Sunday Times 28/05/06 01 01rm2805metro 20 Jhb 26/05/06 01:25:43 PM

Sadness waits at the top of a dark stairway

Behind the pretty facade of Melrose House, **Loren Anthony** finds food for sobering thought



FINE FRONT: Melrose House in Pretoria, home of the Heys family and the scene of historic events — and injustice

WALTER Benjamin, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, wrote that "there has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism". What the philosopher is getting at is that the history of so-called "civilisation" is really a history of atrocity, and the great monuments of the past are really built on the backs of others.

This thought came to me as I stood at the foot of the "servants' staircase" at the genteel and ornately furbished Melrose House in Pretoria, the residence of the Heys family from 1886 onwards.

The main staircase is an exquisite affair. Made of the finest wood, and Persian-carpeted, its walls adorned with gilt-framed paintings and shown to advantage by the soft light issuing in through stained-glass windows, the staircase is regal and significant.

This sort of contrast always haunts me. When I enter these beautifully preserved, monumental homes from the Victorian age, I sense a flurry of ghosts. Not real spooks, of course, but the forgotten people who kept this home going while others — the owners — enjoyed the privilege of leisure.

So while the croquet lawns and clay tennis court, the aviary and dovecote, the morning room and conservatory provided the spaces for leisure and ease, busy hands were in the kitchen, nursery, coach-house, behind the scenes, ensuring that there was high tea, fresh linen, warmed pyjamas, polished shoes, snuff in the snuff box.



UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS: The grand wooden staircase that servants were not allowed to use

The servants — fit to serve but not be seen, ubiquitous in the home but invisible — are the ones that most intrigue me. It is not the celebrated occupants of the house that I try to imagine — and celebrated occupants there were aplenty. In 1902, the Peace Treaty of Vereeniging was signed in the house. The Heys family had turned their home over to Lord Kitchener and his men during the Anglo-Boer War, and it was naturally the site, with its massive dining and billiards tables, its stately spaces, where great men sued for peace.

But it is the attic that draws me — the nannies' quarters. Low-ceilinged and sparsely furnished, this hidden chamber hides its sorrows well. Below, in the drawing room, great men once signed documents, bankrolled events and forged history. Before the war, the family drank toasts and hosted balls, while at night, some lone figure crept into a cold bed excluded from the warmth and luxury below.

My children, sensing that I was growing morbid, led me out of the house into the sunshine. There, on the manicured lawns, we found a massive tree, with roots stretching above ground for metres; the children played, banishing the ghosts.

Today, the Melrose House property is a sliver of its former self. Its front lawns have been cut through by a main road thick with traffic, and its fine architecture — porticos and steeples, latticework and bay windows — is now flanked by apartments. But there is something significant in that. It has found its place, yes, and it is part of our past. And so its preservation becomes important, if just for that narrow stairway, that low room in the attic, which recall the horrors of the past.

As I leave Melrose House, ushering the kids into the car, I look up and see a group of teenagers making their way up the steel stairway of the apartment block next door. Kwaito music — brash and happy, vibey and triumphant — issues from a ghetto blaster they are carrying, and I think (getting all philosophical again) that the other stairway, the darkened one, is well and truly in the past.

● Melrose House is open daily except Mondays. Fee: R5 adults, R3 kids and pensioners. The Tea Garden is open during office hours.Tel: (012) 322-0420

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