

# **‘She said: He said:’ Reading, Writing and Recording History**



## **Oral History Association of Australia**



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The Editor of the Journal welcomes offers of material for possible publication in the 2014 issue, No. 36. See Call for Papers at the end of this Journal, or the OHAA website: [www.ohaa.org.au](http://www.ohaa.org.au). Suitable items include papers for peer-review, un-refereed articles (such as project and conference reports) and book reviews. Please see the website for further information.

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## Editor's notes

It is with pleasure that I bring you the 2013 edition of the Journal of the Oral History Association of Australia. I am thankful for the wonderful work of my colleagues on the Editorial Board – Chair Ariella van Luyn, Beth Robertson and Janis Wilton – for the time they take with thoughtful commentary on the papers submitted for peer review. I would also like to acknowledge the constructive feedback from reviewers and their timely return of reviews. This all helps to make my own job so much easier.

The variety of the contributions to the Journal never ceases to delight me. One of the beauties of oral history is that it can be applied to so many diverse disciplines, which lends itself to a rich and broad field of endeavour and offers a fascinating array of perspectives. This issue certainly does not disappoint in this regard.

Aaron Payne introduces a challenging and relatively unexplored concept: oral histories of the deaf. His article deals with some of the physical and emotional hurdles he has crossed in pursuing this research interest and the interesting results it has produced. Carol Roberts delves into her own local history with an analysis of the work of landscape artist Greg Hansell relating to its use in tourism in the Hawkesbury region of New South Wales. Helen Stagg presents a picture of working life along the River Murray through the lives of some of the people involved in the construction of locks and weirs in the 1920s and 1930s. Elaine Rabbitt looks at the way the sharing of Indigenous oral histories can add to the reconciliation process.

In this edition we also have an article by Arua Oko, a doctoral candidate with McMaster University, Canada, dealing with the stories of disabled veterans of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the late 1960s. His research reveals a tale of neglect and abandon by the very people for whom they fought and suffered and offers an insight into some of the legacies of violent conflict.

Hilary Davies provides a profile of a man who was influential in her childhood through the memories of her older brother, a history that would be otherwise lost to the record. Therese Sweeney details some of the results of her project working with migrant market gardeners in outer south-western Sydney that brings to light personal experiences that add to the richness of that particular local history.

This year we again have four peer-reviewed papers. Jesse Adams Stein brings us an exploration of the part played by oral histories in the deciphering of meaning in institutional photographs from a collection of images of the NSW Government Printing Office that provides illuminating and sometimes amusing deconstruction. Mary Brooks deals with memory and selective recall in her research with women involved in the WWII war effort following the bombing of Darwin. She focusses on the influence of public propaganda and official history on personal recollections from this era.

Christeen Schoepf combines material culture and archival oral histories from a State Library of South Australia collection of interviews conducted by Beth Robertson in 1979, thus demonstrating the enduring value of oral history recording. Christeen provides an analysis of one of these to enhance her research into the WWI Cheer-Up Society in South Australia and to develop a biography of the objects identified that relate to it. Finally Deirdre Prinsen's foray into attachment to places in the landscape through the eyes of shack owners on the southern NSW coast gives an insight into the emotional meaning attached to place that can develop over generations.

It is disappointing that this issue of the Journal contains no book reviews. This is due to a shortage of time on my part to follow these up. A recent call for a Reviews Editor received an overwhelming response by eight highly qualified people, presenting a dilemma as to who to appoint to the role, which was decided on a 'first come, first served' basis. At the time of going to press, I am pleased to announce that Dr Jayne Persian will take on the role and I very much welcome her on board. I also thank the other applicants for their generous offer.

I am delighted to be able to include the citation for the winner of the Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History – Francis Good. This is a well-deserved recognition of Francis' long and worthy contribution to the field.

I look forward to the forthcoming Biennial Conference in Adelaide and to receiving submissions for the 2014 Journal as a result of presentations made.

Best wishes,  
**Sue Anderson**

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# The challenges of producing an oral history of the Deaf: cued speech in New South Wales 1965-1990

Aaron Payne

## Abstract

This article documents the experiences of conducting an oral history project to record the history of Cued Speech in Australia through the experiences of teachers, parents and students. It explores the importance of oral history in documenting the historical experiences of marginalised or forgotten groups such as the deaf and the challenges associated with this, in particular recruitment and communication strategies.

## Introduction

The introduction of Cued Speech, an innovative method to assist deaf students to speak, is an example of an approach to deaf pedagogy in the quest to attain the ephemeral concept of 'normal'. In many cases this concept of 'normal' for the deaf is the acquisition of speech and spoken language. It is this problematic concept that would occupy the minds of stakeholders in deaf education particularly because much of deaf identity is formed by the use of sign language that is developed through association with other deaf people particularly in schools.<sup>1</sup> The complexities of educating deaf students and meeting the needs of parents, students and the Deaf and hearing communities is evidenced through the constantly evolving policy and educational practices relating to deaf education.

Education in Australia is a developing field and historically it has focused on individual schools or schooling systems in the educational mainstream. The history of the deaf and deaf education has largely been viewed through the prism of hearing educators, governments and institutions that has resulted in the voices of deaf children and their parents being largely ignored.<sup>2</sup> Recently there have been moves to incorporate the experience of individuals within the broader history of education in Australia. Revisionist historians often write about a 'history from below' however in more modern scholarship this has been refined to a 'history from within'.<sup>3</sup> The historical absence of the deaf in academic scholarship prompted this project to look at the experiences of Cued Speech

in Australia as a history from within, by producing an oral history relying on the testimonies of students, parents and teachers.

This oral history project sought to record the experiences of teachers, students and parents at St Gabriel's School at Castle Hill in northwest Sydney.<sup>4</sup> This school was the site of the introduction of the Cued Speech method in Australia and also had a well-documented history, which made it a suitable location for a study.<sup>5</sup> The process of interviewing and the information obtained provided unique insights into the history of deaf education and the importance of understanding the motivations and experiences of individuals. Producing an oral history utilising the experiences of deaf participants who used sign language necessitated some changes to the traditional methods of recruitment and interviewing. This involved using video cameras to record interviews, conducting interviews in a digital platform such as Skype as well as the complexities of transcribing sign language into written English.

## Oral History and the Deaf

Previous projects that used the approach of oral history in looking at the experiences of the deaf were influential in determining the approach of this project. Donna Ryan conducted interviews with deaf Jewish survivors of the Holocaust which used oral histories to record the stories of people who have until now been unheard of and ignored by conventional history.<sup>6</sup> Two major issues identified by the researcher were communication and being able to recruit participants. Sign language is not a universal language with different communities and groups having their own form and there are significant difficulties in locating interpreters. Ryan used video cameras to record the interviews for the oral history project and reported no difficulties with using this technology and that experience was shared with this project. In interviewing deaf survivors of the Holocaust, translators were used to bridge the gap between American Sign Language and Hungarian Sign Language. However, translators were not necessary in researching the history of Cued Speech in Australia as both the interviewer and interviewees



Former student Riona planting a tree on school grounds 1987 to mark her graduation from the school, with Principal Br McGrath watching on. Photograph courtesy Riona's mother (surname withheld).

both used the same sign language. The use of deaf people in the community as recruiters enabled Ryan to access individuals who would normally be reticent in participating in a project of this nature and a similar strategy was also adopted here.

Paula Hart in another project interviewed deaf participants and found that interviews were best conducted in an environment where the participant could see the interviewer and respond to physical cues.<sup>7</sup> These recommendations were implemented for the interview with the interviewee being able to see the interviewer at all times. Hart also recognises the challenges of 'reverse interpretation' in transcribing sign language and recommended combining sign language with facial expressions, body language and gestures. The experiences of both Hart and Ryan in interviewing the deaf provided valuable precedents that significantly informed this project.

## Methodology

This project interviewed former students, their parents and teachers about their experiences with Cued Speech at the Castle Hill School. An effort was made to obtain a range of viewpoints, both male and female as well as across a different age range – particularly for the students, however this was not satisfactorily achieved. This weakness is largely due to the nature of the recruitment process and the small population from which to obtain participants. Due to time constraints it was only possible to interview two former teachers, three parents and five former students. The University of Sydney granted ethics approval for this project

and research was conducted following the guidelines outlined by the Research Integrity unit. All participants were provided with an Information Statement that outlined the purposes of the research and the position of the researcher. When participants agreed to be interviewed they were required to sign a Participant Consent Form where they could demonstrate their agreement as well as indicating their consent to being recorded, for interview data being used for the purposes of the Honours research project and other subsequent publications and whether they wished for their identity to be concealed. All interview transcripts and recordings remain in the possession of the author.

Passive snowball recruitment was used in order to access a community that is often obscured from researchers for reasons such as language, culture or geographical barriers.<sup>8</sup> In this project a former student of St Gabriel's volunteered to assist with recruiting by passing onto other students and teachers a letter of introduction from the researcher inviting them to take part in the project. By selecting a former student, this enabled the project to directly access participants, which was advantageous due to a small population size that could not be reached through traditional means such as telephone or newspaper advertisements. It was believed that newspaper advertisements would not yield sufficient responses from the small target population for this study and the time constraints associated with the project meant that participants needed to be identified and located expeditiously.

However, there are some significant disadvantages to passive snowballing. One risk of snowballing from a single individual is the creation of a hegemony that cannot be claimed to be truly representative.<sup>9</sup> Selecting an individual and relying on that individual's social network cannot produce a representative sample because one's network is a result of individual experiences and prejudices. This was the experience encountered by this project because the former student was enthusiastic about Cued Speech and most people she contacted shared this enthusiasm and consequently it was difficult to obtain a variety of views. This resulted in the production of an oral history that was overwhelmingly in favour of Cued Speech with only one dissenting voice. Further complicating this recruitment process was the reluctance of some potential participants to be interviewed firstly due to anxieties about speaking 'on the record' to an 'outsider' and secondly because of an awareness of the contentious nature of deaf education. This contentiousness can be traced to the protracted debates around whether deaf children should be taught to speak or to sign.<sup>10</sup> This suspicion of 'outsider' researchers by individuals who are deaf in conjunction with the complex nature of deaf education are likely factors in the limited nature of previous research on the history of deaf education in Australia.



Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants and recorded using a video camera where face-to-face interviews were possible. The positioning of the camera was a significant challenge as it was necessary to record both the interviewer and interviewee. Initially this meant that the interviewer and interviewee sat directly opposite one another with the camera placed on the side to capture the sign language and body language of both individuals. This method was not ideal as some sign language was not easily visible and the facial expressions of the interviewee were often lost. A decision was then made to focus the camera solely on the interviewee in order to capture the full body and sign language and facial expression and the interviewer would orally state the question whilst signing for the benefit of the recording.

Where logistical and geographical constraints prohibited the use of face-to-face interviews, interviews were instead conducted through Skype. Though this approach enabled the researcher to interview participants who were interstate it was felt that this method was not as effective as a face-to-face meeting. Technical issues such as connection speeds resulted in some delays in the video conferencing, which impacted on the fluidity of the conversation. Hanna reports on the use of Skype to conduct semi-structured interviews and also acknowledges some of the technical limitations or difficulties.<sup>11</sup> Hanna also notes that conducting web-based interviews through mediums such as Skype may create a more comfortable environment for the interviewee through the provision of a 'neutral' space as well as the ability to overcome physical barriers to interviews.<sup>12</sup>

The interviewer as a profoundly deaf person had some knowledge of sign language, which enabled him to conduct the interviews using sign language where appropriate. Sign language, in this case Auslan, the national sign language of the Australian deaf community does not follow the grammatical and lexical structure of spoken or written English. This meant that the interviewer in composing the interview transcript after its completion was required to 'translate' sign language into written English, and maintain the tone and emotion conveyed by facial expression and body language. To ensure that transcripts were an accurate reflection of the interviewee's responses, copies were sent to the interviewee in order to verify that the translation of sign language was accurate. Most texts that deal with interviews promote the use of tape recorders to document the interviews. However, this suggestion is the result of the unconscious assumption that an interview must consist of verbal communication. With all participants, the interviews were recorded by a video camera to enable the sign language to be captured.

## Cued Speech at St Gabriel's

The interviews were interesting as they were able to elucidate not only the pedagogical aspects of Cued Speech but also the intensely emotional experiences surrounding deaf education for parents and children attempting to navigate a labyrinth of competing views surrounding disability, deafness and education. To provide some context it is necessary to briefly explain the history of the school and deaf education in New South Wales. The Christian Brothers founded St Gabriel's in 1922 in response to growing concerns about the education of deaf Catholic boys. At the time there existed the New South Wales Institution for the Deaf, Dumb and Blind at Darlington in Sydney and the Waratah School at the Rosary Convent in Newcastle. The Waratah School as a Catholic school for girls did not have the capacity to educate deaf boys beyond early childhood level, which necessitated the establishment of St Gabriel's at Castle Hill in northwest Sydney. The school began as an all-boys boarding school before admitting day pupils and eventually girls in 1973.

Cued Speech was invented by Dr Orin Cornett in 1966 in the United States in response to what he saw was an unsustainable use of lip reading to develop speech in the pre-lingual deaf. This method broadly referred to as 'oralism', had been introduced to St Gabriel's in 1952 and Brother McGrath, who was interviewed for this study, found it to be unsatisfactory. Only thirty percent of the English language can be comprehended through lip reading in the absence of sufficient auditory stimulation. Cued Speech was a means by which individual phonemes that were indistinguishable on the lips could be differentiated through visual symbols or cues using the hand while the individual spoke. McGrath became principal of the school in 1965 before embarking on an overseas study trip and met with Cornett by chance at Gallaudet University. McGrath was persuaded by Cornett as to the advantages of Cued Speech over existing methods to teach deaf children



St Gabriel's Christmas Pageant, 1985. Photograph courtesy Riona's mother (surname withheld).

how to speak and decided to implement it at St Gabriel's in 1968 following his return from overseas.

McGrath in his interview emphasised the challenges of introducing a new teaching method with very little training and support apart from intermittent long-distance advice from Cornett. In spite of these logistical challenges, he believed that the introduction of Cued Speech was successful and as he relates below, the program in its infancy had exceeded expectations:

And we did a video and sent it over to Cornett, and he sent a message back, maybe a telegram. He said you've taken this on the wrong speed, you have it on fast-forward, the boys could not be Cueing that quickly. And they were! They were going like crazy! And this is important, I decided and I told the teachers that we'd never tell the boys to Cue. If it was reliable, they would want to Cue to each other. And that's exactly what happened, we never asked them to Cue. So we started to see them in the yard, Cueing to each other a little bit, and then they were using it all the time. So that was a very important test.<sup>13</sup>

Brother Reg Shepherd was a teacher at St Gabriel's at the time Cued Speech was introduced and he similarly reflected on the challenges it presented the teaching staff:

And it was tough, it knocked out some teachers and they left. It knocked out Brother Adams who'd been working with the deaf for 25 years. It was sad to see it happen, but the common good comes before the individual good.<sup>14</sup>

Shepherd also commented on the difficulty in developing a rapport with the adult deaf community, the majority of whom at that time used sign language. St Gabriel's, in seeking to teach the deaf to speak, placed itself at odds with significant sections of the



St Gabriel's Drama production, 1985. Photograph courtesy Riona's mother (surname withheld).

deaf community at the time. Shepherd recalled that it was a:

...bit of a struggle. Not very keen on Cued Speech at all. And they were not very keen on the cochlear implant either. Because the reality is, you cut their community from underneath them. They used to say they are changing the deaf people into hearing people. It's a big change.<sup>15</sup>

The idea of changing the deaf into hearing was a contentious one at the time and continues to be contentious today. This is a significant challenge for hearing parents of deaf children for whom deafness and the associated sociological and cultural issues are largely foreign. The experience is quite confronting as Vivienne, a hearing mother of a deaf girl related:

Ha ha, where do I begin? I was shocked, in disbelief, angry. I felt isolated in many ways. My parents noticed before I did. I was looking for someone to blame and I always wondered why my perfect child was deaf... It's hard being a hearing person with a deaf child because you suddenly have to enter a world that you didn't understand. And in many ways you never will.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to this feeling of isolation, a sense of helplessness was reinforced by professionals in the field of both medicine and education where Vivienne was told that, 'there was no future for our child. But I refused to believe that. If there was one thing I was certain of, was that my child would get a good education just like everyone else.'<sup>17</sup> It is with this resolve that Vivienne sought to enrol her daughter at St Gabriel's in 1978 because she believed an important component in the education of the deaf was developing the ability to speak.

In addition to recording the often-ignored experiences of parents in the history of deaf education, the voices of the students conveyed a similar level of emotion that is often absent in many texts regarding the history of education in Australia. Annette was one of the students interviewed and was passionate about the benefits of Cued Speech. Annette, who was born in 1964, explained her background in the following terms:

I am the one who is profoundly deaf. I am one of seven children. My mother wasn't aware at the time when she had me inside her, when she had rubella injection. She didn't know she was pregnant. Bugger! I wish I was born hearing.<sup>18</sup>

Despite her sense of frustration in relation to her hearing (a response developed through personal hardships), Annette is overwhelmingly positive regarding her experiences with Cued Speech and stated that, 'I give thanks to my parents ... for choosing Cued Speech... I think Cued Speech should have kept going, for many deaf children who wear cochlear implant.'<sup>19</sup>

In the case of Annette and most of the other students interviewed, they valued the opportunity given to them by their parents and the school to develop the ability to communicate through speech.

A former student Martin expressed very different sentiments regarding Cued Speech in comparison to other students who were interviewed. Martin requested that his name be changed to protect his anonymity and he was the only participant who requested this. Whilst understanding the purpose and methodologies behind Cued Speech, he argued that, 'I don't Cue, how can I communicate? I use Auslan, and it is my first language. Auslan evolved from the Deaf community; Cued Speech was developed by hearing people.'<sup>20</sup> Martin's position reflects the challenges faced by Cued Speech, which was incorrectly described as a language. Some in the deaf community were suspicious of what they believed to be the potential for this artificial 'language' to replace the organic Auslan.

Brother McGrath in his interview recalled that students were active users and consumers of Cued Speech. Martin, who started at St Gabriel's in 1981, suggested that Cued Speech may not have been wholly embraced by students particularly those who could sign. 'I remember if I used sign language they would discipline me with the cane. Bang bang bang on the hands. I used to spread sign language to the younger kids, you could see their eyes open wide when they saw it for the first time.'<sup>21</sup> As Shepherd noted, Martin also identified the divisive nature of deaf education and cautioned that, 'It weakens our culture; we must work together regardless. Cued Speech, cochlear, oral, hard of hearing, Deaf, deaf, half-deaf, everyone comes together, works together for better access to our lifestyle.'<sup>22</sup>

Whilst the above examples from the interviews paint a very brief picture of the experiences of Cued Speech at St Gabriel's, they demonstrate the value of oral history in adding a richer layer of understanding and context to historical events. The testimonies of former students, their parents and their teachers greatly enhance what is known about Cued Speech in Australia and the intersections that exist with broader issues in deaf education. Whilst the documentary history of deaf education and schools for the deaf present a binary history of Cued Speech as comprising a beginning and an end, the reality is that the 'middle' contained complex and challenging experiences for all those involved with this novel pedagogy.

## Conclusion

This oral history project was able to reveal a great deal about the history of Cued Speech in Australia through the personal experiences of those directly involved with it. Despite the enthusiasm of participants in

favour of Cued Speech as a pedagogical method in deaf education, Cued Speech ceased to be used in Australia from the 1990s. The published history of deaf education in Australia refers to the beginning and end of Cued Speech in Australia<sup>23</sup> but fails to explain why it ceased to be used here but continued elsewhere, for example in the United States. The introduction of new technologies such as the cochlear implant opened up new avenues in teaching the deaf to speak that relied less on visual stimuli such as Cued Speech. By conducting interviews with former students it was apparent that many chose to communicate through sign language rather than orally once they left school. Cued Speech represents an important bridging period in the history of oral education for the deaf, however the experiences recorded in the oral history demonstrates that it was not effective in producing independent and oral deaf individuals.

This oral history project revealed the great opportunities that exist in recording the history of deaf people. Accessing the deaf community can be challenging for hearing researchers when positioned as 'outsiders' and it is important to recognise this position. Fortunately the deaf community is well connected through networks of individuals or societies, which provide an entry point for future researchers. My position as a deaf person accorded me some 'insider' status however as a researcher I was viewed as an 'outsider' by some potential participants who declined to be interviewed. Negotiating these issues was difficult and is likely to be a significant factor in why hearing researchers appear to have been reluctant to conduct oral histories with the deaf.

Another significant obstacle is conducting interviews in sign language, especially if the interviewer is unfamiliar with it. This can be overcome by using interpreters during interviews, as was done in the research by Ryan on the experiences of the deaf during the Holocaust.<sup>24</sup> The ability to transcribe or translate sign language into written English is an important dilemma because one of the strengths of oral history research lies in the accurate recording of the interviewee's responses. By providing a transcript to interviewees, any misrepresentations or confusions could easily be resolved, often without substantially changing the content of the transcript.

Oral history research involving deaf people provides an opportunity to challenge standard orthodoxies in both the fields of oral history and historical research. The term oral history can be broadened to include history that is communicated at a personal level through languages such as Auslan or American Sign Language. The absence of spoken interviews should not be seen as a barrier to producing an oral history in the case of the deaf. Further to this, conducting oral histories of the deaf provides great opportunities to further develop historical understanding in a range of fields such as education and sociology that have largely neglected the experiences of deaf individuals or the deaf in general.

## (Endnotes)

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- 2 Barbara Lee Crickmore, 'An Historical Perspective on the Academic Education of Deaf Children in New South Wales 1860s-1990s,' Unpublished, University of Newcastle, 2000.
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- 4 This oral history project was conducted to satisfy the requirements of an Honours dissertation at the University of Sydney in 2011. Sections of the dissertation are reproduced here.
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- 12 *ibid.*, p. 241.
- 13 Brother Gerry McGrath, interviewed by author, August 2011, recording and transcript held by author.
- 14 Brother Reg Shepherd, interviewed by author, August 2011, recording and transcript held by author.
- 15 *ibid.*
- 16 Vivienne Twomey, interviewed by author, August 2011, recording and transcript held by author.
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 Annette Slade, interviewed by author, August 2011, recording and transcript held by author.
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 'Martin', interviewed by author, August 2011, recording and transcript held by author.
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 *ibid.*
- 23 Crickmore, *op.cit.*; St Gabriel's School for Hearing Impaired Children, *op.cit.*
- 24 Donna F. Ryan, *op.cit.*



# ‘And you’re still speaking to each other?’ Drawing the line between friendship and oral history

Carol Roberts

## Abstract

This article focuses on the problems and processes involved in recording oral histories with the pastel artist, Greg Hansell, and how those oral histories and conversations with the artist formed the basis for my thesis on ‘Sharing History: The artist, the historian and the tour guide’. The content of the thesis centred around two collaborative art/history/tourism projects associated with the artist’s recent exhibitions, *Life in the Hawkesbury* and *Hawkesbury Sketchbook*, involving Greg Hansell, the Historic Houses Trust New South Wales and my tourism business, Hawkesbury Valley Heritage Tours.

The thesis also highlighted aspects of Greg Hansell’s paintings that establish his artworks as documentary and interpretive records of heritage sites as they appear at the present time. His paintings are a form of public history that distinguish him as an historian, and the thesis shows how the artist’s sense of place and connectedness with the Hawkesbury district have impacted on his motivation to continue his concept of writing the history of early buildings and heritage sites through his paintings.

This article explains some of the problems associated with embarking on oral history interviews with friends and draws on advice and comments from oral historians Michael Frisch, Alistair Thomson and Lorraine Sitzia.

## Introduction

I took redundancy from full-time work in 2005 and for the last few years I have been an external, very mature-age student at the University of New England in Armidale, mainly studying history. I completed the Advanced Diploma in Local, Family and Applied History, which led to a Bachelor of Arts, and I have just completed my thesis for a Master’s of History – all in the space of eight years. Some would say I am a glutton for punishment, but I am passionate about history and enjoy looking for new angles to present history to the public.

My thesis was based on two art exhibitions held last year by Hawkesbury-based pastel artist Greg Hansell: *Life in the Hawkesbury* and *Hawkesbury Sketchbook*. The artist collaborated with both the Historic Houses Trust New South Wales (HHT) and my tour-guiding business, Hawkesbury Valley Heritage Tours, to extend the content of his exhibitions into guided tours of heritage sites in the Hawkesbury area depicted in the paintings.

I purchased Hawkesbury Valley Heritage Tours in November 2011, when the previous owner retired. Having lived in the Hawkesbury area in the semi-rural township of Windsor in New South Wales for most of my life, and being a sixth-generation ‘Hawkesbury-ite’, I have developed an affinity for rural life and community history in the area. I first met Greg Hansell in the late 1980s, several years after his move from Sydney to live in Windsor and I became aware of his rural background and passion for recording the past in the present through his art. His subject matter includes natural environments and man-made objects, especially the quintessential Australian icon which happens to be the artist’s favourite subject in his paintings - corrugated iron. Hansell comments:

That rural background is hard-wired, so you can’t get away from that – it’s just there. Also, corrugated iron is one of those wonder products. It retains its story too, for me anyway, it retains its story of where it has been recycled, where it has been bashed and bumped, all those things are retained, they get left in the tin...the way it casts shadows, the way it rusts, the way nature has a little bit of a say in it too, the life off it.<sup>1</sup>

But the difference in Hansell’s choice of subject matter is that he often chooses objects that convey a subtle message or have a distinct link with the past, such as rusting farm implements or sheds that are about to fall down or ‘are second-to-midnight’.<sup>2</sup>

The opportunity to work with Greg Hansell and the Historic Houses Trust came about when the Programming Manager HHT Members contacted me to arrange a guided tour of the Hawkesbury



Richmond School of Arts, Earth pastel, 2012, 15 x 20cm, private collection. Courtesy of the artist, Greg Hansell.

area in conjunction with Greg Hansell's *Life in the Hawkesbury* exhibition on view at The Mint in Sydney. This collaborative venture expanded into a second tour in conjunction with Hansell's *Hawkesbury Sketchbook* studio exhibition in October last year. Together, both collaborative ventures formed the focus for my recent thesis. They also formed a pivotal point for the study of how the artist presents the past in the present, by investigating his choice of material, subject matter and medium, his sense of place in the Hawkesbury area and the parameters that characterise his art as public history.

## Use of oral history in research

One of my first exposures to the use of oral history as a valuable research tool came when I was a member of the Curatorium for the opening exhibition at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery in 2005, curated by Cheryle Yin-Lo, called *Agri/Culture: Re-Creating the Living Landscape*. The *Agri/Culture* exhibition focussed on the decline of agriculture in the Hawkesbury area from the mid-1940s to the year 2000. Although the majority of the exhibition consisted of artworks, installations and photographs, excerpts from oral history tapes recorded in the mid-1980s were also included. The experience gained in working on that extensive project helped emphasise to me the importance of oral history and art in recording agricultural and rural history.

My interest and motivation for studying Hansell's work began several years ago, when I recorded my first oral history interview with him in 2008 for the oral history unit at the University of New England run by Dr Janis Wilton. It was then that I really became aware of the unique subject matter of his paintings and his enthusiasm for recording history 'as it is now'. When the opportunity arose to further that interest by

focussing on a research topic for my academic studies, I jumped at the chance.<sup>3</sup>

At the time of the first interview in 2008 I used a large, metal Panasonic audio cassette recorder from the mid-1980s with a good quality external microphone because that was what I had available. It worked extremely well and the quality of the recording was good, but after attending an oral history digital recording information session at the State Library of New South Wales in 2010, I upgraded to a Fostex Field Recorder which captures the voice on high-performance compact flash cards that can then be downloaded to computer – much more convenient. Of course, modern-day technology has made the recording and transcribing of interviews much easier, but the 2008 oral history experience was my first academic forage into oral history and it helped fuel my passion for the oral history genre and its useful possibilities for the crossover, or interdisciplinarity, of creative pursuits and historical research.

Other uses were also found for my oral history recording with Greg Hansell. A slightly-shortened version of the transcript from my first interview with the artist formed the wording for the *Greg Hansell: Survey* exhibition catalogue in 2009 for his 30-year survey at the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery in Windsor. For the same exhibition, I collated and scanned hundreds of photographs and matched them to the oral history audio content to make a DVD which was played throughout the duration of the exhibition. Together, the *Greg Hansell: Survey* catalogue, the oral history tape and the oral history DVD are primary sources for history/art researchers as a record of Greg Hansell's life and work.<sup>4</sup>

I have recorded two oral histories with the artist at two different times and those recordings are held by me in a locked filing cabinet in my home office, along with the accumulated research material. The recordings were interspersed with face-to-face interviews ranging from more formal conversations to informal chats over coffee in the artist's studio. The usual formalities of signing permission forms and talking about the topics to be raised in the interviews were carried out during preliminary visits to the artist's home and studio, and separate times were set aside for taking photographs, especially photographing the making of the earth pastels which are the artist's main medium for his work. My research over the last five years also entailed seeking out documents, photographs and information about Hansell from various sources and following closely the artist's career.

## Reaching beyond the public persona

The second (much longer) interview was recorded in February 2011. There are arguments for and against



St Matthews, Earth pastel, 2012, 15 x 20cm, private collection. Courtesy of the artist, Greg Hansell.

full transcription of interviews, but I found for my purposes that full transcriptions were essential. I transcribed both interviews and copies were sent to the interviewee for correction before being used for research purposes. There were very few corrections in the transcripts and I put this down to the fact that my interviewee has been interviewed several times over the years by media representatives from magazines and local newspapers, so he is fairly well-practised and experienced in interview situations.<sup>5</sup>

The major drawback for me in this regard was the fact that for the first interview I had difficulty in reaching beyond the normal rhetoric given by the artist in media interviews, and on reflection I believe this was also partly due to the shy, retiring nature of the narrator. I realised that I needed to draw on the interviewee's experiences in much more depth in order to gain a deeper understanding of the artist and his work. This was partially achieved in the second, more in-depth interview as we began to search beneath the layers of narrative. The artist was much more relaxed in the second interview and I was able to gain insights into his strict, rural upbringing and how that early discipline and work ethic 'certainly would have been a part of' his professional attitude to his art practice today.<sup>6</sup>

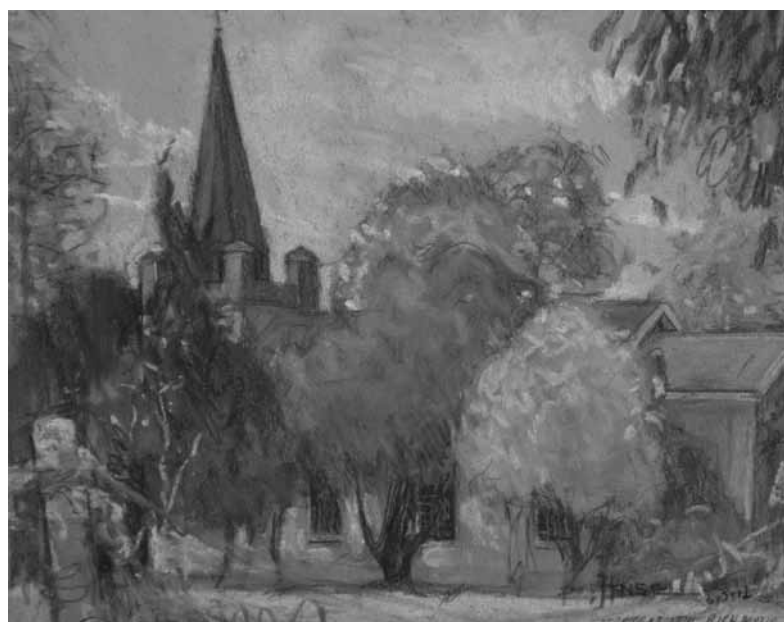
Also, several underlying themes became apparent in Greg Hansell's oral evidence relating to cultural, environmental, political and religious aspects of society in rural Australia during the 1950s and 1960s and while each of those themes could be the subject of further study, it was beyond the scope of my research to dig below the surface and 'interpret the significance of memory' to explore the 'ideological and cultural parameters of social action'. However, one theme was corporal punishment and this aspect remains embedded in Hansell's memory as significant. It was at this point that I realised we were reaching beneath the layers of normal rhetoric to reveal hidden memories.<sup>7</sup>

Discipline at the Christian Brothers high school in Wagga Wagga (New South Wales) where Hansell attended high school was 'very strict – it was the strap...it was about four layers of leather stitched in about three or four strips in a block...it was very short...my record was twenty-eight in one day. One day.' Discipline at home was from a father with 'a razor strop' who 'was always right'. Further into the interview Hansell admits he 'rebelled a bit' when he left home at age 16 to take up a traineeship with the PMG (Postmaster-General's Department) in Sydney. So now we were getting down to 'the real stuff' of Greg Hansell's life and from this point the interview flowed more easily. We discussed the artist's work, life and family experiences before moving on to the actual artworks.<sup>8</sup>

Much of the information included in my recent thesis was gained from those oral history interviews and conversations with the artist. However, I must admit that each of us relied heavily on the level of trust which existed between us – it was a two-way street. I needed the narrator to trust that I would not misuse information revealed in the recordings and conversations, and the narrator needed to know that his trust was well-founded. Also, I had to find a way to reach beyond the public persona and that only happened as our level of trust increased over many, many months.

## Drawing the threads together

The comment which forms the title of this article was made by a friend of the artist who, on learning of the extent of co-operation between us, was very surprised that we were 'still speaking to each other'. To be honest, there were times when I literally had to walk away from the complexity of the project and have an



St Peter's, Earth pastel, 2012, 15 x 20cm, private collection. Courtesy of the artist, Greg Hansell.





Wilberforce Road, earth pastel, 2012, 15 x 20cm, in private collection.

extended break from the amount of information I was collecting because I could not see a way to draw the disparate threads together into a workable research topic. I could not see the direction the thesis was going to take and at times I felt discouraged to the point where I considered withdrawing from the project.<sup>9</sup>

I found that preparing a research project on the scale of a Master's thesis on the work of a contemporary well-known artist like Greg Hansell, while at the same time dealing with the oral histories and the added 'extra-curricular' facets of the tours, was very, very difficult. Dealing with the art/history/tourism collaborations while at the same time, developing the theme of the artist as historian using the artworks as examples proved to be a challenging task and one which entailed sharing of interpretive skills, knowledge and expertise. Even several months into the project, I had difficulty in



Willy, 20 Jan 2008, earth pastel, 15 x 20cm, private collection. Courtesy of the artist, Greg Hansell.

finding an analytical edge: the nexus between fulfilling university criteria and the biographical content of the oral history interviews combined with art, history and tourism. I needed a clearly articulated research question and also needed to avoid my work becoming more narrative than analytical. It was thanks to advice and encouragement from my supervisor (Janis Wilton) that the format gradually began to take shape.

The issue of my lack of artistic training also had to be dealt with in the context of conducting oral history and artistic research with a practising artist. I was an executive assistant who had worked in government departments for many years until a change in career led to music teaching and then history studies. As it turned out, the disadvantages of my lack of artistic training and knowledge of the terminology were not a drawback, but before conducting the interviews I did acquire basic knowledge about perspective, vanishing points and colour spectrums so that I at least had some preparation for the interviews.

## Techniques of the artist

One of the advantages of having no formal training in art was that I took an unbiased viewpoint about the subject matter of paintings and an additional advantage was that the artist took more trouble to explain concepts, subject matter, techniques and methods of painting. One technique Hansell adopts is to use doorways or windows to frame a view outside or inside or where dark trees on either side 'force the line of sight down the centre of the painting'. He adds interest by 'going from the dark looking out to the light', or he uses a technique of 'making the darks darker to show up the lights'. He explains, 'with earth pastels you don't get the lights very well, so I use darker colours (charcoal) to make the lighter colours stand out'. Hansell's depiction of historic buildings is enhanced by his tendency to focus on detail and to adopt perspectives that frame specific features in a scene or, indeed, suggest that there are further features outside the frame. The artist also uses this framing technique, not only to focus on specific details but as a means of drawing attention to items beyond the painting itself. He explains:

Looking over and around and through things and under things...something heading off the edge... you get a glimpse of what's around the corner... you get a glimpse of the upstairs window and that says there is more to it...it gives an idea of the layout of the building.<sup>10</sup>

A further element in Hansell's approach to representing historic sites is his focus on walls, as shown by his comments:

It has really been sub-conscious...because I have always thought of myself as being a bit of a frustrated abstract painter, so the wall creates



that. It really is a recurring theme and if you think of walls, you put windows in them so you can see through them. Walls block things out, the window lets you see through it. So a lot of my work is tin walls, sides of houses, peeling paint. Also, if you put the whole building into your painting and show sky above it and grass in front of it and hills beside, you end up with a picture of a house on the hill in the countryside, whereas I zoom right in, so you end up looking at the surface [or patina] of the wall and that's what I'm really looking at with most of it and then the windows and things make it abstract.<sup>11</sup>

He isolates and features a small 'section of a wall without foreground or background', for instance the painting *Tree shadows* features the corrugated iron on Hansell's barn in Windsor:<sup>12</sup>

It's vertical corrugated iron – just a close-up of a dozen or so corrugations of iron that's larger than life and there's a tree off to the right and there's sun shining from the right...and there was just that whole abstractness of tin showing what's happened to it over the years and what's just outside the spectator's view.<sup>13</sup>

Walls feature in many of Greg Hansell's paintings and have become similar to Albert Tucker's crescent shape that appeared in his works, which he said was an energy source for his painting. Tucker said that once he put the crescent shape in it instantly gave the painting focus. Hansell points out that his walls 'are very sub-conscious':

I didn't even notice I was doing walls all the time until it was pointed out. The wall is a nice one. The tin wall can be the iron curtain; you put a window in it [and] you see through it; you see little glimpses around it and through it...the wall can hold information as if it's sign-written, or the texture or the shadows. There are holes in it, little nooks around it, the shadows cast on it. You can start showing what's around you and behind you. You can extend it nicely...Mainly holding up the light and shade on the wall is very important and showing what's around you.<sup>14</sup>

But they are not all physical walls. Some are visual barriers such as cliffs, trees, fence lines, posts, bushes or water, which the artist uses to break up the landscape. Hansell includes a wall, either consciously or subconsciously, to draw attention to that which is beyond what the viewer actually sees in the painting by 'getting realism and abstracting it by cutting out the peripheral'.<sup>15</sup>

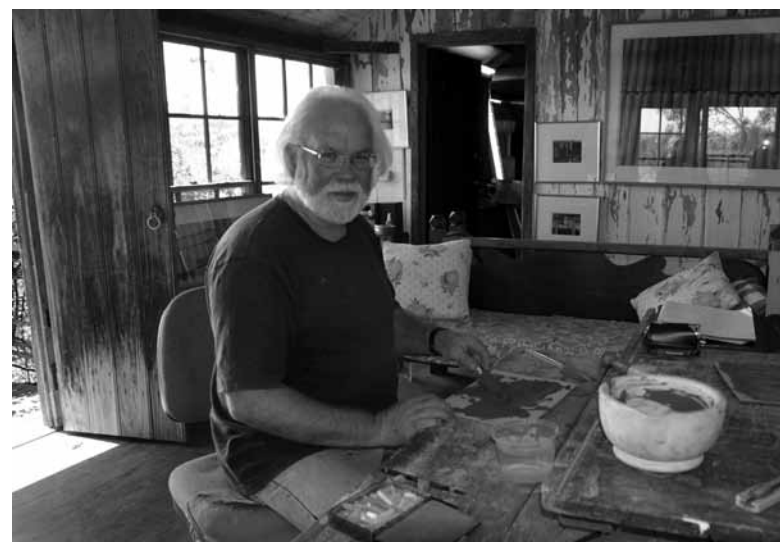
An additional aspect of Greg Hansell's technique involves drawing the viewer in to look at small details in the paintings. *Staffordshire and zinnias at 35 North*



*Staffordshire and zinnias at 35 North Street, Windsor, 1984*, earth pastel on Canson paper, 42 x 55cm, private collection. Courtesy of the artist.

