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## Small things, big pictures: new perspectives from the archaeology of Sydney's Rocks neighbourhood

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### The reputed Rocks

From its first occupation by Europeans after 1788, the steep slopes on the west side of Sydney Cove were regarded by outsiders as an 'other' Sydney. The area grew riotously on the precipitous ground 'across the water' from the orderly civil precinct, its ground appropriated by convict women and men, who built houses, fenced off gardens and yards, established trades and businesses, and raised families. They created 'their town' there, with relatively little government intervention in their lives, much less official land grants or freehold titles. Orderly grid-patterned street layout was impossible on this terrain, and in any case was not a priority among the people there. Instead, they directed their considerable energies towards amassing goods and property, or at least a 'decent life', upon their own terms. Its name, the Rocks, was bestowed by the convicts, and survived in common parlance throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries despite numerous attempts to impose less infamous titles.<sup>1</sup> It was not officially named 'The Rocks' until 1975, by which time the convict past had gained a sort of picturesque respectability, as well as being a tourist drawcard.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout its history, though, and particularly over the second half of the nineteenth century, the Rocks was regarded by most outsiders, and by most historians, as a 'classic' slum, a fearful 'social cesspool' where poverty met disorder, dirt, disease and depravity. Its convict origins (the 'convict stain' which haunted emerging colonial society) and its disturbingly irregular landscape were the foundations of this reputation. Upon them was laid the landscape of rapid urban growth, particularly as a result of rising immigration from the 1840s onwards: close-

packed, at first ill-serviced terrace houses, a multiplying maze of lanes and blind courts, severe problems of drainage, water supply, and rubbish and sewage disposal. As well, the Rocks was surrounded by water on three sides, and so was associated with seafaring and the maritime trades, with sailors from all over the world on shore leave, and with the constant movement of people and goods through the port city. The area had a higher proportion of Irish families than other parts of the city, and when Chinese immigration rose in the 1850s, Lower George Street, at the foot of the Rocks, became Sydney's first 'Chinatown'.<sup>3</sup>

These were the distinguishing elements – a foetid, crowded environment, mean and dirty houses and their poor, down-trodden tenants, drunken, brawling sailors, 'immoral' Chinese, the 'bad and dirty' Irish – which struck observers, and from which they constructed their written accounts. And there were those, indeed, drawn to the Rocks in search of just these elements: evangelical preachers like Nathaniel Pidgeon sought out drunks, prostitutes and Roman Catholics; the intrepid ladies of the Sydney Ragged Schools bent on dragging 'fallen people' out of darkness and into light; and later journalists searching for picturesque and pestilential stories about the city's 'rookeries' or 'warrens', as the homes of working people were called.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the best-known and most-quoted was early social scientist William Stanley Jevons, who wrote in the late 1850s. Taking the stance of the detached scientific observer, he dissected and analysed Sydney, arranging people and houses in classes of worth and status. His map of Sydney, recently reconstructed by historian Graeme Davison, showed that the Rocks had all 'classes' of houses, including those of genteel and professional ranks (first class), mechanics and skilled artisans (second class) and 'labourers and the indefinable lower orders' (third class).<sup>5</sup> But it was Jevons' description of the Rocks as a place of filth, vice and misery which became so well-known as to be unquestioned:

It is in the lower streets . . . that the peculiar features of the Rocks are seen in all their horrible intensity. Small cottages constructed of stone or wood in convict days are here closely scattered almost without order, but practically formed in lines along the terrace of Rocks. Steep narrow passages . . . form the only cross streets . . . the streets are without even gutters except such as the drainage itself forms . . . In many places filthy water is actually seen to accumulate against the walls of the dwellings . . . In other places this accumulation of filth is prevented by a drain constructed beneath the floors

so as to lead the filth quite through the house. Many houses again are built but a few yards from a wall of rock over which various spouts and drains . . . continually discharge foul matter . . .

Nowhere have I seen such a retreat for filth and vice as the Rocks of Sydney . . . nowhere are the country and the beauty of nature so painfully contrasted with the misery and deformity which lie to the charge of man.<sup>6</sup>

When bubonic plague broke out in Sydney in 1900, all eyes turned to the waterfront areas, and to the Rocks in particular. Brought by fleas on rats which arrived with the ships, the plague was a disease which aroused ancient fears, horror and hysteria. It had a far worse effect on the city's psyche than its health, for other diseases such as diphtheria, whooping cough, tuberculosis, typhoid, dysentery and so on had taken a far heavier toll. Dysentery alone killed 8,522 people between 1875 and 1900; the plague carried off 103.<sup>7</sup> The victims of plague occurred more commonly in the areas on the waterfronts west and south of the city, where those who worked on the ships and at the markets lived, but cases were also found in Redfern, Surry Hills, Glebe, Woollahra and many other places. The Rocks itself had only five victims, but its 'slum' reputation meant that it was immediately assumed to be a central breeding ground for the disease. The whole of the waterfront area was resumed by the government in 1900, hundreds of houses were demolished, starting with the Rocks and neighbouring Millers Point, and moving outwards over the other inner city neighbourhoods over the next thirty-odd years.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the academic history written about the Rocks, usually a brief aside in a wider narrative, simply falls back upon the 'slumland' stereotypes, presented as either picturesque or pestilential, or both.<sup>9</sup> Most commonly quoted are the damning passages from Jevons: '[Jevons] deplored the over-concentration of working class population in the slum areas', wrote Birch and MacMillan in their compendium *The Sydney Scene* in 1962. 'Deserting seamen, criminal gangs, and all the hangers-on that find seaports congenial found refuge in the warrens around the Rocks . . . misery and disease . . . bred in such areas.'<sup>10</sup> Deformity was a key theme of early urban historian Bernard Barrett's blunt statement: '[The Rocks was] the rendezvous for the poorest – the birthplace of Australia's proletariat. Thus crippled, the Rocks was Australia's first slum.'<sup>11</sup> Until recently, historians have also constantly reinforced the earlier, unfounded association between the Rocks, rats and plague, with the result the demolitions and dislocations of the community are generally taken for granted, even cele-

brated, as long-overdue urban 'improvement' which 'had' to happen.

