



voiceprint

Newsletter

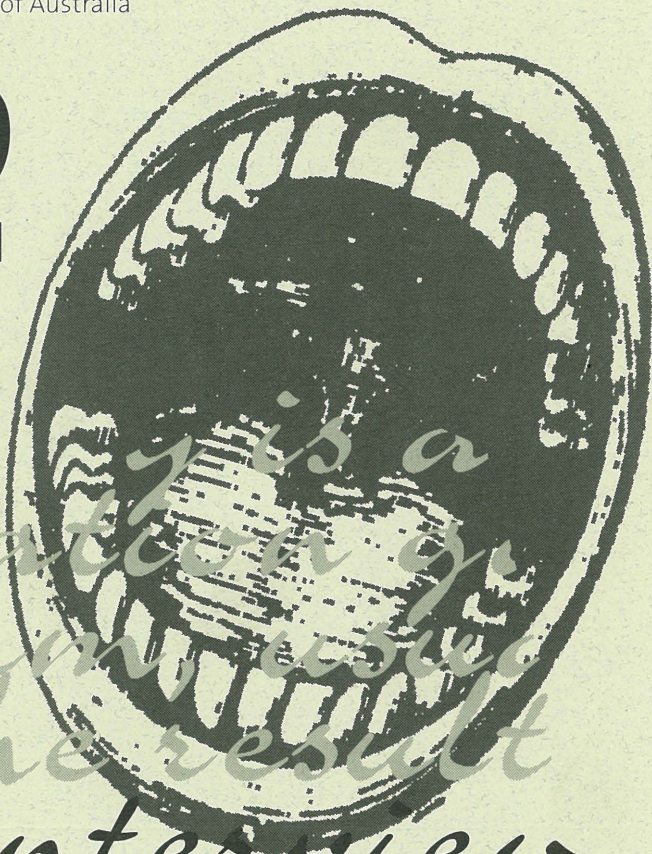
of the New South Wales Branch

of the Oral History Association

of Australia

19

July 1999



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... form, usually  
... as the result  
... interview  
... means of finding  
... the past by asking  
... of people who*





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The views expressed in articles in this *Voiceprint*  
are not necessarily those of the NSW Branch of the  
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# Editorial

*Later this year the Oral History Association will be conducting the national Biennial Conference with the theme 'Tales of the Century'. This theme does suggest it is time to review what has been of interest during this century, the people, the events and ideas which have shaped the twentieth century, as our next conference will not be held until the beginning of the twenty first century. This is, of course, the 21st year since the formation of the Oral History Association of Australia. Our growing years are behind us and we now face the challenge of moving forward as a responsible organisation which will ensure that the voices of the twenty first century are available to be heard by future generations.*

*In this issue of Voiceprint we have presented some comments by Beth Robertson from the State Library of South Australia, regarding the demands being made by some university ethics committees. Beth has expressed concern that because of these demands valuable material is being lost and not preserved for future generations.*

*How shall we face the challenge of such committees and find a way to preserve the 'tales of the next century'?*

*What tales shall we record?*

*Which voices shall we record?*

*Will we still listen to the stories of those who do not write the formal records?*

*Will we all do our own thing?*

*Or is it time to work together to make sure that the record left is comprehensive and as complete as possible?*

*How do we set goals and directions for the challenge of recording 'next century's tales'?*

*Voiceprint is your newsletter, please write and tell us your ideas about 'future directions' – we would love to have some discussion on any of these questions.*

*Siobhan McHugh spoke of the passion that guides us – what is your passion? Tell us. We hope you all enjoy reading about and are inspired by the Historic Career of Tim Bowden – an enthusiastic example of someone with a passion for oral history!*

