
General Gordon Memorial



B4349 General Gordon Memorial

Location

Spring Street, EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002 - Property No B4349

Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

Level of significance

-

Heritage Listing

Vic. War Heritage Inventory

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - May 4, 2005

STATEMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE:

What is significant?

This statue of General Gordon is another casting of Hamo Thornycroft's original which was sculpted after Gordon's death and erected in London in 1888. The Melbourne version was paid for by public subscription and unveiled in June 1889. The bronze figure of Gordon stands, in an informal pose, on a tall stone pedestal on which there are four bas-reliefs illustrating significant stages of Gordon's life. Thornycroft was a successful and respected British sculptor of the late Victorian era, a member of 'The New Sculpture Movement'.

How is it significant?

The statue of General Gordon is significant for aesthetic, historic and social reasons at National level.

Why is it significant?

The statue of General Gordon is significant for aesthetic reasons, being the work of Hamo Thornycroft, one of the Britain's most successful and respected sculptors of the late Victorian era, a member of the dominant sculpture movement at that time, 'The New Sculpture'. Thornycroft's portrait works are among his most admired and the Gordon monument is his only public work in Australia, except for a marble piece held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Bronzed plaster versions of two of the panels were exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1889. The influence of the attitude in which Thornycroft has depicted Gordon can be seen on later Australian artists and artisans when creating monuments and stained glass windows memorialising the Boer War and the First World War: the citizen as soldier, standing at ease rather than triumphal.

The statue of General Gordon is significant for historic reasons as it commemorates a significant figure of the day, General Charles George Gordon, whose life is commemorated, in Britain, by many monuments in addition to that by Hamo Thornycroft (in St Paul's Cathedral by Sir (Joseph) Edward Boehm, in Westminster Abbey and at Chatham, both by Edward Onslow Ford, and in Rochester Cathedral). The monument also commemorates a significant event of the day: Gordon's death in 1885 at the storming of Khartoum by the Mahdi, the spiritual and temporal leader of a Muslim uprising in Sudan. For Australia, there is also historical significance in the fact that news of this event was one of the first major pieces of news to arrive by the under-water telegraph cable laid in 1872 that linked Australia to Britain.

The Gordon monument also represents Victoria's participation in Australia's first steps on a world stage: while New South Wales sent a contingent to Sudan and declined Victoria's offer of soldiers, the people of Melbourne then needed to make a different gesture, with this magnificent monument as a result. The work also has historical significance as Melbourne's third public statue to commemorate an individual (following the Burke and Wills, erected 1865, and the Redmond Barry, 1887) and has one of the most important positions for sculpture in the city. The statue of General Gordon is significant for social reasons as it commemorates a person whose character was held to represent the highest ideals of the Victorian age, displaying steadfast courage as well as charity. Gordon's death caused an outpouring of public grief in Australia as well as Britain: the Melbourne unveiling was described in a newspaper of the day as, 'rather the canonising of a saint than the crowning of a hero'. Gordon had also fulfilled perhaps the ultimate criterion for being a hero: he had died at his post. Just as Burke and Wills are more famous than Sturt, and Scott is more known than Amundsen, Gordon's death secured his place in history when memory of specific deeds has faded.

Hermes Number 125934

Property Number

Physical Description 1

The bronze full-length figure of General Gordon is standing looking down, lost in thought. The pose is informal, arms folded, his cane (his famous 'magic wand') under his left arm, right hand to the chin and left hand firmly grasping a small bible clenched beneath his right elbow; the weight is on the right foot with the left on a broken cannon. The work is rich in detail: Gordon is wearing a crumpled army patrol jacket, belt undone, and without hat, sword or weapon; his binocular field glasses are slung on his back. Thornycroft wished to represent a military environment but also to express Gordon's dislike of bloodshed and war and Gordon's brother also wanted a representation that was 'as little military as possible'. Thornycroft, by showing Gordon with down-cast eyes perhaps avoided the problem of conveying his subject's apparently piercing gaze.

Getsy describes the pose as 'exemplary in its complicated bodily arrangement that expands on traditional contrapposto (a natural pose with the weight of one leg, the shoulder, and hips counterbalancing one another). The arrangement of the body echoes the psychological traits [Thornycroft] ascribed to Gordon through a face that conveys both strength and thoughtfulness' [Getsy in Bostrom].

The figure is facing south, making it difficult to study or take a clear photograph against the light.

