

## Acknowledgements

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Destiny Deacon is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.



## SPARE ROOM

BUILDING 94: 23-27 CARDIGAN STREET, CARLTON



BADDAGINNIE RUN

Supported by

Managed by the RMIT School of Art  
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one of those who on such occasions slept in the Richmond paddock over by the old morgue, with the ‘dossers’ dog’ for a pal.”

“On the night I recall your heart would have gone out to him had you seen his thin little figure clad only in a torn shirt and a grotesque pair of trousers quite five sizes too large for him. Boots were an unknown luxury... ‘Miss’, I remember his saying to me one night when the city streets were awash under a driving rain, ‘you know how you feel at twelve o’clock when it’s a pouring wet night and you haven’t made your bed money?’”

“‘Well’, I admitted to the fair-haired, bare-footed youngster, ‘I don’t exactly know, Battler, but I can imagine it.’”<sup>19</sup>

Onians said that, “those who did not know the newsboys called them ‘roughs’ and, in the Australian vernacular ‘larrikins’”<sup>20</sup> – meaning incorrigible little toughs, shifty and shiftless, untrustworthy, a social nuisance. But she “believe[d] sincerely that no boy...is irreclaimable. Every youngster...born into Australia is a potential source of wealth and happiness. If he fails to fulfill his possibilities, we, his parents, his guardians, his Government, are apt to be at least as much to blame as he... every boy is capable of being turned, by appropriate treatment, into a useful citizen. That may sound sentimental, but it is backed by [a] great psychological truth.”<sup>21</sup>

So what’s the psychological truth in the *Paperboys*? Six grown men posing as street urchins - a little bit each of Horatio Alger, Edith Onians, Battler and the Working Men’s College. I asked Destiny again and got this: “i’m trying to make the images relevant to place...thanks for going in depth about the context. it’s good for people to learn something.”

Destiny and Miss Onians agree on that.

Virginia Fraser, 2010

- 1 Malik Malik, Manager RMIT School of Art; Stephen Gallagher, Artist and Curator/Coordinator School of Art Galleries; John Harding, Writer and Research Officer, RMIT School of Art; Liam Revell, Designer and Lecturer of Fashion, RMIT School of Architecture and Design; Clinton Nain, Artist; and Paul Candy, Student, RMIT School of Art.
- 2 Nasau, D. (1999) “Ch. 3: Youse an’ yer noble scrap: On strike with the Newsboy Legion in 1899.” in Big Town, Big Time. New York: New York Daily News. p. 9 cited in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newsboys\\_Strike\\_of\\_1899#cite\\_note-3](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newsboys_Strike_of_1899#cite_note-3)
- 3 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newsboys\\_Strike\\_of\\_1899](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newsboys_Strike_of_1899)
- 4 Stephen Siff, “Carrying the Banner: The Portrayal of the American Newsboy Myth in the Disney Musical Newsies” <http://www.iipc.org/journal/index.php/iipcjournal/article/viewFile/8/10>
- 5 [http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/About%20RMIT%2FHeritage%2FRMIT's%20historical%20buildings%2FRMIT%20Building%201%20\(Francis%20Ormond%20Building\)/](http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/About%20RMIT%2FHeritage%2FRMIT's%20historical%20buildings%2FRMIT%20Building%201%20(Francis%20Ormond%20Building)/)
- 6 <http://newsboysfoundation.org.au/> and <http://www.gordoncare.org/>
- 7 Siff, op cit
- 8 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horatio\\_Alger,\\_Jr.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horatio_Alger,_Jr.)
- 9 ibid
- 10 ibid
- 11 Page 3
- 12 Sydney Morning Herald, Monday October 9, 1871, page 2
- 13 Page 4
- 14 Page 3
- 15 Page 7
- 16 Edith Onians, Read All About It, Colourgravure, Melbourne, 1953, page 7
- 17 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Mark\\_Forster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Mark_Forster)
- 18 Thomas C Lothian, Melbourne, c1914
- 19 Onians, 1953, page 23
- 20 ibid page 8
- 21 ibid page 6

Left to Right  
*Just add dress I*, 2010  
*Just add dress II*, 2010

Inside Pages, Left to Right  
*Paper boys from the Working Men’s College*, 2010  
*Paperboys* (detail of video still), 2010



## SPARE ROOM

Doing time...