*Do share your thoughts with us.*

**Joyce Cribb**

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## New Members to June 1999

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<b>Yvonne Jones</b>	Family history
<b>Roanld Nichols</b>	Retired ABC broadcaster, interested in recording oral history
<b>Jennifer Cooper</b>	Administration manager, interested in Family and local history
<b>Lady Denman Heritage Complex</b>	Maritime Museum
<b>Mavis A. Clements</b>	Retired teacher interested in social history
<b>Jennifer Swain</b>	Archaeology and history
<b>Cate Vacchini</b>	(mostly) retired history teacher interested in people, literature, history and art
<b>Margaret Hill Clerk</b>	interested in history and genealogy
<b>Rosemary Melville</b>	Historian, interested in Hunter Valley, BHP
<b>Ann Smith</b>	Public servant, interested in immigration history
<b>Paula Watts</b>	Postgraduate student interested in medical social history
<b>John Fleming</b>	Recording history of members of his Association
<b>Jenny Williams</b>	Administrative officer, interested generally in history
<b>Janet Ingham</b>	Retired teacher-librarian, interested in theatre, film, music, reading and travel
<b>Sylvia Lovenfosse</b>	Registered nurse, interested in history
<b>Liam Gash</b>	Publications officer, interested in polio epidemic and political history
<b>Manly Library</b>	
<b>Jo Erskine</b>	Anthropologist interested in cultural heritage oral history
<b>Bronwyn Layton</b>	Queenwood School
<b>Dr Jeannette Manyweathers</b>	Retired teacher-librarian, interested in local history

**Librarian, Research Centre  
Old Parliament House, Canberra  
Kim Ketelbey**

Interested in political oral histories

Architect, heritage consultant interested in  
Headland history

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## The Bancroft Library Collection on Line

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This library at the University of California-Berkeley is placing transcripts from its oral history collection on line in full text format that will allow complex searches of the entire text. The Suffragists Oral History Project – interviews with twelve suffragists and women’s activists – is now available on-line and projects in preparation include the Disabled Persons Independence Movement and the BioTech Project.

Future additions include oral histories of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, the Earl Warren gubernatorial era, and African-American Alumni at the University of California.

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/BANC/ROH/O/online/#collections>

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## John Rich and the Sydney Heritage Fleet

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One of our members, John Rich featured in the *Sydney Morning Herald* recently. John assists with the restoration of old vessels. These are restored so they function as well as appear in all their former glory. John is very interested in radar and has a collection of hand tooled equipment from earlier years, and admires the skills of an earlier generation of engineers who did a wonderful job with nothing like the equipment available today. John is pictured in front of the historic ‘James Craig’. John is assisting with the repair of the electrical systems on this vessel.



## REPORTS

### Seminar – April 10

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Siobhan McHugh spoke to a large and fascinated audience on this day. We were delighted to have the advice and experiences of such an experienced oral historian, broadcaster and author to inspired us all to produce better tapes in the future. Siobhan spoke of the passion we all have to help us with our oral histories!

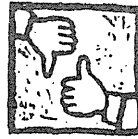
Members present will remember the discussion about current radio programs that use oral history.

Michelle Rayner of the ABC Social History Unit has provided the following information on programs broadcast on Radio National – 576.

**Hindsight** – Sunday 2pm; repeat Thursday 11am. A continuing weekly specialist radio program devoted to Australian social and oral history.

**Verbatim** – Saturday 5pm; repeat Wednesday 11am. A new weekly oral history program reflecting on the story of the twentieth century through the voices of ordinary Australians describing their participation in selected events.

**Earshot** – 5.30pm Saturday; repeat Wednesday 11.30am. A new thirty minute program reflecting on contemporary social conditions confronting Australians at the end of the twentieth century. Good listening!



## From Oral to Aural – My Jazz Life – Keith Hounslow – Reviewed by Ruth Wilson

Autobiographies are normally in book form, even when much of the material on which they are based has been 'recorded on tape as the result of a planned interview' – one of the most frequently used definitions of oral history. In the case of a forthcoming biography about pocket trumpet and flugelhorn player, Keith Hounslow, the autobiography has been described as "an aural account on compact disc".

Ray Marginson of the Victorian jazz Archives considers that the project represents a unique approach. "As a social document, it is invaluable in its charting of the history over five decades of a particular segment of the arts community and the development of Australian jazz performance in the period from the second world war".

