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REFLECTING ON
OUR PRACTICE

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Professional Historians Australia (PHA) is the peak body that acts on behalf of its state and territory bodies. It represents more than 500 professionally accredited historians across Australia. The PHA is committed to advocating for historical perspectives in public debates about interpretations of history and the keeping of documentary, environmental and other historical records.

The PHA works on behalf of its members to encourage and maintain professional research standards and ethics by providing professional development and networking opportunities, and liaising with businesses, organisations, communities and governments who seek to work with professional historians.

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Cover image: Mark Morton Lookout (detail), February 2020, photo by Barbara Eckersley.

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to the new look *Circa*, given a fresh start thanks to the support of the current Professional Historians Australia (PHA) president, Lucy Bracey, and her fellow committee members. PHA's biennial conference now serves as a springboard for publishing *Circa*. Thanks also to the *Circa* editorial board, which has assisted us in establishing guidelines for the publication and its peer review processes.

Producing a professional, peer reviewed journal is no easy undertaking. This is the eighth issue of *Circa: The Journal of Professional Historians* and it is a testament to the hard work, dedication and commitment of our members in advocating and showcasing the important work of professional historians.

Circa offers members a forum to publish work that reflects the diverse ways in which our profession engages with history and historical practice in a wide range of areas, including cultural heritage, oral history, the GLAMR (galleries, libraries, archives, museums and recordkeeping) sector, the media, education, commissioned and community histories and government.

It is fitting that this issue begins with an essay about the historian as advocate, because advocacy sits squarely in the remit of the PHA. Kiera Lindsey's compelling case for recruiting history to the cause of humanity started out as an after-dinner speech at the 2023 conference in Adelaide. It is followed by an essay from Lisa Murray, which was also originally a speech. Murray reflects on her time as the City of Sydney historian. Together, Lindsey and Murray offer cause for optimism about the future of public history – a rallying cry for the historian.

Themes they raise recur in the peer-reviewed section of the journal: the importance for professional historians to understand the challenges and embrace the opportunities of artificial intelligence and big data. Roland Leikauf cautions us to be vigilant about the concept of truth when we examine sources. Have they been created by human beings; have they been altered by machines? Alison Wishart and Patricia Curthoys ask an important question about capturing material published on social media platforms, so that future historians can use diverse voices to interpret the past. They also pose a larger, and more critical, question: do historians today need to do more to document the present before the posts, tweets and likes end up in a digital graveyard?

Carolyn Rasmussen addresses this apparent paradox of historians dealing with the present, especially when they undertake institutional histories. They can even offer therapeutic services. Importantly, too, they can help organisations make better decisions, a point Lisa Murray underlines in her examination of the role of history in local government. This applies equally to state and federal levels and raises the question the PHA has posed before: does Australia need a chief historian?

The effects of history-making are also the subject of Jen Rose's paper about working with community organisations. She reflects on how understanding the history of their organisation, and participating in recording it, can bolster staff understanding of their mission and their place in the wider services sector. She also argues for greater attention to the value of community archives.



PHA Conference
2023, Adelaide.
Day one group
photo, photograph
by Remco Albers.

And as Janet Scarfe shows, the skills of the historian combined with a genealogist can contribute not only to a family's story but may also uncover important aspects of our social history that were previously unmentioned.

After a delightful interlude in the form of a poem by Helen Penrose, we present a review section, with a twist. Given many members of the PHA are working on heritage matters and in museums, we decided to devote these pages to non-traditional ways of bringing history to audiences. You'll find articles about using the gallery space to introduce difficult histories, synthesising oral histories in video, tabletop gaming as a form of history-telling, and how contemporary Indigenous dance performances can provide new insight and understandings of history.

The section begins with a reflection by the PHA book blog's editor on themes emerging over the last couple of years. Many PHA members have given up their valuable time to review books for that blog, which introduces the PHA readership to a monthly dose of new history in books reviewed by PHA members. *Historia* also alerts us to new publications by PHA members. Sometimes there is an overlap between the two publications.

What emerges clearly from the book blog is the vital work taking place re-examining the colonial record and in listening to First Nations histories. In future issues, we look forward to learning more from those in the field about how we can combine Western and Indigenous knowledge systems to move closer to the truth of our troubled past.

FRANCESCA BEDDIE, PHA NSW & ACT
& ELIZABETH OFFER, PHA VIC & TAS

CALL FOR PAPERS

CIRCA: Issue 9

The editors invite submissions that explore the issues faced by professional historians for the next issue of *Circa*, which will be published in 2026.

To find out more about *Circa*, please visit the [website](#). You can contact the editors via [email](#) with any enquiries.

Submissions will be accepted up to September 2025.

Stepping into the arena to advocate for history and humanity

BY KIERA LINDSEY, PHA SA



'A History of drinking and wine', 2023 History Festival event, photograph by Kelsey Zafiridis Photography.

This paper is an edited version of the speech Kiera Lindsey, South Australia's inaugural History Advocate, made at the 2023 PHA conference dinner in Adelaide.

In this paper I reflect upon my role as South Australia's inaugural History Advocate, before identifying some of the opportunities and obligations we share as fellow history advocates in the third decade of the 21st century.

The History Advocate role is a revitalised version of the State Historian appointment, which was created in the 1980s when the nation was preparing for the 1788 bicentenary of European settlement of New South Wales and Australian historians were beginning to explore the possibilities associated with 'social history', which was then a relatively new form of history-making. Like the previous State Historians, I am based at the History Trust of South Australia,

which was established via state legislation in that same decade, 1981 to be precise. The Trust is responsible for collecting and communicating the state's social history, which includes a collection of some 35,000 objects, a network of regional museums as well as the National Motor Museum, the Maritime Museum of SA and the world's first Migration Museum, established in 1986. The Trust also has a dedicated educational team and an extensive events program, which includes its annual flagship event, a month-long History Festival – probably the longest and largest history festival in Australia, if not the world. In May 2023, the festival attracted close to 190,000 participants in more than 500 events across the state. Given the history sector's urgent need for generational renewal, particularly when it comes to our highly valued volunteers, it is encouraging to note that 51 per cent of the attendees at the 2023 festival were under the age of 65.

There have been three State Historians in South Australia, each making a unique contribution until funding cuts led to the role being disbanded in the early 2000s. Since then, many South Australians had called for a resumption of the role; it was the current CEO of the History Trust, Greg Mackie OAM, who made this happen. South Australia is the only Australian state or territory to have a government-funded history advocate, although there was a brief period in the 1980s when the goldrush scholar, Weston Bates, occupied a comparable role in Victoria.

It is tempting to suggest the History Advocate role represents another example of South Australia's celebrated 'exceptionalism', although I suspect few would consider it quite as significant as the idiosyncratic foundation principles and processes associated with South Australia's European settlement; the advancement of the female franchise in 1894; or the decision to legalise nude swimming in 1975! Nonetheless, the History Advocate role does speak to the distinctive value South Australians attribute to the past when it comes to their meaning-making and sense of belonging.

The role begs a few questions about how the history community and Australian public might benefit from each state and territory government funding its own History Advocate. What role the PHA could play in this process? And how might we advocate for history nonetheless? In raising these questions, I hasten to add that the Professional Historians Association has long benefitted from many committed advocates such as Peter Donovan, who established the Professional Historians Association in the 1980s and was one of the hosts of the 2023 conference. And of course, there are and have been many extraordinarily passionate



Peter Donovan addressing the 2023 PHA conference in Adelaide, photograph by Remco Albers.

advocates who have dedicated their professional and volunteer energies to 'giving the past a future - now!', to quote the History Trust's tagline and clarion call!

The notion of 'advocacy' has a rich history dating back as far as the 14th century. The term originates in Roman law, where it was first used to describe a person who assists others to have a voice. Around the same time, the French adopted the term to refer to those who stepped forward to plead for others. The word eventually drifted into the English lexicon where it defined those who were prepared to intercede for others, as protectors and champions. Here, in 21st-century Adelaide, the History Trust has chosen 'advocate' to describe a role intended to:

- champion history in all its expressions and explorations
- increase awareness of, and appreciation for, the state's distinctive history, in collaboration with education, tourism, arts and culture
- explain past complexities in ways that foster wisdom and innovation, and
- make the stories of South Australia relevant across the world, for the world.

Having commenced this role in November 2022, I am still getting the lie of the land and determining what I could, should and must do. Nonetheless, it is already clear that I need to work closely with all stakeholders in the history community – be they experts or enthusiasts – if I am to champion history in ways that make history *matter* to those who are yet to share our passion for the past. As public-oriented historians well understand, history must be sufficiently relevant and resonant to meet ‘us’ in our moment. By ‘us’ I mean the increasingly diverse publics we serve and the various problems and possibilities we face together now.

HISTORY MAKING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

And what a moment this is, especially for professional historians! In contrast to the 1980s, when Australian history was still a relatively new discipline within the academy, several generations of historians have exponentially expanded the areas of enquiry we work in, as well as our capacity to reflect upon the politics of our ‘history-making’. Once upon a time, the public regarded academic historians such as Manning Clark and Geoffrey Blainey as secular priests and gratefully received their definitive accounts of *the* history of Australia, delivered Moses-like from the ivory tower of the academy. Thankfully, in the decades that followed, those who practised history have tended to do so at interdisciplinary intersections in ways that have resulted in rigorous self-reflection and more nuanced understandings of the world. They have dramatically matured our discipline.

By the end of the 20th century, ‘history’ had become such an influential way of understanding Australian society that biographies about historians were the most popular publications

of comparable works. Nonetheless, the ‘truth-telling’ and transformative powers of history clearly threatened certain cohorts of our society, as both historians and their discipline were soon subjected to political scapegoating and institutional antipathy. This, coupled with the economic contractions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, have resulted in a dramatic reduction in the history subjects and students taught across the university sector. Over the last few years, we have witnessed something of an exodus of historians from the sector as people like myself, and many other PHA members, who undertook formal history training animated by the promise of ‘higher learning’, have grown weary of the relevance-deficit model associated with publishing (or perishing) in specialist academic journals. And so, here we are, at a moment when Australian history is undergoing yet another seismic period of generational change.

While some mourn the decentralisation of academic history expertise, I sense an energising invitation to re-imagine both the role of the historian and the nature of history making in ways that infuse professional historians with a fresh sense of purpose. After all, as we know, the majority of Australians no longer consume their ‘history’ via learned tomes but via school curriculums, streaming services, podcasts and heritage paths, museums and family history. Where professional historians could once ply their trade by relying largely upon their reputation as rigorous researchers and stimulating story tellers, we must now also develop and demonstrate our abilities as agile thinkers, creative communicators and entrepreneurs. Now, more than ever, we need to read the world and make a convincing case for how history can help us engage with real-world concerns.

In early 2023, for example, the release of Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformers (Chat GPT), signalled a new era of artificial intelligence (AI) that has stimulated both excitement and moral panic. While those seductive and flattering Chatbots appear to satiate our every question, their answers are often proliferated with hallucinating falsities. For all the possibilities these new innovations present, particularly for those working in the GLAM sector, there is good reason to fear the way that AI's ever-regenerating algorithms of large language data threaten to unmoor 'facts' from their contexts until we can no longer discern a legitimate primary source from one that has been doctored or distorted. Rather than retreat from these challenges, historians need to immerse themselves in these new contexts and become part of the solution by demonstrating how our disciplinary skills in research and analysis, discernment, as well what the Marxist historian, EP Thompson, once called 'the discipline of context' – can help the world become AI-ready.

The South Australian Department for Education was the first in Australia to experiment with the possibility of AI, and in 2023 I commenced a conversation with them about how historical skills might be deployed to generate greater 'AI-readiness' in the classroom. In addition to advocating such cross-sectorial conversations, if we historians are to play our part in preserving humanity from the calculating – and highly distorted – algorithms of AI, we also need to focus our analytical skills and well-developed sense of indignation at injustice into persuasive arguments that challenge the 'black-box' environments in which these algorithms are developed and disseminated. As our history training also teaches us to become comfortable with uncertainty and paradox we can also insist

upon ways of making sense of the world that defy the reductionist black and white 'truths' of Chatbot. Again, the skills we develop in imagination, speculation and storytelling as historians also allows us to connect with hearts and minds in ways that machines cannot.

However, if we are to take our seat at the policy table and convince others that history is crucial to shaping the future, we must address the urgent challenge of generational renewal facing the history sector because the two issues are inextricably inter-linked. Although many recognise that younger generations are powerful history-makers, we historians are often reluctant to relinquish our historical authority. To demonstrate how history can make the world AI-ready, we need to initiate greater exchange across the generations, for example, connecting and combining the considerable AI-skills of 'digital-natives' with our own in research, contextualisation, analysis and meaning making.

THE QUESTIONS WE ASK

A useful starting point may be the advice of French Absurdist playwright, Eugene Ionesco, who asserted 'it is not the answer that enlightens, but the question'. The 2023 PHA conference provided an ideal context in which to think more deeply about the questions we ask. However, before focusing on questions associated with **what** we might do or even **how**, I invite us all to meditate upon our 'why' as individual historians and a history community.

'Why' is the question thought leader Simon Sinek identifies as the driving force in our most outstanding leaders and organisations. Such leaders have a clear **why**, he argues, and it makes them so authentic that they stand out, inspire



trust as well as a potent sense of belonging. Indeed, for Sinek, ‘why’ is the most profound of all questions, because it comes from deep within the ancient limbic part of our brain which manages the feelings and behaviours we need to survive. When we ask ‘why’, Sinek argues, we connect to something innate to the human experience.

To illustrate this point, Sinek recounts the story of the two stonemasons. The first is asked if he likes his job and replies with a grimace. ‘Are you kidding. I am out here in the heat every day and for what? I break my back while I am breaking stones and the pay is terrible. Even though I’ve been at this for years, I doubt I will ever see my work finished in my lifetime’. When the second stone mason is asked the same question, she looks up with a grin, wipes the sweat from her brow, ‘Are you kidding? I am building a cathedral’.

Like the second stonemason, we historians have a powerful **why**, for we too work on cathedrals of truth-telling and meaning-making. We chip and chisel away at the evidence with painstaking attention, driven to produce something of substance we can hand on generation to generation. However, our focus on the detail often means that we forget to look up, and thus we often lose sight of our purpose. The 2023 PHA Conference provided us with an opportunity to look up and recover our **why** as historians who have the power to inspire trust in ways that can transport the individual and transform the collective. By reconnecting with the shared purpose of our ‘why’, we will be able to encourage one another to take risks when it comes to making history for this moment. And so, I want to conclude with a quote from a speech American President Theodore Roosevelt made at the Sorbonne in April 1910. Roosevelt

distinguishes between the critic who sits on the sidelines of history-making and the advocate who is prepared to step into public arena:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who know great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

The 2023 PHA conference was an important occasion when we stopped for a moment to look up from our stonework and acknowledge the scope and ambition of the cathedral we are building together, as we also inspire one another to ‘dare greatly’ for the future of history and humanity together.

KIERA LINDSEY

The historian and the shaping of cities

BY LISA MURRAY, PHA NSW & ACT

The City of Sydney has benefited from having a City Historian to contribute to effective governance and decision making for more than 30 years. Other capital cities and local councils would do well to follow suit. The state and federal governments would also benefit from having a chief historian and supporting research historians. These could be positioned within the national archives, the parliamentary libraries, the state archives and/or the state libraries.

In this paper, I make the case for the centrality of historians in shaping cities through research, policy, decision-making, urban design, placemaking, heritage significance, art and interpretation. I also reflect upon some of my work over 22 years at the City of Sydney, the last 12 as City Historian, and the impact it has (or has not) had on Sydney city.

Since 1987, the Council of the City of Sydney has provided cultural leadership to the historical and general communities by researching, recording and promoting the city and its multiple histories. This is in response to demand: feedback received through public forums and correspondence consistently reports that the community is hungry for history.

Sydney is the only capital city in the nation to have a dedicated history team that undertakes detailed historical research and popular education initiatives. It is a leader among local government authorities in New South Wales in establishing a history research group that employs professional historians specialising in public history. A few other LGAs in NSW have historians; North Sydney City Council and Northern Beaches Council spring to mind. But the City of Sydney employs two historians full-time *and* the team also regularly employs

other consultant historians to work on specific projects. The history program is nationally recognised for its quality and excellence; it is the envy of many of our colleagues.

The Corporation of the City of Sydney was formed in 1842. As the oldest municipal council in NSW, it has governed the inner city and contributed to the creation of urban infrastructure. The city council has archival records dating back to its formation. The City Archives is first and foremost the business archive of the Council of the City of Sydney, but it is also a collecting archive, particularly of community organisation collections, photographs and maps. Thus it is critical for supporting good governance and is the history team's primary repository. The council has proactively managed its archive since the 1970s: it is a gift to all historians.

THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN GOVERNMENT

Historians within government organisations can be very useful. History can be a foundation and catalyst for policy reform, program development and effective governance, as well as providing guidance and added value to corporate decision making. For these reasons, Professional Historians Australia has long advocated for historians to be employed within government, and also to be included on governing boards and strategic advisory panels.

Historical research which feeds into government decisions is usually targeted and deadline driven; the output is rarely an exhaustive, definitive history. The City's history team regularly undertakes background research on the history of sites, assesses the historical significance of objects, places or events, or previous council decisions. Historical information is also used to

THE HISTORIAN AND THE SHAPING OF CITIES (CONT.)

support the legal team, to inform council policy positions or to provide historical context on a subject for council decision. The information might end up in a media release, a briefing note, a memo, a council report or policy document.

The practice of history in the local government sector supports and enhances our vibrant local communities. It provides accessible social infrastructure, such as plaques, and opportunities for life-long learning, with resources, talks and workshops. Through walks, public art, interpretive signage and heritage listings, history can incite curiosity and foster public memory. History can highlight and address past wrongs, and give voice to marginalised citizens. Social sustainability policies recognise that a better understanding of our history can enhance the community's sense of identity, place and belonging. A connected community is a social indicator of well-being and helps build community capacity, cohesion and resilience to change.

While at the City of Sydney, I developed an internal history policy on how the practice and study of history and the sharing of historical knowledge contributed to the organisation's strategic vision and action plans. This formed the basis for my contribution, along with many others, to framing the Value of History Statement created cooperatively by the four Australian History Councils.

The [Value of History statement](#) highlights seven key reasons why the discipline of history matters:

History shapes our identities, engages us as citizens, creates inclusive communities, is part of our economic well-being, teaches us to think critically and creatively, inspires leaders, and is the foundation for future generations.¹

It is a neat summary of how history contributes to our society. Historians, the GLAMR (galleries, libraries, archives, museums and recordkeeping) sector and community groups should lean on the Value of History Statement more to support their strategic vision, research agendas, grant applications and advocacy work.

