

The Chapters: Marvellous Melbourne's own Willy Wonka

Tess McLaughlan:

State Library Victoria acknowledges the traditional lands of all the Victorian Aboriginal clans and their cultural practices and knowledge systems. We recognise that our collections hold traditional cultural knowledge belonging to Indigenous communities in Victoria and around the country. We support communities to protect the integrity of this information, gathered from their ancestors in the colonial period. We pay our respects to their Elders, past and present, who have handed down these systems of practice to each new generation for millennia.

The streets are bustling with activity in nineteenth-century Melbourne. The gold rush has brought thousands of people to the area. Among them is a young man, he pushes a wheelbarrow covered by a sheet through the dirt and mud to the Eastern Market. He passes other stalls and he hears the sounds of people hawking their wares. He's friendly, if a little awkward. He smiles and greets people as he passes them, then he arrives at his stall. It's a small place with just enough room to set up his barrow. He pulls up and removes the sheet to reveal his bounty of books, and then he gets to work.

This man's name is E.W. Cole and get to work he did. From these humble beginnings, he would grow his business into something remarkable. What started as a wheelbarrow filled with books would go on to become one of the most amazing bookstores in history. He didn't know it yet, but his empire would grow to become a sprawling book arcade that would span multiple floors, across multiple buildings, with various different magical departments, plants and animals, a live band, and at one point, even boasted that they had over 1 million books. E.W. Cole was Melbourne's own Willy Wonka, and on today's episode, we'll discover how he went from his barrow to his Marvelous Book Arcade.

Welcome to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. Now you probably know about State Library Victoria's beautiful reading rooms and galleries. You may have even come to see Ned Kelly's armour on display, but this show is about the stories that are hidden at the library, the ones that you may never have heard of, and the librarians who discover them. I'm your host, Tess McLaughlan, and I'm lucky enough to spend my days exploring State Library Victoria's rich collection, and in partnership with our

talented librarians, bring its stories to you.

We all know the character Willy Wonka, the magical owner of the incredible Wonka Chocolate Factory. I'm sure many of you, like I do, have memories of reading these books and watching the film as a child, it's a story that's so vivid. You could imagine finding your own golden ticket, visiting the magical factory and drinking from the chocolate river. But as you grow up, you learn that these places only exist in stories. But for a time, right here in Melbourne, there was a bookstore that was even more magical than the books it sold. E.W. Cole's Marvelous Book Arcade made its home on the south side of Bourke Street, in between Swanston and Elizabeth. It was three stories tall and had all kinds of eccentric departments, and even boasted having over 1 million books. Today, to tell you all about this magical place and the man behind it is Jodi Kok, one of the librarians at State Library Victoria.

She wrote an amazing article about E.W. Cole for the library website because in today's episode, you'll hear all about marvelous Melbourne's own Willy Wonka. Let's open another chapter.

Tess McLaughlan:

Jodi, thanks so much for joining me.

Jodi Kok:

Thanks for having me, Tess.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, the subject of today's episode is E.W. Cole. We'll talk about him and his legendary book arcade in a moment, but to get us started, if you had to describe E.W. Cole in a few sentences, who was he?

Jodi Kok:

So, E.W. Cole, or Edward William Cole, was a man who was born in Kent in 1832. He came to Melbourne in 1852, and he later went on to open the grandest bookshop in the world, and he was a man who was optimistic and had ideas before his time.

Tess McLaughlan:

To get started with our story, let's go back to the beginning. Edward William Cole, better known as E.W. Cole, was born into poverty in the year 1832. He started life in Kent in England. But his story really gets underway after he turns 19 and emigrates to Australia. After arriving in Victoria in 1852, Cole tries a lot of different jobs. He originally worked as a miner, and then he started selling. He sold photos and even pies for a while, but eventually he starts selling books. I asked Jodi how he got started with books.