The pedestal is stone, 5.65 metres high, and the figure, 3.30 metres high. Around the pedestal, there are four bronze bas-reliefs illustrating significant stages of Gordon's life, which is also decorated with bronze wreaths and

swags. The work is surrounded by a circle of low posts supporting a link chain. The figure is signed on the base (on the side under Gordon's right foot) 'Thornycroft A.R.A.' (Thornycroft was elected R.A. in 1888, the year of this work, but presumably it was finished before the election) and shows the founder's mark 'J. Moore' on the base of the figure.

Intactness

The work appears to be in good condition.

Conservation was carried out during the first half of 1994. Conservators found the bronze had been uncleanly cut with numerous fissures, spots of porosity and sand holes, some of which had been repaired with alloy insertions. The 1994 conservation included removal of pollutive salts and copper stains. The work was done by the Victorian Centre for the Conservation of Cultural Material Inc (a full report is in the Melbourne City Council file). During this work, the conservators' work shed was set on fire by a young man protesting against the Boer War: the statue required treatment to remove smoke damage.

By 1995, anti-pigeon spikes had been applied.

Veterans Description for Public

The General Gordon Memorial, located on Spring Street Melbourne, commemorates the life of the General who was killed in Sudan, Africa in 1884. The memorial comprises of a bronze full-length figure of General Gordon standing looking down, lost in thought. The pose is informal, arms folded, his cane (his famous 'magic wand') under his left arm, right hand to the chin and left hand firmly grasping a small bible clenched beneath his right elbow; the weight is on the right foot with the left on a broken cannon. The work is rich in detail: Gordon is wearing a crumpled army patrol jacket, belt undone, and without hat, sword or weapon; his binocular field glasses are slung on his back. Thornycroft wished to represent a military environment but also to express Gordon's dislike of bloodshed and war and Gordon's brother also wanted a representation that was 'as little military as possible'. Thornycroft, by showing Gordon with down-cast eyes perhaps avoided the problem of conveying his subject's apparently piercing gaze.

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Charles George Gordon was born in Woolwich (east of London) on 28 January 1833 into an Army family; he entered the Royal Military Academy in 1848 and obtained a commission in the Royal Engineers in 1852. Gordon served in the Crimea 1855-1859 when he was promoted to captain. After a year in England, he served in China 1860-1865, where his outstanding military and diplomatic achievements were rewarded by both China and Britain and he earned the nickname 'Chinese Gordon'. He then became commanding royal engineer at Gravesend for six years, superintending construction of forts for defence of the Thames. His spare time was spent working for the poor and sick of the area, taking a special interest in the infirmary and the ragged schools.

In 1871, Gordon again went overseas and, by 1874, was appointed governor of the equatorial provinces of Central Africa, a turbulent area at that time. When his attempts to end the slave trade were frustrated, he resigned but soon was made governor-general of a larger area with some successes; however, he again resigned. In 1880, Gordon was once more invited to advise the Chinese government, followed by service in Mauritius and the Seychelles, then in Basutoland and in the Holy Land.

In 1884, because of turmoil in the Sudan, Gordon was commissioned to evacuate the British army from the country and establish an organised independent government. Rather than evacuate, Gordon tried to defend but, after some success, he found himself hemmed in by the Mahdi, a spiritual and temporal leader of the Muslim uprising. The British government delayed raising a rescue force with the result that the Mahdi stormed Khartoum and Gordon was killed, a few days before the relief contingent arrived.

The outburst of popular grief in Britain, the colonies and other countries was great. A day of national mourning was observed and special services held. The British parliament voted funds for a national monument to be placed in Trafalgar Square and commissioned Hamo Thornycroft, the statue being unveiled on 15 October 1888. Other English monuments to Gordon include one in St Paul's Cathedral, by Sir (Joseph) Edgar Boehm, a bronze bust in

Westminster Abbey and a statue of Gordon on a camel at Chatham barrack square, both by Edward Onslow Ford, and a memorial in Rochester Cathedral. The Gordon Boys' Home was also founded in Gordon's honour. In Australia, New South Wales raised a contingent of troops while Melbourne erected another casting of Thornycroft's sculpture. In 1885 (the year of Gordon's death), a bust of Gordon was installed in Boort's shire hall, being part of the newly constituted shire of Gordon (this is now in the Boort Historical Museum). In 1887, a new technical institute was established in Geelong and named for Gordon. In 1891, the Bendigo Art Gallery obtained a copy of Lowes Cato Dickinson's 1885 painting, Gordon's Last Watch, the first official memorial portrait of Gordon (the Gallery sold the work in 1995). Frederick White had installed in his house, Booloominbah (now part of the University of New England), a stained glass window by Horbury Hunt that depicts the life of Gordon.

This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.

For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>