*Street, Windsor* (1984) demonstrates this technique, looking at the ornaments on the mantelpiece, the pattern detail in the lace tablecloth, the cane basket in the bottom right-hand corner, the slats of the venetian blind and the detail of the Victorian-era fire surround. Emphasising decoration and decorative placement in his paintings is a very deliberate approach on the part of the artist to draw attention to elements of historic detail.

Hansell's paintings of the churches at Windsor and Richmond each focus on features viewed from a distance, through trees, 'St Peter's steeple is well-proportioned; a very English setting'. In contrast, he chose to paint the most prominent part of St Matthew's Anglican Church, the dome, from Deerubbin Park. He adopts a similar approach in his painting of the Richmond School of Arts and observes: 'I didn't want to paint the whole stiff building, so I put it into the streetscape and added the little colonial cottage across the road'.<sup>16</sup>



Greg making pastels 2010. Photograph by author.



Tree shadows, 1988, earth pastel on rag board, 100 x 151cm, private collection. Painting of corrugated iron wall on shed at Greg Hansell's former property in Windsor. Courtesy of the artist, Greg Hansell.

In his painting, *Wilberforce Road*, the artist uses a very high, lighter-coloured horizon against the darker colours (in this case the grass in the foreground), making the lighter colours stand out. This was a technique which was also used by artist Fred Williams and Hansell comments, 'you don't get far from Fred Williams when you do Australian landscape.' There is 'energy in the grass' as the viewer's eye travels past the shaft of light in the foreground (the grass) to the centre of the painting and up the road. It is a technique often used by Hansell to draw the viewer's eye towards the centre of a painting.<sup>17</sup>

## Sense of place identity

Both of the recorded interviews with Greg Hansell were conducted in the artist's studios - one in the top of the double-storied converted hay shed and one in the renovated cow shed in the back yard of his property overlooking the Hawkesbury River. The oral histories revealed much more than a life story and the theme that emanated through those recordings was the artist's sense of place, identity and attachment to the Hawkesbury area:

At my last exhibition there were quite a few paintings of the property and sitting on the edge of the river...it's quite a unique house...it's actually like a little working farm on three-quarters of an acre. The cow sheds are here, although it's been modified now. The hay shed became my studio. The corn shed is still there and it works out quite nicely. There are little fences across the garden to stop the cows from getting into the roses on the driveway...so there are tiny little remnants of that old farming community...We love our roses...I do really big paintings of the roses blown right up to really

fill up the page...We've got two chooks and two cats at the moment, so they earn their living by painting them.<sup>18</sup>

His conceptual experience in relation to that sense of place flows through his paintings and through his life. It became obvious to me and to the artist himself and he comments that he 'never really thought about it...it just happened'. In true phenomenological tradition, the oral histories gave a clear perception of Greg Hansell's life and art through spoken memories, but they also revealed the previously undocumented methods of how he makes his earth pastels, his choice of subject matter for recording historic sites and his attention to detail in his work. When I showed the artist the series of photographs I took detailing how he makes the earth pastels, his comment was 'I'm glad that has been recorded'.<sup>19</sup>

Subjectivity of memory in oral history provides 'clues... about the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity' and historian Alistair Thomson discusses this aspect of oral history at length, citing Passerini's work in post-Fascism Italy. Thomson also explains oral historian Michael Frisch's concept that oral history can help 'people make sense of their past...use it to interpret their lives'. Over the years, Greg Hansell has completed a large number of paintings which take as their subject domestic scenes around his former and current homes in Windsor. At both properties he undertook major renovations to haysheds and barns to convert them into his artist studios, and in reviewing his association with his close physical environment I could only compare his reaction as somewhat similar to that experienced by an interviewee who spoke to historian Peter Read: 'my footprints are here...so much of my own personal life has gone into it'.<sup>20</sup>

## Sharing of authority

One other very important aspect of the oral history process for me was the sharing of authority. Frisch explains sharing and collaboration in projects as 'a beginning, not a destination' and the same can be said of most projects involved in presenting history to the public. Collaboration involves often-complex dynamics and personalities negotiating as a project progresses and evolves, and the relationship between myself as interviewer/researcher and Greg Hansell as the narrator and main subject of my research was no exception. As Frisch comments, 'there are no easy answers or formulas, and no simple lessons'. Historian David Thelen also recognises that the sharing of authority for many people is 'terribly scary, unfamiliar, and hard'. Oral historians often find it difficult to cope with the fact that they are 'present to witness and co-create the narrative' and historian John Murphy explains that it is an ethical problem: 'Having been both privileged to rummage through someone's personal memory, and complicit in articulating what was found there, the oral

historian's critical faculties are partially paralysed...But this only obscures the extent to which the interview is a collaborative event'.<sup>21</sup>

## Friendship, communication and professional relationship

Throughout the oral history process and over the past five years, an aspect which proved significant was the professional relationship which existed between myself and Greg Hansell. Before the interview process began, I had concerns about how the project would evolve because we already had a solid friendship through family connections and I had read oral historian Lorraine Sitzia's comments, 'a good friendship is not enough to generate productive and useful interviews'.<sup>22</sup> I fully agree with Sitzia's comments and cannot over-emphasise the importance of maintaining professional and ethical standards when working or recording with family or friends. Because I knew Greg Hansell before the interviews began it was not a case of our friendship ending once the project was completed. The whole process could so easily have been a complete wash-out for Greg Hansell and myself, but what made the interviews productive and useful for my research was the fact that the narrator was a reliable source, we negotiated on a professional level and we both shared a common link – history – and that connection made it possible for each of us to share ownership of the projects.

My interviews with the artist Greg Hansell introduce a new perspective and a new outlook on rural history by revealing one man's race against time to record on canvas a rural world that is fast disappearing. The oral history recordings contain interesting social and artistic reference material and, combined with documentary and photographic sources, they create valuable historic records. I consider that I have been fortunate indeed to have the opportunity to expand on the oral history experience by using that experience in an innovative and practical way, combining academic and business pursuits to further existing knowledge about an artist who has contributed greatly to Australia's artistic history.<sup>23</sup>

The traditional documentary sources available about the tangible heritage of the Hawkesbury area are numerous, but further informal interviews with the artist were conducted to draw together factors about the paintings in connection with the historic built environment of the area. The interdisciplinary strands were pulled together to present the *Life in the Hawkesbury* and *Hawkesbury Sketchbook* guided tours to the public. While my thesis describes and analyses the processes associated with those collaborations, it also emphasises the way in which communication, research and knowledge contribute to shape and reflect the integrity of individual partners in collaborations.

The *Hawkesbury Sketchbook* tours were well-planned, they were unique collaborative ventures in creative tourism and they were of benefit to all partners and participants, particularly as many of the participants were either former or current students of Greg Hansell or were familiar with his works. They were introduced to heritage sites in the Hawkesbury area through Hansell's artwork and an added bonus for participants on the Historic Houses Trust trip included visits to many of the heritage sites depicted in the paintings, with Greg Hansell on board to explain why he chose certain sites to paint. While the artist was not on board the second trip, I interspersed extracts from the transcripts of the oral history recordings and discussions with the artist about the paintings with the commentary, so participants on the tour could experience different perspectives offered by Hansell (through his paintings and his words).

None of this would have happened if it were not for the oral histories that were the pivotal point in the whole series of activities that flowed from the recordings and the paintings. Also, the tours and the exhibitions proved to be successful, not only because of the level of expertise of individual partners in the collaborations, but because those partners were able to share their knowledge and their authority to work together as a team, delivering public history in an informative manner to an interested and knowledgeable audience. My documentary and oral history research over the last five years has revealed that Greg Hansell's methods of recording history in his paintings establish him as a public historian, delivering art as an important primary source for finding out about the past.

And yes, we are still speaking to each other.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 Greg Hansell, interviewed by author, 5 November 2008, tape and transcript held by author.
- 2 Greg Hansell in conversation with Carol Roberts, 5 September 2012.
- 3 Greg Hansell, *Life in the Hawkesbury* exhibition, Historic Houses Trust Members Lounge, The Mint, 10 Macquarie Street, Sydney, 18 May to 28 June 2012; Greg Hansell, *Hawkesbury Sketchbook* studio exhibition, 31 George Street, Windsor, 28/29 October and 3/4 November 2012; Hansell, 5 November 2008.
- 4 *Greg Hansell: Survey 30 October to 6 December 2009* catalogue, *Blue Mountains Life*, Windsor New South Wales; oral history transcript for *Greg Hansell: Survey* catalogue used with permission of Carol Roberts, interviewer.
- 5 Researcher is a qualified, Hansard-trained stenographer with many years' experience working in administration in government departments before a change in career led to music teaching and history studies.

- 6 Greg Hansell, interviewed by author, 18 February 2011, tape and transcript held by author.
- 7 J. Murphy, 'The voice of memory: history, autobiography and oral memory', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 87, October 1986, p. 167.
- 8 Hansell, *op cit.*, 18 February 2011.
- 9 Greg Hansell in conversation with Carol Roberts, 30 October 2010.
- 10 Hansell, 5 November 2008; Hansell, 5 September 2012.
- 11 Hansell, 5 November 2008.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Hansell, 18 February 2011.
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 Hansell, 8 November 2008; Greg Hansell in conversation with Carol Roberts, 4 January 2013.
- 16 Greg Hansell in conversation with Carol Roberts, 1 October 2012.
- 17 Greg Hansell in conversation with Carol Roberts, 22 September 2012; Hansell, 18 February 2011; Kathleen von Witt, Director Hawkesbury Regional Gallery and Museum, *Greg Hansell: A Survey* exhibition gallery talk, 29 November 2009.
- 18 Hansell, 5 November 2008.
- 19 Hansell, 30 October 2010; Hansell, 1 October 2012.
- 20 Alistair Thomson, 'Four paradigm transformations in oral history', *Oral History Review*, Vol. 34, Issue 1, Winter/Spring 2007, Berkeley, United Kingdom, pp. 50, 54, 55, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.une.edu.au/docview/223526307/abstract?accountid=17227>, accessed 12 September 2012; Peter Read, 'My footprints are here: oral history and the attachment to place', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, Vol. 17, 1995, p. 41.
- 21 Lorraine Sitzia, 'A shared authority: an impossible goal?', *Oral History Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Winter 2003, p. 94, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.une.edu.au/docview/2235241237>, accessed 28 May 2012; Michael Frisch, 'Commentary: Sharing authority: oral history and the collaborative process', *Oral History Review*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Winter-Spring 2003, p. 112, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3675355>, accessed 28 May 2012; David Thelen, 'Learning community: lessons in co-creating the civic museum', in *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader*, Gerard Corsane (ed.), London, 2005, p. 336; Murphy, 'The voice of memory', October 1986, p. 171.
- 22 Sitzia, *op. cit.*, accessed 28 May 2012.
- 23 Extracts from oral histories and conversations used in tour commentary with full permission of Greg Hansell.

# Combining oral history and the written word: an insight into the childhoods of the ‘great wandering class’

Helen Stagg

## Abstract

During the early stages of my research over the past 6 years, I utilised an interview and a written memoir about childhood on the construction sites of locks and weirs on the Murray River, to develop the idea of how character traits may be attributable to childhood experiences. The river and the construction environment were powerful influences on the formative lives of these children as their parents struggled to raise families in a harsh and often unforgiving environment. By combining the information from the oral history with the written memoir, a picture emerges of strong and resilient characters, indelibly stamped by their childhoods growing up alongside the river. This article also shares some of the story of these communities about which very little history is recorded.

## Background and Historical Context

*The River Murray Waters Act*, signed in 1914,<sup>1</sup> aimed to assist irrigation along the Murray River by constructing weirs to regulate river flow against the uncertainties created by drought and flood periods. An accompanying lock structure would allow the passage of paddlesteamers carrying freight and passengers.<sup>2</sup> Although the overall scheme involved Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia, the latter took the initiative and in 1915, the foundation stone for lock 1 at Blanchetown heralded the start of construction of the first nine locks, South Australia’s responsibility. These works spanned the next twenty years, and involved the labour of huge numbers of men. My research focuses solely on these first nine locks and weirs, from Blanchetown in South Australia to near Lake Cullulleraine in Victoria. Max Pearson whose father was part of that workforce for the duration, said the lock and weir system was, ‘going to be one of the greatest engineering activities in Australia ... harnessing the River Murray. When there was no water, the River Murray just became ... a series of waterholes and sandbars.’<sup>3</sup>

## The lockworks

Because these structures were created in a river bed, the first task was to section the river off into a coffer dam, usually a third of the river at a time. Steel piles were driven into the river bed and the ensuing dam would be pumped out creating a relatively dry area in which to lay the foundations and construct the immense concrete walls for the lock chamber and the weir pylons. If the river flooded, and the level rose above the coffer dam then work would come to a standstill. The work was all done by manual labour assisted by steam engines.<sup>4</sup>

After the completion of Lock 1 in 1922, construction began at three different locations: Lock 3 at Overland Corner and Lock 5 near Paringa, South Australia, and Lock 9 in Victoria.<sup>5</sup> As the enormous concrete structures of the locks and weirs took shape in the river, so too did the small communities of the workmen’s families, who settled into daily life, successfully establishing many of the trappings of permanent settlement.

## How I Came to this Research

In the 1970s when Oral History as part of mainstream studies was in its infancy, I conducted some interviews on the Great Depression as part of my undergraduate degree at Melbourne University. This experience introduced me to using memory as an instrument to reconnect with the past; however, my childhood had been enriched by a less formal oral history. My mother, Evelyn Smith, nee Rains, had often shared stories of her childhood at the lock construction camps where her father had worked. The opportunity therefore to take the Oral History Unit on offer at University of New England when I undertook my Master’s in History in 2007 allowed me to utilise oral history to add to the written memoir I had collected from my mother in her later life.

For an assignment on ‘rural life and work’, I chose to interview Max Pearson. In 1998, I had telephoned Max in response to an advertisement placed by a



committee he had formed to arrange a reunion of former lock builders' families and friends. I had intended to take my mother to this reunion but unfortunately the sudden deterioration in her health prevented this. My initial phone call to Max alerted me to his passion to tell the stories of these transient rural lock communities. Reflecting on this conversation, Max seemed a very suitable subject for my Oral History Unit interview, centred on rural life and work. My mother's written recollections provided a framework and gaps in her story suggested questions for me to ask Max in order to gain a fuller understanding of the lock families' lives.<sup>6</sup>

This article now draws some comparisons between what Max had said and what my mother had written. This is supplemented with evidence from a significant collection of letters written by the Rains children during 1925 and 1926 to *the Murray Pioneer* when they were living at the Lock 5 site. Taken together, the sources depict aspects of Max and Evelyn's childhoods which helped define their characters.

## Early Life for Evelyn Rains and Max Pearson

Evelyn Rains was born in a tent at Swan Reach not far from Blanchetown on January 20 1919, while her father was working at Lock 1. The following statement gives an indication of just how precarious her 'beginnings' were: 'While waiting for the midwife, Mum delivered me and laid me on her tummy till help came.'<sup>7</sup> Max was due to be born in a tent as well, as his older sister Gwen had been, but a neighbouring family's loss led to a more comfortable confinement for Mrs Pearson this time. Mrs Knight, wife of the Captain of the PS Captain Sturt,<sup>8</sup> had given birth to a boy, Maxwell George, who had died a few days after birth. Mrs Knight invited Mrs Pearson to have her impending confinement at her house on condition that 'if it's a little boy, you will call him Maxwell George' to commemorate her own baby.<sup>9</sup> Max was born on February 11 1921.

Max and Evelyn spent their entire childhoods on lock construction sites. After the completion of Lock 1, the Pearson family moved to the site for Lock 9 while the Rains family moved to Paringa for Lock 5 construction. After the completion of Lock 4 (Pearsons) and Lock 6 (Rains) the two families were at Lock 7 site together from 1930 till 1934.<sup>10</sup> Certainly by the time they left Lock 1 though, both families were in more substantial housing. Max recalls:

We had a government house ... the government provided some housing. They had board floors in them. They were very, very rough, just wood and iron, but at least they didn't leak, or not much anyhow ... they were very primitive in many ways.<sup>11</sup>

Evelyn's family fortunes must have improved also as she described similar houses that her family subsequently lived in:

The houses consisted of two rooms, corrugated iron, built up off the ground because of the closeness to the Murray River floods. Dad had to always build another room or two, usually from flour bags which had to be cut open, and then stitched together.<sup>12</sup>

By the time the Pearson family had moved to Lock 9, Mr. Bertie Pearson had been promoted to foreman and had taken on a prominence in the lock community. Max recalls Bertie was also in charge of signing off on the men's pay sheets, and as the young Max watched him sign, he thought that, 'he must have been the most important man in the world as he signed the paperwork with a flourish of his pen.' By the time the Pearsons got to Lock 7, Bertie's community involvement included organising a school committee.<sup>13</sup> Max said of him: 'He seemed to be involved in most things that were going on and I think he was probably the type of person that people ... trusted.'<sup>14</sup> Arthur Rains was a boiler engine attendant or fireman as they were called on the works although Evelyn referred to him as an 'engineer.'<sup>15</sup>

Despite hardships that were obvious for both the Pearson and the Rains families, Evelyn's description of the family's material life differed in several respects from Max's description. Referring to the furniture in their home, Evelyn described it as 'basic.' She wrote:

Beds were made from pieces of wood, probably tree branches with bags stretched across to make a hammock type bed, only not swinging. They were fairly tight with just enough scoop for your body.<sup>16</sup>



Evelyn Rains and brother Les. From the collection of the author.

There is a contrast here with Max's recollection: 'We had bed heads and spring mattresses sort of thing.'

## Childhood responsibilities

Children in both the Rains and Pearson households had considerable responsibilities. Max explained how, on the weekends, 'we'd load the billy carts up with leaf mulch and cart it into the garden,' for their father to enrich the existing clay soil garden beds which would supply their vegetable needs. 'We used to have to clean the chook yard out and hoe the garden,' and also maintain the kerosene lamps, the only lighting, and 'clean the glasses, trim the wicks and fill them with kerosene.' The Pearson children also milked the cow and goat during the week. The girls would have to 'get the knives and forks out and polish them, and the cruets of sauce'd have to be polished up.' Also they would 'clean the mats ... polish the pots and pans.'<sup>17</sup> Max had to cart water from a tap a distance from the house using a yoke that his father had fashioned for this purpose.<sup>18</sup> Max was quite accepting of these chores, and the memories were not tainted with resentment. This was just seen as part of life.

Evelyn's memories of chores, however, were unpleasant ones. In the preparation of the bags for stitching to make extra rooms, her task was to pull the cut strings from the opened-out flour bags. 'How I hated the job.' Also after the male folk of the house returned with a catch of ducks, 'we all had to sit around a big tub to help pluck the feathers off them.'<sup>19</sup> Evelyn expressed her strong distaste for this task as well. She tried to give meaning to her response by adding that, 'I'm sure I must have thought there were better things for me to do.' Evelyn didn't like having to deliver the orders for her mother's home-made German cake and bread which she thought was a 'bit degrading.'<sup>20</sup> This task had to be done to help make ends meet as, 'Dad never gave Mum much money for housekeeping.' A picture is emerging of a young girl who struggled and reacted against her family's poverty in contrast to Max's apparent acceptance.

More chores at the Rains home are seen through the lens of Evelyn's siblings as their childhood letters to the Murray Pioneer illuminate other aspects of their lives. Walter said, 'I get up at 6 o'clock in the morning and light the fire. I get sixpence a week for that.'<sup>21</sup> Gladys, the eldest daughter, was called upon to help in the house generally, particularly when Mother was in hospital.<sup>22</sup> This happened on at least two occasions and included 'getting meals for father', a task that at barely fourteen, she would have found taxing. Her relief when relieved from this added burden was expressed at another time, 'Mother is home now and I am not sorry.'<sup>23</sup>



Evelyn Rains and unknown. From the collection of the author.

## The Sewing Machine

Max and Evelyn both described the vital importance of the treadle sewing machine in their homes. Women made clothes for their children, often re-using adult clothes. Max describes how his mother, 'used to have a little treadle sewing machine and she used to make so many of our clothes - cut down from my father's pants.'<sup>24</sup> Also costumes were made for the popular school concerts. Joe Joseph, the Syrian pedlar, used to come round regularly with a variety of wares, including fabric. Evelyn describes how her friend's father was sent down to the pedlar to get some material but he spent the money at a two-up game instead. Afterwards, his wife 'squirited him with the hose and locked him in the toilet all night,' such was the sense of loss.<sup>25</sup> At one of the school concerts, Max describes a 'poor little girl' singing a beautiful song, 'She had a lovely little frock on that they had made for her.'<sup>26</sup> This little girl was actually Evelyn's friend whose father had wasted the money gambling!

The women's reliance on the sewing machine to provide clothing for the family highlights the great sacrifice Florence Rains was forced to make by circumstances outside her control. Evelyn remembered:

Things were so bad at Lock 7, Mum decided to raffle her sewing machine for threepence a ticket. I of course had to go around selling the tickets. How I hated that. I felt it was degrading to have to ask people for money.<sup>27</sup>

Evelyn suffered a deep sense of humiliation through this experience and she declared in her writings: 'I would never sell raffle tickets for the church either after I was married.'<sup>28</sup>

## Education

Education was central to the whole lock experience and Max was able to elaborate extensively about the daily routines of school life at each lock site. The school was one room with all the grades together.



The Rains children c 1921. From the collection of the author.

Punishments and injustices etched memories for both Max and Evelyn. Max recalled the six cuts given to a boy who gave cheek to the teacher. 'I used to think that's cruel.'<sup>29</sup> Max was looked up to by the younger kids at school who found him to be a protector from the bullies. Evelyn recalled how she cried when her brother got the strap:

He had to stand in a corner with a bucket to catch his tears. The teacher wrote a letter to mum saying that I if couldn't stand to see my brother chastised I would have to stay home. I have always hated to see anyone made fun of because all the kids laughed at him. I still feel the same about anyone being put down in front of others.<sup>30</sup>

In the above recollection, Evelyn makes the connection with a value she has carried into adulthood.

## Sport

Sport was a very important part of life in these little communities. In addition to cricket, basketball and football, swimming was a vital skill for those living on the banks of a large and often treacherous river. Max's swimming prowess led to his dramatic rescue of a boy who was visiting Lock 7 from the city, but who had got caught up in a whirlpool near the lock chamber. Max was only eleven at the time but he recalled the aftermath:

There used to be a program on the ABC called the 5CL Boys Club which used to come through on the radio on a Monday night. Neighbours with a crystal set invited me to come down to listen. When I arrived, they switched over to the Boys Club. It was quite an entertaining program I suppose, but in part of it, they spoke of this happening at a place named Lock 7. I pricked my ears up and I thought gee, it's up here. And they reported this near-drowning and how this little boy of

11 named Max Pearson hopped in and rescued the other boy. They sent me a medal.<sup>31</sup>

Max's matter-of-fact and humble recall of this event, with no thought of self promotion through what was in fact a heroic deed, show again an admirable strength of character.

Max described the school picnics on the shores of Lake Victoria where the children travelled on the back of a lorry. The flats around the lake provided a good surface for foot races. He explains with passion the love he had for running:

We used to have races out there, foot races, ... [laughs in an embarrassed way] I shouldn't tell you this, I used to be a good runner, and that's one thing that I regret now that in those formative years I wasn't somewhere that I could have been coached for running. There was nobody there that was interested in training, but my father used to tell me that you could be a good runner when you get older. I would still like to be able to run, that was one big disappointment that I had as a young person that we didn't live in a settled area, where I could be trained for running because I would have really enjoyed that, and it was something I'd have been very serious about too.<sup>32</sup>

I noticed the pain of unfulfilled dreams in Evelyn as well:

It was there [Lock 7] ... I decided I wanted to be a hairdresser, but my parents could not afford to let me do that so I ended up going out to do housework as soon as I left school.<sup>33</sup>

## The Murray River

It is important to recognise that the lock communities and the Murray River were all that Max and Evelyn had known. Max recalled:

The area away from the lock was foreign to us. The lock establishment where the village was and where the works were and where the river was, it was our world. When we went down to the Goolwa barrage, you could hear the sea roaring at night and we used to wonder what all the noise was. Of course our parents would tell us, that it was the sea, and we'd never seen the sea, so after probably a few weeks, we climbed over these sand hills and went right over the other side to have a look at the sea. There were three or four of us, standing looking and couldn't see the other side of the water ... the only water we ever saw was the Murray and we could always see the other side of that ...<sup>34</sup>



As I grew up listening to my Mum, she engendered in me a fear of the Murray River. Perhaps this came from a dreadful experience she wrote of at Lock 6:

One Sunday I went down with a friend to the lock and got into the lock master's boat. There were no oars in it, presumably to prevent it being taken. I couldn't see anything wrong with just standing in it and rocking it from side to side, until the rope broke and it started drifting quickly towards the weir where the water was rushing madly. I called for help and some people from the other side of the river were coming but I panicked and jumped out of the boat. Luckily I could dog-paddle to the river bank.<sup>35</sup>

Although Evelyn's respect for the river seemed to arise from fear, Max had a different basis for the respect he held for the river:

Well, I think we all have ... a great affection for our roots. ... Our roots are really the River Murray. ... It's been ... a very important part of my life ... because I lived on it till I was sixteen years of age. ... It gave us life really ... it gave us a living, and apart from what it provided in ... foodstuffs, it ... provided work for people to earn a living, to buy food ... and it gave us a sense ... of being able to live responsibly. ... You couldn't fraternise with the river because it was too dangerous. ... There was ... deep, very deep respect for it ... and a love for it, ... and ... people who worked on the River Murray will always have the River Murray flowing through the blood of their veins. ... When we left Goolwa and went down to Adelaide [pause], ... younger brother and I ... we sat on the back of the truck ... with all our stuff around us and as the truck drove out from Goolwa, ... I wondered [pause] whether I was saying goodbye to the river, whether I'd ever see it again ... It was 1938 when we left there ... and it was 1977 when I bought this block of land. ... I just had that feeling that I must come back to the river again ... I knew then that this was ... how I wanted to finish my life. I wanted to be on the river again, to be as close as I could get to it.<sup>36</sup>

## Reflections on Early Life

Through 'listening' to the stories of my subjects, Max and Evelyn, I have begun to discover something of their understanding of themselves as players in history. David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig have demonstrated in *The Presence of the Past* that most people engage with the past in deeply personal ways, drawing upon it as a resource for enhancing identity and explaining



Max Pearson. Photograph by author.

experience.<sup>37</sup> Similar living conditions sparked differing responses in Max and Evelyn but nonetheless nurtured character traits which endured their whole lives. Evelyn's courageous attitudes, generosity and toughness carried her through life's adversities and challenges and enabled her to understand others. She claimed that 'It's life that makes us tough; the hard work and the hard knocks.'<sup>38</sup> Max's keen sense of justice, kindness and generosity has led to an active involvement in community projects over his long lifetime. Events like the story of the hungry little girl who came and asked his mother for bread one evening, which he recounted with a palpable distress, most likely contributed to this.

... Mother said to the little girl, 'Tell mummy, she doesn't want anything paid for it' ... Then she said to my father, 'What a terrible world to let little people like that have to live in it so helpless.' It's things like that ... they're not big things, but they're things that stick in your mind ...

He summed up his beliefs about helping others this way, 'I think that togetherness is ... really something that is very, very precious in life.'<sup>39</sup>

## Conclusion

Although the children of these lock workers were referred to by one of their teachers as 'the great wandering class',<sup>40</sup> spending their entire childhoods in this semi-nomadic lifestyle as their little community literally 'pulled up stumps' to re-establish itself at the next site, they would reflect as adults on the lock construction's shaping influence, not just on navigation and irrigation, but on their lives, forging patterns of thought and belief and character traits of resilience, generosity and resourcefulness. Max and Evelyn have sketched an elaborate word picture of a distant past which not only altered forever the Murray River system but impacted on the lives of a generation of children growing up on its banks.

## Post script

My initial interviews with Max at his home alongside the Murray River started an enduring relationship. I continue to regularly speak to him on the phone and each time I pass by on my way to Adelaide, I drop in and invariably we share more of the story. The family honoured the depth of my knowledge of Max's childhood years on the locks when they invited me to deliver the speech at Max's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday two years ago.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 'Water management before the Water Act 2007', *Water for the Future, Water in Australia*, Australian Government, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, revised 21 May, 2010, <<http://www.environment.gov.au/water/australia/water-act/index.html>> accessed 27 March, 2013
- 2 <http://www.murrayriver.com.au/about-the-murray/locks-weirs-dams-barrages/>, accessed 27 March, 2013
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May, 1925, p. 8.
- 6 Since then I have undertaken five more interviews with others who also grew up in the lock camps and complemented this with extensive archival research on the lock and weir construction.
- 7 Evelyn Rains, 'Recollections of our younger days,' recorded 1989, P.1, unpublished manuscript held by author.
- 8 The *PS Captain Sturt* was the workhorse for the construction sites, carrying raw materials back and forth along the river.
- 9 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 10 Pearson, *op.cit.*; Evelyn Rains, 'Recollections of our younger days,' *op. cit.*
- 11 Pearson, *ibid.*
- 12 Rains, *op. cit.*
- 13 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 14 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 15 Rains, *op. cit.*
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 Rains, *op. cit.*
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 4.
- 21 Walter Rains, Letter to *Murray Pioneer*, May 26, 1926.
- 22 Gladys Rains, Letter to *Murray Pioneer*, March 14, 1925.
- 23 Gladys, Rains, Letter to *Murray Pioneer*, February 10, 1926.
- 24 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 25 Rains, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- 26 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 27 Rains, *op. cit.*
- 28 *ibid.*
- 29 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 30 Rains, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- 31 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 32 *ibid.*
- 33 Rains, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- 34 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 35 Rains, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- 36 Pearson, *op.cit.* Max and his wife live in a home they built alongside the river he loves so dearly
- 37 David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig, *The Presence of the Past*, Columbia University Press, 1998, cited by Linda Shopes, 'Making sense of oral history,' <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/how.html>, accessed 24 March 2013.
- 38 Rains, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- 39 Pearson, *op.cit.*
- 40 C.M.Costelloe, Head Teacher, Lock 9, letter to the Director, Victorian Education Department, Public Record Office Victoria, Inward primary schools correspondence, 1924-1926, VPRS 640 Unit 1753 25 April 1925.

# Indigenous Australian oral stories contribute to the Australian reconciliation process

Elaine Rabbitt

## Abstract

Memories of Family, culture and community are central to the stories of Indigenous Australians. Their stories provide us with a greater insight into the past and how the past has impacted upon the lives of Indigenous people today. This paper is based on the memories of Indigenous Australians, recorded for an oral history project entitled *Moving Back to Country: A History of the Outstation Movement in the Kullarri Region* (Broome North Western Australia) and funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2006 – 2013).

The role oral history plays in the reconciliation process is examined. The focus is on the relationship between memories of family and upbringing, country, tradition and culture in relation to why Indigenous people are moving back to country. Recording their memories enhances the understanding of Indigenous families' history, relationships with the land, community and family traditions. They also provide an insight into contemporary social life.

The recorded and transcribed oral histories contribute to the understanding of Indigenous peoples' lives. In making their stories and memories available, Indigenous people are augmenting the reconciliation process, by paving the way for mutual understanding, peace and respect.

## Introduction

Five years have passed since Australia officially apologised to its members of the Stolen Generations.<sup>1</sup>

The 13th February 2008 was a significant landmark in Australian history, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) families who had waited a long time for *The Apology*, which instilled hope and determination for a reconciled Australia. On the first anniversary in 2009, an ATSI healing foundation was established to support and promote healing.<sup>2</sup> Today the Australian Government's Indigenous Reform Agenda includes the *Closing the Gap* strategy, a commitment by the Australian government to improve the lives

of Indigenous Australians, and in particular provide a better future for Indigenous children through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)<sup>3</sup> and the proposed Bill of Recognition to have ATSI people included in the Australian Constitution.<sup>4</sup>

Oral history provides a voice for Indigenous people. Many have not had the opportunity to be heard and have their histories recorded. The recording of their stories becomes a resource of information that can be interwoven with the stories of others to gain Indigenous historical perspectives. Making their recorded histories available is a means of furthering the reconciliation process.

To gain a better understanding of the past, from an Indigenous perspective, stories need to be collected. The method of recording experiences orally has grown in popularity both internationally and in Australia. Those interested in preserving the stories of marginalised people who did not lead prominent lives, such as the poor and working class, women, ethnic and Indigenous minorities have used oral history to record accounts of people's lives, and their interpretations of the past. Having the opportunity to listen to these stories and reflecting upon them provides a basis for better understanding the past and present. It is a means of promoting respect for others and peaceful resolutions.<sup>5</sup>

An important part of reconciliation is to gain an understanding of the history of Indigenous people, accepting them as the first Australians, acknowledging how long they have been living in Australia and how they have been treated since British Settlement. There is a dearth of literature portraying the response of Indigenous people to the invasion and expropriation of their resources. The paucity of information on this topic is an example of the written/recorded history only reflecting the opinions or values of the dominant culture.<sup>6</sup>

## The Project

In 2006, my colleague Mrs Eileen Roe, a Bard woman and I commenced documenting the history of the families who have re occupied their land in the Kullarri



Lombardina Mission Church 1940, made of paperbark. Still in use in Lombardina Community. Courtesy Broome Historical Society.

Region - from 80 mile Beach to Cape Leveque/Sunday Island, via an Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) funded project. AIATSIS is 'the world's leading research, collecting and publishing institution in the field of Australian Indigenous studies'.<sup>7</sup> In this project, entitled *Moving Back to Country, A History of the Outstation Movement* in the Kullarri Region in the Broome area of North Western Australia, Indigenous people are remembering the past. They are telling their stories and having them recorded. They are leaving an imprint of their history.

## Indigenous Oral History and Reconciliation

While the history of 'white' Australia has been taught to Australian people, the history of Indigenous Australia has been neglected or not told until recent times. Indigenous Australian history is not known to the broader community. Colonisation for Indigenous people meant forced acquisition of land, loss of life and traditional ways of living.

Indigenous Australians have experienced tragic hardship and have struggled to gain the opportunities that other Australians enjoy. Despite having to fight to be accepted as equal citizens in Australia, they have remained strong through their family ties and upbringing, their relationship with the land, culture and traditions.

Indigenous academic Professor Lyn Henderson-Yates has described the Apology as 'our finest hour': 'We need to heal the hearts and minds of all Australians so that we can enter a new phase of respect and shared understandings,' Henderson-Yates said.

Not to do so means we will continue to practice our divisions...and we will continue to have groups of people living lives of trauma, poverty and sorrow. Can we live with that?<sup>8</sup>

Storytelling is a traditional Indigenous way of communicating Indigenous histories and experiences, cultural stories and law. It is an ancient tradition used to pass on information. It preserves customs, beliefs and events of significance. Stories are instrumental to the sharing of Indigenous knowledge and tradition. They provide insights into past and contemporary Indigenous life. The recording of these personal oral testimonies has the potential to educate the broader Australian community.

In the interviews many issues were spoken of and recorded. The oral histories include stories from Indigenous people who remember their family and upbringing. They speak of their memories of being forcibly removed from their parents, living in missions, running away from the missions and being taken back, and living under discriminatory laws. Life was hard. Their accounts of the implications of this forced removal and mission life, and how it has affected them and their families, are sad and compelling.

The following excerpts are the recorded memories of Bard Elder Paul Sampi. Along with his brothers and sisters he was removed from their parents and taken to Lombardina Mission. He wasn't sent thousands of miles away from his family. Rather the Mission was established close to his home, a paper bark hut on the sand dunes.