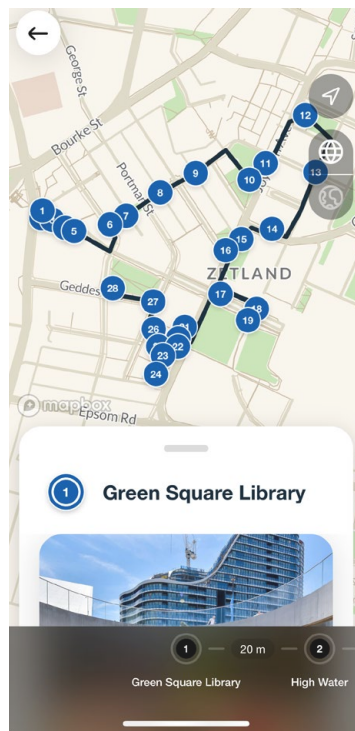
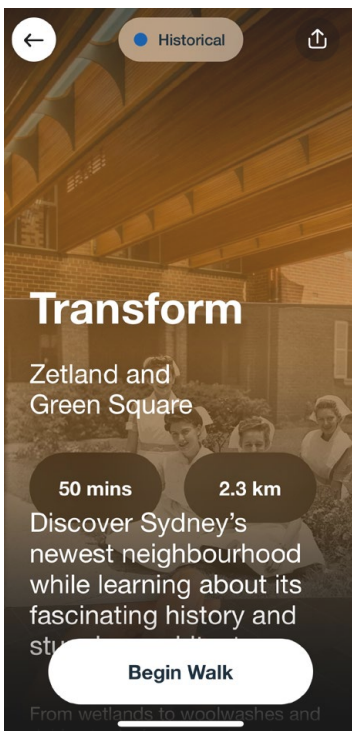
HISTORY AND THE PUBLIC

History has been an important element within the City of Sydney's broader cultural policy and ten-year action plan. The City's historians are actively shaping the meanings, histories and memories of the city. They are charged with 'developing new programs to integrate the stories from Sydney's past into the public domain of each village through innovative use of the built form, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, and working with historians, artists and digital technologies.'² This is a strategic directive for historians to get involved in placemaking processes that support precinct distinctiveness and to make the City's history more visible and legible for the community, particularly in the public domain.

To assist us define our audiences, we came up with three categories within the general public: the skimmers, the delvers and the divers. This guided how we provided different access points and layers of historical information. Historians who work in the public sphere, be it in heritage or placemaking or interpretation, should be constantly asking:

- How can we enable people to stumble across or encounter history?
- If they are interested, where can they follow up?

One significant area where I applied historical knowledge was to the master planning of urban areas and interpretation strategies for naming



Screenshots from Sydney Culture Walks app, best experienced live, images by Lisa Murray.

new parks and streets. Through this process I developed the naming policy for the City of Sydney, first adopted in 2018 and revised in 2023. The policy provides principles (based upon the NSW Geographical Names Board policies) for how streets, parks, localities, and buildings are named or re-named. It incorporates Aboriginal language and local community history to support a powerful form of placemaking.³

I have researched and recommended names for dozens of streets, parks and reserves. This work will shape the public's historical consciousness in areas of urban renewal and foster a renewed sense of community identity. Communication of the names' meanings is achieved through interpretive signage, walking tours, as well as online historical content. Historical highlights on the origin of a name are also regularly included in marketing and publicity.

Guided and self-guided walking tours are an effective way to educate the public about an urban area; they encourage people to familiarise themselves with a place. The history team helped to develop a free walking tour app, known as Sydney Culture Walks.⁴ Most of the self-guided walks are precinct based, often presenting a slice

of history to facilitate a greater understanding of an area. The walk along Oxford Street Darlinghurst focusses upon LGBTQI+ history; the Green Square walk in the former industrial area of Zetland introduces new street names and highlights the evolution of old and new areas; another walk, particularly requested by the heritage team while the heritage review of mid-20th century architecture was underway, explores modernist architecture.

PLACEMAKING

Another area where the history team has played a key role is in the delivery of the Eora Journey strategic vision. Before the community could start imagining public artworks and new forms of Indigenous expression in the public domain, we needed to tell the histories of Sydney's Aboriginal people. Hand-in-hand with the Aboriginal advisory panel, the City's historians initiated in 2010 a cultural mapping project to research and demonstrate their ongoing connections and histories in the urban city. The booklet *Barani/Barrabugu*, which means Yesterday/Tomorrow in Gadigal language, was the first collaborative step in reasserting the Aboriginal histories of this place we now call

THE HISTORIAN AND THE SHAPING OF CITIES (CONT.)

Sydney. The booklet and the Sydney Barani website are important elements that continue to educate the public and support the council in delivering on the Eora Journey and more recently the NSW government's Connecting with Country Framework.⁵

An unsung but essential role for the history team is to contribute historical information to support the work of others: both council employees and professional contractors engaged by council. For example, historical content is included in artist briefs for public art commissions, provides background for architectural competitions for new buildings, and informs landscape designs for park upgrades. Sometimes this is done through research and writing that is included as part of the brief, other times it is just a few sentences and the provision of a link to a Trove list of books, maps and images curated by the historians. The idea is that the historical context will add another layer in the urban design creative process and may inspire a building, landscape or artwork design that responds to the city's history in poetic or curious ways.

Historians are also essential for heritage assessments and interpretation plans for heritage items. This is made clear in the *Burra Charter*, and in the state and local criteria for heritage assessments. The broad public interest in site histories and their importance for professional heritage assessments led the history team to develop an online 'Guide to House & Building Histories'.⁶ The guide introduces the resources available to research the history of a building or site. It is targeted at properties within the City of Sydney local government area but is illustrative of the types of resources that are available and should be used for any detailed site history. It also provides tips on how to interpret the sources and points to other essential repositories.

Unfortunately, historians are rarely included by heritage firms in teams that develop of interpretation plans. Instead they delegate this creative practice to conservation architects and other heritage practitioners, who tend to regurgitate statements of heritage significance on plaques and timelines. Placemaking is not about putting another plaque on a building, thereby branding the urban environment with the stamp of history. Historians involved in placemaking should aim to collaborate and facilitate a diversity of community histories to be embedded into the fabric of the city, either temporarily or permanently.

LISA MURRAY

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PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES

1

The impact of AI tools on the historical profession

BY ROLAND LEIKAUF, PHA NSW & ACT

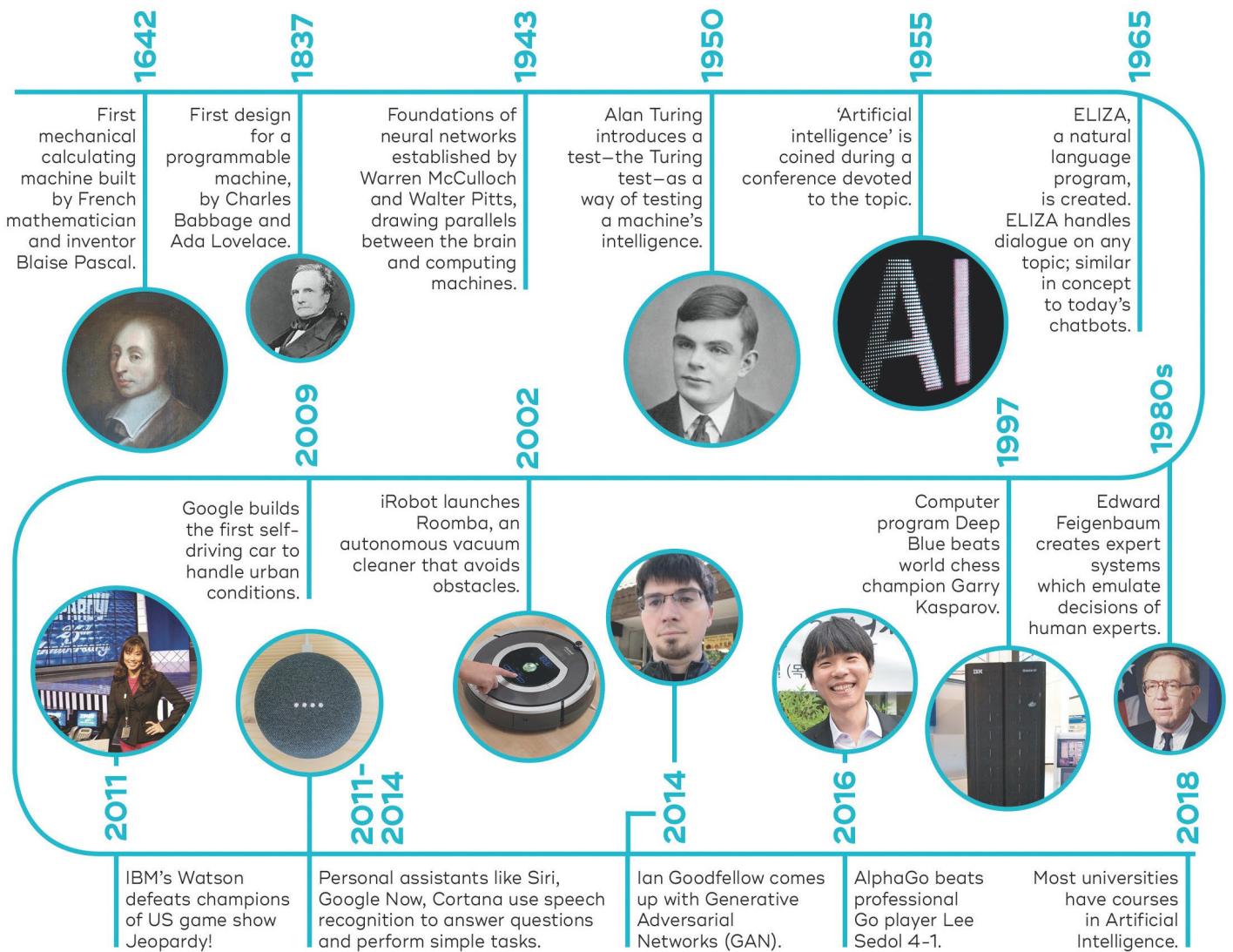
Artificial intelligence, a field of research that has been steadily progressing for decades, has suddenly been thrust into the public consciousness, primarily by the rise of large language models like ChatGPT and its competitors. This article looks at challenges, opportunities and general developments in this complex area that is full of rapidly developing theories and multiplying commercial products. It does so from the perspective of a historian who expects that AI will very soon impact every aspect of human existence. While the history and technology of AI are topics in the article, it also provides general suggestions why – and why not – a historian should use AI tools now and in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, artificial intelligence (AI) has fulfilled a role in information science akin to that of nuclear fusion in physics: it is a complex field of study overburdened with expectations that occupies the imaginations of politicians, corporations, defence officials and the public, with everyone expecting rapid innovations and encompassing impact. My interest in AI began while working at the Department for Informatics at the University of Hamburg in Germany in 2008-2009.¹ Then and now, progress in AI consisted of a constant stream of minor advances oversold as major developments, with the goal of real thinking machines as the implied endgame, a development that seemed always just out of reach.² This article is written from the perspective of a historian who was and is interested in the impact AI can and will have on the field of history. The author wants to provide a perspective on AI from the vantage point of the historian, who feels confronted and challenged by these developments: should we participate, fight or flee? The article is not a professional introduction by an AI expert. It is a historian's perspective on something that will, after decades of impatiently waiting for it, impact everything we think and do as a species.

A SHORT HISTORY OF EXPECTING TOO MUCH FROM AI

Artificial Intelligence research has been burdened from the start with grand expectations – aiming at nothing less than developing ‘machine models of human cognition’.³ The 1956 Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence, which laid the groundwork for the coming decades of research, had a strong emphasis on the task of simulating human consciousness.



*This timeline was created by the Queensland Brain Institute, University of Queensland.
Images 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 10, 11 Wikimedia; images 4, 6, Creative Commons; image 7 iStock; image 8 Twitter.*

The aim of the meeting was to find ways to consolidate the diverse fields that worked on information processing and simulating cognitive functions. There had been attempts at harmonising theories of human and animal thought processes with systemic theories before. Cybernetics⁴, especially the movement represented by Norbert Wiener, was one of the more important attempts: human and animal behaviour were compared and sometimes equated to self-regulating mechanisms.⁵

The proposal for the Dartmouth conference stated that:

The study is to proceed on the basis of the conjecture that every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it.⁶

A core goal was to find practical ways of implementing the theories that had been developed so far. If these concepts were correct, it should have been possible to at least simulate, if not replicate, human behaviour or consciousness in a computer environment.

Developing intelligence, for instance by presenting knowledge to a machine and enabling it to undertake decision-based activities, became the area with the biggest hopes and most impressive failures of AI research. The vision of developing a 'general AI' that could fulfill all kinds of tasks by programming it by hand turned out to be unfeasible and was later identified as one symptom of an epidemic of constant overpromising in the discipline.⁷

AI discussions were caught between lofty goals and attempts to define all the ways in which AI

would never work.⁸ The concept of 'AI Summer' and 'AI Winter' was born: at any time there was either massive interest in the discipline or a complete lack of trust and funding. Authors often reference this ebb and flow of interest.⁹

AI TODAY

The modern technical foundation for creating AI that fulfills specific ('narrow') tasks is the machine learning processes.¹⁰ Algorithms, the rule sets used to solve problems and answer questions, are not programmed but developed through a process of learning. Alan Turing's ideas influenced AI discussion and theory decades ago and are still influential today.¹¹ Input and output layers of data are connected through learning and feedback, the algorithm develops data-based solutions that satisfy the defined goals by the user. The achievable AI that results from these learning processes is focussed ('narrow'), because its knowledge is situation-based and rooted in datasets developed by training it for specific tasks, making it hard or impossible for it to act outside of established patterns. The inability of AI to understand context has been brought up as its core limitation for a long time, but modern AI tools accept these limitations as necessities for task-oriented solutions.¹²

In the current AI renaissance, chatbots are one of the AI solutions that have garnered much attention, and as text processors, they are of special interest to historians. Simply put, large language models (LLMs) are tools that finish text a user types, often in form of a question, by utilising a large base of training and other data. An LLM is taught to learn what a good answer is supposed to look like, which creates the illusion that the model understands the question and gives an answer based on cognitive reasoning.

The finalised text, however, is developed out of its datasets, and the quality of the result is highly dependent on the training data and other data available to the model. Solutions are not based on understanding, but data comparison and correlation. Another phenomenon closely connected to LLMs are hallucinations – bogus answers far removed from reality. Some models like Bing Chat were goaded by users to strongly hallucinate, which had in one case famously led Bing to try to convince a user that the year is 2022 instead of 2023.¹³ Unintended answers and problematic expressions by chatbots have led to acts of censorship by the operating companies, which most of the time has a strong negative impact on the useability of the product.¹⁴ Chatbots are also far from easy to use. The user has to learn how to design orders in such a way that the AI can provide a satisfying result. Simple commands will only provide unsatisfying results, and the user has to develop skills at ‘prompt engineering’¹⁵ the commands for specific AI tools.

Right now, LLMs are rapidly evolving; it can be expected that they will outgrow their limitations. It seems, however, that more specialist models would be needed to satisfy the specific requirements historians have for their text. This is especially the case when it comes to citing sources, but also for understanding how a LLM reaches its conclusion, which will be discussed further below.

While the creation methods can be quite different, the challenges and limitations for image creation engines like Dall-E¹⁶ and Stable Diffusion¹⁷ are quite similar. Results can be unpredictable, and proper prompt engineering is necessary to produce something that satisfies the requirements of the user.

CHALLENGES AND DANGERS

The tendency to call AI a ‘disruptive technology’¹⁸ is often rooted in experiences with the effects of other processes of rationalisation, especially in areas like human obsolescence and job loss. For a historian, the most significant impact AI can have will be on the concept of truth related to sources, especially those that are represented visually. The creation of fake evidence and manipulation of historical data has been a constant concern for historical work. With AI support, historical photos and to a lesser degree movies can already be created with so much detail that very soon, it will be beyond the capability of a historian to recognise the difference between original and fake without expert help. It is also easy to project, based on the current capabilities of these systems, that soon the differences between original and fake will be no longer discernible in any way. The opportunity for creating fake or manipulated sources will be available to users with minimal knowledge. Even now, a somewhat convincing historical image is only a couple of hours work in one of the mentioned image generators.

Algorithms are also heavily dependent on their source material and training data. The style and content they produce when finalising user commands are fully based on databases. Most models that have been trained on big data drawn from the internet. These could potentially use datasets from places where hate, racism and historical bias are strongly represented. This leads to what is called algorithmic bias, an underlying tendency of the models to produce content based on other content that is questionable or unpredictable. Many of the challenges and dangers of AI are rooted in the fact the user often has a complete lack of insight into the foundations of these content creation algorithms.

HISTORIANS AND AI – A GENERAL REFLECTION

For historians, the biggest challenge from AI in 2023 is that many questions about using them in a professional environment remain unanswered. It is, for instance, hard or impossible to recommend specific tools. At the time when this article will be published, it will be far from clear what software tools will be popular or successful, and which will be languishing or have vanished entirely. Until consolidation takes place, people will be using programs like Google Bard¹⁹, Claude²⁰ as well as the iterations of ChatGPT²¹ and their competitors, parallel to each other. This is a time-consuming effort. Additionally, these products are still in a phase where user acquisition is central, and strategies for monetisation yet to be fully developed. What is now an affordable product could quickly become costly once consolidation has finished.

AI is being pushed into products historians already use daily. Microsoft's Copilot chatbot²² will be present in most Office products shortly. Completely avoiding AI will be hard or impossible. Most AI tools are also harvesting data from their user; especially when a product is free, the user is exploited for data, not the customer.²³

The current proliferation of AI offerings is made even more complicated by plugins, that is specialist addons that refine and enhance particular AI capabilities for specific tasks, like generating documents²⁴, harvesting content from peer-reviewed databases²⁵, or extracting information from papers²⁶. Plugins are very interesting for historians, because they can turn the often very generic capabilities of AI programs into something more tailored to the

historical process. Right now, these plugins are proliferating without, however, any guarantee that they will still be supported in the next years or even months.

In the next couple of years, a strong consolidation is sure to take place. This will result in viable solutions for the historian's daily work. Until then, it is the time to experiment and explore.

