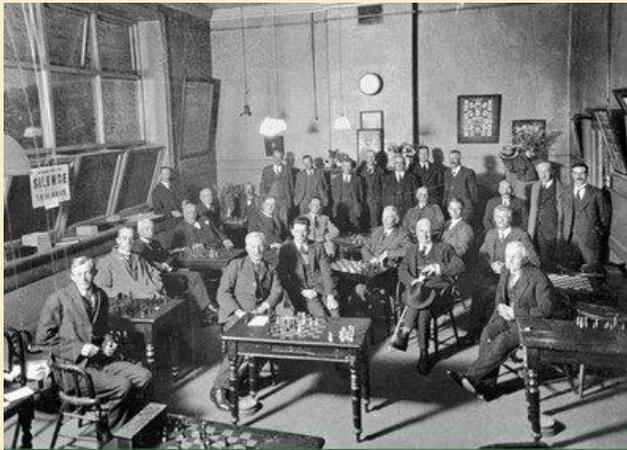


MECHANICS' INSTITUTES

Mechanics' Institutes, along with Schools of Arts and other similar institutions, played a vital role in the social and educational life of the Australian colonies between the late 1820s and early twentieth century. Most townships and many metropolitan regions around the country had at least one building dedicated to fostering community wellbeing. In this respect they invariably included a library, meeting and lecture rooms, an entertainment hall, and games rooms. As one of (if not the only) venue for entertainment in many regional towns the institutes were used by touring minstrel and burlesque troupes during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. As entrepreneurial activity in regional Australia increased from the 1910s, resulting in new and better set up theatres and picture houses, they gradually fell out of favour as theatrical venues.



Games Room, Ballarat Mechanics Institute

Source: *Art and Architecture, mainly.*



Prahran Mechanics Institute (Victoria)

Source: *Prahran Mechanics Institute Victorian History Library.*

In the nineteenth century the term mechanic meant artisan or working man. The origins of the movement named after them can be traced to Scotland in 1800 when Dr George Birkbeck of Glasgow's Andersonian Institute began presenting lectures to local mechanics about new technology. These became very popular because Birkbeck offered them without fees. It was also a time when formal education was largely unavailable to the working class. In 1921 the Edinburgh School of Arts became the first building dedicated to the education and leisure of mechanics. Its success led to a Mechanics Institutes being opened in Glasgow in 1923 and shortly afterwards in Liverpool, England (1923). The movement then spread quickly, with institutes being set up throughout the United Kingdom. By the mid-1820s the movement had also spread to many parts of the British Empire. In *Exhibiting Electricity*, K. G. Beauchamp notes:

The effect of the growth of mechanics' institutes in Britain had a strong influence also on the inauguration of similar bodies in British territories abroad. Mechanics' institutes were established in Sydney and Hobart in Australia, Wellington in New Zealand, in Calcutta and Bombay in India, Canton in China and several locations in Canada.

In the United mechanics' institutes had been in operation since 1826 when the first of these was organised in Boston. Others were established shortly afterwards in Ohio and Maryland and by the 1840s some hundreds were in operation throughout America (48).

The Mechanics' Institute was not the only such movement to be established during the nineteenth century. Others included Schools of Arts, Temperance Halls, Assembly Halls, Polytechnic Halls, and Athenaeums.

Most of these institutions served as means of helping lift their level of education for the working class, and in particular adults. In this respect they provided opportunities for developing skills, particularly technical skills, for men. The institutes were often given financial assistance from local businesses and industrialists who saw benefit in the town or district having more knowledgeable and skilled employees. The Mechanics' Institutes were also an attempt provide alternative pastimes to gambling and drinking in pubs. In addition to housing a library and one or more rooms for lectures and classes, each institute would also include an auditorium for concerts, exhibitions and other types of entertainment. Each institute was run locally:

It was a voluntary self-help association, set up for the workers of a town, assisted by a few leading residents who had money and education. The workers had to raise, by means of small weekly fees, a fund to be expended in the instruction of the members. And the institutes could also be funded by local industrialists who would benefit from having skilled workers. Trustees and committee members were dedicated to the improvement of their local communities. Education in science and literature was perfectly acceptable; subjects like religion and politics were not ("Mechanics' Institutes 1: The Victorian History," n. pag.).

The Mechanics Institutes and other institutions were one of the most important aspects of Australian social life in cities, and more importantly regional towns throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, almost every town and small community in the Australian colonies established one or more of these institutions, and it has been estimated that over 2000 existed in Australian towns, city suburbs and rural districts by the 1920.



