



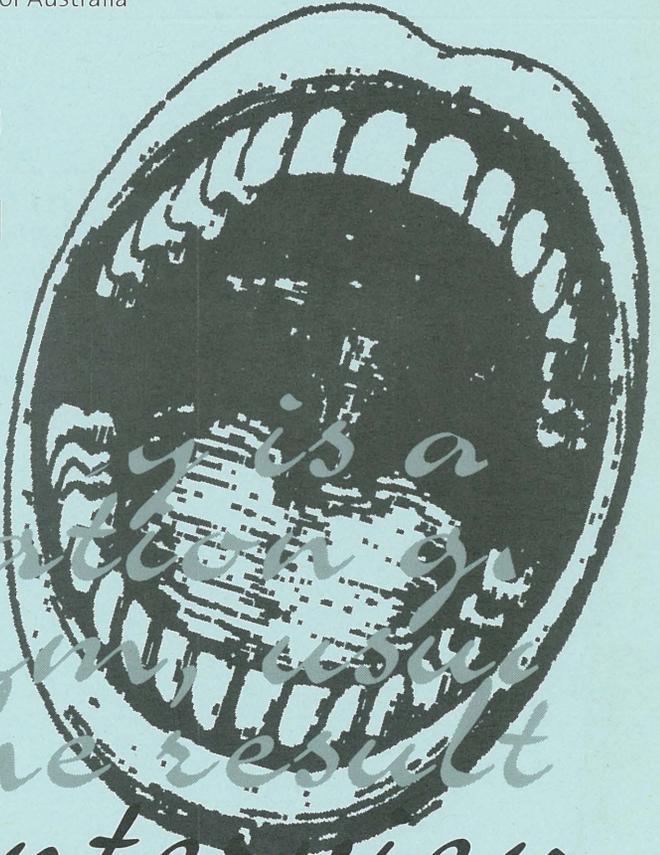
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Newsletter

of the New South Wales Branch
of the Oral History Association
of Australia

10

November 1996



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Editorial

*This is the last **Voiceprint** for 1996, and also the last produced by the current editorial committee.*

*We hope that you enjoy the variety, ranging from Rosemary Block's amusing and informative account of the Queensland regional conference to the useful, basic information in the article by Ronda Jamieson which we have reprinted from **Play Back**, the journal of the West Australian Branch of the Oral History Association, with our thanks.*

*This is the newsletter produced for you, our members, and we always appreciate hearing from you. There are, unfortunately, no Letters to the Editor in this issue, for the simple reason that no one has written to us. We really do want your views on **Voiceprint**, as well as reports on current projects, book reviews, and any items of information which you would like to share with the rest of us.*

*Among these items of information, we would appreciate receiving regular contributions to our new section, **Projects in Progress**. The initial contribution is a brief description by Lianne Hall of the Stanton Library's very interesting project relating to North Sydney's waterfront between the first and second world wars.*

*Please put either pen or computer type to paper, to let us know what's going on in relation to your oral history project for inclusion in **Projects in Progress**. We would like to make this a regular feature, but this will not happen without your contributions.*

*We also hope that as many members as possible will be able to attend some of the talks listed under **Forthcoming Events**. If you know of any talks or other events which may be of interest to our members, please provide us with as many details as possible for inclusion in **Voiceprint**.*

Angela Wawn

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› *Janet McCalman*



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New Members

Dorothy Blake	Secretary
Denise Bray	Librarian
Roslyn Burge	Secretary
Linda Drew-Smith	Historian
Gabrielle Godard	Transcriptionist
Mary Ann Hamilton	OHM Consultants
Marie Henderson	Office
Billy Kirlaw	Interested in History
Lady Denman Heritage Complex	Maritime Museum, Huskisson
Gwenda McGregor	Librarian
Sylvia May	Diversional Therapist
Lois Michel	Printer
M.D. Spring	Retired
Sandrine Therese	Oral Historian
Lyn Walton	Adult Educator
Barbara Wright	Medical Historian
Anne Coleman	Diversional Therapist
Peter Williamson	Occupational Therapist
Pippa Robinson	Clerk
Bernard Sargeant	Retired Librarian
Jane Stephens	Graduate Student
Daughters of Charity	Archives of a religious order

WANTED: Two members for the Editorial Committee

We regret to report that, owing to the pressure of their other work, both Jenny Allison and Miriam Moloney have decided that they can no longer continue to be on the editorial committee. We are extremely sorry to lose their dedication and expertise over the past year or so, but fully understand that other demands mean that they can no longer continue on the committee, and thank them for all their hard work for Voiceprint.

We are therefore in urgent need of two more people who would like to exercise their editorial skills in the preparation of Voiceprint. This only entails either one or two meetings per issue, usually in the later afternoon, with gentle refreshments to help deliberations.

If you would like to help, could you please ring Rosemary Block on 9230 1697. We'd love to see the new committee members in place for the first issue of Voiceprint for 1997, for which it is anticipated that a meeting will take place towards the end of January.

OHAA (Queensland) Regional Conference 27-29 September 1996

We expected that it would be a hard act to follow beautiful Magnetic Island of the 1994 Conference. However, with their usual impeccable sense of place, Queensland did it again! The venue – attractive St Brendan's College, set in delightful grounds inland a trice (half an hour's walk) from Yeppoon Beach and the ferry to Great Keppel Island. We only looked at the Island – and did not run away thither or hold the sessions on the ferry. Such was our devotion to our program! The theme of the Conference was People, Identity, Place: Oral History in the Community. Unfortunately, I was not able to reach Yeppoon for the first day and so missed

Niles Elvery, Jill Cassidy and Anna Shnukal's papers. I almost missed Niles himself, for his baby chose to arrive early and he rushed away to Brisbane on the earliest Saturday morning plane. Angela and family are very well if a bit surprised at the speed of events. The Conference sent flowers!