LEGALITIES AND ETHICS

Another current unknown concerns legality. Most if not all aspects of AI are currently being tested in courts. This makes AI a potentially perilous prospect for history professionals. Many AI tools are essentially based on mass-harvested sources. Did the companies acquire their training data ethically, or did they 'download the internet' without consent from individual content creators? Does this mean that all text generation by AI is copyright infringement on a global scale, and what would be the ethical implications of using text based on these products? Guidelines like Australia's AI Ethics Principles are right now just the beginning of an exploratory phase into how to deal with all the implications AI usage can have.²⁷ These questions are especially worrying for a historian when AI analysis tools require the upload of documents into software products whose legalities haven't been determined yet. This is one of the reasons why the Australian Research Council bans the use of AI for their grant programs.²⁸ What rights would uploading these documents grant to the creator of the software, and who owns the results the AI tool generates?

AI AS A BLACK BOX

From the perspective of a historian, the way modern AI design solves problems presents several problems. AI processes are closed systems to the user. Companies want to keep their algorithm from being accessed and analysed; moreover, models developed through machine learning may not be as transparent in their functions even to their developers compared to algorithms that were created manually. Analysing the reasoning behind an answer provided by an AI is, because of this, impossible. While some AI tools quote sources, these citations are often not comprehensive, and there is no way to find out if they are the basis of the answer or just references for further reading. LLMs are text completion tools – algorithms that react to the user query by completing it based on their collected assembly of data sets. Knowing the nature of this data set would also be important for a historian to adjudicate the quality of a text generated by an AI, but these sources are also mostly closed to us. Even if the text produced by an LLM is satisfactory from a historian's perspective, the procedure that led to its creation is not available for analysis. This ubiquity of 'black boxes' – systems and procedures that cannot be perceived and analysed – is typical for modern computing.²⁹ This makes LLMs useful for creating larger amounts of general text, but much less useful for developing texts with historical arguments that can be retroactively understood and tested based on the provided sources and thought processes.

Most AI content creation tools are not optimised for writing and thinking history, and not trained on historical sources and professional writing. Once training AI has become something that is accessible, transparent and easy to use, the

potential for using it is limitless. However, for a long time AI, like most software tools, will come with a strong learning curve.

CONCLUSION

At this stage of the AI revolution, historians have to develop, both on a personal and organisational level, procedures and concepts to interact with this very old yet also very new phenomenon. There will be no more 'AI Winters'. The ways in which a historian could, in theory, use AI today, are many. These programs can create text for outlines, analyse documents, correct grammar, make design suggestions for text and graphic layouts, attempt to transcribe interviews, and draw pictures in seconds. The quality of the result will differ greatly, and the user of the software will have to invest much work into learning how to use it and how to correct the shortcomings of the results. Further, the unanswered legal and ethical questions could make this usage a perilous undertaking. For the individual historian, it is the right time to experiment and explore, always remaining aware of these tools' challenges and limitations.

For the Professional Historians Australia and other representative organisations, it is time to provide their members with suggestions and guidelines for engaging with this new phenomenon. Historians are custodians of records, who interpret the past and seek to sift myth from historical reality. In a future full of uncertainty, this role will most likely increase in importance, but only if historians become the experts to consult about when is helpful to use AI for historical research and when it is detrimental or even dangerous.

ROLAND LEIKAUF

THE IMPACT OF AI TOOLS ON THE HISTORICAL PROFESSION (CONT.)

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2 A STEP TOO FAR? RAINBOWS, RELIGION AND SYDNEY'S WORLDPRIDE FESTIVAL IN 2023

BY ALISON WISHART, PHA NSW & ACT
WITH ASSISTANCE FROM DR PATRICIA CURTHOYS



Members of the PSUC Mardi Gras parade group gather outside the front of the church, 25 February 2023. The remnants of the grey paint can be seen on the steps, photograph by Meredith Knight. This is one of the images selected by SLNSW for their WorldPride 2023 collection.

In 2023, Sydney hosted the WorldPride Festival. There were many things to celebrate but not everyone was partying. This article records the harassment and vandalism that Pitt Street Uniting Church, situated in Sydney's CBD, was subject to because of its public support for WorldPride. The decision to document the escalating attacks was prompted, in large part, by the absence of such accounts in the contemporary recording of Sydney WorldPride. Such incidents were generally ignored by the mainstream and LGBTQIA+ media as well as WorldPride organisers. This led us to reflect on how the recent past is recorded and archived for future generations of researchers in an era when so much social commentary and journalism occurs online. What is the role of historians in navigating and interpreting a past that may not be collected by libraries and archives?

Imagine it is 2074 and you, a historian, have been asked to write an account and analysis of an event that happened in Australia 50 years ago. What sources will you use? Will the documents, photographs and records we make today be available?

Now that over 85 per cent of Australians own smartphones with cameras, people are documenting their lives and commenting on social and political issues more than ever.¹ The proliferation of content is mostly uploaded to online social media sites that are thinly harvested by collecting institutions and may not exist in 50 years' time. This presents a dilemma for archives, libraries, and future historians. With printed newspapers declining in number and size, particularly in regional Australia, what will historians use as a reliable, written record of past events? Should historians be

recording important events in the present, so there is a record for future historians to use? As digital sources supersede analogue records, will historians need to change their research methodologies? These questions were prompted for us by events during WorldPride in Sydney in 2023.

RECORDING CONTEMPORARY HISTORY: THE RAINBOW STEPS AT PITT STREET UNITING CHURCH

Is there a collective noun for rainbows? Sydney was awash with rainbows in public spaces and buildings in late February and early March 2023.² There were rainbow pillars, rainbow flags and, most prolifically, rainbow steps. Nearly every business wanted to declare their support for WorldPride, which came to the southern hemisphere for the first time in 2023.³ Situated less than 100 metres from Sydney's Town Hall, Pitt Street Uniting Church (PSCU) also wanted to show that it supported this international event and, as it had long done, welcomed people of all genders and sexualities.⁴ The congregation hosted several events during the three-week festival and painted the front steps rising off Pitt Street in the colours of the rainbow. While this attracted some positive comments and media coverage, it also became a red rag to the people who believe that LGBTQIA+ people are inherently sinful and should not be celebrated, especially by a church. The rainbow steps at PSCU were both a source and an outlet for their outrage.

Pitt Street Uniting Church is on the NSW Heritage Register, so painting the front concrete steps was not straightforward.⁵ The Heritage Architect who advises the church recommended gluing a special 'membrane' to the front steps



A banner and rainbow steps welcome people to Pitt Street Uniting Church during the WorldPride Festival in Sydney 2023, photograph by Robyn Floyd.

with a water-based adhesive and painting that, so it could be removed without damaging the steps after the event. At 4pm on 17 February (the first official day of World Pride), while the second coat of paint was being applied to the membrane, a man wearing a shirt emblazoned with the words 'Jesus Saves' approached the two painters and asked if he could take a photograph. He then started firing questions about God, gay marriage, and the truth of the Bible, and filmed this exchange in which he was becoming more aggressive. He called the steps 'an abomination' and told one of the painters (the Chairperson of the Church Council), that she was 'going to Hell' before walking off.⁶

During the following week, volunteers from the congregation ensured that the church was open every day between 10am and 2pm so

A STEP TOO FAR? (CONT.)



Angels symbolising (from left to right) compassion, courage and joy in Pitt Street Uniting Church, 2 April 2023, photograph by Alison Wishart.

people could come into the church to view the *Queer Faces of Faith* portrait exhibition, organised and installed for the WorldPride festival.⁷ The congregation also raised over \$30,000 to commission Jyllie Jackson OAM, Artistic Director and CEO of lightnUp Inc., to create three, larger-than-human-size lanterns in the shape of angels and run five lantern-making workshops for the public, free of charge.⁸ Representing courage, compassion, and joy, the paper and bamboo angels were illuminated with rainbow colours and ‘flew’ above the pews. In addition, the congregation hosted an event called ‘Pancake Pride’ on Shrove Tuesday (21 February) at which about 200 people consumed about 600 free pancakes and attended an ecumenical service to affirm and celebrate queer people of faith.⁹

On Saturday 25 February, the two volunteers who were opening the church for the day, and

the chaplain who was rostered on to provide pastoral care (should any visitors seek it), arrived to find the rainbow steps had been thickly covered in grey paint. While the volunteer was making the area safe with bollards and barrier tape and working out what to do, she was approached by two people who preached at her to repent of her sins. When they were told the police had been called, they scurried away. The police from the Day Street Station did attend promptly and, after hearing from the volunteer and the Chairperson of the Church Council (who came to offer support), decided that it was not just an act of vandalism, but a hate crime.¹⁰ They were able to view footage of the steps being vandalised on the ‘Christian Lives Matter’ Facebook page because Charlie Backhos, the administrator of the page, had posted it online, along with the earlier footage from 17 February.¹¹ When it became a criminal matter,

this footage was taken down, but not before it had been captured by *The Daily Mail* in the United Kingdom, which picked up the story and posted it to their website.¹² Other online news outlets, in both the mainstream press, such as news.com.au and the LGBTQIA+ media also reported the story.¹³ Backhos was said to have encouraged his followers to protest against queer people, to vandalise and disrupt WorldPride events.¹⁴

At PSUC, the globs of grey paint were scooped into a bucket and the remainder allowed to dry. More people approached the volunteers as they did this, some expressing their support and affirming the church for their inclusive actions; others thanking God for the people who had vandalised the rainbow steps. While no one had been physically hurt, everyone was feeling tired and rattled. Sixty queer people from several denominations were coming to the church that afternoon to dress and practise for the Mardi Gras parade that night. Anticipating further hostility, the church leaders decided to employ a security guard to stand at the front of the church for the afternoon and the following Sunday morning. Just minutes before the Mardi Gras marchers left the church, the security guard successfully moved on a group of young men who came to preach their non-inclusive and conservative theology.¹⁵ However, he couldn't stop the abusive phone calls to the church office or messages of hate expressed on the church's Facebook page.¹⁶

After the morning church service on Sunday 26 February, the rainbow was re-painted onto the steps. Along with the banner proclaiming 'Rainbow Christians Together', which was hanging above the double front doors.



The membrane which was painted in rainbow colours and overlaid the steps at PSUC, as it was found on 1 March 2023, photograph by Robyn Floyd.

The steps were once again a sign of welcome and acceptance. On Wednesday 1 March, the first day of the 'largest LGBTQIA+ Human Rights Conference in the world', at which Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin, the Minister at PSUC, was due to speak, the steps were again found vandalised.¹⁷ This time, the membrane had been ripped off and left in a scrunched-up heap on the top step. The police came again and took some photos and statements.

The Director of Honchos Supplies (who had provided the membrane) inspected the mess and said it was too dirty to stick back on.¹⁸ Nevertheless, two 50 cm wide strips were salvaged and laid down on either side of the doors. They were taken inside at the end of each day.

The Chairperson of the Church Council explained: 'We wanted the rainbow steps to remain as an important symbol of welcome, hospitality and love; but we did not want to be part of a reactive engagement with antagonists'. As the cut-down steps were being put in place one morning, a regular passer-by commented: 'This gives me courage when I see it here'.¹⁹

Anticipating further harassment, the church leaders arranged for a security guard to be present on the final day of the WorldPride Festival. On this day, many people who identified as or supported LGBTQIA+ Christians were coming back to Pitt Street Uniting Church for breakfast after walking across the Sydney Harbour Bridge.²⁰ Sunday 5 March was the last official day of the Festival, and to avoid the need to keep employing a security guard the rainbow steps were removed. However, this was not the end of the harassment and vandalism. The following Thursday morning, the large 'Rainbow Christians Together' banner, which had been hanging outside the church for over a month, was stolen.²¹

Unfortunately, PSUC was not the only target of hate crimes during WorldPride. Other queer-led or queer-affirming Sydney churches saw property defaced and people abused. For example, when the Rainbow Catholics InterAgency for Ministry held a Mass of Thanksgiving for LGBTQIA+ people on 24 February 2023, the 'Christian Lives Matter' group videoed their assault on the service at the Chapel of the Good Samaritan Sisters in Glebe and it went viral across far right-wing networks.²² Soon it became clear there was a deliberate, organised campaign against LGBTQIA+ people as a whole, and queer people of faith in particular. Benjamin Oh, Convenor of the Queer

Christian Roundtable, released a statement on 28 February 2023 expressing abhorrence at the 'religious abuse and intimidation directed intentionally towards LGBTQIA+ people of faith and their supportive communities'.²³

WHY SHOULD THIS EVENT BE DOCUMENTED?

Not every event can, or must be recorded for future reference – so why this one? First, even though these hate-filled and hateful acts of self-righteousness by right-wing groups were being discussed by the media and the community, they were ignored by the organisers of WorldPride.²⁴ In the lead up to WorldPride, Rodney Croome, Tasmanian LGBTQIA+ human rights advocate, wrote in the *Star Observer* about the persistence of anti-LGBTQIA+ prejudice among some of Sydney's political and religious leaders.²⁵ He argued that this prejudice, and its consequences, were 'little acknowledged and addressed' by the city's LGBTQIA+ leadership.²⁶ So it was with the attacks on Pitt Street Uniting Church. As Reverend Inkpin said: 'It is simply not enough to festoon this city with Mardi Gras rainbows and [to] party unless we address the pressing issues of transphobic and homophobic violence and discrimination'.²⁷ The 27,000-word report on the WorldPride Festival did not mention the involvement of any religious groups in the festival, and the only reference to homophobia, and the need to address it, was in the Lord Mayor's foreword to the report.²⁸

Secondly, the homophobic attacks on Christian groups did not cease with the end of the WorldPride Festival. Disturbingly, as further proof of Croome's argument, the NSW state election campaign, held in the month following WorldPride, saw an increasingly vitriolic and physically violent campaign by far-right

Christian groups against the LGBTQIA+ community. At a public meeting held in a church in Belfield at which the NSW One Nation leader, Mark Latham, spoke, Christians attacked 15 peaceful protestors holding rainbow banners and two people were arrested.²⁹ By 2 May 2023, ABC television was revealing a more widespread, and very public campaign by some Christian groups against LGBTQIA+ participation and content in schools, council libraries and churches, in both Sydney and Melbourne, inspired by similar alt-right campaigns in the United States and the United Kingdom.³⁰ This is the antithesis of the inclusion and acceptance that the WorldPride Festival sought to promote.

Thirdly, we wanted to address a perceived imbalance in the historical record of the Sydney WorldPride Festival 2023. We were aware in the preparations for the festival, that organisers were uninterested in, and at times actively discouraging of, participation of LGBTQIA+ people of faith.³¹ During the festival, organisers sought to downplay or marginalise the attacks on LGBTQIA+ Christians by far-right religious groups. When the attacks happened, the Sydney WorldPride organisation did not issue a statement condemning the attacks and expressing support for the victims, as the Convenor of the Queer Christian Roundtable and the Moderator of the Uniting Church NSW-ACT Synod did. The organisers wanted ‘the very first WorldPride in the Southern Hemisphere’ to be remembered, as it is described on their website:

17 days of celebration, visibility and sunshine – over a million festival attendees congregated in our beautiful city to experience the best in LGBTQIA+SB creativity, and to stand together in a powerful call for equality.³²

An ‘ordinary’ person looking at the media representations of the WorldPride Festival and the final report – the colourful photographs of participants and the popular support for the events – would think it was a glowing success and that Sydney was a wonderful, inclusive, welcoming place. While this is mostly true, it is not the whole story. This account reveals that ‘a powerful call for equality’ may still be met with silence.

Finally, these hate crimes should be documented because they are part of a larger history of assaults by right-wing groups on PSUC. The attacks of 2023 were unprovoked and unlawful, just as they were nearly 40 years ago. Between 1986 and 1988 the congregation, and in particular its minister, Reverend Dorothy McRae-McMahon, were harassed by members of National Action, a neo-Nazi group active in Sydney at that time. It was believed their actions were in response to the Church’s anti-racism stance and activities, including removing anti-Asian graffiti in the city as well as hosting a rally against apartheid at which Archbishop Desmond Tutu, of South Africa, spoke.³³ The harassment included the disruption of Sunday morning services by National Action members and the distribution of offensive material to the press and the wider Uniting Church, attacking both McRae-McMahon and the congregation. This history is documented in Dorothy McRae-McMahon’s personal papers, which the SLNSW accepted as a donation.³⁴

THE PRESENT WILL SOON BECOME THE PAST – AND HOW WILL IT BE KNOWN?

As historians who frequently access archives, this event has caused us to reflect on how the recent past is documented and collected for

future generations of researchers to discover. References to these events were made in reports to the PUSC Council in the first couple of months following WorldPride. The Church Council's minutes will be donated to the SLNSW in the future, to grow the archival collection the State Library already holds.³⁵ However, because it is not an LGBTQIA+ organisation, records generated by PSUC, either digital or physical, are unlikely to meet the Collection Policy of the Australian Queer Archives.³⁶ Further, no detailed account, such as this one, was recorded and the reports of the incidents may not reach the archives.

In the past, a parishioner might have written an account of what happened in a letter to a relative or friend, or in their personal diary. If that parishioner was significant enough for their family members to think that a library or archive might be interested in their personal papers after they had died, and if that collecting institution considered their papers significant enough to collect them, and if the metadata in the catalogue records they created for those personal papers, then mentioned their account of this event, then there is a chance a future researcher might find the story of the PSUC rainbow steps. But who writes letters anymore? Personal communication is mostly done via SMS, emails and phone calls, which are not typically gathered up after a person dies and donated as part of personal papers.

In the 2020s, many historically significant events are only documented online as is evident in the 23 references for the first section of this article, six of which are from sources likely to be archived (such as articles in *The Conversation*, the *City of Sydney News*, and the State Heritage

Inventory). Eleven are from online sources that will most likely not be collected by archives or libraries. The final six references are personal communications in an email sent to the authors.

Online sources are often ephemeral. Unless online content is collected by GLAMR (galleries, libraries, archives, museums and recordkeeping) institutions, it will end up in a digital graveyard floating somewhere inaccessible in cyberspace. Our collecting institutions are aware of this issue and have taken steps to address this growing problem. In 2019, a national e-deposit scheme (NED) was launched. However, it only applies to books, serials, sheet music and maps published digitally.³⁷ Since 1996, the NLA has harvested significant websites through its PANDORA (Preserving and Accessing Networked Documentary Resources of Australia) project and they are now available on Trove.

But what about social media platforms? This is where the conversation happens: through comments, tags, re-tweets, shares and likes. Tyler Stovall, former President of the American Historical Association, speculates that 'the rise of social media and its increasing role in interpersonal interactions may enable historians to come closer than ever to seeing how masses of people think' but how will this material be captured?³⁸

Australia's collecting institutions are exploring ways to gather this content. In 2013 the SLNSW collaborated with the CSIRO to trial the 'Vizie' software to collect and curate social media content from the application programming interfaces (APIs) of platforms like Facebook and Twitter/X.³⁹ The trial was successful and SLNSW is continuing to use Vizie to gather content

from social media platforms on significant events in NSW (such as the Sydney WorldPride Festival) and Australia. However, the SLNSW's Collection Strategy Coordinator, Brendan Somes, has noticed that following a successful class action against Meta (the organisation that owns Facebook) regarding a breach of privacy in 2022 and the sale of Twitter to Elon Musk in the same year (prompting its re-branding as 'X' in 2023), both platforms have been releasing less data via their API.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the National and State Libraries Australasia collaboration is still grappling with how to digitally preserve this content and make it publicly accessible in the future.⁴¹ To mitigate the possibility of digital obsolescence, they need to save the content into file formats that can be read in the future.