The library in the Ballarat Mechanics Institute (1909)
Source: Museum Victoria

The first Mechanics' Institute to be established in Australia was in Hobart in 1827. Two years later the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* criticised New South Wales for not following Tasmania's lead:

We perceive by the Hobart Town papers, that the Mechanics' Institute of that place is still in existence. It is not at all to the credit of New South Wales that in so important a branch of intellectual improvement she has permitted herself to be outstripped by the younger colony; and we earnestly hope that some effort will be speedily made to introduce that invaluable instrument of popular instruction. The town of Sydney abounds with young persons who would gladly avail themselves of such an opportunity of storing their minds with scientific knowledge, and who would willingly exchange those vapid amusements which are now their only refuge from ennui (18 July 1929, 2).

A Sydney institute was eventually opened in 1833.

LAST Night But One of the Nelson Family's Musical Entertainment, at the Mechanics' Institution This Evening, Thursday. 32978

THE Nelson Family's Musical Entertainment will take place this evening, Thursday, at the Mechanics' Institution. 32977

CONCERT—This Evening, Thursday, Mechanics' Institution, by the Nelson Family. 32979

"ROMANCE and Reality," will be Performed this evening, Thursday, by the Nelson Family in addition to the Concert. 32980

FIRST Night of a New Petite Comedy, by the author of Quix's Colonial, entitled, "Romance and Reality," This Evening, Thursday, at the Mechanics' Institution. 32983

MECHANICS' Institution.—The Nelson Family Musical Entertainment This Evening, Thursday Part 1—Concert. Part 2—The New Piece written by Mr. W. N. Ashurst, entitled "Romance and Reality." 32984

FOR This Night only.—"Romance and Reality," Mechanics' Institution. 32985

FOR Full Particulars of the Musical Entertainment given by the Nelson Family, this evening at Programme. 32986

Other early institutes included Newcastle in 1835, and Melbourne in 1839 (it was renamed the Melbourne Athenaeum in 1873). From the 1850s, Mechanics' Institutes quickly spread throughout Victoria wherever a hall, library or school was needed. Although over 1200 Mechanics' Institutes were built in Victoria only a little over 500 remain today, and only six still operate their lending library services. The *Official Yearbook of New South Wales* for 1917 records, too, that in 1912 that state had 433 institutes (with a total of 47,749 members). The largest of the institutes was the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, which in 1915 had a membership of 2,133 and a Library of 33,412 books.

The Mechanics Institutes were popular venues for touring minstrel and burlesque troupes during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. In 1906, for example, J.C. Bain expanded his entrepreneurial activities beyond Tasmania and into regional Victoria, operating initially out of the Mechanics' Institutes in both Bendigo and Ballarat.

Argus (Melbourne) 15 Sept. 1853, 8.

Local minstrel troupes also sprang up in regional communities, and made use of the institutes for public performances (often as benefits). Other theatrical enterprises, including drama, musical concerts (both amateur and professional) and from the early 1900s film exhibitions, were also presented.

As entrepreneurial activity in regional Australia increased from the 1910s the institutes largely fell out of favour due to competition from newer, bigger and better set up theatres and picture houses.

BALL AND SUPPER,
 AT THE
MECHANICS' INSTITUTE, SOUTH
BRISBANE,
 On **TUESDAY, OCTOBER 25.**

Double Tickets, 7s. 6d. each; Single, 5s.
 May be had at the Principal Hotels in Town.
W. H. M'QUAKER, Caterer.

N.B.—Boats will ply at the Corporation
 Ferry during the night.

Brisbane Courier 22 Oct. 1864, 1.

M ECHANICS' INSTITUTE.
 LAST TWO NIGHTS
 OF THE
ENGLISH GLEE AND BULESQUE OPERA
COMPANY.
 COMPLIMENTARY FAREWELL BENE-
 FIT TO MR. W. H. BENT,
 The People's Favorite, who will be supported by
 several Gentlemen Amateur Christy Minstrels.
MR. MELVYN in New Ballads, Duets, &c.
MISS M. A. LIDDLE in Choice Vocal Gems.
MR. LINLY NORMAN will perform the
PRINCE ALFRED WALTZES, by W. H. Spiller.

To conclude with the
CARNIVAL D'AFRIQUE,
 In which Mr. Bent will appear.

Doors open at 7-30, performance to commence
 at 8 o'clock. Carriages may be ordered at 10.15.
 Reserved Seats, 2s.; Back Seats, 1s. Tickets
 may be had and seats secured at the Mechanics'
 Institute, and at Webb's Hotel.