The autobiography breaks new ground. It is a 'spoken biography' by a living jazz man whose recollections are supplemented by his music over the decades. The total package comprises six CDs, of which two are taken up by

spoken biography, while the remaining four contain Keith's jazz from the 1947 second Australian Jazz Convention up to and including the five decades to the 1990s.

Keith's story is of historical significance, since it is also the story of jazz history as lived in those times, including the music and the musicians Keith has played with. The multipack is a collector's item in its own right. It is presented as a hardcover book – 130 x 240 mm folder. There are two CDs tucked into each of the three folds. An informative booklet is included with stories and comment plus a detailed discography and personnel listing of the sixty three music tracks. In all, over eight hours of aural delight!

The package is covered in a historically significant black and white photographic montage along with comments about Keith by such jazz luminaries as Roger Bell, Vince Jones, Adrian Jackson and Richard Hughes.

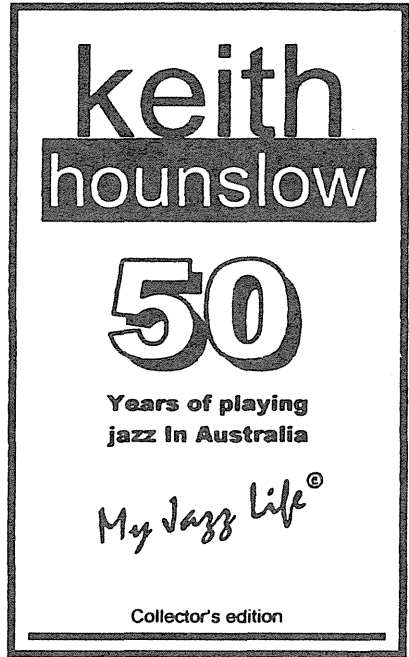


The response to this innovative form of autobiography has been positive. Typical of the critiques has been this enthusiastic commendation by Paul Grabowski, leader of the Australian Art Orchestra:

It came as no surprise to me that Keith would choose to create his memoirs in the form of the spoken word on CD. He is a great communicator, a wonderful lyrical and natural musician, and I can only imagine his recording of his "Jazz Life" will be of lasting value, both in its own right and as something of lasting archival interest.

It is possible that other artists will follow the example of Keith Hounslow and create a new genre of autobiography, one that we may call *oral/aura!*

*(Package may be obtained by contacting the author – c/- Kiama Post office, Kiama NSW 2533. Cost \$85 Includes postage and handling. Phone/fax 0242 322 859)*



## ARTICLES

# The Impact of University Ethics Committees on the Practice of Oral History

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*The following article is reprinted from **Word of Mouth**, Newsletter of the South Australian Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia, January 1999, Number 36,*

### **Introduction: A Curator's Comments**

By Beth M Robertson, Oral History Officer, State Library of South Australia

Oral history is being muted in the 1990s by the demands of some universities' ethics committees. Universities claim to be protecting the interests of interviewees by subjecting oral history interviewing programs to the same policies governing medical, psychological and sociological human subject research. However, universities own interests in an increasingly litigious era are clearly the underlying concern.

For their projects to be approved at some universities, staff and student researchers must agree that no interviewee will be identified by name in any writing based on interviews and that all tape recordings will be destroyed

after the project has been completed. Interviewees are denied even the opportunity to vary these conditions and to choose whether or not their uninterpreted voices might survive in a public repository.

Such requirements contradict the very foundations of the practice of oral history. They render interviewees to the role of anonymous informants and rob the historic record of valuable source material. And what are the effects on the quality of research when, according to another common requirement, questions must be approved by the ethics committee before the project has begun?

My work as the curator of a repository for oral history colours my experience of the impact of university ethics committees. It is very frustrating to hear that another interviewing program will be lost and to sense the way in which the process is inhibiting the development of interviewing skills and the understanding of the potential of oral history techniques.

But not all university ethics committees respond to oral history proposals in the same way and by no means is the work of any ethics

committee only negative. To explain more about this important topic there follow two very different experiences of ethics committees.