DESTINY DEACON

FRIDAY 22 OCTOBER TO THURSDAY 11 NOVEMBER 2010  
**OPENING THURSDAY 21 OCTOBER 5-7PM**  
**FLOOR TALK THURSDAY 28 OCTOBER 1-1.30PM**





## READ ALL ABOUT IT

When I asked Destiny why, during her RMIT residency earlier this year, she posed the six models<sup>1</sup> in *Paperboys from the Working Men's College* as turn of the century newsboys, she emailed back a reply with its cards so close to its chest they were practically coming out the back;

*"i was able to round up a few men to pose. that image seemed suitable to base something / a story on."*

There's a surprisingly large amount of history and folklore about newsboys – the children and teenagers with loud voices who, before child protection became a big deal, sold papers from a stack under their arm to strangers in the street, drunks in pubs, and commuters they reached by jumping on and off moving public transport.

Newsboys appeared with the rise of mass circulation papers and “were the main distributors of newspapers to the general public from the mid-19th to the early 20th century in the United States”<sup>2</sup> (and cities elsewhere including Australia). It was badly paid work, the sellers vulnerable to weather, the meanness of newspaper proprietors and to human vice and pettiness in general. They were mostly the poorest of the poor, often homeless. And when, in 1899, New York newsboys spearheaded a successful two-week, city wide strike of non-union child labour including messengers and bootblacks (or shoeshine boys), one of several newsboy stereotypes was fixed in the public imagination. The strike (over tiny commissions and who paid for unsold copies) greatly reduced the daily circulation of papers dependent on street vendors for sales. During the strike, *New York World* (owned by Joseph Pulitzer for whom the famous prize is named) fell from 360,000 to 125,000.<sup>3</sup>

The 1992 Disney film musical, *Newsies*, loosely based on the strike, and starring Christian Bale and Ann Margret, among others, transmitted “an updated version of this mythology to a contemporary audience”.<sup>4</sup>

Even earlier in Melbourne, from 1888, a series of clubs for newsboys operated under a variety of names. One of them, the Gordon Institute for Boys and City Newsboys' Society had a building constructed on land in Bowen Street in the late 1880s before that thoroughfare was completely taken over by what is now RMIT. It shared one side of the street with a pub, and various other business premises.<sup>5</sup>

Melbourne newsboys were the object of a great deal of philanthropy. The Stamford Plaza Hotel on the corner of Little Collins Street and Alfred Place takes in the site of another newsboys' club, the City Newsboys' Society, whose now demolished building included a swimming pool, gymnasium, library of 4000 books and a games room. The Society's purpose-built headquarters went up there in 1923 on the site of the delicensed and demolished Adam and Eve Hotel (which, in December 1921, was a few lanes away from the blind alley where, in a famous murder case, the body of 12-year old Alma Tirtschke was found bruised and strangled). Several organisations built on earlier newsboy clubs still exist today including the Newsboys Foundation and Gordon Care for Children.<sup>6</sup>

Documentary photos of late nineteenth and early twentieth century newsboy groups show primary school or early teenaged boys in caps and ragged clothes, clutching huge bundles of papers sometimes tied to their bodies with rope, their faces an assortment of watchful, pinched, lopsided, shrewd, cocky, mournful and hyper-cheerful expressions. But popular representations of newsboys favour only three images – pathetic, enterprising, or delinquent.

Stephen Siff writes that: “By 1899 [the year of the strike], newsboys, and New York newsboys in particular, occupied a poignant place in American iconography. They may have been at the bottom, but they were seen as having hope and hustle, ‘an incarnation of the [commercial] spirit of the day’, in the words of an 1844 short story writer...Newsboys were perceived as social problems and potential criminals, but they were also torchbearers for the American dream...Benjamin Franklin started as a newsboy. So did



Thomas Edison. Industrious newsboys played prominently in many of the 106 hardcover novels written by Horatio Alger prior to his death in 1899, some of which may have been penned in the New York Newsboy's Lodging House operated by the New York Sun.”<sup>7</sup>

Horatio Alger was the kind of person the Working With Children Check was invented for. His career as a young Unitarian minister ended abruptly after two years when officials of his church wrote to head office complaining of doings with local boys “that are too revolting to relate”.<sup>8</sup> He moved to New York where he hung out with “impoverished young bootblacks, newspaper boys, and peddlers.”<sup>9</sup> Combining this experience with “the moral values he learned at home”<sup>10</sup> rather than those he'd developed for himself, Alger produced his first popular novel, *Ragged Dick*, serialised in *Student and Schoolmate*. (It wasn't till 23 years later in 1890, nine years before Alger's death, that ‘dick’ became a vulgar synonym for penis, returning to his improving stories based on “pluck, luck and virtue” an



inadvertent clue to their sublimated and embarrassing origins).

