Pioneer Women and Social Memory: Shifting Energies, Changing Tensions

Shannon Schedlich-Day

BA (Hons)

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Statement of Originality

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. Research for this thesis was begun as a candidate enrolled at Flinders University in January 2002 and was continued under this enrolment until the formal transfer of my candidature to the University of Newcastle in April 2007. The research and writing of this thesis has been under the sole and continuing supervision of Dr Victoria Haskins, who took up an appointment at the University of Newcastle in April 2006, throughout my entire candidature from January 2002 to May 2008. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the ideal of the Australian pioneer woman has been so broadly circulated in Australian national social memory. Through the study of the dissemination of the social memory in a range of diverse sources, I will scrutinise the tensions that have existed around this ideal; how these tensions have been reconciled into a dominant narrative; and how they have shifted through the time of the inception of the legend to the present day.

In its approach to the creation of social memory, to understand the changing influences of this particular memory in the Australian psyche, this thesis draws upon a number of types of sources for history that have tended to be overlooked – such as headstones, popular and family histories, and museum exhibitions. Significantly, the thesis will examine the role that such non-traditional accounts of the past have played in the transmission of social memory. Most people do not gain their knowledge of the past through intensive and exhaustive research; instead, they appropriate, as their own, the messages and meanings that they are fed through a variety of modes.

The relationship between sources and social memory is a symbiotic one, where the sources are informed by social memory, and then in turn shape and elaborate social memory. In so many cases, the very creation of sources happens within the parameters of the national social memory. These sources are then drawn upon by subsequent generations to form their own social memory of pioneer women.

This thesis will demonstrate that social memory is not rigid, but instead is subjected to shifting energies and changing tensions; and explain, through a discussion of a diverse range of sources through which it is disseminated, how memory remains fluid so that it is able to respond to the needs of the community that it serves. Australia’s pioneer woman remains an important aspect of the national identity – her creation and, thus, significance situated firmly in the present.