A lot of us, seven, or eight, nine year old and you'd be taken out to the dormitories, put in a dormitory. You wouldn't be able to go and see your parents you know. You had to get permission to see your parents up on the dunes there, which might be once in the week. The nuns and priests looked after us. Grew up on the Mission and went to school there. I was only 7 or 8, something like that, a boy, young. One sister was behind me, the others were the big ones.

Oh in those days ... we were not allowed to practise our culture in those days. It was forbidden you know. Under Catholic law, it was forbidden to do it and so the old priest and the bishop stopped it altogether. So it was hard and a lot of us, me and a couple of others boys tried running away to Sunday Island to be initiated in Sunday Island, but we couldn't do it on account of there was no boats in those days. We got in trouble for running away a couple of times from the old priest.<sup>9</sup>

Revisiting memories of family and upbringing Paul Sampi continued the storytelling and spoke about how he left the Mission and moved to Broome. Excerpts from his interview illustrate how it was for an Indigenous person living and working in Broome after

World War II. He remembers what it was like to live under discriminatory laws. His story exemplifies the impositions placed on Indigenous Australians and how it affected their way of life.

I mean just after the war. In those days you wasn't, you couldn't talk to a white person, especially a white lady. You know you would be gaoled for that. Honestly, you would be gaoled for talking to a white lady in those days, honestly. Even if you'd be working in the shop or somebody with the lady and you'd say Hi, how are you? Moreover, that's all you know. You couldn't sit around the table and talk. It was so different. Even if you knew her for six, seven, for a year or twelve months or whatever you know. It was hard but today if an Aboriginal person whistled at her, white lady smile at you; you know in those days you couldn't.

Even when swimming down at the Old Jetty there, we were all put in a yard, fence, big yard there. You got blackfellas swimming there and gudiyas [colloquial Broome krio term for white people] swimming on this side, honestly. We all had to swim in one yard there on account of sharks 'cause there was lots of sharks in those days. They had that Meatworks there.<sup>10</sup>

The importance of these social histories, representing the lives and experiences of Indigenous peoples, is a means of furthering the reconciliation process. This was acknowledged with the establishment in 1987 of the first Indigenous publishing house in Australia, the Broome based Magabala Books. Publications cover a variety of subjects including autobiographies, local histories, traditional stories and natural histories of the Kimberley.<sup>11</sup>

Celebrating ATSI culture through the arts also contributes to the reconciliation process. Performance is a means of demonstrating Indigenous Australians' relationship to the land and how white settlement has affected them. Music, art, theatre, films, Indigenous radio and television stations are all contemporary vehicles to exemplify Indigenous Australian culture.

However one of the fundamental problems is that there is little public access to Indigenous accounts of the colonisation of traditional lands, such as those provided to Native Title Courts. This makes the Indigenous peoples' viewpoint of this history less evident. 'Failure to weave the Indigenous story into the nation's political and social fabric has affected Indigenous people's participation in Australian society'<sup>12</sup>. Reconciliation Australia believes that:

Reconciliation involves building mutually respectful relationships between Indigenous and other Australians that allow us to work



Town Beach Swimming Baths Broome. The shark-proof fence was abandoned in the mid-1970s. Courtesy Broome Historical Society.

together to solve problems and generate success that is in everyone's best interests. Achieving reconciliation involves raising awareness and knowledge of Indigenous history and culture, changing attitudes that are often based on myths and misunderstandings, and encouraging action where everyone plays their part in building a better relationship between us as fellow Australians.<sup>13</sup>

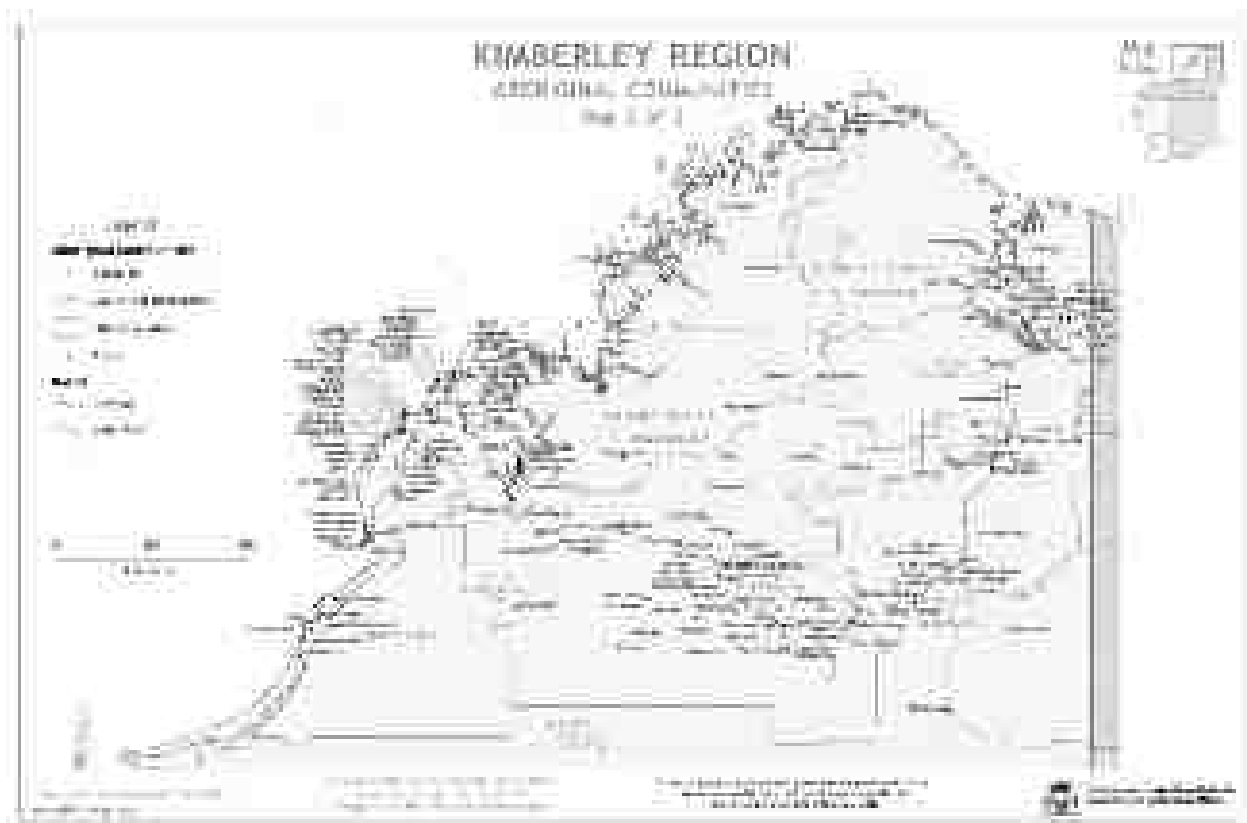
Reconciliation in Australia encourages good relationships between ATSI people and non-Indigenous people. It is about striving for a better, fairer future for Indigenous Australians, a future where their standard of living is improved. A goal of reconciliation is to educate all Australians about Indigenous history and Indigenous ways of life.

Reconciliation Australia is the lead agency managing the Australian Reconciliation process. It is a not-for-profit, non-Government organisation that works with individuals, educators, government and business to bring about change for Indigenous Australians.<sup>14</sup>

In this project an important part of Western Australia's recent regional history is being recorded and documented. Over the last 20 years, in the Kullarri Region, more than 100 family groups have reoccupied their traditional homelands. The progressive movement of Indigenous people away from major towns and communities has created a major population shift in the area, that has not been previously documented. The recent history of the Indigenous reoccupation of land through the development of outstations in the Kullarri Region, is distinctive in the Kimberley.

In this context an outstation is a small settlement of extended family members that have moved away from the major community or town to their traditional lands. The traditional owners in the Kullarri Region have won their fight for determination of their land in the Australian High Court.





Map of Indigenous communities in the Kimberley. Courtesy WA Department of Indigenous Affairs.

Recording the experiences of Indigenous Australian and other Indigenous people through oral histories is a way of documenting what has happened to them. For example in post-apartheid South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), through its Institute for Justice and Reconciliation focused on nation building. The implementation of the TRC's recommendations is monitored by the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development.<sup>15</sup> Education for reconciliation is a key component of rebuilding South African society. Oral history has been used as a vehicle to further understanding and mutual respect between diverse groups of people. Providing people with the opportunity to tell their stories evokes memories and feelings from the past. Storytelling has been used to engage reconciliatory dialogue between victims and perpetrators.

Similarly Truth and Reconciliation Canada (TRC) has been established with an aim: 'to put the events of the past behind us so that we can work towards a stronger and healthier future... The truth of our common experiences will help set our spirits free and pave the way to reconciliation'.<sup>16</sup>

## Oral History a Valid Technique

In Australia oral history has been used as an essential means of gathering evidence for Native Title hearings which have relied on Indigenous testimony. Acknowledging land rights and accepting Native Title are ways of achieving reconciliation.

The publication of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* in 1997 provided further evidence of oral history's worth.<sup>17</sup> This was the largest oral history project to be undertaken in Australia, whereby the lives and circumstances of Indigenous peoples, now known as the 'Stolen Generation' were documented using oral testimonies.

In 2013, The Stolen Generation's Testimonies website<sup>18</sup> and the National Library's Oral History Project both contain personal stories from survivors.<sup>19</sup> This correlates with Indigenous Australian Patrick Dodson's view that 'Australia needs to demonstrate our capacity to be a mature Global leader prepared and able to accept the truth of our past to bring to a conclusion a negotiation of the Unfinished Business between us'.<sup>20</sup>

## Wanting to be Interviewed

In this AIATSIS project, one of the major reasons Indigenous Australians have agreed so readily to be interviewed is that they see the project as an opportunity to have their stories and experiences recorded, documented and heard. The interviews have been conducted in English, not always standard Australian English, but Broome kriol spoken by both researchers.

Their stories add to our knowledge of Australian history and make a contribution towards forming a greater understanding of the past and moving towards reconciliation. This role was acknowledged by AIATSIS who have continued to commission the recording of these oral histories.

As a means of preserving the stories our priorities are to interview Elders and senior traditional owners first so their living histories, their personal stories and the stories passed on to them by their Elders can be captured and documented. The drive to establish the outstation in many cases was the result of the motivation of the older people. When they tell their stories of 'Moving Back to Country', their responses are in the context of why they moved. They give their history and experience with that Country<sup>21</sup> from when they were young. This illustrates their connection to the land and their motivation to move and establish their own small communities, the outstations.

Bard woman and traditional owner Mrs Madeline Gregory was born in Lombadina Mission. She was a 'dormitory girl'. 'Grew up, up the hill that was where everybody was living. Paper bark huts, which they did themselves. We were all up there before we come to go to school. We were with our parents up the hill. Later on, we were in the dormitories, with other girls. There were people living up there on the hill'.<sup>22</sup>

I had the privilege of listening to her story and recording it on her Country.

**Author:** You were telling us that this is your Country.

**MG:** We didn't get enough of staying out here. We always wanted to come back out here but that Mission thing. We couldn't stay outside, anymore out here because the Mission took over. We spent more time in the Mission growing up and then I was working. Really working at the convent at that time; my sister was working there too also, the two of us. The Mission was OK. Taught us what to do. We learnt everything from that but we didn't get enough 'thing' with our parents. That's the bottom line. When we had holidays like once a year, the girls would go to Pender Bay but not with our parent see. All that time we was in the dormitory we had to go girls together from Beagle Bay and all that, mixing with all that, instead of and setting us free and letting us go back to parents, helping us. But that didn't happen. We had to go to Pender Bay every time every year just one place Pender Bay, holiday, to the beach house there. Mr Bell's house it was.

We didn't know if we had my rights to anything in those days. Nothing was told to us. Never told us to go back to the place where your

parents come from. No, we just had to stay in the community. Now we know we can come back and claim back our areas. We went for it. We had court here and my sister for this land. Right up from there now all the way down to the end of this creek here. It's my Grandfather born here. See where that rock is in the middle there, that high one? That's Gulun there now. My Daddy was born here. It's our area, all of it now really and truly, traditional way. Everybody, don't no matter who they are, got a grass roots from their Mother and Father, nobody else.<sup>23</sup>

The oral histories are being collected for the narrators, their families, their communities, educating others and AIATSIS. It is a way of recording memories of family and their background, their ongoing relationships to 'Country', how tradition and culture are preserved in relation to why Indigenous people are 'Moving Back to Country'.

All of those approached to be interviewed are known to my Indigenous colleague. She visits potential interviewees and provides a verbal explanation of the project and a written invitation to participate. She introduces me to the participants I do not know and explains who I am by giving details of my family and connections with Broome. This is an important cultural protocol which builds rapport.

The written invitation and the consent form for the interview are given prior to the interview. The interviewees are given time to read the documentation and/or show other family members and ask questions. The letter outlining the parameters of the project and invitation to participate is given to each outstation family group. Once consent is obtained the interview takes place. The recording is then transcribed by the researchers. The digital recording of the stories is burnt to an audio CD. The transcribed stories and CD are taken back to the interviewee, and/or family groups, for verification if the original interviewee has passed away. The researchers re-check that the interviewees are satisfied with their stories and gain final verification and consent for the transcript and CD to be sent to AIATSIS with open public access or not. This is ongoing.

Thomas King, a Karrijarri man recorded his memories of travelling back to 'Country' with his grandparents and the control of the movement of Aboriginal people in the 1960s:

**Author:** So you were telling me how when you were a child you came with your Grandparents down from Broome to Bidyadanga [Community, formerly La Grange Mission] and that's how you kept up your ties. Can you tell me a bit more about that and what happened here when you arrived?

**TK:** Well in those days the Mission was run by the Catholic Church so they had a regime in place assisted and supported by the Government, at the time that was common policy with all missions, I suppose. They were run by the Catholic Church or Government. I remember when we came here as kids with my Grandparents they had to check into the administration office and report in and the person there in the office would record their names and how much people they had with them in the car. How long they were staying. Who they were going to visit and also had to report when we left the Community so that was the regime we grew up in. I didn't understand it at the time, until later years I understood the significance of that. Aboriginal people couldn't mix with other people, white people. Even Asian people weren't allowed to mix with Aboriginal people. People were sort of segregated. That's why you hear stories about the Common Gate and curfews and all that sort of stuff, well it's true. Black fellas were basically forced to the fringes of society. They had very little rights. Once you were told to do something that was it. Basically you had no rights. You had no rights of appeal anyway. You had no rights as a citizen. In the 20s, 30s, leading up to the '67 referendum, people had no rights. They couldn't even walk into the pub, they couldn't even consume alcohol. They didn't have them rights; they were regarded as non-citizens.<sup>24</sup>

Paul Sampi, Madeline Gregory and Thomas King are traditional owners and Native Title holders. Anyone who wishes to use resources on Bard and Karrijarri land must negotiate and receive the consent of the traditional owners of that 'Country'.

Native title and land rights have been mentioned in many of the interviews in this project. It took over two centuries to legally overturn the notion that the Australian frontier was unoccupied land, 'terra nullius' (land belonging to no-one). This landmark decision was made in the 'Mabo vs Queensland' case on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1992. This result challenged the myth of the peaceful acquisition of land in Australia, where the pioneers battled against the land rather than the people.<sup>25</sup>

Australia celebrates National Reconciliation week which starts on the 27<sup>th</sup> May, the 46<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 referendum, whereby 90% of non Indigenous Australians voted to remove discrimination against Indigenous people in the constitution.<sup>26</sup> The end date, the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, commemorates the day the High Court of Australia handed down the landmark 'Mabo' decision in favour of Indigenous land ownership.

The Australian Declaration towards Reconciliation (2000) acknowledges that the people of Australia are

of many origins and that Indigenous Australians hold a unique status as the original owners and custodians of the land and waters. It recognises the journey of healing, forgiveness and regret for past injustices. It recognises the right for all Australians to have the opportunity to reach their full potential and makes a commitment to move forward together in the spirit of reconciliation. Nevertheless, the aim of reconciliation has not been achieved. Indigenous Australians earn less than non Indigenous Australians. They have had less education, experience high unemployment rates and have a shorter life expectancy.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

The oral tradition of ATSI people is alive and thriving today. Oral history is a means of promoting social and emotional well being, as narrative provides people with the opportunity to be heard, express their views and tell their stories. A formal interview offers participants an alternative approach to the healing journey. The stories recorded for this project depict the significance of the healing that 'Moving Back to Country' has given families. By lodging these interviews in a public depository such as AIATSIS, others are given the opportunity to access this recording information.

The compiled outstation histories provide an insight into the resilience of Australian Aboriginal people and how their connections to the land and to Country have survived the impact of colonisation. The loss of traditional lands, separation of children from their families, racism, social inequality, trauma and grief can and are being healed by 'Moving Back to Country'. Returning to Country is a means of reclaiming cultural, social and emotional well being.

The primary purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the important role oral history can play in the reconciliation process. The recording of oral memories, in this ongoing AIATSIS project makes a significant contribution to Indigenous Australian Studies and the reconciliation process. The stories of Indigenous people 'Moving Back to Country' and reoccupying their traditional lands in the Kullarri Region have been told, recorded and documented.

These stories provide a testimony to the reasons why people in the area have created their outstations. Telling the stories of why they have moved back to their homelands, how their lifestyle has changed and the benefits of this relocation, has given a group of Indigenous Australians a voice. Their first person accounts provide an explanation of their heritage and ties to Country, their continuous spiritual connection to the land and the need to protect Country.

These Indigenous oral histories add to the understanding of contemporary social life, particularly in relation to



family, the economy, landholding and religion. They add to the reconciliation process by giving the broader Australian community the chance to hear their stories of how it was. The journey of healing continues.

## (Endnotes)

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# **‘Our history is not disabled:’ memories and tears of disabled veterans of the Nigeria-Biafra war**

**Arua Oko Omaka**

## **Abstract**

The historiography of the Nigeria-Biafra War has been dominated by the accounts of those who wielded power before and during the war. In their accounts, they adopted a top-down approach. By this approach, they focused mainly on what they did. In an attempt to justify their actions, they silenced the voices of the foot soldiers, the children and those women who were part of the struggle. These neglected groups who now constitute the voiceless or ‘silenced constituency’ remain unknown. Whereas they have their own experiences of the war to share, they lack the means to express them. This paper is an attempt to recover the voices of a section of the ‘silenced constituency’ through oral history. This group shares its experiences as disabled veterans and argues that they also have a voice in the war history. By engaging these people in oral interviews, one is able to see the motivations that drove them into the army and how they see life outside the battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

This paper is a description of part of my research project on the Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970. I embarked upon the research as part of my doctoral dissertation. I conducted oral interviews which involved human subjects. The interview process was duly approved by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board. The research involved interviewing people in different states that made up the former Republic of Biafra. The participants in the research were those who experienced the war or participated in one way or the other. I did not interview people who fought on the Nigerian side. The focus was mainly on those who identified themselves as Biafrans. I used both English and Igbo in my interviews. Igbo is the language spoken by the majority of the people that identified themselves as Biafran during the war. I have focused on Biafra because the war was mainly fought there. Biafrans also seemed to have been presented to the outside world as the victims of the war. More importantly, memoirs of the war written by the actors apparently valorise the

soldiers who commanded different fronts or divisions in the army. I travelled to different states in south-eastern Nigeria. Each of the visits presented its own interesting case, and I learnt many things about the war that have not been documented in existing literature. Stories of women, children and the foot soldiers who also contributed to the war effort still appear unexplored. I have identified these three groups as the voiceless groups in the historiography of the Nigeria-Biafra War. Their story is that of the subaltern.

While I do not yet intend to narrate my whole field work experience, I plan in this paper to discuss the experience of the disabled veterans of Biafra who seem to be the most visible casualties of the war. Although women and children have been identified as part of the voiceless group, they do not form part of the discussion in this paper. The Biafran veterans fought at different fronts during the war but got injured and disabled. This group never went back to their families after the war. They were quartered in a place where they were supposed to receive medical treatment and some other care. Unfortunately, they were abandoned by the federal and state governments. A study of the oral history of the war is like licking a pot of hot soup. Though tasty, it still has to be taken in bits. My job as a historian is not to present the entire account of the marginalised or ‘silenced constituency’ but to open the lid so we can start licking the soup little by little, for it is by starting that we can finish. I therefore hope that further steps will be taken by other colleagues in the field to ensure that the oral history of the war is salvaged. The title of this article was derived from a statement made by one of the veterans during their interview. The interpretative meaning is that some societies do not give equal opportunity to the disabled or physically challenged people. The veteran seemed to argue that physical disability is not the same thing as inability as some people erroneously think.

## **History of the War**

The Biafra war broke out on July 6, 1967 and ended officially on January 15, 1970. It is generally argued that the secession of Biafra led to the outbreak of the

war.<sup>1</sup> That interpretation is too simplistic. A lot of issues preceded the secession of Biafra. It was a clash of rights. Both Biafra and Nigeria seemed to have had legitimate claims. General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the leader of Biafra, argued that it seceded due to the insecurity of the lives and property of its citizens, especially the Igbo. General Yakubu Gowon, the leader of Nigeria, on the other hand, argued that Nigeria must exist as an indivisible entity for greater strength and more prosperity on the continent of Africa. They both also added that the future of the Igbo still lay in a “United Nigeria” and that whatever differences that existed could still be settled within the framework of one Nigeria. The preceding events of 1966 which included the massacre of Igbos which some describe as genocide<sup>2</sup> provoked tension in Eastern Nigeria (later Biafra). The massacres of members of the Igbo ethnic group living in Northern Nigeria on May 29, 1966, July 29, 1966, and September 29 1966 led to the migration of two million Igbos from Northern Nigeria to Eastern Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> These massacres resulted in a political stalemate that was to be resolved at Aburi in Ghana in January 1967. The non-implementation of the agreements reached at Aburi contributed largely to the thirty-month war that took over three million Biafran lives.<sup>4</sup> Although the Nigerian government for the whole period of the war described it as a civil war, it was obviously internationalized. It was presented before the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>5</sup> Countries like Russia and Britain openly supported and fought on the side of Nigeria<sup>6</sup> while France was allegedly on the side of Biafra. Many other European and North American countries that decided to be militarily neutral supplied relief aid to Biafra where children and women died in large numbers due to starvation. This is just a brief background of the war that created disability among many youths of Igboland.

I set out to Okwe in Imo State, Nigeria, in the company of my friend David on July 8, 2011. Okwe is the headquarters of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB).<sup>7</sup> As I approached the entrance which was blocked with an iron bar, I was stopped by three young men. They sought to know who I was, and I explained with the presentation of my student identity card. They requested to know my mission, and I told them I came to see the disabled veterans. They allowed me into the veterans’ quarters and delegated one of the men at the gate to inform the veterans of my presence. The veterans, who were in their sixties and seventies, came out to an open place under a canopy on their wheel chairs. They had sustained serious injuries that affected their spinal cords and legs. Some of them needed someone to assist them before they could move. Owing to time and distance from where I stayed, I decided to conduct a group interview with the veterans. The people that participated included: Lawrence Akpu (President, Disabled Veterans of Biafra), Chukwu



The author interviewing disabled veterans. Courtesy of the author.

Osim, Chukwunke Adophus, Joseph Egwu Akani, Israel Nwagbara, Festus Mba Onu (Secretary General, Disabled Veterans of Biafra), and Ifeacho Joseph.<sup>8</sup> All gave their approval for me to publish their oral histories.

## The War

### Arua: Where were you when the war started?

Israel Nwagbara: I was living in Port Harcourt when the war broke out. We heard that many Igbos living in the North were killed and their headless bodies sent home through train. The news also was that children above five years would be killed. The younger ones would then be converted to Islam. You know, almost every Easterner is Christian. Even if anybody was not going to church they had had the Christian religious influence through Western education. The question of killing every adult and Islamising our children was the worst thing anybody could hear. This made me join the army rather than wait to be killed by the Hausa. I voluntarily joined the Biafran army in Enugu in 1967 but got injured in 1968.<sup>9</sup>

### Do you think Nigerian soldiers were actually going to kill everybody?

Joseph Egwu Akani: Almost every family or village was affected by the massacres of Igbos in the North. The first massacre of May 29 1966, took about 30,000 lives. Then there was the July 29, and the September 29 massacres which spread to other parts of Nigeria including Lagos, the seat of Nigerian government. If it did not affect you directly, it affected your brother or neighbour. We did not need anybody again to tell us that they were bent on exterminating us.<sup>10</sup>



The compound. Courtesy of the author.

Chukwu Osim: I was living in Port Harcourt as a businessman when the news of the massacre came. I was just about twenty years of age. They said that everybody above the age of five would be killed by the Northern soldiers and the remaining children will be trained to speak Hausa language and be converted to Islam.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Do you think it was a religious war?**

Chukwu Osim: We know Hausas are Muslims and they have always wanted everybody to worship their own God. They boasted they would dip the Koran into the sea.<sup>12</sup>

This religious connection in the conflict is very important. It formed part of Biafra's propaganda theme both locally and internationally. Its impact seemed to have been far reaching in Europe and North America. However, it is important to point out that religious differences were never an issue in Nigeria. Nigerians were extremely tolerant of each other's religious allegiance. Even in Northern Nigeria where the relationship between the Christian minority and Muslim majority was delicate and complicated, there was still much good feeling and mutual understanding to make realistic concession.<sup>13</sup> It did not matter to Easterners that some of the Northern soldiers were Christians and may not be really fighting a religious war. Such explanations may not have made meaning to the people who suddenly experienced an influx of two million refugees from Northern Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> The Biafran propaganda built its narrative around the massacres, religious differences and the attendant refugee problem which affected the displaced Igbos from the North and those permanently living in the East.

Festus Mba Onu: I was living in Port Harcourt as a welder. On November 16, 1966 we saw many people, injured people that were brought

home from Kano. Those who came back alive had their bodies mutilated. Some women's breasts were chopped off. Many people were killed and some of their dead bodies brought to the Eastern Region. They said those bodies were brought for us to celebrate Nnamdi Azikiwe's birthday.<sup>15</sup> I lived very close to the hospital in Port Harcourt, and I saw some of the refugees from the North. This is why I said the Amalgamation of Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 never worked. How could this happen in a united country? I thought about the whole thing and decided to join the army in December 1967. I left my welding job in Port Harcourt and came to Enugu for the recruitment. I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion Itu and was later recalled to 56 Brigade Task Force, Ohafia. We were selected to serve as Ojukwu's Special Squad in Umuahia. We were to act as His Excellency's Guard. I fought at Azumini in 1969 and got injured in my spinal cord and was taken to the hospital.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Do you think everybody accepted to go to war?**

Festus Mba Onu: There was no collective agreement to go to war. What I mean is that Igbos did not want to go war. They pushed us out of Nigeria. They killed General Ironsi and dragged his body on the tarred road. We went to Aburi and agreed on confederacy but Gowon disappointed us by not implementing the agreement. We fought with knife. It was a war of survival. We felt they were coming to kill us. We had two options: to fight and die or to wait for the Northerners to come and kill us. It was therefore better to die as a man by joining the army.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Do you have any regrets fighting for Biafra?**

Adolphus Chukwuemeka: I have no regrets but when I remember my business in Lagos and the wealth I had acquired, I feel so bad. I was a big trader in Lagos, importing cotton from Europe before joining the Biafran army. I fought in places like Afikpo, Abakaliki, Nkalagu and Ozuakoli. But today, I have nothing left.<sup>18</sup>

#### **How did you come to live in Okwe?**

Festus Mba Onu: The war ended on January 15, 1967 for everybody in Nigeria and Biafra, but for the disabled veterans, it marked the beginning of another phase of war. When the war ended, families who survived got reunited, but the disabled veterans could not go back to their families. General Yakubu Gowon's 'No Victor, No Vanquished' campaign had promised assistance to people who were injured as a

result of the war. We were camped at GTC Enugu where we were receiving medical treatment. Some lost their legs while others became paralysed due to spinal cord injury. At GTC Enugu, we faced some death threats from some of the non-Igbo nurses and cooks. One Christopher from Benue State visited his village and discovered that many of his relatives had died as a result of the war. When he returned to Enugu, he vowed to kill all the veterans by poisoning our food. Fortunately for us a Mid-Western Igbo overheard him and revealed his plans to us. Before we knew this, some had been killed due to wrong injections. When we realised this, we started refusing injections from non-Igbos. If we did not trust you, we would not take the injection. One of the non-Igbo workers used to say, 'If I no kill you, call me bastard.' We were to move to the orthopaedic hospital which was specially built for the disabled veterans but the military governor of East Central State, Colonel Ochefu, ordered that the veterans should be relocated to the Leprosy Centre at Oji River, Enugu. The buildings at the Orthopaedic Hospital at Enugu were designed for us as wheel chair users.<sup>19</sup>

Joseph Egwu Akani: Ukpabi Asika (former Administrator East Central State) was wholly responsible for the relocation of the veterans. He was not present the day we were ejected from GTC Enugu. He was said to have gone to Umuahia for the official opening of the Golden Guinea Breweries Ltd. We were forced to leave GTC by the soldiers, and those who were reluctant to leave were flogged. The soldiers that came to drive us out said 'Take them there, dump them there, let them decay and die.' They were told to shoot anybody that refused to move to Oji River. The major who led the operation had asked to know whether we were resisting the relocation order, and the junior officers said we were entering the bus (Oriental Line). And many of us actually died and decayed at Oji River; only the 'diehards' survived. We were about 979 veterans that were moved to Oji on July 11, 1975, but the number came down to 600. Some died while some went home. Out of the 600, only fifty of us made it to Okwe, the 'Promised Land.'<sup>20</sup> After abandoning us at Oji River, which was a leprosy centre, we were forced to go into begging to survive. They initially cared for us at Oji River. They provided food and health care. After the overthrow of General Gowon, they stopped giving us food. Colonel Ochefu did not recognise us. We started living a communal life, sharing whatever any member had or was given by his visiting relatives (what we call battalion jot).<sup>21</sup>

Chukwu Osim: Life in Oji River was horrible. We were forced to become beggars, something any Igbo man would be ashamed to do. We had to beg to survive. The irony of it is that the people we were begging from were the same people we fought to protect during the war. We would leave our houses at 5 am and return at 7 pm. We had to pay the person that would help wheel us to the Enugu-Anambra highway where we sat in the sun and rain and begged just to provide food for our families. Some Igbos forgot that they live because we fought. Some kind-hearted Nigerians usually stopped and gave us some money or any gift. Those who could not beg went home and died. People treated us as though we were lepers. Money was dropped on the ground for us to pick up in order to avoid body contact. When some members died, we had to plead with the authorities to come and remove the corpses. The federal and state governments forgot people like us existed, yet they were driving past the highway between Enugu and Anambra. Sometimes we visited some state governors to seek assistance. Promises would be made but would not be fulfilled. We made attempts to see some state governors to explain our plight but workers at the government houses would not allow us in. No state governor ever came to see us. There were occasions some governors announced donations of some money to us but we did not see anything. It was only Governor Achike Udenwa of Imo State who once made a donation of ₦200,000.00 (\$1300) to us.<sup>22</sup>

Joseph Egwu Akani: When Chief Uwazurike, the MASSOB leader, visited us and promised to relocate us to a comfortable living environment, we thought he was joking. Life was miserable at Oji River until Chief Raph Uwazurike came to our rescue. He built a two-bedroom apartment for each of us. We now live in our own 'White House.'<sup>23</sup> Our children can now go to school, unlike when we lived at Oji River. We have reconnected with our relations and our children visit them from time to time. Today, we buy freely from the market and traders do not need to wash our money before putting it into their purses. We are no longer treated as social lepers.<sup>24</sup>

### **Do you think it was wrong to have fought on the side of Biafra?**

Festus Mba Onu: We have no regrets going to war. We only regret our people denied us. We fought in the collective interest of the Igbo, for the Igbo to exist, but we were abandoned to suffer alone. Our children could not go to school. Some of us that have caring relatives



offered to take care of our children by enrolling them in schools. They are with us now because they are on holidays. It is one thing that gives us some hope. Although they are still young, we believe God will see them through.<sup>25</sup>

### **What is your relationship with General Ojukwu, the then leader of Biafra?**

Joseph Egwu Akani: It is fine. You know Ojukwu is an individual who is trying to protect himself. His brothers even blame him for spending their father's wealth on the war. He shed tears when he came to see us after his return from Ivory Coast. He felt for us and was disappointed that nothing had been done for us. The people we fought for disappointed us. It was Uwazurike who remembered us. He built accessible houses for each and every one of us. Whether you eat or not, you are happy because the environment is clean and people now see you as somebody. People can give things directly in your hand and collect money from you without dropping it on the floor. But I must remind you that Asika died miserably from punishing us.<sup>26</sup>

### **Do people visit you for discussions or interviews about the war?**

Lawrence Akpu: Yes, sometimes we get visitors, even 'white people.' They come and go but we do not see anything changing for us. Even though we are disabled, our history is not.<sup>27</sup>

Festus Mba Onu: We have our accounts of the war. We were in the field. One of the reasons Biafra lost the war was because of sabotage. We had saboteurs within Biafra. I remember a divisional attack we had planned under a brigadier. The plan was leaked to the enemy. We were supposed to attack at 4:30 am but

waited for signal till 7:30 am, and we asked to withdraw from the field. The Nigerian soldiers had known our plans and were laughing at us. Biafrans were not united. We could have won if we were united.<sup>28</sup>

## **The Historian**

Why should we care about the accounts of the disabled veterans? They are one of the lost or fading voices in the oral history of the war. They are actually disabled but they do not tell a disabled history. Their account is as valid and relevant as those of the army commanders. They were disabled as a result of the war and have since remained voiceless in the historiography of the war. Some people probably think because they are physically incapacitated, they would not have anything to offer. The veterans form an important reservoir through which oral historians can recover and fill some gaps in the existing literature and as long as the veterans were part of the war experience, it is imperative to listen to their own account of the war.

One of the challenges that face the study of oral history is the way we deal with the memory of our informants. Yet, it is much more difficult when it comes to dealing with a disabled group. The physical pains and the psychological trauma they have passed through sometimes affect their disposition to engage in meaningful discussions. I had to grapple with the challenge of dealing with one of the veterans who was emotionally overwhelmed as he recounted his experiences during the war. I briefly stopped my interview to give him time to regain his normal mood. Such people still need some psychological attention. It is forty-three years since the war ended and the veterans have been living in this lonely world of isolation and rejection.

Some of the generals who fought on the side of Biafra and were branded rebels have been granted amnesty and paid their retirement benefits by the Nigerian government, but these disabled veterans who seem to have lost the whole essence of their existence are yet to be re-integrated into society. The Biafran commanders seem to valorise themselves in their memoirs. Major-General Alexander Madiebo, the Biafran Army Commander, in his account described how he managed situations in places like Ogoja, Garkem, Obudu and Nsukka, without mentioning the role of the foot soldiers he commanded.<sup>29</sup>

The disabled veterans on the other hand tell their own stories with tears - not tears of going to war but tears of being abandoned by society. The retrieval of information from somebody who has suffered a psychological trauma can be challenging to an oral historian. Owing to the fact that some of the disabled veterans suffered psychological trauma and have not



The veterans with their banner. Courtesy of the author.

been properly rehabilitated, they seem to be easily overwhelmed by emotions when they have flashback of their past. Some suddenly stopped talking in the middle of the interview when their stories led them to past memories. Pausing temporarily when past memories seemed to interfere was found to be useful as it offered me the opportunity to introduce a form of 'stimulus variation.' I could introduce a story or joke outside the topic of discussion. That way, everybody laughed and was relieved to go back to the discussion. I also had to remind them that anybody who was uncomfortable with any question had the right to skip such a question and could also withdraw from participation at any time.

It was also easy for me to handle the situation because much of the discussion was done in Igbo, the ethnic language of the Igbo group which all the veterans spoke. Although all the veterans were literate in other languages, I still preferred to discuss with them in Igbo. While I was trying to engage them in Igbo, some of them preferred to respond in English. My understanding of this was that some of them were trying to prove how educated they were, and I actually saw that. Some of them spoke very good English while some combined pidgin English and Igbo. This, I think, created a more relaxed atmosphere. Speaking the same language made them feel I was culturally part of them. Dealing with such an emotional situation can be somewhat challenging when one realises that the task is that of trying to create public memory out of private memory. For people like the veterans whose past has defined their present, one struggles not to be partisan.

The social environment created during the interview was also helpful in retrieval of the memory artefacts. I noticed that the veterans already had the culture of sitting out together to discuss the war events. This might have helped in retaining much of the detailed information. This seems to be in line with the argument that the culture of collective and frequent transmission of oral history makes it for people to retain and reproduce meaningful and reliable information.<sup>30</sup> The veterans also felt that by telling their story, they were equally gaining recognition for their contribution to the war efforts. Their suffering appeared to have created a kind of collective identity as the group interview created room for them to share their collective experiences.

As Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes observe, oral history is often used to celebrate a common identity.<sup>31</sup> The war experience seemed to have unified the veterans as people with a common destiny. Although they do not regret fighting for Biafra, they feel they were denied by the people whom they fought to defend. They now live on charity and have no hope of getting re-integrated with their extended families. It is only somebody who is familiar with Igbo socio-cultural life that will appreciate what it means to live as a beggar. Olaudah Equiano (a freed slave) in his picture of Igboland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century noted, 'Everyone contributes something



The veterans. Courtesy of the author.

to common stock; and that as they are unacquainted with idleness, they have no beggars.'<sup>32</sup> Begging is probably the last thing an Igbo would do as a means of livelihood. The disabled veterans were subjected to this shame and psychological torture because of the irresponsibility of the government.

The veterans as a constituency in the study of oral history are of interest because their own accounts take the bottom-up approach as opposed to the existing literature that predominantly takes that top-down approach. As Donald A. Ritchie aptly notes, '...no one group has an exclusive understanding of the past, and ... the best projects were those that cast their nets wide, recording as many different participants in events or members of a community as possible.'<sup>33</sup> To write an inclusive history of the war using the bottom-up approach, one should therefore turn to the foot soldiers who have been largely neglected in the existing literature of the war.

