



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/LPMJ3817>

'Weston Bate, Richard Broome, Nicole Davis, Andrew May, and Helen Stitt, The Story of Melbourne's Lanes: Essential but Unplanned'

Simon Sleight

To cite this book review: Simon Sleight, 'Weston Bate, Richard Broome, Nicole Davis, Andrew May, and Helen Stitt, The Story of Melbourne's Lanes: Essential but Unplanned', *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 5 (September 2025): 210-211, <https://doi.org/10.52230/MTND7454>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Weston Bate, Richard Broome, Nicole Davis, Andrew May, and Helen Stitt, *The Story of Melbourne's Lanes: Essential but Unplanned* (Royal Historical Society of Victoria with the State Library Victoria, 2024), 268pp. Hardback. A\$49.95. ISBN: 978-1-8751-7312-9.

Since its first publication in 1994, Weston Bate's rich history of Melbourne's lanes has enjoyed high regard among urban historians, friends of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, and other interested parties drawn to the remarkable lattice of laneways that criss-cross the city. To mark the fortieth anniversary of Bate's book, a team of scholars and photographers has collaborated to produce an extended edition, taking the story into the twenty-first century, and supplementing the original text with fresh insights and innovations.

In the first half of the book, Bate's pioneering assessments have proved as solid as the bluestone foundations for which Melbourne is known. It was a pleasure to reengage with his distinctive prose. If a city's streets reveal its persistent skeleton, then for Bate the laneways represented its cartilage: vital connective tissue more easily prone to wear and tear. Naturalistic analogies – to backwaters, billabongs, birds (shops), and shoals of fish (customers) – punctuate the text. Here the city is a natural system, subject to its own rhythms. Change through time is well accounted for in the first chapters, grime and notorious instances of crime stick to and stalk the laneways, and as the pages are turned one learns of the efforts of reformers, anti-car campaigners, and of the ever-industrious denizens of Melbourne's narrowest streets. Changing residency patterns rendered some lanes vulnerable, it transpires, and this reader was sorry to read again of the re-naming of Sleights Lane in 1937, part of the ongoing practice of updating that has more recently seen the advent of AC/DC Lane and Dame Edna Place, among others. Phases of 'slum' clearance also receive worthy attention in the first half of the book, with rigour trumping nostalgia in characterising of the 1994 analysis as a whole.

The pivot between the original text and the new material is a striking series of 'Then & Now' images, pairing photographs Bate would have known with more recent depictions of the same locations. What follows is a suite of new chapters tracing the often-stark changes to Melbourne's laneways in the years since 1994. That decade, historians Andrew May and Nicole Davis reveal, witnessed the start of a gradual transformation of the laneways, with tables and chairs more welcome alongside coffee and alcohol, street art cautiously (and periodically) permitted, and greenery encouraged. Into the 2000s, multiple commissioned studies expertly reviewed by the authors suggested strategies for laneway enhancement. Accompanying photographs show a different type of human presence to earlier years, more leisurely and less work-related. As the authors note shrewdly, civic ambitions to place the city's laneways at the heart of the Melbourne experience were always finely poised, and not without inherent tensions. Can places pitched as 'secret', 'hidden' or 'intimate', they ask, survive an encroaching tide of commercialisation? A 'slow but certain centring of lanes in Melbourne's imaginary' (p. 170) since the early 2000s is well elaborated here, and despite the shifts towards marketing and liveability agendas, the authors (also including Richard Broome and Helen Stitt) reflect on a 'spirit of place in many ways unchanged' since the laying out of the landscape decades prior (p. 207).

It is customary for reviewers to praise books for being 'richly illustrated' when somewhat more attention has been paid to the images rather than the writing. Yet, having read every word of this handsome volume, here the phrase really does hold true. The array of fresh full-colour photographs (some taken specially for the new book, others donated to benefit the project) and accompanying captions help transport the reader right to the heart of the locations discussed, and to track the changing street furniture and laneway usage assessed in the main text. That text contains in its second half a few stray typos and unfinished sentences. More important by far is the handy new Part 3, allowing one to trace the lanes through time and to follow the maps and references for further individual exploration.

The Story of Melbourne's Lanes: Essential but Unplanned is a worthy successor to Weston Bate's original text. It is in turn essential reading for anyone seeking orientation around a gridded, and at times gritty, city. As a collaborative effort involving experts and enthusiasts, the book is also characteristic of what makes great cities like Melbourne. Each form of 'text' is more than the sum of its parts, hosting multiple perspectives, conversations and the capacity for change and resilience. The writing of the city continues, and one hopes this volume will find space on bookshelves and coffee tables in Melbourne and beyond.

Simon Sleight, King's College London