At the time of writing, the National Film and Sound Archive had collected some Instagram reels of four First Nations Digital Content Creators and was still investigating how it could gather moving image content from YouTube and TikTok.⁴² Collecting, preserving and making online content accessible in the future is a worldwide problem and no country has a definitive solution. According to Brendan Somes, Australia and New Zealand are doing better than many other countries.⁴³

Writing in 2013, Richard Cox optimistically outlined his case for why (not how) archives and archivists will survive the transition from the analogue to the digital realm. He argued that 'archivists are needed now more than ever to engage with the issues related to an increasingly complicated documentary infrastructure'.⁴⁴ These archivists will need a new skillset to manage digital-born archives .

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HISTORIANS?

Collecting the past is always uneven. A lot of it is left to chance. In the last 50 years, oral history has supplemented written historical sources. More recently, it has been used to diversify and de-colonise collections by including the voices and memories of multicultural, First Nations and other marginalised groups.⁴⁵ Archiving online content is another way of diversifying collections and including perspectives from outside the corridors of power and privilege. However, even when cultural institutions consciously seek to collect online records of events in the present, the software and the social media companies do not always allow this. The pace at which social media platforms are proliferating is outstripping our ability to select and preserve their content.

Collecting the material culture and documentary evidence of events as they are unfolding is, like everything, subject to bias. This underlines the importance of thinking about the bigger picture – archives can only reveal part of the story. We need to keep interrogating our sources and asking what's not recorded, whose story is not included. We need to keep in mind who created the primary source and what their intention was.

In his article about history and the COVID-19 pandemic, Richard Vinen cautions that, while the majority of people in the industrialised world have a smartphone, and a smaller majority have access to an internet, there is still a significant proportion of the global population who does not, or cannot, create or comment on online content: historians should remember this when extrapolating from online sources.⁴⁶



Further, Vinen reminds us that ‘the rise of social media has encouraged a sense that all personal accounts are of equal value’.⁴⁷ In the past, a newspaper editor would have sifted through the letters to the newspaper and chosen those they considered worth printing. Now anyone can publish their opinions. Quality may be sacrificed in the virtual public square.

Just as historical records are changing as they become increasingly digital-born, their quantity is also expanding. Big data sets are now available that allow researchers to see the wood and the trees. For historians, this begs the question: should we be documenting history as well as writing it? Historians who record oral histories already do this, but can we do more? How are historians responding to the fact that written sources are being superseded by digital sources, which may not be archived for the future? Given that historians are trained to be aware of bias and to think about their subject from multiple perspectives, it could be argued that they are well placed to create records of the present for the future.

Several scholars have grappled with the pitfalls and benefits of writing contemporary history, which is usually defined as events that are within living memory, or the last 50 years.⁴⁸ Saime Durmaz concludes: ‘As a social scientist, a historian should not turn his[sic] back on the present and should not put a gap of fifty years between himself and his responsibilities’.⁴⁹

ALISON WISHART

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A STEP TOO FAR? (CONT.)

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3 The therapeutic function of the commissioned historian

BY CAROLYN RASMUSSEN, PHA VIC & TAS

This essay is an exploration, based especially on the histories of Footscray Institute of Technology, the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works and the Melbourne Museum, of the unique and valuable role a commissioned historian can play in assisting a public institution deal with distressing change and disruption in both their past and present.

One of the strongest influences on my opting to take up public history was an accidental encounter back in 1984 with the American historian of public policy, Richard Neustadt. Neustadt was holding a lecture series with Ernest May at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, which became the basis of their influential book *Thinking in Time*.¹ I was deeply impressed by what seemed to me a call to arms. Since, as Neustadt asserted, decision-makers always draw on history to some extent, historians had a duty to take up the task of assisting them to develop a more conscious and nuanced understanding of that history. I have never assumed that anything I do might influence public policy at the level Neustadt worked, or indeed that I might make anything but the most minor contribution to Australian history. I did however come very quickly to see that by engaging in public history, I just might leave the institutions I wrote about in better shape than I found them. It is that insight I would like to share in this article. I think it is one of the ways public history can contribute to Australian society as well as to Australian history.

When, in 2001, an advance copy of my history of Museum Victoria² arrived on the desk of Martin Hallet, then acting director of the Museum, he called me up to his office. As I sat down, he put his hand on the book and said, 'I want to thank you. You've given us back our museum.' Now, I am not the weepy sort, but at that moment I was in serious danger of shedding a tear. That goal had indeed become a large part of my mission while writing the Museum history in association with 46 specialist contributors. It was through the course of interviews and conversations at the museum that the idea of the 'therapeutic function of the commissioned historian' took concrete form in my mind – but it had its origins back in 1986.

Three months after starting work on my history of the Footscray Institute of Technology (FIT),³ the director Doug Mills died from a heart attack at the age of 46. I saw the institution plunged into grief, but much else besides. In the fallout from that sad departure, fissures opened up, and behind-the-scenes activities came into sharper focus. Like the Museum, FIT had been in a state of flux for several decades and was still struggling to fully incorporate additional functions and decommission others.

After writing the history of FIT, I worked on the history of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW).⁴ Not long after it was published in 1991, I attended a birthday party of a close friend. As it happened one of his boyhood friends was an employee of the MMBW. He began to pour out his heart about the changes and losses – and then stopped. 'It's pretty bad,' he said, 'but at least we have your book. *Our* Board of Works is in there'. In contrast to FIT and later the Museum, the MMBW in 1988 appeared to be a well-integrated, confident organisation

about to celebrate its centenary. And then the earth moved. While Tony Dingle, Pat Miller and I worked on its centenary history, the MMBW was broken up, regionalised and rationalised to emerge by the time of the launch in 1991 as the very lean entity we now know as Melbourne Water. It was bad enough for us as we tried to hold bits of the 'rationalised' library in proximity to our office, save the magnificent photo collection and other rare resources from being out-sourced goodness knows where (potentially the tip), and keep track of new locations for files we'd been working on a week previously. It was so much worse for the employees. Grief is scarcely a strong enough word. The Board shed 5,000 workers while we wrote the history – from 8,000 to 3,000. Some of these were the sons and even grandsons of former employees. For many, the MMBW was not just a workplace, it was a family. An institution in which workers took inordinate pride – in their work and that of their fellows, and which they felt provided essential services to the highest possible standards. The institutional memory was very powerful and, in fact, part of an immense, under-appreciated resource, as Melbourne Water would find to its very great cost a couple of years later.

The Museum and the MMBW are, perhaps, extreme examples of institutions caught in the backwash of economic rationalism and ideological warfare as the twentieth century drew to a close. Perhaps my experience is atypical. Or perhaps I am sensitive to rupture, yet inclined to see continuities rather than discontinuities in a way that many inside these institutions found comforting. I am certainly fascinated by the way institutions that survive continually re-invent themselves. And I am fascinated by the processes that must be undertaken to incorporate new

functions or shed long-standing ones, adapt to new leadership or policy directives, and accommodate changing expectations over time. I'm also captivated by the conversations that go on inside institutions and what constitutes the leadership styles that produce harmonious and productive organisations as opposed to those that, like the Museum in the 1990s, were wracked with tension, factionalism, grief, anger and anxiety.

I could write a detailed paper on this subject for each of my projects, without, I think, becoming a closet anthropologist or management theorist. However, in this article I want to make some general observations about the consequences of our presence as public historians in the institutions we are writing about. And I stress institutions, since I am not sure that what I have to say is quite so applicable to histories of place.

The first one is that while I/we launch ourselves into these 'public history' projects as 'historians', in many respects what we are doing is more closely allied to the work of biographers of living subjects. Extensive interviewing of significant individuals involved with the institution, past and present, is expected, to say nothing of the many casual conversations we have. As a result, we cannot simply confine ourselves to the objective and scrupulous weighing of evidence because, from the moment we set foot in the institution, we become 'participant observers', to use a concept that was very fashionable in the mid-1980s.⁵ The theoretical underpinning of that concept helped sensitise me to what I was doing, and these days encapsulates why I became so hooked on writing histories of Victorian public institutions.

I am now inclined to the view that, for most institutions, the *process* of having a history written might be more valuable than the end product. Although the end product, I hope, does freeze in time the new understandings of the past that can provide a firm basis on which to plot future trajectories. For this value to become apparent, the historian has to commit to fairly substantial *engagement* with the contemporary institution and its work. In this regard, some are more accessible than others, and perhaps as individuals we 'fit' better in some than others. At the heart of this engagement is the interview. And it is the interview that has the greatest therapeutic potential, for the individual and collectively for the institution.

The Italian oral historian (amongst other things) Alessandro Portelli has observed that 'as opposed to the majority of historical documents, oral sources are not *found*, but *co-created* by the historian.'⁶ I would add, the more interviews are conducted, the more the co-creation effect is compounded and the balance of interpretive power shifts towards the historian. This demands great empathy and responsibility. A highly self-conscious awareness of the perturbations in the existing institutional narrative is created by the very fact of going about posing questions, conjuring up memories, revealing your latest discoveries, and sometimes inadvertently spreading gossip. Conversely, every interview and conversation should be pushing the historian towards a more nuanced, maybe even radically revised, view of the explanatory narrative he or she is developing. Those involved with 'whole of life interviews' have long noted that events or experiences that remain unresolved in the present are the ones most likely to come forward and even dominate such interviews. So it is with individuals in

institutions when given a chance to speak with an interested and informed but essentially neutral person. I very quickly came to love the fact that as 'historian' I had licence to move anywhere at random within the institution, to speak to anyone from the cleaner to the CEO, from the administration to the professional staff. Similarly with former staff, it was easy to wriggle round the semi-institutionalised 'patriots' and 'critics' and find the less obvious people to interview. Almost everyone was keen to talk, or more precisely, to be *listened to*. I also found very quickly that, with some exceptions, the narrative I heard was profoundly connected to the present. I was being given insight into *the construction of memory* as much as historical facts that I could use as evidence in my history.

This was exaggerated for me because, instinctively, I have always engaged in whole-of-life interviews, starting with questions like, 'Why did you become an engineer?' rather than, 'When did you join the Board of Works?' – though only recently have I acquired some formal understanding of its therapeutic value for the individual. If you see the institution as the sum total of the individuals within it (or historically have been in it) then the same therapeutic value can, I believe, be activated. Of course, good management practice harnesses this potential. I'm reminded that the MMBW was probably never happier than when the chairman, J C Jessop, regularly ate his sandwiches in the staff canteen: that would be a good place for historians to hang out, if they still existed.

As a budding public historian, I did not start out especially interested in the 'here-and-now' institution. I presumed that, as a historian, I lacked appropriate perspective and that I would

merely chronicle the most recent period, at best providing some source material for the next historian. But my interviews soon had me wrestling with crossed wires, incorrect information, hastily formed judgments, recycled myths, unfounded rumour, and deeply unhappy, sometimes clinically depressed people. All this was undermining the effectiveness of the institution, quite apart from the impact on individuals. And then there was the battle over 'who owns the history', who is telling the 'real' story. In many ways, narrative is most necessary when things depart from the ordinary, so there was much storytelling going on in the places I was investigating. And yet often, as I went off to interview people, I felt I was crossing hastily dropped drawbridges and once inside the Keep, I became as much the storyteller as they were. People were stuck in silos trying to make sense of the present by constantly referencing a past to which they only had very partial access, telling stories to themselves about other parts of the institution that made no sense to me. As for those who had left or retired, there was often a powerful sense of alienation, that 'their' institution was 'gone', unrecognisable, diminished, corrupted, forever changed. This corrupted their ability to see their own period with as clear eyes as I would have liked. So, long before I was writing about their time, I was, of necessity, through my interviews and conversations, *co-creating* the history with them in ways I could scarcely have articulated until recently.

Is this a confession of sin? No, not really, but it does not always turn out well. The former Chief Planner at the MMBW told me at the launch, in all seriousness, that I had taken 10 years of his life! The reasons for that are instructive. It would be hard to find anyone to question the therapeutic value of oral testimony, but

I think as *historians* conducting interviews – not psychiatrists or social workers, other family members or business analysts or even biographers and novelists - we have a unique set of methodologies. At our very best we bring to our interviews, and what we do with them afterwards, a respect for complexity, for voice, for balance, for considering all the available evidence, sifting the detail and fitting it into the overall picture in a way that makes sense of sometimes contradictory narratives, and extracts the central themes. Alistair Hepburn remained convinced that the Board had been diverted from best practice by irrational public protest and faint-hearted politicians. He objected strenuously to my even-handed approach to a very fraught period, but that, of course, was also my best defence. In all the institutions I have written about there have been deeply partisan or aggrieved individuals who did not and do not find comfort in seeing both sides. By and large though, the conversations started in the course of writing the history continued without me, and the very fact that those lines of communication had been opened up was – to reduce myself at this point to the delightful shorthand of *1066 and All That* – ‘a good thing’.⁷

An organisation that sets aside discretionary resources to have its history written is already displaying wisdom, especially if it wants a *real* history, not just a glossy celebration. Not all institutions are in need of therapy, but they all have much to gain from the process inherent in inviting a historian to scrabble about in their records, talk to all and sundry, and kick start a reflective conversation quite different from the sort that business consultants set in train. Good historians legitimise and moderate the storytelling by stepping into the middle of it as the official narrators. They draw on all

available evidence, balance and nuance the story so that everyone can recognise themselves, acknowledge the failures and the successes, and then focus on retaining the best while responding to a changing environment. At least at an institutional level, I think this goes some way towards achieving Neustadt’s aim of encouraging the *conscious* use of history in decision-making.

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4 Reflections on the audiences of our work with community organisations

BY JENNIFER ROSE, PHA VIC & TAS



The Boite Concert of Ethnic Music poster, 1980, The Boite archive, appears with permission from The Boite. This poster is an example of the rich historical materials and ephemera that can be held within community organisations.

This paper offers reflections on some of the critical audiences that community histories reach. It encourages an expansive view when considering audience and the potential impact of the work professional historians do with community organisations. In addition to working on histories, they can play a valuable role in advocating for the importance of archival materials held by community organisations for historical inquiry broadly and for supporting the community services sector to understand and tell stories about its role in society.

Community organisations are a pillar of Australian civil society. They provide vital social services, foster community connectedness and development, and support the expression of culture and identity. This article draws on my experiences developing public histories in partnership with community organisations. I have found that the work historians do with community organisations unearths insights and source material of relevance not only to that specific story but which have significant value to broader social, cultural and urban historical inquiry.

INVERTING THE AUDIENCE: A FOCUS ON STAFF

As historians, we commonly give significant consideration to the 'public' outward-facing audiences of our work. Similarly, the

organisations we are working with are largely motivated to share their history with a broad and multi-faceted audience. It has been my experience, however, that the audience for whom an organisational history has held most meaning are the current and past staff, volunteers and program participants: in other words, the individuals whose lives have been most closely affected by the work that goes on within the organisation.

Values-driven organisations that seek to make a social impact are often ‘person centred’ and may have participatory approaches embedded in their ways of working with community members. This needs to be taken into consideration in the planning phase of a history project and prompts the question ‘how can the way we conduct a history project reflect the core values of this organisation?’ Another question arises if meaningful ‘client’ participation in decision-making is central to the organisation: ‘how might that be built into processes to determine the format and scope of a project, the collection of historical evidence and the development of the final product?’

Oral history offers one significant opportunity to engage staff and community members, not only as interviewees but as part of the project. In a recent project I undertook, staff within the organisation brought their communications, design, audio-visual technical skills and participant engagement skills to the project. Volunteers also drew on their performance skills to record audio quotes from past program participants, so that these could sit alongside contemporary voices in an oral history. Such participation offers people a chance to make discoveries about the organisation’s past and creates a greater sense of ownership of the history.

Organisational history is an account of a public body but still has, inescapably, a personal dimension. In some cases, an organisation has been born out of the vision and passion of an individual or group of people. Founding members’ understanding of the need for a service may have stemmed from their lived experience. In others where long-standing staff have invested a large part of their career into the development of an organisation, the characterisation of the work of the organisation is entangled with their identities as professionals. For them, participating in an oral history interview can offer an opportunity to share their insights with a broader audience. They may also find it rewarding to make some personal reflections, though this can give rise to challenging memories as well. In anticipation of this, it is important to consider and apply measures that support the personal wellbeing of interview participants in line with ethical practice principles, including the opportunity to review and redact statements made in interview.

Historians understand that the nature of memory (and collective memory) is subject to change over time and necessarily influenced by context. This applies also to the construction of ‘organisational memories’. Recollections about how an organisation was founded, and how it has developed can reflect the gradual distillation of values and purpose that have taken shape over years of organisational development. At times, memories that most strongly reflect the values of the organisation may take sharpest focus in personal recollections and be almost subconsciously prioritised in oral history accounts. In other cases, memories of events may be reshaped over time to embody those values. For example, in the account of how an organisation was first



established, a staff member's reflective account may give prominence to characteristics (such as organisational autonomy) that are now highly valued by the organisation but were not necessarily strong features of its early operational structure. Rather than simply seeing this as something to be 'de-coded' by the historian, it can provide important signposts to key features of organisational identity and culture, enabling their incorporation into the historical narrative.

These considerations highlight the importance of the historians' interpretative gaze and research skills to verify and contextualise information. It may also require the sensitive handling of 'multiple truths' or of contrary reflections on the past. I have found that sharing primary source material with staff as the project develops and inviting their input on its historical interpretation can prompt collaborative reflection that may assist in navigating some of these challenges of interpretation. This helps to present the past in an inclusive way.

While the independent scholarship of the historian must be maintained, it is, in my experience, equally important to maintain an active channel of communication with staff while developing a history. Feedback on content can protect against the accidental misrepresentation of historical events, where written archival materials only tell part of a story, or a detail has been overlooked in oral history interviews. Such misrepresentations can have serious contemporary implications. Not mentioning, for example, the role of a partner agency or community group in the historical development of a contemporary program could place that relationship under strain or even jeopardise the partnership. Seeking

feedback from staff on draft materials shows respect for the complex work in partnership building, community development, participant engagement and program design that is not necessarily well reflected in the paper archives.