I was delighted to catch up with Jill and we shared early morning conversations over the partitions in the very elegant cubicles in the newest post-modern boarding dormitories. Jill's paper was entitled Walking the tightrope – Oral history in the community, and Anna's The Expulsion of Pacific Islanders from Murray Island: contemporary and

modern interpretations. Both of these papers will be published in this year's OHAA Journal so neither you nor I have missed out. Niles reflected on community oral history projects with the John Oxley Library, but owing to his rapid departure I was not able to hear more.

Day two opened with Gai Copeman's practical advice for including oral history on the computer catalogue at Thuringowa Public Library. I presented the Colgate Palmolive Oral History Project in huge competition with SES exercises on the school oval. Read all about it in OHAA Journal 1996. Diane Melloy shared some of her experiences of a stimulating summer school at the University of Columbia, where she met and was taught by the Names of oral history – Ron Grele, Alessandro Portelli, Rina Benmayor and others. Janis Wilton exercised her memory and ours in a lively seminar on Memory where participation was eager and much learnt. She also included us in quick tour of the communities and people that she visited in England. Community history is indeed alive and well there and we were fascinated by her insights and conclusions. In several instances the communities are using oral history to raise the profile of the community both for their own image to themselves and to impress the outside world. And it is working!

Lesley Jenkins reflected on oral history as a catalyst for change and opened my

eyes, and no doubt those of others, to the astonishing way that community oral histories remain alive in the community, giving rise to other activities and even more interest in the community's history both of itself and within the larger community. Her particular case study was her very successful oral history of the Italian community in Lismore. This paper also will be published in this year's Journal. Sue Pechey gave an interesting plan on the structure and conducting of oral history in the community.

There were various presentations, in brief, of oral history projects in progress. It is always enlightening to hear what is going on and it is always so diverse. Kathy Hall spoke about the Queensland Railway Museum – it is on a train and it travels. Susan Gillespie spoke about Clayfields College, Ros Schupper on the German community of Bundaberg, Reg Harris on the Uniting Church and Nola Thom on the Rockhampton Biographical Register. Geoff entranced us with his knowledge of synchronome clocks! I had the honoured task of wrapping up these three excellent days and I was able to pay tribute personally to the hard work of Niles Elvery and Sue Pechey and their committee in combining – as we have come to expect – a great place and a great Conference!

Rosemary Block, President

Article on Donald Hyslop taken from Insight the In-House Magazine of the Southampton (UK) City Council No 15, February 1996

Television appearances, national radio interviews and numerous newspaper stories Community History Officer, Donald Hyslop, caused a stir in the media when he toured Australia and New Zealand last autumn giving a series of lectures on the City Council's innovative oral and community history service.

Donald was initially invited to give a keynote address to the Australian Oral History Association Conference in Launceston, Tasmania, but as word of his visit spread it developed into a two-month lecture and study tour, jointly funded by the Oral History Association of Australia, the Museum & Galleries Commission (UK) and the South East Museums Service (UK).

As well as the conference, Donald gave lectures in Perth, Arndale (sic), Sydney and Canberra in Australia, and Wellington and Dunedin in New Zealand, including impressive venues such as the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney, the Department of Internal Affairs in Wellington, and several universities.

"I was amazed at how interested everyone was in the work of our oral and community history service, not just historians, but a wide range of people",

says Donald. "As for the media coverage – it was incredible".

Particular interest was expressed in the imaginative ways that the service is giving people access to history in their everyday lives, such as use of the Bargate Shopping Centre for the Blitz exhibition, D-Day memories on posters and buses, and the Arts and Heritage Roadshow project.

"It was especially rewarding for me as the people I met were really enthusiastic", he adds. "During one lecture, a man from a museum leapt up and exclaimed 'Wow, we're going to try that!'".

The antipodeans were also fascinated to hear about City Council's book 'Titanic Voices', featuring people's memories of the Titanic. Donald was even asked to give a Titanic lecture in Dunedin.

"It was a horrible rainy night and I didn't expect anyone to turn up – but there were more than 100 people".

The tour inspired Donald with new ideas. He was particularly impressed with their use of CD ROM computer technology to make history available to the outlying communities.

He is also keen to follow New Zealand's example by setting up a programme of regular contemporary

recording of people from different backgrounds and circumstances – to build-up an on-going picture of their lifestyles and experiences.

Some exciting future projects were mooted during the tour. Canberra Cultural Centre is keen for one of their staff to spend some time with the unit in Southampton*. Both Adelaide and Wellington Museums expressed interest in projects recording the experiences of those involved in the post-war emigration boom, on both sides of the world.

On a personal level, Donald found the tour hugely rewarding. Rather than

staying in hotels, he was accommodated in people's houses, and had a taste of their way of life. Travelling by train, he also saw much of the stunning scenery of both countries. One sight that will always stay in his mind was his first view of Sydney Harbour.

"I arrived in Sydney at dusk and everywhere was lit up and magical. It is one of the most striking places I have ever seen" he says.

**This has already taken place. A member of CCC spent three weeks with Donald in Southampton.*

PROJECTS IN PROGRESS

Work and Play on the Waterfront: North Sydney Between the Wars

Stanton Library is collecting stories of North Sydney's waterfront for a new publication about life on the harbour foreshores in the 1930s. Interviews are being conducted with people who lived or worked in the harbourside suburbs and who remember North Sydney before high rise towers and million dollar views.

In the 1930s and 1940s many people worked around the harbour foreshores or in the maritime industries dotted around Lavender Bay, McMahons Point and Berrys Bay. Eaton's Timberyard, Ford's boatbuilding, the ferry workshops,

Neptune Engineering, North Shore Gas Company and the Berrys Bay coal loader all provided employment for residents of North Sydney.

