

## **A PLACE TO CATCH THE EYE**

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It is easy to forget that we are surrounded by history. We bustle along in the morning, face down, crown-first into the cold, weaving through people and past sandstone, but rarely pausing to notice the intricacies of a building's exterior or ponder what our streets may have once looked like. Often it takes a tourist's observant eye, emphatic point or frantic photography to remind us of the fascination behind the everyday. When I remember to stop and look, I like to imagine how people used to live, and how their particular historical contexts influenced their thoughts, opportunities, fashion, and daily life. Historical buildings are particularly inspiring in this regard because of the ability for the writer to stand in the very same rooms and walk on the very same streets of the historical characters they are bringing to life. There are many secrets and stories hidden within the walls of an enduring piece of heritage waiting to be given voice.

It is a day to be inside, a classic chilly drizzly July morning that taunts me with short bursts of sun amidst the wet, misty greyness. After a bustling morning of convincing myself to brave the cool air and make the perilous heat-absent journey to the shower, I chow down some breakfast and taxi my mother down to the airport as the weather grew ever darker. A quick lunch and a slow drive into the city follows, cars daring not to take on the rain with their wheels. I crawl up levels of the Argyle Street car park, performing a delicate first-gear balancing act between my clutch and accelerator with the occasional intervention of the handbrake. After a stop at one of my favourite coffee spots for caffeine fuel, I walk briskly, armed with laptop, to Hadley's Orient Hotel.

I am seated in a spot at which the bar and the high tea area converge. There is swinging big-band music playing and I can't help but tap my toes and bob my head a little. Elegant

chandeliers hang from the ceiling above, a baby grand piano sits in the corner, and the cushions and carpet evoke the feel of colonial decadence. The high tea area is filled with white chairs above a parquet floor with a high ceiling that allows natural light to stream in – a tiny glimpse of a summer garden party amidst the cold and the wet. I can see glimpses of floors above and am surprised at the building's extensive space. Entering the Hotel and discovering the depth, the intricacies, and the high ceilings is like opening up Mary Poppins' deceptively small-looking carpetbag!

It is a Friday afternoon and the Hotel is relatively quiet. Whilst the building's entrance faces busy Murray Street, I am deaf to the traffic and other city noises outside. A couple of women visit to have a look around soon after I arrive – one with shoulder-length grey hair and the other with a distinctive sculpted white bob. In a challenge between her hair and the outside weather, I believe the latter to have come off second-best. The ladies look around and seem to comment on the recent changes and renovations, and perhaps reminisce on a previous memory. I wonder if they used to visit here when they were younger – for a drink in their finest frocks or for high tea with their mothers. Uncovering stories of those past are one of the main attractions of a historical space such as Hadley's.

We marvel at the idea that a building has witnessed more of history than we ever will, and that people who are no longer with us have stood in the very same room, walked up the very same stairs, or looked out at the very same view that we do, albeit with the customary changes that come with the march of time. Television shows such as the ABC's *Who's Been Sleeping in My House?* appeal directly to this curiosity, asking questions like, what did this place mean to someone else? Who frequented it? What happened to them? I find myself pondering this aspect as I stare out at the restored Victorian splendour that surrounds me as I type. A little research gleans a fruitful list of colourful characters, some whose fame was only a

product of their day and others whose names continue to live on. Hadley's now has a suite named in honour of one of its most famous guests, though the building's brush with such fame is not quite the glorious tale that one might expect.

It's 1912, the first days of March. A scruffy looking man barges in to the Hotel, a husky-on-leash in each hand. The dogs are excitable, shaking off their coat of cabin fever, but the man yanks at their leads to order calm. Patrons look up from their newspapers and down past their spectacles to observe the commotion before them, and the man, looking a common sailor, hunches forward, eager to avoid anyone's gaze. The receptionist greets him and asks if he has a booking, to which the man shakes his head and averts his eyes. The receptionist gives a pleasant smile but frowns once he lowers his head and begins flipping frantically through the bookings list. There is only one room free, the cheapest of the range, but by this man's appearance it is likely more than suitable. The receptionist also informs the man that he will have to relocate his dogs. The man begins arguing, words a mixture of English and something Scandinavian. He demands to see the manager, and the receptionist willingly obliges, thankful to be absolved of this particular customer service matter. Howard Henry Hadley, of parents with a penchant for alliteration, appears. He observes the man's weathered face, the skin under his eyes and jowls stretched and hanging wearily; a contrast to Hadley's crisp suit, combed beard and curled Edwardian moustache. The man leans forward and whispers his predicament, his dogs intermittently pulling at their leads, eager to explore the un-iced terrain. Hadley's eyes widen for a moment but he composes himself. He whispers his congratulations and assures the man that he will remain a sailor in these premises, despite the disappointment that his establishment cannot house the announcement of such a triumph. After the man acquiesces to relocating his dogs, Hadley beckons the receptionist and directs him to escort the sailor to his room, urging him that he is to treat the guest with the greatest hospitality. The receptionist nods, and begrudgingly carries the sailor's haggard luggage

towards the stairs. It is not until a fortnight later in the daily papers that he learns that the common sailor is none other but Roald Amundsen, returned from the South Pole.