The slum images have also dominated much of the modern-day public presentation and understanding of the Rocks, now a historic tourist area visited by more than 7 million people every year. Popular booklets, guided tours, pamphlets and museum displays all incorporate the seedy, sick and sinful 'past'. More recently the idea of the Rocks as a close-knit, poor but proud working-class *community* has also made a tentative appearance in interpretative material. The deeply rooted slumland images are not easily challenged, however, and the two sit uneasily side by side in Max Kelly's *Anchored in a Small Cove*, a book which accompanies the historical and archaeological exhibition at the Sydney Visitors' Centre.<sup>12</sup> When the NSW Historic Houses Trust acquired a wonderfully intact 1840s terrace of four houses and a corner shop, 'Susannah Place', in Gloucester Street, its curators found no evidence of filth and deprivation, but layer upon layer of wallpaper, paint and linoleum, decades of domestic care and pride.<sup>13</sup> Domesticity and community are therefore key themes in the museum's presentation. But this evidence has been treated as exceptional. A video made recently for visitors still portrays the Rocks generally as a dirty slum, while Susannah Place 'was *not* one of these'.

### **Birthplace of a proletariat? Cultural identity by default and denunciation**

As well as being a repository for historical stereotypes, the Rocks has been a place of possibilities for historians. With its convict pedigree and population of working people, the area has been dubbed, in Barrett's words, 'the birthplace of the proletariat', the heartland of authentic working-class culture. Robert Connell and Terry Irving agree, surmising

In some parts of the towns, like The Rocks at Sydney, a considerable social solidarity could develop against colonial respectability. Crowds often gathered for illicit sports like cockfighting and boxing . . . The magistrates attempted to control liquor and put down 'disorderly houses' . . . On occasions there were riots and minor disturbances, usually fired by drink. To the sanctimonious, such things were evidence of 'the Immorality and Vice so prevalent among the Lower Classes of this Colony'; to historians, they have usually represented light relief and colour. We should see them as signs . . . of the attempt by working men and women to carve out their space for living from a highly repressive environment.<sup>14</sup>

What 'their space' actually might have constituted is not actually further explored, apart from these stock-image references. But, despite the lack of actual investigation, this 'space' has nevertheless been filled with a certain set of values. The culture working people constructed for themselves there must have been utterly non-respectable: riotous, violent, illicit, immoral. It must have been, in short, the repudiation of the rules of authority, the exploitative bonds of nascent capitalism, and the hegemonic culture of the rising bourgeoisie.

This mirrors a number of wider assertions and assumptions about working-class culture and behaviour in Australia. Since class and class struggle have played such a fundamental role in Australian historiography, some historians have generally supposed that working-class beliefs, culture and attitudes must have been the opposite of those values and institutions defined as 'bourgeois'. Taken together, the latter make up an inordinate slab of social and cultural life, for the middle classes, although amorphous and notoriously difficult to define, were none the less apparently incredibly busy and powerful in nineteenth-century Australia. Constantly on the rise, here as everywhere else on the globe, they constituted, in David Cannadine's words, the 'soufflé of history'.<sup>15</sup>

In some accounts the middle class had a monopoly of 'respectability'.<sup>16</sup> The nuclear family, with its inherently exploitative gender relations, was recently invented bourgeois ideology 'imposed' upon the working classes as a 'main agency of cultural control', inimical to its interests and destiny.<sup>17</sup> The rise of the bourgeoisie has also been linked with the 'invention' of the 'child' as innocent, malleable, precious, in need of special care and training 'in the approved middle class way'; and of 'childhood' as a distinct period of life, separate from the world of adults.<sup>18</sup> Some historians argue that attitudes to contraception, abortion and the importance of infant life itself diverged radically along class lines. Middle-class women increasingly considered the embryo as human life, and, armed with means, knowledge and appropriate 'mental furniture', they alone forged the path towards artificial contraception.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile working-class people, lacking these attributes, clung to so-called 'traditional', rather more callous and careless, attitudes to children.<sup>20</sup> Some say that they did not even regard the newborn child as a human being, so that infanticide 'fell inside the category of population control' and was a 'normal' even a routine measure, rather than one used by women in the most desperate of circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Judith Allen painted a grim picture of child neglect, abuse and murder, based on evidence from coroners' inquests, criminal records, and the evidence of doctors and police at the various inquiries.<sup>22</sup>

Springing from the allegedly bourgeois home-and-family-centred ideology is the 'cult of domesticity', the notion of the female-centred home as sacred, private haven from the workaday world of men.<sup>23</sup> The artefacts of domesticity revolve around physical comfort, decorative details and genteel distancing from the unpleasant or the crude: furniture of mahogany and rosewood, soft furnishings, cushions, carpet and rugs, pictures and wallpaper. Fire irons, grates and fenders tamed the old open fires, ornamental gardens further buffered the domestic sphere from the outside world. The increasing number of rooms, each with its own function, separated men from women, servants from masters and mistresses, parents from children, visitors from visited.<sup>24</sup> Poor labouring people who worked in manual occupations and lived in the congested cities were thus excluded from such refinements.