Undertaking a history project can provide community organisations with a unique opportunity for staff development. Their participation in the project can sharpen their understanding of the organisations' evolution and the factors that have supported or hindered its development. Staff are able to reflect upon the contextual issues that have shaped the organisation, thereby bringing a historically informed perspective to the contemporary context. This in turn effects the transfer of 'corporate knowledge' from long-standing staff to newer staff members. It encourages reflection on achievements and challenges and the ways in which organisational values, practices and specialist knowledges have been developed and refined. The ability to place their work within a broader, historical context of change-making can bring a fresh and inspiring dimension to the way staff view their contemporary roles.

CONTRIBUTING TO A BIGGER HISTORICAL PICTURE: THE COMMUNITY SECTOR AS AUDIENCE

Like many others, community organisations are often spurred to capture their histories when reaching significant anniversaries. The histories of longstanding organisations are intertwined with the historical development of their broader community sector, or sub-sector, with organisational developments shaped by changes in the governmental, funding, practice and service landscapes. In developing and sharing their histories, community organisations

are both contributing to a broader sectoral historical narrative and to the preservation and ‘unearthing’ of source materials that can hold significant value to social history researchers.

Cultural historians may find value in an analysis of the role of sector peak bodies and state-wide organisations in influencing collective sector identities and cultures. An examination of how these organisations host and foster networks, support sector development and advocate for collective interests can provide rich historical insights into the evolution of these service sectors and their relationship to the communities and political processes they work within.

ILLUSTRATING SOCIAL CHANGE OVER TIME: AN AUDIENCE OF POLICY MAKERS AND FUNDING BODIES

Community organisational histories can provide important insights into historical changes in service provision, practice development and the impact of social, governmental and political contexts. They offer reflections on service approaches tested in the past and the limitations or successes in those examples, as well as insights into how previous governments and services approached social problems and responded to changes in demographics, urban development and community needs. The historian should keep this potential audience in mind, thinking also about how to write up material that will resonate with policy makers.

Tracing the impact of an organisation over time, including in oral history testimony, is an important contribution of the historical narrative.

The following excerpt from a recent interview is a case in point, demonstrating the flow-on effects from working in a community organisation:

So, it’s intergenerational, you know, you work with one cohort of young people, those young people then become voices within their communities and they then become role models within their communities, where other young people within that community aspire to be like that person.

By drawing out the outcomes of the work of an organisation at a higher, perhaps thematic, and broader scale than is typically reflected in reporting on individual programs, a picture of social impact over time may come to the fore. For prospective funders, this can provide evidence of a proven ‘track record’. While it is not the task of the historian to measure programmatic outcomes, nor is a history developed solely, if at all, for the purpose of securing funding, the historical analysis may unearth or synthesise information that can be drawn upon by the organisation in its advocacy and fundraising activities.

Organisations may be reluctant to offer insights into challenging times or mistakes. It is the role of the historian to support them to understand the value of dealing with these issues within a well-rounded history. The historian must also consider, within an ethical framework, the suitability of types of organisational data or information for inclusion in a history and to work with the organisation to consider issues of ‘client’ disclosure, privacy or of potential ramifications of drawing from previously published works in a history.



UNLOCKING COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS' ARCHIVES: NEW INSIGHTS AND SOURCE MATERIAL FOR HISTORIANS

Both the archival materials held by community organisations and the histories that we develop with them are useful source material for social, cultural, political, labour and urban historians. By way of example, delving into the advocacy work of an organisation may uncover perspectives on social issues that are difficult to access elsewhere. Where organisations have worked in participatory ways with community members to develop an evidence base for public advocacy purposes, they may hold consultative reports and other historical material that gives voice to people – such as young people, people experiencing homelessness, people living with disability, culturally diverse and economically marginalised people – who are otherwise hard to find in existing public archives.

Historians (alongside archivists) have a critical role to play in working with community organisations to support them to understand the significance of their historical materials and, if possible, establish processes for maintaining their archives for posterity and as a resource to draw upon in governance or day-to-day business. For example, historians may like to support organisations to consider the nature of consent in their information collection processes. Where appropriate, historians can encourage organisations to make materials in their archive accessible through public collecting institutions or platforms like [Victorian Collections](#)¹, thereby unearthing and supporting the preservation of significant source material for social history researchers. The perennial problem here is resourcing for this process, particularly in the case of not-for-profit organisations with limited budgets. This is a worthy focus for advocacy, including by Professional Historians Australia, to governments and publicly funded research and collecting institutions.

IN CONCLUSION

I hope these reflections encourage historians to take an expansive view when considering how to conduct history projects with community organisations, and to find creative, engaging and participatory approaches to working with staff and volunteers to analyse sources and develop stories of the past. This type of history making provides a multitude of opportunities not only to involve communities in understanding and presenting the past, but to uncover rich source material that may not otherwise be easy to locate in existing public archives. We have an opportunity not only to tell fascinating histories, but to show community organisations how the historical materials they hold can bolster their sector by strengthening its collective historical identity and contributing to the public understanding of its vital role.

JENNIFER ROSE

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Protecting women and girls in depression and war Jean Campbell WPC and Senior WPO

BY JANET SCARFE, PHA SA



Founder and principal of the South Australian Women, Kate Cocks, and South Australia's women police constables, 1934, (Kate Cocks front row left of centre; Jean Campbell back row, centre), courtesy of the Campbell family collection.

Jean Campbell (1906–2007) was, in succession, a nurse, woman police constable (WPC), hairdresser, South Australia's senior Woman Peace Officer (WPO) in the Second World War, a beauty therapist and finally a floor manager in David Jones, the department store.

As one of the first generation of women police in South Australia, Campbell worked in a role that was as much social work as it was law enforcement, in a time and location where social and economic upheaval were great. As the senior WPO she oversaw a team helping to manage the security and safety of munitions factories and their largely female workforce.

Campbell spoke little about her life as a WPC and WPO. Two nieces, Janet and Suzanne Scarfe, a historian and genealogist respectively, have reconstructed her life. Their research has revealed a woman of remarkable resilience and adaptability.

This biographical essay recounts part of the long life of South Australian Jean Campbell (1906–2007). The story of this resilient woman emerged during family history research. My sister and I were investigating our maternal forebears, the Campbells, who had lived and worked for three generations on South Australia's iconic pastoral property known as Anlaby. The family had left a collection of photographs, diaries and notebooks, Anlaby's records are held in the State Library of South Australia (SLSA). These sources plus contemporary newspapers available on Trove and other records allowed us to reconstruct their lives. The result was the book *The Campbells of Anlaby 1860-1940*, which we self-published in 2021.¹

THE COLLABORATION

Sue (Suzanne), my sister, is an accomplished self-taught genealogist and adroit at sleuthing among genealogical records. My interest as a professional historian lies in biography, particularly in collective biography. In 2010 Sue and I found ourselves with no forebears left to answer queries about previous generations. Asked at a family funeral 'Where do you fit in?' Sue's uncertain response was 'cousin'. Curious, she went to the SLSA, unfamiliar territory for her. She discovered the registers of births, deaths and marriages in South Australia, recorded since 1836, and quickly found unknown forebears one, two and three generations back. Hooked, she subscribed to Ancestry and joined Genealogy SA. She amassed information (newspaper articles, land titles, sports results and more) on her computer, where it sat.

In 2016 I returned to Adelaide to live and we turned our combined attention to all the material Sue had gathered and to other sources as well. My interest was in the connections and contexts of people's lives. Slowly, it dawned on me that family history is another form of collective biography. I could see we had the makings of a family history, a social history and a history of Anlaby. *The Campbells of Anlaby 1860-1940* provides a useful model of collaboration between a genealogist and a historian. The first edition sold out and we reprinted. We hope that it might benefit the writing of family history that all too often gets no further than a compilation of births, deaths and marriages. We discovered much about the Campbells as individuals and across generations.

Jean Campbell – or Aunty Jean as we knew her – was very much part of our upbringing

as children in the 1950s and 1960s. To us she was formidable, a stickler for rules and good manners. We knew little about her life before and she always brushed aside any questions about it. Part of what we uncovered after her death in 2007, aged 100, follows below.

Jean's succession of jobs showed a determination to adapt successfully to circumstances. Her roles as a WPC during the Great Depression and as the Senior WPO in the Second World War give her a place in South Australian history.

JEAN CAMPBELL

Jean Margaret Annie Campbell was born in 1906 on Anlaby Station, approximately 100 kilometres north of Adelaide. She was the second child and eldest daughter of Anlaby overseer, Charles Campbell, and his wife Annie.

Anlaby had been established by Frederick Dutton and his brothers, Francis and William, in 1839. Henry Dutton, the owner from 1890 to 1914, created a colonial version of an English estate of which he was 'the Squire'. Under his direction Anlaby formed as a large homestead with extensive and elaborate gardens. His son, Henry 'Harry' Hampden Dutton, and Harry's wife Emily maintained this lavish lifestyle, entertaining the leaders of South Australia society as well as artists and musicians from overseas. After Harry's death in 1932, Emily became the owner until she died in 1962.²

As overseer from 1904 until his death in 1938, Charles Campbell worked for Henry, Harry and Emily. While the Duttons and the Campbells exchanged social courtesies, the social gap between the families was wide.

The Campbell family lived in comfortable housing provided for senior employees. They enjoyed access to a tennis court and the golf course that wound its way through the paddocks. Jean, as well as her two brothers and two sisters, were educated in local schools to qualifying certificate level, the usual education standard of the day. She played golf and tennis, learnt music and singing, providing the piano accompaniment at many local dances. Their upbringing was conventional and happy.

For young women like Jean and her sisters, living on a station or farm meant limited life choices. Nursing was an attractive option because training could be done at many country hospitals. In 1929, aged 22, Jean left Anlaby to train as a nurse at the Soldiers Memorial Hospital in Riverton, 35 kilometres away.³ In 1930 she transferred to the South Coast District Hospital in Victor Harbor but she resigned after six months for health reasons and returned home.⁴

In 1932 Jean Campbell embarked on an entirely different career as a constable in the South Australian Women Police. This novel choice brought her into contact with people and experiences she had never encountered growing up.

WOMAN POLICE CONSTABLE

All of the WPCs pictured were handpicked by the founder of the South Australian Women Police, Kate Cocks', from the longest serving Mary Wilcher (appointed in 1916) to her last recruits Constance McGrath and Jean Campbell (1932). Each one met her rigorous educational, health, fitness and character standards.

Two of Jean Campbell's family members were police. Her uncle, Norman Campbell, had been in the South Australian Police Force, then the Northern Territory Mounted Police in the 1890s. Another uncle, Charles Keene, was at the time a sergeant at Port Adelaide station where two WPCs were posted. He undoubtedly encouraged Jean to apply to Kate Cocks. In 1932 Jean became the 22nd recruit accepted in 17 years. She remained in the force until she married in 1936.

South Australia's pioneering Women Police Office had been set up by Cocks and Annie Ross in 1915. Its role was to keep women and children safe in their homes and public places, away from temptation and situations that might lead to wayward or illegal behaviour.⁵ It was widely admired at home and overseas.

Jean and Constance McGrath spent a year as probationary constables at the Adelaide Police Station. They learnt to interview and take statements, prepare reports for court, give evidence and patrol the streets. They passed the St John Ambulance first aid certificate and learned jujitsu for self-protection.

The job was demanding. The shifts (day or day/night) were officially eight hours but usually longer. There was one day off a fortnight and three week's annual leave. Remuneration was the same as male constables received. As a probationary constable, Jean earned £275 a year, roughly the same amount in a day as she had earned in a fortnight as a probationary nurse. The £17 uniform allowance paid to all police went towards the clothes she wore on duty – typically a street dress, coat, hat and stylish walking shoes.⁶



In 1933 Jean was transferred to the Port Adelaide police station where Charles Keene was a sergeant. The senior WPC was Daisy Curtis who had worked with women police forces overseas and studied conditions contributing to crimes against women and children. She was fearless, demanding of her staff, stern but generous to a fault.⁷ The daily work she and her WPCs did at Port Adelaide was recorded in journals now held by State Records of South Australia.⁸

Port Adelaide was a working-class district. Livelihoods revolved around the wharves. Ships meant sailors, a potential source of danger for girls, and passengers, who sometimes needed assistance or escort. The area had been hard hit by the depression. In 1934 around one third of its population received government relief such as ration stamps, clothing and boots.⁹

Administration of relief and assistance fell largely to the police. In 1933–34, WPCs conducted over 6,000 interviews with relief applicants across the state, a high proportion of them at the Port Adelaide station.¹⁰ The WPCs recorded applicants' details, prepared statements of need and typed them for forwarding to the local Unemployment Relief Committee and for filing. They checked on recipients at home to ensure the women and children in the household were adequately provided for and to investigate potentially fraudulent claims.

Unemployment was the main source of the problems the WPCs dealt with daily. It led to violence in homes, neglect of children, drunkenness, prostitution and exploitation of women and girls. Cocks was proud that her WPCs found jobs for nearly 200 women in 1933–34.¹¹ Jean used her personal connections to find positions in Kapunda for two women.¹²

WPCs spent part of everyday on the beat. Curtis often took Jean on her patrols, usually long brisk hikes during which members of the public were questioned.¹³ On her own patrols, Jean would typically visit half a dozen hotels to check for illegal gambling and intoxicated women, warn patrons about inappropriate behaviour and prevent underage girls from entering. On the nearby wharves she admonished girls who were loitering or acting suspiciously with men. Dance halls, carnivals, the local races and other public gatherings were also part of her beat. The WPCs moved through the crowds dealing with lost or missing children, drunken teenage girls and girls with older men who were not their fathers.¹⁴

In summer the Port Adelaide WPCs patrolled local beaches and sand dunes. Jean warned girls and couples about their behaviour. Sometimes she took their names and endeavoured to contact their parents. On one patrol, she questioned a girl sitting on the public lawns with a married man and took her home. A week later she found the girl work in the country.¹⁵ When a 20-year-old man assaulted a 15-year-old girl on Semaphore beach, Jean's evidence saw him remanded. She and Curtis then dealt with his mother who became 'hysterical' over the charges laid against her son.¹⁶

Jean investigated a number of indecent assault/rape cases. She dealt with the charge of a 20-year-old man assaulting a girl of 12 and attended his trial in the Supreme Court. He was released on a good behaviour bond – 'no medical evidence', Curtis wrote in the journal.¹⁷ It was a valuable lesson: on a subsequent case Jean interviewed the victim and her mother, accompanied the girl to a doctor then 'handed [over] bloomers as an exhibit for seminal stains'. Despite their hard work on the police report, the case seems not to have gone to trial.¹⁸

With Abby Campbell to Bonifant
 Street, re Bessie O'Toole - Invalid Pension
 drinking. Bessie was at Stuart St,
 Glauville with Brazil - was later removed
 to Bonifant St. Semaphore, P.B. Luthers
 + Constable Connor assisting.

Extract from
 Women Police
 Journal, Port
 Adelaide, 21
 November 1935,
 State Records of
 South Australia.

The Port Adelaide WPCs attended when women attempted suicide. A woman they arrested for setting fire to her house tried to kill herself in the station cells.¹⁹ Bessie O'Toole, a chronic alcoholic for whom they had found a place in a refuge, swallowed caustic soda. Jean and Daisy Curtis saved her life by hailing a passing motorist who drove Bessie to hospital. They attended her trial for the crime of attempting suicide for which Bessie was released on bond. They took her to the refuge but she soon absconded. Jean and the other WPCs continually grappled with Bessie's problems – drinking, itinerancy, theft, resisting arrest – while trying to find her a permanent home and a job. They secured her a position as cook and housemaid in a country hotel but the outcome is unknown.

The WPCs also dealt with women affected by mental illness. Cocks believed the increase in cases they encountered in the early 1930s was partly due to 'prevailing financial stringency in numerous homes'.²⁰ Jean and Curtis visited one family where the wife was 'much better mentally [but] still suffering from slight delusion'. They urged her husband to 'try and increase her

allowance'.²¹ They visited a home where a new mother was 'despondent and probably not receiving the nourishment she needs' though they were reassured by her well-meaning husband.²² Referral to an institution such as Northfield Mental Hospital was sometimes the only option.

Almost every day the Port Adelaide WPCs interviewed women about drunken, violent, philandering husbands. For all their experience they could still be taken aback as Jean clearly was when she reported a 'house in sheer poverty'.²³ They took action where they could, often going to great lengths to resolve situations. Following up a report about a drunken woman and sick child, Jean and Curtis arrived to find the woman 'on floor in bedroom hopelessly intoxicated. Man living with her under influence of drink'. They despatched her 'very frail' 14-year-old son to hospital, arrested him as a neglected child and notified the Child Welfare Department. Their enquiries revealed that the woman's husband was in a mental hospital. They found her a lawyer when she wanted a separation. They intervened when she refused to return to home

because of her lodger's 'excessive drinking and dirty habits'. They quickly organised a job in the country for her son and found him temporary accommodation. The solution was short-term: the drunken lodger remained and continued to assault the woman, and the WPCs continued to try to assist.²⁴

Neglect and mistreatment of children was a persistent issue for the WPCs. Jean and her colleagues investigated reports by neighbours or the public about mothers who were out at night or intoxicated or whose children seemed malnourished or punished. They issued warnings to the mothers and distributed clothing and blankets when necessary. The WPCs referred many cases to the Port Adelaide Methodist Mission for assistance.²⁵

As many situations involved alcohol and violence, the Police Commissioner urged the WPCs to carry small revolvers in their handbags. Curtis had a gun but Cocks refused. Jean's colleague Constance McGrath relied solely on her tongue and a few jujitsu holds for protection.²⁶ It is not known whether Jean carried a weapon.

The WPCs counselled reconciliation in domestic disputes. They urged husbands to provide adequately for their families, give up alcohol and search for employment. Cocks claimed the couples they assisted and advised were often reconciled but the Port Adelaide WPCs knew from experience that the domestic peace was usually short-lived.

Jean prepared numerous police reports and attended the Port Adelaide court and even the Supreme Court but her work and that of other

WPCs was rarely mentioned in newspaper accounts of charges and trials. Occasionally she made the newspapers because of raids with male police constables, once on an opium den where an elderly Chinese man was arrested, and once on a house in which a beer stash was seized.²⁷ Investigations she and WPC McGrath made into the 'Order of Mission Light' resulted in two women being fined for fortune telling.²⁸ Cocks saw these instances as demonstrating the support rendered by her constables to police work as a whole.