This has become imperative particularly for oral historians in view of the poor documentation of the war by government agencies. My experience at the National Archives in Nigeria during my field work reveals a scarcity of documents on the war. It is not clear what happened to them after the war. By engaging the veterans, whether disabled or not, historians can still recover a lot of valuable information about the war. We are yet to know more about the motivations of the foot soldiers, their roles in the field and why they made certain decisions. Women and children also form part of the silenced constituency in the historiography of the Biafra War. It is only through the study of the oral history of the war that such voices can be recovered.

A visit to the disabled veterans has also made me understand the extent to which the government of Nigeria executed the rehabilitation project that was announced after the war. The Gowon-led government

demonstrated his conviction in one Nigeria for all ethnic groups by reabsorbing all the civil servants of Igbo origin who were dislocated as a result of the war.<sup>34</sup> However, the disabled veterans seem not to have been reintegrated into the Nigerian society until Chief Uwazurike, the MASSOB leader came to their rescue. It has to be appreciated that it was the intervention of Uwazurike that made it possible for the veterans to make themselves available for the interviews. If they had been allowed to continue to languish in Oji River, some of them might have died before my visit, and I could not have interviewed them on the highway where they would have been busy with their begging.

This study also reveals the impact of change of government on social development. The care of the veterans ceased because a new government came into power. This points to the fact that Nigeria was relapsing to the old habit of national disenchantment after fighting a thirty month bloody war. General Gowon was magnanimous by declaring that the war ended with 'no victor, no vanquished.' It was left for a successive regime to maintain the vision of building a strong and united nation that would care for all, including the physically challenged.

## Conclusion

This study reveals that the history of the Biafra War has been dominated by the accounts of the dramatis personae. It is more of the story of the commanders, those who controlled the machinery of government. Their accounts apparently neglect the experiences of the children, women and the disabled. These groups have been virtually silenced and would have remained so if there had not been a quick intervention to recover the voices of the disabled in the war.

It is interesting to note that despite the challenges of the veterans, they were still able to make themselves available for the interviews. This is a common spirit I found in the field. Many people were always ready to talk about the war. So many things that are not yet in print are hidden among this previously voiceless group.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 Biafra was a state that broke away from the Republic of Nigeria in 1967. It actually existed as a state by international standards and was recognised by some countries including: Cote D'Ivoire, Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon and Haiti. Haiti was the only state outside Africa that recognised Biafra as an independent state.
- 2 International Commission of Jurists' Report, 1969, p.96. This report was prepared by the International Committee for the Study of the Crimes of Genocide. See also Chima J. Korie (ed), *The Nigeria-Biafra War: Genocide and the Politics of Memory*, Cambria Press, Amherst, 2012, p.3.
- 3 Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'A Condemned People,' *The New York Book Review*, Volume IX, no 11, December 21, 1967.
- 4 Colin Legum 'Nigeria vs Biafra: On Taking Sides,' *Christianity and Crisis: A Christian Journal of Opinion*, May 26, 1969, Vol xxix, 9. See also H. M. Njoku, *A Tragedy Without Heroes: The Nigeria-Biafra War*, Fourth Dimension, Enugu, 1987, p. 113.
- 5 Department of State, Telegram, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Summary of official French Government Statement on the Nigerian Civil War, June-December 1968.
- 6 Lt.-Col Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, 'End of the Year Message 1968,' *Markpress*, GEN 472.
- 7 MASSOB is a non-violent organisation that agitates for the actualization of independence of the sovereign state of Biafra. The organisation is led by Chief Raph Uwazurike. The membership of the organisation covers the five states in south-eastern Nigeria. Over the years, the organisation has had serious confrontations with the government of Nigeria over the legitimacy of its programmes and objectives.
- 8 The veterans willingly gave their consent to participate and be identified personally in the study.
- 9 Israel Nwagbara, interviewed by Arua Oko Omaka, July 2011, tape and transcript held by the author.
- 10 Joseph Egwu Akani, interviewed by Arua Oko Omaka, July 2011, tape and transcript held by the author.
- 11 Chukwu Osim, interviewed by Arua Oko Omaka, July 2011, tape and transcript held by the author.
- 12 *ibid*.
- 13 National Archives of the United Kingdom, FCO 23/182 Nigeria and Biafra 1968.
- 14 O'Brien, *op.cit.*, p. 14.
- 15 Nnamdi Azikiwe was the first Nigerian President after independence. He was an Igbo by ethnic origin.
- 16 Festus Mba Onu, interviewed by Arua Oko Omaka, July 2011, tape and transcript held by the author.
- 17 *Ibid*.
- 18 Adolphus Chukwuemeka, interviewed by Arua Oko Omaka, July 2011, Tape and Transcript held by the author.
- 19 Mba Onu, *op.cit.*.
- 20 Joseph Egwu Akani described Okwe as the promised land because it was where their personhood and dignity as human beings were restored. According to him, Uwazurike wiped away their tears.
- 21 Egwu Akani, *op.cit.*.
- 22 Osim, *op.cit.*



- 23 The houses are in fact painted white but Akani actually meant that they now live in their dream houses with all the basic facilities.
- 24 Egwu Akani, *op.cit.*
- 25 Mba Onu, *op.cit.*
- 26 Egwu Akani, *op.cit.*
- 27 Lawrence Akpu, interviewed by Arua Oko Omaka, July 2011, Tape and Transcript held by the author.
- 28 Mba Onu, *op.cit.*
- 29 Alexander Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War*, Fourth Dimension, Enugu, 1980, pp123-144. See also Njoku, *op.cit.*, pp 100-106.
- 30 David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads and Counting-out Rhymes* Oxford Press, New York 1995, p. 10.
- 31 Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (eds), *Oral History and Public Memories*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2008, p.103.
- 32 Adiele Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture*, University Press Limited, Ibadan 1981, pp. 175-176. Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, was a freed slave believed to have been of Igbo descent. His autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative*, which was published in 1789, is believed to be the first documented history of the Igbo.
- 33 Donald A Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, p.24.
- 34 The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives, 1973-5005-1/1968-69, Re-absorption of Former Civil Servants and the Appointment of Central – Eastern State Indigenes in the Federal Public Service and Other Public Services of the Federation 1970, pp. 9-13.

# Boyhood memories of person and place

Hilary Davies

## Abstract

While researching Queensland heritage places, two men who had made contributions to that story came to my notice.<sup>1</sup> A third contemporary was a long-deceased family friend, Leo Charles Marienthal. These men lived parallel lives in Brisbane and its environs during the interwar and post-World War II period. They served in World War I, taught at the Brisbane Technical College then served in Queensland's defence forces during World War II. However, they had disparate professions – architect, artist and mechanic-turned-businessman; and there is no evidence that they knew each other. The wider project uses the lives of the men as a means to examine Brisbane's and Queensland's social history between c1919 and c1970. Their spheres of endeavour will provide insights into Brisbane's artistic community, its physical development and its business world. This paper reports on an oral history interview conducted for Marienthal's biography within the larger project. This report will give an overview of his life including stories and impressions obtained from interview, briefly discuss the changing nature of biography and oral history's role in that change, and discuss what has been achieved through the oral history interview in this project.

## Introduction

Over time, the purpose and nature of biography has changed. Traditionally it was used to reveal the lives of the literate and the elite of society. The lives of great men were intended to provide others with models to emulate. During the nineteenth century the biography of 'men of mark' – individuals who rose from obscurity to wealth and social prominence – attracted interest. This curiosity was generated by the published lectures of British writer Thomas Carlyle in 1840 entitled 'Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History' and those of American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, on 'representative men'.<sup>2</sup>

As the subject matter of historical research altered during the twentieth century, so did biography. According to Lawrence Stone, interest in social history as the prime subject matter of history, rather than the administrative

and constitutional evolution of nation states and the diplomatic and military relationships between those states, arose in the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> Social history, which may be defined as concerned with the general membership of a society (not just elite individuals) and the framework of their daily lives – their family, artefacts, community life, their births and deaths – was studied to fill out the historical characterisation of a period.<sup>4</sup> This trend intensified during the 1960s with an explosion of interest in, and writing of, social history. Political pressures led to some of the different areas of enquiry that developed – for example, black history, women's history, protest history and labour history.<sup>5</sup> With this change of interest came research into the lives of 'ordinary' people and those leaving little or no written record. Accessing their stories was enabled by oral history and new types of social histories and biographies were created, based wholly on interviews.<sup>6</sup>

Also aiding research and writing about ordinary people has been the increasing amount and availability of documentation. Information held in official records and published sources grew and people created their own records due to high literacy and the use of photography. An explosion of family history research encouraged and benefited from the availability of documents through microform and later digitization – of newspapers, birth, death and marriage registers, war service records and so forth – starting in the latter part of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup>

Today, oral history remains a powerful methodology, enriching life stories/biography with information not otherwise available to the researcher. Through recollection of personality, incidents, behaviour and style of life the researcher and reader gain some ability to see and hear the subject and imagine the person's milieu. The oral history interview in this project has this goal of enriching Marienthal's biography.

## Leo Charles Marienthal

Born at Kangaroo Point in Brisbane in 1891, Leo Charles Marienthal was the son of German immigrant Leopold Aloysius Marienthal and his wife Julia Albina Ann née Baker, who came from a large Catholic family



Leo with Douglas & Charles at Mt Coot-tha 1959. Photograph: Frank White, White Family Collection, from Hilary Davies' private collection.

living at Warwick where her father operated a livery stable. Marienthal senior worked as an accounts clerk but was also the organist at St Stephen's Catholic Cathedral in Brisbane and his musical talent was well-regarded.<sup>8</sup>

When Marienthal was six weeks old, his father died unexpectedly. Subsequently, his mother raised her two children; Gladys Bernardine Mary and Leo, by running the boarding house, *Mildura*, on Main Avenue, Kangaroo Point. Leo attended St Joseph's College, Nudgee, at Boondall north of Brisbane, until 1907; leaving at age 16.<sup>9</sup>

With his schooling completed, Marienthal was apprenticed as a mechanic to Phizackerley's Ltd in Sydney. Phizackerley's at this time was a Hupmobile, Humber and Minerva car dealer headquartered at 169 Elizabeth Street, with its garage located at 140-150 Castlereagh Street.<sup>10</sup>

On 10 August 1915, Marienthal enlisted at Brisbane in the First Australian Infantry Force (AIF) as a trooper in the 12<sup>th</sup> reinforcements of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Light Horse. He embarked at Sydney on HMAT *Suffolk* on 30 November 1915, arriving in Egypt a few weeks later. There he served as a bugler for ten months before changing to a transport unit and sailing for England where he remained until August 1917 when transferred to France. During his time at the Front he was promoted to Lance Corporal and was specially mentioned in Sir Douglas Haig's despatches on 7 April 1918 for his

efforts as a motorcycle messenger during the German offensive codenamed 'Michael'.<sup>11</sup>

In October 1918 Marienthal became seriously ill with influenza and was evacuated to hospital in Bath. He returned to Australia on the Royal Mail Ship *Karmala* on 2 January 1919, disembarking on 15 February and transferring to the 1<sup>st</sup> Military Hospital. His discharge took effect on 19 July 1919. In recognition of his service he received the 1914/15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal as well as Mentioned in Despatches emblems.<sup>12</sup>

After his war service, Marienthal taught as a Motor Instructor at the Brisbane Central Technical College until at least 31 March 1925. Sometime before World War II, Marienthal completed a Diploma from the Institute of Sales and Business Management. By 1928 he had become Sales Manager for Austral Motors, which imported Dodge Cars. A highlight of this period was chauffeuring Charles Kingsford Smith and his crew in procession from Eagle Farm Aerodrome to Brisbane city after the Southern Cross' historic flight across the Pacific Ocean from the United States in June 1928.<sup>13</sup>

Married in 1936, Marienthal and his wife, Nell, resided at 'Banff,' 24 Kirkland Avenue, Coorparoo. This house was a large, early twentieth century timber dwelling with verandahs along its front and side, and set on stumps about six feet above the ground.<sup>14</sup>

By July 1940 Marienthal and his wife were already involved in the war effort, fund-raising for the Patriotic Fund of Queensland and the Red Cross.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, Marienthal was called up for World War II service and appointed as a Lieutenant (1 August 1940) in the Queensland Line of Communication Area. He commenced duty with the Australian Military Forces on 29 December 1941 after being deemed Fit for Class II (B) service. His service ended on 20 November 1944 when he was placed on the Retired List (Qld) and in July 1947 he was removed from that List.<sup>16</sup>

Marienthal returned to his previous position as Sales Manager at Austral Motors in Brisbane after his war service. However, change was on the horizon and in 1951 Marienthal registered the Great Northern Trading Company. Its office was located in the Australasian Chambers on the corner of Queen and Wharf Streets in Brisbane's CBD. With the assistance of a full-time secretary, and his wife on a part-time basis, he operated this business, which imported household items including washing machines and luxury goods, for the next 18 years.<sup>17</sup>

In 1952 my mother began working for Great Northern Trading Company as a temporary secretary. Joan White was a new migrant to Queensland from England and her diary provides insights into Marienthal's personality and behaviour. He and his wife introduced our family

(Joan, her husband Frank and her mother, Isobel Hargreaves) to Brisbane life, sights and activities.<sup>18</sup> Family history and photographs record that Leo and Nell Marienthal took them sight-seeing and picnicking to nearby Mt Coot-tha, Samford and Redcliffe, and further afield to the Gold Coast, Lamington National Park and Somerset Dam in the Brisbane Valley. In the 1950s the Marienthals regularly drove Joan and Isobel to Sunnybank on Brisbane's suburban fringe to buy fruit and vegetables from the farms located there, while Frank White built the family's home in the then outer suburb of Carina. They also provided advice about living in sub-tropical Brisbane, gardening and even teaching budgerigars to talk. When their son, Douglas White, was old enough he was taken fishing by Marienthal. Visiting each other's homes was usual during the 1950s and 1960s as the Marienthals took the White family under their metaphoric wing.

Although the documentary sources provide insight into Marienthal's life,<sup>19</sup> interviewing my brother, Douglas White, who had had first hand and on-going contact from birth to age 14 during the latter part of Marienthal's life (1955-69), was necessary for a more personalised picture of the man and his style of life. Douglas remains one of probably only two or three people (one untraceable and me), who are still alive and who remember Marienthal. The narrator's recollections, plus my own more sketchy impressions, of Marienthal are therefore the only ones available to supplement documents.

The intended audience for the biography is the general public, specifically those who are interested in 'biography as a prism of history'<sup>20</sup> and Brisbane's and Queensland's history from c1914 to c1970.

As the interview<sup>21</sup> deals with the last years of Marienthal's life it will contribute to the concluding chapter of the biography. This recollection of the later years of the subject's life has a meditative and nostalgic tone and provides an episode told with rhythm, in simple language suitable for a wide audience. It is engaging and provides good imagery, giving insight into the subject's personality, lifestyle and home. It is a very personal ending to the life story and I feel it has the most impact when told in the narrator's words without interruption by the biographer. Just as quotes from diaries and letters allow a subject to speak for him/herself and become more real to the reader, so does the use of this interviewee's narrative make the person and place more real to the reader than a biographer's often more detached words. This is in accordance with Tim Bowden's and other authors' advocacy for preserving 'the colour, flavour, pace, movement, emotion and integrity of the oral testimony "as she is spoke" on the printed page.'<sup>22</sup> Therefore, with minimal editing and re-ordering of the answers to my questions, the narrator's account flows well from house to garden.

The rhythm of the narrator's story is retained and his style of speech works well in creating the scene.

The interviewee, Douglas White, described Marienthal's home as it was in the 1950s and 1960s.

Douglas White: The front was a formal garden, pathway through the middle, roses on either side, roses along the inside of the brick and wrought iron fence at the front, two beds of roses in the lawn. Down the right-hand side as looking at the house was the drive to his garage. They had gardens either side and then when you went around the back it was basically a jungle of vegetation – large custard apple trees, the backyard was terraced, very shady, my sister and I enjoyed rolling around on the grass down the terraced banks. And Leo would take us for walks down to show us the chooks and the ducks and always warned us to keep away from the bees.

It [the house] would be a typical upmarket colonial house - typical Queenslander with closed-in verandahs, weatherboard exterior. Inside was very nice. They collected a lot of antiques. It was always a very fascinating place for me and we were warned, 'Don't touch anything'.

[There were] beautiful figurines on pedestals. Lots of ornaments. Shelves with ornaments - I remember Nell [his wife] kept a lot of wonderful ornaments even in the kitchen. She would even keep the odd pieces of china. She used to say they were for her breakfast, but just the cups and saucers - were very ornate. It was always a very fascinating visit for me because there were so many beautiful things.

[My favourite part was] [t]he lounge room .... They had beautiful old ball and claw chairs and a two seater lounge. It was always nice to perch on the edge of one of those chairs with Mum or Dad and just marvel at the furniture – the timber cabinets with stained glass work in them and then the beautiful ornaments inside the cabinets. And the clocks. Leo was a collector of cuckoo clocks and, if I remember rightly, grandfather clocks. I remember clocks chiming. It was fascinating. You would be sitting there, and Mum and Dad and Nell and Leo would be talking, and then a clock. You would hear a clock – you would hear a clock mechanism start and chime the hour or half hour. And there were clocks all through the house, so it wasn't just one clock chiming. And I used to go from room to room to see which clock was chiming. So it was always fascinating.

.... [T]here was a formal dining room .... I used to like going around through the rooms. They had archways - not so much small doorways, but beautiful archways between the rooms and it was always fascinating to wander around.

[There] ... was an L-shaped verandah and they had wind chimes. And a hanging plant that hung in a hanging basket and if you touched it, it dropped little round succulent leaves and people would know if you had touched it – it would give you away. They had birds on the verandah, I think budgerigars. Budgerigars on the verandah and I used to like watching the birds and I think a fish tank - back against the verandah wall. The atmosphere on the verandah was always very pleasant. It was cool on hot summer's afternoons and there was a breeze and of course the chimes would sound and he had wisteria or something growing up the side of the verandah. There was always a fragrance of flowers. And also Nell would cut flowers from the garden and she would have large vases of flowers in the house and also out on the verandah.

[On the verandah was the] [r]ustic furniture of the day. I think they had a couple of lilo chairs or recliners of some kind – the sort of chairs that you would have on a deck in that day and if I remember rightly they were cane.

There was a room that was a continuation of the verandah but was completely closed in with glass and that was on the right hand side of the house.

... it was a high level house. The house was approximately six feet off the ground at the front and then two storey at the back. You accessed the rear garden by the kitchen backdoor out onto a little verandah then down a flight of wooden stairs. It was all enclosed with trees, very shady, very cool and pleasant. And as soon as you went outside you heard his bird aviary. He had an aviary with budgies. Downstairs, in the garden. Of course you always heard them because budgies chatter a lot. He bred ... budgies.... we got [ours] from him, fresh out of the nest because Leo always said they make the best talkers.... they were always very tame little birds.

You go down the stairs, turn at the bottom, down a concrete path with garden enclosing it and in underneath the house to the laundry where again Nell had many little ornaments. As I said before she liked collecting ornaments. So the laundry was a typical laundry of the day – concrete wash tubs, old style ringer washing

machine and from there you went through to a storage area where they had jars of honey, jam and, if I remember rightly, bottles of ginger beer. They brewed their own ginger beer. From there to a little area where he kept the lawn mower and his tools and then out into the back garden to a path that went round the back of the house across to the garage where he kept the car.... If you turned left you went down the path to the back of the garden.

On the left was the chook house, on the right was his little vegetable patch and the incinerator. Back in those days they were still allowed to have incinerators. Well, the ducks were with the chooks and also the ducks were allowed out to graze the garden to eat the bugs. The bees were at the end of the path. You went down the path and to the left was the chook house and chook pen and just there to your right as you were facing the chooks there was the bees. --- As a little boy one approached cautiously because Leo warned me 'don't touch the bees'.... If I remember rightly, it was just one [hive].

They were very keen gardeners. And Leo I think had something to do with the horticultural society in Brisbane....And they were very, for the want of a better word, house proud, or garden proud. They always had a beautiful garden. Their garden was always well-tended - beautiful. Roses were always pruned at the right time. Leo used to paint the trunks with lime every off season to protect them, and then when they were in flower, they were full of beautiful flowers, lovely fragrance in the garden. Yeah, I very much enjoyed the garden, even as a boy. I think that Nell and Leo had, you might say, the green thumb.

With regard to Marienthal's appearance and personality the interviewee had a few impressions, as discerned from the perspective of a child:

Douglas White: [Leo Marienthal was] very quiet and gentle sounding. I never heard him cross. Educated. Definitely had an educated tone to his voice.

He was a short man of average build. He was half bald. The front half of his head was bald from wearing hats and caps as was the normal thing.... I'd say he'd be thinnish. He was only a frail looking man in his senior years. In his middle age years, which was when I would probably remember most activities with him, when he would take me around the garden a lot, he was just a modest man, mid-life.

He was always a - kindly man - mischievous at times. They [Leo and Nell] were definitely



kindly towards children. They weren't reserved or shy about children.

I remember him taking me for walks around his garden. He taught me how to safely catch grasshoppers without being pricked with their thorny legs. Then he would take them down and feed them to the chooks.

He explained to me how to prune. He even showed me how he did a grafting; because he would do his own grafting. At that age of course it was all interesting ...[although] it was not clear to me, but he showed me the technique.

[They also visited our home at Carina and] Leo liked to sit in Nana's [Isobel Hargreaves] rocking chair. That was his favourite seat. And one of his passions was that he would give us a shilling each when he arrived. He would dig into his pocket and make a light game of it and pull out a shilling in his hand and open his hand and 'Ooh! This must be yours'. Or something like that. 'How about an ice cream?' It was always a little quirky thing with him.

My strongest impression of [Leo] was that he was always a kindly old man. He was never stern with us when we visited. He smiled. He was even mischievous.... He would be a typical middle-aged boy to sum him up. I gather he would be a man of integrity too because my parents always spoke well of him. There were never any negative comments or sentiments in our house about either Leo or Nell. My remembrance of him was a very kindly old man. I enjoyed going and visiting and seeing him when he came here.

I remember him as being a very frail little old man, still wearing his cap. My last recollection of him was visiting and sitting in that rocking chair that he would always sit in, and laboured getting up and down from that chair. That was the last.

I only knew him as a kindly old man who had an importing business and a house full of lovely treasures.

I enjoyed going and visiting and seeing him when he came [to visit us]. And of course Nell was always very nice to us, very friendly. Yeah, a lovely couple.

During the 1960s Leo Marienthal suffered from increasingly serious bouts of ill-health. He died on 3 November 1969, and for the next two decades Leo's wife remained a family friend until her death in 1992. Their house and garden were replaced by a medium density brick apartment complex in the early 1980s

as the Brisbane suburb of Coorparoo, like many others with large suburban blocks, was developed to accommodate an increased population.

## Conclusion

While a fulsome exposé of Marienthal's personality was not forthcoming from this interview, glimpses of the man and his life are revealed. He and his wife were shown to have welcomed, provided assistance and kindness to a family of migrants. To the child of that family Marienthal exhibited patience, interest, and a willingness to teach and to treat. The interview also provided images of the man's home, activities and interests; clearly establishing his middle-class socio-economic status, but also showing that keeping a productive back yard was part of that life-style. Without the oral history interview, Marienthal's biography would be far less revealing of the man, his personality and his impact on those around him. It was certainly a worthwhile undertaking that has enriched the biography and hopefully can be replicated for the other subjects of this project.

## (Endnotes)

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  - 15 *The Courier-Mail*: 18 Jul 1940, p. 10; 22 Aug 1940, p. 9; 11 Oct 1940, p. 9; 5 Nov 1940, p. 10; 2 May 1941, p. 10; 3 May 1941, p. 9; 17 Jul 1941, p. 7; *Nambour Chronicle*, 25 Jul 1941.
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  - 21 Douglas White. interview March 2012.
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# Case study: 'Pioneers of the fringe,' south-west Sydney 2009-2012

Therese Sweeney

## Abstract

This article addresses one stage of an enduring 20-year project of community engagement in a far-outer suburb of Sydney, NSW. Beginning with the aim of recording history in a fringe area, the initial project expanded into a multi-media endeavour, culminating in the establishment of a non-profit organisation, Memory Bank Cultural Media, in 2008. Previous projects that form part of the wider enterprise are described as a background to the subject of this article, the retired migrant market gardeners of the region. Oral history interviews were incorporated with other media to showcase the lives of people that would otherwise slip through the gaps in the historical record.

## Introduction

I began engaging with communities in new media and historical processes on the fringes of west-southwest Sydney in 1994 and I continue this practise to the present day, primarily in community oral history and digital storytelling projects, photography, video documentaries, training residents and digitising private photographic collections. My interest stemmed from growing up in a large area to the northwest of Liverpool, an outer suburb of Sydney, which was dubbed Green Valley from the early 1960s, a public housing estate which comprised six suburbs: Busby, Miller, Ashcroft, Cartwright, Sadleir and Heckenberg. I grew up in Busby; from 1963, my parents secured a house there, moving from south-east Sydney when I was two years old.

The Green Valley Post Office was opened in 1964 and operated as such until 1973, when it was renamed Miller Post Office. Officially, today Green Valley is known as a small suburb located near the Estate; the pioneering residents on the Estate still however refer to their community as 'the Valley'.

In 1994 I was inspired to document and record fringe communities under-represented in our local and State cultural institutions in order to 'create history.' I then sought to archive my collections in libraries,

to 'claim space' for these communities. I introduced photography with the oral history component because my community of origin lacked images other than the existing sterile representations of new homes on file at our major library institutions provided by the NSW Housing Commission.

I taught myself photography on the job at the start of this journey and the following year studied social history (theory) and film-making (production) formally at the University of Technology Sydney. I developed all my research and project work on Green Valley at university, guided by Dr Paul Ashton, who at the time was my tutor at UTS. I arranged a meeting with Alan Davies, Curator of Photography, State Library of NSW, whilst I was a student and he selected and purchased a large body of my work for the State photographic archive.

Today my sound, video and photography collections and transcriptions are archived in Sydney inner city (City of Sydney, Leichhardt, Marrickville) and south-west Sydney (Liverpool, Miller, Camden, Campbelltown, Glenfield and Airds) local libraries in New South Wales, in galleries (Campbelltown Arts Centre, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Liverpool Regional Museum, Camden Museum) and in the State Library of New South Wales.

Currently, my entire twenty year collection is being prepared for offer online through the library system at UTS as an open learning source launching in mid-2014. Eventually UTS Library aim to host the entire multi-media archive through their platform.

## Background to case study

In 2004-2005 I collaborated with Liverpool City Library to produce a photographic survey and a series of video histories on contemporary market gardeners in south-west Sydney, reflecting the wave of migration during the 1970s. This exhibition, 'Bringelly City on the Edge,' toured for twelve months through libraries and galleries on the fringes of Sydney. I undertook all research and engagement for this project, reporting

to a steering committee made up of approximately ten people, comprising local librarians, academics, historical societies and community representatives. This committee was formed and co-ordinated by personnel within Liverpool City library.

During my research, I was introduced to ageing migrant women and retired pioneering market gardeners from Europe and their stories stayed with me. The local community service, Outer Liverpool Community Service (who were represented on the steering committee), with whom I had built a very positive and trusting relationship, were anxious for somebody to capture the stories of these women and their husbands before it was too late, as many had passed on.

In 2006, I initiated an oral history and photography project in Kings Cross, with elderly clientele from a diner that had been operating since the 1940s. In 2007 this project launched Sydney Living Museums' Heritage Week and was titled, 'Conversations at the Diner'. I had waitressed one night a week for twelve months to build relationships with the clientele before I began the project. The Diner closed its doors in 2010.

This was the beginning of my formal journey to commit to and record ageing people to secure and value their stories in local communities.

## Establishing a cultural entity

In 2008 I formalised a strategy to share and create a more enduring cultural vision, by establishing a not-for-profit entity, Memory Bank Cultural Media Incorporated,<sup>1</sup> the primary purpose of which was 'to collect knowledge and memories from ageing pioneering residents before it is lost' through training and digital engagement to create enduring digital archives for future generations.<sup>2</sup> I was supported through the research phase by Shopfront<sup>3</sup> at the University of Technology, again led by Dr Paul Ashton, who valued the concept of Memory Bank, our enduring partnership and the broad vision.

A Management Committee was established to steer the organisation's beginnings into formulating the Constitution and legal requirements, membership, fundraising, operations, digital media and community engagement. The Committee comprised seven members from local industry and business, two prominent families from the region, the community development worker, a representative from Shopfront, UTS and myself.

Memory Bank was officially launched in 2009 by the Department of Health and Ageing's National Ambassador for Ageing, Noeline Brown, at Liverpool City Council's Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre. This launch was extraordinarily well attended by the ageing migrant market gardeners from the region. Also in attendance was the Liverpool City Mayor, Ms Wendy



Ivica Boskovich on her property, Austral 2008. Photo by author.

Waller, State MPs Mr Paul Lynch and Dr Andrew McDonald and Federal MP Chris Hayes. Dr Andrew McDonald reported to parliament about the launch and the initiative in June 2010.<sup>4</sup> Representatives from the local community service were also in attendance and included Jayne Foster, founder and Management Committee representative and Tanya Eades, Community Development Worker. A series of short video moments and sound bites, reflecting the migrant market gardeners screened as part of the launch.

## A case study: Pioneers of the Fringe, Postcode 2179, South West Sydney

'Pioneers of the Fringe', a digital sound and photographic survey, was initiated in 2009 by Memory Bank at the request of the local not-for-profit community service, Outer Liverpool Community Services. This was in response to radical social, cultural and demographic changes occurring in the traditional market gardening communities on the fringe of Sydney. This semi-rural landscape is in transformation from five-acre market gardens to extensive medium density housing which will greatly increase the population size and density in coming years. There has been extensive press coverage on this issue for a number of years and documents and maps released from both Local and State government.<sup>5</sup>

These residents are located in the suburbs of Austral and Leppington, postcode 2179, housing one of the highest concentrations of ageing migrant residents from south-east Europe in New South Wales. These ageing migrants, both first and second generation, in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century grew food for our armed forces during World War II and for greater Sydney ever since. Farming methods were developed by migrants from the old Yugoslavia, who in turn taught the Italian, Maltese and other migrants. Their extraordinary and enduring contributions remained virtually unrecognised in our



'Pioneering,' video installation from the series *Intimate Moments*, projected onto building surfaces, Liverpool CBD. Artist Therese Sweeney 2009.

local cultural institutions and in our national narrative. They remain out of the consciousness of the wider Sydney population.

This Memory Bank initiative aimed to redress the omissions in this history and acknowledge this group through digital media. There is no broadband in this region and the group had no understanding of current technology or digital equipment. As a result, engagement with this target population took about twelve months, building trust and affirming the value of the group in the process.

## Target group

Research included analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics data, local maps and local knowledge, identifying pockets of residents over the age of seventy. Ideally the residents who were to be engaged in an oral history were to meet some of the following criteria:

- Be over the age of seventy
- Be former market gardeners
- Have lived in postcode 2179
- Be migrants from south-east Europe
- Represent generational farming families
- Have been community leaders and business people who shaped the economic profile of the region
- Have been involved in practices that represent the diversity of farming production in the region.

Sites where the target group congregated or held membership were identified. Although there are few in this landscape, sites of engagement included the Bowling Club, the Bocce Club, Outer Liverpool Community Services and of course farms, dairies and market gardens. Priority was given to residents or former residents over the age of ninety.

A questionnaire and framework was developed as

a guide to evoke generational farming memories, including growing and distribution methods, co-operatives, land use, migration stories, the effects of World War II, community life, gender, isolation, poverty, labour, housing, water, the changing landscape and the implication of government policies.

## Funding and partnerships

Over a twelve month period I met with key cultural and library agencies and with local, State and National MPs pitching the vision in order to raise funds, interest and support. I held meetings with the Mayor and General Manager of Liverpool City Council, who provided in-kind support by way of printing. I met the head of Liverpool Library and Regional Museum and the local history Librarian. I also met with the local State MP, who at the time held the portfolio for the NSW Department of Ageing. In addition, I met with another State MP (at his request), whose family farmed in Green Valley. I held meetings with the Australia Council, Public Library Services, the State Library of NSW and the Powerhouse Museum. I also made enquiries with the Migration Heritage Centre to gauge their interest in this initiative. In fairness there was some praise for the vision, but no real tangible support, nor was any enduring interest generated from my many face-to-face meetings.

Once Memory Bank achieved charity status this opened up opportunities and we developed strong partners. No government grants have proved successful to date, even when funds privately raised have matched grant amount requested, as was the case for the Australia Council's Creative Community Partnerships grant application. There was also no success with local community donations and community development grants administered through Local government or the Federal Volunteer Grants program and the Small Communities Awareness Fund (Office of Rural Affairs). More recently a small grant through History and Heritage within the Royal Australian Historical Society was unsuccessful.

Through private grants we sought funding from IMB Building Society Australia and Clubs NSW, both of which were also unsuccessful. However we did gain success with a Community Heritage grant through the Ian Potter Foundation.

Prominent families from the region, represented by second and third generation businesspeople, were also approached during this time in the hope of securing some major donations, and we eventually secured support from two of those families. Our major primary partner became Tulich Family Communities, who donated regularly during the engagement and collection phases of the project and Leppington Pastoral Company also donated an amount which assisted us in website development.



## Engaging residents

An extensive 'on the ground' engagement began at key sites in the landscape, promoting the project, seeking participants and getting referrals from residents. Posters and related promotional material were printed by means of printing sponsorship from Liverpool City Council and design sponsorship from Shopfront, UTS. These materials were posted in local shops, various articles appeared in print media and I held radio interviews with ABC 702 and 2UE.<sup>6</sup> This engagement phase of the work was arduous and painstaking, but essential. I had the advantage of being known because of my previous project work in the region with a reputation for 'best practise'. In addition, my organisation commits to relational engagement, proving most successful in terms of securing resident participation.

Memory Bank based its operations at Austral Bowling Club for the duration of the project in a makeshift office. After a few months of meeting and talking with residents who either played lawn bowls or bingo, I set up a makeshift photographic studio over two days and shot approximately seventy portraits of ageing residents in the Club. From that exercise more subjects were identified for oral histories and a series of black and white portraits that would be archived and used later for an exhibition and/or publications were secured. I also recorded the sound of bingo being called and bowls being played, as an aural history. I produced a 'video moment' by observing one of the women playing bingo and generally photographed people bowling or playing bingo. From time to time the screens at the Club were used to further engage potential participants by displaying photographs and communicating with members. I also engaged extensively and regularly at Leppington Bocce Club, a Yugoslavian club established in 1941, known then as the Partisan Club. Many subjects were secured from this site.

## Ivica Boskovich - Participant

I cannot remember how many bus trips I undertook with members of Outer Liverpool Community Services to secure resident participation and promote the project. One woman I met as a result of one of those bus trips, an older resident who had barely left her property since migrating from Yugoslavia, was by all reports difficult to 'crack'. I was told by the locals that she would never talk to me. It took me many months to build trust with Ivica, who eventually did talk with me and agreed to participate.

I believe she eventually consented because her friends were becoming involved in the project and relaying their experience to her. Ivica is 'all smiles' when she sees me now which is moving. She is a former poultry farmer and a proxy bride who migrated to a country she



Therese Sweeney, holding a photograph from the Green Valley series, 2011. Photograph by Armen Deushian.

didn't know anything about to be with a man she had never previously met.

Ivica and three other women also participated in an exhibition I produced through Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, titled, 'Intimate Moments'. I collaborated with Ivica on a short 'silent' video, filming her simply walking around her disused poultry sheds on a now barren property. I called this video, 'Pioneering'. This was projected onto a large building surface in the local CBD of an evening, for many weeks. I have also photographed her property and taken many portraits of Ivica at home and at the Bocce Club, amongst other places. Ivica also participated in a farming forum I hosted in the theatre at Casula Powerhouse which included a film screening titled 'Tomato Stories', in which she is featured. This multi-media body of work is all now part of Ivica's enduring archive.

## Outcomes

The collection phase of the project ceased in July 2012, as did private funds. The digital assets that were produced maintain high production standards. Thirty one digital oral histories were recorded during this period, many private photographic collections were digitised, extensive contemporary portraiture was recorded as well as contemporary photography and many video installations, video footage and documentaries were produced for exhibition purposes in collaboration with residents.

The work is currently being prepared for archiving, which is a huge task and is stored and backed up by Memory Bank and UTS and will appear on our website toward the end of 2013. In addition, a meeting is scheduled with the new Mayor of the Liverpool City Council in late July 2013 to discuss digital repository solutions for this work at the local level. Some of the video installations appear on our website at [www.memorybank.org.au](http://www.memorybank.org.au).

[memorybank.org.au](http://memorybank.org.au). Eventually the collection will also be housed at the State Library of NSW.

As mentioned previously, 'Pioneers of the Fringe' will eventually be hosted as an online community history by the University of Technology Sydney, commencing in mid 2014. E-books will be produced in 2014 about this project through UTS library.

Following this, my life's history work will then be archived and hosted by the Library at University of Technology Sydney. This is a great privilege and a great relief! My archive includes: 'Conversations at the Diner', Kings Cross, launched for Heritage Week in 2007, which includes oral histories, photography and text; 'Green Valley from 1994-2013', which has a particular focus on the nuns and residents from St Therese Parish, Sadleir and includes photography, oral histories, videos and short films, and photography in surrounding locations. This archive is currently held in its entirety by myself and is currently being logged and assets itemised for delivery to UTS. Parts of the archive are represented in those cultural institutions referenced earlier in this paper.

## Current work

Memory Bank's most recent project is 'Workers Histories from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Camden Park Estate, Belgenny Farm Trust', involving oral histories, photography and scanning archival material from private collections. This project began in 2011 and is ongoing. It is now almost as comprehensive as the 'Pioneers of the Fringe' project. This project is fully resourced by the NSW Department of Primary industries.