In her marvellous study of genteel culture in Australia, Linda Young recreates the world of the middle class in Australia, tracing out the intricate rituals of etiquette and the range of material goods they adopted to express social propriety. By demonstrating this 'social capital' via action, demeanour and things, they could recognise one another and exclude those of inferior quality, thus creating their own class. A whole world of new consumer goods was essential to this process, objects which, like houses, expressed individualisation and segmentation: elaborate dinner sets with a place setting for each person, and a particular vessel for each type of food; clothing and jewellery, worn in certain ways and combinations, which marked out the respectable from the unrespectable.<sup>25</sup> At a more general level, the middle class is credited with developing and spreading the values of cleanliness, godliness, hard work and temperance, in short the whole Victorian ideology of self-improvement and self-control. Several historians argue that these were exploitative ideologies which, once imposed, would ensure the sober, quiescent, reliable workforce needed by bourgeois capitalists. They too were, or must have been, opposed to the 'values' of working-class people.

The 'hegemonic offensive', as Jan Kociumbas terms it, was also launched by the bourgeoisie via institutions, large and small: 'schools, Mechanics' Institutes, churches, theatres and sports grounds; universities, houses of parliament and banks, asylums, hospitals and gaols', as well as various scientific endeavours.<sup>26</sup> The chief purposes of the education system, for example, were to 'reorganise the workforce for industrial capitalism' (though that was still decades away), and to 'defuse radicalism'.<sup>27</sup> In this scheme, working people were the victims or opponents of education, science, temperance movements and the censoring and gentrification of various amusements and

sports. Either by default, or via the denunciations of policemen, churchmen, doctors and the like, people of the 'real' working class were, by force of circumstance or cultural outlooks, or both, uncommitted to family life and domesticity, neglectful of their children, forever drunk, fighting and engaging in bloody sports and lewd, noisy public behaviour, and always associated with poverty and hard times.

### An archaeology of the 'slum'?

A major problem for the archaeologists who have undertaken excavations on the Rocks was that, despite its fame as a historic precinct, it had no scholarly history. There was no framework, besides that of the slum and the 'wicked waterfront', which they, as well as architectural historians and other heritage professionals, could use as an interpretative starting point. The author of the Archaeological Management Plan prepared for the Rocks and Millers Point in 1991 did not even include historical material and themes for the period after 1850, assuming that it was already well documented, and implying that later-nineteenth-century sites were not really worth excavating.<sup>28</sup>

My own historical research on the Rocks was partly aimed at providing such a contextual history. At the same time it had also become clear to me that archaeology offered one of the few paths *inside* the Rocks, allowing us to examine the 'space for living' which working people actually 'carved out' for themselves, so long hidden, and demonised by the writings of outsiders. Postmodernist writers had ably demonstrated the role of literary constructs and the discourses of class and masculinity by deconstructing the texts, but they were generally unwilling or incapable of dealing with the 'real people, living in real houses' about whom archaeology 'speaks'.<sup>29</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, however, were equally 'disembodied' artefacts, hundreds of thousands of them, earnestly counted, measured, weighed, and listed in long and inscrutable catalogues (Fig. 6.1).<sup>30</sup>

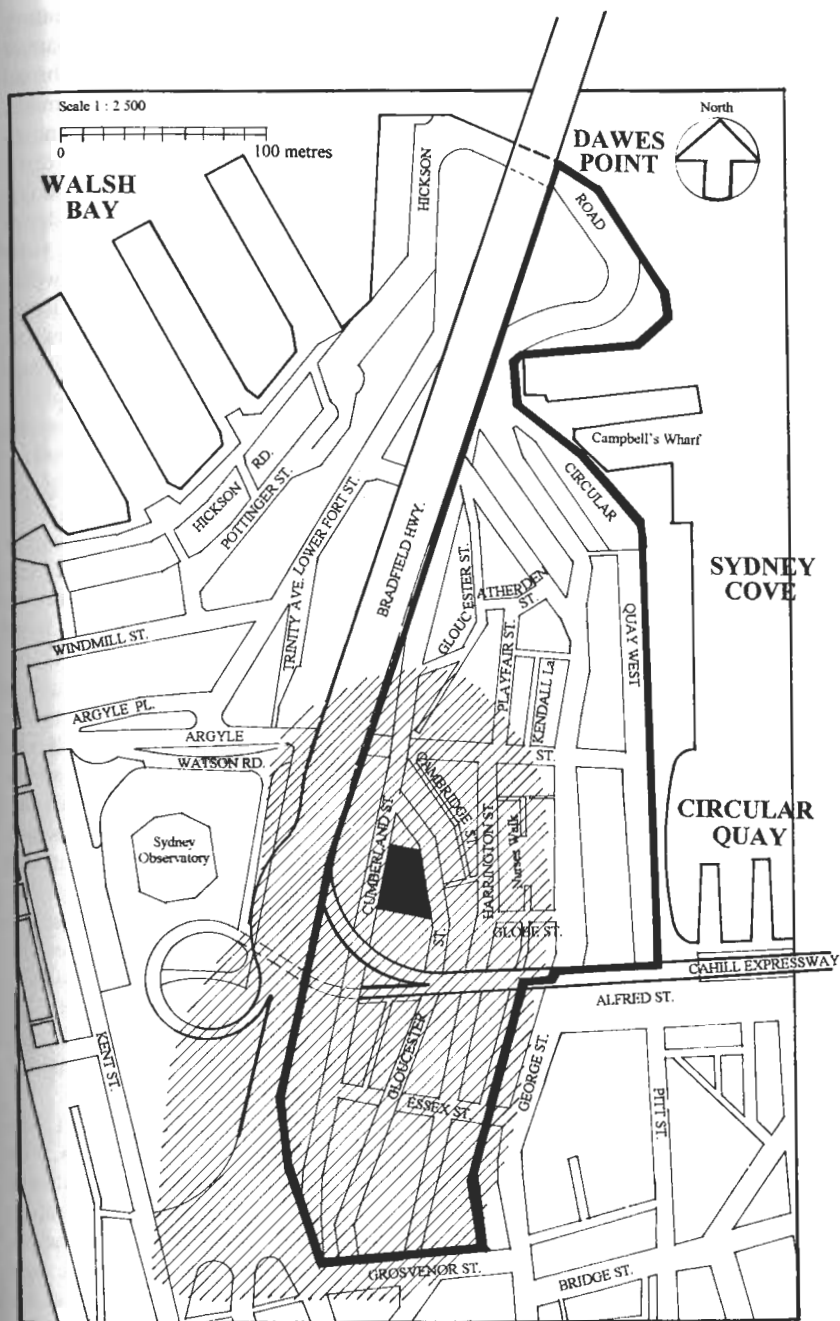
Recently archaeologists have begun to develop broader and far more sophisticated approaches to the sites and artefacts of the Rocks by conducting primary research on their historical, cultural and ethnographic contexts, and by posing appropriate research questions.<sup>31</sup> The Cumberland/Gloucester Street site, at the heart of the Rocks, was an opportunity to apply a new collaborative approach, one which sought to integrate history and archaeology, rather than maintain the artificial disciplinary boundaries which had bedevilled any real interpretation of urban archaeological sites.<sup>32</sup> The site was excavated in 1994 by a team assembled by Godden