After four years as a WPC in 1936 Jean resigned to marry Sergeant John (Harry) Butler of the Motor Traffic Branch. Their time together was brief and unhappy. Harry had lost his wife and stillborn child 18 months earlier. He was mentally scarred from fighting at Gallipoli and on the Western Front and by the loss of a brother in the war. He applied for assistance from the Repatriation Commission in August 1938, citing health problems, and in February 1939 he was invalided out of the police force with a pension.²⁹ Jean had left him several months earlier, well aware of the effects of domestic misery on women's lives.

Harry returned to police duty in 1940 with reduced rank and country postings until he retired in 1954. In 1944 he was granted a divorce on the grounds of Jean's desertion and subsequently remarried.



Jean Campbell newly appointed Senior Woman Peace Officer, at home, 1942, courtesy of the Campbell family collection.

SENIOR WOMAN PEACE OFFICER

Jean was unable to return to policing in 1938 as she was still married. She changed direction entirely. She became a ladies hairdresser in 1940 and opened a salon near her mother's home in suburban Adelaide. Two years later, in May 1942, she was appointed the state's first senior WPO in charge of a team enforcing security among women workers in Adelaide's munitions factories.

By early 1942 Australia was moving urgently to a total war footing. A huge increase in munitions production was a key component of that. Munitions had formerly been made for the armed services in Europe and the Middle East but now they were essential for defending Australian shores. At the peak of production in mid-1943, there were 47 government-owned factories. The munitions workforce grew dramatically and large numbers

of women were recruited. So great and urgent was the demand for labour that restrictions on women's employment fell away. In 1942, single women and widows, wives and dependent mothers of servicemen, married women with and without children were all encouraged to work for the war effort. By 1943 over half Australia's female workforce was employed in some branch of the munitions industry.³⁰

The new government munitions factories were built in southern Australia, distant from the vulnerable northern coastline and states. Three large facilities were in Adelaide (at Hendon, Finsbury, and Salisbury/Penfield), and another six in country South Australia.



'Women Peace Officers', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 29 July 1942, p. 4.

Munitions work was tedious, repetitive and dangerous because of exposure to chemicals and ever-present potential for explosions. The factories themselves were deemed vulnerable targets for enemy attack, as well as potentially open to internal sabotage, information leaks and theft.

The Peace Officer Guard was responsible for security in government munitions factories. Set up in 1925, its initial role was 'the preservation of peace and good order throughout the Commonwealth'.³¹ In government-owned factories and essential services, peace officers were primarily watchmen and searchers. They were empowered to search any one entering Commonwealth premises, their bags and possessions. Women workers had to be searched by 'female persons'.

Jean's policing experience and contacts with former police colleagues explain why it was hardly surprising that a former woman police constable was appointed to establish the women's unit, as had happened in Victoria.³²

Marian March, the *Advertiser's* women's reporter, devoted an article to South Australia's new WPO.³³ She reported that Miss Campbell had been

appointed by the Commonwealth government, was well qualified and keen to get the important work underway. Her office was located with the Commonwealth Investigations Branch (responsible for intelligence and internal security). The duties of her staff involved 'the social welfare of the girls working in munitions factories' undertaken in eight-hour shifts, six days a week. The qualifications were personal rather than technical – 'a pleasing manner and an abundance of tact'. She invited women interested in the role to apply.

Two months later in a second interview, Jean elaborated on the work. The WPOs regularly patrolled the factory work areas, female changing rooms and grounds during their shifts, night and day, to ensure there was no contravention of the rules.³⁴

The nature of munitions work, the materials handled and the products made necessitated the most stringent safety precautions in the factory. The workers were constantly exposed to highly toxic and dangerous substances such as TNT and, at Salisbury, cordite. Jewellery was dangerous near machinery; hairpins and hairclips could fall out and spark an explosion or fire.

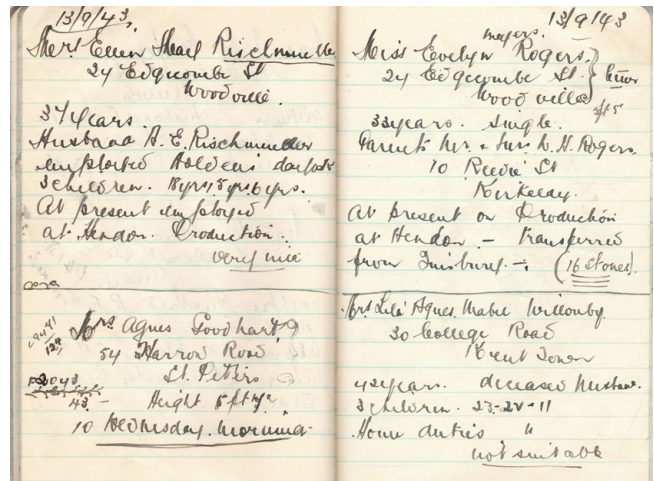
It was the WPOs' role to:

make thorough searches for contraband articles, such as cigarettes, tobacco, matches, jewellery of any kind, hairpins, sweets or food, all of which are forbidden to be taken into or worn in certain munitions and explosives sections. Such searches were liable to be made at any time.³⁵

Forbidden articles were confiscated.

Jean's first and ongoing task was to recruit staff, initially 20. The first *Advertiser* article invited applications directly. Other applicants were directed to her by the Manpower Directorate/Labour Exchange. She recorded in her notebook details about each applicant: name, address, telephone number (if any), age and height, marital status, children and their ages, current employment, husband's occupation, and for a time, religion. Successful applicants were sent for a medical examination. Sometimes her notes included comments: 'good app', 'very nice', '✓', 'too short', 'large x', '16 stones', 'Police Record'. She appointed a wide variety of women – single, married, divorced, women with young children and with none.³⁶

Jean drew up the six-day rosters covering day and night shifts. She rotated the officers between the factories in and near Adelaide on a fortnightly basis. This policy caused her officers transport challenges and probably annoyance. She herself visited each site regularly but enjoyed the privilege of a car and driver. She dealt with minor accidents among the staff, and approved their recreation and sick leave. She also organised their uniforms, which were difficult to get and required precious clothing coupons.



Jean Campbell's notes on applicants in her notebook, courtesy of the Campbell family collection.

The calibre of her staff was less than Jean had hoped. In October 1943 the factory workers enjoyed a public holiday but she called her WPOs together for a refresher course. She jotted down key points to make in her notebook. They should stand, she said, when a senior officer entered the room. 'We are not actually respecting the person – it's the uniform – remember ladies – it's the Kings Uniform' she reminded them.³⁷ Secondly, their searching technique needed improvement:

I want each Off' to place themselves in the girl's position – Supposing you were approached in a manner which you thought was anything but nice – you would naturally resent it – and so do they – remember – civility costs nothing – so in future just pay a little more attention.

She also warned them against 'yarns with men and discussing private business with men'.

Peace Officer numbers were progressively reduced from 1943 onwards as the tide of the war changed and munitions production was wound down.

All WPOs became redundant between September and November 1945. Prior to retrenchment there had been 1745 Peace Officers in total, just 159 of them women. South Australia had 28 WPOs out of a total of 325.³⁸

Jean had to find yet another career after the war, and she did. She trained as a beauty therapist with the renowned cosmetics company Cyclax and from there moved into retail management and staff training with David Jones department store in Adelaide.

Of her several careers, Senior Woman Peace Officer was the one of which she was most proud.

Jean Campbell spoke only to her closest family members about her roles as a WPC and as the senior Woman Peace Officer in South Australia. For most of us, it was as if she had not existed before 1950.

However family photographs, the journals of the Port Adelaide Women Police and her own notebooks as Senior WPO revealed that our Aunt Jean's life was varied and challenging. Her career also casts light on the social history of a time of great social and economic upheaval.

Researching her life we learned of her capacity to adapt to circumstances and her resilience. She had a remarkable life and we are so pleased that in the course of researching and publishing our family history we have been able to uncover and share part of it.



Jean Campbell in her late 80s, courtesy of the Campbell family collection.

JANET SCARFE

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POEM

TAKE IT OUT BY HELEN PENROSE, PHA VIC & TAS

*I wrote this light-hearted poem to perform at the PHA national conference in 2023.
It muses on the nexus of history and marketing in our work as professional historians.*

Take it out!
What's that?
My natural habitat
Isn't gloss or floss
Or censoring.

Put it in!
You want spin?
So we can't see through the din?
Leave it with me
(and I'll put it in the bin).

Take it out!
Who says?
Your boss? The press?
But history is rigorous
Let's argue the toss!

Put it in!
Are you sure?
Does your audience need more?
Extra cost, extra time –
Add an extra budget line.

Take it out!
No way!
I will stand my ground.
We must learn from the past
Not consign it to the dust.

Put it in!
I applaud your
Courageous approach.
You will see no loss of income –
Truth can never encroach.

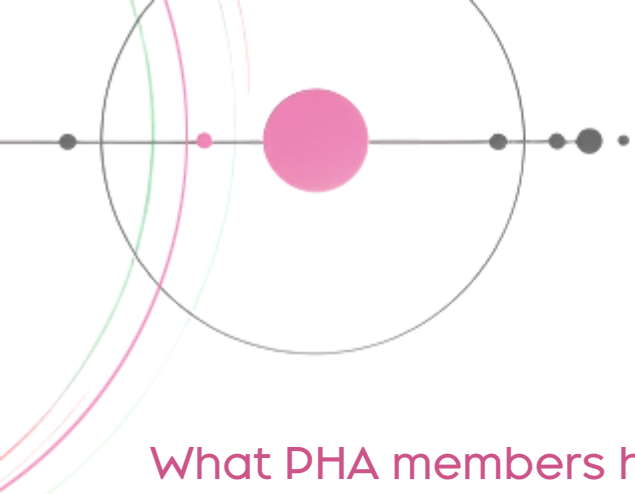
Take it out!
But why?
History is not blue sky!
That's the marketing department
Down the stairs to level five.

Put it in!
You're the expert
And now I see
That history done properly
Will liberate me.

Take it out
Put it in
Take it out
Put it in
Take it out
Put it in
Take it out ...

REVIEWS

The page features a complex abstract graphic design. On the left side, there is a vertical line with several small black dots. To the right of this line, there are several overlapping circles and arcs in shades of pink, red, and green. A prominent feature is a large pink circle centered on a horizontal line that extends across the page. This horizontal line has several black dots of varying sizes along it. A thin pink horizontal line is positioned above the word 'REVIEWS'. The overall aesthetic is modern and minimalist.



What PHA members have been reading, reviewing... and writing

This is an exciting time in Australian history. The Great Australian Silence of much of the 20th century is over. No longer are we ignoring what the colonial archive tells us about the past. The task of revisiting the records and incorporating First Nations perspectives into historical analysis is more urgent than ever, now that we have seen, during the 2023 Voice referendum, that championing ignorance – ‘if you don’t know vote no’ – can have popular appeal.

Professional historians are well represented in the work that is taking place on colonial–First Nations encounters. This the most prominent theme of the PHA book blog, which features reviews of several books that are making a significant contribution to detailed research into the frontier wars and to telling the stories of Indigenous–settler relations.

Listening to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders recount the history of their country is often part of the daily work of historians who work in heritage jobs across the country. Their experience can make an important contribution to the practice of history. And yet, it is rare to see discussion of the practice of professional and public historians, pleasingly a strong theme in this issue of *Circa*.

More common are books on historiography and the lessons we can draw from history. Another aspect of women’s history – the role of women in the professions – has produced books on women in science and in the ABC that were reviewed in 2023. Others were about crime and legal battles between men and women; ASIO; football; food; and the Vandemonians.

The screenshot displays four book review cards from the PHA Book Blog. Each card includes a book cover image, the title, author, date, and a short synopsis. The reviews are for 'The China-Australia Migration Corridor: History and Heritage' by Denis Byrne, Ien Ang & Phillip MAI (Feb 9, 2024); 'Courting: An Intimate History of Love and the Law' by Alicia Simmonds (Dec 17, 2023); 'Bennelong & Phillip: A History Unravalled' by Kate Fildes (Nov 6, 2023); and 'Australia's Most Infamous Criminals: Gripping Chronicles of Bold Heists, Clever Frauds, and Mysterious Murders' by Graham Seal (Oct 1, 2023). Each card has a 'READ MORE' link.

Screenshot from the PHA Book Blog.

Australia’s engagement with the world and other cultures is a theme that catches my eye, so makes an occasional appearance in the review pages. PHA members are among the scholars examining Australia and the Pacific and the Chinese in Australia. What rarely comes across my radar are stories about our multicultural past written by historians from within the various ethnic communities. Going deeper into the story of Australia’s multiculturalism is another element of our history that deserves greater attention. With its good connections into local government and community as well as the history profession, the PHA could address this gap, for example, as Jen Rose argues in her essay in this issue of *Circa*, by encouraging ethnic community archives; lobbying for funding research and publications; as well as by mentoring representatives of those communities interested in preserving the record and interpreting it for all Australians.

FRANCESCA BEDDIE
PHA BOOK BLOG EDITOR

REVIEWS



Bundanoon
Memorial Hall
bushfire meeting,
28 December 2019,
photograph by
Francesca Beddie.

BLACK SUMMER IN BUNDANOON

A COMMUNITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

“We are the fire continent of the globe, so it's not surprising that we are so concerned about the future of fire as we go into hotter times. The answers are always going to be local, ecological and historical.”

Tom Griffiths, Emeritus Professor of History at ANU,
Rear Vision, ABC Radio National, 10 February 2020

On 28 December 2019, a community history project was born in the Bundanoon Memorial Hall. The hall was so full that residents spilled outside into the scorching heat to hear about the Currawan fire to the east of the Morton National Park. I was standing next to David Brennen, the President of the Bundanoon History Group (BHG – established in the early 1980s, with

around 150 members in 2022). The Rural Fire Service (RFS) speaker was emphatic, telling the crowd that it was not a matter of *if* but *when* the fire would reach the village. ‘We should record this summer’, I said. David agreed. So began the bushfire archive project.

The project became, primarily, a collection of oral history interviews with residents who lived through the horror bushfire season of 2019/2020. On 4 January 2020, the fires did arrive in Bundanoon. A pyrocumulus cloud created its own weather system that produced a monster, which stomped through the national park and, when the wind turned in the evening, consumed four houses on the northern edge of the village.

REVIEWS

BLACK SUMMER IN BUNDANOON (CONT.)

THE PROJECT AIMS

In discussing the savage 2019/20 summer, Tom Griffith stated ‘it is essential for our survival and our culture that Australians learn a fine-grained language of fire in all its different localities’¹. The BHG project aimed to contribute to that language by:

- documenting a significant event in the history of Bundanoon, a village in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, with about 3,000 residents
- creating an archive for future analysis, building existing records of earlier bushfires. (The BHG holds a collection of historical material in the form of print, photography, audio recordings, and ephemera. It has been recording oral histories since 2010. The oral history sub-committee meets monthly and has several trained interviewers.)
- contributing to a more complete understanding of an unprecedented fire season in Australia.

THE PROCESS

While the project’s origin can be traced to the informal decision on 28 December, it did not begin immediately. The village was preoccupied with the fires that raged until early February. Moreover, the idea had to be agreed to by the BHG committee and membership, both of which expected due process. As convenor of the project (and a newcomer to the group), it fell to me to brief the BHG and take minutes of meetings, as well as liaise with the volunteers and undertake background research. The scope of the project – a series of short, targeted interviews with a cross-section of the Bundanoon community –

was agreed upon and a core group of volunteers established in early March. Then came COVID-19. Operating now on Zoom, the group drew up consent forms and a set of interview questions and protocols. The BHG archivist logged and copied the interviews, ensuring a back-up copy is held in the BHG offsite storage. Peg Fraser’s *Black Saturday, Not the End of the Story* (Monash University, 2018) winner of the Oral History Australia Book Award in 2019, was an important reference.

Amid the restrictions caused by the pandemic, the BHG managed to complete 31 oral history interviews – some using Zoom, others taking advantage of breaks in the lockdowns – most in time for what turned out to be a cool and wet end to 2020. We had aimed to present the community with the main messages from the interviews to remind residents not to become complacent. These were distilled in a poster using images taken by locals.



*Glow Worm Glen, 6 January 2019,
photograph by Margie Thomas.*

The messages and images were also presented in a short video made for the [National Museum of Australia's *Momentous*](#)², an online project that invited people to share stories about



Poster created by Bella Gnechi Ruscone using images submitted by members of the Bundanoon Photography Group and local RFS.

COVID-19 and the bushfires. Similar material was submitted to the Royal Commission into the National Natural Disaster Arrangements. This work ensured that a local perspective on Black Summer was included in the national record.

Another element of the project was the collection of documents (newspaper articles, statements to NSW inquiry, photographs). With so much of the information about the fires distributed via social media, this proved more difficult than anticipated. The BHG did not have the means for scraping the digital archive. Nor was it possible to get copies of the bulletins issued by the RFS.

Two significant gaps in the interviews conducted were the experiences of firefighters and the First Nation's voice. While RFS members were prepared to submit their photographs for the archive, very few wished to be interviewed about their experience. Several attempts were made to interview a Gundungurra representative but this did not eventuate.

FURTHER DISSEMINATION

With enthusiasm for the project still alive among the core group, the BHG decided to forge ahead with a second phase of the bushfire project. We applied for a Culture NSW grant, administered by the Royal Australian Historical Society, to build a dedicated website to convey the findings from phase one in an engaging way for local audiences and beyond, and to place Black Summer in Bundanoon within a broader historical and environmental context. That application was unsuccessful.

We had, however, received a grant of \$1,500 from Oral History NSW to support the work of documenting the experience of the Bundanoon community during the 2019/2020 bushfires. Our initial intention had been to hold workshops led by professional oral historians and to create connections with other community history groups documenting Black Summer. This plan was stymied by the persistence of COVID-19 and the continuation of restrictions on face-

REVIEWS

BLACK SUMMER IN BUNDANOOON(CONT.)

to-face interaction. With Oral History NSW's agreement, the grant was instead used to support BHG's efforts to curate the material gathered in the oral history interviews. The \$1,500 was spent on engaging a website and multimedia company as well as a student at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School to produce a short video foregrounding the voices of the community: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hUUeOyCAIE>. For me, the convenor and editor, this was a steep learning curve. Creating a storyboard for video production requires a huge amount of painstaking work – quite different from editing the written word!

OUTCOME

While the dedicated repository did not eventuate, the project did result in a video that tells the story of the bushfires using excerpts from the oral history interviews and photographs collected. The video also demonstrates the power of oral history to record a community's experience. In November 2023, extracts from the interviews were used as lyrics to accompany a song performed at the inaugural Bundanoon folk festival.

