

Prospect/us, protect us: plague and resumption in fin de siècle Sydney

On John Degotardi Jr.'s *The Plague Albums*, Sydney, 1900

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Abstract

This text examines the photographs of John Degotardi Jr., photographer for the New South Wales Department of Public Works, who produced 6 photographic albums containing 379 photoprints of the plague in The Rocks, Sydney, 1900, also known as *The Plague Albums*.

It proposes alternate interpretations of the photographs, readings that both confirm the original purpose for their existence on the one hand, and subvert that purpose, and their formal legacy, on the other. In so doing we can begin to understand what an incredibly sophisticated photographer John Degotardi Jr. was, and how he deserves much more recognition than has been accorded him at present in the history of Australian photography.

Keywords

John Degotardi Jr., *The Plague Albums*, Sydney, Australia, bubonic plague, plague in Sydney, photography, art, urban landscape, the Prospect, prospectus, infection, rats, disease, plague, resumption, slum, community, The Rocks, Millers Point, Sydney Harbour Bridge.

During this time of pestilence, I came across several online articles about the outbreak of bubonic plague that occurred in Sydney in 1900 (in particular “Purging Pestilence - Plague!”¹), the infection more virulent – don’t you love that word – in the harbour side slums around Darling Harbour, Millers Point and The Rocks but covering “the whole of the quarantine area, which stretched from Millers Point east to George Street, along Argyle, Upper Fort, and Essex Streets thence south to Chippendale, covering the area between Darling Harbour and Kent Streets, west to Cowper Street, Glebe, along City Road to the area bounded by Abercrombie, Ivy, Cleveland Streets, and the railway. The area east from George Street enclosed by Riley, Liverpool, Elizabeth and Goulburn Streets; Gipps, Campbell and George Streets were also quarantined, as were certain areas in Woolloomooloo, Paddington, Redfern and Manly.”²

Under the supervision of architect and consulting engineer Mr George McCredie, who was appointed by the Government to take charge of all quarantine activities in the Sydney area, work began on March 23, 1900 to cleanse the infected areas, and through compulsory purchase, or resumption (Australian law: the action, on the part of the Crown or other authority, of reassuming possession of lands, rights, etc., previously granted to another), to demolish slum properties. The buildings selected for demolition because of the health risks they supposedly raised, were recorded by photography,³ through the auspices of John Degotardi Jr., photographer for the New South Wales Department of Public Works, who produced 6 photographic albums containing 379 photoprints of the plague in The Rocks, Sydney, 1900, also known as *The Plague Albums*.

Degotardi Jr.'s photographs, commissioned as result of the outbreak, “are largely of buildings requiring to be demolished, and include the interior and exterior of houses, stores, warehouses and wharves, and surrounding streets, lanes and yards, thus providing a fairly clear indication of the state of the city during and immediately after the plague.” They document property and living conditions before, during and after the outbreak of plague. “George McCredie noted in a letter to Sir William Lyne that ‘Where it was found necessary to pull down premises or destroy outbuildings photographs were taken of them before their demolition, and in order to prepare in case of future litigation, each inspector was instructed to take careful notes of any property that might be destroyed’.”⁴

Probably taken on a large format glass plate camera (although no details are given), the resultant album photographs, now scanned, are available at high resolution (600dpi) and 130Mb file size images on the New South Wales State Archives and Records website copyright free, in the public domain. While it is admirable to have these photographs online, the scans have been left in their original condition, as is an archives want, in order to protect the presumed integrity of the original artefact. In other words, over 100 years after the taking of the photograph, this is the current physical state of the object and this is how the images should be seen today. You can see a couple of iterations of the original scans below, replete with their sickly yellow hue, which does not allow the viewer to really appreciate the scene, the photograph as a complete composition, or the skill of the photographer when observing and capturing the urban terrain. This is not how these photographs would have appeared when originally produced and their deterioration is akin to a layer of yellowing varnish that obscures the colours

and details of some Old Master painting, which has discoloured with age. Conservators do not leave this layer of yellow in place, they remove it. The same can be said of discoloured photographs.

In this case, I spent many hours restoring these photographs to their pristine condition, removing colour and dust spots, so that I may study the scene intimately, zooming into the image (because of their high quality) to observe everyday nuances of Sydney life in 1900. In so doing we can begin to understand what an incredibly sophisticated photographer John Degotardi Jr. was, and how he deserves much more recognition than has been accorded him at present in the history of Australian photography. Let us set the stage, then, for the taking of these photographs.