Jill Barclay's item, originally prepared for the Reports Forum of the Crossing Borders conference in 1997, refers to an ethics committee that was prepared to recognise that the standards and procedures established by the Oral History Association of Australia provide appropriate ethical guidelines for oral history research. To date, 25 present and former staff members and clients of the Royal Flying Doctor Service have agreed to the deposit of their interviews in the State Library of South Australia. A valuable research collection is being formed that will exist quite separately from Jill's thesis.

In a paper presented at the South Australian Branch's mini-conference *Spreading the Word* last June, Avis Smith explores the consciousness-raising dimensions of the ethics protocol of the University of South Australia. However, under that protocol, Avis's research interviews will not become part of a public repository.

Meanwhile, I continue to urge university-based researchers to question the assumptions of ethics committees to ensure that the voices of those who assist their research will survive to enrich our understanding of the past.

# Conversations with Robert Richardson Bowie

By Andrew McFadzean

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*The following brief discussion is adapted from my presentation as a guest speaker at the Oral History Seminar and Workshop conducted by the New South Wales Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia at the State Library of New South Wales on November 1, 1997. In my presentation, I discussed generally my experience of using testimony gained from interviews in writing the biography of Professor Robert Richardson Bowie. The following article is a personal debriefing of my responses to the use of testimony in writing biography. While trying not to be too pompous, I may drift from a descriptive account of my research into personal prescriptions for further research.*

At a very early stage in the preparation for my interviews with Professor Bowie I became aware of one of the central difficulties behind the gathering of testimony for oral history: determining the gap between what the person knows and what are they willing to reveal. A biographer using testimony is confronted with the task of discovering what his or her subject knows and then, at the deeper level

asking whether the subject understands fully the questions being posed. This fundamental step must be considered before the more complex issue of whether your subject is avoiding or evading a question. A biography of a senior governmental official, which uses testimony, is more problematic.

The popular political British BBC satire, *Yes Minister*, summed up the problem. Sir Humphrey Appleby, Departmental Secretary to Jim Hacker, the Minister for Administrative Affairs, responded exasperatingly to Hacker's confusion in one episode by declaring, "I don't know what you don't know, Minister!" In another episode, after Hacker is once again caught flat-footed, Appleby retorted to Hacker's allegations about the suspected manipulation of information by stating, "But Minister, you did not ask the right question!" The series depicts the continual bureaucratic conflict for control through the manipulation of knowledge between the Minister, and later Prime Minister, Jim Hacker and his Departmental Secretary, and later Secretary of the Cabinet, Sir Humphrey Appleby. I do not wish to suggest, in any way, that Professor Bowie manipulated information during my interviews with him. His support, general

assistance and willingness to respond as fully as possible to my many and varied questions were vital to the completion of my PhD. He made the paper chase comprehensible which was an essential step to archival research.

My PhD thesis was the first full-length biography of Professor Bowie and it involved having to research from the ground up. Professor Bowie was a senior State Department adviser and Harvard University international relations academic, who served with the Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson and Carter administrations throughout the Cold War years. He was a trusted confidant to John J. McCloy who has been described as the unofficial Chairman of the American Establishment. My study of his career emphasized the significance of the second echelon of governmental officials as authors and critics of America's foreign policy during the Cold War. He is a naturally quiet person whose career often covered many sensitive topics of national security and diplomacy and his work, both in government and academe, was not well publicised outside governmental and academic circles beyond the foreign policy Establishment. There was no single collection of private papers. Official papers of Bowie's governmental

and academic careers were dispersed into various collections and archives. I wanted to gain the most complete insight that was possible into Robert Bowie and oral history was one of the methods I used to move beyond the one-dimensional perspective of the documentary record.

In the beginning, there were three reasons why I used evidence gained from interviews in writing my biography of Robert Bowie. I hoped the interviews would provide essential background material on Robert Bowie and would bring to light the rich diversity of the often-unknown aspects of his personality and the hidden color of the many aspects of his everyday life and events that had not been recorded. Secondly, the interviews provided information about new or undiscovered evidence and/or new approaches to problems about researching Robert Bowie's careers as a lawyer, policy adviser and academic. This information included names of colleagues and subordinates, descriptions of duties and positions of people, and significantly, bureaucratic and governmental processes that may not be officially recorded, but were accepted administrative procedures. These processes were therefore crucial to understanding how issues were debated and conclusions decided by policy makers. Finally, the interviews laid the



foundations that linked the various accounts that comprised the chronological narrative of his life and careers.