Jodi Kok:

E.W. Cole came up with this idea that he thought that all the world's religions had things in common. One of the reasons he decided to come back to Melbourne was actually for the Melbourne Public Library, which is State Library of Victoria now, because it was one of the few free libraries in the world, and it had a great collection of religious books where he could continue. So, he was working on this idea about religion, and he did a lot of research and tried to get the book published, but the idea that all religions were equal was not a particularly accepted one at the time. So, no one wanted to publish it so he actually self-published some pamphlets. He actually took to taking this brochure around and trying to sell it door to door, and at one of the places he visited, the woman said he would be far more welcome if he had come to purchase books rather than sell them, because she had a whole lot of books that she didn't want.

He said, oh, well, I'll have a look at that. He ended up buying them and he then realised it was a much easier way to make a connection with people than to just go and sell his books. So, he started saying, 'I'm here, I've got a book that you might be interested in, but also do you have any books to sell?' So he got a lot of books together, and he started selling them from a barrow at the Eastern Market, which was on the corner of Bourke and Exhibition Street, which was called Stephen Street at the time, so that's how he started in the trade.

Tess McLaughlan:

And things go well from here because he moves into what you describe in the written piece as an ever more illustrious premises. How does he get from the humble beginnings of a wheelbarrow filled with books to the famous book arcade?

Jodi Kok:

It came to a point where the Eastern Market was going to be sold. So in 1873, he actually started looking for another premises. He really, really loved the Royal Arcade on Bourke Street. He thought that an arcade worked so well. He loved the glass ceiling and the palm trees and the way that people could just come in and have a talk, and he really wanted to recreate that sort of atmosphere. So, he did actually move into a premises that was just 10 doors down from the market on Bourke Street. It was 158 Bourke Street. He was really big on people getting an education, so he had this principle that people could read for as long as they like, and they weren't pressured to buy, so that was well received. He did quite well, and one of the symbols that I guess people might associate with him is the rainbow.

There's a story that says that he was quite good friends with Ferdinand von Mueller,

the man who started the Botanic Gardens, and the story goes that he was there one day visiting and a rainbow appeared, and he realised this would be a great sign for his bookshop because it was colorful and beautiful and talked of unity. So, he actually trademarked the rainbow, which didn't go down so well with some people. And he got a massive bright rainbow painted at the entrance of his bookstore. And that remained his symbol throughout time. It ended up on his books and it was very much this idea that if a rainbow appeared and people saw it, they would kind of associate it with his store and maybe buy some books.

Tess McLaughlan:

After the very humble beginnings of a wheelbarrow full of books, we now find E.W. Cole in the year 1883 ready to open his book arcade.

Jodi Kok:

He grew in popularity, and later in 1883, he was able to lease a Spanish restaurant in Bourke Street Mall also, and that was the start of that famous arcade, which was a three-storey-high restaurant. He got permission from the owner of that restaurant to make whatever additions or amendments to it that he wanted, so he really tried to mimic the style of arcade that was Royal Arcade. He put in an arched glass ceiling, he pretty much gutted the building, took out the two main floors and just had sort of flying balconies around. So, when you walked in, the whole place was lit from the ceiling, was very open, very airy and very inviting for customers, and you can really see that in the photos of the arcade from the time.

Tess McLaughlan:

Now, one of the things that made Cole's Book Arcade so magical was the variety of different departments it had. Some of them were amazing, others were a little misguided. The things Cole included in the arcade were truly astounding, I had to know more about this.

Jodi Kok:

There were different departments over time in the arcade, but over time it included a music department, stationery, toys, pictures and frames, a perfumery, a photo studio, a printing department, fernery, aviary, tea salon, even a monkey house, and it also featured a live band in the afternoon. So, it really made it so much more than a bookshop. It was a real sort of place to go for entertainment, and that sort of seems to be how it was remembered. Even though books were the prominent thing, he would sort of sell anything that would sell.

Tess McLaughlan:

And so people would be able to come and just enjoy the space, and I'm just wondering, did it become a bit of a community space then rather than just a shop?