We note that for the photographer this was a job, working as he did for the New South Wales Department of Public Works. He was to document the quarantine area to provide a clear indication of the state of the city during and immediately after the plague, those photographs of interiors and exteriors, of buildings and boundaries (streets) – things that “exist to insure order and security and continuity and to give citizens a visible status”⁵ – also needed in case of future litigation (presumably by aggrieved landowners) after they were compulsorily purchased. Here we begin to understand that the aesthetic of urban landscape photography is always contextual and political. In his photographs Degotardi Jr. maps out the boundaries of his, the government’s, and the camera’s authority – one’s position (and that of his all seeing, ambivalent ‘mechanical eye’), not just a matter of where one stands, but that it is more comprehensively spatial, social and economic.”⁶

Often in these photographs (more generally in the images found online), Degotardi Jr.'s camera occupies and draws on "the seventeenth century device of the 'prospect', an oblique landscape viewpoint located between ground and aerial perspectives... The viewpoint of the prospect hovers in mid air between the aerial image and the landscape view, oblique to the terrain it is depicting. It provides an order that would otherwise be illegible to the grounded eye."⁷ In other words, Degotardi Jr. positions his camera to best bring order to the urban chaos, picturing through the ritual of taking photographs, a surveyed and regulated order (both economic and legislative) that determines the urban grid – in this case, of the quarantine areas / remediated areas, dis-ease areas / proposed redevelopment, business areas – in some of the oldest suburbs of Sydney. Following Goldswain's commentary on the photographs of John Joseph Dwyer and his mapping of the gold mining city of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, we might concur that, "It is not unreasonable to suggest that Dwyer's [Degotardi Jr.'s] camera is literally prospecting, combining both senses of the word, mapping the city and its suburbs to find an economic potential in its ordered state..."⁸

In his "views", Degotardi Jr.'s camera often portrays people (in)congruously in doorways or on streets, used to document scale or to bare witness to their surroundings. People, mainly men, go about their work often demolishing buildings or cleaning rubbish in the streets, stopping as the photograph is taken, or deliberately posed by the photographer. In some images the photographer sets up a scene that has no logic at all. For example, the photograph of *Nos. 223, 225 Sussex Street* (below) evidence a shoeless lad, a group of young men, a painter, and two firemen who hold a deflated fire hose which leads out of shot in one direction and terminates under the eaves

of a row of shops in the other direction, seemingly connected to nothing. Their surroundings are declamatory and, for today's reader, insightful. In a building erected by P.R. Larkin in 1866, the row of shops includes a "Johnny All Sorts" – a business that bought and sold all sorts of things. To the right of the group are pasted billboards, much as today, two of which advertise a plague remedy and disinfectant soap (sound familiar in 2020?):

Avoid the

PLAGUE!

Purchase at Once!!

Prof. VON ELSEBERG'S

'KALTHA'

Just Arrived

Notice to householders

BLACK DEATH

or Bubonic Plague

SANITOL

Disinfectant soap

3d Double tablets 3d

In other photographs, men stand in doorways, hidden in the shadows (*No. 20 Upton Street*). Many are images of workers, homeowners, citizens and families who live a hand to mouth existence. The intimacy of these photographs portrays, betrays, the place where societies rejects are housed, the setting (the place or type of surroundings where something is positioned or where an event takes place) of human lives; the "setting", or settling, of human lives, as in the solidification of space and place, the environment of

existence. As a group of photographs the series is an extraordinary social document of poverty and squalor, of the desperation of people just getting by.

To the photographer, and to the people and buildings he was photographing, the familiar serves as a point of departure. Firstly, Degotardi Jr. documents what was there – this diseased land, a landscape not only as a composition of spaces but also a composition of a web of boundaries. Secondly, he photographs to map out what was to be “resumed” through the Resumption Act 1900, the city “fathers” using the outbreak of bubonic plague as a convenient excuse to compulsorily purchase land in the loosely defined quarantine area, offering the residents compensation “estimated without reference to any alteration in the value of such land arising from any purchase or any appropriation or resumption for any purpose mentioned in this Act or the establishing of any public works on any land the subject of any such purchase, appropriation, or resumption.” These albums, then, become a prospectus, a prospect/us, an authentic record of the terms, the conditions and the contexts for the reformist attitude in the minds of these city fathers: not to protect us (the populace) but to prospect us, using land resumption as the tool to get rid of the old and bring in the new. The plan was to demolish the existing structures and rebuild to a grand design.