Mackay Pty Ltd, directed by Richard Mackay and with myself as project historian. It was one of the largest sites excavated in Australia, occupying two half-city blocks where forty-two houses had stood. The site is an extraordinary material record of urban life and development in Sydney, for below the massive fills which raised and levelled the site after the demolition period in the early twentieth century were deposits documenting each phase of European occupation. The row-houses and shops of the mid- to late nineteenth century overlay larger freestanding houses, hotels and yards of the settled convicts and ex-convicts; beneath them were the postholes and trenches of the convicts who appropriated land here from the 1790s onwards (Fig. 6.2).<sup>33</sup>

Could the site, and the three-quarters of a million artefacts ultimately retrieved from it, throw new light on the stock portrayal of the Rocks as an unmitigated slum? Were all its occupants poor, deprived and condemned to live in shockingly crowded and dirty conditions? Located in the heart of the neighbourhood, our site would seem to be a prime example of 'slumland'. It had the back and side lane terraces so much reviled by observers as hidden pockets of fearful filth and depravity. Externally it even answers some of Jevons' descriptions: the rock walls behind some of the houses really were festooned with pipes and drains, they did glisten slimily with moisture, and drains did run under houses. The mid- to late-nineteenth-century houses were conjoined and often had small rooms, and few of the houses had any cesspits at all.<sup>34</sup> Yet, if we move inside, an entirely different scene materialises (Fig. 6.3).

### The archaeology of the Rocks

It is important to note at the outset that the basic unit of social organisation and household structure on the Rocks was the nuclear family of mother, father and children, irrespective of whether the parents were legally married or not. This pattern was not 'imposed' at any stage, but dates from the earliest days of unregulated convict settlement and stretches unbroken to the 1900s. These were, however, rather 'porous' households in that they included convict servants in the early years (who were treated as members of the household), and numerous lodgers and other family members throughout the period. In many cases, the patterns of occupancy as well as the houses themselves – the very shape of the neighbourhood – were tied directly to family relationships, particularly those of women. Another important factor was the ethnic affiliation: Scandinavians, Portuguese and Irish in particular tended to live close by one another.<sup>35</sup>



**Fig. 6.1** The Rocks, Sydney, showing the original area, 1788–c. 1830 (shaded); the modern boundaries of the former Sydney Cove Authority in heavy line; and the Cumberland/Gloicester Street archaeological site, excavated in 1994.

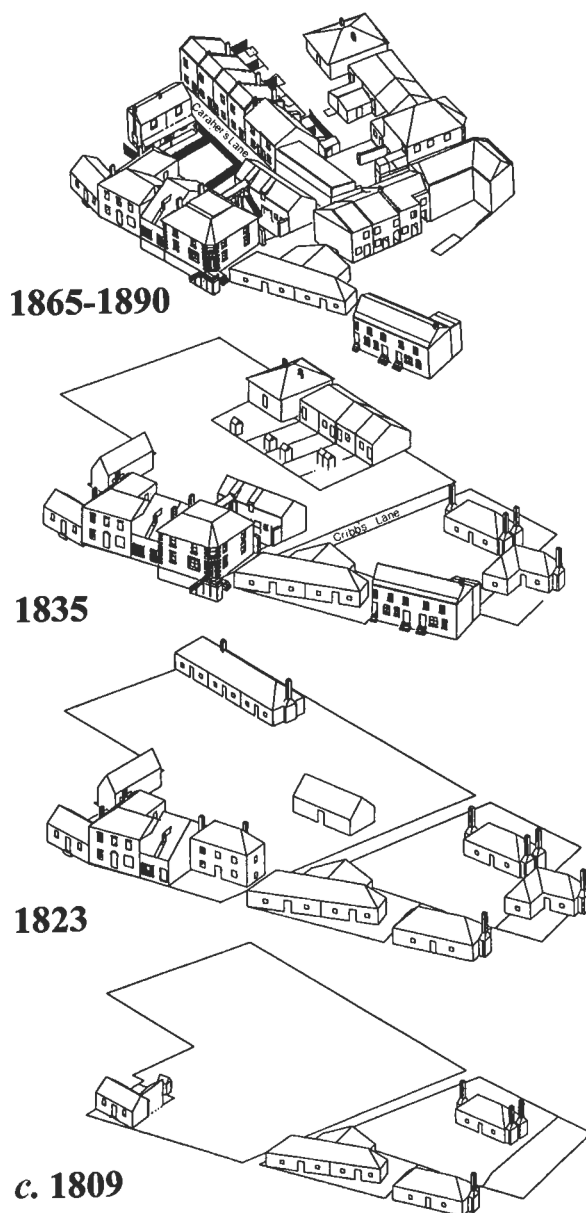


Fig. 6.2 Wayne Johnson's bird's-eye view re-creation of the site as it developed over the nineteenth century, views to south-west.