Bill Barnett's family have been boatbuilders in McMahons Point for three generations. He recalls looking for work on the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the 1930s.

I left school at 14 during the Depression, and we tried hard, very hard, to get a job catching rivets down the bridge ... The rivet catchers used to get a quick turn round

because they used to get burnt catching the rivets. They used to get very bad burns off them. My name came up and right this day I went down there and a chap asked me my name and I told him and he said, 'Is your dad Prince Barnett?' and I said, 'Yeah', and he said, 'Well away you go son, I'm not giving you a job, your father'll kill me if I give you a job'.

For others, the harbour was a place for fun and recreation. Lavender Bay Baths, North Sydney Olympic Pool and Luna Park attracted hundreds of pleasure seekers, as did the harbour itself. As one informant recalls, there was 'not a great deal to do besides fishing, swimming and rowing around'.

As well as those who worked in the area, the library is keen to hear from members of sailing clubs, rowing clubs, model boat enthusiasts or even keen fishermen who remember North Sydney and the harbour between the wars.

For more information, contact Lianne Hall at Stanton Library, tel: 9936 8400.

ARTICLES

Some Practical Hints from Ronda Jamieson

The following is taken from a talk and handout prepared by Ronda Jamieson at the workshop organised by the W.A. Branch of OHAA in March 1996. The handout was produced by LISWA, Batty Library, Oral History Unit.

Points on interviewing

Each person will develop an individual interviewing and recording style but the following points may help.

Some do's and don'ts of interviewing:

- Record the full name and date of birth of the informant and the date of the interview.
- Listen in silence, laugh silently, gesture, nod and smile encouragement IN SILENCE.
- Do not interrupt unless you have a very good reason to do so.
- Don't talk over your informant: If you do, neither speaker will be intelligible later.
- Remember it is not your version of events, your anecdotes, your memories which are important. If they were, you would be the one being interviewed.
- Ask open questions like, 'What did you do after you left school', rather than, 'You worked at Myer after you left school didn't you?' which encourages a 'Yes' or 'No' response.
- Avoid leading questions, though sometimes these are appropriate.
- Do not ask questions in such a way as to indicate your own opinion or belief.
- Don't show off your knowledge of a subject.
- People will feel there is little point in telling you more.
- Don't forget to ask why.
- Don't finish sentences or suggest answers. Wait until interviewees find their own words – after all that is what you interview for.
- Be polite but do probe.
- Don't be afraid of pauses on tape – give people (and yourself) time.
- Concentrate and listen to every word to pick up clues for further questions and to prevent the embarrassment of asking questions which have already been answered.
- Make a note of follow-up questions to be asked later rather than interrupt.
- Make sure you do not run out of tape in the middle of a sentence.
If a second interview is taking place, listen to the first session to see if further questions should be asked about material already covered and to remind yourself about what has been recorded to avoid repetition.

For best recording results and to preserve the material

Use 60 minute, good quality tapes. Clean and demagnetize the recording head of your tape recorder after at least each 40 hours of use (i.e. recording and play back time).

Use an external microphone positioned as far away as possible from the tape recorder when interviewing

Break out the plastic lugs on cassettes when recording has finished so material cannot be accidentally recorded over. (If you break out these lugs and further recording is required, putting sticky tape over the holes will make recording possible). Tapes being kept for long periods should be played through annually: play at normal speed and do not rewind.

Keep tapes from extremes of temperature, dust and magnetic fields.

To ensure accurate recording

(Counter settings given are for a tape recorder with a counter which registers 500 for 30 minutes of tape. The figures will need adjusting for counters which are different.)

Practice beforehand and know your machine well. Find out where a 30 minute tape ends on your recorder's counter. Set counter on zero before starting on Side A of Tape 1.

Press fast forward button until counter reaches 25 if introduction is to

be recorded later. Press fast forward button until counter reaches 8 if identification only is to be recorded or record the identification first and start the interview from the point the identification finishes.

During the interview, watch discreetly for position on counter which is 50 short of tape ending. Once reached look for a suitable break in the informant's response to hold up hand to indicate tape being turned. The ideal finishing point is between 25 and 10 before the end of that side of the tape. Depress the pause button, fast forward to the end of Side A, turn the cassette, set the counter to zero, fast forward to 3 on the counter (to clear the non-recording leader) and continue the interview by releasing the pause button. The record button will still be in operation. If using a unidirectional microphone (the one recommended) it should be as close as possible, pointing directly at the informant.

Avoid background noises as much as possible by closing doors, windows, and pulling heavy drapes over windows if traffic noise is bad.

If one microphone is being used, position it as close to the interviewee as possible. The interviewer will have to sit close by so questions are recorded clearly.

An omnidirectional microphone does not need to be as carefully positioned but picks up extraneous noise.

Checklist for interviews

(things to be sure to take when interviewing).

- Tape recorder and external microphone
- Cord for recorder and, if relevant, an adaptor so mains power electricity can be used.
- Microphone extension cord/s.
- Double Adaptor.
- Extension cord.
- Piece of carpet to place under the microphone.
- Map and/or reference books.

- Interview structure or outline.
- Pad for taking notes, pencil and pen.
- Carbon receipt book for documents and/or photos, loaned
- or donated by the interviewee.
- Supply of tapes, already labelled and numbered, at least in pencil, on the tape itself and the tape box label.

Reproduced from Play Back Volume 16 Number 2, May 1996: the Newsletter of the West Australian Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia.