Factored into the design of the Resumption Plans was the need to keep Dawes Point free for the construction of a possible bridge across the harbour. “While public health was a convenient excuse for resumptions, the need for a harbour bridge may also have motivated the authorities.”⁹

“Plans were underway even at these early stages and a good 23 years before construction of the bridge commenced. Even at the turn of the nineteenth century, it was clear that there would need to be a widened thoroughfare to accommodate traffic entering and exiting the bridge, and many buildings would need to be sacrificed to achieve this. The bubonic plague outbreak offered the ideal opportunity to highlight the inadequacies in a lot of buildings, and the chance to condemn the area as slum, whose only chance of redemption was through mass demolition.”¹⁰

But as an article by Gillian McNally in *The Daily Telegraph* insightfully observes, “The reshaping of the city ... provided a convenient “public health” excuse for resumption of private property. The NSW Government took back ownership of virtually the entire headland from Circular Quay to Darling Harbour and demolished hundreds of slum houses and businesses in what are now prime real estate precincts such as George St, Sussex St, Kent St and Martin Place. There was little attempt to define a slum area and there was no recognition of the rights of tenants as resumptions took out a house here, a street there and great swathes of properties in some suburbs to improve crooked roads and thoroughfares.”¹¹

If we define a landscape as an environment modified by the permanent presence of a group of people,¹² then what these photographs do, in one sense, is document the death throes of the communities that created this urban landscape. As J.B. Jackson notes, “No group sets out to create a landscape, of course. What it sets out to do is to create a community, and the landscape as its visible manifestation is simply the by-product of people

working and living, sometimes coming together, sometimes staying apart, but always recognising their interdependence.”¹³

But, as Denis Cosgrove observes, the concept of landscape (and thus of community) is always powerful and political.

“Landscape was a ‘way of seeing’ that was bourgeois, individualist and related to the exercise of power over space. The basic theory and technique of the landscape way of seeing was linear perspective ... and is closely related by [Alberti] to social class and spatial hierarchy. It employs the same geometry as merchant trading and accounting, navigation, land survey, mapping and artillery. Perspective is first applied in the city and then to a country subjugated to urban control and viewed as landscape. ... The visual power given by the landscape way of seeing complements the real power humans exert over land as property.”¹⁴

The photographs in these albums, then, evidence the real power of the city fathers over land as property, their property and not that of the citizens or the communities that had grown up in these unregulated buildings and shantytowns. They, the city fathers, ordered these pictures into existence. The landscape thus portrayed, is “a way of seeing, a composition and structuring of the world so that it may be appropriated by a detached, individual spectator to whom an illusion of order and control is offered through the composition of space according to the certainties of geometry.”¹⁵ Residents, armed with lime, carbolic acid and sulfuric acid, were then enlisted to cleanse, disinfect and even burn and demolish their own houses in infected areas.¹⁶

But in another and far more important sense, what these photographs document are the lives of ordinary people, people who form a community of souls, for whom a sense of community was of vital, life giving importance. The photographs record their existence as traces and energies from the past that impinge on our consciousness in the present. Here are the ratcatchers, modest men with their traps and cages, bowties and pipes, all adorned bar one in the obligatory hat; here are two Chinese gentlemen surrounded by squalor and chopped wood, one sitting on a pile of rocks, both portrayed with a touching dignity; here in a rubble strewn *Wexford street* men resignedly sit on the ground or stare pensively at the camera, pondering we know not what, while on the other side of the street children stare inquisitively at the camera; and there smoke arises from amongst the demolished *Exeter Place* as labourers, persons doing unskilled manual work for wages, dance a ballet of destruction amongst the rubble. Children on a veranda, pails in a dirt back yard, chickens, and children, roaming free... and a rock tied on a piece of string guards the entrance to a door.