Jodi Kok:

Yeah, it seemed to be the place to go, the place to be seen. It was often really, really, busy and crowded, particularly on special occasions, and he seemed to be very good at creating an atmosphere. Also this idea of having people be able to read for as long as they like without having to buy. He actually had over a hundred seats on the ground floor where people just came and read, which did apparently lead to quite a lot of thefts, and his staff often didn't really understand why he allowed this to happen. But he really, I guess coming from poverty himself, this was something that was really important to him, so he wore the thefts and he wore the people laughing at him because he thought it was a really important principle.

Tess McLaughlan:

And so I wanted to ask a little more about a few of the departments you mentioned. I think in there you mentioned an ill-considered monkey house, what happened there?

Jodi Kok:

He actually opened the monkey enclosure in 1900. He'd read a book by R.L. Garner, which was called Speech of Monkeys, and he became quite fascinated with them. So, it was a really popular attraction for a long time, but it had its side effects. So monkeys aren't all that inhibited with their sexual behaviour, so people would bring their kids in, the monkeys would act up, the parents wouldn't know how to explain it. There were also a couple of incidents. There was quite a bad one when Cole was quite elderly, where he was nursing a baby monkey and one of the male monkeys actually attacked him quite badly, so bit and tore his scalp and he had to have 16 stitches. The health inspectors weren't super thrilled about having monkeys in the middle of the city, so he did eventually close the monkey house. He donated most of the monkeys to Melbourne Zoo and kept a couple for pets.

Tess McLaughlan:

He learned some lessons.

Jodi Kok:

He did, yes. I hope so.

Tess McLaughlan:

And you also mentioned a tea salon. Is it true that Mark Twain came to the opening?

Jodi Kok:

That is the rumour and it was mentioned in the family. So, it was in 1895, in the height of the Depression, and there was quite a strong anti-Chinese sentiment at the time. He had seen the bad treatment of Chinese people on the goldfields, and he was a very strong advocate of all men are equal. So that was something that really grated with him, and he decided he would open this tea salon, so he did that on Cup Day in 1895. He hired an entirely Chinese waitstaff and despite all the prejudices of the day, it became really, really popular, it was the place to go. And yes, there is the rumor that Mark Twain visited, and I think Edward Cole was quite a big fan of his, so that was quite a big deal.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, it sounds like a really magical place. In the written piece, you describe him as Marvelous Melbourne's own Willy Wonka, why did you make that comparison?

Jodi Kok:

Well, I actually have to confess that that was not my comparison initially. So, this was a blog that was initially going to be written by my colleague, Kylie Best, and she found out I had quite an interest in Cole and said, oh, well, you're welcome to write it, but she'd come up with this great idea. The more I read about Cole, the more I could see these comparisons between him and Willy Wonka, so there was the eccentricity, there was the golden tickets with Willy Wonka, and while Cole didn't have golden tickets, he did have these gold coins, which he used for various reasons.

So, he got these coins minted. Initially they were advertisements for the arcade, so he would get his staff to walk home on different routes and scatter them around the city, and people would find them and think that they were coins and pick them up and they'd have things on them that said, 'bring them to Cole's book arcade and you'll get two pens' or whatever.

Cole's idea was it would promote the arcade, and surely some of the people who came in to get the pens would buy books as well, and it was later used when he opened his big arcade. He did that on Cup Day and he encouraged all, I think he said intellectual non-racing fans to come and visit instead of going to the races, and actually they came and then after the races, the people from the races came as well, and it got a little bit out of hand. So, he got his staff to start selling these coins as entry tokens to sort of make sure there wasn't a riot, and he also used them later on just to kind of spout his – someone's called them 'his enthusiasms' –. I think my favorite one talks about the people in the world you don't know being as good as the people that you do know.

So those coins are still in existence, which is fantastic. So, I think there's that, there's the gold coins, the golden tickets. Now, I don't think this was in the book, but in the movie of Willy Wonka, there was the goose that laid the golden egg, and in his store he actually had imported from Germany a mechanical hen that laid eggs that had little gifts in them for children. They could be all different things. There's one story of someone getting a hanky and being quite upset with that, but yeah, there are just these... I guess it's just that fantastical nature too, that way that he did things that defied public expectation, so with all those similarities, it almost feels like E.W. Cole, in some ways, was Willy Wonka brought to life.