The digital archive exists on the [BHG website](#)³. It explains the rationale for the project, provides links to background materials and other sources, for example, testimonies by locals to the NSW Bushfire Inquiry, summarises the main messages gleaned from the interviews, and gives a full list of the interviews conducted. Edited transcripts are available for some of the interviews; in the case of the majority, the unedited version (created in Otter.ai) can be requested from the

BHG. This incompleteness is the result both of the need to finalise the BHG's obligations to Oral History NSW and waning enthusiasm for the project amongst its volunteers.

FINDINGS ABOUT BUSHFIRES IN BUNDANOOON AND SURROUNDING AREAS

The BHG holds paper files with clippings about previous fires: New Year's Eve 1904 when the Holy Trinity Anglican Church was destroyed by bushfire; January 1939, when Bundanoon escaped the fate of neighbouring village, Penrose, which lost nine houses, two stores, a fruit-packing shed, a church, and eight farmhouses, and March 1965, when Bundanoon fared better than Wingello (hit hardest on 4 January 2020) thanks to 1,000 firefighters, volunteers, troops, and police who fought back the fire. The history of these previous fires, their causes and how people reacted and remember them, reinforces the importance of continuing to examine the historical record for what can be learned and what should be unlearned. The refrain 'the fire always comes from the west' was proved false on 4 January 2020.

Much of what was said by the residents of Bundanoon echoed messages from other areas and inquiries about the bushfires:

- residents need to heed the call to be prepared, to be informed, to understand their limitations. It cannot be assumed that all are tuned in to social media, or even more traditional sources of media such as radio.
- authorities must improve coordination and communication. The local doctor amplified this point by saying that GPs in fire-affected

areas felt left out. They should be better integrated with the fire services.

- all can benefit from learning more about cultural burning.

Also recorded were important messages from people who lost their houses:

the trauma was magnified by having to repeat their story over and over. This points to the need for more cohesive recovery services.

Dissemination of these messages is difficult, especially when the rains come and you are talking about fire – people want to forget. Local radio did respond to a media release issued about the video and the project did become part of the University of Wollongong study, *Remembering Black Summer: How can community bushfire memorialisation help build resilience?*

LEARNINGS ABOUT A COMMUNITY HISTORY PROJECT

What two people thought was a good idea was not enough to get the project up and running. The BHG needed to be consulted and persuaded. Once up and running, BHG members relied on the convenor to drive the project (as volunteers flag). The networking skills of the president were invaluable in keeping the team together.

Another important question arose, one that holds relevance for those working in trauma-affected communities and individuals: did we start interviewing too early? No. Much thought was put into the questions and to the potential triggering of the interviewees. The then BHG

president was also a Lifeline counsellor and offered sound guidance. While some discussions did provoke emotion, no one voiced a negative reaction to the process. COVID-19 probably assisted the project, as many of those involved had more time.

At the time, there seemed to be repetition in the stories we were capturing; from a distance, it is clear this repetition amplifies the main themes and messages. If the resources were available, another set of interviews could yield further insights, for example, about the longer-term impacts on the RFS brigade and residents, as well as on the recovery effort and policy response.

The archive offers raw material. To influence behavioural change and policy, the material needs to be analysed. That proved too contentious to be done from within a small community. There are difficult questions to be raised about responsibility, myths, and differences of opinion about what happened when. These are matters for an outside historian to consider.

FRANCESCA BEDDIE, PHA NSW & ACT

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REVIEWS

HISTORY ON STAGE:

A REVIEW OF DANCE AND THEATRE PERFORMANCES IN 2023

For First Nations readers: this review contains the name of a deceased person.

The year 2023 may have been marred by the outcome of The Voice referendum, but it was rich in First Nations storytelling on the stage. This included theatre and contemporary dance, with this review discussing four of these performances: *Tracker*, *Burrgaja Yalirra (Dancing Forwards)*, *Triple Bill 2*, *Yuldea* and *The Visitors*. With some caution, I use the term contemporary to denote the genre of dance, noting that scholars like Mique'l Dangeli have questioned the false distinctions we make between 'traditional' and 'contemporary' – were not all dances once new?¹ Rather, all are expressions of the concerns of their time, and the four performances outlined here, as experienced by me as a non-indigenous audience member, accomplish that with passion, skill and artistry, along with an intent to provoke thought.

TRACKER

I viewed *Tracker*, a collaboration between Australian Dance Theatre (ADT) and ILBIJERRI Theatre Company, at the Carriageworks in Sydney on 13 January 2023. This combination of dance and theatre, or, perhaps more accurately, oral storytelling, is based on the life of Alexander (Alec) Riley (1884–1970), the great-great uncle of the choreographer and artistic director of ADT Daniel Riley. Alec Riley lived near Dubbo and worked as a tracker for the New South Wales Police Force, assisting in cases of cattle thieving, escaped prisoners, murders and lost children. He was the first Aboriginal person to be promoted to sergeant in 1941 and received the King's Police and Fire Service Medal. Despite

this, he was not eligible to receive a pension after his retirement due to his indigeneity. His grandson, Michael Riley, made a documentary about Riley in 1996, titled *Blacktracker*.²

The circular stage for this production is surrounded by a moving transparent curtain that serves to both obfuscate and reveal the story, not unlike fragments of primary sources in historical research. The main protagonist, an avatar of director Riley, arrives to follow in the footsteps of his ancestor, the tracker Riley. The dancers seem uncomfortable, unfamiliar with Country, not being able to read a map or connect with the land. They also bring along a box of documents and artefacts – primary sources. Historical records are part of the story, part of the telling, indeed one of the performers.

Denim-clad dancers emerge, who seem more at one with the earth, comfortable in Country, their gracefulness at odds with the awkwardness of the protagonist. The choreography supports and advances the story, bringing an emotional depth that words might struggle to convey. Likewise, the spoken narrative provides explanatory context, sometimes in language, that movement alone may not convey to an audience. The collaboration between words and dance, between narrative and non-narrative forms, works more effectively than either could provide by themselves.

The performance brings together past and present, the great-great nephew pursuing the traces of the tracker. History itself is being tracked even as it reveals its presence in the present. Riley's role in tracking Roy Governor,



Stanley Nalo and Ses Bero, "Bloodlines", from Marrugeku's *Burrbgaja Yalirra Triple Bill 2*. Photograph by Carlita Sare. Used with permission.

the younger brother of Jimmy, to help place him in gaol is linked to the incarceration of First Nations people today – 'nothing has changed'. The clothes might be different, but the situations are not – one is 'still being hunted', and continues to be subjected to white arrogance. Time is removed, or collapsed, or perhaps there is simply a different sense of time, of connecting and conflating past, present and future.

By the end, the protagonist tracking the tracker has gained new knowledge and reconnected with the land, now becoming a teacher to the next generation. Engaging with the past helps to better place one's feet in the present. And we as the audience are left with more complicated questions about how to read and remember the historical record. Does truth lie in the documents, in memories, or in the land?

BURRBGAJA YALIRRA (DANCING FORWARDS) TRIPLE BILL 2

Marrugeku is a Broome and Sydney-based intercultural dance company that explores many issues related to contemporary life – First Nations, sexualities, refugees, migration, ethnicity – through the lenses of the present and past. The company's *Burrbgaja Yalirra (Dancing Forwards)* program also supports future creators and choreographers, some of whose work was showcased in this performance.³ I viewed *Triple Bill 2* at Carriageworks on 29 April 2023.

The first piece, *No New Gods*, created and danced by Filipinx artist Bhenji Ra, is a dark and powerful piece set in a dystopian mangrove – twisted trees, fog, a dead ox in the water. Flashes of light are like a storm, retreating or arriving.

REVIEWS

HISTORIES ON STAGE (CONT.)

The single protagonist seems anxious, distressed, as expressed through jerky, sharp movements. They hold two sticks, sometimes used as weapons, sometimes as tools or aids, other times as utensils. The most powerful moment for me was the declaration that ‘we don’t want any new gods’, which I read as the coming of the coloniser’s new god. Perhaps they, too, were a god, fearing for the future of themselves and their land should they be usurped.

The second piece, *Bloodlines*, moves the setting to the sugar cane plantations of Queensland. Creators Ses Bero and Stanley Nalo explore the impact of forced migration and slavery on South Sea Islanders and their interactions with Torres Strait Islanders, who also moved between worlds. The performance begins with the oral history of a kidnapped ancestor. The duo’s movements reveal the impacts of Western technologies on land and wellbeing through trains and falling trees. Work is a major theme, where camaraderie and coercion coexist.

The final in the trilogy is *Nyuju*, a reflection on the life of creator Emmanuel James Brown’s great grandmother. Again, this sharing of deeply personal stories enables larger truths and meanings about the past and present to emerge. *Nyuju* also begins with an oral history in language, punctuated by English words. There is a fantastic light show on the floor that honours the great-grandmother’s art. A graceful male dancer enters carrying long sticks over his shoulder, soon changing into a hat and shirt, now an Indigenous cowboy, a station hand. In a speech we hear that there is no more hunting, that if you wanted to eat you had to get paid, to clock on and off. It is the arrival of colonial industrial modernity to replace traditional life, which brings with it the drinking away of

sorrows. Eventually, he discards the hat and shirt, loses the drunken-like motions, again becoming graceful, his body painted. Once more he embraces traditional life, picks up the sticks, and hunts.

Collectively, *Triple Bill 2* reveals the impact of colonisation on the environment, on spirituality, and on work/life, and advocates for the need to reconnect with culture and language.

YULDEA

Yuldea is a production of Bangarra Dance Theatre, which I viewed in the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House on 14 July 2023. This was the first production by new artistic director Frances Rings, who took over the reins from Stephen Page last year. *Yuldea* is about the Anangu people of the Great Victorian Desert, the place of Rings’ own family, and the impacts of colonisation and nation-building as told through two key events – the building of the Trans-Australian Railway across the Nullarbor and the atomic tests conducted at Maralinga.⁴

Like *Tracker*, historical documents are used to effect in *Yuldea*. A British male voice reads the proclamation of the creation of the province of South Australia, heralding the change that is in store for these communities. The early scenes convey a time of tranquillity, of positive human and animal relationships expressed through the gentle fluidity of a *par de deux*. Voice, light, music and props are used effectively to support the story’s trajectory.

Again, the curtains are integral to the performance, cut into strips that allow for the movement of both dancers and light. This is most effective in conveying the impact of

the train, a common trope to signify Western technology. Dancers are now in Western work uniforms, sharp clanking noises pierce the air, the previous harmony of the landscape is disrupted, and light breaks through the curtain strips like lightning, or electricity – or the headlight of an oncoming train.

Maralinga is powerfully and poignantly conveyed through a single, dancing male, on the ground in pain, struggling, with blackened parts on his body. One stream of light falls on his body like a negative sunbeam, flakes falling around like black snow. Nuclear fallout. Voiceovers talk of the effects on the land, of contaminated water.

The performance ends as a gentle but strong showing of survival and resilience – dancers moving through and behind the curtain strips, only partly visible. They are still there but mostly forgotten by non-indigenous society. This is a perhaps more subtle work than that of Page, but it continues the theme of the ongoing impacts of colonisation as experienced by First Nations people for which Bangarra is known.

THE VISITORS

Jane Harrison's *The Visitors*, previously part of the 2020 Sydney Festival, was presented by the Sydney Theatre Company (directed by Wesley Enoch) in the Drama Theatre at the Sydney Opera House in 2023. I attended the performance on 21 September, which included such well-known Indigenous performers as Elaine Crombie, Aaron Pedersen and Beau Dean Riley Smith (who danced as Bennelong in Bangarra's eponymous production).⁵ The uncomplicated set and staging disguise the power and complexity of the play, which cleverly imagines the discussions and debates that took place when the First Fleet

gathered in Sydney Harbour, but before any of those aboard arrived onshore.

Centre stage is a rock on which the law men of the Sydney clans gather, a stage on a stage, a midden lying nearby. The men (two played by women actors) are barefoot in modern business attire, conveying the sense that this gathering has the importance of any company board or government meeting today. The discussions and debates – to send on their way or to welcome – are circular, which any attendee of a work meeting would recognise, gradually moving the group from advocating one position to that of another. The conversation moves between language and English.

The play is excellent at showing that when we are faced with an unfamiliar event or new challenge, we try to explain and understand it by drawing on our existing systems of knowledge. The law men, through their communication channels and stories, knew about others like those in the harbour who had come to the land, but they had not stayed. The clans had their own systems of protocol for moving through the Country of another clan or nation, so perhaps they could implement that same protocol here. And they knew how integral the land was to their very existence, and thus assumed the same of these visitors: they would surely want and need to return to their own country: 'visitors leave, right'?

There is another layer to this play – the audience. Every audience member brings with them some understanding about what happened in the 235-odd years that followed the arrival of the First Fleet. Unlike the play's characters, every audience member is aware of what happens next, and is forced to view that brief moment in time with the weight of its consequences.



REVIEWS

HISTORIES ON STAGE (CONT.)

The final soliloquy, the Welcome to Country, moved me to sobbing tears. It spoke of the intimate connections between people, land, sea and sky, of the vast knowledge of flora and fauna and the shape of the land with incredible power and beauty, from one who knew that land better than the back of their hand. After the performance, I overheard an audience member say they now better understood the meaning of connection to Country: a demonstration of the potential power of these performed histories to bring us to new knowledge. And if that Welcome to Country is seen as a kind of temporary visitor's visa, then the rest of us have certainly violated those visa conditions.

FEELING THE PAST

History on the stage, as in the above four examples, is not about documenting the past with footnotes and written words, with its claims to objectivity and accuracy, and nor should it be. It instead creates a multisensory immersive experience designed to make you *feel* something about the past, to provoke a reaction, a response. You come at history from different angles – above, below, sideways – and, at least in the pieces discussed here, witness a First Nations perspective of that past told through a fusion of cultural and Western forms and knowledge. For the mostly non-indigenous audience members, questions remain about what to do with this experience. As my audience companion asked of *Tracker*, 'What do you do after the show with what you have witnessed? How do you do it justice – not just take it as entertainment or a token acknowledgement of the past? How do you take this and make it meaningful in your own life? For others?'⁶ That, of course, is up to you.

CHRISTINE de MATOS, PHA NSW & ACT

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REVIEWS



Gallery 1 entrance:
Silhouettes: Fashion in the Shadow of HIV/AIDS showing the red ribbon blazer based on the Visual AIDS Artists' Caucus design of 1991, Rossella Jardini for Moschino, 1995, and Chester Weinberg Ladies' Suit, 1966, photograph by Nathan Schroeder.

SILHOUETTES: FASHION IN THE SHADOW OF HIV/AIDS

Silhouettes: Fashion in the Shadow of HIV/AIDS was an exhibition on display at the David Roche Foundation House Museum, Adelaide in 2022. The exhibition used fashion as a medium to detail the history of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) epidemic and to discuss advances in treatment and preventive therapies. More than 150 items of clothing, accessories and jewellery by 22 designers who died of AIDS-related illnesses were displayed, as well as photographs, posters, promotional t-shirts for HIV/AIDS awareness initiatives, and a quilt block from the Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt Project.

The exhibition was curated by Skye Bartlett, team manager of SAMESH (South Australian Mobilisation and Empowerment for Sexual

Health). This community-based, peer-led organisation provides information and support about sexual health for men who have sex with men and people living with HIV. Outside this sphere, Bartlett collects historic garments and accessories made in Europe or the United States; he is custodian of a family collection of English and Australian dresses.

Bartlett's purchase of a pink dress by American designer Chester Weinberg was the catalyst for the exhibition. While researching the dress, he learned that Weinberg had died of an AIDS-related illness. This piqued Bartlett's interest, prompting him to search for other fashion industry professionals whose deaths were AIDS-related. The resulting list of names showed evidence of significant careers: some designers had received exposure through the press and

REVIEWS

SILHOUETTES (CONT.)



Gallery 2 showing scarves by Perry Ellis (left), garments by Giorgio di Sant'Angelo (centre), and three dresses by Fabrice Simon (far right), photograph by Nathan Schroeder.

were illustrated in major fashion magazines; others were patronised by leading celebrities of the time. Encouragingly, some of their works could be purchased through e-commerce platforms and specialist vintage clothing dealers. But, it was soon apparent that there was an alarming paucity of biographical information about some designers.

DEVELOPMENT

Satisfied there was potential for an exhibition, Bartlett quietly discussed his idea with fellow collectors, a fashion historian, and a vintage clothing dealer who could source loans for the exhibition. He also obtained in-principle support from SAMESH management to develop the idea, then enlisted the support of a friend, historian Timothy Roberts [PHA Qld], who had previously researched and written interpretative texts for a group of Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt blocks in the care of SAMESH. Bartlett continued to identify and research the careers

of fashion industry professionals who had died of AIDS-related illness.

Initially, it was planned to hold the exhibition during *Feast*, Adelaide's annual LGBTQI+ Arts and Cultural Festival but the team encountered challenges regarding the size and suitability of the venue, security, staffing, lease terms and expense. Furthermore, with the project gathering steam, Roberts advocated for Australian designers to be represented in the exhibition. He recommended the display of HIV/AIDS t-shirts to illustrate the rise of fashion activism. After visiting several Adelaide galleries and museums, the exhibition concept was proposed to two preferred institutions.

From this point, the exhibition received an outpouring of support. Both institutions wanted to host the exhibition; the David Roche Foundation House Museum was ultimately selected. Loan requests were approved by the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney; Australian Queer



Display of a collection of activist t-shirts from the 1980s to 2000s, photograph by Nathan Schroeder.

Archives, Melbourne; and Art Gallery of South Australia, realising the ambition to represent Australian designers and illustrate the rise of fashion activism. The David Roche Foundation supported the production of a 164-page catalogue to accompany the exhibition.

THE EXHIBITION

In the first two exhibition galleries, groups of works by each designer were arranged in a loosely chronological format. The works were installed at a uniform height against the gallery's black interior to enhance the exhibition's elegiac tone, save the three Blades of Piccadilly chandeliers illuminating the space.

Large interpretive panels introduced the designers in the context of the style of the time; smaller texts near each group of works provided a snapshot biography for each designer. The final exhibition gallery underscored the role

of fashion as activism by presenting colourful activist t-shirts alongside the playful yet purposeful works of Franco Moschino and his successor Rossella Jardini. Pieces by Australians David MacDiarmid, Peter Tully and Brenton Heath-Kerr were also displayed here, near Block 7 from the Australian AIDS Memorial Quilt.

The exhibition also presented pieces by Bill Gibb, a Scottish designer who died of stomach cancer. Hasty to break the story, the British tabloid press assumed Gibb's death was AIDS-related, causing great distress to his family, confidants, and colleagues. The homophobic moralism that underscored this assumption has an enduring character, with Gibb's cause of death still being linked to HIV/AIDS from time to time. This inclusion in the exhibition opened pertinent discussions around stigma and homophobia, which were outlined in a large interpretive panel and a more detailed essay in the exhibition catalogue.