A position of Oral Historian was advertised by the Belgenny Trust of the NSW Department of Primary Industries as the Belgenny Farm Oral History project. I applied as I felt it fitted very well with my work to date in south-west Sydney and would enrich me and develop my knowledge and appreciation of farming activity, economy, community and social life in the region. I have since expanded my role of oral historian and have undertaken all the research for the project and the planning. I have also begun shooting contemporary photographic portraits of participants. Digital archiving has become a big part of the role as I have been offered many archives from participants and I also oversee the transcriptions. I have formatted all the documents and sound files for the local cultural institutions and this will be delivered eventually at the project's completion to the State Library of NSW.

## Future Direction

The focus for the most part of 2013 will be preparing the digital collections for archiving with the Library staff at the University of Technology Sydney. The future role of Memory Bank will be revisited in the second part of 2013 in order to produce a new strategic plan to identify future projects, direction and funding opportunities.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 Further information on Memory Bank can be found through its website at [www.memorybank.org.au](http://www.memorybank.org.au)
- 2 Memory Bank Constitution.
- 3 Shopfront is an award-winning non-profit arm of UTS that supports disadvantaged and under-resourced community groups in undertaking community-initiated projects and community-engaged research.
- 4 <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/hansard.nsf/V3Key/LA20100601011>
- 5 Narellan library holds an extensive collection of documents on the issue.
- 6 See Press menu on the Memory Bank website.

# ‘That was a posed photo:’ reflections on the process of combining oral histories with institutional photographs

Jesse Adams Stein

[This paper has been peer-reviewed]

## Abstract

This paper emerged from observations following oral history interviews with thirty people who worked at the New South Wales (NSW) Government Printing Office, Sydney between 1933 and 1989. This project incorporates photographs from the NSW Government Printing Office collection: institutional images taken within this public service workplace. This paper describes how the use of institutional photographs during the oral history interview can provide insight into the disjuncture between bureaucratic representations of an organisation, and former employees’ recollections of working life. Oral history interviews indicate that these former employees possessed a confident and playful awareness of the ‘grey area’ between institutional representation and everyday practice, and they performed an active role in the shaping of some of those situations. This paper engages with oral history literature on the relationship between oral testimony and photographs, and opens up the field to include the use of institutional photographs in the interview process, rather than personal or family images, which have often been the focus of previous research in this area.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The relationship between oral history and photography is a relatively new but growing area in oral history literature.<sup>2</sup> While recent scholarship in this field has tended to focus on personal and family photographs,<sup>3</sup> this study uses photographs from an institutional archive: that of the NSW Government Printing Office. Oral history interviews have revealed that this public service factory was colloquially known as ‘the Guv’ – a term I will employ henceforth.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of family photographic collections, the photographic record often belongs to those who are depicted; it was often generated by them, or by other family members. These photographs (as physical objects and images) are often invested

with strong attachments and associations, already tightly bound to memory, and embedded into the way in which individuals already make meaning in their lives.<sup>5</sup> The introduction into the oral history interview of workplace photographs produced by an institutional employer introduces an entirely different scenario.

This is a meaningful shift; these are photographs that are not personally ‘owned’ by the people being interviewed, and yet the images may still record important aspects of these participants’ lives. With institutional photographs, the questions of ‘what?’, ‘how?’, and ‘in whose interest?’ are sometimes difficult to answer specifically, although it is usually possible to say that photographs depicting workplace scenes were generally produced in a manner that was officially endorsed. Such images were taken and distributed with the aim of representing the institution in a positive light, to relay an appropriate image of this organisation to the public. The images are depersonalised; they are not usually produced with the aim of recording someone or something ‘special’, but with the aim of recording and distributing normative, best-practice images of idealised labour.

Given that many of these photographs were taken in the service of a government institution, the collection has a certain bureaucratic quality. American writer and theorist Susan Sontag raised concerns about the bureaucratic classification produced by the photographic medium.<sup>6</sup> She warned of how, through institutional photographs, ‘the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers*’.<sup>7</sup> This could risk a historical view that trivialises and fetishises isolated photographic images, rather than understanding their deep interconnectedness with social and historical contexts.<sup>8</sup> That is why the photographs from the Guv cannot easily stand alone, but when juxtaposed with verbal accounts (among other sources), we may have some hope of stitching things back together in a variety of ways, providing the connections that can be lost when an image is isolated from its context.



Alan Leishman pouring acid toner, 1962. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Government Printing Office collection 2 #22009.

What happens, then, when an institutional photographic collection is re-introduced into a contemporary context, into an oral history interview?<sup>9</sup> In this case, what happens when these photographs are presented to former employees of the Guv? These are the people who are perhaps best equipped to ‘read’ the images and tell a richer, and perhaps more complex story about the layers of workplace history and institutional representation, but their testimony may not operate in predictable or straightforward ways. Interview participants’ testimony should not simply be used to ‘decode’ or explain the photographic content; what they say can potentially tell us far more.

The use of institutional photographs in the oral history process does not demonstrate workplace practices ‘as they were’ in a documentary sense, but it can reveal some of the ways that this institution sought to represent itself, and how employees responded to those attempts by the institution to present particular narratives. More importantly, the examples provided in this paper also indicate that these participants are shrewd, active, and sometimes mischievous contributors to the production of the Guv’s public ‘image’.

## Background to the Project

*Precarious Printers: An Oral and Pictorial History of Technological and Social Reordering at the New South Wales Government Printing Office 1959-1989* is an ongoing doctoral research project that examines the three-decade period prior to the closure of the NSW

Government Printing Office in 1989. My sources include oral history interviews with thirty former employees, photographs from the State Library of NSW (SLNSW), and archival materials held with NSW State Records.

Between 1959 and 1989 the Guv operated out of a centralised printing factory in the inner-city suburb of Ultimo, Sydney.<sup>10</sup> The 1960s to the 1980s was a period of dramatic upheaval in the printing industry, in developed capitalist economies.<sup>11</sup> Hot-metal typesetting and letterpress printing was phased out, and replaced by high-speed offset lithography and electronic phototypesetting systems.<sup>12</sup> This meant that the traditional craft trades such as letterpress printer, Linotype operator, and hand compositor (to name but a few) were utterly transformed, and many trades swiftly became redundant.<sup>13</sup> *Precarious Printers* explores how workers at the Guv experienced this transitional stage. In the *Precarious Printers* project (as a whole) oral history is used as a way to access individual and collective ways of talking about working life at the Guv. In this particular paper, however, my observations are limited to the intersection of photographs and oral history.

## The Photographic Collection

Many historians will already be familiar with the NSW Government Printing Office picture collection held at SLNSW. It is a remarkably diverse resource for nineteenth and twentieth century images of NSW, comprising 208,706 digital images and photographic copy negatives.<sup>14</sup> The collection grew from the production of the Guv’s photographic section, which from the 1860s provided visual documentation of the colony’s major events, public buildings, and labour activities.<sup>15</sup> In the twentieth century the Guv produced photographic records for the state departments of Main Roads, Agriculture, and the Tourist Bureau (among others), and later on the photographic briefs concentrated on cultural events and portraits of public servants.

One of the most intriguing aspects about the Guv’s collection is that their photographic section turned their lenses on themselves, so to speak, to record their own workplace. The sheer quantity of photographs, taken of and within the Guv, means that the available photographic trace of this workplace is extremely rich. In the photographs from the 1960s to the 1980s, print workers pose amid stacks of paper, heavy cast-iron presses, and electronic typesetting machines. Women in overalls stand facing printing equipment, and male compositors in collared shirts and shorts slouch over computer keyboards. Bookbinders wield hand tools, and compositors lean over pages of type laid out on imposition slabs. Men in suits, grinning, assemble next to boxy electronic equipment.



Needless to say, these images do not provide a direct window into ‘working life’ at the Guv. The nature and function of these photographs is various, and we cannot treat them as straightforward documentary evidence. Many photographs were produced for promotional or reporting purposes, such as annual reports or apprentice recruitment, and thus depict consciously posed scenarios. The intended audience was often the NSW Public Service, or potential apprentice recruits. The staged or constructed nature of certain photographs does not, however, discount their value as sources, particularly when combined with oral histories.

Institutional photographs also operate in a different way materially: the Government Printing Office collection is generally experienced not as a set of physical objects, but as digital images in an online catalogue, and so the material connection to the past is once removed, not something that can be tangibly ‘felt’ in one’s hands. While I used printed copies of the Guv’s photographs when interviewing participants, the print-outs themselves of course held no special object ‘aura’,<sup>16</sup> they were mere facsimiles, digitised institutional reproductions.

I approached this project with the understanding that – as with oral history – photographic meaning is contingent upon the contexts of interpretation that emerge during the interview, and afterwards, in the processes of visual analysis, presentation, and the writing of history. Photographic theory has established that meaning in historical photographs is not simply given, waiting to be discovered.<sup>17</sup> Rather, meaning is deeply contingent upon the ‘subject position’ of the viewer (who they are, what they know, where they come from), and the contexts of interpretation and presentation. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall has explored how in photographs (as with oral histories) meaning is produced on a number of levels, and in changes at different historical stages.<sup>18</sup> Put another way, the ‘decoding’ work undertaken by the viewer/reader is subject to their own background and experience, and the context in which the image appears.<sup>19</sup>

With this in mind, I acknowledge that the photograph selection process for this project was originally influenced by my existing research interests in the impact of technological change on the printing industry’s labour process. This meant that I initially looked for photographs of men involved in typesetting activities – whether it be on hot-metal typesetting machines or using computer typesetting equipment – because I guessed that the presentation of gender and skill in these images might provoke interesting discussions. The way that I ‘read’ these photographs was, of course, wholly different from the way that the interview participants interpreted them. Some participants were able to take on the position of ‘expert’, and appeared to enjoy the sense that their technical knowledge – of machinery that is long obsolete – could



Former Monotype caster Bob Day pretends to type on a Monotype keyboard, 1985. Captioned ‘Photos of printing machines for video presentation’ on the State Library of NSW online catalogue. Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Government Printing Office collection 4 #38079.

be of use once more. This is particularly apparent in the second example, which features an image of a man sitting at a Monotype machine.

## Existing Research

The intersection of oral history and photography is a discussion that was spurred on in 2011 by Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson’s edited collection of essays, *Oral History and Photography*.<sup>20</sup> Prior to Freund and Thomson’s publication, oral historians’ references to using photographs occurred haphazardly,<sup>21</sup> and the organised theoretical discussion about photographs in the oral history process was a notable gap in English-language oral history literature.<sup>22</sup> Oral history has come some distance since the early advice for oral historians to be wary of using photographs during interviews, as they could easily ‘generate false memories’<sup>23</sup> or kill the conversation entirely.<sup>24</sup>

Freund and Thomson observe that the intersection between oral history and photography is not a new phenomenon in practice.<sup>25</sup> The handling of photographs is without a doubt well integrated into the work of historians and oral historians alike.<sup>26</sup> While earlier studies tended to treat photographs as memory triggers in interviews, as ‘evidence’ to back up a verbal claim,<sup>27</sup> or simply as illustrations to accompany quotes,<sup>28</sup> the possibilities are more diverse and complex. It is well established that oral history is a process that produces and generates meaning on a number of levels: through the processes of listening and asking questions, through transcription, and finally, through quotation and dissemination.<sup>29</sup> The idea that oral history constitutes a co-construction of meaning, where interviewer and participant work together to produce historical meaning through conversation, is now well established in oral history literature.<sup>30</sup> The



matter that is still somewhat under-discussed, however, is the multiplicity of interpretive functions of historical photographs, when introduced into this context.

Judith Modell and Charlee Brodsky's 1994 *Envisioning Homestead* project is notable in this context, chiefly because they interpreted photographic material as being a major part of what the participants had to say.<sup>31</sup> In researching the community of Homestead, Pennsylvania, Modell and Brodsky brought along their own selection of photographs (from press images and community archives), and encouraged participants to provide some of their own personal images.<sup>32</sup> Like Modell and Brodsky, I did not want to use photographs only as reminders, or as simple 'illustrations' to stories.<sup>33</sup> Instead, the photographs became part of 'a conversation about the past', in a context wherein the interviewer and participant collectively examine the photographs, offering possible explanations, interpretations, and sharing ideas.<sup>34</sup> For Modell and Brodsky, their use of photographs helped these participants to put their experiences in a broader historical context, to 'make these points "history"'.<sup>35</sup> The use of photographs in oral history interviews can enable what Modell and Brodsky call a 're-viewing' of verbal history, and it can affirm the spoken word, sometimes adding specificity and confidence to the participants' recollections.<sup>36</sup>

As it turned out, in the case of the Guv, the use of photographs during the interview did not always place participants' experiences in context, or affirm existing institutional narratives. Rather, the conjunction of oral history interviews and institutional photographs sometimes destabilised established institutional accounts about the Guv, and opened up new avenues for understanding workers' relationships with their institution.

## The Interview Process

The oral history component of this project involved interviews with thirty former employees (twenty-four men and six women), between October 2011 and March 2013.<sup>37</sup> The participants were employed at the Guv between 1933 and 1989, and worked in a variety of positions and trades, including book-binding, hand and machine composition, computer typesetting, letterpress, lithography, graphic reproduction, proofreading, planning, despatch, and senior management. Participants were recruited through printing industry advertisements, social media, and word-of-mouth 'snowball' sampling.<sup>38</sup> The audio interviews took place at community centres, local libraries, RSL Clubs, and private homes in Sydney, the Blue Mountains, and the NSW Central Coast.

During the interviews I asked participants open questions about the Guv's culture of working life and about their recollections of technological change.

Although a focus on material culture is a key element of my research, participants were not guided too sharply in the direction of providing sensory recollections and discussions about objects and machinery, so as to not force observations.<sup>39</sup> The participants were aware that I came from the UTS School of Design, but my research focus was only explained in general terms, to avoid overly prescriptive responses (and to diminish the risk of interviewees trying to guess what I might want to hear, to the extent that this is possible).

To each interview I brought along a variety of photographs sampled from SLNSW's Government Printing Office photographic collection. The selection of photographs differed slightly with each interview, because my collection of images was enriched over time with further catalogue discoveries as my research progressed. This selection was broadly representative of the main sections at the Guv (bookbinding, printing machining, composition, document reproduction, management), and I included images of spaces within the factory building, close-up photographs of machinery, and images of leisure activities (such as netball on the roof and special events in the canteen).

In most cases, the photographs were shown to the interview participants towards the end of the interview session.<sup>40</sup> This was when most of my questions had been exhausted. Often, while we were consuming refreshments, the photographic browsing would begin, usually quite organically. I left the recorder on during this period, with the consent of the participants. Many participants began by scanning photographs for familiar faces, staying quiet until they recognised someone they knew. This sometimes meant that the end of the interview consisted of silences, or observations about the images that do not yield useful quotes, such as, 'Yep, I know him ... I know him ... I know him too.' This process required patience. Occasionally particular photographs had the effect of sparking a conversation, reminding the participants of something that had been forgotten, and that I would not have known to ask about. When this happened, the conversation could start up again. In this way, some photographs operated as direct mnemonic devices in the oral history process, as memory triggers.<sup>41</sup> But that is not what is compelling about the use of institutional images in this process.

The examples provided in the following two sections demonstrate a subtly different dynamic. While they remind us of the unpredictable mnemonic power of photographs, and how the presence of photographs in the interview process can enable different ways of talking about the past,<sup>42</sup> more interestingly, these examples demonstrate the awareness that participants had about how their institution sought to represent itself publicly. In response to this formal performance of institutional competency – as demonstrated in the images filling Annual Reports and apprentice

recruitment material – the workers responded playfully, with humour, irreverence, and creativity.

## ‘Typical, as they Say’

Consider the photograph ‘Alan Leishman pouring acid toner, 1962’. [Fig. 1] Alan commenced at the Guv in 1955 and was apprenticed in photo-etching and engraving. He worked in the photography and lithography sections at the Guv and became a senior manager, staying until the closure in 1989. The following excerpt is from an interview undertaken with another man, Graeme Murray, who was apprenticed in lithographic dot-etching and engraving in 1960. While Graeme refers to Figure 1 in the interview, the image was not actually present at the time. In this way, Graeme’s interview took on a visual sensibility, indicating the presence of institutional photographs within his memory of working life at the Guv. Graeme recalled:

We did all these posters ... it’s occupational health and safety, but it they never knew the word then. ... But Alan [Leishman] was in a situation where he was working with a lot of dangerous Nitric acid, all the time, and he was in an area there where they have massive baths where they put zinc plates in to be etched with this acid. But Alan used to have this dustcoat. Everyone had dustcoats ... and Alan’s one was particularly shredded because of the acid splashes over the years. ... But they had this poster going on, they wanted to show the safe way of handling acid. So they brought into our section the proper rubber gloves, up to the elbows, they brought in special aprons, they brought in goggles, hair thing, the whole lot. The photographers photographed him with all this gear on. As soon as they finished photographing him with all this gear on, they took all the gear back, and Alan went back to his dustcoat! Typical, as they say.<sup>43</sup>

As Graeme’s comment indicates, photographs had a strong presence in these interviews, even when they were not on the table. The quote also tells us about the production and use of one of these photographs, in its original context. This discussion also opened up an avenue where Graeme was able to talk about how the ‘official’ institutional version of events differed from his on-site knowledge of the Guv.

One month after interviewing Graeme, I interviewed Alan Leishman, and showed him the acid toner photograph. Seeing the image of himself in 1962, Alan immediately shifted to telling another (related) story:

Oh yes! That was the old acid! [laughs] We did have an interesting incident at Liverpool Street. When we were packing up to move

[to the new building], there was myself, and a chap called John Devrice. Previous to that, we used to get acid in earthenware jars. We were on the fifth floor, and as he walked around the corner it clipped one of the corners, and a full earthenware jar, [over a foot] high, and pure Nitric acid went everywhere! I grabbed him and threw him into a sink. ...

The interesting thing with that photograph is that a lot of that safety equipment was taken away immediately after they photographed it. They came and photographed it for health and safety and they took the equipment away. [laughs] We did get equipment after that, I must say.<sup>44</sup>

In this case the photograph functioned as a memory trigger, and Alan immediately recalls the workplace accidents that came with using hazardous materials. But more than that – Alan’s comments again remind us that the employees were fully conscious of the staged nature of institutional photographs, and they were knowing (and somewhat amused) participants in this production of institutional imagery. In other words, they were well aware of the gap between workplace practices and performed institutional representations.

Here we have moved from the use of a photograph as a memory trigger and an historical document, into territory that begins to examine the epistemic status of the image.<sup>45</sup> These two interviews opened up discussion about the circumstances in which the image appeared in the first place, and how its use evolved over time. Two decades later, in the mid-1980s, the apprentice Sandra Elizabeth Stringer joined the Photographic Reproduction section at the Guv. During her interview, Sandra glanced at Figure 1 and said, ‘That was actually an OH&S poster we used to have on the walls there.’<sup>46</sup>

The photograph of Alan Leishman pouring acid toner lived on – as a poster – for almost three decades at the Guv. Tellingly, Sandra also observed that although workplace safety equipment was most definitely available by the time she worked at the Guv, it was often inappropriate for female apprentices:

By the time I got there they were very good at providing things like protective clothing, and all that sort of thing. But one of our issues was ... they couldn’t get their head around the fact that women were a lot smaller in size to the males that worked there, so ... [laughs] often getting things like gloves that’d fit you. [...] I used to have a big problem because the gloves’d be really huge on me, and I’d end up with more stuff inside the gloves than what I would on the outside!<sup>47</sup>

Again, this is an instance where an interview participant positions their experience and their narrative as somewhat separate from the official institutional

narrative. There is tolerance and affection in Sandra's accounts of the Guv, but also an admission that the institution was somewhat flawed and deficient.

## Man at a Monotype

Throughout this project it has become apparent that the captions provided by the SLNSW online catalogue are often quite limited.<sup>48</sup> For example, specific images are titled with the generic term 'machines' rather than describing particularities. Oral history interviews have enabled me to add a great deal of information to these captions, although this must be attempted with caution.

Early in my research I had come across a photograph depicting a seated man, captured in profile, who appears to be operating a hot-metal typesetting machine. [Fig. 2] Initial assumptions about this image might easily be that it was a scene of a compositor at work. The image is dated 1985. The date itself is of historical interest: for a worker to be operating Monotype or Linotype machines in a large factory context in 1985 was unusual, as this hot-metal typesetting technology was well on the way to obsolescence at this stage. On the SLNSW online catalogue the image is simply captioned, 'Photos of printing machines for video presentation'. This caption suggests that the image was produced for some sort of official presentation purpose, but, as with the image itself, we cannot wholly trust the caption, and must work harder to critically interrogate the available visual, spoken, and textual sources.

After a number of oral history interviews in which this photograph was shared, it became clear that this was a Monotype keyboard, that the man posed with the machine was not a Monotype keyboarder, and that he was not properly operating the machine. Former compositor Rudi Kolbach considered the image, and he could tell by the man's posture that something wasn't right. There are two stages to Rudi's interpretation. Recognition, with a statement, then a closer look:

Yep. Still workin' on the Monotype keyboard. Well, [long pause] they didn't sit that far away, and they don't have a copy there, and they never, ever looked at the keyboard, because they learned to touch type, without any need to look there.<sup>49</sup>

As Rudi notes, there was no copy present from which to type.

Former Monotype operator Lindsay Somerville had a similar response, but he also indicated his embodied knowledge of the practice of Monotype setting.

Oh, there's a Monotype, yeah. That was the old thing. ... No copy in there – he's not working! He hasn't got any copy on the board! And ... ahh ahh ... that hose doesn't look like it's connected

anyway. So ... he wouldn't be setting like that. Look at it. He's too far back. Look at his back, he'd kill himself. You had to sit with your legs apart, to get close enough. Then you had to swing it around, to use the bold and italics, and so on.<sup>50</sup>

There is great pleasure in Lindsay's conversation, pleasure in being able to 'read' this photograph expertly enough to be able to swiftly ascertain that the photograph was in some way staged.

Another interview participant was able to identify the man pictured. Former Linotype operator Bob Law's response adds detail in describing to the character of the man pictured:

There's Bobby Day! This man was a Monocaster. Bob Day. He passed away. He wasn't a Monotype operator. That was a posed photo. He was a real character, he'd walk around ... he'd just had a haircut, and everyone was really bagging him about his shocking haircut, and he'd walk around and say, 'I went to the Barber's yesterday, and I said, "Make me like a fighter!"' 'Cos all boxers in those days used to have real basin cuts. He was a funny bloke. But he's long gone, too.<sup>51</sup>

The man sitting at the Monotype keyboard – Bob Day – was not indentured as a Monotype keyboard operator; he operated a hot-metal Monotype caster machine in the room next door at the Guv (a caster was a large machine for producing individual metal letters from rolls of punched tape).

Linotype operator Geoffrey Hawes confirmed this identification:

Bobby Day! That guy sittin' at that keyboard would not know anything about it! He was a mono caster operator, and they've got a photo of him sittin' at a machine! He wouldn't know a thing about it.<sup>52</sup>

There is a hint of ruffled feathers in Geoffrey's response. The fact that he specifically mentions Bob Day's trade (Monotype casting) is significant. Geoffrey emphasises that Bob would have had no knowledge of how to use this machine, he was *pretending* to be a Monotype keyboarder. Monotype keyboarding was traditionally seen as a higher status printing trade than the casters,<sup>53</sup> and in normal circumstances demarcation rules set by the Printing and Kindred Industries Union would have strictly prevented Bob Day from even touching a Monotype keyboard.

We have discovered that this image was posed – and it depicts a scenario that is not a scene of 'actual' work at the Guv. But this should not be perceived as a problem, and it does not lessen the photograph's historical value

as a source. When brought into an interview context, this photograph discloses a moment of play, once a manual trade had disappeared. It also brings to light an aspect of the trade demarcation rules of this period in the printing industry. The fact this man is pretending to operate this machine is not merely silly, it would have been a significant industrial transgression, had the photograph been taken one year before, in 1984.

Why do the years matter? Archival research confirms that the Monotype room at the Guv finally closed down in April 1984.<sup>54</sup> By 1985 – the date ascribed to this image – the Monotype keyboards were no longer in place in the old Monotype room on the fourth floor. Instead, the machines were taking up space elsewhere at the Guv, waiting to be discarded, as redundant machines. Bob Day is not performing everyday work at the Guv, he is posing at a recently historicised object, a *new* relic. The act of posing with this relic and recording the act shows a playful, but also respectful, acknowledgement of the dramatic transitions facing the printing industry.

There was one major problem in interpreting this photograph: everything was blurry. In fact, image quality of almost all of the Government Printing Office images on the SLNSW online catalogue is extremely poor. There are historical reasons for this. From the 1960s to 1986, the Guv's glass-plate and film negatives were stored in the basement of the Ultimo building, in problematic conditions for the safe preservation of negatives.<sup>55</sup> In 1986 the Guv was awarded a Bicentennial grant to conserve its collection, and the negatives were subsequently copied and transferred to videodisc. In the mid-1990s SLNSW digitised the videodisc images, not the copy-negatives, which resulted in low-resolution images online. While this might seem a menial detail of collection digitisation, it has real effects for historical study. The fuzziness of these images produces a sense of interpretive distance, as if gazing at the past through layers of cellophane. Upon request, SLNSW can re-scan the copy negatives in high-resolution, and being able to access high-resolution images has allowed details to come to the fore – a vital process for close visual analysis.<sup>56</sup>

Once I was able to access a high-resolution version of Figure 2, a few details became clear. In the background the photograph, a number of large machines (most likely Monotype casting equipment) are swathed in drop-sheets. To the right in the middle ground, a sign reads:

'Goodbye, Farewell and Amen: M \* O \* N \* O.'<sup>57</sup> Therefore, far from being an image of a man at work, typing at a Monotype machine, this image is a spirited but memorialising tribute to an out-dated technology, a lost trade, and an outmoded skill set. The machines that Bob Day would have mastered are in fact visible in this photograph; they are (probably) underneath

the funereal drop-sheets in the background. When coping with large institutions in the midst of a major transition and technological change, employees can be remarkably good at expressing humour, giving some solace in a world of bureaucratic madness.

## Conclusion

An exploration of the connections between these two types of sources should occur in a manner that is constantly aware of the socially shaped nature of both photographs and oral testimony, and the role of the historian is to carefully assess the way in which these sources coalesce. The spoken word can open up visual possibilities, and the use of photographs (in the interview, and in the interpretive stages that follow) opens up potential for new ways of speaking about the past. The Guv offers a particularly rich example of this, partly because we have the privilege of access to a large and diverse photographic collection held at SLNSW, and because many former employees of the Guv are still alive to tell their stories.

These playful or absurd actions – such as Bob Day's memorialising performance at being a Monotype operator, or Alan Leishman's obliging charade demonstrating the supposedly correct use of protective equipment – have become embedded in the historical archive. Without the interview content, these photographs are but two of 4000 or more images of people at work at the Guv. Once just a few of these photographs are introduced into oral history interviews, new stories emerge, and we are reminded of the ways in which memory, history, and visual culture are deeply intertwined.<sup>58</sup>

The convergence of oral histories and institutional photographs can produce a productive slippage, or a gap, between what is said and what is pictured. It is precisely because these sources do not match up neatly that makes the stories and the images so compelling. This illuminating gap hints at the complexity of human labour experience, and begins to disclose the relationship that workers had with their institution. It provides insight into how people coped with the challenges and bureaucratic rituals that characterised this particular public service factory, through irreverence, humour, and through a tolerance of the rather human flaws inherent in bureaucratic process.



## (Endnotes)

- 1 Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (eds), *Oral History and Photography*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2011, p. 7.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 1.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 7. Freund and Thomson do not offer an explanation for this emphasis on family and personal photographs in oral history practice, except to say that they believe this 'is intrinsic to current oral history practice.'
- 4 This colloquial nickname for the Printing Office was also found in Government Printing Office *Staff Journals*, sometimes spelled 'the Gov.'
- 5 Although, as Alexander Freund and Angela Thiessen have noted, getting participants to respond to family photographs is not a straightforward matter either, and some family photographs are not 'used' by participants to make meaning in their lives. See Freund and Angela Thiessen, 'Mary Brockmeyer's wedding picture: Exploring the intersection of photographs and oral history interviews,' in *Oral History and Photography*, pp. 30-31.
- 6 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, London and New York, 1979 [1973], p. 156.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 21.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 9 With the photographs from the Guv, however, participants were sometimes unfamiliar with the images (or had not seen them for many years) and many were delighted by the experience of seeing so many photographs of their former workplace gathered together. Printed and digital copies of particular photographs were shared with interview participants, when requested.
- 10 The Guv was closed down by the NSW Government in 1989.
- 11 Alan Marshall, *Changing the Word: The Printing Industry in Transition*, Comedia, London, 1983, pp. vi-9.
- 12 Rob Dunn, Ray Hester, and Andrew Readman, 'From letterpress to offset lithography,' in *Print and Electronic Text Convergence*, Bill Cope and Diana Kalantzis (eds), Common Ground Publishing, Champaign, Illinois, 2001, p. 83; Frances Robertson, *Print Culture: From Steam Press to Ebook*, Routledge, London and New York, 2013, pp. 112-14.
- 13 Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change*, Pluto Press, London, 1983, pp. 61-95.
- 14 NSW Government Printing Office, *Priceless Pictures from the Remarkable NSW Government Printing Office Collection 1870-1950*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1988, pp. 6-8. See also SLNSW's current information on the Government Printing Office picture collection: <<http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemdetailpaged.aspx?itemid=153687>>
- 15 *ibid.*, pp. 6-7. The collection also benefited from donations of images, notably from the *Star* newspaper.
- 16 Walter Benjamin, 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,' in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 1968 [1935].
- 17 Susan Buck-Morss, 'Visual studies and global imagination,' *Papers of Surrealism*, vol. 2, 2004, pp. 1-29, online <[http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal2/acrobat\\_files/buck\\_morss\\_article.pdf](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal2/acrobat_files/buck_morss_article.pdf)>; Allan Sekula, 'On the invention of photographic meaning,' in Vicki Goldberg (ed.), *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1988 [1975], pp. 452-54; Derrick Price and Liz Wells, 'Thinking about photography: Debates, historically and now,' in Wells (ed.), *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2000, pp. 9-64; Jennifer Tucker with Tina Camp, 'Entwined practices: Engagements with photography in historical enquiry,' *History and Theory*, vol. 48, December 2009, pp. 1-8; Stuart Hall (ed.), 'The work of representation,' in *Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Sage, London, 1997, pp. 13-74; Anandi Ramamurthy, 'Constructions of illusion: Photography and commodity culture,' in Wells *op.cit.*, pp. 165-214.
- 18 Hall, *op.cit.*, pp. 3-4.
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 *ibid.*
- 21 Freund and Thomson (*op.cit.*) provide a thorough list of oral history publications that refer to the use of photographs, pp. 19-23.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 3; Beth M. Robertson, 'Book review: Oral History and Photography,' *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 34, 2012, p. 78.
- 23 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, second edn, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1978, p. 134.
- 24 Historian Edward Stokes advised interviewers against the use of photographs during the interview process, citing one example where the method was unsuccessful. Stokes, 'United we stand: A synthesis of oral and pictorial history,' *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 5, 1982, p. 55.
- 25 Freund and Thomson, *op.cit.*, p. 2.
- 26 *ibid.*
- 27 *ibid.*
- 28 For example: Paula Hamilton, *Cracking Awaba: Stories of Mosman and the Northern Beaches community during the Depression*, SHOROC Council Libraries, Sydney, 2005; Margaret Park, *Doors Were Always Open: Recollections of Pyrmont and Ultimo*, City West Development Corporation, Sydney, 1997.
- 29 Katherine Borland, 'That's not what I said: Interpretive conflict in oral narrative research,' in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, Routledge, London & New York, 2nd edn, 2006, pp. 310-21; Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré, 'Positioning: The discursive production of selves,' *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1990, pp. 43-63; Paula Hamilton, 'The knife edge: Debates about memory and history,' in Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, p. 15; Siobhán McHugh, 'The aerobic art of interviewing,' *AsiaPacific MediaEducator*, vol. 18, December 2007, pp. 147-54; John Murphy, 'The voice of memory: History, autobiography and oral memory,' *Historical Studies*, vol. 22, no. 87, 1986, pp. 155-75; Arlene Oak, 'Particularising the past: Persuasion and value in oral history interviews and design critiques,' *Journal of Design History*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2006, pp. 345-56; Howard E Sypher, Mary Lee Hummert & Sheryl L. Williams, 'Social psychological aspects of the oral history interview,' in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, Eva M McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers (eds), Lawrence Erlbaum & Assoc., Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1994, pp. 47-62.
- 30 Perks and Thomson, *op.cit.*, p. 118.



- 31 Judith Modell and Charlee Brodsky, 'Envisioning Homestead: Using photographs in interviewing', in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, Eva M Macmahan & Kim Lacy Rogers (eds), Erlbaum, Hillsdale New Jersey, 1994, pp. 141-61.
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 143.
- 33 *ibid.*, p. 142.
- 34 *ibid.*, p. 145.
- 35 *ibid.*, p. 159.
- 36 *ibid.*, p. 145.
- 37 This project was approved by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee #2011-285A.
- 38 Participants contacted former colleagues, and soon I was receiving phone calls and emails from up to sixty former employees of the Guv who were interested in finding out more about the project. Some participants found out about this research project through the blog, *Penultimo* (a blog about the Sydney suburb of Ultimo), written by the author between 2010 and 2012. <<http://penultimo.tumblr.com>> and through the author's photograph research process blog, *Picturing the Guv*: <<http://nswgovernmentprintingoffice.tumblr.com>>.
- 39 For discussions of the careful handling of material culture in oral history, see Linda Sandino, 'Oral histories and design: Objects and subjects', *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 4, 2006, pp. 275-82; Janis Wilton, 'Telling objects: Material culture and memory in oral history interviews', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 30, 2008, pp. 41-49.
- 40 Judy McKinty and Margaret Tomkins had a similar but subtly different strategy when engaging in an oral history project related to the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB). In their interviews, photographs were presented *before* the formal interview process, with a variety of results. McKinty and Tomkins, 'From the cradle to the grave: Sister Lindsey and the blind babies' nursery', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 34, 2012, pp. 27-31.
- 41 Freund and Thomson, *op.cit.*, p. 4; Hugo Slim, Paul Thompson, with Olivia Bennett and Nigel Cross, 'Ways of listening', in *The Oral History Reader*, pp. 148-49.
- 42 Freund and Thomson, *op.cit.*, pp. 5-6.
- 43 Graeme Murray, interview with the author, 9 September 2011, tape held by the author.
- 44 Alan Leishman, interview with the author, 28 October 2011, tape held by the author.
- 45 Freund and Thomson, *op.cit.*, p. 3. Recent oral history literature that involves interviews with photographers also covers this territory, albeit in a different way. Howard Bossen and Eric Freedman write about the way in which steel and industrialisation has been pictured in the past, and they conducted oral history interviews with both steelworkers and the photographers who depicted them. See Bossen and Freedman, "'Molten light: The intertwined history of steel and photography": The roles of oral histories and other first-person,' *Oral History Review*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-14.
- 46 Sandra Elizabeth Stringer, interview with the author, 17 October 2012. 'OH&S' refers to 'Occupational health and safety', tape held by author.
- 47 *ibid.*
- 48 Oral history interviews indicate that this photographic collection was thoroughly indexed by staff at the Guv in the 1980s. Unfortunately these indexes are disconnected from the online image collection.
- 49 Rudi Kolbach, interview with the author, 12 December 2011, tape held by author.
- 50 Lindsay Somerville, interview with the author, 15 December 2011, tape held by author.
- 51 Bob Law, interview with the author, 27 February 2012, tape held by author.
- 52 Geoff Hawes, interview with the author, 16 February 2012, tape held by author.
- 53 Cockburn, *op.cit.*, pp. 44, 52-53.
- 54 *Government Printing Office Staff Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, April 1984.
- 55 The original glass-plate negatives are now held with NSW State Records. After 1989 the copy-negatives and videodiscs were transferred to SLNSW. See *Priceless Pictures*, *op.cit.*, p. 6.
- 56 The SLNSW charges for rescanning the negatives. I am funded only by an Australian Postgraduate Award; this has limited my access to high-resolution images.
- 57 The April 1984 *Staff Journal* (cited above) also made reference to the TV series *MASH* in the 'M\*O\*N\*O' title.
- 58 Tucker (with Campt), *op.cit.*, p. 3.

# **‘My brain is playing up with me:’ reminiscing the home front: memory, story and fading scripts**

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**[This paper has been peer-reviewed]**

## **Abstract**

The seventy-first anniversary of the bombing of Darwin revived debate over the manipulation of public memory. For decades few Australians knew the full story of Japan’s startling attack on homeland soil in 1942. Wartime censorship worked swiftly to prevent an aggressive reality from sparking immediate national panic, but a continued suppression of information in post-war years would serve to diminish public memory, rendering the episode largely unknown in Australia’s history. This paper explores the influence of wartime public narrative on one woman’s reminiscence through the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. Further, it examines the admix of elder-memory decline, and how both individual and public memory-schemas drawn from the war era are distilled to form essential narrative scripts. These scripts in turn become anchor-points of meaning for a drifting self-identity. With an overarching emphasis on narrative practice in oral history, the paper traces themes, blended scripts, and telling-strategies employed in the negotiation of an identity compromised by fading recollection and official information.

