. We have found lots of instances where books have been stamped for multiple Institute library collections. Just how and when some books moved from Institute to Institute can be quite unclear as dates of entry and exit from a collection were not always recorded, although it would be fascinating to find out the details. It is great to hear of some Institutes who are having a cull or clear out of their collection, furniture or fixtures offering it to other Institutes and Institute Libraries to add to their collection, replace old items or create facilities of their own. It is a nice to think that things are being kept in the Mechanics' family, and that although there are miles between these places, these Institutes they are doing exactly the same things, providing the same opportunities, for their own communities, in their own way.

Today, Mechanics' Institute libraries offer a retreat from the large scale municipal library system. They can offer a diverse range of book-related activities – book clubs, poetry readings, author talks, craft, creation and games – as well as a quiet corner in what is often a busy part of the world to hide away and lose yourself in the pages of today's newspaper, magazine or your current read.

Some Institute Libraries have developed specialist collections in local history, theatre, film, romance, crime, travel or children's books, whilst others have kept a general collection to appeal to the wider community. Children's book readings are a popular way to introduce kids to the library, as are themed craft days and holiday programs leading back to a particular author or book series. There are many ways to bring people to your Library - so start small and through word of mouth and persistence, your events and membership will grow. Being active is the best chance your Institute has to keep up in the 21st Century.

A recent resurgence in tabletop games (away from that of computer/console and handheld screen devices) has opened a new opportunity for not only younger generations, but for older ones as well. There has been more and more interest in social tabletop gaming, which in-turn has led to a larger production of new tabletop games. (As an aside - tabletop games were the largest number of projects crowdfunded on sites like Kickstarter.) With tabletop games, there is no 'gap' in knowledge on how to play them. It's a roll of a dice, a turn of a card, a move of a token. It is a far easier multigenerational game, and an encouraging way for people of different ages to interact. Games can range from minutes to hours – there is a perfect game for the amount of time or effort of skill you would like to put into it. The downside though is, that modern board and tabletop games can be quite expensive. But they are a worthwhile investment and if cared for, will last for years to come. Designated games days/afternoons/evenings where people can bring their own games, or borrow those available, can be a good community gathering and easy fundraising event. Chips, drinks,

lollies and soft drinks could be available for purchase or a small (\$1 or \$2) donation could be requested to cover utilities.

Technical education, for the most part, had its early beginnings at the Mechanics'. Early scientific and mechanical studies enabled a start in the further education for much of the working classes. Classes held in the Mechanics' were affordable, sometimes a small subscription fee for a series of classes to cover the cost of materials used. No prior knowledge or education was need to be passed – if you were interested enough to take the time to learn, then you were welcome to attend. This largely self-motivated learning system enabled working class people to become masters of their trade – beyond that of which they would have become just through on-the-job learning. Some of the teachers visiting the Mechanics' were the best in their field, with the latest in inventions and demonstrations – some of which were not deliverable to university courses due to their sometimes limited and traditional teaching structure.

Today, Institutes are still a great place to learn. They can hold a variety of different activities, both community and commercially run, which enable a full spectrum of age participation. Some Institutes have on-site kindergartens, day-care or playgroups which meet several times a week. They can also hold holiday activity days with games, movies, readings or crafts to keep kids entertained. There are several youth-theatre production groups which involve the under 18s in stage plays, complete with lighting, set design, multimedia, playwriting, makeup and costume design and sourcing. Having the opportunity to participate in various aspects of a stage production can encourage kids to find what they are interested in, or have a natural knack for, which they may choose to pursue further after they finish their studies. You never know what people may be good at or interested in until they give it a go. Again, approach the local school and see if their drama club, art or textile class may be interested in creating the stage set up, painting the backdrop, creating or altering costumes for the upcoming production. These are community based projects, but sometimes without direct exposure to them, youth do not find themselves automatically engaged with them. They may not realise how easy it is to be part of, or how much they can learn from people who have many years of experience with theatre and stage management. The community is their future inheritance, and youth theatre is a great opportunity to show older generations the commitment, innovation and enthusiasm of the upcoming leaders; that what committees of management struggle to maintain for their community will be wanted, needed and cared for by future generations. It gives youth a great voice for the management of an Institute – they have a chance to give advice on where money should be spent; where investment needs to be made in their Institute that younger generations will look back and think 'I'm glad they did that. That has helped us. That has made it easier for us. That gave us an opportunity we never would have had otherwise.' As was found from the earliest teachings at the Mechanics' – if you make the time to learn, they will take the time to teach you.

Institutes themselves are a great source of study in this day and age. Due to their diverse age, architecture, activities and assets, there is much we can learn from the Mechanics'. They are now a place to learn about, not just a place to learn at. Their diversity opens many doors to all who wish to study some aspect of the evolution of Australia's history.

Architecturally, Institutes cover a wide range of building styles and materials. There are over 150 years worth of Institute buildings found throughout Australia. Some of these have been repurposed from their original construction, and others are still continuing with their original Institute purpose. The study of the buildings alone can be a very interesting tale. Why were they built of the materials they were? Was it of local timber, sourced from a nearby farm or mill which the local residents constructed themselves? Or was it locally quarried stone? Or was the new building actually an old building, starting a new life in another part of the country. This was somewhat common practice back in the early days; the great upcycle of materials in a world where quality materials could be scarce, expensive and hard to come by. What better way to create the history of a hall than to build on the history of one before it? Even small things like using bricks from the old chimney to create a new garden path or repurposing old floor boards into trestle table tops. Can you imagine the memories which flash through the minds of seniors in the community when the new tables are set up for afternoon tea, and they take a stroll down memory lane to the full moon dances of yesteryear. Keeping some of the old to mix with the new will add an extra special story to the history of an Institute.