Looking over the thousands of nineteenth-century artefacts, the most obvious overall change in consumer patterns and culture from 1800 to 1900 is the slow, broad swing from partly pre-industrial, local and handmade, and objects with intrinsic worth and value, towards industrialised, machine-made and standardised commodities mass-produced at a distance and often single-use and disposable. The result was a greatly enlarged range of things from which to choose, commodities – everything from buttons to glass food bottles, bricks to tea sets – which were often cheaper, smoother, more readily available, easily replaceable and in a dizzying range of colours and patterns. Foodways are also deeply marked by the increase of pre-prepared, pre-packaged foodstuffs of great variety, and the concomitant reliance on external, commercial networks rather than household systems of food production and processing which had characterised part of the earlier assemblages.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the material record suggests that this was more a gradual shift in emphasis than a sharp break in habits and tastes over the nineteenth century. People continued to use salted meat, packed in barrels, and cooked in large iron pots over the hearth, just as the convicts and ex-convicts had done, until around the 1860s. Glass tumblers and simple blue- and green-edged ware were common from the earliest years of the colony and lasted well into the 1860s, although the glassware was increasingly machine-pressed rather than hand-blown, and became much more affordable. The site's convict residents had been keen consumers of ceramic tableware, both matched and individualised sets of English manufacture, as well as quasi-matched Chinese ware of widely varying quality. The interest in refined dining was expressed over the century in an extraordinary range of dinner, breakfast and tea sets, often of the best quality, in an explosion of colours and designs. Until around the 1860s the tableware included all the use-specific and refined pieces like butter dishes, gravy boats and the like.<sup>37</sup>

Nineteenth-century genteel consumerism was, as Linda Young has pointed out, a culture of aspiration. For working and 'middling' people (the distinction still very much blurred over the nineteenth century) that aspiration was expressed as striving for respectability and means. Amidst the older-established patterns, there were new streams of thought and behaviour, and new commodities for creating, expressing and demonstrating the respectable family, and some of these were indistinguishable from those of the comfortable to wealthy middle classes. Perhaps the most striking of these artefacts are what archaeologist Graham Wilson has called 'moralising china'. In a period when Christian philanthropists were



*Fig. 6.3 Cribb's Lane, later called Cumberland Place, view to west, about 1900. This early lane bisected the site from east to west and by this stage was paved with sandstone blocks. On the left are gabled hotel stables, a walled yard and a substantial corner shop; on the right are an early house (c. 1810) and its yard, and a row of three flat-fronted terraces, with a corner hotel adjoining at the end. As in most of the photographs of this period, this one is constructed to suggest a 'crowded neighbourhood' scene, with local people carefully posed. The second woman on the right is hugging a large ceramic platter, typical of those found during the excavation.*



launching the Ragged Schools to save 'slum' children from the terrible neglect of their brutal, uncaring, drunken parents, the wives of coal-lumpers and mariners living in the back-lane terraces were feeding their babies and children from mugs, plates and bowls designed especially for them. These items were embellished with educational and moral phrases and patterns. The letters of the alphabet set about the rims of soup plates and porridge bowls helped a child learn to read at the table. Others have pictures showing children behaving well, while mugs inscribed 'A Present for a Good Girl' underscore rewards for good behaviour. Still another mug bears the legend 'Lessons for Youth on Industry, Temperance and Frugality'. This moralising china reveals a clear interest in educating children, in inculcating them with moral principles of self-control, self-improvement and hard work.<sup>38</sup>

Rocks sites have also yielded a great collection of manufactured toys, many 'of fine and unusual quality': dainty tea sets, pretty dolls with glass eyes, lead figures such as horses, soldiers, boats and carriages, playing pieces from games, ceramic figurines and child-sized jewellery. An abundance of slate and slate pencils suggests that children were practising their letters at home. These things reveal that children were not regarded by working people as 'non-human' and unimportant at all; clearly they held modern cultural notions of childhood as a phase separate from adult life, a time of play and indulgence as well as education.<sup>39</sup> More intriguing is the discovery, in late-nineteenth-century underfloor deposits of a small back-lane terrace, of a plain bone ring. The ring matches descriptions of an 'occlusive pessary' available in this period, a modern contraceptive device made of 'membranes of rubber encircled by rings of bone'.<sup>40</sup>

Personal care and presentation were also extremely important. Cleanliness was evident in the wash-sets (basins, ewers, soap dishes), combs and brushes, while a love of dress and personal adornment established by the convicts was intensified by rising availability and variety of consumer goods.<sup>41</sup> The houses and yards of nineteenth-century working people have yielded thousands of buttons, in all manner of designs and fabrics, over 1,500 different types of beads, and a large collection of jewellery which, as Nadia Iacono concludes, 'attests to occupants of comfortable means'. Among the collection are high-quality earrings, including one of gold filigree and cloisonné enamelling, set with faceted beryl stones; handsome hat pins with glass balls, copper alloy leaves or disks of shell at their ends; rings (one of gold set with rubies) and good-quality jet mourning jewellery. Iacono's analysis of the scraps of surviving fabric revealed fine-quality silks, wool crepe, very fine weave silk crepe and organza.

