The Eight-hour Day Movement

UNDER THE BURNING SUN OF THE COLONY
In the currency of cultural cachet, no less than patterns of philanthropy, opera and art galleries rank ahead of museums and libraries, with archives at the rear; while in the court of historical evidence, that precedence is reversed. Reality and postmodernism would suggest both orderings are too rigid. What is undeniable is the University Archives’ pre-eminent strength in trades hall, union and labour movement documentation such as minute books, correspondence, ephemera and photographs. These are complemented by records of the Victorian peace, protest and disarmament movements. Their documentation was vital then, recording decisions, validating delegates’ credentials, and sometimes quite self-consciously fixing moments for posterity. And it is just as important now to the transmission of societal memory, educating the next generation of citizens and leaders, and teaching the lessons of the past about such enduring notions as a living wage and work-life balance.

Although the Potter is primarily an art museum, an exhibition of materials held in the University Archives makes sense. The study of art history has expanded to include what is now called ‘visual culture’; the full spectrum of signs and symbols arising from cultural practice. In any case, the riches of the Archives are irresistible. The visual culture of the eight-hour day campaign is striking, revealing the early roots of communication strategies that we now take for granted. Parades and marches, often with a theatrical bent, thread down to us from the eight-hour day through the women’s suffrage campaign and the 1960s counterculture. Coloured lapel ribbons are now ubiquitous badges for numerous social and political campaigns. Sadly, the age of the elaborate oration has given way to the press release and the blog rant. As contemporary artists seek to reinvent an art of social conscience, this exhibition is a timely reminder of the sophisticated union of language, design and image in the nineteenth century.

Michael Piggott
University Archivist
Dr Chris McAuliffe
Director, the Ian Potter Museum of Art
One hundred and fifty years under the burning sun

“Look at yonder city, illuminated by its magic lamps, its windows glittering with wealth, a city with palaces worthy of kings, and temples worthy of gods, which labour has placed there in the short space of a quarter of a century [...] and by whom has this change been effected? By the rich, the wealthy, the kid-gloved, fine-handed gentry? No; by the horny-handed son of toil, and after all that he has done here, and ready as he is to do more, would you have him work until his heart breaks under the burning sun of this colony?”

Their victory set an international precedent, marking a pivotal turning point in the labour movement that saw the beginning of working-class representation in government, the establishment of trade unions and the formation of the Trades Hall Council. As a celebratory gesture on 21 April 1856, stonemasons ceased work at the university and marched through the streets of Melbourne, gathering workers from various building sites along the way. We are in a unique position to provide a window into the spirit of this time through the holdings of the University of Melbourne Archives. The vast trade union and business collections held by Archives have given life to this exhibition, which includes a careful selection of around 150 items.

Archival materials tell a story in themselves. Dust, torn edges and greying text insist on the impossibility of a single, clean vision of the past. In a sense, these material traces are symbolic of our social values and ideals, which also undergo significant transformation over the course of time. The weathering of the eight-hour day materials in this exhibition points to the fragility of the ideals of the eight-hour day pioneers, whose passionate belief in the equal division of labour, rest and recreation is seen in a different light today. The regulation of hours in working culture is neither as universal, nor as clear-cut, as it might have seemed in 1856. Technological revolution and a demand for flexibility have forced workers to conceive of new ways to implement their work-life balance. What has persisted through the last century and a half is the same deep concern for a fair division of work, rest and recreation in Australian working life.

The eight-hour day movement has always represented much more to the community than the specific demand for eight-hours’ labour in one day. The original campaign quickly grew to encompass wider political issues, social welfare and community celebration, signifying a demand for quality of life. The eight-hour day emerged, in part, as a result of the gold-rush, which encouraged a general sense of prosperity that enabled workers to consider their right to enjoy life. This was manifest, for example, in the spectacular anniversary parades that gathered thousands of workers, families and sightseers for picnics, sporting competitions and general festivities.

The achievement of the eight-hour day was accompanied by great social pride, and this resulted in the elevation of eight-hour day pioneers such as James Galloway (1828–1860) and James Stevens (1821–1889) to heroic stature. Many such men went on to lead successful careers in politics and civic society, somewhat contradicting their origins as ‘horny-handed son[s] of toil’. Meanwhile, the successes of building construction workers did not extend into all areas of working life, with numerous workers, notably women from the clothing trades and Indigenous mission workers, failing to achieve an eight-hour day until late in the twentieth century. Here emerges the contradictory mixture of achievement, success, toil and struggle that characterizes the history of the eight-hour day. Images of celebration and images of labour overlap and interact in this exhibition in order to highlight some of these contradictions, as does the contrast of spectacular archival objects such as the famed Tinsmiths Union armour, with more humble items of equal significance such as the minutes of the Operative Stonemasons’ Society, recorded during the pivotal months of their campaign in 1856.