Amundsen wrote in his diary that he was given a 'miserable little room' and that he had been 'treated like a tramp', but details of his disguise did not come until recent years. His appearance and behaviour was designed to keep his Antarctic triumph a secret from any local media, as he had made financial agreements with newspapers in Europe that news of his success would be announced through their outlets before any others. It was also an attempt to mislead others in to thinking the Pole was still there for the taking. Amundsen kept his crew aboard the ship, including 16 huskies, with reports stating that ladies of Sandy Bay complained of noise from barking. Uncovering a story such as this demonstrates that historical places still have stories to share and secrets to reveal, even many years after the characters have left the narrative.

There are also stories of the Hotel's presence to the everyday people of Hobart – ordinary citizens just like ourselves who were travelling, socialising, marrying, escaping, drinking, dining, dancing, and dreaming. I come across snapshot newspaper articles in *The Mercury* that detail events and gatherings that have taken place at Hadley's. The columns are a kind of journalistic ancestor to today's 'Out and About' colour-picture-plastered sections. An entry from Friday 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1939, with the bold heading of *SEASONAL PARTY* details that a gathering was given at Hadley's with '*cocktails and savouries served in the lounge, where floral decorations were most effective*'. The hostess, Mrs Benjamin, was clothed in '*an attractive moss green frock stitched with gold, and a felt hat featuring a modish snood*'. Another, from Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> July, 1941 reports of a *SHERRY PARTY* that took place, hosted by Mrs G Taylor and her husband. The hostess '*donned a becoming frock in a pretty soft shade of green, which had alternate rows of fine valenciennes lace and pin-tucking forming a crossed effect on the bodice*

*and short sleeves*'. In the absence of colour photography, these sumptuous descriptions offer a vision of Hadley's in Hobart society in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I'm struck by the detail and frequency of such entries, and can imagine men and women of the time adorning themselves in their finery to enter the doors of a building that already boasted historical elegance and charm for its time. I look over at the parquet floor covered in white furniture for today's high teas. The furniture fades away and images of fluttering shirt tails, flowing gowns and jewels that glitter in time with the dashing chandeliers above. Guests move around with flat conical champagne glasses, puffs of cigars hover and circle like small clouds, and the big band music of the time trumpets and hums with swing. Perhaps in wartime, both these parties and their subsequent published reports offered escapism and a glimpse of decadence at a time of rationing and uncertainty.

Immersing ourselves in historical places is also a kind of escapism for us. Why does a historical place fascinate us? As I move around the hotel I think about the facilities that it has offered over time. An advertisement I discover from 1934 boasts of 'PRIVATE DINING ROOMS FOR BANQUETS AND PARTIES, INCLUDING BRIDGE AND MAH JONG PARTIES...ELECTRIC ELEVATOR, AND BEDROOMS WITH PRIVATE BATHROOMS'. Another from the same year proclaims 'HOT AND COLD WATER IN ALL BEDROOMS'. I'm amazed at the sense of modernity or innovation that our predecessors had, and perhaps deep down feel a sense of admiration of what they achieved without the conveniences we enjoy now. Learning how a place operated at a different period can make us nostalgic for the past, for a slower world where messages could only move by mail and telegram and people had different clothing for different meals throughout the day. And there are also still stories to be revealed. During the most recent renovation, a hidden chamber with various archival material and artefacts was discovered. A historical place such as Hadley's therefore not only takes us back in time, but also keeps the

memories of those who have long passed, alive. And while the people are long gone, a building can survive through the ages, witnessing more time than we can ever hope to.

There is an image from the 1870s taken in which members of the Tasmanian Club sit atop Hadley's balcony, all shiny top hats, black jackets and grey beards amidst the sepia-snapped surroundings. They look out to a wide, dirt road, traversed by horse-and-cart, and the sandstone structure of St David's Cathedral. As I stand at the same spot, much of my view is now different – the constant stream of motor vehicles, large bold signs of well-known brands, a mixture of casual and work-attired commuters. But, like the sandstone, the Hotel, its views and its stories endure. We just have to take the time to look.