Rebecca Bower's examination of the shoes from the site indicates that much of the residents' footwear was of good quality, including 'fashionable . . . high quality boots' and elegant slip-on or slipper-type women's shoes, finely made of calf, kid or fabric.<sup>42</sup>

While women wore jewellery, hair combs and perfume throughout the nineteenth century, it appears that, towards the end of the century, working men also began to take more interest in their appearance. There are rising numbers of men's jewellery, collar and cuff studs, handsome and even extravagant 'bachelor buttons' and so on. Men also seem to have taken a liking to wearing non-prescriptive spectacles which would have given them a sober, respectable, dignified appearance. On Sundays and holidays they put on their sober, best suits, looped gold or silver Albert chains through the waistcoat buttonholes, and tucked prized watches into the pockets, the 'special badge', as Graeme Davison puts it, 'of the self-regulated, provident, punctual workingman'. These were the men who joined the lodges and friendly societies, with their orderly, rational and hierarchical organisation, their glorious regalia and their public processions, their brotherly and patriotic aims.<sup>43</sup>

A tour of the interior of one of these small houses reveals spaces made warm, pleasant and comfortable by women. The walls were tinted from a wide palette of colours, and sometimes dado lines and wallpapers were added. The floors featured a great range of highly decorative and coloured tiles, or were covered with rugs or matting. The rooms were lit by glass lamps and some of the furniture was padded with kapok, decorated with buttons and tassels. Shell collections, with an example of each species, indicate that some Rocks people practised the same sort of rational scientific collecting as the genteel men and women in Tom Griffith's *Hunters and Collectors*. Shells were also placed on the mantelpieces for decorative purposes, alongside a great array of sentimental figurines of poodles, cottages, lambs, ladies, and angels sheltering little children under their wings. The bankruptcy inventories for such households list items such as clocks, pictures, blinds and valences, books, perhaps a ship in a bottle or a telescope. These were common in all but the most destitute of houses.<sup>44</sup>

What should we make of these unmistakable signs and patterns? If genteel culture is the defining hallmark of the middle classes, how can it appear in the homes of labourers, tradesmen and -women, coal-lumpers and other waterside workers? Was the material culture really indistinguishable from one class to another? Some historians and archaeologists would, conversely, see this plethora of genteel goods as manifestations of the same exploitation



and manipulation of the proletariat which governed the production sphere of the industrial revolution. Stuart Ewan, for example, argued that 'the fantasy of consumption . . . served the important function of diverting the American working class from efforts to unite and exercise control over their work lives. Instead they were seduced by the essentially individualistic glamour of consumption.'<sup>45</sup> These artefacts are merely more evidence of the resounding success of the 'hegemonic offensive' in winning over hearts, minds and bodies of working people. Archaeologist Mark Leone argued, in the same vein, though for the eighteenth century, that domestic artefacts such as individualised place settings represent 'false consciousness', the imposition of dominant ideology through the alliance of capitalism and the ruling class. The rise of individual over corporate identity, and consumption itself, then, is really a cynical device to create a docile, divided workforce, to 'control wage labour and direct their workers to higher production goals'.<sup>46</sup> As Martin Hall remarks dryly: 'It is almost as if the possession of matched tableware turned the worker into an automaton, as if the capitalist had won the struggle for ideological control as soon as he had persuaded his laborer to adopt good table manners.' Or perhaps the dinner sets, shells and buttons, vases, teacups and jewellery represent the 'trickle down' model of culture, which Neil McKendrick implied in *Birth of a Consumer Society*. They are merely the cast-offs of slavish social emulation by which the working classes simply aped their 'betters' in order to display status or aspirations. In this model, once more, the hundreds of thousands of artefacts, particularly those which were mass-produced, would appear to be largely empty of genuine cultural meaning (Fig. 6.4).<sup>47</sup>

#### Dimensions of respectability: confluence and divergence

But if we interpret this large, consistent, and insistent, body of evidence as reflection of either exploitation, seduction or 'embourgeoisement', we surely run the risk of dismissing the most direct account we have concerning the conditions and aspirations of Rocks people themselves, of what mattered to them, and of what they were striving for in their everyday lives. For the material record to make sense in these terms, it is necessary to shift from the 'dominant ideology thesis', the 'either/or' model of culture, in which cultural identity was *exclusively* a battleground, a site for struggle and inevitable domination.<sup>48</sup> Archaeology demonstrates that some important cultural strands, in this case expressions of genteel culture, were shared across classes. Rather than a culture of repudiation, resistance and/or sheer brutal poverty, consumer

and popular material culture among the urban working classes ran parallel with, or was identical to, those of the suburban middle classes. They had similar inspirations in rising evangelicalism, with its emphasis on personal redemption, and in the culture of individual self-improvement through education, temperance and rational recreation. It did not automatically follow, however, that middle-class observers recognised this commonality, or heeded the demonstrations of respectability. At the same time, if we review the sites and assemblages as a whole – houses, yards, cesspits as well as artefacts – certain conditions, practices and tastes may be identified as other elements of a particular urban culture which was very different from that of the middle classes. And if we then reread these assemblages and the sites in their wider social contexts, important divergences in the use and meaning of some shared material culture emerge.