Under the burning sun of the colony: the eight-hour day movement remembers the spirit of Victoria’s eight-hour day campaigners at a time when the fragility of their ideals has a poignant resonance. In delving into the University of Melbourne Archives to curate this exhibition, I have often returned to this evocative description of the nineteenth-century worker. It was expressed in a public speech in 1856 by Charles J Don, an eight-hour day pioneer who later became the first working-class member of parliament. Combining a fighting spirit with poetic idealism, it captures the character of the Victorian eight-hour day campaign. Importantly, the statement points to an inherent sense of struggle lying beneath the celebratory façade of the history of the eight-hour day. The twenty-first day of April 1856 did not signify the end of the fight for fair working conditions in Victoria or abroad. Instead, it marked an important stage in an ongoing challenge to regulate working life. Historical material surrounding the eight-hour day movement is often marked by this contrast between idealism and struggle, success and strife. This subtle conflict is also present in the archival materials used to recreate the story of the eight-hour day in this exhibition, illustrious items that have not escaped the effects of time.

Under the burning sun of the colony is part of a state-wide program of events that celebrates the 150th anniversary of the Victorian gain of the eight-hour day. One hundred and fifty years ago, when the agitators of the eight-hour day were first mounting their arguments, the University of Melbourne was still in construction. It holds a significant place in this history for it was stonemasons working on the building grounds that sparked the initial debate, arguing for the benefits of the eight-hour day system and successfully negotiating a deal with building contractors.

Under the burning sun of this colony: the eight-hour day movement argues for the benefits of the eight-hour day system and which labour has placed there in the short space of a quarter of a century [...] and ready as he is to do more, would you have him work until his heart breaks under the burning sun of this colony?”

1 Charles J Don, cited in WE Murphy, History of the eight hours’ movement, vol. 1, Spectator, Melbourne, 1856, p. 60.
Encountering the diverse materials in an archive is to encounter the web of history. Any attempt to sift through and make sense of such a wealth of material involves a process of filtering and the construction of a particular version of history. In my role as curator, I have embraced the responsibilities of selecting and omitting materials to shape a historical narrative about working life in Australian culture. Yet I have also attempted to make this process open and transparent, including fragments of memory and pieces of the past often left behind in the story of the eight-hour day campaign. Under the burning sun of the colony acknowledges the silent narratives that live within the history of the eight-hour day, including the unsuccessful struggle of Indigenous and female workers to achieve equitable conditions in working life. These stories emerge through the placement of items that might not immediately be associated with the eight-hour day campaign, such as photographs of domestic workers, factory floors and workers on missions. These traces of ‘other’ stories are woven through the exhibition as an integral part of the same historical fight for fair working conditions.

Under the burning sun of the colony presents my experience of delving into, and sorting through, the rich and complex collections of the University of Melbourne Archives. The resulting images, words, documents, objects and sounds attempt to capture the multifaceted nature of the eight-hour day movement in Victoria. While this exhibition can only provide a glimpse into the vast holdings of the University of Melbourne Archives and a snapshot of the eight-hour day campaign, it offers an invitation to explore this fascinating material. I hope that experiencing Under the burning sun of the colony recreates the energy of the original eight-hour day movement while providing a space to consider the relationship between this exciting time, where whispers of dissent coalesced into active democracy, and struggles faced in contemporary working life.