Mercury (Hobart) 11 Aug. 1868, 1.

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. In "The Mechanics' Institute" (*Companion to Tasmanian History*), Stefan Petrow writes: "Most Mechanics' Institutes failed in their educational aims and became congenial places of resort for middle-class patrons, including women. The libraries pandered to their non-demanding tastes, and lectures proved less attractive than musical performances and entertainments of various kinds, such as penny readings. While institute buildings have survived, sometimes as community centres or libraries, the worthy ideals of the founders' self-improvement, self-discipline, class co-operation and cultural egalitarianism have long been forgotten."
2. Located at 188 Collins Street, Melbourne, the Athenaeum is one of the oldest existing public institutions in Victoria. Originally called the Melbourne Mechanics' Institute (1839) it was expanded in 1846 to the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution and School of Arts. In this respect it played a key role in the establishment of Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria. The building was eventually completed in 1842. The Institution changed its name to the Melbourne Athenaeum in 1873. At that time, as now, a focal point was the library. In 1877, membership was 1681 and in 1879 there were 30,000 visits to the library. In 1880 it was reported "that the floor of the large hall was the only one in Melbourne expressly constructed for dancing." The front of the building was rebuilt in 1885 and 1886.

Athenaeum (Melb).

Source: State Library of Victoria.

► For individual Mechanics' Institutes see **Theatres & Venues** section.



Geelong Mechanic's Institute (1856-1926)

L: Original building. At some stage it was given a second storey. **R:** Hand coloured engraving by Albert Cooke (1836-1902). Originally published in the *Illustrated Australian News* 30 Mar. 1868. Source: *Antique Print Room*.

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Nowra Mechanics' Institute.
Source: Victorian Information Technology Teachers' Association.

**MECHANICS' INSTITUTE,
SINGLETON,**
Direction Dix & Baker, Ltd.

The Best in Vaudeville.
Selected from the World's Leading
Centres, without regard to cost.

**NEXT MONDAY & TUESDAY NIGHTS,
NEXT MONDAY & TUESDAY NIGHTS,
April 20th and 21st.**

Direct from a Triumphant Season at
the Victoria Theatre, Newcastle.

**DIX & BAKER'S TOURING
PLAYERS.**

A Wonderful and Colossal Galaxy of
Talent, including—
**SIX NEW & ORIGINAL SPECIALTY
ATTRACTIONS.**
**SIX NEW & ORIGINAL SPECIALTY
ATTRACTIONS.**

Singleton Argus (NSW) 16 Apr. 1914, 3.

A Theatre Sensation.

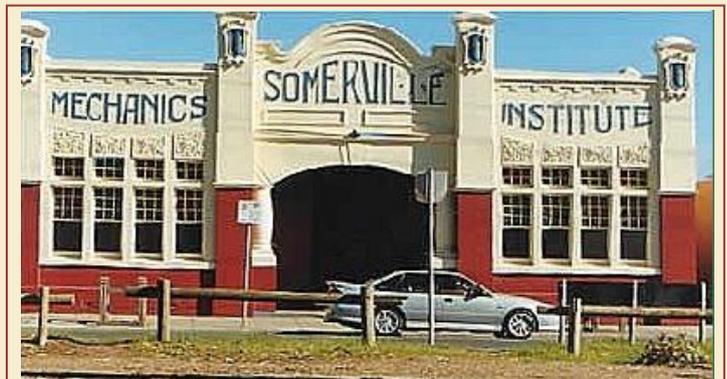
BENZINE CATCHES FIRE.

FAINTING ACTRESSES.

Ballarat, Friday. — A sensation was caused at the hall of the Mechanics' Institute to-night during a performance by the James Bain troupe of entertainers. An attendant while engaged under the stage in connection with the preparation of the limelight illuminations accidentally dropped a lighted match into a tin of benzine, which immediately burst into flame.

A dense volume of smoke arose, and, sweeping around the stage, found its way into the dressing-rooms of the actresses, a number of whom, thinking the theatre had caught fire, rushed in a half-dressed state into the hall among the audience. Several of the young ladies fainted, and consequently were unable to fill their respective parts in the entertainment. One of them, Miss Ada Delroy, collapsed on the stage.

Considerable alarm also prevailed among the audience, and the fire bells of the city and town rang out alarms. The fire, however, was extinguished with the appliances in the hall before the arrival of the firemen. Very little damage was caused by the fire.



Somerville (Victoria)
Source: Art and Architecture, mainly...

North Western Advocate and Emu Bay Times (Tasmania) 5 June 1906, 3.

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