## **Introduction**

Stories of Australian home front life during the Second World War have an absorbing appeal. The impression given is often one of grand adventure and the sense of pulling together in extraordinary times. Men, women and children were roused to shoulder wartime tasks and deprivations with unanimity and a spirit of commitment. Prescribed modes of thinking - the concepts of sacrifice and social unity, common-purpose against a demonised enemy, and acceptance of ‘durational’ roles - were the basis of government propaganda, and official manipulation of information ensured the nation’s unquestioning compliance. Manpower shortage compelled the formation of the Women’s Auxiliary Services launching 1940s women into a new realm of responsibility and social consciousness. It was the proud pioneering quality of women’s endeavours on the home front that held for me a strong attraction, and I felt that these lives set amid

the exigencies of war presented an evocative context for my research into memory and autobiographical narrative. The ever-diminishing number of Australians with firsthand knowledge of the war impressed upon me the need to capture and value their memories before they were lost. Thus with an opportunity to record the wartime memories of three ex-army servicewomen, I set out to explore the arrangement and delivery of life narratives, and chart the ways in which elder-storytelling fashioned a sense of self. The women in turn, had an opportunity to recall what was for them, a formative and by all accounts exciting time in their lives. Nonetheless, my collaboration with one of the women delivered an unanticipated twist, one which raised for me a number of questions about identity, and one where I was left to consider the influence of ‘official memory’ over individual recall. This paper then digresses from the women’s narratives as-a-whole to concentrate on two areas: to trace a theory of public memory of wartime Darwin as it progressed from seeming amnesia to recent recovery; and to consider private memory as it engages with official scripts and silences.

My inquiry into memory and narrative developed new meaning during the first interview. I had known ‘Jenny,’<sup>1</sup> a close relative, all of my life and was well-acquainted with her life history and reminiscences of war-era Brisbane. Along with her two friends, all members of the same ex-servicewomen’s association branch, Jenny had agreed to an oral history interview to record some of the delightful stories she had told her family-circle over the years – stories of her role in the women’s army and tales of young adult life during the war. Jenny, like the other women, was interviewed over cups of tea in her home surrounded by an assortment of photos, army payslips and wartime mementos. I had hoped my use of open-ended questions might encourage her free expression and perhaps open a path to unanticipated findings which might reveal links between memory and narrative. But here the first interview took a different shape. At the age of 89, Jenny complained of memory problems; initially displaying a lack of confidence in the process of remembering and periodically commenting her memory was ‘playing

up.’ Concerned I may have overly hijacked the interview with questions, and reminded of Anderson and Jack’s caution against data-gathering in favour of a nurturing-interface,<sup>2</sup> the opportunity for a second interview a few weeks later afforded some interesting comparative observations. The unplanned nature of the ensuing interview freed her to reminisce with more autonomy, producing the same stories as the first, but without the vagaries of uncertainty they had possessed. It would seem recalling her army experience in the first interview helped consolidate fuzzy memories into more confident scripts for the second.

Yet, Jenny’s initial insecurity over her memory set a tone for the interviews that had some bearing on my questions and reflections. Having prior knowledge of her life experiences I was careful not to influence her storytelling, but I did steer questions to areas of relevance in the hope of eliciting some of her favourite anecdotes. Indeed she did recount her regular tales, although, while I was unaware of any diagnosis of memory loss, I was surprised by what seemed a gradual alteration of some stories, and subtle changes in the way they were delivered. I began to wonder if the vulnerability of being asked about an indistinctly remembered life might cause her to control the arrangement of these stories, and thereby control the type of identity she wanted to convey to others. Although only self-confessed, her memory problems appeared to disrupt her stories’ chronology in favour of themes and cyclic repetition; public and private memories seemed to meld through well-worn verbal scripts to create new meaning.

The most obvious example of a melded story and what could plausibly result from official rhetoric on long-term memory became clear as she recounted the story of her husband’s hospitalisation in Darwin. As I will show later: her oft-repeated anecdote about unpalatable food in the women’s army, metamorphosed into her husband’s hospitalisation in Darwin ‘from malnutrition’ – because ‘the food was awful.’ In reality he had been hospitalised suffering a stroke from a bomb-blast injury during raids on Darwin, an affliction that would reoccur some years later and hasten his early death. The government’s failure to acknowledge the service personnel who defended Darwin<sup>3</sup> – frequently labelled Australia’s ‘forgotten’ theatre of war<sup>4</sup> – meant Jenny’s husband would receive no repatriation pension, thus consigning their family to years of financial hardship. It was not until 1994 that Darwin veterans finally received a medal of acknowledgment, fifteen years after his death.

In light of her life since, listening to Jenny I couldn’t help but wonder if the ‘silencing’<sup>5</sup> of the bombing of Darwin by the government of the day had correspondingly erased the event’s consequence from her long-term memory. Lacking a ‘flashbulb memory’<sup>6</sup> of the attack – a sanctioned mental-snapshot

– I wondered if her memory schema for her husband’s war service had altered over time to accommodate the officially-adjusted schema for Darwin, rendering her passively compliant with official-speak and abstracted from the episode’s significance and lived legacy. There seemed to be a type of inversed congruence between Jenny’s present-day private memory of ‘forgetting’ and the government’s present-day public memory of ‘remembering.’ I wondered too how the public/private, remembering/forgetting dichotomies might reflect identity at both a national and a personal level.

I will return to Jenny later. My analysis however does not seek to diminish the otherwise engaging tales of a valued elder, least of all diagnose a pathological condition; instead I merely offer an understanding of her present-day self. But before looking into Jenny’s stories, first I will sketch the bombing of Darwin and relay a theory as to the historiography of its commemoration. Thereafter I will consider aspects of memory and their links to identity.

## **Forgotten and Re-remembered: Darwin and Identity**

In the aftermath of the seventy-first anniversary of the bombing of Darwin and Prime Minister Gillard’s announcement in October 2011 that February 19 would be deemed a National Day of Observance, it is helpful to consider some of the dynamics at play in the dialectic of remembering and forgetting that has come to exemplify the commemoration of the first enemy attack on Australian soil.

The veil of secrecy over Darwin’s bombing would have a lasting effect on the national consciousness. Commemoratively over the next fifty years Darwin appears to have been forgotten.<sup>7</sup> In the schooling of two generations it appears to have been ‘airbrushed ... from the history books.’<sup>8</sup> Yet the bombing of Darwin remains the largest attack on the Australian continent by a foreign power since the British invasion in 1788. In terms of military significance the bombing of 19 February 1942 was immense, surpassing in magnitude the assault on Pearl Harbour two months earlier. Two hundred and forty two enemy aircraft dropped 683 bombs in two waves across the town and its harbour, its wharf and airfields, destroying major infrastructure and producing the largest death-toll of any one event on Australian soil. Peter Grose puts the toll between 300 and 320 people, although some estimates have ranged between 200 and upwards of 1000.<sup>9</sup> Bombing raids on Darwin would continue over a period of twenty-one months until November 1943, and yet such was the paucity of news coverage, until recently few Australians were aware the northern towns of Australia had been subject to a total of ninety-seven enemy attacks.<sup>10</sup> In comparison with the American



Release a man. Join the AWAS, McCowan, Ian, 1941-1945, lithograph, 61x48.3 cm. AWM ARTV01049

government's candid reportage of Pearl Harbour and the Western world's recognition of its magnitude still today, the bombing of Darwin would indeed appear to have been 'forgotten' in the post-war era.<sup>11</sup>

Commemorative ceremonies marking anniversaries of the Second World War have proliferated in recent decades world-wide, awakening in many countries a rise in national consciousness. The commemorative era has coincided with a transnational boom in Memory Studies since the 1980s, where debates over war-memory have received considerable attention. Debate has centred on questions of agency, on who determines the narrative of war and how it is told.<sup>12</sup> As Elizabeth Rechiwieski argues, attention to the politics of remembering has far outweighed scholarly consideration of the role of forgetting in the construction of collective memory.<sup>13</sup> Yet she counsels against assuming 'that forgetting is simply the passive obverse of remembering' and inverts Timothy Ashplant's claim that there are 'agencies of remembrance', to emphasize equally that there are agents of forgetting (most notably governments) orchestrating the composition of war-memory narratives.<sup>14</sup>

In her paper 'Forgetting and Remembering the Darwin Bombings'<sup>15</sup> Rechiwieski sets out a convincing case as to the motives behind the event's adjusted historiography. The Bombing of Darwin Day has advanced from a little known and seemingly hushed-up 'day of shame,' to its current elevation as a 'day of remembrance.'

The synthesis of this evolutionary process Rechiwieski suggests, lies in the nation's continuing obsession with national identity.<sup>16</sup> In her words she sought to 'identify what has had to be forgotten in order to remember the Darwin bombings' in a way that contributes to a sense of national pride.<sup>17</sup> Clearly war holds a revered place in Australia's official narrative and people attune themselves to shifts in its portrayal. From Charles Bean's narrative of nationhood born out of the Great War and manifest in the Anzac legend,<sup>18</sup> definitions of 'who we are' have been forged through sanctioned commemorations of war. But to speak of remembering episodes of war is already to speak of forgetting. Forgetting happens for different reasons, but it also occurs in varying intensities.

Paul Connerton's inquiry into 'Seven Types of Forgetting' transfers forgetting to the forefront as an active rather than a passive counterpoint to remembering, and suggests it need not always be considered a failing, as for example, where it may contribute to the formation of a new identity.<sup>19</sup> Rechiwieski classifies some of the 'types' into a scale of intensity ranging from the malign types of 'repressive erasure' indicative of totalitarianism, to the more benign 'strategic forgetting' used in matters of international diplomacy, or that used in school curricula to smooth over 'difficult pasts'. She notes here, once events pass from living memory, governments as agents of memory hold the key to intergenerational forgetting (remembering) through children's education and commemorative activities. Just why the bombing of Darwin should have been 'strategically forgotten' across two generations she suggests therefore, might be found in Connerton's seventh type of forgetting – "humiliated silence" brought on by collective shame.<sup>20</sup>

While the bombing of Darwin was reported immediately in the southern press, precise details of damage and loss were not known. The Melbourne *Herald* the following day reported, '15 killed, 24 hurt in Darwin.'<sup>21</sup> A truer estimate of 243 deaths was not released for many weeks, well after it was no longer front page news.<sup>22</sup> The dilution of the intensity of the raids by Prime Minister Curtin was to forestall national panic and mask from the enemy the success of the bombings.<sup>23</sup> Yet as Rechiwieski indicates, more conceivably it was to mask revelations of military and administrative incompetence.<sup>24</sup> The enemy attack exposed an acute lack of preparedness: a lack of civilian defence due to bureaucratic discord; a lack of planned civilian evacuation; general confusion over the correct chain-of-command; shambolic troop-dispersal through counter-commands prompting accusations of desertion – 278 servicemen were still missing three days after the attack; and 'appropriation of property' – whether that be outright looting or the legitimate feeding and re-equipping of service personnel remains in contention.<sup>25</sup> Given that evidence of such a debacle could seriously

undermine confidence in the military at a crucial phase in the nation's history, the dampening-down of events might well be understood. But by applying carefully 'sanitised' references to the bombing, the Prime Minister employed a counter-strategy to deflect embarrassment and to marshal greater patriotic involvement in the war-effort.<sup>26</sup> On 20 February Curtin said, 'It will be a source of pride to the public to know that the armed forces and civilians conducted themselves with the gallantry that was traditional in people of British stock.'<sup>27</sup> Thus Darwin's story at this juncture had been shaped through 'strategic forgetting' and utilised 'in a way that contribute[d] to national pride' – albeit tied to Empire.

Yet despite carefully crafted propaganda, the post-war memory of Darwin's bombings would come to be associated with panic and dishonor. The veil of camouflage would be lifted enough, following Justice Lowes' long-awaited report to parliament in 1945, for the press to finally print some details of events. Tinged with shame,<sup>28</sup> Darwin would subsequently become an awkward memory to integrate into a national narrative, and without commemoration it would lie submerged in the national consciousness for decades to come. The 'humiliated silence' would only begin to lift as the war generation – those with direct memory of Darwin – was beginning to pass away.<sup>29</sup>

Public interest in the bombing of Darwin accelerated in line with what some regard as 'increasing militarisation of Australian history.'<sup>30</sup> Successive governments have given varying ideological significance and commemorative weight to different theatres of war, while calibrating history and defining Australian identity in light of its own values. A combination of local promotion of Darwin's war heritage, growing interest in war tourism, and the current focus on US/Australian military cooperation in the Pacific region, has seen expression in a range of commemorative initiatives in recent years, culminating in 2012's National Day of Observance.<sup>31</sup> Finally receiving recognition, Darwin's present-day narrative emphasizes the nation's courageous, improvised defence in a battle against overwhelming odds.<sup>32</sup> Arriving at this juncture in its historiography Elizabeth Rechiewski suggests, 'has been a gradual, even programmed, forgetting of the less glorious aspects' in order to again 'remember the Darwin Bombings in a way that contributes to national pride.'<sup>33</sup>

## Faded Memory and Identity

In his paper 'In Search of a Theory of Public Memory' Brian F. Havel makes the observation that while official memory may serve the interests of social control, the consecrated claims in the dominant narrative about a nation's past provide contextual grounding for



'Jenny' left, as an AWAS driver. Photo published in the Women's Weekly circa 1942. Interviewee's personal collection.

individual lives. He suggests individual memory operates with some analogy to that of official memory. The past is not a projection of events on a screen, but is itself a creative, constructed process.<sup>34</sup> Just as official memory serves the current identity-purposes of a nation, so individual recollections of our past reflect the present concerns of our lives, including our construction of self. In short, 'We remember ourselves in the past *as we are now*.'<sup>35</sup>

Explaining the distortionary potential of recall, Havel speaks of the way personal memory 'cannibalizes itself' to the point where we only remember the memory of a prior memory's reconstruction. Consequently, it is the *construct* we engage when we attempt recall, not the event itself.<sup>36</sup> Where there are gaps in memory, we apply 'story fillers' of plausible events that we believe must have happened. These reconstructed memories are then influenced by 'schemas' of similar or often repeated activities, which in turn become organisational summaries in the recall of an event's details.<sup>37</sup> Ulric Neisser termed the blending together of details from similar events, 'repisodic memory', where an episode 'represents a repetition' – one which may be essentially correct but not literally faithful to the specific occasion.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps for this reason Graham Dawson labels the telling of life-stories 'composure,' although he suggests the term has a double meaning: firstly in the cultural sense where we construct narratives of ourselves, and secondly in the psychic sense where 'subjective composure' is achieved by placing ourselves comfortably within the social world.<sup>39</sup>

Returning once again to Jenny's stories – it stands to reason given memory's continuous revision and identity's need for composure that the potential for inaccuracy is immense. Certainly my interview





'Jenny' fifth row from the front Victory Parade 15 September 1945. Interviewee's personal collection.

objective was not historical accuracy but rather, the significance that stories held for their narrators' concepts of self. My interest was in 'meaning-making' or Alessandro Portelli's epiphanous discovery that memory's sheer fallibility might well be an interpretive resource.<sup>40</sup> I had expected oral histories based on servicewomen's stories of the Second World War would elicit an array of themes, and narrative styles in which to explore the identities of a fast-diminishing generation of Australians. My interpretative emphasis therefore was on narrative, on the storied plots of memory, their themes, genres and structures, and the strategies employed in their telling.

It appeared the gradual paring down and re-composition of stories had distilled for Jenny a supply of stock-memories of the war-era, enough at least for her to maintain present-day 'composure'. Indeed at the age of 89, Jenny's reminiscences of her time in the Australian Women's Army Service (AWAS) exude a sense of pride and shed light on what appears to be formative years in her psychological terrain.<sup>41</sup> Daniel L. Schacter discusses how elderly adults present with an increased tendency toward reminiscences of their late adolescence to early adulthood – a time span researchers call the 'reminiscence bump'.<sup>42</sup> The experiences of one's youth – beginning a career, entering into marriage, or in the case of the 1940s, enlisting in the war effort – often become the defining narratives that shape identity and form the nucleus of a life story.

Perhaps perceiving a certain expectation on my part, Jenny's stories appeared to follow 'patterns of expectancy' or what Elizabeth Tonkin explains are 'the products of canons of appropriateness and rhetorical stereotypes'.<sup>43</sup> She relayed her memories through

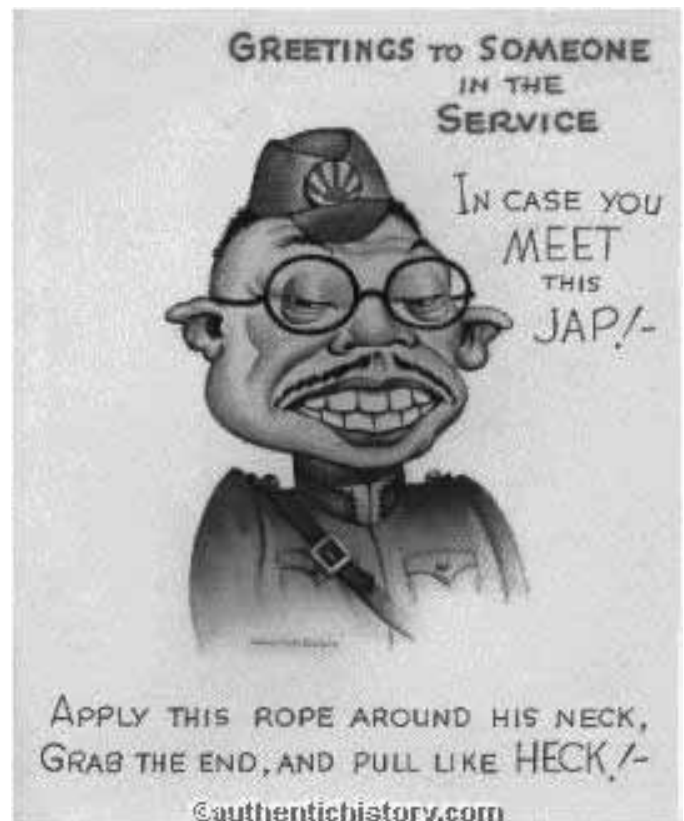
gendered narratives that borrowed from popular, cultural and official influences, while having limited engagement with military or political events. The stories emphasised day to day life and, similar to Kate Darian-Smith's findings on the Melbourne home front, could be separated into the narrative genres of romance and adventure.<sup>44</sup> Her enlistment in the AWAS in Brisbane in 1941 became an antidote for loneliness. Finding herself alone following the death of her parents, the enlistment of her brother in the air-force and the posting of her sweetheart, Malcolm, to active duty, provided the emotional stimulus for a romantic tale of enforced separation, a longing to reunite, and a 'keeping true' against a background of looming danger. Yet her memories of acquiring new skills in the army – her technical studies and learning to drive – together with the fun of barrack life and the camaraderie of new friends recalled stories of adventure. The adventure-narrative becomes tinged with Hollywood-inspired glamour in her encounters with seductively suave Americans in uniform. By evoking popular wartime representations such as, 'They knew how to do things nicely and ... had beautifully, immaculate uniforms. They could get their hands on stockings ... you couldn't get stockings during the war'<sup>45</sup>; she fulfilled perceived 'expectancy.'

Yet it was Jenny's narrative construction and self-reflexive comments that captured my attention. Given Jenny's age and accumulation of experiences, memory gaps and overlaps might be expected, but any emphasis on remembering beyond 'stock memories' exposed in her a degree of self-conscious uncertainty I had not detected before. Comments such as 'Betty would probably remember – her memory's not as bad as mine'<sup>46</sup> expressed a theme that seemed to stamp her

current identity. A summary of Jenny's interviews gives a general impression of her personality from the tenor of her stories. Presenting as a quirky individualist characterised by eclectic experiences, story segments were arranged episodically rather than temporally and assumed a fragmentary configuration. While these idiosyncratic patterns far from imply pathological impairment, as a means to understanding their ambiguities, I reflected upon Schacter's assertion: given memories form the foundation for our most strongly held beliefs about ourselves, understandably sufferers of memory loss may become obsessive in their quest to maintain identity-control.<sup>47</sup> Lazzaro comments further that the frustration and confusion of being asked about an indistinctly remembered life may compel sufferers of memory-loss to control the arrangement of their stories. Characteristically a small group of themes may be perpetually revisited as a confirmation of beliefs and identity.<sup>48</sup>

Jenny clearly exercised a degree of control in steering the interview to a group of themes and episodes in which she felt comfortable. When she conveyed a sense of intimidation at being laughed at by Japanese prisoners, I asked if she felt they were a threat. Clearly determined to move to a story she identified with positively, she replied dismissively: 'Yeah --- well that was one episode' and proceeded with her 'singing lesson' story. An attempt to re-establish the Japanese theme produced, 'Oh nothing ever surprised me much'<sup>49</sup> before she resumed her own agenda. By steering the direction of the interview and by telling her 'singing lesson' story three times in total using comparably parallel scripts, Jenny emphasised the identity she wished to convey, adding, 'I was very interested in singing, very interested. I wanted to be a singer.'<sup>50</sup>

Jenny's singing story appeared to be an identity-anchor that bolstered her psychic composure both in content and in performance. Norrick's study of verbal behaviour surrounding forgetfulness and uncertainty in oral narration, found self-aware comments about difficulties in remembering or conversely, about having a positive memory, work not only to register embarrassment or pride, but often to justify the story's telling, or as strategies to preface or finish a story. They can also gain the teller planning time and help them maintain control of the floor.<sup>51</sup> He adds however, 'Older narrators are very much aware of the significance of memory, and they worry about forgetfulness as a sign of senility and impending Alzheimer's.'<sup>52</sup> The singing story describes how as an army driver Jenny was afforded some autonomy, enough to attend clandestine singing lessons. All three deliveries had similar or verbatim words and phrases which included the names of three 'good singers – Donald Smith and Michael Aysar and Dorothy Jessarick.'<sup>53</sup> Finally, to highlight the significance of the wartime memory and



to underline her problems with recall, the third delivery finishes with the self-reflexive but proudly triumphant comment:

Everywhere we'd go we'd have to write down where we'd go and put down the time we left and when I went in to drop somebody off or whatever in the city, I was there longer than I should have been because I'd go upstairs for my singing scales. When the auditor checked everything he wanted to know why I was so long doing these jobs. [laughs] Betty didn't know. I used to cheat. I used to go upstairs and do the scales and keep my voice in good order. There was Dorothy Jessarick, she was a very good singer. There was Donald Smith he was another good singer and Michael Aysar. Isn't it funny how your brain works? Now my short-term memory is rotten, but long-term, long-term is good. I can't remember things on the spot, but long-term, I remember during the war those three singers; I can remember their names quite clearly, but you tell me a singer now and it goes through that ear and out the other.<sup>54</sup>

The imagery and rhetoric employed by government to rally its citizens seemingly resonates with the war generation still. In their interviews all three women drew freely on popular tropes and wartime catchphrases: 'it was a job we had to do' and 'we got to and did it'; in the rhetoric of 'All In,' 'everybody gave their all'; 'you had to keep our country safe'; and in recruitment-poster terms, 'we were doing what a man would have to do so they could be released.'<sup>55</sup>

The government's jurisdiction over the public mind-set meant perceptions of the enemy could be easily manipulated through racist literature. Australians on the whole had little informed knowledge of Japan when by early 1942 an infamous series of anti-Japanese propaganda was produced which caricatured the enemy as stereotypically small, buck-toothed, wearing thick glasses and often shown laughing, either foolishly or menacingly.<sup>56</sup> The impression of the enemy was for many that they were 'little runts with glasses.'<sup>57</sup> Jenny spoke of delivering mail to the Grovely internment camp one day, recalling the acute intimidation she experienced when walking past a convoy of Japanese prisoners. As mentioned earlier, I had hoped to dwell on this topic with Jenny but she was keen to move to more self-affirming territory. Her description nevertheless distinctly bore the hallmarks of caricature. She referred to the prisoners in their jungle uniforms as 'little green people with big teeth' and went on to say, 'they would be laughing - laughing, and showing their big teeth ... I got out of there quickly. I didn't like these prisoners laughing at me - seeing a nicely dressed army girl - poking fun at her.'<sup>58</sup>

The control and manipulation of information to Australian citizens created, in Darian-Smith's estimation, a general sense of helplessness in the community.<sup>59</sup> But as Betty said about the situation, 'you actually accepted it, this is what you did. You just accepted it.'<sup>60</sup> In reverse of the generation of propaganda, a *dearth* of official information led to the proliferation of hear-say knowledge. The three women made vague allusions to Japanese invasion: 'they had a Brisbane line...they were going to stop them in North Queensland'<sup>61</sup> and 'there was a line of defence in certain areas but - .'<sup>62</sup> Kate was more decisive in saying, 'we weren't told anything ... I mean Darwin was bombed and I thought, well we didn't know; we weren't told those things.'<sup>63</sup>

For 'Jenny,' talk of Darwin would interweave her stories as a regular point of reference linked to her husband. In controlling the identity she conveyed, she frequently digressed to the male experience of the war as if by proxy, homogenising story segments into meaningful wholes. Alistair Thomson has written on relationships between identity, memory and public versions of the past and how for elderly male veterans the Anzac legend provided public affirmation of the importance of their military past.<sup>64</sup> Yet the public version of women's patriotism was constructed as subservient to state and male imperatives.<sup>65</sup> For Jenny to achieve Dawson's 'composure' within her wartime memory-frame when questioned about the *value* she placed on her military service, as opposed to simply her *memories* of her service, she would deflect to her memories of Malcolm's military experience – moving from a faltering uncertainty-of-feeling, to a fluid stream

of consciousness. A long and well-rehearsed story of his time in the militia at Fort Lytton in the years before the war seamlessly cross-pollinates with fragments of his wartime service in Darwin disregarding temporal sequence to become one and the same tale – in Neisser's terms a *repisodic*, *representation* of a *repetition*. The packaging of his military service into one memory-episode and the readiness of her to relay it, suggests a regard for the importance of his 'real' service over her 'supplementary' service. In recalling how as a corporal he trained others on the 'heavy guns' at Fort Lytton she adds, 'And they fired the guns at one stage ... because they thought it was a Russian ship coming up the Brisbane River.'<sup>66</sup> Here Jenny confuses knowledge of an event that happened during World War I with her recollection of Malcolm's army service.<sup>67</sup> Again she repeats this and other phrases almost verbatim in the second transcript. The slippage between remembering a past and remembering what it represented, had her fuse an historical memory to her blended recollections to create a weighty tale of wartime significance.

The course that Jenny's narratives take appear to be associatively connected, making them appear in some measure disjointed. Lazzaro remarks that with a faltering memory stories can begin to fragment. Where one anecdote fades into the forgotten, it may then be combined with another to create a new meaning.<sup>68</sup> When Jenny mentions Darwin, she associates the memory with Malcolm's month-long hospitalisation which, as previously mentioned, she has come to associate with malnutrition rather than his bomb-blast injuries. In her first and second interviews she patterns parallel scripts linking his hospitalisation to army food which she pictures in her mind as cooked in 'big dixies' or 'big billycans':

He was in the hospital in Darwin – from malnutrition mainly – he didn't have the proper food, they used to make soup in big dixies, in big, big basins on the stove and it was just soup made out of bully-beef with hot water.<sup>69</sup>

But Malcolm I know was in hospital – I know because he didn't have the right food. If they made soup they used to have a big, big ah, big, ah I've forgotten what they called it ah – billycan.<sup>70</sup>

In another first-interview story she speaks about food in the women's army:

There was a lot of wasteful food. Now, they couldn't get eggs, they used to have powdered eggs, and the girls didn't like those, but I had to go and tip them down the hill, they didn't like the powdered eggs – a lot of food wasted ... at that time powdered eggs, the cook told me to tip it out down the hill so -- powdered eggs were tasteless.<sup>71</sup>

Concluding a long story about Malcolm's war service in the second interview, Jenny's Darwin/hospital/food association receives new meaning when it melds into *her* experience with army food:

But ah, oh the food was awful up there, he was in hospital for about a month, for ah, for not having the right food. He hated the powdered eggs – I used to tip the powdered eggs *out* because the girls didn't like it either.<sup>72</sup>

For 'Jenny,' her memory schema for the events of Malcolm's war service had altered over time to accommodate her memory schema for associative narrative scripts. Adopting the era's officially-adjusted schema for Darwin, Malcolm's hospitalisation is no longer associated with bomb-blast injuries, for their cause was never indelibly captured by mental 'flashbulb,' instead the cause of his infirmity has shifted to an association with army food. With a note of equivocation in the first interview she hedges her diagnosis of malnutrition with 'mainly' but by the second, his dislike for bully-beef has metamorphosed into 'the girls' dislike for powdered eggs.

The seeming erasure from her memory of the real reason behind Malcolm's hospitalisation and the corresponding annulment of the episode's consequence in their lives, left me confused. I felt I had to question her further:

**MB:**

**Do you remember him being in the bombing of Darwin?**

**Jenny:**

Yeah -- there were about 200 people killed!

**But do you remember him being in the bombing?**

Oh – I'll have to look up some of his letters, which I've kept from when he was in Darwin. Ah -- but as I say, my brain is playing up with me –

**He may not have been able to tell you too much because it was hushed up.**

Oh, all your letters were *read* before they were posted down, and they were cut up. They were cut out – a lot of letters. Yeah well, there was a line of defence in certain areas but–

**When did you hear about the bombing of Darwin then?**

Oh -- I – couldn't tell you -- sometime afterwards – it wasn't *then*. But Malcolm I know was in hospital - I know because he didn't have the right food.<sup>73</sup>

The 'forgetting' of the bombing of Darwin by the government in the decades following the war would extend to a lack of official recognition for its service personnel. From our close association I was well aware of the impact Jenny's husband's war injuries would have on their lives. While he did recover from his wartime hospitalisation, after a few decades his stroke would reoccur. By the 1970s, despite his increasing incapacity, her husband would be frustrated (and no doubt insulted) enough by bureaucratic obstructionism to finally tear up his claim for a repatriation pension. At a time when war service claims were beginning to strain the government coffers, only troops who served outside of Australia would be recognized. For Jenny's family therefore, consigned to years of incapacity and financial hardship, the legacy of the bombing of Darwin would have lasting effect.

## Conclusion

Jenny's wartime narratives reflect a defining period in her life, a time of which she is proud but one which has become less defined. In seeking to understand her 'forgetting' of an event of significance to her life I was drawn to parallels between public and private remembering and forgetting, and their respective links to identity. Darwin's public story had progressed from being 'strategically forgotten' post-war, to being 'remembered' today in a different light. Jenny's private story of Darwin had been keenly remembered post-war for its (officially) unacknowledged legacy to her family, yet had become 'forgotten' today for its private significance. For Jenny the construction-process of the past has become less stable but the content is still engaging. Recalling her past reflects how she sees herself now and both entities are to some degree indeterminate. Yet despite her uncertainties, blending, interweaving narratives and official scripts, create for her a delicate form of 'composure.' I have no answer for Jenny's forgotten private story of Darwin, I can only speculate and appreciate.

Had the legacy of the bombing of Darwin, the hardship, the lack of recognition, the silenced and 'shameful' subtext, become a memory in her twilight years she would rather forget? Had the memory 'cannibalised itself' to the point where its meaning had been replaced with another, one more in keeping with her current agenda for 'subjective composure?' I suggest just as official memory, through its shifting incarnations, serves the current identity-purposes of a nation, so individual recollections of the past, through creative refinement present the present subjectivities of our lives. Defining 'who we are' is determined by 'what has had to be forgotten in order to remember ... in a way that contributes to a sense of national [and personal] pride'.

## (Endnotes)

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# Oral history and object biography as companion methodologies in researching the Cheer-Up Society of First World War South Australia<sup>1</sup>

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[This paper has been peer-reviewed]

## Abstract

Objects as inanimate entities, do not have voices of their own, but can ‘speak’ through a labyrinth of interwoven stories that can be embroidered into an object’s biography. These stories include the layers of memories and recorded narratives of the people and communities who were intimate with the object, with each layer then collectively revealing the changing meanings and rich history of a person, group or locale that has been associated with that particular object. The Cheer-Up Society was a First World War patriotic group operating throughout South Australia. Sadly, little documentary evidence remains to tell the story of its significant contribution to the well being of those who served during the war. Consequently, objects and their own biographies are now being explored to present a broader historical narrative and oral history was considered an important companion methodology in this process. This paper explores how the oral history of just one woman volunteer has enhanced, informed and fleshed out the biographies of several significant objects relating to the operations of the Cheer-Up Society of First World War South Australia.

## Introduction

Patsy Adam-Smith’s *Australian Women at War* introduced me to the Cheer-Up Society (CUS) of South Australia and its work and achievements during the First World War. Adam-Smith wrote inspirationally of Mrs Seager and her ‘coterie of ladies’ who during the war became ‘a great and glorious sisterhood’ of women who toiled day and night, rain or shine to provide meals and comforts for the troops leaving for war and later for those who were to return changed men, physically and mentally.<sup>2</sup> Captivated by these ladies, I began to research the CUS with the hope of someday presenting their significant story to a new generation of readers. My search for further information started enthusiastically, but was soon extinguished after it became obvious that few primary sources relating

to the CUS remained. Further, extensive archival research produced little extant evidence of the more than eighty sub-groups started state wide from 1914 to 1918, or of the hundreds of women war workers supporting and maintaining the efforts of the CUS headquarters in Adelaide.

While historians should *never* assume anything, I considered that I would eventually discover the remnant records, for example, minutes of meetings and account ledgers, of at least some of the sub-branches. But after four years, many talks to historical, genealogical and community groups across the state, conference papers and articles in the local press, my search had yielded very little documentary evidence that would shed even a glimmer of light on the wartime activities of so many women.

What did remain, however, were traces of objects within some of the sources that were directly related to the CUS, and I considered that with some diligence, each might lead me to places where other related primary sources useful to my research might be located. Some wider and interdisciplinary reading and reflection introduced me to ideas emanating from material culture studies. Scholarship by archaeologists and historical archaeologists such as James Deetz,<sup>3</sup> Danny Miller,<sup>4</sup> Laura Peers,<sup>5</sup> Chris Caple,<sup>6</sup> and Jody Joy,<sup>7</sup> and museologists including Susan Pearce, and Gaynor Kavanagh<sup>8</sup> have informed me of the theories underpinning the concepts of both the life cycle approach to researching objects, and also the notion of object biography as related to relics both within, and outside of, the museum.<sup>9</sup> As a technique that makes use of methodologies derived across many disciplines, including oral history, object biography is now being employed within my project to reconstruct the story of the CUS as far as possible in order to reinstate the significance of this war work within the scholarship. Following an introduction to the CUS and a general discussion on some of the concepts underpinning the method of object biography, this paper will relate how the only known oral history to date relating to the work of the CUS has complemented my investigation of the CUS.

## The Cheer-Up Society of First World War South Australia

During November 1914, several letters written to the Adelaide newspaper, *The Register*, and a comment printed by its editor William Sowden, began the patriotic work of the CUS. The first letter was from 'The Girl in White', the pseudonym of Miss Edna Rogers, who wrote to the paper at the behest of Mrs Alexandrina Seager. She told the readership of her recent excursion to the Morphettville Military Camp with a friend to visit the troops of the Second Contingent, and who, in their opinion, had obviously been forgotten by the people of South Australia. She laments, 'imagine my surprise when I found the camp practically deserted. It is a fearful pity that the citizens of our fair city should show such a lack of patriotism.'<sup>10</sup> Within the same edition William Sowden challenged:

Our boys must not be allowed to believe for even one solitary hour that they are forgotten or neglected by the people for whom they have shown their willingness to make the supreme sacrifice, or fancy that nobody cares for them. At such a time as this far better is an excess than a deficiency of approving hurrahs! Who will form the first Cheer-Up Our Boys Society?<sup>11</sup>

The second letter written by Mrs Seager herself, and signed 'The Woman in Black,' appeared in *The Register* on the following day. Her exemplary literary skills reiterated and expounded the story told by her friend Miss Rogers, and left the readers in no doubt that they had indeed acted apathetically 'towards our boys at present under canvas at Morphettville' and where the generosity, patriotic fervour and appreciation as shown by the people of South Australia to the soldiers of the First Contingent now on their way to the war, was now sadly diminished. Mrs Seager took up the challenge posed by editor Sowden and expressed that 'the Register's suggestion of a "Cheer-Up Our Boys Society" is an excellent one', and she would be 'very pleased indeed to become a member.'<sup>12</sup>

Within days of announcing their formation, the women, and it must be stated, some men, made their working debut by organising the inaugural Cheer-Up Concert to entertain the troops at the Morphettville Army Camp. All manner of food items such as fruit and vegetables, eggs, jam and baked items were donated to the Society almost immediately it was formed, and comforts for the troops like cigarettes, books and balaclavas thus rewarded Mrs Seager and 'her coterie of women' for their tenacity in publicly chastising the people of South Australia for showing such abandon in their patriotic behaviour.<sup>13</sup> Throughout the state in towns such as Burra, Peterborough, Jamestown, Mount Gambier, Murray Bridge and over seventy five other centres by the end of the war,<sup>14</sup> the fundraising and social activities of

the CUS were fired and impassioned by great patriotism and concern for the comfort and well-being of both the departing soldiers, the men at the front, and later, those who returned injured or changed by their experiences at war.<sup>15</sup>

Initially housed and operating from Mrs Seager's business offices in Bentham Street, by war's end, and following several venue changes as the number of soldiers making use of the facilities increased dramatically, the hundreds of women who volunteered at the Cheer-Up Hut were sourcing food items for, and preparing, serving and clearing away thousands of meals per week. During the last six months of operations, before officially closing on Christmas Eve, 1919, in excess of 65,000 soldiers had been fed, entertained or cared for, and monthly expenditure amounted to as much as £1,600.<sup>16</sup> Such a feat could not have occurred without an exemplary managerial and organisational structure; a substantial number of country sub-branches; a network of suppliers that stemmed from Mrs Seager's pre-war business as an employment agent supplying workers to rural properties, and several hundred willing and able volunteers to cook, serve and wash up such a large quantity of meals each day.

## The Remnants of the CUS and Object Biography

The sheer dynamics of such an enterprise should have presented future historians a veritable Lasseter's Reef of primary source materials to mine, but instead, several contemporary books, a plethora of newspaper articles and some photographs form the basis of what evidence remains. It is from these sources that I have discovered the objects that form the foundation of my own research into the CUS and the biography that will ultimately be compiled about each relic.

