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Congress Paper SUMMARY

Title: *Operational heritage – economic millstone or opportunity for reaching new audiences*

There was a period, which really got going in the second half of the 20th Century, when it seemed everyone wanted to exhibit historic vessels. They were regarded by maritime museums as ideal and, indeed, necessary instruments for telling the maritime story and attracting audiences.

I divide those vessels into two groups; the first, 'passive' vessels, the second 'operational'. The passive group makes up by far and away the majority of maritime museum craft. Many of them are successfully integrated into the museum's themes. But there is another group of passive vessels. They are tied up at wharves or pontoons, on display as examples of this type, or that era. Curatorially, they tick all the significance boxes; from an audience perspective I suggest that, in many cases, they achieve little. One has to ask: What is attractive to a museum audience about a boat which is tied up at a wharf, out of context and 'dead'? It's just possible that in many cases a well interpreted gallery exhibit, without the boat, could evoke more reaction from museum audiences and teach them more.

Those with floating collections know that after a time the gloss, very literally, goes off. Historic vessels need skills, trades and maintenance facilities and the use of expensive external resources. The result is that the focus of museum management towards their floating collections can switch, from attracting audiences to see their ships, to ways of reducing an increasing strain on resources, as preservation and maintenance requirements increase, and costs escalate. I think it is fair to say that as purse strings continue to tighten, and floating collections age further, and preservation and maintenance costs compound at an alarming rate, we will begin to see the rationalisation of small-boat floating collections. It's a sombre thought.

'Operational vessels' divide into two broad categories; static vessels large enough to allow visitor access and interpreted as an historical ship exhibit; and vessels which are operational in the real sense. I also include replicas in museum hands. Why describe static vessels as 'operational'? Properly presented, I believe it is possible to evoke in the visitor a response which allows the imagination full play.

It is interesting to consider what motivated the 'ship savers' of the 20th century. People like Frank Carr of *Cutty Sark* fame: "*I want the child to go aboard . . . and be able to stand by the wheel . . . and imagine her at sea. That is why, to me, preserved historic ships, if they are exhibited with imagination, are the cathedrals of the sea . . .*". There is drama in ship saving. And it catches the imagination of museum audiences. There is no doubt that static ships, well presented as Frank Carr says, with imagination, have the potential to attract new audiences and repeat visitors.

And then there's the 'off-the-wharf' breed of operational heritage. Ships like Sydney's 1874 barque *James Craig* which also have a static role when sitting alongside, as a museum ship, open for daily visitors. But then they go sailing and it is in this role that the audience pulling power comes to the fore. A voyage on a restored ship not only demonstrates its significance, it stimulates the imagination and curiosity to learn what went on in a ship's operational life. Following historically authentic operation as far as possible, and maintaining original traditions and skills, heightens the experience and involves the visitor. Many come back for more; and they tell their friends.

But there are some cold hard realities connected to operational historic ships

1: **Not all historic ships are successful.** *Falls of Clyde* in Honolulu is an example.

2: **Historic ships, static or operational are expensive to maintain.** An historic ship, in the water, is deteriorating fast. A detailed survey of the entire ship is an essential first step in prudent ship management.

Then, from the survey, a detailed work plan. Cost the plan. And if you can't afford it, get rid of the ship – try

and find it another home. Because unlike building or other artefact maintenance which can be ignored or deferred way past the point of prudent care, ship's can't. They sink!

3: **Historic ships can be expensive to run.** It's easy to undervalue staff and other overhead requirements for a historic ship. Remember, a ship with multiple decks will often be far larger than a museum gallery.

Recruiting volunteers can be a godsend and a money saver.

4: **Audience pulling power.** Sydney Heritage Fleet is the case study here. The not-for-profit Fleet which receives no subsidy funding has five fully operational vessels over 100 years old: barque *James Craig* (1874); Steam launch *Lady Hopetoun* (1902); Steam tug *Waratah* (also 1902); Schooner *Boomerang* (1903); and launch *Protex* (1908). There are also other, younger craft in operational order.

Sydney Heritage Fleet is a volunteer led organisation with about 550 working volunteers who donate in excess of 100,000 volunteer hours a year. It is this volunteer effort which is the first key to the Fleet's success. We run our own volunteer-manned shipyard which restores and maintains the vessels. The shipyard is the second key to our success. It also tackles major restoration projects; the bulk of *James Craig's* restoration was carried out by our own shipyard volunteers. We are now restoring the 1927 coastal steamer *John Oxley* one of the last remaining ships of her type in the world. The *Oxley* will return to full operation and be in survey to carry passengers.

James Craig is open to the public every day, except when sailing. Offshore public day sails take place every other weekend and there is usually an annual one-month voyage to an interstate port. The ship is also used for alongside functions, including weddings. The steamers effectively work as charter vessels, taking pre-booked groups on Sydney Harbour tours. Specialist educational tours are also organised.

All the activities are designed to build audiences for the Fleet, whether it be visitors to the ships, passengers on board them when sailing, or members and volunteers who join the Fleet as a result of exposure to its vessels.

Does it all work? The honest answer is - most of the time.

So to return to the question I was set in this paper: Operational heritage; an economic millstone, or an opportunity for reaching new audiences?

My answer? On balance, opportunity wins.

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