
NAME: John Dowie's *Three Rivers Fountain*

Address: Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square, Adelaide

SUMMARY OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE:

Description:

The Three Rivers Fountain is set in a hexagonal pool in the centre of the northern half of Victoria Square. At the centre is a triangular fountain sculpture facing north. At the apex a column with an aluminium basin - suggesting a crown - supports four fountain jets of water – a primary central jet, with three others at the side. Below at each corner of the triangle are three naked figures sculpted in an elongated form and constructed with plaster and aluminium. They are seated on granite pedestals and represent, respectively, an Aboriginal man holding an ibis and two women, one holding a heron and the other a swan. Jets of water issue from the beaks of the birds. Water from the main column jets rains down continuously on the three figures and into the pool below. Below the sculpted figures more jets of water issue from the side of the structure into the pool. The water from the fountains is continuously recycled.

A plaque on opposite northern edge of the Three Rivers Fountain records the sculptor and the meaning of the sculpted figures..

All components within the hexagon are integral to the Fountain.

Statement of Heritage Significance:

The Three Rivers Fountains is of heritage significance because it demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic and technical accomplishment, and because it was produced as a major work by a South Australian sculptor of national standing at the height of his creative powers.

Relevant Criteria (Under Section 16 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*):

- (a) it demonstrates important aspects of the evolution or pattern of the State's history.
This criterion is not applicable.
- (b) it has rare, uncommon or endangered qualities that are of cultural significance
This criterion is not applicable.
- (c) it may yield information that will contribute to an understanding of the State's history, including its natural history
This criterion is not applicable.
- (d) it is an outstanding representative of a particular class of places of cultural significance.
This criterion is not applicable.

(e) **it demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment.**

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(f) it has strong cultural or spiritual associations for the community or a group within it.
This criterion is not applicable.

(g) **it has a special association with the life or work of a person of historical importance.**

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RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the ***Three Rivers Fountain, Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square, Adelaide*** be provisionally entered in the South Australian Heritage Register.

NAME: John Dowie's *Three Rivers Fountain*

ASSESSMENT OF HERITAGE VALUE:

(e) it demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic and technical accomplishment.

The fountain demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic and technical accomplishment. Commissioned by the Corporation of the City of Adelaide in 1963 to commemorate the visit of Queen Elizabeth to Adelaide that year it was conceived and developed by sculptor John Dowie, who worked on the project continuously over the next five years in consultation with a planning committee appointed by the Council for the purpose.

The planning phase included several redesigns and revisions but the final product achieves the objective behind the original concept. It was intended to be an 'object of interest and drama', visually in proportion and linked to the statues of Charles Sturt and John McDouall Stuart on, respectively, the north western and north eastern corners of the sector. The sense of drama, as well as accurate proportion and scale, is reinforced by the realignment of King William Street from the then straight line intersecting the Square to its present oval shape around it. This allows the fountain to become the focal point of the northern sector, drawing pedestrians towards it.

The three sculpted human figures and birds are produced in stylised and elongated form. The technique succeeds as a device in creating a sense of dynamism and tension, suggesting to the viewer that the humans, utterly dependent on the water the rivers provide, are reaching out to honour or placate the 'river gods' of the Murray, Onkaparinga and Torrens Rivers, while at the same time the three birds – equally dependent on the river for survival - are straining to be free from their human captors. Dowie believed that the use of a male Aboriginal figure for the major river, the Murray, suggested its relatively greater importance to Adelaide than the smaller – but still significant – Onkaparinga and Torrens Rivers. The sculpted forms, play of water on the figures from the fountain jets, and the boldness and scale of the fountain as a whole achieves Dowie's vision of a dramatic focus and central feature for the northern sector of the Square.

The fountain reflects not only a high degree of creativity in conception, but also skill in execution. Dowie produced the three figures and associated birds from plaster and aluminium. He undertook much of the construction work for the fountain itself, including the frame for the aluminium basin at the apex of the fountain and the human figures, which were cast by Castalloy Limited from an alloy provided by Alcoa Ltd.

(g) it has a special association with the life or work of a person of historical importance.

The fountain was produced by a South Australian artist of historical importance, sculptor John Dowie. Dowie's work adorns many parts of the city and suburbs, as well as featuring prominently interstate. Among his noteworthy commissions are the bronzes at the Victor Richardson gates at Adelaide Oval, the four aviators at the Smith Brothers Memorial, Adelaide Airport, the life-sized statue of Queen Elizabeth II in Brisbane, the and the Tjilbruke Monument at Kingston Park, as well as numerous portrait busts including Patrick White, Joan Sutherland, Lord Casey, Douglas Mawson, Edmund Hillary and others. Examples of his work are represented in collections at the Australian National Gallery and State Galleries

in Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart. Dowie undertook more than 50 public sculpture commissions in Australia and overseas.