Tess McLaughlan:

E.W. Cole was a really ambitious person. He had an incredible vision for what he wanted to create with Cole's Book Arcade, and he created something truly ahead of its time, and it turns out Cole was also ahead of his time in some other ways too. For example, he had a really unique advertising campaign he ran in the newspapers.

Jodi Kok:

He really had this gift of this kind of amusing, engaging advertising. He also advertised for a wife. So even though he was this very eccentric out-there man in some ways, he was reportedly very shy, and he got to, I think 43 years of age and had not met a wife. So, he decided he would advertise for a wife also in the Herald, and so I guess it was almost like the online dating of its time, and he was heavily mocked for it. So what he did was he offered a 20 pound reward for anyone who could recommend to him a woman who met certain qualities, and people thought that was a real mockery of marriage, or perhaps it was another stunt, but he was absolutely legitimate with it. I read the ad the other day, and it's interesting. I was thinking about, wow, if you put that on a dating site these days, people would share it and go, check this guy out.

There is a really long section about women spending money on unnecessary fashion items. It's quite detailed, but basically he was looking for a wife who had similar worldviews to him, was educated, wanted to have a family. He found a wife. There was one person who came through in this, she called herself Tasman because she was from Tasmania. She actually admits to being a Tasmanian in the first letter, like she said, well, I'm going to put it on the table because if you don't like that, that's not me. So, her name was Eliza Jordan and they actually got married a month later. They had six children together and a very happy life apparently.

Tess McLaughlan:

And he wasn't just ahead of his time when it came to advertising, what are some other ways that he was ahead of his time?

Jodi Kok:

So, I think his beliefs were really ahead of his time, his ideas about religion, that religions were all essentially the same, that was very progressive in a time when people were deeply religious, generally deeply Christian here. I think his ideas about education and the importance of education for everyone stand out too, and this real belief that people were equal, people from all over the world were truly equal, he really believed that. Yeah, I feel like those wouldn't have been popular views at the time, but he was very set about them. So, when the White Australia Policy was introduced, he was very much against that, very publicly against it, he wrote pamphlets against it. He was actually invited to Japan in 1903 because of his feelings towards the White Australia Policy and met with a lot of important Japanese dignitaries and ended up writing another pamphlet about what Japanese people thought of that particular policy. Even though he was reportedly a shy man, he was someone who could stand up for what he believed in.

Tess McLaughlan:

Now, Jodi, you mentioned that there's a quote that really sums up E.W. Cole and his legacy, would you be able to share that with us?

Jodi Kok:

Yeah, I'd love to. So, this is from a book by Lisa Lang, which is called E.W. Cole, Chasing The Rainbow:

'Over four decades, Cole's Book Arcade became part of Melbourne's soul. For many, it was synonymous with the city itself. A trip to town meant a trip to Cole's for afternoon tea, the latest book, or to catch the monkeys in some rude act. It was like no other store in the world for it was not really a store at all. It was an extension of Edward Cole himself, an expression of his unique ideas and passions. If Edward could picture the future as a harmonious utopia, then the arcade was its blueprint, mapping out the way it could be achieved.'

Tess McLaughlan:

Jodi, thanks so much for joining me.

Jodi Kok:

Thanks. It was a nice chat.

Tess McLaughlan:

You've been listening to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria, all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. If you're interested in

finding out more about today's topic, you can read the article that this episode was based on, which you can find in the show notes.

For more information about State Library Victoria's collections, events and services, head over to the library's website at slv.vic.gov.au or visit us in person. This show was recorded in the podcast studios of State Library Victoria, and it was produced in partnership with Wavelength Creative. To make sure you don't miss an episode of *The Chapters*, be sure to subscribe to or follow the show in your podcast app, and while you're there, leave us a five-star review. It really helps others find the show.

I'm your host, Tess McLaughlan, and I'll see you in our next episode as we open another chapter.

This podcast was recorded by State Library Victoria on the lands of the Wurundjeri people.