Oral History and Writing History: Ethics, Memory and Knowledge by Janet McCalman

While much interesting theoretical work is being done on memory, little attention is being paid to writing history using oral testimony. This paper discusses the working theory of memory that has emerged from my two books "Struggletown" and "Journeys", and then looks at the effect that using living memory has on writing a book that will enter the public domain. I thought that perhaps I should talk about the methods I have employed as an oral historian, and the effect that form of historical knowledge has had on my writing. The reason for writing about the Melbourne middle class in my last book "Journeys", was that, like Mt Everest,

it was there, and yet so few had attempted to climb it. It seemed extraordinary that this thoroughly middle-class nation should work so hard to avoid confronting itself. As you all know, that Australian Legend, invented first by urban Bohemians and developed later by a left-wing intelligentsia which was deeply middle-class; celebrated the womanless, rootless bush worker, not the men and women who from the slums to the suburbs constituted the core of the nation. Australian has been a middle-class society from the 1860s, but apart from the great historians of its nineteenth century history Serle, Blainey and Davison you could scarcely recognise

it from its historiography. Protestants outnumbered Catholics in the working class and the middle class had a strong Catholic membership, but you could be excused for not knowing that, if you relied on the historians. Even in fiction, the representations of the middle class have been too few; moreover those representations in fiction and non-fiction have seldom been sympathetic. When people start to write about the middle class, their internal Thesaurus flips open at 'complacent', 'smug', 'conservative', 'puritanical': Barry Humphries is more often quoted on Camberwell than Geoffrey Blainey, yet Blainey always had an acute feel for the Protestants of the suburbs; his diction is still that of the Methodist personage and his atavistic fears are those of the Protestant panic as the churches began to empty in the 1950s and 1960s, while the neighbouring Catholics boasted new congregations of people with black hair, brown eyes and peculiar eating habits.

I wanted to write about that world, simply because it was so important and it was so difficult to penetrate. Private schooling I saw as a way in, taking a generation passing through some representative as well as intrinsically important private schools. First, there is no doubt that private schooling is an important part of being middle-class in Melbourne. It's not a necessary condition, but it is a widely desired one. And since it

was once relatively cheap and you didn't need to go there for long anyway it would probably reveal paths of upward mobility and the people taking those paths. The private school conferred caste membership; the income to sustain membership of the middle class as well in later life was another matter. But the wonderful thing about going to a private school and joining the caste was that it gave you a way of feeling superior without having to achieve anything at all.

Schooling itself also would enable me to explore how young members of the caste were taught their class position, their gender roles and their spiritual values. It would also provide me with a network so that people could inter-relate in the book; for I knew that there was no way that I could do this book without using a lot of oral history. But what I want to discuss today is the way that oral history used me: how it has changed me as an historian and even more as a writer.

What has bothered many critics of oral history has been the early claim by Paul Thompson and others that oral history is the path to a superior form of historical truth. The militant oral historians insisted that the testimony of those who were 'really there' and who can tell us 'what it felt like to be really there' supplies us with a form of evidence which can dispossess the written word. Thompson urged that for our century 'the printed word is

increasingly polluted by self-conscious politicians.' But since when hasn't it been? What always puzzled me was Thompson's apparent belief that ordinary people like us, the subjects of the oral historian, are not subject to the same temptations as politicians to endeavour to place the most flattering version of ourselves down on posterity's record? Are we not too subject to vanity and greed and guilt and envy and bitterness and malice and self-pity and pride and frustration and fear and anger; in fact the full range of human nasties which can pollute both the spoken and the written word? There are goodies that can pollute the spoken word too, like charity and forgiveness and tolerance and diffidence and modesty and self-doubt and good old general niceness.

But in so much of the discussion about the whys and wherefores of oral history, no one seems to want to talk about liars, and few question the nature of the evidence we glean from memories recorded forty or fifty years after the event. Part of the trouble is the human dynamics of the interview itself. There is no doubt that oral history is a tonic for the budding misanthrope. People are extraordinarily welcoming and helpful. They are, in fact, usually flattered and delighted to be interviewed even though they may attempt to appear offhand. There is also, more often than not, a considerable amount of shyness on both

sides. Even after interviewing eighty middle-class former students of private schools in the 1930s and 1940s, I still find starting every new interview an ordeal. And there you are, a guest in their own home, asking them to reveal their lives, in particular all those things they would prefer not to disclose. Yet others often want to confess, to share, to pass on wisdom learnt from bitter experience, to reassess. The recollections sometimes bring tears of continuing and unresolved griefs. And sometimes one feels privileged to be told of things and sometimes one senses that in a clumsy way, it has been therapeutic. A human being who can be deeply hurt or even destroyed by your own sensitivity.

So there you are. You cannot skip the boring bits as you hold the microphone; and as your mind races ahead to the next question in one part, and absorbs what's being said with another part, and observes body language with yet another part, you are 'in deep'. And if later, you do what I consider to be essential – you transcribe your own tapes – the cadences and imagery of your informant's words take over your imagination. It becomes a process of intense identification, leading to the fundamental (if now considered old-fashioned) tool of the good historian, empathy. Perhaps I should use another word here: attentiveness. If I am interviewing a captain of industry who has bashed unions, used scabs, subjected his

workers to filthy and dangerous conditions, polluted the countryside with his factories' waste, was racist, a sexist and to cap it all, never paid a cent of tax in his life, I am still required to get inside his skin and see the world with his eyes and depict him accurately before I can stand back and evaluate him in his historical context. Of course, with such an informant whose values accord with one's own, then vigilance can slip and the informant can be idealised rather than realised. Above all, one doesn't want to hurt the feelings of people whose privacy one has invaded. Most of us who have moved from printed to oral research have been chastened by the ease with which we once condemned the dead. The law of defamation can be discounted. And what right have you to trample over your informants' feelings and reputations just for the sake of your own work, academic studies, or career? Your hands are tied when your subjects can read or hear what you think of them. Things, often important things, have to be suppressed or put aside for later. On the other hand, it is to the good if you learn greater charity and understanding; on the other, it is to the bad if you fear you must hold back the truth as you see it. We must, however, discard the fiction that ordinary people are truthful all of the time about simply everything.