Born in Adelaide in 1915, Dowie showed a precocious talent for art and at age 10 was undertaking modelling classes at the South Australian School of Art. He was inspired by the work of English sculptor Jacob Epstein and sought to emulate Epstein's vigorous, impressionistic style in his subsequent work. He enlisted for military service in 1940 with the 2/43rd Battalion and in 1942 participated in the siege of Tobruk in Libya. He was an early member of the Contemporary Art Society of South Australia, a breakaway group from the Royal South Australian Society of Arts, which he considered to be too steeped in classical traditions. He became close friends with a number of well-known and highly regarded South Australian artists including David Dallwitz, Hans and Nora Heysen, Jacqueline Hicks, and Dorit Black. In the 1950s and 1960s he took a number of extended study trips abroad, meeting various European masters including Epstein, who was a continuing influence.

He is a well respected figure in Australia's artistic community, although there are divergent views among art critics as to the overall merit of his work. On one hand Andrew McCullough in the *Australian Encyclopedia of Art* (1994) regarded him as a 'nationally respected and well-known figure'; Ken Scarlett in *Australian Sculpture* (1980), in praise of his work, remarked on his 'swift ability to seize essentials', while Michael Hedger, *Public Sculpture in Australia* (1995) singled out the *Three Rivers Fountain* as a 'strikingly original work' which exploited the 'strong angular shapes of the 1960s'. On the other hand Graeme Sturgeon, *The Development of Australian Sculpture 1788-1975* (1978) regarded the stylised figurative mode in which Dowie and others worked as 'conceptually weak', representing a 'superficial modernism rather than a genuine attempt to create a new idiom', and Giles Auty, *Weekend Australian*, (28-29 October 1995) offered his opinion that the 'elongation and stylisation of the figures hints at a short-lived vogue that found expression all over the world'. Auty went on to contrast this with Dowie's figures at the Victor Richardson Gates which he considered retained their freshness because they made 'little concession to current modes'. Despite his criticism of *The Three Fountains*, Auty had high praise for Dowie's work in general.

There is little doubt that Dowie's prodigious output, of consistently high aesthetic and technical quality had wide popular appeal. This is reflected by the extraordinarily high number of commissions he received, as well as by the number of the artist's works acquired by leading Australian art galleries. His work found favour with the public, and with kindred professional groups such as architects: the editorial of South Australian architectural journal *Building and Architecture* (1968) pronounced the *Three Rivers Fountain* to be 'the most outstanding aesthetic [sic.] addition to the City of Adelaide in recent years'. Dowie himself considered the *Three Rivers Fountain* to be his most important work, and the one by which he would be remembered. Dowie was also an educator, and spent considerable time teaching and mentoring young artists and sculptors. But it is as an artist and particularly as a sculptor that he will be remembered. In 1981 he was made a Member of the Order of Australia for his service to sculpture, and in 1997 he was granted Freedom of the City of Burnside. It is the sustained high quality, wide appeal and acceptance of his work that make him a person of historical importance.

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square has undergone a number of changes and revisions. A report to the Council (c.2002, undated: 3.1.33 *Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square Report*) refers to the possibility of there being fountains in each of the four quadrants of the Square in the 1870s. But this is based on pictorial evidence, with no written information to support it. The notion was revived in the 1960s following the visit of Queen Elizabeth to Adelaide in 1962, when Alderman J.C. Irwin (subsequently Mayor) proposed that a fountain be positioned in the

northern sector of the Square. Further development of the idea led to suggestions that the pavements be converted into lawns and gardens and that the north-south road alignment along King William Street change to create a diagonal traffic flow around the two large central islands, intersected from the east and west by Wakefield and Grote Streets. The fountain would then become a central feature of the northern sector.

In 1964 John Dowie was commissioned to design the fountain and joined a planning committee appointed by the Council. After meetings, discussions leading to numerous modifications and revisions the brief was summarised in the Council's *Annual Report* for 1966-67 as follows:

The base of the fountain will be hexagonal in shape with an overall width of 60 feet. In the centre of the large basin will be a massive column consisting of three segments approximately 10 feet 6 inches high with abutments 4 feet 6 inches high at the bottom of each to separate three pieces of sculpture. The sculpture will be likened to the three great rivers of South Australia, the Murray being depicted by an aboriginal figure with an ibis; the Torrens by a woman and a black swan; and the Onkaparinga by a woman with a heron. The sculpture will be large, in keeping with the proportions of the whole fountain and its setting in the Square.

Mounted on the central column will be a three pointed basin from which water will flow into a hexagonal basin some feet below. The sculpture and base will be cast in aluminium. Jets of water will rise some 15 feet or more into the air through the central basin, giving a total height of at least 30 feet. Other jets and plumes of water will flow out from the sides of the centre-piece. The central column will be surrounded by a smaller raised hexagonal basin from which water will flow into the main, low-level fountain basin. The ground level pool will be finished in mosaic tiling. Complementary jets will supplement the central display of water.