Pails and tins and rocks and wood and chickens and children and rats and butchers and dirt and sugar... and a rock tied on a piece of string, like the great pendulum of time, marking all their existences. And yet... and yet, what that most excellent photographer John Degotardi Jr. does (in this second sense), is not just to record as instructed, their quarantine, their dispossession – but through his photographs, he empathises with the people, with their community of existence. While his photographs are not sentimental about humankind, traces of humanity are ever-present in his pictures. Unlike the Parisian Eugène Atget, who established a beneficial “distance between man and his environment” here, Degotardi Jr. engages in

a conversation with the people and the city. And in so doing, in so immersing himself in (t)his project, he lifts his photographs out of the ordinary, out of (t)his world.

As Jon Kabat-Zinn has so eloquently observed,

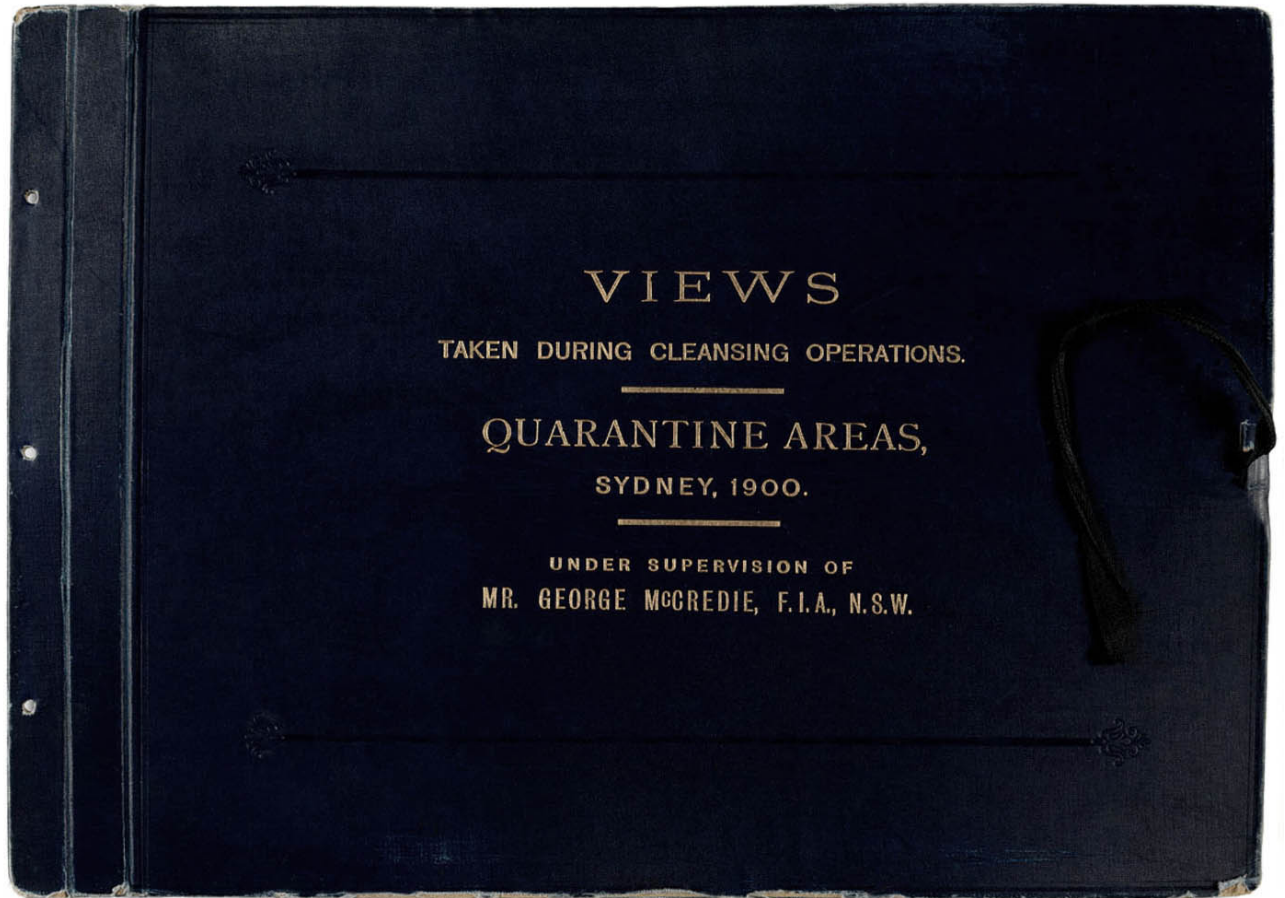
“Effortless activity happens at moments in dance and in sports at the highest levels of performance; when it does, it takes everybody’s breath away. But it also happens in every area of human activity, from painting to car repair to parenting. Years of practice and experience combine on some occasions, giving rise to a new capacity to let execution unfold beyond technique, beyond exertion, beyond thinking. Action then becomes a pure expression of art, of being, of letting go of all doing – a merging of mind and body in motion.”¹⁷

