

Exploring a vanished community

(By Dr Alan Mayne)

The Little Lonsdale Street study area is the focus of an exciting conjunction between history and archaeology. Hitherto, historians focused so exclusively upon documentary evidence from the past that they overlooked archaeological data, whereas archaeologists were often hesitant to relate material objects rigorously to their enveloping historical contexts.

By working closely together, historians and archaeologists have begun to puncture the myths which surround Little Lonsdale Street, and to open windows upon the communities which once lived there.

The neighbourhoods in and around Little Lonsdale Street had been widely stereotyped in Melbourne during the late-nineteenth and early-to-middle twentieth centuries as 'the heart of slumdom'. (*The Age*, 3 January 1931.) These sensational 'low life' stereotypes of 'Little Lon' and other working-class communities in turn coloured the interpretations of later historians who sought to trace the lives of the urban working classes. (refer to C.J. Dennis, *The Songs of A Sentimental Bloke* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1916,) p.40.) However these negative and misleading slum myths distort our knowledge of the actual working-class communities to which the slumland label is applied. (See Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum. Newspaper Representation in Three Cities, 1870-1914*. Leicester, 1993, and Alan Mayne, 'A Just War: the language of slum representation in twentieth century Australia', *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 22, No. 1, November 1995, 75-107.)

The material data contained within the Little Lonsdale Street archaeological collection helps us to penetrate beyond the level of *outside* myth making, and to begin to look instead at this community *from the inside*. The collection comprising domestic ceramics and glassware, currency, jewellery, pipes, toys, clothing, shoes, and other material artefacts provides a rare insight into the lifestyles of a now-vanished inner city working-class community. Artefacts constitute a tangible link between past and present. Thus, as Gillian Tindall noted, 'the past can be said to be still there, not just existing in the minds of those who seek it, but actually, physically still present.' (See Gillian Tindall, *The Fields Beneath: The History of One London Village*. London, 1977, p.14.)

Research on Little Lonsdale Street highlights how sensitivity to the *material context* of past urban life extends our historical appreciation of what it was really like to live and work within such

inner-city communities. At the University of Melbourne, undergraduate students in the Department of History are unravelling the life histories of owners and occupiers within the study area, and tracing the houses and businesses they lived or worked in, as well as meshing these inside histories with the outside history of slumland sensationalism and of 'improvement' and 'renewal' projects to weed out the 'slums'.

A major research project funded by the **Australian Research Council** is enabling historians and archaeologists from Melbourne and La Trobe Universities to pool their expertise in order jointly to study 'Li'l Lons'.