In the first place, a closer examination of the archaeological vista itself reveals a number of patterns of consumption and use which suggest that people there were actively choosing and shaping their material worlds, rather than being passive recipients of whatever goods manufacturers foisted upon them. From the 1850s, the range of ceramic tablewares available 'became far more extensive, though of a lesser quality' as a result of the increased mechanisation of the English potteries. But rather than their buying sets exactly as offered by the manufacturers, archaeologist Graham Wilson observed that residents of the Cumberland/Gloucester Street site often possessed sets of china in matching transfer-prints, but in different colours: blue, green, brown, grey, mulberry, purple, red and, more rarely, black. Wendy Thorp, writing about the Lilyvale site further south, noted a penchant for 'crazy' tea sets, made up of pretty unmatched china, a very personal creation of household assemblages. People also personalised common mass-produced tumblers by engraving their initials on them, and they reused, recycled, repaired and modified a great many other manufactured objects.<sup>49</sup>

While a large proportion of the assemblages have to do with respectability, self-improvement and control and so on, we can see that strands of more traditional pastimes also survived. The proportion of the glass assemblage relating to alcohol consumption, together with the hotels which stood on the site, indicate that drinking remained an important part of Rocks socialising, as it had been from the early days. The site's people drank wine, beer, champagne, schnapps and brandy from a great range of bottles, flasks and glasses. To outsiders, usually middle-class and evangelical people obsessed with the drinking habits of working people, the mere sight of these bottles,



*Fig. 6.4 Cribb's Lane during the excavation of the site, view to west, 1994. The stone flagging on the left (above middle) was the floor of the stables shown on the left in Fig. 6.3 (where the man is standing); on the right are the remains of the early house and yard, and a glimpse of 4 Cribb's Lane, as excavated.*

decanters and hotels was enough to confirm their worst suspicions of hopeless and widespread alcoholism.<sup>50</sup> But as historian Richard Waterhouse points out, towards the end of the nineteenth century 'there is considerable evidence to suggest that the working classes applied a high degree of discipline to their drinking'. Though there would always be some men and women for whom drinking was a debilitating problem, generally it is likely that working people distinguished between the pleasures of drinking, and drunkenness, between sobriety and teetotaling (the avoidance of drink altogether). For them sobriety, in the older sense, meant moderation, not the loss of the pleasures of drinking together.<sup>51</sup>

Gambling remained a popular pastime among working people, one which also continued the traditions of pleasure for its own sake, but which was marked, in horseracing at least, by small wagers and disciplined betting. The Rocks sites – Lilyvale and Cumberland/Gloucester Street – have yielded many gaming pieces manufactured from lead, or 'home-made' out of sherds of broken crockery and slate. These may well have been used in 'innocent' games, children's or adults'; equally they may have been used as counters for games involving wagering.<sup>52</sup>

Hidden below the floorboards, too, were some of the thirty spent cartridges from .22 and .45 calibre guns, lead shot and gun flints. The presence of such weapons and their potential for violence seem at odds along with the lamps, shell collections and figurines; they make us consider the limits of domesticity and moral order in some houses, in some lives. In the nineteenth century, guns of many types were widely available and completely unregulated. A number of .22 cartridges from No. 1 Caraher's Lane also suggest that women as well as men were gun owners and users, for they are likely to have come from the small, easily concealed 'Ladysmith', also known as the 'prostitute's favourite'.<sup>53</sup>

Respectable culture amongst tradespeople, labourers and housewives of the Rocks dominates the archaeological record, but there are also these concurrent signs of older cultural streams – less polite, less inhibited, not entirely pious and proper – which, like their neighbourhoods and workplaces, marked them out from middle-class people. As Waterhouse argues in his study of Australian popular culture, urban culture was a lively, complex and distinctive *blend* of traditional pastimes, new and old institutions, and rising interest in the 'private pleasures' of domestic life and 'respectable' culture. In her intimate portrait of the working-class community of the Melbourne suburb of Richmond, Janet MacCalman also outlined the importance of 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' culture as the division clearly understood and

felt among working people themselves.<sup>54</sup> The maintenance of respectability could not always be taken for granted. At times, and for some, it was more a struggle, fought on many fronts: in some ways between men and women, in other ways between old and new cultures; but always against the searching, accusing eyes of outsiders.

There were also undeniable economic differences in the lives of working and middle-class people. The most obvious of these, as Shirley Fitzgerald has well demonstrated, was the far more precarious financial situation of many working people, and the lower down the social scale, the more precarious was the getting of a living.<sup>55</sup> Much work was seasonal, irregular and on a day-to-day basis, and in many households there was little or no margin for illness, accident or strikes. Bills or fees unpaid in lean times often remained unpaid when things improved, because income only covered weekly outgoings, and could not easily cope with accumulated debts. Thus, while the notion of the male breadwinner and dependent wife and children appears to have grown stronger over the nineteenth century, many Rocks women none the less did all kinds of work to contribute to the family income.<sup>56</sup> Women's work – sewing, piecework, laundry work, baking, taking in lodgers – was often tied to the home so that they could also run their households and care for children.<sup>57</sup> This in turn meant that the idea of separate and symbolic spaces, such as the middle-class halls, drawing rooms and separate bedrooms, was an impossible luxury for most. A parlour, the equivalent of the drawing room, was a highly desired aim, and those who were better off – artisans, people who had successfully invested in real estate, the bigger shopkeepers – could maintain this room where the family's finest furniture and decorative items were displayed in pristine, glorious isolation. But with the arrival of children, and the taking in of lodgers and work, the parlour was often compromised with beds, sewing machines and work tables, and there was nothing to be done about it.<sup>58</sup>