These buildings were ever changing. Rarely did a building remain in the same state or size as which it was built. Why did they make additions to the original plans? Every addition or alteration could be traced to a key development within the community or in technology, or to a specific event in history. Buildings got bigger as communities grew so they could accommodate the whole town. New rooms were added for other community groups to use as their club room, or so that the Institute could be used by 2 or more groups at the same time. Bio boxes were added to the front as film became more popular and accessible. Stages came and went with the popularity of theatre. Recreational activities such as roller-skating, billiards, bowling and badminton have left their mark on these buildings and lighting technologies often resulted in some changes to the building as well. Grants were offered in post-War times, which again saw a change in these buildings, often with a name change as well.

There is a lot to consider about why a building was designed the way it was. What were the committee considering the building being used for in the future and how did this influence their construction of it? Did the roof pitch lend itself to good acoustics in the hope of lots of musical and vocal entertainments? Did the stage set up allow for smooth entrances and exits during theatrical performances? Did large windows mean that the building would be more highly used during the day as more natural light could make its way in? Were water

catchment tanks placed there and what were they used for? What were their plans for the building and site in the future and what future did they hope their descendants would make of it?

One room of necessity to all at the Institute was the WC, washroom or toilet. To study the location of this alone at an Institute site is certainly an interesting one. Usually they were first found right at the back of the block or across the road as a little tin or wooden shed. As plumbing and sewerage technology advanced, they were added to Institutes, usually building on in brick (which certainly sticks out like a sore thumb on a simple wooden building). A few of these crimes to the building's aesthetic have been removed in recent years and a new addition added in-keeping with the rest of the building. Some Institutes still have their original outhouses and the structures are occasionally dressed up or decorated to suite the season. Public use is avoided due to the large number of resident spiders and sometimes snakes which may choose to make an appearance at a very ill-opportune moment... Although not the most entertaining of topics, the history of the lavvie's location at your Institute might be an interesting bit of info to document and have on file for future researchers; to be totally honest - people have studied stranger things!

The collections found in Institutes can also be a valuable source of study. Not only because they have history on their side as being part of the Institute for a long time, but they can give us an insight which may not be recorded as part of social history anywhere else.

Borrowing ledgers and card catalogues can give an understanding to the scope and trends of reading over the decades. Catalogues can show us the trends in book buying, cost, suppliers, themes, bookbinders and bookbinding.

Artefact and ephemera collections can show the interest in natural history, farming and recreation which the community had and has.

The Mechanics' Movement from the outset was fiercely independent. Each Institute was its own entity:- own governance, own responsibilities, own community. But today Institutes have to reach out a little more. Their town community may have gone down in numbers for some places, but your district community is there to fill the empty seats. It is time to be part of something bigger and stand proudly amongst other Institutes. Having to explain what a Mechanics' Institute is every time is a frustrating reality of still sporting the MI name, but being able to say to your neighbouring Mechanics' Institute's community "we're like this place, just in another town" to a group of Mechanics' savvy supporters takes a lot less effort. Collaboration with other local Institutes can be greatly beneficial to you all; particularly filling out exhaustive grant application forms. Talk to your Institute neighbours - they may need the same thing as you and bulk order discounts can bring more bang for your buck and more than you originally planned for.

Event bookings can be easier if there are a guaranteed a set number of shows/locations which can be locked in. Special collection exhibitions are a manageable event to co-ordinate with other Institutes of similar size as the whole exhibition can be transplanted from one location to the next with very little discussion about which is the best way for it to be set up and viewed. Promotional booklets and flyers can be mostly generic with an “insert time and place here” box so that very little start-from-scratch work is required at each new location. Even planning a weekend self-drive Institute crawl where there is a new event or activity at 3 or more Institutes over a day or weekend. For example, start the morning with a brunch accompanied by a string quartet; a light lunch and theatrical performance; and evening dinner with a film screening.

Now is the time for Mechanics’ Institutes and Halls to become a united front in their independence. Pretty much every Institute now knows that there is more than just them in this world. Sure, if an Aussie speaks to someone in the UK they may find it a little unrealistic that we can understand exactly what they are going through, which in some respects is true. But we all know the changes Institutes face, regardless of where they are in the world, and even giving a little bit of advice, be it from the other side of the world, can be enough to look at things in a whole new light. I am often astounded that people can be so disconnected from the Institute in their community or from the Institute movement entirely. Working together is the best way to achieve. Don’t be that building that everyone walks past but no one goes in to. Involve your community. Involve your district.

Write your wish list.

It is time to think outside the box. Take inspiration from all corners of the globe. Aim high. Start small. From little things big things grow.

Here we all are, 220 years since John Anderson’s legacy started a Movement. A Movement which has shaped communities the world over. To quote a documentary I watched recently on Netflix about the Steampunk Movement titled “Vintage Tomorrows”, one person talked of how a collective interest in something can be a ‘community-building Movement’. And i think that sums up Mechanics’ Institutes very well. The Mechanics’ were created by the people, for the people.