Since the publication of several small books by F. J. Mills, around 1920, *Cheer-Up: a story of war work*, and *Cheer-Up memories: a tribute to the Cheer-Up ladies*<sup>17</sup> there has to date, been no other comprehensive publication about the formation, management and work of the CUS.<sup>18</sup> Both of these books were romanticised, patriarchal and highly patriotic narrative tributes to the predominantly women workers of the society. They were also designed to be purchased by past workers, members and soldiers, sailors and nurses who may have passed through the tent, or later the hut during the war. These books are ostensibly memory objects that lose some of their significance once those who purchased them are no longer living, but often such publications remain the only vestiges of the many Australian wartime patriotic groups whose volunteer work, contribution to the war effort and wartime experiences in general remain silent and largely unexamined within the literature. Unfortunately, Adelaide newspaper, *The Register*, was



Volunteers at the Cheer-Up Hut PRG 280/1/18/56 Reproduced with permission from the State Library of South Australia (SLSA).

part owned and edited by the President of the CUS, William Sowden, (later Sir), and therefore could not be relied upon as an unbiased source. *The Register* is consequently used only as a tool for general information and clues as to other sources that might be of use to my research and since Sowden obviously enjoyed sounding his own trumpet, mention is given almost daily of the work and achievements of the CUS.

Some of the objects identified as part of my research and to be discussed in more detail below include the Burra Hall, (the Adelaide Headquarters of the CUS), Violet Day badges, and a book of poetry written by Mrs Seager, *Violet Verses*. Each of these objects will have its own life story to tell, a biography, but as a collective and when collated within a broader narrative these object biographies will reveal many more of the layers that comprise the CUS than is currently able to be reconstructed from the few remnant documentary sources alone.

So what then is Object biography? It is a methodology that explores the notion that objects can be considered to have a life, or a series of lives, that can be examined and explored, just as people have biographies that can be researched and documented. Investigations can reveal many things about an object: its origins, form and make-up, type, use, genealogies, stories and accounts – the who, what, why, where and when – of an object's life course, from creation to death or discard. Such discoveries are undertaken using a multitude of sources and techniques – documentary, illustrative, aural, sensory and of course,

oral – that together can bring objects to life, since without such illuminations objects are merely things that lack the context and personal history that make each one unique. It is not merely an investigation of the object where design and manufacture, use, changes and alterations and movements or destruction are considered. Central to object biography then is the explicit relationship that exists between the two entities – objects and people – and where research seeks to learn about the lives of all of the people who used or owned the object and all of the places it has been, since it is this inter-relationship that determines the wider story of the object as it journeys through differing social contexts, locales, cultures and time periods.<sup>19</sup>

Object biography then can ultimately be described as an examination of an object's evolving and changing relationship to people and cultures, individually and collectively, through the contexts of space and time and the modal entities of production, exchange and consumption, creation, use and death. It is these newly accumulated meanings acquired as the object passes through each of these entities that provide the agency, or voice, through which an object is then able to 'speak' and offer its own biography to the historian for further interpretation and analysis.<sup>20</sup> Daniel Miller's notions surrounding these previously silent, or 'quiet and demure' voices of objects are regarded as significant within this research and where 'a material culture analysis has to listen to the explicit voices but remain focussed on messages that appear like invisible ink, emerging only under the wash of analysis'.<sup>21</sup>



Interior of the Burra Hut circa 1918 SLSA B5505 Reproduced with permission from the State Library of South Australia (SLSA).

## Oral History and Object Biography as companions in the methodological toolbox

Given that the interactions and relationships that exist between people and objects form the basis of the method of object biography, oral history then has a great deal to offer the researcher. It can provide a human element and new layers to the object's story, where those listening can experience the aural of the narrative through the voices of potentially many and varied people and to further allow the researcher to hear accents and nuances, the fumbling of words and even the silences. All of these dimensions form the foundation by which we, as oral historians seek to interpret, verify and analyse what has been captured within the interview process and the results can be equally utilised in the object biographer's toolbox - where the outcomes of the interview and later analysis can then be applied to the narrative enveloping the object and hence the object's own story.<sup>22</sup>

Oral history can also provide context for objects of the past.<sup>23</sup> In asking questions like 'how does this work?', 'what did you do with this?' or 'what did it sound like?' items like household objects, rural tools and implements, and even sheet music can have their essence both reinvigorated and restored in the historical record. This is particularly true in the investigation of objects that have not been documented 'carefully' as would be the case with the many everyday objects that are taken for granted. In asking 'What's in a butter churn?' American women's historians Jensen and Johnson argue that through the employment of oral history methods:

Historian[s] can begin to describe the function of the object, the skills a woman needed to use it, the environment within which she used it, and finally the feelings she had about it. With the help of objects in turn, an historian can draw a woman back into her past, encourage her to remember the objects with which she surrounded herself, and form a bridge with the past. Objects and oral history seem naturally to belong together.<sup>24</sup>

Within Australia, such notions of symbiosis, and a rich and growing literature, are also being produced by historians engaged in exploring the integration of oral history and objects, particularly relating to issues of memory and place. The recent publication *Oral History and Photography* edited by Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson reveals the experiences of oral historians using photographs as part of the interview process and where photographs, or the absence of them, are seen as important considerations within the memories being recounted.<sup>25</sup>

Archaeologist Grace Karskens<sup>26</sup> and historian Ann Toy used oral histories to contribute to their examinations of localities within The Rocks, Sydney. Toy reveals that the site had an extremely complex history but she considered that the minimal documentary evidence discovered was too little to present the complete picture of life within the location and decided to use oral history to flesh out her investigation since it gave her access to individual families, their households, patterns of daily life and wider relationships within the community. According to Toy, the oral evidence provided valuable comparative observations that then revealed firsthand memories of Susannah Place, The Rocks.<sup>27</sup>



At the 2012 Australian Historical Association Conference, *Connections*, Joanna Boileau presented her analysis of the museum-based personal objects of Georgie Ah Ling gathered from both documentary sources and 'the recollections of local residents who knew him to provide a context for the objects in time and space'. This fresh interpretation revealed new and multilayered meanings as each object's significance was understood within the contextual spaces provided by the sources - individually for Georgie Ah Ling, and collectively within the community and as part of the Chinese migration process to Australia.<sup>28</sup>



Mrs Alexandrina Seager Courtesy of Seager family.

Janis Wilton has been examining the new meanings and perspectives offered by the tangible relics extant many decades after her interviewees' migration to Australia. She has utilised the objects during oral history interviews to invoke memories which then 'become a means to convey important messages about the migration experience'.<sup>29</sup>

Wilton argues that the juxtaposition of the tangible, material items such as buildings, places and objects, with the intangible, oral history and its idiosyncrasies, 'invites the interplay of many different perspectives and a telling of many different tales'.<sup>30</sup> Some of her latest scholarship invites the reader into her family's home and lives as she discusses the processes occurring when the passing of her mother resulted in the building of new memories as the family dismantled and packed away the objects with which they each shared memories and narratives. By taking photographs of the objects in their contexts within the home prior to their removal, Wilton has created a new set of memories, layers and meanings not only for the narrative of the family's history, but so too the object's biography.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Catherine McLennan has undertaken oral history interviews with people who lost all of their personal belongings and objects during the 2009 Black Sunday bushfires in Victoria.<sup>32</sup>

Oral history then is a methodology that not only supplements other historical sources but can stimulate the posing of further questions; cover a plethora of subject matter; enrich our knowledge and add further dimensions to the story that was accumulated via the documentary evidence. Information previously not available, obvious or forthcoming from within the primary sources can also be verified or even contested. With all of these exemplary examples at hand, I then set out to discover if any archival repository held oral history interview recordings or transcripts that could

assist with my research into the CUS, or the objects I had already explored.

## Oral History and the CUS

With 2014 marking the centenary of the beginnings of the CUS, first-hand accounts of the society's operations during the First World War can no longer be recorded, but I remained hopeful that someone, somewhere, had undertaken an interview with at least some of the many hundreds of women who had volunteered. Fortunately, in 1979 Beth Robertson recorded the memories of 39 South Australian women for her *South Australian Women's Responses to the First World War* research project. With a focus on their personal reminiscences, Robertson recorded over twenty three hours of interviews resulting in 442 pages of transcripts and acquiring plenty of data for analysis to complete her Honours thesis.<sup>33</sup> While the entire 39 interviews have as yet to be analysed or compared by me for my own research purposes, of significance is that the Interview Summaries and further personal communication with Robertson reveal only several mentions of the CUS within her cohort.<sup>34</sup> Mrs Olive Martin, wife of Leonard Martin, tells Robertson of her husband, children and family home in the Adelaide hills, and of her three brothers who went away to the war. She also recalls her hatred of German people, an emotion she had carried with her throughout her entire life, and of her war work including some volunteering at the CUS.<sup>35</sup>

In total contrast, Mrs Elva Morrison, as a teenage Miss Elva Harding<sup>36</sup>, began volunteering at the CUS during 1914 and moved to a paid administrative position soon after. She continued to volunteer after her marriage and during the Second World War was Organiser of the Country Branches. For several decades following the closure of the Cheer-Up Hut in 1945, she was Secretary of the social club formed to keep the women in touch with each other, the Cheer-Up Association. Elva's position at the hut firstly as assistant to Mrs Seager and then as country organiser gave her first hand knowledge of the intimate workings of the CUS. Directly relevant to my own research is that Elva describes some of the objects being explored and adds elements to their stories that other sources had not – the emotions and personal perspectives of a volunteer – and some answers to the what, why and who questions I had been asking in the construction of the genealogies and stories of the people who were intimate with the objects. For example, what drove or inspired hundreds of young women to volunteer at the CUS and work for hours cooking, cleaning and feeding thousands of soldiers per week? Where and how did this take place? How was the food sourced and prepared? What were the organisational dynamics within the group from the perspective of a young woman volunteer? Elva's recollections are therefore considered within my

research as significant since they provide a 'hands on' woman's perspective of volunteering at the Hut that is not recorded in any other documentary source.

Elva had been working in a law firm at the outbreak of the war, and had volunteered her spare time to help out in any way she could. Here, she relates why she joined:

I was seventeen – and everybody of my age became very enthusiastic. It was lovely to see boys in uniform ---I met a girl from the Commonwealth Bank who said 'Oh, come up and meet Mrs Seager. She is starting a Cheer-Up society'. She took me up and introduced me to Mrs Seager, and in my lunch hour I used to pop up and help pack parcels, balaclavas, caps and things which had come in to her.<sup>37</sup>

Spending an increasing amount of time at the Hut, Elva was later employed as one of Mrs Seager's secretaries for fifteen shillings per week. This did not mean of course that her voluntary work ceased. At the end of each day she tells us:

I did voluntary work until I caught the ten to ten train to Belair at night, to help with meals or peeling vegetables or unpacking crates of fish which were sent in, and doing things like that. Playing games that they had, sometimes they had a dance, and library and records bar – record room where they played records. And from finishing my five o'clock work, I then stayed on until ... the train home to Belair.<sup>38</sup>

Reflecting in her interview on her motivations for spending most of the war working in both paid and voluntary capacities at the Hut, Elva expresses notions of patriotism and duty and considers that she was not unlike most of the women on the home front and wanted to do her 'bit' for the war effort.

Well it was just something that seemed exciting. To think that all these young men – and mostly they were young men – were coming in to help – as we said then – to help England. I mean, I suppose having ancestors from England, our country love was very deep, and it was, for teenagers, a great excitement to think, 'oh, we could go and help look after all these boys in uniform' – or men in uniform. And myself, I had always had a desire to do something more than just an ordinary office job, and I think that has followed me through life, because I love voluntary work and helping others.<sup>39</sup>

Elva adds further that her time at the Cheer-Up Hut was, 'such a great privilege, because I felt that, although I couldn't go to the war, I was serving in a small way – humble way – trying to help them.'<sup>40</sup>

As previously mentioned, Elva's' interview also contributes to the narrative regarding some of the objects

being examined within my research. The Burra Hall as it was known was erected out of an increasing need for room as the success of the Cheer-Up Society escalated. It was named because of the generosity of the people of Burra, a very small community about two hours north of Adelaide, South Australia, who contributed £1300 toward the overall cost of £2,000 for the project.<sup>41</sup> Elva reveals:

We started out with coppers out in the back yard --- The work gradually grew to such an extent that we had to have somewhere for the troops from the country to meet. We had a wonderful time down at the tent, but it was not big enough. The men were coming in in hundreds and hundreds and mothers were writing in from the country saying what a comfort it was and the railways granted the land and an appeal was made, through Mrs Seager, for the money for the building of this hut.<sup>42</sup>

The hut was erected within a few months of its design by:

Mr Henderson who was secretary of the Adelaide Club ... brought down a model made to scale – a tiny model of the building he thought would take the place of the tent. ... As the first men were coming home from Gallipoli in October 1915, the Hut was opened and from then on we entertained tens of thousands of men.<sup>43</sup>

The walls of the Hut were covered with photographs of dead soldiers, battalion photographs, souvenirs and colours and other military ephemera. Many soldiers who had visited the Hut prior to departing for the front came back upon their return, to meet with comrades, rekindle past friendships, or just sit in the same seat at the same table where once they dined with mates who did not return. Troops could play quoits, cards or billiards, write letters home or sit and read. It was an alcohol free and safe environment that was greatly appreciated by the mothers of the very young. Elva recalls:

We found men were coming back in a shocked state – and shockingly injured – some of the sights we saw were terrible, but the boys knew we understood. And I've known one man take all the bandages off his face with his jaw shot away, just because he wanted to be back to normal and he was with people who knew. And those things stayed with me always.<sup>44</sup>

Elva also met her husband at the Hut:

He was in the landing [at Gallipoli] and after four days was hit with shrapnel and had fifteen months in hospital and nine operations. Well, that brought home to us the tragedy. Not his case particularly, but the ones who came back – brought home. And men who were mentally disturbed who used to come into the Hut in the evening, and I know

one night I was on duty – voluntary duty – and a man came in. He thought he was Christ, and he raved and went on, and he preached to us, and it was frightening. The Military Police always came to the Hut and half past nine for a cup of tea – they were on duty at the railway station – and I ran over and got them, because I was afraid that the man would damage – hurt himself – as well as scare we younger people who were on duty. But that sort of thing brought it home, very, very greatly to us.<sup>45</sup>

After reopening during the depression and the Second World War, the Burra Hut was demolished in 1970 to make way for the new Festival Theatre complex. A plaque is now all that remains indicating the significant history of the Cheer-Up Society and women's war work on that site almost a century ago.<sup>46</sup>

Aside from the beliefs and mores instilled by her parents, as a seventeen year old young woman, Elva had also been influenced by the stiff upper lip attitude of women like Mrs Seager who had insisted that the workers at the Hut never show personal sorrow and emotions, particularly grief to the visiting soldiers they were there to in fact 'cheer-up'. Violet Day badges were sold annually by the Cheer-Up Society following the inaugural Violet Day, established in July of 1915. This day was Mrs Seager's way of 'giving the public an opportunity of paying a tribute to the Fallen Heroes ... [and] in memory of those gallant boys who gladly gave up precious life for love of country.'<sup>47</sup> On this day, everybody was asked to wear a violet but in addition, buttons could be purchased from the Cheer-Up ladies who were out and about in the streets of South Australia selling them, and bunches of violets in aid of the Cheer-Up Club Fund.<sup>48</sup> Elva recalls the first Violet Day in her interview:

Violet Day - which was carried on until about four years ago ... Mrs Seager's son went with the Ninth Light Horse and was killed when he was seventeen. He put his age up and got away, and Mrs Seager then thought of Violet Day – violet, a humble flower in memory of the brave. Well we had our first Violet Day at the South Africa Soldiers' War Memorial which was a memory day and from then on it became a money-raising day and people wore a violet. And the heading in the paper was 'Wear a violet today in memory of the brave.'<sup>49</sup>

*Violet Verses* was written by Mrs Seager directly in response to the death of her youngest son, George who had fallen on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Her silent grief and that of other women is reflected within the words of this poem that was later collated along with the poems of others to be sold as a fundraiser for the Society.<sup>50</sup> Documentary sources such as those of Mills' *Cheer-Up: a story of war work*, relate how Mrs Seager reacted to her son's death. Mills states that upon hearing the news of George's death, Seager said, 'my boy's last words

to me were, "If I stop a piece of German lead – be a sport", and I am going to be a sport. It is only my duty'. Mills adds that such an example 'uplifted the hearts and sustained the courage of hundreds of others similarly placed.'<sup>51</sup> Elva adds more to the story however:

And the women were brave, because so many of them lost. ... So we had so many at the Hut in the First War who lost one boy, and sometimes two, and even when Mrs Seager lost her young son, George, at seventeen, she went home and I suppose saw her husband and her three daughters. She came back on duty next day and never another word. The only outward sign was that she had a little enamel cross on a chain, and she wore that, in memory of George. Not a word, no recriminations, no outward grief, but inwardly – you know, so deep ... the women who lost their boys – there were so many of them at the Hut – and their bravery and their outward show of loyalty to the country and overcoming their inward grief, was just so wonderful. ... I feel that I've been a very lucky person to have been privileged to help, and perhaps take inwardly the courage of other people. It gives you an inner strength.<sup>52</sup>

Elva's narrative contributes further to our understanding of women's responses to the death of soldiers during the war and provides a gendered comparison to the contemporary documentary sources of the war. Where Mills' discourse is from a male perspective and extremely patriotic Elva relates a more feminine and motherly response, which she is more able to construct and reflect on as a mature woman and mother in her 1979 interview. Her memories provide an insight into the grief of Mrs Seager that would not have been possible reading Mills' book alone.

An object biography on the poetry written by Mrs Seager in her *Violet Verses* allows us to 'hear' her speak, albeit only through her written words – to hear of her notions of loyalty to nation and empire; to ascertain what fired her belief that women could indeed help the war cause, by providing for the welfare and mental health of returned soldiers and their families; to understand how and why she was able to gather thousands of women, and some men, to labour voluntarily for her cause, not only for the duration of the war but beyond and her despair, disbelief and utter grief, but then experience her outright stoicism to continue on, when her son George died. These changing emotions are apparent in Seager's later writings,<sup>53</sup> and whilst her 'voice' retains all of her original notions for Australia's involvement in the war, her verses later speak of the loss of young men cut down in the prime of life. Her personal grief at the loss of her son is evident.

To-day is his, in bush and town, in homes  
flung far and wide; In countless hearts that  
hide an ache for him — The boy who died.

The wine of youth ran in his veins, Youth's morning flushed with pride: Ah, life was infinitely sweet to him – The boy who died.<sup>54</sup>

Elva's own narrative, however, is silent on how as a young woman, she mentally coped with her husband's significant injuries or of those of other soldiers visiting the Hut. She mentions words like 'service', 'inner satisfaction' and 'exciting' until she says, '[when] we saw the men coming back, we realised just what war meant I think.'<sup>55</sup> However, she poignantly adds:

You know, it was a marvellous experience. I just feel that, to me, it made a big difference in my life, but it made me conscious of the need of help for others who were less fortunate ... [we were] privileged to be there ... to face life with a different outlook.<sup>56</sup>

Elva's memories are, to date, a lone voice in remembering the Cheer-Up Hut and work there during the First World War. Although this was indeed *her* oral history interview and an opportunity to speak about her personal experiences of the First World War, her own rollercoaster of emotions, the narrative is almost dominated by the Cheer-Up Society and Mrs Seager, both major influences in her early adulthood. In stark contrast, Mrs Martin's memories of her life during the First World War are of her own life and emotions. Elva's life course has quite obviously been influenced by her tender age when beginning her work at the CUS and the women with whom she worked like Mrs Seager.

Alistair Thompson's *Anzac Memories* considers the reasons behind such dominated memories and their place within narrative construction. In his analysis of the interviews he conducted with First World War veterans, he determines that for this generation of Australians 'life events' such as the two Wars and the Depression not only impacted on lives and memories but provide the context, lens and framework through which the life stories and reminiscences are then later composed.<sup>57</sup> The work of wartime women volunteers has been stereotypically portrayed as one where women knitted away four years of their lives waiting for their men-folk to return from the war. Interviews like those of Olive, Elva and many of the others interviewed by Robertson and many others testify to the contrary that women in fact did more than sit at home to 'wait and weep',<sup>58</sup> that Australian women wartime volunteers instead stepped up. They saw what was needed, set up new organisations and effectively managed them to provide for items that were not being provided by any other agency, government or otherwise. Elva's interview adds new layers and fresh insights into the story of the creation and building of the eventual home of the CUS, and widens our knowledge of the day-to-day operations of the group and the role and coping mechanisms of women at the Hut. Further, her

reminiscences return a human perspective to the built landscape of First World War Adelaide that is no longer extant. Her interview offers a comparative voice to the few documentary sources still available and gives my own research more depth and an ability to ask broader and more informed questions of the archival sources still available.

## Conclusion

This paper has presented just some of the ways oral memories can enhance, inform, and flesh out an object's biography. It is through this maze of interwoven stories that the biography of each object can embroider its own genealogies and historical lives to the layers already sewn by those people and events of the past. Together, oral history and object biography can broaden the scope and avenues of historical questioning, reveal changing meanings and further dimensions to rich, emotive and sometimes devastating histories allowing differing stories to therefore emerge.

## (Endnotes)

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  - 14 See *ibid.*, p.202 for a full list of Cheer-Up Society branches.
  - 15 Adam-Smith, *op.cit.*, pp. 64-70.
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  - 33 Beth Robertson, *South Australian Women's Responses to the First World War*, State Library of South Australia, OH 31.
  - 34 Beth Robertson, personal communication March 2011.
  - 35 Mrs. Leonard Martin, Interview with Beth Robertson, 1979, *South Australian Women's Responses to the First World War*, State Library of South Australia, OH 31/7. Olive Martin had been married prior to the outbreak of the First World War and she had several small children and a stillbirth during 1918 that would have prevented her volunteering the long hours required at the Adelaide headquarters of the CUS.
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# Oral history and attachment to place in cultural heritage management: a case study of the shack community at Era, Royal National Park, NSW

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[This paper has been peer-reviewed]

## Abstract

The coastal shack community at Era in Royal National Park, New South Wales was listed on the State Heritage Register in April 2012 after fighting demolition for over 40 years. Oral history provided much of the evidence for the nomination; particularly under the criteria of social significance, historic associations and research values. This paper considers the importance of oral testimony in the conservation of threatened heritage places under current heritage legislation, particularly those places that may not be considered significant aesthetically or by association but which hold significant social value to a particular community. I seek to illustrate the sorts of attachment to place that can be accessed through an oral history approach by using the example of an individual oral history I recorded with one of the shack owners from Era who has been heavily involved in the shacks' protection. I argue the case for more serious use of oral history in heritage work, including the mapping of memories to further reveal attachments to place that may help strengthen a case for heritage conservation. I argue that oral history is vital in the conservation of heritage places associated with social groups not currently fully represented in the heritage listings.

## Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been a growing recognition of oral history's value in bringing meaning to heritage places and objects that can be invisible in historic remains or in the archaeological record.<sup>1</sup> Archaeologists such as Denis Byrne and Rodney Harrison have made pertinent use of oral history in archaeologies of contact and post-contact Australia.<sup>2,3</sup> These studies have focused on intangible heritage: Byrne & Nugent explored the ways in which Aboriginal people imprint landscapes with personal stories, memories and emotion, while Harrison's oral history work facilitated identification of the ephemeral places shared by Aboriginal and settler groups on and around pastoral stations in post-contact New South Wales. With place attachment at their core, both

bodies of work expose the potential of oral history in commercial heritage work.

Peter Read asserted in 1995 that the standard environmental impact statement has no requirement to investigate the nature or existence of attachments to threatened places.<sup>4</sup> Through a specific case study, this paper aims to explore whether emotional attachment receives enough consideration in heritage legislation and the impact that serious evaluation of oral histories could have in the conservation of heritage places. At the core of Harrison's and Byrne's work is the methodology of mapping memories in the landscape – travelling to the site of memory with the protagonist and composing maps of their remembered places. This paper also questions whether the creation of a documentary visual aid through mapping memory can impart further meaning which may add weight to a heritage argument.

Harrison's and Byrne's work concerned pastoral camps and town camps. Temporary settlements such as these lend themselves to an oral history methodology as they are composed of structures that leave few tangible remains, perhaps a few post holes and scatterings of broken glass or fragments of kerosene tin.<sup>5</sup> The testimony of those who lived there is the key to recording these sites' importance. There is a rich history and architecture of camping in Australia, Indigenous and non-Indigenous; from pre-contact Aboriginal camps to itinerant worker and Depression camps – and later on camping for pleasure. There is a continuity of places used as campsites – albeit for different purposes – and also of construction techniques from the deep past into the historical period and up to the present day. According to Geoff Ashley, 'the gunyah may have contributed to the materials and techniques that the European settlers used as temporary shelter and passed into vernacular tradition.'<sup>6</sup> The coastal shack settlements that dot Australia's coastline are an example of the continuity of place.<sup>7</sup> In style, too, these weekenders huts 'share aspects of simplicity in form, materials, amenities and resultant lifestyle' with Depression huts.<sup>8</sup>

## Era Beach

In April 2012 I attended a public open day of the shacks at Era Beach in Royal National Park (RNP), interested in the possibility of a research project into reconstructing historic camps through studying extant hut settlement and architecture.<sup>9</sup> I met several owners who spoke enthusiastically about their heritage, their community and about the conflict with National Parks over their continued presence on the site. It soon became clear that archaeological research value was just one part of these shacks' overall significance and I became interested in the meaning that these remains of the past give to people in the present. I also wanted to learn how the community experienced the landscape in which they were sited and the relationship between shack and landscape. Helen Voysey, president of the RNP Coastal Cabins Protection League, agreed to be interviewed on these subjects.

At Era it is likely that initial recreational use of the site in the early decades of the twentieth century led to occupation during the Depression. This usage may have in turn provided the location for the recreational shacks that were built in response to the health and fitness movement of the later 1930s.<sup>10</sup> Helen's father Lew built a shack at Era in 1937 with four friends as a weekend getaway – a place to fish, swim, walk and enjoy the outdoors. The shack remains today, still in the family of Lew's friend Warwick Hilton. The community is inaccessible by road and all building materials and provisions have to be brought in on foot, two kilometres down a steep track, or gathered at the

site. The shacks at Era were built on freehold land with the permission of the land owner.<sup>11</sup> The prospect of demolition first arose in the 1940s when the land was listed for sale. The Protection League was formed, with Helen's father Lew as secretary, and together with bush walkers they lobbied the government for the land to be protected from development.<sup>12</sup> The land was resumed by the Government in 1950 and incorporated into the National Park in 1954, administered by the National Park Trust. The shacks were allowed to stay with the instruction that no more were to be built. In 1967, the growing wilderness movement led to the passing of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act*, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service took over control of all national parks. This led to a change of policy and the beginning of shack removals; shacks could no longer be transferred between people and many were demolished when their owners died.<sup>13</sup> In 1993 the Protection League achieved National Trust listing for the shacks which was instrumental in preventing more demolitions and a moratorium on shack removal was announced in 1994.<sup>14</sup> The 1994 management plan for Royal National Park stipulated that the shacks should be conserved with cultural values intact and recognised that the occupants owned the shacks.<sup>15</sup> However, when the shack owners were re-negotiating their licences in 2001, National Parks claimed to own them.<sup>16</sup> In 2005 the shack owners took the case to the NSW Land and Environment Court. A settlement was reached in late 2006; the mediation agreement including a legal clause that National Parks and the shack owners should jointly apply for the communities to be listed on the State Heritage Register.



The shack settlement at South Era, 6 May 2012. Photo: author.

## Helen's Story

I was interested in Helen's story because of her family's long history at Era and because of the inter-generational involvement in the Protection League. One weekend when she was there with her husband, daughter, son-in-law and two grandchildren, we sat on the verandah of the original shack built by her father and his friend Warwick Hilton. By focusing on an individual life story I hoped to also gain a wider sense of the feelings of those who have called Era home, or at least a home from home. The existence of a collective memory in this community had been revealed in some of the stories I heard at the open day – the same names and events were recalled by different narrators; their stories all agreed. I was interested in getting to the core of the community's perception of the place through Helen's personal account.

In place attachment, cultural and social aspects such as identity, relationships and traditions are cemented in memory and pinned permanently to a location in space. Personal experience and place are inextricably linked; the landscape shapes those who live in it; those peoples' experience shapes the landscape. It is also a biological response: as children we experience place through all five senses.<sup>17</sup> Place can provide continuity and security: 'To have roots in a place is to have a secure point from which to look out on the world, a firm grasp of one's own position in the order of things, and a significant spiritual and psychological attachment to somewhere in particular.'<sup>18</sup> Inspired by the work of Byrne and Harrison, I asked Helen to annotate a large aerial photograph with the places she spoke about. Kevin Lynch regarded paths and edges, as well as landmarks, as having meaning in cognitive maps of attachment.<sup>19</sup> I hoped to record an extra layer of meaning by perceiving Helen's memories spatially; to examine this idea that buildings do not exist in a vacuum and people do not live just in buildings but in the landscape, counter to the conventional site-specific



Helen's father Lew looking over the shack settlement at Era from Governor Game lookout in 1950 after the announcement that the land was to be resumed and the shacks allowed to stay. The Wind Charger Point is centre left. Photo: Helen Voysey.

way of looking at cultural heritage.<sup>20</sup> While the shacks themselves are built fabric, the spaces around and connections between them link the tangible with the intangible.

The setting seemed to guide and shape the interview: the ocean roared steadily in the background. I had felt strongly about doing the interview at the site of memory and the sense of being in the place, together with visual stimuli – the shacks themselves, familiar plants, a wallaby – prompted and kept the interview flowing. Helen also showed me old photographs of her family taken at Era over the course of 75 years, further stirring recollections. Ten days after our interview I had the opportunity to meet Helen again, this time in Sydney. The intervening days had given us both a chance to reflect on our first interview: myself on questions to follow up; Helen perhaps on the memories she wanted to share. I was concerned the office environment, far removed from the shacks' dramatic coastal setting, would inhibit her interview. However, it soon became evident that Helen's memories of the landscape have their own life and she seemed not to need the visual prompts. As president of the Protection League she was used to talking about the importance of Era to her and her family; having lived under the threat of demolition for most of her life, she had clearly spent some time reflecting on what losing it would mean and those feelings seemed to be not far from the surface.

## Heritage Value of Era

In April 2012, immediately after my first visit to the shacks and before my interviews with Helen, the NSW Heritage Minister announced that the cabin communities' nomination to the State Heritage Register had been successful. Under the criteria, the nomination concluded that the 'historic, aesthetic, social and rarity values most strongly contribute to the overall State significance of the Little Garie, Era and Burning Palms cabin communities.'<sup>21</sup> Broadly speaking, under State and Territory heritage legislation, emotional attachment is contained within assessments of 'social significance'. In New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia the registers use a version of the Commonwealth's criterion (g) which refers to association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.

From a broad survey of heritage reports, including environmental impact statements and conservation management plans, social significance rarely appears to be investigated in depth.<sup>22</sup> As David Dolan has pointed out, it is easy to assume social value for a place but evidence is needed to withstand legal challenge.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, environmental impact statements are written predominantly not by anthropologists or historians but by planners who do not normally deal



Lew and Helen (left foreground) at the surf clubhouse in 1954.  
Photo: Helen Voysey.

with intangibles such as social value. Even when undertaken by a heritage practitioner, that specialist is unlikely to have a personal connection to the place in question.

In the nomination, the social significance (criterion (d)) of the cabin communities in Royal National Park was described as strength of ties, sense of identity, values associated with the shack lifestyle, a sense of place in the landscape, and family associations over several generations.<sup>24</sup> It was considered that the relative geographic isolation of the communities had influenced their social identity. These conclusions were drawn largely from the evidence of oral testimonies and illustrate the social values that can be reached through oral history: Geoff Ashley's extensive work on the cabin communities as part of a State-wide study of huts on National Parks land, which included the 1994 Cabins Conservation Management Plan, was informed to a great extent by oral histories he and Edie Swift collected during research, including an interview with Helen's father. The State Heritage Register nomination



Helen and brother Peter fishing on the rocks at the south end of Era beach, 1960. Photo: Helen Voysey.

drew heavily on this research.<sup>25</sup> The oral evidence made significant contributions to the criteria (b) historical association, (d) social significance and (e) research potential.<sup>26</sup>

Some of the most useful scholarship in researching intangible heritage has come from the Indigenous field. The work of Byrne & Nugent and Harrison leads this growing interest in New South Wales.<sup>27</sup> I hoped to apply some of their concepts and methodologies to non-Indigenous intangible heritage without trying to draw any direct parallels between European and Indigenous experience of landscape: in European society land is a commodity to be bought and sold; in Aboriginal society the concept of land tenure is based on a reciprocal relationship with land in which the rights and responsibilities of its people are implicit; a spirituality that encompasses a sense of identity, belonging and continuity.

Royal National Park has significant cultural, spiritual and social associations for the Dharawal people.<sup>28</sup> Aboriginal sites recorded at Era are evidence of long Aboriginal occupation and use of the area; for example, the large open shell midden at North Era. I felt that addressing the Aboriginal prior occupation of the site was too large a subject for the confines of this study and I therefore did not ask Helen to reflect on it. Unprompted, she did talk a little about the midden and about an Aboriginal stockman who had one of the first shacks at Era:

My parents certainly gave me an understanding of the Aboriginal history that had been here before us. Aboriginal people often became stockmen to stay on their country - this was probably Old Tom's country and that was his means of staying here.<sup>29</sup>

Helen is mindful of the fact that her country of attachment was previously taken from Aboriginal people and her discomfort with that fact is evident. The considerable question of how non-Indigenous attachment to those same places and landscapes can be justified when Indigenous people have been dispossessed of those places is the subject of Peter Read's *Belonging*.<sup>30</sup> Yet it is important to remember that place meaning is not static but changes over time and with the transit of different lives across a landscape. Place can hold a multiplicity of meaning as Veronica Strang has observed in her study of non-Indigenous farmers in Australia: 'The landscape is never inert, people engage with it, rework it, appropriate it and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed.'<sup>31</sup> While Peter Read and Chris Johnston have made significant advances, not enough has been done to investigate non-Indigenous attachment to place in Australia.<sup>32</sup> As Helen put it, non-Indigenous attachment to place:



... might often be connected with a family farm or with the school you went to or with these sorts of things where a place has a connection – well, Era is a really special place because of all those other sides to it.<sup>33</sup>

## Attachment to Place

During the interview, Helen's deep association with the landscape at Era was obvious. She talked about vegetation, native animals, rock pools, fishing spots, the moon and stars, caves where you could shelter if you got caught in the rain. There is a pattern and a natural rhythm of things:

... at dusk you can bet that a sea eagle will fly from the south to the north and go back to its roost on the Thelma Ridge, which is the big ridge over towards Garie, and when you're there in an evening and you look up and you see the eagle flying over there, you go, right, that's the sea eagle going home, and that fairly much invariably happens.<sup>34</sup>

When we began looking at the aerial photograph her recollections gathered pace. Her intimacy with the landscape was unquestionable:

Yes, this is the rock pool, it's right in there, you can see the blue. There's a bit of a wave coming over to it but that area there is the rock pool ... And of course that's the midden, as you know. Used to get oysters, lots of really nice oysters; this is an oyster bed around here. And there's another very deep rock pool, another pool we used to go to just somewhere here, but that was a deep diving pool and quite small but it's somewhere on there, it's quite nice. And there's a spring. Over on this area here there's a spring, you walk to here and there's a spring. And even when the creeks are dry, this spring – and this is why I think this is such an important midden – because there's water, fresh water coming from this spring all the time that you can get and I wouldn't drink this water [the creek] but I would drink this.<sup>35</sup>

The power of the landscape for Helen is unambiguous; it lives within her. Growing up in the shack settlement has produced a connectedness that contributes to her social identity. Moreover, the landscape cannot be separated from the physical building of the shack, both metaphorically and literally – there are no fences:

We always felt we owned the shack but we never felt that – it's not like a plot of land where you have a house and a fence – there are no fences ... the land kind of belongs to everybody and yet there's your place in that land.<sup>36</sup>



Bringing a water tank down the track, 1980s. Photo: Helen Voysey.

From Helen's map, we learn that each place has a name. There is Blue Hole, Rabbit Flat, Wind Charger Point. The shacks are also known by names, either nicknames – Trocadero, Starlight – or after their inhabitants – Booths, Lyons. Peter Read has identified local or affectionate names for places as a measure of attachment and therefore as evidence of social value.<sup>37</sup> Helen explained the origin of her shack's name: 'And it was known as Lilliput Inn, basically because all the blokes were fairly short.'<sup>38</sup> From a heritage conservation perspective, this sort of detailed information – stories and names of real people in a particular place – is difficult for decision-makers to ignore.

Helen's strong association with the place is particularly connected with her father. Her father had recorded an oral history himself in 1994 for the state-wide huts study commissioned by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, so it is probable that in the process of recording her own oral history his memory was felt all the more acutely.<sup>39</sup> Her words reveal that she senses



Four generations of the Voysey family at the shack, including Helen's parents in their wedding photograph on the wall behind, 6 May 2012. Photo: author.





Lilliput Inn, 1938: Warwick and Joan Hilton on the left and Lew Voysey on the right. Photo: Helen Voysey.

his spirit within the very fabric of the shack he built; the materials, the kerosene refrigerator he carried down the track, the furniture he constructed. She described him as a classic Aussie larrikin and the social activities of the shack lifestyle – surfing, beer, socialising, the beach, the outdoors – reflect that persona.

Reminders of her father were also everywhere in the surrounding landscape; it was very much his place. Further, the family shack holds a continuity and a sense of belonging that the family home does not:

And whereas the family home's been sold and – we lived in a family home at Castle Hill for many years – and I still drive past that with a bit of trepidation but you don't go there anymore. I mean it's just such an amazing thing to be able to have that connection and to go back there and to be in a place that your parents were and which you knew was a really significant part of their lives.<sup>40</sup>

Such length and continuity of attachment to a place is rare nowadays and Helen recognised the importance of such a deep connection, describing passing on family and shack traditions and knowledge to her grandchildren; seeing herself as a kind of link between the past and the future.