We cannot ignore the stark differences in the housing conditions of the middle classes and working people. Though the interiors were characterised by comfort and domesticity, the conjoined houses of the city lined streets and lanes, not suburban avenues. Their condition depended on their age and on the conscientiousness of their owners, the landlords. Some were quite solid, comfortable and roomy, others were appalling. The houses were not swathed by calming gardens, but by the public footpaths at the front and small patch at the rear, crowded with washing and tools, rubbish and even a few chooks. Archaeology has revealed that some of these were neatly paved and regularly swept, but that others were damp,

muddy patches full of rubbish pits and strewn with debris.<sup>59</sup> Not every house was connected to the sewer when it arrived in the 1850s, cesspits often leaked and overflowed, and people without even these threw their night soil in the street to mingle with the mud, horse droppings and rubbish. Street-making, paving and drainage were carried out constantly from the 1850s but progress seems to have been slow and the results quickly worn down or blocked up. By the end of the century, however, considerable improvements had been made to these amenities.<sup>60</sup>

Until late in the century, too, garbage collection was erratic, and this is probably the reason archaeologists found that rubbish – broken glass and ceramics, food scraps including meat bones – was deliberately thrown under the floorboards, choking the underfloor spaces. Alarmingly, it seems that dead dogs and cats were also sometimes disposed of in this way. The remains of two medium-sized dogs were found stowed underneath the cottage-cum-shop at 128 Cumberland Street. Another lay entombed below No. 5 Caraher's Lane.<sup>61</sup> What this suggests is an 'out of sight, out of mind' mentality, a culture of disguise, aimed at hiding the problems of high-density living. MacCalman suggests that respectable working-class culture and domesticity were somewhat 'obsessive', the fruits of low self-esteem and status and reactions against widespread prejudice. While the archaeology from Rocks sites suggests a much more positive and assertive cultural stance, that working people were in fact active participants in modern cultural practices, the determined efforts at domestic comfort and cleanliness among working people may also have been a kind of response, or defence, against an external urban world which was not always pleasant, just as the best suit or dress, jewellery and shoes were the repudiation of the dirty weekday work clothes that went with much manual labour.<sup>62</sup>

In this context we can see that certain aspects of material culture – pictures, pianos, showerbaths, thimbles – had different meanings according to who was choosing and using them.<sup>63</sup> The artefacts of sewing are good examples. While the association of sewing with women was practically universal in the mid- to late nineteenth century, middle-class women tended to regard needlework and embroidery as a leisured activity with which to produce goods to embellish homes, to provide and mend clothing, as presents or to do good works for charity. The sheer numbers of items of sewing equipment found on urban working people's sites, though, strongly suggests that the women there were working as seamstresses and dressmakers as well as sewing for their families. Sewing for them was work, not leisure, although, as Jane Lydon

has observed, this pragmatism did not rule out the style and sentiment of Victorian domesticity. She found metal thimbles inscribed with various mottoes and messages, 'Esteem', 'Remember Me', 'Contentment', 'The Queen Forever', and some incised with floral, tendril and line motifs. For these women, paid work was *fused* with the cult of domesticity, rather than its anathema.<sup>64</sup>

### Observations

Still, stepping back from the houses, we can see that consumer culture, and the aspirations which drove it, meant that there were many common strands between the working and middle classes, between city and suburbs. Such a common language of things, together with the many solid and neat homes, the lace-curtained windows, those yards which were tidy and neatly swept, should have allowed recognition, dialogue, sympathy and acceptance. The lone social investigators, the energetic Christian women, the parties of frock-coated gentlemen who ventured into places like the Rocks, saw and even noted many things, manners and habits which would have been familiar to them. But these observations were usually made with some *puzzlement*: they did not fit the images and rhetoric about working people and city spaces these outsiders carried about in their heads. Stanley Jevons spent a rather uneventful evening perambulating around the Rocks in search of vice in the 1850s, and noted instead people gossiping quietly on street corners or seated comfortably in their front rooms, reading, talking and sewing. Yet it did not occur to him that his portrayal of the area as a stinking sink of the purest evil and the people as possessing 'dirty clothes, slovenly manner and repulsive countenance' might be just a little exaggerated.<sup>65</sup> The indefatigable Miss Danne, a teacher for the Ragged Schools, admitted in her daily journal that, after all, 'It is true very few are starving. The visitor finds houses apparently better furnished than the London garrets or cellars.' She found people not brutish, but polite and kind (if rather bemused at her self-invitation into their homes; the middle class seemed to think the sanctity and privacy of the home applied only to them). Why did she and the men who wrote the impassioned reports of the Schools' work year after year fall back on the same fearful stereotypes of drunken, loutish parents, and children who were 'polluted in heart and imagination, and corrupt and wicked of tongue'?<sup>66</sup> Why did the vases of flowers, the spick-and-span rooms, the soft furnishings and little ornaments make no impression on the frock-coated professional men when they barged into homes, covering their noses and making demolition orders (Fig. 6.5)?<sup>67</sup>



*Fig. 6.5 Rockswoman Jane Neal (left), wife of mariner William Kitchen Neal, with the youngest of her five sisters, Margaret. The Neals lived in Gloucester Street just south of the Cumberland/Gloucester Street site. Note their genteel clothes, the tea set on the table, and the tea cups in their hands, which, archaeology shows, were quite familiar objects to them.*

These reports, 'eyewitness' accounts and official actions were based, as Alan Mayne has argued, on pre-existing cultural assumptions and literary devices.<sup>68</sup> They were often aimed at fascinating and horrifying readers, or persuading them to renew subscriptions, or to convince them that official parties, committees and scientific gentlemen knew what was best for the city. And what they wrote then provided much of the 'history' of working people and their environments. Difference, poverty, poor housing, social and urban problems which did exist, were drawn out, magnified, demonised, while the obvious day-to-day fabric, the homes, families, communities and the things with which most lives were constructed and defined, remain largely invisible, unremarked. And so people continued to talk of 'the great unwashed', the ignorant and

beast-like working class, the unmitigated misery of the anonymous 'faces in the street',<sup>69</sup> hapless dwellers of the irredeemable 'slums'.

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