We must also beware the danger of less than honourable scholarship. I don't

mean by this outright fraud, though, of course, tapes could be tampered with or fabricated. Rather, I mean the oral history project in which seek and ye shall find is the motive. You can find evidence of anything if you try hard enough; you can discard or avoid the sources which don't support your theories and prejudices. Those with axes to grind and ideologies to confirm are most at risk here.

Let us now concentrate on the process of 'doing' oral history. Just for a moment, would you all think back on the most embarrassing events in your own lives and think about how you would relate those to an oral historian. Would you tell the story differently to a seventeen-year-old from how you would to a contemporary? How would the gender of your interviewer affect your telling? And so on. I'm not suggesting that you are going to tell black lies, but there might be some white ones, and very likely, unless you are very brave, some omissions and much attention to extenuating circumstances. But the problem is more complex than that and here I part company with those who believe that people remember peak events in their lives accurately. To understand the nature of oral evidence, we have to understand the nature and function of human memory. What is happening in the process of recalling and retelling?

One of the most sophisticated early discussions was John Murphy's essay

“The voice of memory, history, autobiography and oral memory” in Australian Historical Studies. Much of what he argued then accords with my experience as an oral historian, and both of us find common ground with the work that emerged from the Popular Memory Group in Birmingham of which Thompson was part. Here is a summary:

“The essence of the human intellect is not that it absorbs experience like a tabula rasa, but that it at once structures and selects experience. We retain in our conscious memory only a fraction of the sensory inputs we receive in daily life. There is a constant editing process going on every minute of the day and night. There is a classic case in psychology of a brain-damaged man who could not edit his conscious memory, who could not forget, and for whom the unrelieved torrent of total recall made life unbearable. Our capacity to forget is just as important as our capacity to remember. And memory is laid down because, for all sorts of conscious and unconscious reasons, those experiences are judged to be significant.”

As we progress through life, this act of structuring experiences and storing them in memory constitutes the creation of a private, inner history of ourselves.

And that inner autobiography becomes the core of our evolving sense of identity. People who suffer from amnesia lose themselves from themselves. But the intellect that creates that inner autobiography is itself a changing and developing faculty. As we mature, so does our perception of ourselves and of the outside world change. Most people begin to accumulate wisdom, more insight into themselves and others, more or less tolerance, as they gain in life experiences. So that the mind that experienced unemployment in 1933 is not quite the same mind that recalls that experience in 1993. Memory is not laid down immutably, for the changing mind and personality and mood constantly reconstruct experience and memory. Psychotherapy and psychoanalysis are all about inner histories and the rewriting of those inner histories so that present pains are understood and relieved.

Let's take some common examples encountered in an oral history project which would be of use. First, conflicts between parent and child. The outraged adolescent will usually feel less tolerant of parental failings than he or she will thirty years later when it is their turn to be on the receiving end of teenage resentment. Which version is true? Well, both are, but the historian has to understand and account for the differences. Then the breakdown of a marriage. The rejected partner will recall

it differently ten years later if he or she is happily remarried than if still alone. And back to the Depression. Recalling it sixty years after life has come together, the children had done well and the grandchildren are doing VCE at a private school and you've just sold your Victorian cottage to a nice young couple for \$200,000 ('he's in computers and she's a solicitor') – of course the Depression will be remembered as 'terrible', but it will be equally important that 'we got through it'. Finally, there is mood. The most vivid illustration of the nature of the historian's process is in the effect of mood and mood swings. If you have ever had the misfortune to experience or to have witnessed close at hand a clinical depressive illness or mood swing disorder, you will know how exactly the same life is interpreted differently in a state of depression from a state of elation. People with severe moods swing disorders have at least two quite distinct personal histories in their head. That is the nature of the illness and it illustrates most vividly of all the nature of our innate historicity of mind.

There are people who can keep in touch with their past emotions, who have a strong enough imagination to recreate the emotional facts of the past. Often those who do are in fact neurotically blocked – the pain of parental rejection still rings in their voice half a century later – but that is perhaps

an unacceptable price to pay for historical authenticity. We have to guard also against the practiced performers, the polished story tellers who seem so wonderful in the first hour of the interviewing until the verbal tricks and repetitions give them away. People vary enormously in their capacity to talk well of the past of their life as they have seen it. But when the oral historian faces up to the informant, what is really going on is a dialogue between two historians. And when that idea is grasped by the interviewer, then it becomes a dialogue between equals – not an exercise where a university-trained professional is giving people back their own history and raising consciousness.

But again we face the endless variety of human character and performance. Some people can exercise strong intellectual discipline when they recall experience; with others, wish fulfilment can overtake reality, or the telling and re-telling of stories over the years and the listening to others' stories can fudge matters. In cultures with strong oral traditions – which includes our own – stories become lore, memory slides into mythology. The book that haunts me as an oral historian is Tom Harrison's "Living Through the Blitz", based on the diaries commissioned and collected by the British organisation Mass Observation during World War II. When Tom Harrison went back to the archives thirty years

after the war, he decided to trace some of the original observers and check on how they recalled the same events three decades later. The results were sobering for the likes of us – most later, oral accounts, were wildly different from the contemporary diaries, some did not even recognise their own writings. Yet these were the peak experiences that Brian Harrison assures us that people remember best.

That doesn't mean that oral history is not worth the trouble. Certainly most every day details of life are recalled with reasonable accuracy. Rather it is with the difficult and demanding life experiences that the problems begin. But if what you get fifty years later is somewhat altered over the years, that is still valuable grist to the historian's mill. Like John Murphy, I believe that it is with the creation of private mythologies and the way people remember, that oral history begins to be really exciting. There is a window into the way people cope with life and make sense of their world. For that is what history is really doing – through it, we make sense of the past, and through the ever-changing inner histories of ourselves, we make sense of our own lives.