And that's what I see my future – playing cards, teaching kids about fires, and cooking on fires, and being careful with fire and about not running the tap and being careful with water and how we manage the kerosene technology and the solar technology and just passing on those traditions.<sup>41</sup>

Preserving her memories of childhood and her parents in the place of their occurrence, passing that down to her children and grandchildren, is vital to her sense

of self. Growing up in that community – the unique combination of freedom and responsibility – has shaped her identity and values. The special moments that are held in this particular location allow its inhabitants to face their lives, but also their deaths. As Helen annotated her aerial photograph, she remarked that she might not be here today if her father had not built that shack:

And this one is Mackays. Now, John Mackay introduced my mother to my father so without him I might not be here.<sup>42</sup>

At our second recording, she spoke about scattering her father's ashes off the Wind Charger Point, where the sea eagle appears most days. She spoke of reincarnation and it was clear that the sea eagle is a very strong emblem of her father and of everything, perhaps, that Era means to her.

I must say that when I see that sea eagle I always think of him because we put my father's ashes off the Wind Charger Point ... And we cast Dad's ashes off that Point and this wind just picked them up and blew them across the Point – and, you know, Dad is always there.<sup>43</sup>

An outsider – a specialist preparing a heritage assessment, for example – might see shacks on a hillside, an eagle gliding over the ridge. They might think the eagle a beautiful sight but without this poignant oral history they would not understand that it appears at the same point every day, embodying the spirit of a loved one.

Substantial emotional ties and psychological attachments are wrapped up in the material fabric of these simple dwellings. It is clear that deeply personal attachments such as Helen's are not unusual among shack owners at Era:

And there are many other people from the community who've had either their ashes – in various spots and locations – interred in walls at peoples' shacks or put into the sea or all sorts of different situations.<sup>44</sup>

Placing the ashes of a loved one in a landscape further establishes their place in it and strengthens the bonds of attachment to that place for the family. Inserting them into the actual built fabric of a shack could be seen as an attempt to preserve the metaphysical within the physical.<sup>45</sup> The sense of loss that would be felt on destruction of that place would be significant to its owner. Demonstrating a sense of loss if a place were to be destroyed is also a measure of social value in heritage legislation. That fear of displacement has been felt by Helen almost all of her life:

... and that's what I remember as a child. I remember the feeling that one day this would

be taken away. It was very strong, you know – I was probably about fourteen in 1966 when the first licence was signed and I remember the angst and anxiety ... and then I also remember in 1979 that feeling that when my parents died this would be pulled down. So they were very – they were horrible feelings to have.<sup>46</sup>

In most heritage legislation, criteria for protection under ‘social significance’ require that the place must hold social value to a community. What is meant by community has been much debated but it is clear that the ‘shackies’ do identify themselves as a community – visible even in the nickname they give themselves – a community formed in the 1930s out of like-minded young people helping each other build surf shacks to come to at the weekends.<sup>47</sup> Now, in their fifth generation in some instances, the current community is perhaps bound together more by the common desire to protect their shacks rather than any ideological or social coherence. However, the egalitarian nature of the shack community is considered significant by Helen. Her mother always said ‘leave your cares at the top of the hill’ – and with them stayed any notion of social hierarchy or prejudice. Some marginalised groups may have found an acceptance or a commonality at Era not found elsewhere:

... there were several, as I understand it, gay men who came there who could live and were accepted in that community, to a large extent ... and my parents came from a fairly left wing group, or intellectual group. There were the miners from Helensburgh, and there were other peoples who had been just bush walkers or, you know, whatever, I can’t really categorise them and yet when you’re there in your cossies on the beach, hey, [laughs] you’re pretty much equal.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

Proving a place’s importance requires a community to present a united, representative voice in responding to development threats. For the people of Era, the heritage may have become the means of cohesion. Their involvement in the heritage debate and the reinforcement of a shared heritage has drawn them together and contributed to the group sense of identity. The collective memory that I heard at the open day, the same stories retold, might be partly a social construct of the group to defend itself against a common threat.

Peter Read has suggested that documents other than written ones can strengthen an argument for heritage conservation, delivering more impact than written statements alone. For example, a photograph or a drawing or a poem can portray attachment more effectively than a transcript.<sup>49</sup> Likewise memory maps can be a powerful tool in a heritage legislation system



Playing cards in the Voysey family shack, 1970s. Photo: Helen Voysey.

that is still more comfortable with the tangible than the intangible, where oral evidence may be deemed frivolous because of concerns about the nature of memory and reliability. Creating maps from memories produces a piece of concrete evidence that has its origin in science rather than sociology. It firmly fixes attachments within a landscape. It makes attachments instantly visible to a decision-maker. Numerous attachment data presented spatially (for projects larger than the current case study) reveal patterns that can help pinpoint potential social impacts of development more readily than a bundle of transcripts.

The *State of the Environment 2011* report revealed that heritage listings worldwide and in Australia remain unrepresentative. Analysis of the listings for Australia was anticipated to reveal “our glorious past” dominating and less visible cultural, modern and



Helen and Lew on the beach in 1974. Photo: Helen Voysey.

Indigenous sites, cultural landscapes and industrial heritage being poorly identified and thus poorly protected'.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, there exists a bias towards age in significance assessments; the importance of valuing living memory and conserving places from the familiar past has been argued by Clarke & Johnston.<sup>51</sup> In a survey of social significance in heritage assessments undertaken for National Parks in 2003, Byrne et al criticised the 'fabric-based' nature of heritage conservation in Australia, finding that most consultants did not take oral histories and when they did, it was informal and only recorded in field notes.<sup>52</sup> David Dolan has also recognised that oral history is crucial in social significance work: 'Oral history projects which focus on places in terms of establishing their social value would be of great use to the cause of heritage preservation for the benefit of future generations.'<sup>53</sup> How to fund this research is problematic, however. Preparing for, researching, conducting and processing oral histories is a time-consuming, high-cost business. Heritage work, frequently funded by the party making the planning application, is often subject to tight deadlines imposed by that party – whose aims often run contrary to those of heritage conservation. It is clear, however, that intangibles such as social significance must be given more serious attention in order to redress the imbalance in the sorts of items currently considered worthy of heritage conservation – predominantly items of grand architecture or structures associated with people who are perceived to be important. The future heritage of subaltern groups, for example, or of ordinary people – such as the shacks at Era – depends to a great extent on oral history.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 See, for example Margaret Purser, 'Oral History and Historical Archaeology,' in Barbara J. Little (ed.), *Text-Aided Archaeology*, Boca Raton, 1992, pp.25–35; Peter Read, *Returning to Nothing: the meaning of lost places*, Cambridge, 1996; Chris Johnston, *An integrated approach to environment and heritage issues*, paper prepared for the 2006 Australia State of the Environment Committee, Department of Environment and Heritage, Canberra, 2006. <http://www.deh.gov.au/soe/2006/integrative/heritage/index.html>
- 2 Denis Byrne & Maria Nugent, *Mapping Attachment: a spatial approach to Aboriginal post-contact heritage*, Sydney, Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW), 2004.
- 3 Rodney Harrison, *Shared Landscapes: archaeologies of attachment and the pastoral industry in New South Wales*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2004.
- 4 Peter Read, 'My Footprints are Here: Oral History and the Attachment to Place,' *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 17, 1995, p.40.
- 5 Anita Smith & Wendy Beck, 'The archaeology of No man's land: Indigenous camps at Corindi Beach, mid-north coast New South Wales', *Archaeology Oceania*, 38, 2003, pp.66–77;
- Harrison 2004 *op. cit.*
- 6 Geoff Ashley, *Royal National Park Cabins Draft Conservation Plan*, Hurstville, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1994, p.8.
- 7 *ibid.* p.13.
- 8 *ibid.* p.13.
- 9 A public open day was organised by the communities of Little Garie, Era and Burning Palms as part of the National Trust Heritage Festival to showcase their history and heritage.
- 10 Geoff Ashley, State Heritage Register Nomination: Royal National Park Coastal Cabin Communities of Little Garie, Era and Burning Palms, submitted to the Heritage Office in 2010.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Helen Voysey, interviewed by author, 6 May 2012, digital recording and transcript held by author.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, *Royal National Park, Heathcote National Park and Garawarra State Recreation Area Plan of Management*, Sydney, 2000, p.33.
- 16 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 6 May 2012.
- 17 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1977.
- 18 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, Pion, London, 1976.
- 19 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1960.
- 20 An idea also conjectured by Denis Byrne, for example, in Foreword to Sharon Veale, *Remembering Country: History and Memories of Towarri National Park*, Hurstville, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2001. See also: Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw & Tracey Ireland, *Social Significance: a discussion paper*, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, 2003, p.3; Annie Clarke & Chris Johnston, *Time, Memory, Place and Land: Social Meaning and Heritage Conservation in Australia*, Paper Presented at the Scientific Symposium, ICOMOS 14th General Assembly, 2003 in Zimbabwe.
- 21 Ashley 2010, *op. cit.* p.4.
- 22 Based on the author's experience of editing and proofreading a wide range of heritage reports in her capacity working at a heritage consultancy, and also from personal research.
- 23 David Dolan, 'Oral History and Heritage Work', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, 25, 2003, p.4.
- 24 Ashley 2010, *op. cit.*
- 25 Geoff Ashley, pers. comm., August 2013. Some of the oral histories are now held in the National Library of Australia, including the interview with Helen's father, Lew Voysey, interview by Edie Swift, transcript, January 1994, National Library of Australia, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/11455257?selectedversion=NBD10710753>. As a result of the recommendations made in the State-wide study, huts in Crater Cove in Sydney Harbour National Park and at Mullett Creek on the Hawkesbury River have been retained by the National Parks and Wildlife Service with various management arrangements in place (Geoff Ashley, pers. Comm., August 2013).
- 26 The National Parks and Wildlife Service opposed several points in the nomination, including that the shacks met criterion (d) at a State level; they said that the association with the community was limited to a restricted area within New South Wales and that significance under criterion (d) should be reduced to

- local level. While the Heritage Council originally agreed with National Parks' assessment, the number and strength of submissions received by the Heritage Council (216, all but one in favour of the listing) from all around the State and nation, led them to revise their assessment to State level (Heritage Council of NSW Agenda Item 5.1.1, 1 February 2012). National Parks also claimed that in the heritage studies for the site the heritage values of other communities, such as bushwalkers, had not been considered and that 'the voices of a small community have been given undue prominence.' (Heritage Council of NSW Agenda Item 5.1.1, 1 February 2012). Also still contested was the ownership of the cabins. National Parks wanted references to shack owners changed to 'occupants' and 'licensees' throughout the nomination (Helen Voysey, interviewed by author, 6 May 2012). The shack owners felt strongly that this did not truthfully reflect their ownership.
- 27 Byrne & Nugent 2004 *op. cit.*; Harrison 2004 *op. cit.*
  - 28 Graham Brooks & Associates, *Royal National Park Coastal Cabin Areas Conservation Management Plan*, Parks and Wildlife Division, NSW Department of Environment and Conservation, 2005.
  - 29 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 6 May 2012.
  - 30 Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*, Cambridge, 2000.
  - 31 Barbara Bender, *Landscape, Politics and Perspectives*, Oxford, Berg, 1993 quoted in Veronica Strang, *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values*, Oxford, Berg, 1997.
  - 32 See also Peter Read 1996 *op. cit.*; Chris Johnston, *What is Social Value? A Discussion Paper*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1992; Clarke & Johnston 2003, *op. cit.*
  - 33 Helen Voysey, interviewed by author, 16 May 2012, digital recording and transcript held by author.
  - 34 *ibid.*
  - 35 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 6 May 2012.
  - 36 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 16 May 2012.
  - 37 Read 1995, *op. cit.* p.41.
  - 38 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 6 May 2012.
  - 39 Lew Voysey, interview by Edie Swift, transcript, January 1994, National Library of Australia, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/11455257?selectedversion=NBD10710753>
  - 40 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 16 May 2012.
  - 41 *ibid.*
  - 42 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 6 May 2012.
  - 43 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 16 May 2012.
  - 44 *ibid.*
  - 45 For much of Aboriginal Australia the ethnographic literature cites avoidance, for example, shelter removal, on the death of a family member. Paul Memmott states the reasons usually given are either to prevent the spirit lingering or to remove stimuli of painful memories. (Paul Memmott, *Gunyah, Goondie + Wurley: the Aboriginal Architecture of Australia*, St Lucia, Qld, University of Queensland Press, 2007.) It is worth noting the difference with the burial practice described by Helen where the shack owners have sought to preserve the spirit in its place and to be reminded of them. It also serves to illustrate the conflicting experience of place between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.
  - 46 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 6 May 2012.
  - 47 The community at Era has a historical association with people involved in the arts and literature as well as social groups such as communists and gay people (Geoff Ashley 1994 *op. cit.* p100).
  - 48 Helen Voysey, *op. cit.*, 16 May 2012.
  - 49 Read 1995, *op. cit.* p.44
  - 50 State of the Environment 2011 Committee, *Australia State of the Environment 2011, Independent report to the Australian Government Minister for Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities*, Canberra, DSEWPac, 2011.
  - 51 Clarke & Johnston, 2003 *op. cit.*
  - 52 Byrne et al. 2003, *op. cit.* p.157.
  - 53 Dolan 2003, *op. cit.* p.4

# 17th International Oral History Conference Report

## The Challenges of Oral History in the 21st Century: diversity, inequality and identity construction

by Christeen Schoepf

[This conference report was first published in *Word of Mouth*, the newsletter of the South Australian Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia]

Buenos Aires, Argentina is an expansive city of three million people at its heart and up to fifteen million in the surrounding suburbs. It is loud, fast and extremely busy. It is old and yet new, rambling and rundown, but spreading its wings and rebuilding. Magnificent churches abound, and changing dictatorships and regimes have left their relics. There are few quiet spaces to be found even in the wee small hours. It is culturally vibrant and protestors regularly pound their drums on the march to the square that fronts the country's governmental building. Buenos Aires has a history of colonial invasion, Indigenous loss, multiculturalism and radical governments. It was the home and is the resting place of Eva Peron, and most importantly, it has a story to tell that is now being actively collected, analysed and interpreted by local chapters of the many South American Oral History Associations.

Held at the 'Centre of Cultural Cooperation' and several smaller venues in Buenos Aires, from 3 - 7 September 2012, the 17<sup>th</sup> International Oral History Association (IOHA) Conference, *Challenges of Oral History in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: diversity, inequality and identity construction*, was both challenging and hectic. Unfortunately, few Australians and New Zealanders

attended and distance and visa requirements prohibited many other oral historians from Europe and Africa from travelling to the conference. Language also proved to be an issue with only the plenary sessions being translated from Spanish into English. However, communication between Spanish and English speaking presenters was overcome in some instances with *ad hoc* translation graciously provided by multi-lingual members of the audience and last minute PowerPoint presentation changes using 'Google Translate'. These problems aside, the conference presented a diversity of oral history projects and current theoretical issues that reflected new directions in thinking and a range of ventures into previously unrecorded and undocumented oral narratives. Technology proved problematic in some venues where hardware compatibility and new versus old versions of software and operating systems created challenges for presenters who were reliant upon the technologies for the success of their papers. Due to these issues, a great deal of the oral and visual components of many papers was abandoned.

I was fortunate to have attended and presented a paper at this conference and was funded by several very competitive grants to this end. In the first instance, my travel and accommodation were reimbursed as the recipient of the *Keith and Dorothy McKay Scholarship*, through the University of New England, and secondly, I was awarded a scholarship through the International Oral History Association to cover conference fees, some travel, and the attendance at the Master Classes. In addition, I would like to mention that earlier grants from the Oral History Association of Australia South Australian Branch's *Lizzie Russell Oral History Grant Scheme*, and the Historical Society of South Australia contributed funds to enable my research and that was presented at the conference.

Master classes were held on Monday 3 September and covered oral history collection techniques and best practice methodologies in fields such as trauma and violence; ecology and environment; Indigenous



Christeen Schoepf & Sue Bruley from London. Photograph by Paul Siddell.





Kirsty McCully (NZ), Christeen Schoepf, Fiona McDougall(USA) & Sue Berman (NZ). Photograph by Paul Siddell.

peoples; and research methods such as collecting and interpreting qualitative data. Robert Perks and Mary Stewart from the British Library (BL) presented a class on archiving oral histories, with the principles being equally applicable to large institutions such as the BL down to the smallest local history collection, library or museum. Rob Perks took the class through the process of accessioning and cataloguing oral history projects to be archived in the BL, while Mary informed the group of the latest ethical problems and solutions and the legalities of access to oral histories including copyright, anonymity, retrospective access to recordings and the handling of metadata within the archives. Since the conference, Mary and Rob have kindly sent some further literature regarding these points which I am happy to share with anyone who wishes to have a copy. Please contact me at [christeen.schoepf@gmail.com](mailto:christeen.schoepf@gmail.com) for further information.

Many of the English speaking participants supported each other by attending sessions in which each was embedded within the Spanish presentations. Participants from Australia, New Zealand, Britain, Germany and the United States presented some very interesting papers on issues ranging from feminist groups and protests; object biographies of hospital operating theatre spaces; volunteer workers and businesses of the Gulf of Mexico oil spill; football posters; unionism, digital history, and living with disabilities. Michelle Rayner, ABC Radio presenter and Executive Producer of 'Hindsight,' presented her experiences creating narratives for radio where she personally considered the use of the audio documentary as a powerful tool for delving into the past, and into memories, both individual and collective. Expatriate journalist and documentary maker Fiona McDougall, now a resident of California, told of her experience making the documentary *Living between sound and silence*, and the challenges that presented themselves to the interviewees and families, the production team, and Fiona as interviewer and producer of the film. The fifteen minute documentary explores the lives of two teenage girls, one the hearing child of deaf parents, the other a deaf child of hearing parents and

the two worlds of the 'other' that each move between within their family, school and social lives. The movie can be watched at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9iVW\\_x4IB8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9iVW_x4IB8)

Helen Klæbe from the Queensland University of Technology (and former South Australian), revealed the emptiness felt by communities in the wake of natural disasters such as cyclones, floods and fires, when in the aftermath of such events comes the realisation that everything tangible that told of the past was now gone. Along with others from QUT and the Queensland Oral History Association, Helen told how digital story-telling is giving such communities a new resource with which to rebuild the history and narrative of a locality. Workshops provided community members with the skills to record the oral histories and memories from how to use the equipment to ethics and storage of the recordings. My own paper considered how oral history and the notion of object biography not only supplement each other as methodologies but can also stimulate the production of wider and more informed questions. Examples presented include the Mayoral Chair of Port Pirie which was a research project discussing the life cycle and object biography of the chair from its birth as the barque Saturn, built in Stralsund, Germany in the late nineteenth century and its demise when it burned in the harbour at Port Pirie; then reincarnation as the Mayoral Chair built by German migrant Theodore Kneese and the chair's new life within the council chambers. Other examples were discussed from my current research project investigating the story of the Cheer-Up Society of SA which is also using object biography and oral history as its methodology. The IOHA meeting elected new members for the next two year period and no decision was made regarding the next IOHA conference in 2014. Further news can be obtained from their own website later this year.



Rob Perks. Photograph by Paul Siddell.

# 2012 – 2013 President's Report

It gives me great pleasure to present the annual report of the Oral History Association of Australia for 2012-2013, a particularly exciting and productive year.

There have been several changes to the national committee: Lindy Wallace, who moved to Melbourne from Perth in 2012, stepped in as National Secretary after Sarah Sanderson retired. As the Treasurer's role was not re-assigned, I have continued to act in the position, with the assistance of an external bookkeeper. Al Thomson has been a wonderful vice-president (and teleconference chair). Keeping a meeting in order when it is face to face is challenging but to do this when we meet over the phone is particularly commendable. I thank him for his support over the two-year period. June Edwards has continued to keep our website up to date: especially commendable since she has also spent much of the last year working on the biennial conference 'She said he Said: reading writing and recording history.' (It's good to see 'the girls' getting first say!). Sue Anderson continues to do a wonderful job with the journal and I would like to thank her for the professionalism that she brings to the role and the quality of the journal that she produces. A call for a Book Reviews Editor resulted in the appointment of Jayne Persian to this role and I welcome her on board.

State representatives have changed with Catherine Cottle replacing Ariella van Luyn in Queensland and Len Cargeeg replacing Lindy Wallace in Western Australia. Judge Caren Fox is the International Oral History Association Oceania Representative.

My congratulations go to the conference committee for their splendid effort in its planning towards the conference and workshops. Having assisted with the biennial conference in Victoria in 2011, I fully understand just how much work is involved. The biennial conference is a much looked forward to event and is a wonderful opportunity to attend papers, network with other oral historians, enjoy the social side of the conference and catch up with old friends.

The national committee has continued to meet by teleconference each quarter and the focus of our discussions this year has been a name change for our

organisation and changes to the national constitution. It was felt that the letters 'OHAA' said little about what we did as an organisation—especially for people who are unfamiliar with oral history. Oral History Australia Inc. is a more precise name and is in-line with modern practice in the way businesses are named.

Along with the name change is the change to the constitution. Sandra Blamey and Jill Cassidy have worked tirelessly on this process. At each stage, draft versions of the proposed constitution were circulated to members and the national committee received very positive comments and suggestions—most of which were incorporated into the progressive drafts. Sandra Blamey has reworked draft after draft and sought professional guidance and advice in its drafting. Every effort was made to ensure that the new constitution provided appropriate guidelines for the effective management of Oral History Australia's business by the committee and office bearers. To this end, governance and legal compliance will be streamlined, with a committee made up of a nominee from each member association rather than being made up of the office bearers from the state branch that ran the biennial conference. The committee will elect its own office bearers and the term of office will be one year with a maximum term of six years. Each member association will appoint an alternate delegate to ensure maximum involvement and continuity of the work of the committee.

Rather than being independently incorporated, state oral history associations will become members of a national incorporated association, and provision will be made for Territory associations, not currently in existence, to be admitted. The new constitution also amplifies our aims and objectives with its focus on the role and intent of the national association and of the practice of oral history in general.

Because our focus as a committee has been on the constitution, little has been done towards establishing a national training program for oral historians, which was something that we set out to do at the start of our

two-year term. This could perhaps be something that the new committee explores in the future.

I wish to thank my fellow committee members, especially Sandra Blamey, Jill Cassidy, Al Thomson and Lindy Wallace for their assistance and support over the past two years. I feel that I came to this role with little expertise and leave it having learned a great deal.

And finally, I wish the new committee all the best for 2013-2014.

**Jill Adams**

# OHAA 2012/2013 Financial Report

**Receipts        \$23,499.11**

<b>Made up of</b>	<b>\$9,095.50</b>	<b>Conference share</b>
	<b>\$425.00</b>	<b>Standing Orders</b>
	<b>\$12,635.00</b>	<b>Capitation from states</b>
	<b>\$127.63</b>	<b>Interest</b>
	<b>\$1,215.98</b>	<b>Copyright payments</b>

**Payments        \$13,537.45**

<b>Made up of</b>	<b>\$691.34</b>	<b>Copyright payments</b>
	<b>\$7,452.48</b>	<b>Journal and postage</b>
	<b>\$538.00</b>	<b>Web</b>
	<b>\$851.63</b>	<b>Meeting expenses</b>
	<b>\$3,174.00</b>	<b>Legal and business registration</b>
	<b>\$15.00</b>	<b>Bank fees</b>
	<b>\$815.00</b>	<b>Standing orders to state branches</b>

**Term Deposit: \$5139.81 sitting in a holding account as of 21 May 2013. The term deposit has accumulated \$137.55 since 1 July 2012 and \$60.00 has been deducted as we have not provided a TFN exemption details**

<b>Balance at 1 July 2012:</b>	<b>\$14,305.73</b>
<b>Plus receipts:</b>	<b>\$23,499.11</b>
<b>Total:</b>	<b>\$37,804.84</b>

<b>Less payments:</b>	<b>\$13,537.45</b>
<b>Current Balance:</b>	<b>\$24,267.39</b>

<b>Plus Term Deposit</b>	<b>\$5,139.81</b>
<b>Balance at 30 June 2013</b>	<b>\$29,407.20</b>

# Notes on Contributors

## Mary Brooks

Mary Brooks is a PhD candidate from the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane with research interests in history and literature. Her research into women's experiences on the home front during World War Two explored elder-storytelling and identity formation within the gender-consigned sub-narrative of a national story. Placing interpretive emphasis on story, the study examined the multiple dimensions of memory found in the oral autobiographies of army servicewomen (AWAS), and investigated the themes, genres and telling strategies employed in their narration. After completing her BA (Hons) degree in 2010, Mary was awarded the University Medal and the Faculty Medal in Arts and Sciences. Her current research investigates the paradox of self construction in the autobiographies of nineteenth century missionaries.

## Hilary Davies

Hilary Davies gained her PhD with a thesis examining middle-class social mobility in colonial Queensland, using the Hume family as a case study. This was published in 2011 as *Surveying Success: The Hume Family in Colonial Queensland*. Her Master of Arts thesis was a regional study examining the independence, status, and power of elite women in colonial south-east Queensland. In 2012 she undertook post-graduate study in oral history at the University of New England. She is now engaged in using these skills to complete a biographical study of the parallel lives of three Brisbane men in during the twentieth century. For the last seven years Hilary has worked as a heritage officer. Currently she is employed as a Senior Heritage Officer in the Heritage branch of the Department of Environment and Heritage Protection, primarily engaged in researching and assessing the cultural heritage significance of places nominated for entry in the Queensland Heritage Register.

## Arua Oko Omaka

Arua Oko is a PhD candidate and a teaching assistant in history at the McMaster University, Canada. His dissertation is entitled 'Mercy Angels: Biafra and Humanitarian Responses, 1967-1970.' He has a BA (Hons) in history and a Master's Degree in history and international studies (economic and social history) from the University of Nigeria. He has taught history at the Ebonyi State College of Education, Ikwo, Nigeria. His research interests are African history, conflict studies, colonialism, nationalism and nation-building, humanitarian studies, genocide and human rights.

## Aaron Payne

Aaron Payne graduated with a Bachelor of Medical Science Degree before deciding to pursue his passion for teaching and education with a Bachelor of Education/Arts degree at the University of Sydney. Aaron is a qualified secondary teacher and is interested in exploring deaf education through oral history. As a profoundly deaf person himself, Aaron has a long-standing involvement with the Shepherd Centre and Cochlear working with young adults and their families and raising awareness of issues relating to deafness. He is also a member of the NSW Frog and Tadpole Study Group and has a passion for frog research and conservation and has assisted with field research and publications. He is currently undertaking a PhD looking at the history of deaf education in Australia and the individual experiences of parents and students in New South Wales.

## Deirdre Prinsen

Deirdre Prinsen is a Masters student at the University of New England, majoring in Heritage Studies. Her research interests are in social significance, the conservation of vernacular architecture and twentieth century heritage, community involvement



in heritage outcomes and the heritage of ordinary people. She holds a Bachelor of Archaeology from University College London and has experience in undertaking archaeological surveys and excavation, site recording and planning. Before changing career she had considerable experience as a production manager in the book publishing industry and in live television captioning for the hearing-impaired. She currently works in Sydney as an assistant at Godden Mackay Logan heritage consultants.

## Dr Elaine Rabbitt

Elaine Rabbitt is the president of the Broome Museum and Historical Society, a social historian with a PhD in Oral History, and the training manager of Djaringo Pty Ltd, the registered training arm of Nirrumbuk Aboriginal Corporation. Elaine has recorded many interviews with people from all walks of life including for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies, the National Library, the Australian National Film & Sound Archive, the Australian Generations Project, the Australian Women in Leadership E-encyclopedia, Broome Historical Society and the Shire of Broome. She has written and presented papers on oral history and methodology in relation to key themes in Australian social history at state, national and international conferences.

## Carol Roberts

Carol Roberts has a BA, majoring in Australian History, as well as an Advanced Diploma in Local, Family and Applied History from the University of New England in Armidale, NSW. She also has qualifications in music, tour-guiding and community cultural development. Her recently-completed thesis for her Master of History was based on the art making practices of Hawkesbury artist Greg Hansell and the transcript from her oral history interview with Hansell in 2008 formed the wording for the catalogue for the thirty-year *Greg Hansell: Survey* exhibition at Hawkesbury Regional Gallery in 2009. Carol worked in executive administration in Federal and Local Government environments for many years, while at the same time pursuing an active interest in historical and arts organisations in the Hawkesbury area. She is a member of Hawkesbury City Council's Heritage Advisory Committee, and is also currently involved in recording the history of families in the Kurrajong area with the Kurrajong-Comleroy Historical Society Family History Group. In November 2011, she purchased Hawkesbury Valley Heritage Tours and, together with her husband Geoff, provides a step-on heritage tour guide service for coach groups and visitors to the Hawkesbury area.

## Christeen Schoepf

Christeen Schoepf is currently a PhD student at the University of New England, NSW. Her thesis topic is an exploration of the Cheer-Up Society of South Australia during the First World War. She has completed a BA (Hons) which produced an object biography of the Mayoral Chair of Port Pirie in South Australia and tells of the life course of the chair from birth as an acorn in a German forest, its life as a ship sailing the world during the nineteenth century, the burning of the ship in Port Pirie and its reincarnation as the chair. The project will eventually be presented as a web based history of the Port Pirie district. Christeen also completed a BA majoring in Australian History and Archaeology/ Paleo-anthropology and an Advanced Diploma in Local, Family and Applied History where her interest in the use of oral history first developed. Further research interests include exploring the stories objects can tell; the home-front during WW1 and the migration stories of new Australians. Christeen is a member of the Oral History Association (South Australia and International), Australian Women's History Network and Port Pirie District Family History Group.

## Helen Stagg

Helen Stagg completed her Masters of History at the University of New England in 2010 based on interviews with children of former members of the lock/weir construction gangs along the River Murray. She has become interested in giving voice to minority groups including women, children, and ordinary workers. Helen has had a peer reviewed paper published in the *Flinders Journal of History and Politics*, Volume 27, 2011, and has presented papers at conferences in Adelaide over several years including at the 2012 Australian Historical Association Conference. Along with her historical passion she is an avid genealogist and edits the newsletter for the Mildura and District Genealogical Society.

## Jesse Adams Stein

Jesse Adams Stein is a PhD Candidate in the School of Design at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). In 2009 she graduated with a MA in art history and design history from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and in 2005 she was awarded the University Medal for art theory at the University of New South Wales for her Honours degree. Jesse hopes to bring a stronger consciousness about labour experience into the academic disciplines known as Design History and the History of Technology. Her PhD research focuses on the final three decades of

the New South Wales Government Printing Office, with an emphasis on technological change and gender relations. This project involves a substantial oral history component, in addition to pictorial and archival material. Jesse teaches design history at UTS, and has published in *Design & Culture*, *New Matilda*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and *Art & Australia*.

## **Therese Sweeney**

Therese Sweeney is a consultant and practitioner in new media history and relational engagement project work, within community and industries. For the past twenty years Therese has initiated and committed to a practise of documentary photography and oral history recordings in south west and inner Sydney, collaborating and engaging in fringe communities. In 2008 Therese established Memory Bank Cultural Media Inc. a not-for-profit new media history institution focussing on ageing residents. Therese studied in the mid 1990s in social history and film at the University of Technology Sydney (BA Communications) and was awarded a Community Fellowship from this University in 2000, under Shopfront, led by Dr Paul Ashton, Professor of History, UTS. Prior to this Therese worked for over a decade in Human Resource Management in State Government; resigning as a Senior Policy Analyst, Legal Aid Commission in 1991.



**Oral History Association of Australia**

**The Hazel de Berg Award, 2013  
for  
Excellence in Oral History**



Francis Good has made an outstanding contribution to the cause of oral history in Australia for close to 30 years. Appointed as manager of the Northern Territory Archive's Oral History Unit in 1985 he actively and enthusiastically promoted the collection and preservation of oral interviews, introduced high standards in sound recording, and ensured interviews were easily accessible.

Francis initiated oral history projects focusing on disaster survival including the Japanese bombing raids on Darwin in 1942; Cyclone Tracy in 1974; and the 1998 Katherine floods. He has recorded stories of the pastoral industry and of Aboriginal communities including outstations; he trained Indigenous people in oral history techniques; he commissioned interviews and travelled widely undertaking interviews. His own recordings coupled with those he commissioned have resulted in over 2,000 recorded hours; they represent a legacy of inestimable value to the Northern Territory, and an important contribution to the nation's history. Francis became the voice of oral history in the Territory.

Despite the Northern Territory being the focus of his professional employment, Francis's influence has been extensive. Throughout his career he has

steadfastly contributed to raising awareness of the value of oral history within the community and the profession, and he has been generous in sharing his experience and knowledge with others.

Francis has also been active in the Oral History Association; on the National Committee for almost 20 years; on the Association's editorial board from 1994; while Journal Editor for four years he introduced peer review and ensured maintenance of high quality standards and credibility; he managed the website for many years; updated the Journal's index; and he has regularly attended and contributed to oral history conferences. Francis' article in The Oral History Reader is used by students and practitioners alike.

In 2007 Francis was honoured with the award of life membership of the Oral History Association of Australia. In retirement he continues to provide training and consultancy services.

# Membership information

## Oral History Association of Australia



The Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA) was established in 1978. The objectives of the Association are to:

- Promote the practice and methods of oral history
- Educate in the use of oral history methods
- Encourage discussion of all problems in oral history
- Foster the preservation of oral history records in Australia
- Share information about oral history projects.

Branch seminars and workshops are held regularly throughout the year, while a national conference is held every two years. Many of the papers from conferences appear in the OHAA Journal.

Members receive a copy of the annual OHAA Journal and newsletters and publications from their individual branches. Among other publications, the South Australian Branch of the OHAA has published the Oral History Handbook by Beth M Robertson, which is available to members at a

The OHAA website can be found at: [www.ohaa.org.au](http://www.ohaa.org.au).

Enquiries should be directed to State branches at the following addresses:

### **New South Wales**

President: Virginia Macleod  
Oral History Association of Australia NSW Inc  
PO Box 261  
Pennant Hills NSW 1715  
Email: [secretary@ohaansw.org.au](mailto:secretary@ohaansw.org.au)  
Phone: 02 8094 1239  
Website: [www.ohaansw.org.au](http://www.ohaansw.org.au)

### **Northern Territory**

Incorporated into the South Australian Branch

### **Queensland**

President: Catherine Cottle  
PO Box 12213 George Street  
Brisbane Qld 4003  
Email: [president@ohaaqld.org.au](mailto:president@ohaaqld.org.au)  
Website: [www.ohaaqld.org.au](http://www.ohaaqld.org.au)

### **South Australia**

President: June Edwards  
PO Box 3113,  
Unley SA 5061  
Email: [ejune32@yahoo.com](mailto:ejune32@yahoo.com)  
Website: [www.ohaa-sa.com.au](http://www.ohaa-sa.com.au)

### **Tasmania**

President: Jill Cassidy  
c/- Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery,  
PO Box 403,  
Launceston Tas 7250  
Mobile: 0418 178 098  
Email: [mandjcassidy@gmail.com](mailto:mandjcassidy@gmail.com)

### **Victoria**

President: Jill Adams  
2 Leopold Street,  
Glen Iris Vic 3759  
Email: [President@oralhistoryvictoria.org.au](mailto:President@oralhistoryvictoria.org.au)  
Website: [www.oralhistoryvictoria.org.au](http://www.oralhistoryvictoria.org.au)

### **Western Australia**

President: Len Cargeeg  
PO Box 1065,  
Nedlands WA 6909  
Email: [ohaawa@gmail.com](mailto:ohaawa@gmail.com)  
Website: [www.ohaa-wa.com.au](http://www.ohaa-wa.com.au)

# Call for Papers

Contributions are invited from Australia and overseas for publication in the  
OHAA Journal No. 36, 2014



Contributions are invited in the following three categories:

**A** Papers on the themes of, including those presented at, the Biennial National Conference held in Adelaide in September 2013 (*limit 5,500 words*).

Papers in Category A may be submitted to the OHAA Editorial Board for peer-review.

However, please note:

- Papers for peer-review must demonstrate a high standard of scholarship, and reflect a sound appreciation of current and historical issues on the topics discussed.
- Papers for peer-review may be submitted at any time; however, if not received by the Editorial Board by the deadline for submissions of 28 February 2014, they may not be processed in time for publication in the 2014 issue of the Journal. Furthermore, regardless of when offers are forwarded to the Board, no guarantee of publication can be given, due to availability and time constraints of reviewers.
- Before being submitted for peer-review, papers will first be assessed for suitability by the Editorial Board. Authors will be advised of the recommendations made by the Chair of the Board.

## **Deadline for Category A submissions for peer-review: 28 February 2014.**

Forward to: Dr Ariella van Luyn, Chair, OHAA Editorial Board, email: [ariella.vanluyn@jcu.edu.au](mailto:ariella.vanluyn@jcu.edu.au), mobile: 0401 925 228.

**B** Articles/project reports describing specific projects or conference reports, the information gained through them, and principal outcomes or practice issues identified in the process (*limit: 4,000 words*).

**C** Reviews of books and other publications from Australia or elsewhere that are of interest to the oral history community: may include reviews of static or internet available exhibitions, or any projects presented for a public audience (*limit 1,500 words*).

### **Accompanying Materials**

Photographs, drawings and other illustrations are particularly welcome, and may be offered for any of the above categories of contribution.

## **Deadline for Category B submissions: 1 April 2014.**

Forward to: Dr Sue Anderson, Editor, OHAA Journal, email: [Sue.Anderson@unisa.edu.au](mailto:Sue.Anderson@unisa.edu.au).

## **Deadline for Category C submissions: 1 April 2014.**

Forward to Dr Jayne Persian, Reviews Editor, email: [jpersian@uow.edu.au](mailto:jpersian@uow.edu.au).