It would seem to me that this is the great achievement of a Department of Public Works photographer who was hired to do a job: that he transcended his subject matter by letting execution unfold beyond technique, by immersing himself in the derivation of composition, perspective, light and form, place and context, feeling and emotion. So while these photographs in the obvious obey the command of the city fathers, of the planners, of patriarchy and the capital of industry, in the immersive and subversive they undermine the prospectus that first proposed them. Unable to protect the people, to protect us, from the demolition of community (to the benefit of commerce hidden under the “public health” excuse), John Degotardi Jr. leaves, through his photographs, a lasting legacy of lives that matter, not bureaucracy that doesn’t. He imagines streets and buildings and lives, pictured for eternity through the psychogeography of the city. And if we

think of the long queues of unemployed in our current pandemic, here are also lives that matter – the lives of the dead and the destitute, each one a valuable, sentient, human being.

Dr Marcus Bunyan

Word count: 2, 809



Cover of from Vol. IV of Views taken during Cleansing Operations, Quarantine Area, Sydney, 1900, Vol. IV / under the supervision of Mr George McCredie, F.I.A., N.S.W.

1900

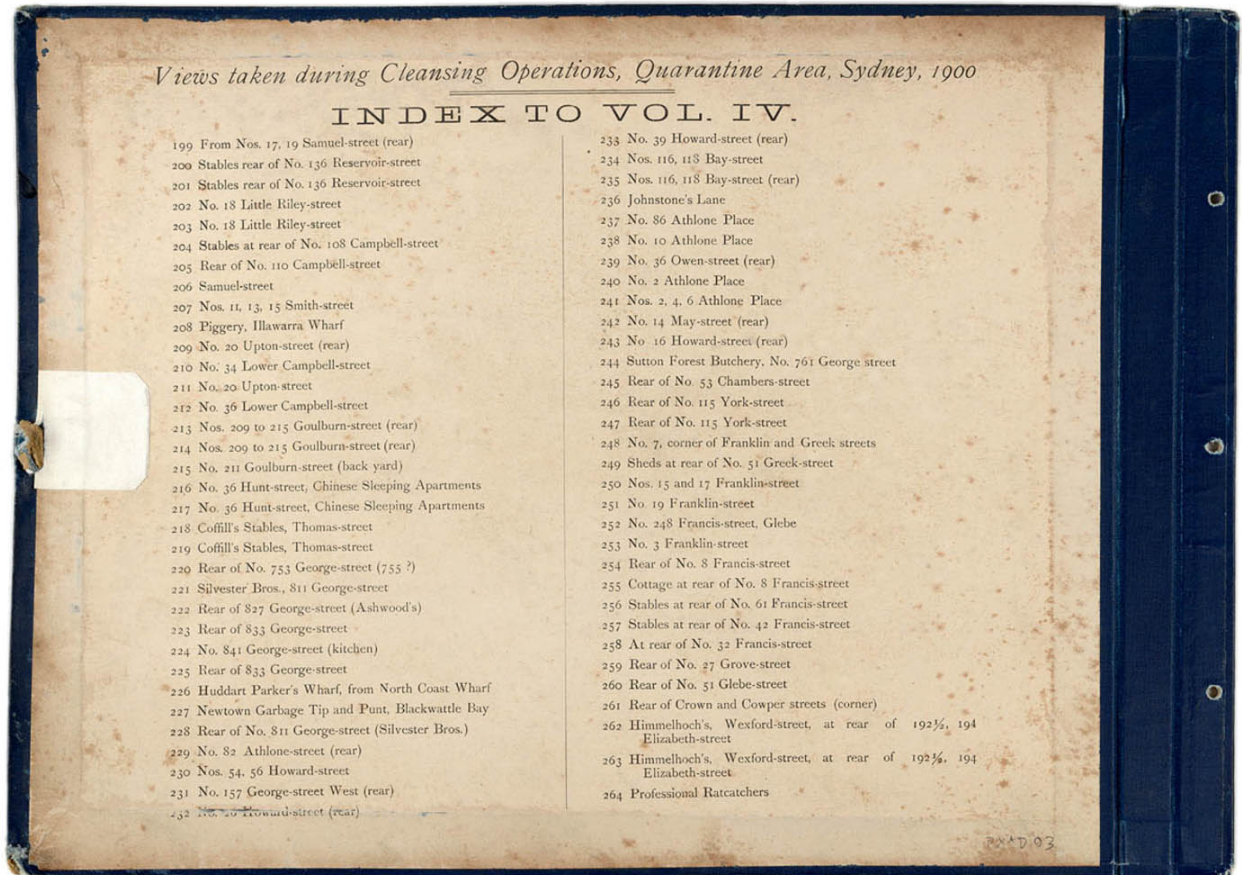
66 silver gelatin photoprints

28 x 49 cm

6 albums containing 379 photoprints also known as *The Plague Albums*

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales 413017

Public domain



Index from Vol. IV of Views taken during Cleansing Operations, Quarantine Area, Sydney, 1900, Vol. IV / under the supervision of Mr George McCredie, F.I.A., N.S.W. including number 264 Professional Ratcatchers

(above)

1900

66 silver gelatin photoprints

28 x 49 cm

6 albums containing 379 photoprints also known as *The Plague Albums*

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales 413017

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

No. 20 Upton Street

1900

From Vol. IV of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas, Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

Nos. 223, 225 Sussex Street

1900

From Vol. II of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas, Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

Nos. 223, 225 Sussex Street, Sydney (detail)