But with all this said, we have only got as far as switching off the tape recorder and saying thank-you and goodbye. The next stage is the way you use that oral testimony. And I want to talk about this, because the theorising, even the best of

it, seems to stop at this point. On the tapes I collected for "Journeys" there are tears from both men and women; there's anger, contentment, shame, joy, faith and unbelief, disillusionment and inspiration and an awful lot of confession. A number admitted that they had never talked about such things before, and now I was about to reveal them to thousands of prying eyes. How does one write about private life of living people who read the language in which the book is to be published?

More important than anything else, when you are using oral history you are engaged in a human relationship; your subjects are alive and so are their families and life associates. They will be able to read what you say about them – they are alive and therefore able to be hurt. Can you leap into print with some juicy tales of other people's lives? We all love stories of other people's lives, above all the juicy bits in them, but none of us likes to be the owners of the lives so revealed in the public eye. For most people – including myself – it is extremely disconcerting to find yourself being written about by others, even sympathetically, for others see us differently than how we see ourselves. The others' words about us never seem quite right – sometimes totally wrong. To some extent I was not fully aware of this until after I published "Struggletown". In that book I made everyone anonymous,

including the people spoken of by informants, apart from the politicians Jim Cairns and Pat Kennelly. I asked those informants whose feelings I feared I might hurt to read the manuscript – some refused saying that they didn't mind what went in. What I did not anticipate were those who, having spoken honestly to me, wanted to change the public record. I had taken what people told me in good faith and had reported them accurately – but I learned that is not enough. I hurt two people with "Struggletown" and for the rest of my life that will be on my conscience.

I decided to go about "Journeyings" differently. Everything from the informants was to be under their control and when I had finished the manuscript, I sent back to the informants every piece I wanted to use from their interviews. I wrote a long letter explaining the book and its likely audience and reception and I urged them to choose to be anonymous. I warned them that they would be initially shocked by the sight of their spoken word in print and suggested that they put it aside for a few days before sitting down to edit it. They were really all very good. A few became initially very upset about seeing their raw feelings on the page and others felt guilt mostly about being disloyal to their parents. I asked them to show their bits to their families and in a couple of cases

there were some major excisions from the text. Only one informant out of the eight withdrew completely. What they did change was every occasion where my guard slipped and by a phrase or juxtaposition I made a comment which reflected unfavourably on themselves or their families. They also removed most phrases which suggested they were prejudiced or ignoble. I had censored these already, but not well enough.

So how did it all affect me as an historian? Compared to working on the lives of people long dead and from another country, my hands were tied. I could write nothing that would hurt or embarrass my informants. I couldn't deconstruct them before their very eyes and before the watching world; I couldn't detect motives and unconscious desires which were news to them. I couldn't criticise them, and sometimes when I praised them, they found that embarrassing and told me to cut that out also. As the historian I had to work with them, not on them. They became contributors, active witnesses, and when they went back their contributions full of changes and queries about my interpretations and corrections to their memories, the book got better. I came to see their words on tape as a first draft – just like my written first draft – and that it is quite unfair to lay down someone's spoken word for posterity without giving them the chance to rework and correct.

I kept watch on the style of their corrections to preserve the freshness of the spoken word, and on the whole, that worked also. This process of going back to all the informants enriched the book, and I hope prevented embarrassments – although I suspect that when you are dealing with so many people, something has to go wrong. Above all, because I couldn't overtly analyse – or deconstruct – the oral testimony, I had to allow it to make its own impact, for the evidence – not me – to suggest other levels of meaning, to allow it to have the resonances. And perhaps the voices of the contributors, as witnesses, could say it far better than I could on their behalf. But in the end, I have to trust the readers to hear the silences and the omissions. I was going to have to ask the reader to read the texts as they would read fiction – to respond both emotionally and analytically.

There was on me another profound effect. Because I was so conscious of what they would think of how I had used their testimonies, I began to write the book for them. And because they are not a professional audience of my peers, but general readers, I had to play down the preoccupations of the academy.

My language had to change; concepts had to be expressed in plain diction and concrete example. Moreover, I was swamped by a mountain of research material – I had done enough reading

to write a 150,000 word book just from printed sources. Did I write a monster of a book, or did I write a book which the informants and their families would enjoy? I chose to attempt the latter, but in many ways that was the harder option. To write a careful, scholarly book is not all that difficult; you advance orderly arguments and attach to them the evidence; but to write the book that began to speak to me out of the material was more like writing a novel. It was piecing something together like a mosaic, where the linkages between the parts of arguments and sections were implicit rather than explicit, the inner structures of the writing had to grow organically. But when I took that path, was my task all that different from that of an historical novelist who is careful about context and authenticity?

In 1991 I went to a seminar held for Writers' Week on the relationship between fiction and history and that hybrid – faction. The most interesting speaker was Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer who had written an acclaimed – and beautiful and clarifying – trilogy on the Spanish impact on South America. He writes with a novelist's eye and an historian's understanding of context and significance. He spoke of seven years in exile, undertaking solitary research, of reading through hundreds of unlikely and frequently tedious works looking for pearls. And the pearls are

those crystallisations of truth that the novelist can see with the eye of the artist and the historian can interpret as part of the great narrative of humanity's muddled, ignoble and occasionally heroic stewardship of this planet. And so his history of the tragic clash of cultures that is Latin America, reads as a sequence of insights, of poetic moments which display, like the facets of a diamond, his construction of that history. It reads with the full force of tragedy and comedy. Perhaps it contains too much art to be history; but there is more than enough history to give it extraordinary literary power.

I realised, that in my lesser way, I look for pearls also, and that in writing history for the general reader, the literary quality of the book – my construction of the history – becomes paramount. Oral history roots you in the narrativity of human consciousness – the most natural way we construct our inner histories is by narrative. Even more, narrative works like what TS Eliot termed the 'objective correlative' in poetry – where emotion and idea are realised in concrete imagery or story. These are the pearls. And the historian as a writer has to make an aesthetic and intellectual decision about whether to write an argument or to forge a literary dramatisation – in other words, a rendering in narrative part of most of the analysis and argument.