Grace McQuilten Guest curator
Catalogue

Dimensions are given as height before width before depth

Historical documents and records
1 Minutes of the central lodge of the Operative Stonemasons’ Society of Australia, Victorian Branch, 5 March – 8 September 1856, bound vol., 33 x 22 cm, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University, Canberra (E1171/1)
2 Victorian Operative Masons’ Society, Report of the committee to enquire into the origin of the eight hours’ movement in Victoria, 1884, 22 x 15 cm, Archives Library Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
3 William Emmett Murphy, History of the eight hours’ movement, 1896, two vols, each 18 x 12.5 cm, Archives Library Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
4 Eight Hour Day Anniversary Committee minutes, 1896–1921, two of three bound vols, each 33 x 22 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
5 Victorian Trades Hall Council minutes, roll and cash books, 1897–1985, 45 bound vols, dimensions variable, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
6 Th’ Itchin, 1905–06, bound vol., 44.5 x 33 cm, Archives Library Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
7 Ballarat Eight Hours Anniversary Committee first prize certificate for best decorated vehicle, 1916, gilded certificate in original frame, 59 x 42 cm, Ballarat Trades and Labour Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
8 NSW South Wales Eight Hour Day Act 1916, 21 x 13 cm, Australian Labor Party Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
9 Eight-hour day anniversary sports program, 1894, 22.5 x 14 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
10 Eight Hours Defence Committee weekly contribution card, c. 1900, 12 x 9 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
11 Invitation to Eight Hour Jubilee celebration in Melbourne, 1906, 11 x 16.5 cm, W Haysom Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
12 Eight-hour day anniversary pamphlet, 1919, 42 x 30 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council, Melbourne
13 Ticket to eight-hour day celebration sports gala, 1919, 6.5 x 10 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
14 Labour badges, 1945–55, each approx. 7 x 5 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
15 Eight-hour day commemorative ribbons, c. 1910, each approx. 20 x 5.5 cm, Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners Collection and Australian Boot Trade Employees Federation Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
16 Eight Hour Day Anniversary Committee commemorative brooch, 1911, sterling silver and enamel, 4 x 6 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
17 United Tinsmiths’ eight-hour day commemorative sash, c. 1930–40, velvet with silk lining, approx. 243 x 15.5 cm, Operative Bakers’ Union of Victoria Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
18 Eight-hour day commemorative ribbons, 1910, each approx. 20 x 5.5 cm, Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners Collection and Australian Boot Trade Employees Federation Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
19 Eight Hour Day Anniversary Committee commemorative brooch, 1911, sterling silver and enamel, 4 x 6 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
20 Operative Bakers’ Society president’s ceremonial sash, c. 1930–40, velvet with silk lining, approx. 243 x 15.5 cm, Operative Bakers’ Union of Victoria Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
21 Reproduction of ‘Eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest’ celebration banner, 2006 (E585), 354 x 530 cm, cotton with appliqué canvas and reinforced eyelets, Museum Victoria, Melbourne

Original photographs
22 Benjamin Douglass standing under home-built eight-hour day monument, 1903, black and white photograph, 29 x 24 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
23 Eight-hour day procession and portraits of union executive members, 1906, black and white photomontage, 22 x 103 cm, United Carters’ and Drivers’ Industrial Union of Australasia Victorian Branch Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
24 Portrait of Melbourne Eight Hours Jubilee Anniversary Committee executive officers, 1906, black and white photograph with decorated mount, 63 x 72 cm, Victorian Trades Hall Council Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
25 Federated Railway Loco Enginemen’s Association of Australasia members and banner, 1907, sepia photograph, 48 x 53.5 cm, Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
26 Fibrous Plasterers Association of Victoria and eight-hour day anniversary float, 1921, black and white photograph, 53.5 x 91.5 cm, Victorian Fibrous Plasterers and Plaster Workers’ Union Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
27 Operative Stonemasons Society of New South Wales members and eight-hour day float, 1921, black and white photograph, 17 x 30 cm, Eight-Hour Day Photograph Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
28 Eight Hours Banner Committee May 8 1914, framed black and white photograph, 37.5 x 44.5 cm, Manufacturing Grocers’ Employees Federation of Australia Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives

Contemporary media
29 Workers and eight-hour day anniversary floats in Victoria, c. 1882–1931, printed 2006, type C black and white mural print from original photographic negatives in the collections of the University of Melbourne Archives and the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne (La Trobe Picture Collection, H93624/3), and Angus Newspaper Collection of Photographs, H9a.201(2264), 100 x 1700 cm
30 Under the burning sun of the colony, 2006, DVD, colour, sound, montage of images c. 1850-2006 sourced from the University of Melbourne Archives, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, Australian Council of Trade Unions, Melbourne, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation, New South Wales, Queensland Coalition of Indigenous Organisations, Brisbane, The Age, Green Left Weekly, The Recorder, Union issue, and Women at Work, with audio preserved and digitized by the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra, from the Australian Rail, Tram and Bus Industry Union, Melbourne

1271 Hanging the Coach and Rolling Stock Makers Society banner for display, c. 1940, type C black and white photograph, Eight-Hour Day Photograph Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives
Acknowledgments
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Finally, at the Ian Potter Museum of Art I would like to thank Joanna Bosse for her insightful and generous management of this project, Scott Miles for his assistance with exhibition preparation, Jay Miller for her assistance with registration, and Bala Starr for providing me with the opportunity to work in such a supportive and responsive environment on this rewarding exhibition.

– Grace McQuilten

The Ian Potter Museum of Art
The University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010 Australia
Email potter-info@unimelb.edu.au
www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au

Below left: Australasian Federated Butchers Employees Union float and banner, c. 1910, type C black and white photograph, Communist Party of Australia, Victorian State Committee Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives

Background image: Sydney eight-hour day procession (detail), c. 1910, black and white photograph, Australian Boot Trade Employees Federation, New South Wales Branch Collection, the University of Melbourne Archives