REVIEWS

SILHOUETTES (CONT.)

A program of illustrated lectures provided deeper insights into the themes and individuals discussed in the exhibition. Curator Rebecca Evans discussed the life and work of Peter Tully; Dr Sally Gray shared many personal memories of David MacDiarmid; Curatorial Consultant and arts advocate Alison Kubler celebrated the glorious heights of 1980s and '90s high fashion; and art historian Timothy Roberts examined instances of fashion activism. Skye Bartlett's exhibition tours were enthusiastically attended, and the exhibition catalogue attracted international interest, with copies acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Irene Lewisohn Costume Reference Library and the Victoria & Albert Museum's National Library of Art.

IMPACT

Silhouettes: Fashion in the Shadow of HIV/AIDS presented a history of fashion through an unusual lens of health, and similarly received unusual outcomes. Many visitors were nostalgic about styles they remembered or wore but commented that they never really considered the people behind the designs. A collaborator of Brenton Heath-Kerr told the curators they felt he 'would be very pleased to be included in this exhibition', and Alison Kubler's review of the exhibition urged visitors to 'come for the clothes and stay for the activism'. Most charming, though, was a comment made to Skye Bartlett following one of his exhibition tours. Having learned of the existence of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), an anti-viral medicine taken by a person who does not have HIV to lower their chance of infection, one lady said 'I'm going to talk to my grandson about PrEP'.

TIM ROBERTS, PHA QLD

REVIEWS



Cast of William Bailey's Haunted Mansion, photograph by David Waldron.

WILLIAM BAILEY'S HAUNTED MANSION

One of the primary challenges in history education revolves around capturing students' interest and establishing a connection with the past. Museum theatre – blending traditional stagecraft with historical interpretation – strives to enhance the immersive and engaging aspects of the museum experience. Concurrently, gamification is on the rise in history education, because it can leverage participant engagement and competition to foster students' interest in course content.

In my quest for diverse heritage engagement and participation events for the Ballarat Heritage Festival, I investigated roleplaying games, such as the renowned Dungeons and Dragons, as a conduit for heritage education. This led to crafting a narrative set in 1890s Ballarat, featuring authentic locations, historical figures,

events, and era-specific issues, all framed within a historical fiction context for players to explore.

The 1890s marked a unique era for Ballarat's community and is a very rich and atmospheric era for storytelling. It was a period when a town founded on mining began transitioning towards an economy centred on heavy industry and manufacturing. Despite experiencing prosperity, society became increasingly stratified, with the wealth gap widening and the threat of recession looming. Additionally, it was a time of emergence for the middle class, with a growing segment of the population seeking diversions and new ideas. These were reflected in various forms such as literature, cinema, the flourishing of Mechanics' Institutes, and educational establishments. Furthermore, the era witnessed the rise of alternative religious beliefs, such

REVIEWS

WILLIAM BAILEY'S HAUNTED MANSION (CONT.)

as spiritualism and new religious movements, which challenged traditional religious orthodoxy and gained widespread popularity.

Another conflict that shaped the community was the clash between old money, established with the squatters and early landholders, and those who made their fortunes in the gold rush, often from very humble beginnings. In Ballarat, this is perhaps most famously remembered in the story of the Learmonth/Bailey dispute. At the core of this legal battle was the claim William Bailey, acting as an agent for the wealthy and powerful squatter family, the Learmonths, fraudulently claimed the Mount Egerton Goldmine was worthless and arranged the sale of the mine to an anonymous consortium (secretly co-owned by William Bailey himself). The immense wealth of the mine catapulted Bailey to millionaire and magnate status, and was manifested in the building of the Fenshaw (Bailey's) Mansion on Drummond Street, which remains there today as part of the St John of God Hospital. The Learmonths, furious, challenged Bailey in court. This led to one of the longest-running and most dramatic legal cases in Australia's history involving claims of fraud, violence, intimidating and assaulting witnesses, and even threats of murder.

The drama and skullduggery of this tale makes for a very rich field for storytelling. Roleplaying games (RPGs) are interactive narrative experiences where participants assume fictional roles within a predetermined setting. These games often involve storytelling, decision-making, and character development. RPGs can be played in various formats, including tabletop (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*), video games, or live-action scenarios that promote creativity and social interaction. Recently, live performances

of RPGs, where actors perform their roles and improvise their characters and actions, have become incredibly popular. In 2023, the entertainment group, Critical Role, for example, sold out Wembley Arena in London for a live performance of *Dungeons and Dragons*.¹

In terms of their capacity to captivate young learners in history, roleplaying games do foster engagement. By immersing participants in historical environments, they go beyond passive absorption and actively contribute to historical narratives, making choices and witnessing consequences. This interactive approach deepens their understanding of history. Furthermore, these games allow players to step into the shoes of historical figures across various eras, nurturing empathy and a deeper appreciation for the perspectives and challenges faced by people in bygone times. This, in turn, promotes a nuanced comprehension of historical events.

I crafted a narrative for the 2023 Ballarat Heritage Festival, titled 'William Bailey's Haunted Mansion'. It took inspiration from the post-Bailey/Learmonth legal dispute and drew upon a rich source of newspaper articles and Public Record Office Victoria records. These documents unveiled the intriguing dynamics of the Stevenites or New Lights, a cult-like religious movement that thrived in western Victoria from the 1870s to the 1890s. The group faced allegations of predatory conduct toward its members, including targeting the bereaved and demanding the surrender of all worldly possessions to their enigmatic leader, Stephen, often referred to as the Prophet Stephen in historical records. The story also drew on the fictional milieu of the 'Cthulhu Mythos' created by gothic author HP Lovecraft, which

underpinned some of the broader designs of the cult in the fictional component of our narrative. For this reason, we used the 'Call of Cthulhu' rules system by Chaosium, a role-playing game company, who also supported with marketing and publishing the adventure as a commercially available book.

The story I wrote for the adventure drew on newspaper articles, plans and historical photographs to present a story that culminated in the resolution of a mystery. The collaborators were approached with the idea and initial concept and we examined ways in which they could support the project. All the participants came together with a great deal of enthusiasm. The project culminated in a performance at the Ballarat Town Hall, funded by the Ballarat Library, Chaosium Inc. and GUF Games, with music provided by *The Drongo and The Crow*. The players controlled characters based on historical figures from Ballarat such as James Curtis – prominent spiritualist; Bella Guerin – suffragist and the first woman to achieve a bachelor's degree in Australia; and Thomas Montague – a police detective and champion of scientific policing methods. The actors, having been briefed on their characters and presented with the scenarios and results of their actions, would make decisions they felt their characters would make and engaged with each other through improvised acting. The success and failure of actions their characters took, such as investigating a clue or persuading someone to give evidence, were resolved with the 'Call of Cthulhu' gaming system, where players would roll percentage dice (two 10-sided dice) and see if the result was under their skill level in a given area, such as forensic medicine or persuasion. They could then discuss which rooms and

places they wished to examine for clues, talk to witnesses (played by our storyteller), or take other actions they might wish to follow.

The event itself was very successful with a sell-out audience in the Town Hall and well over 200 viewers on the livestream of the event. The performance is viewable here: <https://youtu.be/EqJlqPkrYuI>. The event was described by the Chaosium Inc. Vice President, Michael O'Brien, as:

a masterclass of showing how you can deftly concoct a Cthulhu Mythos (fictional) tale out of real historical happenings, bringing in known locations, authentic artefacts and documents, and actual people who lived at the time.

Likewise, Ballarat Library found the event uniquely able to engage the youth demographic it had struggled to attract to previous events.

The script and module for 'William Bailey's Haunted Mansion', published by Chaosium, is available here in pdf, <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/455051/William-Baileys-Haunted-Mansion>. The adventure has been taken up by the Miskatonic Playhouse in London (<https://www.miskatonicplayhouse.com/>).

DAVID WALDRON, PHA VIC & TAS

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CONTRIBUTORS



FRANCESCA
BEDDIE

Francesca Beddie is editor of *Australian Garden History*, co-editor of *Circa* and editor of the PHA's book blog. Her expertise is in history and policy, and fin-de-siècle Russian history. She was the convenor of the Bundanoon History Group bushfire archive project from 2020 to 2022. She evacuated from her house in Bundanoon, deemed indefensible, four times in January 2020. The house survived. Nevertheless, the risk of fire was one reason she and her partner decided to sell and move to Newcastle.



PATRICIA
CURTHOYS

Patricia Curthoys has worked as a professional historian for many years, primarily on Australian history projects for academics, state and local government and other cultural institutions as well as non-government organisations. She has published mainly in the area of Australian religious history and was awarded the SLNSW 2023 Australian Religious History Fellowship for a project on a group of mid-nineteenth century Anglican women. She is also a member of Pitt Street Uniting Church.



CHRISTINE
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Christine de Matos is an historian and writer affiliated with The University of Notre Dame Australia (Sydney campus). Her research focusses on the post-Second World War military occupations of Germany and Japan, paying particular attention to women as occupiers. She is also interested in representations of Australia's past through contemporary dance and ballet. Her most recent publications are 'The Home as a Space of Re-Education: Imperialism, Military Occupation, and Housekeeping Manuals' in *The International History Review* (2024) and 'Visualising the Modern Housewife: US Occupier Women and the Home in the Allied Occupation of Germany, 1945-1949' in *Histories* (2024).



ROLAND
LEIKAUF

Dr Roland Leikauf is the Curator for Post-war Immigration at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney, Australia. Before migrating to Australia in 2021, he worked for museums in Germany as a curator and historian. At the Hadamar Memorial Museum, he researched and prepared a new permanent exhibition about Nazi 'euthanasia' crimes perpetrated in what is now the museum building. Before finishing his PhD in Siegen, Germany, he worked as a freelance public historian. His PhD 'Welcome to my Bunker', which was published by transcript publishing in Germany, analysed the different strategies of memory construction on the websites of veterans of the Second War in Indochina.

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KIERA
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Dr Kiera Lindsey is South Australia's History Advocate at the History Trust of South Australia. In this capacity, Kiera undertakes research, provides advocacy and outreach to historical organisations, individual practitioners and the broader community, while guiding the 're-presenting' of South Australian stories and bringing history into focus to give the past a future – now. She is also an award-winning 'creative historian' who specialises in imaginative but ethical ways of re-presenting those who might otherwise remain shadowy in the historical record.



LISA
MURRAY

Dr Lisa Murray is a professional historian specialising in Sydney's social and urban history. She is the former City Historian. Lisa has co-authored chapters on public history in Australia, urban walking tours as applied history, and noise in Darlinghurst. Recent books include *Sydney Cemeteries: A Field Guide* (NewSouth Publishing, 2016) and *Our City: 175 Years in 175 Objects*, an expansive catalogue which accompanied an anniversary exhibition at Sydney Town Hall in 2017. Lisa was awarded the Dr AM Hertzberg AO Fellowship at the State Library of NSW in 2021. She is the current 2023–2024 Historian-in-Residence at the Sunshine Coast Council.



ELIZABETH
OFFER

Dr Elizabeth Offer has completed a Doctor of Philosophy in history at La Trobe University, Victoria, where she is currently a Research Adjunct. Elizabeth's research examines the Jewish communities that formed in Bendigo and Ballarat between 1851 - 1901, focusing particularly on the intersection of faith, identity, and Britishness. She has published several articles relating to her research, including in the *Journal of Australian Studies*, for which she won the award for Best Article.



CAROLYN
RASMUSSEN

Dr Carolyn Rasmussen began her working life as a secondary teacher but subsequently completed post-graduate studies in labour history and the peace movement at the University of Melbourne, where she is currently an Honorary Fellow. In the excitement surrounding the sesquicentenary of Victoria in 1985 she thought she would try her hand as a freelance public historian and since then her work has ranged over the history of Victorian public institutions such as Museum Victoria and the MMBW, the history of science and technology, education history, the involvement of women in all of the above. In parallel with this work she maintained an academic engagement with labour history, but has shifted her principal focus to biography. She is a member of the National Editorial Board of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and chair of the Victorian Working Party. Her most recent book is *The Blackburns: Private Lives, Public Ambition*, MUP, 2019. Currently she is working on a history of Computer Science at the University of Melbourne.

CONTRIBUTORS



TIMOTHY
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Timothy Roberts is an art historian who specialises in Australia's art heritage, decorative arts, and material culture. He is Curator of The David Roche Foundation House Museum, a collection of fine and decorative arts in Adelaide.



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Jen Rose is a public historian and a PhD candidate with the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Australian Catholic University, where she is undertaking a historical examination of migrants rights activism in Melbourne between the 1960s and 1990s, with a particular focus on children and young people's rights within the education and youth work fields. This project contributes to the cultural history of Melbourne by exploring episodes of migrants rights activity within the historic context of local urban settings and evolving community/public sectors of the time. Jen also has extensive experience working in community service settings in the realms of social policy, research and participatory engagement. She is a member of the Professional Historians Association Victoria and Tasmania and is currently serving as Vice-President of Oral History Victoria.



JANET
SCARFE

Dr Janet Scarfe is a professional historian. Her research interests and publications include family history and biography, Australian army nurses in both world wars. She has written more than 60 extended biographical essays on army nurses (available at <https://emhs.org.au> and <https://vwma.org.au>). She and her sister Suzanne published *The Campbells of Anlaby 1860-1940* (2021), a collaboration between an historian and a genealogist that was highly commended in the Genealogy SA TT Reed Family History Awards. She is completing a book on the Australian Army Nursing Service using the diaries and photograph albums of their aunt Dorothy 'Puss' Campbell SX3050.



DAVID
WALDRON

Dr David Waldron is a Senior Lecturer in History at Federation University Australia with a research focus on folklore and community heritage. He is the author of *Sign of the Witch: Modernity and the Pagan Revival* (Carolina Academic Press 2008), *Shock! The Black Dog of Bungay – a Case Study in Local Folklore* (Hidden Press 2010) and *Snarls from the Tea-Tree: Victoria's Big Cat Folklore* (Australian Scholarly Publishing 2013), editor/contributor of *Goldfields and the Gothic: a Hidden Heritage and Folklore* (Australian Scholarly Publishing 2016) and author of *Aradale: the Making of a Haunted Asylum* (Australian Scholarly Publishing 2020).

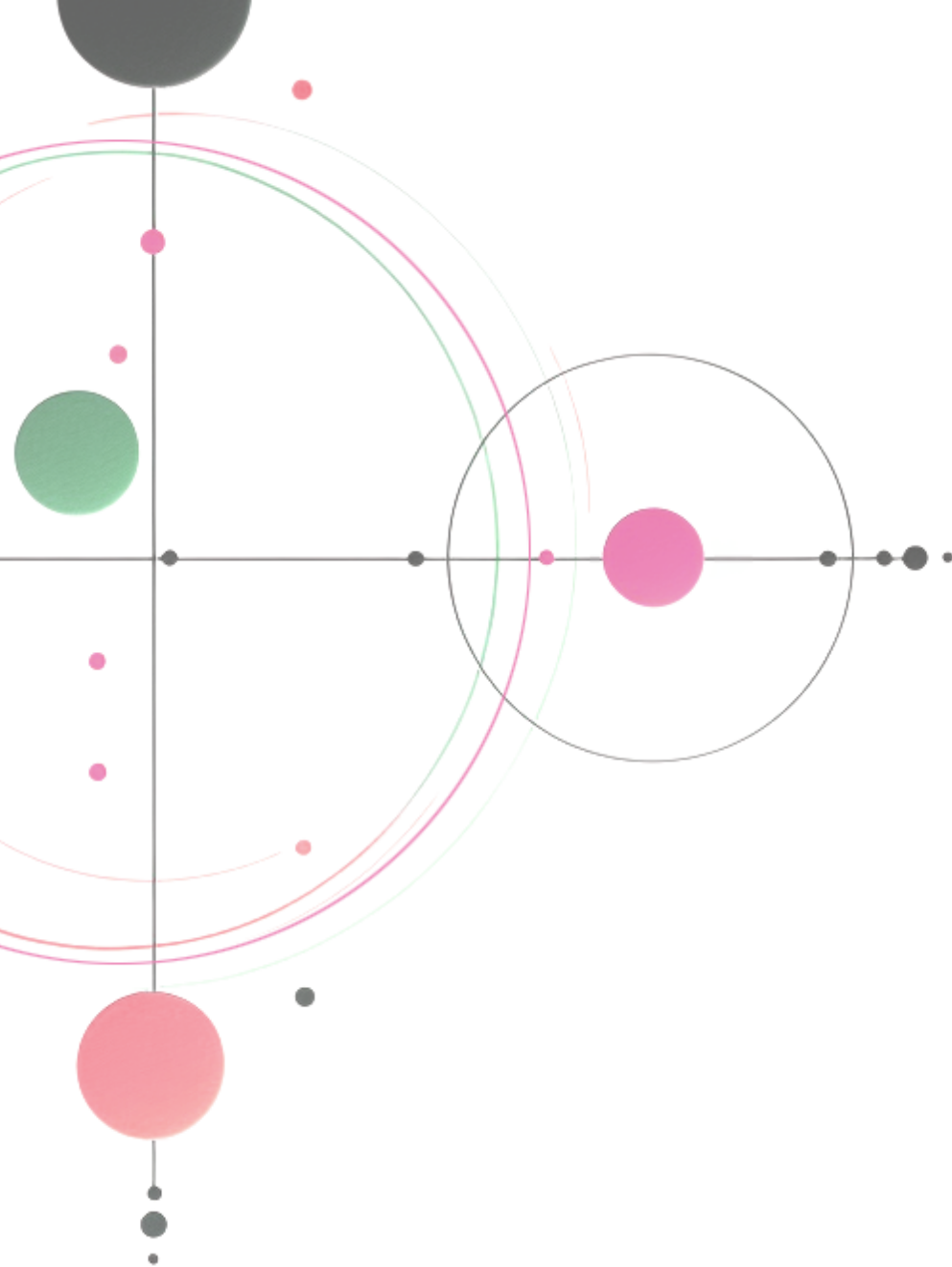
CONTRIBUTORS

He is regularly involved in public engagements, festivals, and multi-media displays, including the Ballarat Heritage Festival, and is the co-writer and researcher for the 2019 National Trust of Australia People's Choice award and 2023 Victorian Community History Award-winning podcast series, Tales from Rat City.



ALISON
WISHART

Alison Wishart has worked as a curator and collection manager in national, state, and local cultural institutions for the past 20 years. She is secretary of the PHA NSW-ACT, a councillor with the Royal Australian Historical Society, a past-president of the Museum Historians Network and a member of Pitt Street Uniting Church. Her publications and presentations are available at: <https://deakin.academia.edu/AlisonWishart>



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