I firmly believe history to be a branch

of creative writing. It is a literary genre in its own right, and 'history' does not exist until its constructor gives it form in words or images. But there are fundamental differences between history and fiction. Manning Clark was fond of quoting Henry James who said that Art is neat and Life is untidy. What makes the difference to me is that the fiction writer is in control of the plot. Now I know that there are novelists who protest that once a book is on the way, the characters and plot assume a life on their own, but I do not have in mind that sort of powerful creative flow which appears to have the helpless author in its thrall – for even there, the author is in control of the plot. But for the historian, it is not. The historian can only go as far as the available evidence will permit. We cannot flesh out a character in a history with imagination in the absence of credible evidence we dislike or disapprove of. Often we are forced – if we are honest scholars – to draw conclusions we would prefer not to have to draw. We have a duty, as scholars, to seek and tell the truth as we see it, even if we do not like what we find. As writers, we have to make the best of events and lives which end with whimpers rather than artistically satisfying bangs. Historians are specialist in following the muddying, meandering feet of clay which blur the contours and neat boundaries of the map of life.

Finally, we also tentatively understand, and sometimes acknowledge, the quality of the reality in which we are engaged. Leaving religion aside for a moments, there is a terror in us all that we don't know what is going to happen in the future – to ourselves, to those we love and to the world. Why were so many of us ablaze in 1990 for three days when SBS screened the Seven-Up series? Why was our curiosity so inordinate; why was the tension of waiting twenty-four hours for the next episode so much more intense than it would be for a fictional serial? Because Seven-Up was fact, not fiction. Because it recorded the development of real people – not recollected, not reconstructed, not fictionalised, not dramatised later – but happening before our own eyes in real time. Life was in control of the script, not the film-maker or the author. Fact stories are those buffeted by the indifferent winds of fate – the ancient Greeks knew all about this. Fiction is therefore a rehearsal for life, and however edifying and moving art may be, it is, none the less, play, not life itself. It is a relief from life, and through art we live vicariously but safely. We need art to understand and endure this moral coil. But it remains under our control. Historians have to grapple with life as it actually was – and with the patchiness of the historical record. But we also have to sense that human terror of the unknown future

and the awful innocence of us all before our fate.

For better or for worse, when I sat down to write "Journeys" the material I had in my hands was all about life and could speak for then and now and always, and so the book which started out as an orderly study of the Melbourne middle class and of private schooling as a class organiser, finished up being a book about life. "Journeys" changed me as a scholar and as a writer. I have been forced to be attentive and careful in a way that does not come naturally to me. I also found myself writing history in a new way – from writing from below, I moved to writing from within.

Reproduced, with thanks, from the August 1996 edition of Real to Reel, the Newsletter of the Tasmanian Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia.

Janet McCalman

Diary of Events



We thought that the following functions would be of particular interest to our members:

History Series: Morning Tea

Houses and People: Vignettes of Life in 19th Century NSW

Wednesday, 4 December 1996

Through her unique appreciation of the culture and history of early New South Wales, Elizabeth Ellis, Curator of Mitchell Pictures, will weave the story of a number of great houses and their occupants through original letters and portraits. Elizabeth Farm and Camden Park, home of the Macarthurs, Iron House, Kirribilli (owned by the Rileys), Dunheved (the Kings), Newington (the Blaxlands) and Henrietta Villa (home of the Piper family) will feature.

Time: 10.30 a.m. – 12.00 pm

Place: Metcalfe Auditorium

*Admission: \$12.00 TLS members,
\$15.00 non-members*

History Series

Songs for the City of Sydney

Thursday, 16 January 1997

All great cities have special songs. We present a concert of songs and music written in celebration of beautiful Sydney dating from 1825 to the present. They include La Sydney Quadrille (1825), the Sydney Railway Waltz (1855), the song

sung at the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and an Isaac Nathan song or two. We may even try "My City of Sydney" and "I still call Australia home" by popular demand. With tenor Scott Cameron with background by Patricia Baillie. Appropriate refreshments will be served.

In association with Da Capo Music.

Time: 5.30 pm for 6.00 pm

Place: Dixson Room, State Library of New South Wales

*Admission: \$10.00 TLS members,
\$15.00 non-members*

Sydney Writers' Festival

Wednesday, 22 January 1997 to Monday, 27 January 1997

Among the many outstanding events which will be of interest to members is:

Thea Astley at a Literary Lunch

Friday, 24 January 1997

"Don't ask me why. No 'why' will ever explain hatred, will it? It's true you never forgive the people you have treated badly." Hailed as a diva among contemporary novelists, Thea Astley published "The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow" last year about the effects of racist brutality. Among her prizes are the Miles Franklin Award on three occasions (for "The Well Dressed Explorer", "The Slow Natives" and "The

Acolyte”), and the Age Book of the Year in 1975 (for “A Kindness Cup”). The Cambridge Guide to Australian Literature says of her work: “Witty, with a keen eye for egoistic pretension and exploitation and a rich talent for social comedy, she frequently writes from the point of view of the vulnerable misfit, the unspectacular outsider, destined if not for tragedy then at least for failure. Implicitly she chips away at national myths such as mateship, rural solidarity, the fair go’, egalitarianism and the notion of a homogeneous national (male) identity.” In association with the Sydney Writers’ Festival

Time: 12.30 pm. – 2.00 pm

Place: Dixon Room

Admission: \$40.00

Morning tea

Voices from a Lost World: Australian women and children in Papua New Guinea before the Japanese Invasion

Thursday, 6 February 1997

Based on oral interviews, ‘This is the book we have been waiting for. It revives memories which have lain dormant for half a century.’ Jeanette Leahy, who went to Papua New Guinea in 1939 as the bride of Mick Leahy, the famous explorer, has remained there ever since. Jan Roberts’ book addressed the culture shock experienced by many women as they struggled to make a home in shacks in the jungle, with only tinned or unfamiliar

food to eat. Daphne Murcutt arrived, a new bride, to be faced with a bed and furniture of upturned boxes, the inevitable white prejudices and fear of the ‘back peril’, tropical disease, ‘going troppo’ and the trials of ordinary working women in an extraordinary place.