The dominant colour of the fountain will be white and it will be illuminated with white light.

By February 1967 the design had been finalised and approved, and John Dowie was formally commissioned to undertake the work.

Site works, including the changes of alignment to King William Street and the replacement of paved areas with lawns commenced later in 1967. The project was completed in time for the official opening by the Duke of Edinburgh on 28 May 1968. With rain on the day forcing a hurried transfer of the opening ceremony to the Town Hall, the Duke pressed a button, whereupon the fountain sprang into operation.

The project created much public interest, with local media following its progress closely. Crowds gathered to inspect the installation of the sculptures. On 1 May 1968 *Adelaide Advertiser* reporter Don Riddell commented:

In three weeks, when the water goes on, we shall be able to see if Dowie succeeded completely in the atmosphere he tried to create, an atmosphere of excitement, full of spirit to go with the sparkle of the water.

REFERENCES:

Books

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- Lock-Weir, T, *John Dowie: A Life in the Round*, 2002, Adelaide, Wakefield Press

McCulloch, A, *Encyclopedia of Australian Art, revised and updated by Susan McCulloch*, 1994, St Leonards NSW, Allen & Unwin

Scarlett, K, *Australian Sculpture*, 1980, West Melbourne, Nelson

Sturgeon, G, *The Development of Australian Sculpture 1788-1975*, 1978, London, Thames & Hudson

Journals/Magazines

Editorial, *Building & Architecture*, vol. 7 no. 4, 1968

Palmer, J, 'A master gives life to bronze and stone', *Heritage Living*, Spring 1999, p. 5

Newspapers

City Messenger report, 10 March 1999

Eastern Courier Messenger report, 15 October 1997

Sunday Mail article, 9 September 1979

The Advertiser reports and articles: 23 October 1965; 11 May 1968; 3 May 1968; 25 May 1968; 27 May 1968; 4 June 1968; 30 October 1969; 30 June 1981

Weekend Australian article, 28-29 October 1995

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Annual Reports, Town Clerk, 1962-63; 1965-66; 1966-67; 1967-68

Municipal Year Book, 1967-68, pp. 188-192

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Photograph, *Victoria Square – Commencement of Excavation for Fountain Area, 13.9.1967*

State Library of South Australia

Oral History Transcripts:

- Palmer, J, *Interview with John Dowie, 1999*
- Wilson, G and Sha, H, *Interviews with Vi Johns and John Dowie, 1991*

NAME: John Dowie's *Three Rivers Fountain*

SITE RECORD:

FORMER NAME: Not Applicable

DESCRIPTION OF PLACE: The Fountain is set in a hexagonal pool. At the centre is a triangular fountain sculpture facing north. At the apex a column with an aluminium basin - suggesting a crown - supports four fountain jets of water – a primary central jet, with three others at the side. Below at each corner of the triangle are three naked figures sculpted in an elongated form and constructed with plaster and aluminium. They are seated on granite pedestals and represent, respectively, an Aboriginal man holding an ibis and two women, one holding a heron and the other a swan. Jets of water issue from the beaks of the birds. Water from the main column jets rains down continuously on the three figures and into the pool below. Below the sculpted figures more jets of water issue from the side of the structure into the pool. The water from the fountains is continuously recycled.

A plaque on opposite northern edge of the Fountain records the sculptor and the meaning of the sculpted figures. It is desirable but not essential that it be retained.

All components within the hexagon are integral to the Fountain.

DATE OF COMPLETION: 20 February 1967 - 28 May 1968

REGISTER STATUS: **Description:** Nominated
Date: 14 February 2011

CURRENT USE: **Description:** Park/Garden Structures or Features
Dates: 1968

PREVIOUS USE(S): **Description:** Not Applicable
Dates:

ARCHITECT/DESIGNER: **Name:** John Dowie
Dates: 1915 - 2008

BUILDER: **Name:** Castalloy Limited (Basin)

	Dates:	1968
SUBJECT INDEXING:	Group:	Parks. Gardens and trees
	Category:	Park/Garden Structures or Features
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:	Description:	Adelaide City Council
LOCATION:	Unit No.:	
	Street No.:	
	Street Name:	Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square
	Town/Suburb:	Adelaide
	Post Code:	5000
LAND DESCRIPTION:	Title Type:	CR
	Volume:	5779
	Folio:	247
	Lot No.:	117
	Section:	FP 218073
	Hundred:	Adelaide
OWNER:	Name:	Adelaide City Council
	Address:	GPO box 2252
	Town/Suburb:	Adelaide
	Post Code:	5000

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Site Plan – *Three River Fountain*, Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square, Adelaide

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**Three Rivers Fountain, Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square, northern aspect.
Photograph G. Speirs, 21 June 2011**



**Sculpted figures and view to north along King William Street, Three Rivers Fountain,
Tarndanyangga/Victoria Square, southern aspect.
Photograph G. Speirs, 21 June 2011**