

1890-1930.

JANE LYDON

Monash Publications in History, Department of History, Monash University, Clayton, Victoria 3168, Australia, 1999. xxii +276 pp., 54 figs., 17 apps. \$19.95 (AUS) paper.

Many Inventions is one of the most interesting books on historical archaeology I have read this year.

"The Rocks" was the rather unimaginative but eminently descriptive name given by 19th-century settlers to a neighborhood in Australia's Sydney Harbour marked by a series of sandstone outcrops. In a city where, as late as 1901, a remarkable 96% of residents traced their ancestry to the British Isles, the Rocks' mixture of whites and Chinese gave it an exotic atmosphere—as well as a reputation for gambling, drug-taking, and the kind of congress between the races that scandalized Sydney's genteel residents.

Lydon opens with a review of the literature on ethnic identity and cultural representation, laying the groundwork for the through-going critique of historical archaeologists' functionalist proclivities that she will complete in her final chapter. She correctly points out that if one conceives of ethnicity in purely functional terms—solely as a strategy to advance the well being of individuals and groups—much of the complexity of actual cultural encounters may be lost. Those outside the academy may have trouble cutting their way through the occasionally dense growth of academic lingo in the first chapter that, ironically enough, is titled "Pigeon English." It is well worth the effort, however, for it is here that the author introduces the idea of *pigeon*—a suite of mutually understood artifacts and behaviors—by which she conceptualizes the process of interaction between whites and Chinese in the Rocks.

"Life on the Rocks," the second chapter, focuses on the neighborhood's historical development and the efforts of domestic reformers to improve public health. Here Lydon incorporates archaeology in the form of domestic refuse associated with Mrs. Lewis' genteel boardinghouse. The variety and number of glassware and Victorian transfer-printed dining ceramics are interpreted as a representation of order and propriety, as well as where the household saw itself in the Rocks' "social landscape" (p. 54). Lydon asks, "What did it mean for a European to display a fourteenth-century porcelain figurine of the Chinese goddess of mercy, Guanyin?" (p. 59). Drawing on her earlier discussion of the discourse of Orientalism, her response emphasizes the multiplicity of meanings that may have been attached to this artifact in the context of Chinese-European interactions in the Rocks.

In case anyone should think that the Chinese of the Rocks were monolithic, either socially, culturally, or in relation to wealth, Chapter 3 focuses on the complexity of this stratified community. At the lower end of the social scale were laborers who lived in boardinghouses concealed behind very Victorian-looking building facades. Meanwhile, merchants used the system of personal relationships and mutual obligation known as *guanxi* to enhance their businesses and social standing with the non-Chinese community.

Many Inventions: The Chinese in the Rocks,

Again, archaeology is invoked; this time to suggest the role traditional material culture came to play in the creation and reproduction of identity in the household of merchant Hong On Jang.

Although the Chinese district was seen as a source of both physical and moral contagion by Sydney's genteel society, the remaining chapters demonstrate that contact across ethnic lines was far from uncommon. Lydon posits that gender, social standing, and respectability, among other factors, sometimes eclipsed ethnicity as the most significant basis for interaction in the Rocks. In spite of laws that sought to separate the races, and by means of "many inventions"—such as the creation of exaggerated public performances of "Chineseness"—ways were found to subvert these Victorian attitudes.

The book concludes with a review of archaeological research approaches in the study of the Overseas Chinese in North America and Australasia going back to the early 1970s. Here Lydon is especially critical of studies conceived within the "functionalist, logico-positivist approach of the New Archaeology" (p. 189). For my part, I find *Many Inventions* both evocative and convincing. Any critique, however, should recognize that people do not engage in symbolic behavior in order to give social scientists something to write about. Pointing out that behaviors have outcomes does not necessarily constitute vulgar functionalism, and, if nothing else, offers a coherent model of the past that might be lacking in a highly contextualized analysis emphasizing the fluidity of culture over its structure.

Students will welcome the book's low price, while senior members of the profession (who are surely squinting at the minuscule print of this review) will appreciate its slightly oversized font and uncluttered page design. Well-reproduced historic images occasionally break up the text, which is extensively footnoted and indexed. Even the photographs of archaeological ceramics and glass vials are, for the most part, clear and useable.

Archaeologists of a processual bent should beware: the Foucault-to-Binford citation ratio of *Many Inventions* exceeds 6:1. Lydon conceives of her goal as the creation of an "ethnographic collage" (p. 23) and is firmly committed to an interpretive approach whereby the meaning of behaviors, landscapes, and archaeological collections are inferred from the social contexts of their use. In spite of the fact that it emerges from a university history department's publication series, this imaginative and scholarly volume would be equally at home on the shelf of the anthropologically oriented archaeologist. The flimsy barrier between the fields is effectively dissolved in this theoretically grounded, wide-ranging analysis; and historical archaeology is better off for its disappearance. I have seen no book-length study of the Overseas Chinese that is as successful in incorporating documentary data, archaeological remains, and social theory into such a richly textured piece of historical anthropology. Lydon has produced a fine piece of work, thoroughly contextualized, and exhaustively documented. Those who want to see the future of historical archaeology will want to read *Many Inventions*.

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