Time: 10.30 a.m. for 10.45 a.m.

*Place: The Jean Garling Room,
Mitchell Library*

*Admission: \$12.00 TLS members,
\$15.00 non members*

History series

Four Convict Biographies

Thursday, 13 February 1997

Warwick Hirst, archivist of the Mitchell and writer for the Bulletin, tells the story of four little known convicts who lived extraordinary lives. William Noah chronicled the voyage of the convict transport Hillsborough, on which one third of his fellow convicts perished from typhoid and harsh treatment. The captain was so terrified of mutiny that he had the convicts shackled in double irons and kept below decks on short rations. Sir Henry Browne Hayes (the convict knight) was transported for abducting an heiress in Ireland. Although a convict, he led a colourful life, continually running foul of Governor King as well as building the first Vaucluse House, where he lived in style when not serving time on Norfolk Island and in the Newcastle coalmines. Robert Jones wrote

an account of his years as head gaoler on Norfolk Island under the command of the sadistic Major Foveaux. Mary Bryant stole the governor's cutter in Sydney. After 3,000 miles she reached Timor enduring gales, near-shipwreck, starvation and the attacks of hostile tribes. After she was apprehended, Bryant's story attracted the compassion of James Boswell, the great friend and biographer of Samuel Johnson. He campaigned on her behalf with the result that she and her surviving companions were pardoned.

Time: 5.30 pm for 6.00 pm

Place: The Jean Garling Room, Mitchell Library

Admission: \$10.00 TLS members, \$15.00 non-members

Morning Tea

**Passing Through the Pump Room:
The Literary Associations of Bath**

Monday, 17 February 1997 with Susannah Fullerton, President of the Jane Austen Society. The city of Bath, with its Roman history, its graceful Georgian crescents and its fame as a social centre, is rich in literary associations. Many famous writers have visited over the centuries to 'take the waters', restore their health and to have a good time in the process. Samuel Pepys, Fanny Burney, Tobias Smollett, Jane Austen, William Wordsworth and Charles Dickens are just some of those visitors who have recorded

their impressions of the 'Bath experience'.

Bath has also been the setting for many wonderful scenes in English literature. Catherine Morland goes to her first ball at the Assembly Rooms in 'Northanger Abbey', Anne Elliot and her hero Captain Wentworth romantically walk the streets of Bath together at the end of 'Persuasion', and Mr Pickwick learns which meeting places will introduce socially superior people to his acquaintance.

A guided tour through the literary history of delightful and beautiful Bath! Those who attend will remember Susannah Fullerton's amusing and lively account of the gossip, the manners, intrigue and the flirtations at the balls of the early 19th century.

Time: 10.30 a.m. for 10.45 a.m.

Place: Jean Garling Room, Mitchell Library

Admission: \$12.00 TLS members, \$15.00 non-members

Great Manuscript Treasures

Abel Tasman's Journal of 1642

Wednesday, 19 February 1997

Paul Brunton, Curator of Manuscripts from the Mitchell Collection, will present a fascinating series of five talks on major manuscript treasures. Covering 160 years, they will trace European knowledge of Australia from an unknown Southern land to a charted continent.

The series begins with Abel Tasman's Journal (1642), the earliest manuscript

journal in the world relating to Australia.

Later talks cover the Endeavour Journal of Sir Joseph Banks, the Nine Manuscript Journals of the First Fleet, the Journals of William Bligh, and the Journals of Matthew Flinders. The treasures discussed will be on display for this single lunchtime only, out of their cases.

Time: 12.00 pm for 12.30 pm (ends 2.00 pm)

Place: Dixson Room, Mitchell Library

Admission: \$15.00 TLS members, \$20.00 non-members (Members' price for all five lecture \$60.00, non members \$80.00, light lunch included)

Great Manuscript Treasures

The Journals of Sir Joseph Banks

Wednesday, 26 February 1997

In this second talk in our series, Paul Brunton, Curator of Manuscripts, will discuss the journal of Sir Joseph Banks kept on board HMS Endeavour, 1768-1771. Valuable as a literary documents as well as for its historical information, it also has a fascinating history. It was secured for the national by David Scott Mitchell himself, after pursuing it for many years. Paul Brunton regards it as the single most significant document in any Australian collection.

Time: 12.00 pm for 12.30 pm (ends 2.00 pm)

Place: Dixson Room, Mitchell Library

Admission: \$15.00 TLS members, \$20.00 non-members (includes light lunch)

Next OHAA (NSW) Seminar

Saturday, 15 March 1997 is the date for the next OHAA (NSW) Seminar. Please note your new diaries now!

Are you interested in recording your life story? What about the life story of a member of your family, or a friend?

Journeys Life History is owned and operated by Sandrine Therese (BA Hons), a freelance oral historian based in Sydney. She has been collecting oral histories since 1991 and to date she has recorded the life stories of over a hundred people of all ages and from all walks of life.

Sandrine launched Journeys in 1996 because of her commitment to the pursuit of oral history and her belief that people want the opportunity to commission and own their life stories and those of their families and friends.

For further information, call Sandrine Therese on 9560 2206.

We are very interested to record details of members who are offering consultancies, so please send us details that you would like printed in *Voiceprint*.