The pathetic image of newsboys had at least as strong a grip on popular sentiment as the little battler. In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of Tuesday February 8, 1870 the writer says of New York newsboys: “I have seen boys who, in the nursery of a well-to-do gentleman, would be called ‘the baby’ so wee and little footed and squeaky voiced, that it made one sad to see them out on the street without shoes or cap, struggling with difficulty under their load of literary merchandise and often pushed aside by larger boys, who received the penny which they, had they not been mere children, might have secured.”<sup>11</sup>

At the far, bathetic end of this kind of representation is the story of “Little Ben the Newsboy”, a tale with obviously fictionalised elements – if not a completely fabricated story – that went viral in late 1871. Echoing the earlier *Sydney Morning Herald* article, but with a lot more purple prose,



it began in a vaguely specified time by recollecting “a big burly newsboy, very rough looking, very dirty and uncombed” pitching his papers to two passersby “in a ho[alrse brazen voice...just as hundreds of rough looking uncombed newsboys do every day” trailed by another smaller boy. The shadow was Little Ben, “the merest mite of a little boy, not more than seven years old, I think, and small for his age, too. He was a fragile-looking little fellow, with a pale face, and slender little hands. His hair was combed and curled carefully in long yellow curls, almost like-a girl's. None but a mother's hand can comb and curl a boy's hair just that way, I have noticed. The small boy had a few papers under his arm, trying to hold them as the big boy held his, and when the big boy sung out...he would turn immediately round to the little one, nodding encouragingly and tell him;

‘Now you say it Baby’.”

“Then the pale little fellow, with, his long yellow curls, would take up his cry, faintly and feebly, and try to say it in his weak childish quaver: Somehow it made one feel queer about the throat to hear that poor little voice.”

After many more emotive paragraphs in which we learn that the boy and his beautiful mother had once lived in a big house with a carriage but were now destitute thanks to a ne'er do well father, Little Ben is run over by a street car, “the cold hand of death stiffening his white eyelids, and dimming his great blue eyes...the long bright curls all dragged and dusty, two poor little slim hands broken at the wrist, one of them hanging quite dead and lifeless.”

The story of Little Ben was published first in ‘a Cincinnati paper’, and on Thursday October 5, and Friday, October 6, 1871 the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried a page one advertisement mentioning the story for Saturday's issue of its weekly publication, *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*. By Monday the *Sydney Morning Herald* had

reprinted the article in its own pages<sup>12</sup>, and on November 2, it appeared in the *Queanbeyan Age*.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile the story was also circulating in New Zealand where it appeared, amongst other places, in the *Star* on October 31,<sup>14</sup> in the *Tuapeka Times* on November 16.<sup>15</sup>

Melbourne philanthropist, Edith Onians developed her almost lifelong interest in helping and improving newsboys after reading a story at this end of the spectrum. In her 1953 book, *Read All About It*, Onians dated her “interest in boys” from a tale she read as a small child in a volume won for a Sunday School prize. “Hope on, Hope ever” concerned a hungry, barefoot lad who, on a bleak London day, was gazing longingly in the window of a baker's shop. When a carriage drew up and its occupant “a lady richly dressed in furs” alighted, he asked for a farthing for a piece of bread. The lady refused haughtily and swept past. Edith as a child “was touched to the depths of my heart by this picture and I made up my mind there and then that when I grew up I would try to help poor boys.”

Like other philanthropists who took an interest in newsboys – a term including any boy working or living on the street – Edith Onians began her work in 1897 by accosting an idling group.<sup>16</sup> She offered classes (and later many other facilities which included dental, medical care and meals). Mark Forster who established the Try Boys Club, the Newsboys' predecessor, began in 1883 by inviting three boys home to eat with his family.<sup>17</sup> You could get arrested for that now.

Onians dedicated an earlier book, *The Men of Tomorrow*, an account of her worldwide investigations into child protection, to “the newsboys of Melbourne who more than I have helped them have helped me”.<sup>18</sup> *Read All About It*, published two years before her death, summarised in anecdotes her affection for various boys she had known and helped. She recounted the story of ‘Battler’: “who won his title in the battle of life. Left destitute and friendless at the age of eleven, he sold matches outside Parer's Crystal Café in Bourke Street [where the Mid City Arcade now is], and often knew what it meant to go to sleep hungry and bedless. He was