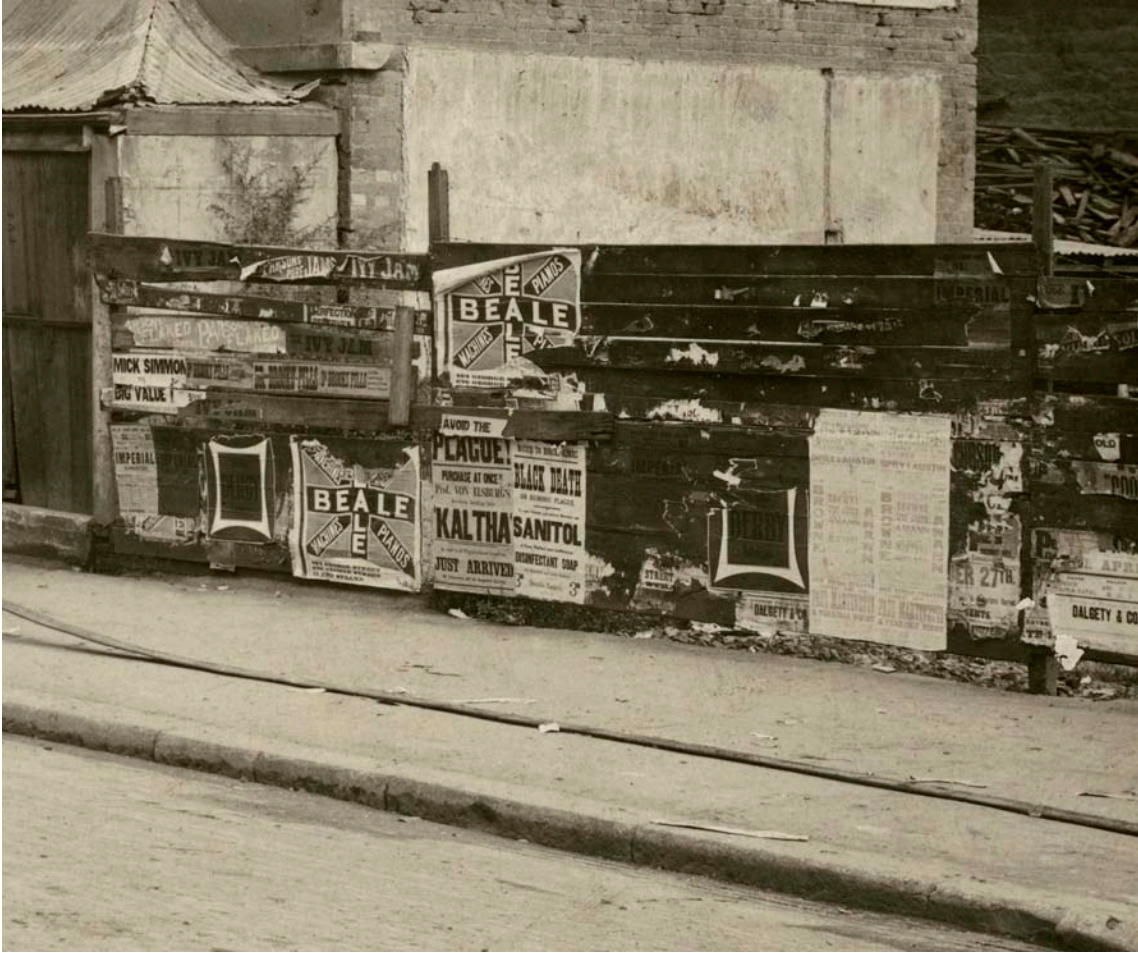
1900

From Vol. II of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas, Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

Nos. 223, 225 Sussex Street, Sydney (detail)

1900

From Vol. II of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas, Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

No. 50 Wexford Street (rear), Chinese bedroom

1900

From Vol. II of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas,
Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken
during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

Wexford Street

1900

From Vol. II of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas, Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

Exeter Place demolished

1900

From Vol. II of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas,
Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken
during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

No. 7 West Street off Oxford Street (rear)

1900

From Vol. V of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas,
Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken
during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

No. 7 West Street off Oxford Street (rear) (details)

1900

From Vol. V of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas,
Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken
during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

No. 7 West Street off Oxford Street (rear) (detail)

1900

From Vol. V of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas,
Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken
during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

Rear of 129 Gloucester Street (detail)

1900

From Vol. V of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas, Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain



John Degotardi Jr. (Australian, 1860-1937)

NSW Department of Public Works photographer

Rear of no. 12 Robinson Lane (details)

1900

From Vol. V of Views taken during cleansing operations. Quarantine areas,
Sydney, 1900

Gelatin silver print

New South Wales State Archives & Records NRS-12487 Photographs taken
during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney

Public domain

Endnotes

- ¹ Anonymous. “Purging Pestilence – Plague!” on the *New South Wales State Archives and Records* website [Online] Cited 25 May 2020
- ² NRS-12487 | Photographs taken during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney. Text from the *State Archives of New South Wales* website [Online] Cited 11/04/2020.
- ³ Alan Davies. “Photography in Australia,” in *Celebrating 100 years of the Mitchell Library*. Sydney: State Library of NSW, 2000. p. 86.
- ⁴ Footnote 1. NSW Parliamentary Debates, 1900, vol. CIII, p. 111 quoted in Max Kelly. *Plague Sydney*. Marrickville, NSW: Doak Press, 1981 in NRS-12487 | Photographs taken during cleansing operations in quarantine areas, Sydney. Text from the *State Archives of New South Wales* website [Online] Cited 11/04/2020.
- ⁵ J.B. Jackson. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 12.
- ⁶ Philip Goldswain. “Surveying the Field, Picturing the Grid: John Joseph Dwyer’s Urban and Industrial Landscapes,” in Phillip Goldswain and William Taylor (eds.). *An Everyday Transience: The Urban Imaginary of Goldfields Photographer John Joseph Dwyer*. UWA Publishing, 2010, p. 65-66.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 63.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 66.
- ⁹ Anonymous. “Purging Pestilence – Plague!” on the *State Archives of New South Wales* website (archived) [Online] Cited 10 April 2020.
- ¹⁰ Anonymous. “Bubonic Plague outbreak in Sydney in the 1900s helps Politicians to clear the way for transport progress & landmark,” on *The Digger* website 13th August 2016 [Online] Cited 10/40/2020.
- ¹¹ Gillian McNally. “Bubonic plague Sydney: How a city survived the black death in 1900,” in *The Daily Telegraph* September 3, 2015 [Online] Cited 16 May 2020.
- ¹² J.B. Jackson. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, p. 12.
- ¹³ Ibid.,
- ¹⁴ Abstract in Denis Cosgrove. “Prospect, Perspective and the Evolution of the Landscape Idea,” in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1985, pp. 45-62.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 55.
- ¹⁶ McNally, op.cit.,
- ¹⁷ Jon Kabat-Zinn. *Wherever You Go There You Are*. New York: Hachette Books, 1994, p. 44.