However, from the outset, I understood that oral history is about contemporary reviews of historical events that are jointly created between the biographer/historian and the subject through the recording of interviews. This quality of interactivity means that oral history is not only about what is remembered, but also, significantly, how memories are arranged in the act of remembering. The language used, such as metaphors and analogies and the gaps in peoples' accounts are often more instructive than what is remembered! Testimonies from interviews are the outcomes of interplay between memories and agendas. These agendas can be a composite of personal, political, cultural and intellectual worldviews. Consequently, interviews can be affected by such factors as the physical environment of the meeting, the psychology of memory and the act of the narrative of remembering, personal agendas and perceptions of reputation and the institutional sensitivity to various political and social issues.

With this in mind, I launched into my research and recorded eight interviews with Robert Bowie over the period I conducted my archival research in the United States. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded on a small cassette recorder, which used the internal area microphone. The interviews were conducted in a quiet room so the reproductive quality was very good. The interviews were more thematic than chronological as we progressed through his service in the US Army in wartime Washington to his duty in post war Germany until 1946. His career as a law professor at Harvard Law School from 1946 to 1952 was interesting for the insight it gave of the academic culture at Harvard both before the Second World War where he was a student, and after as a member of Faculty. The most interesting interviews, however, covered his work as Assistant Secretary of State for Planning in the Eisenhower administration from 1953 to 1956, Counselor in Dean Rusk's State Department from 1966 to 1968 and his post as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence in the Central Intelligence Agency under the Director Stansfield Turner during the Carter Administration from 1977 to mid-1979. The second aspect of his career dealt with his tenure as the founding director of Harvard University's Center for International

Affairs from 1957 until 1972 and his time as the Clarence Dillon Professor of International Relations from 1958 until 1980, when he retired. Bowie provided an insight into university politics and the community of international relations scholars in the United States from 1958 to the 1970s.

So, while having investigated and experienced some of the limitations of oral history, I also identified the advantages. At the end of the exercise I came to the conclusion that oral histories are very useful for two reasons. Developing my understanding of Robert Bowie the person was essential to this biography and the interviews proved highly successful. The information from our interviews provided a map on which the research for my thesis was initially based. Bowie provided a personal tour through his life that greatly assisted my search for Robert Bowie, the historical figure by lifting him from the one-dimensional figure of the archival documents to an active "I" which assisted greatly when writing the biography as you can see where and how some of the pieces of his narrative fit into the broader scheme of his life and times. However, I had to carefully walk the thin line between seeing the world through the eyes of Robert Bowie, as told

in 1993, or falling into the temptation of using the interviews as supplementary papers. Secondly, testimony from the interviews proved effective in developing research strategies into the documentary record of the archives. His narrative linked the small autobiographical and biographical sketches I had located to the limited references found in the secondary sources that placed his life, and careers, into a broader historical context which was essential to the biography. This map of his life provided the main themes and issues that Bowie had dealt with throughout his careers.

In hindsight, my experience with oral history has re-inforced the need for me to be aware of three crucial factors which influence how testimony from interviews should be read. Firstly, the act of remembering is a creative, complex and interactive process that is not simply the retrieval of information, but, the re-interpretation of historical events in a contemporary setting. This dialogue between interviewer and subject is the merging of historical memory and contemporary analysis that also involves the science of memory and recall, as well as the art of the narrative.

Secondly, interviewing is a personal and intellectual act, which is influenced by such factors as the unwritten rules of conversation. These conventions are based on mutually accepted ground

rules for the establishment of a common language between the biographer and the subject. This language incorporates metaphors and analogies that need to be translated for the exchange of meaning, which involves understanding the concepts as well as the vital personal context of the narrative. Understanding this exchange improves as the relationship between the biographer and the person develops through the interviews. Interviewing is affected also by the recognition of personal agendas of competition and cooperation between the participants. These views are not usually overtly hostile, but are part of the subtle interplay of personalities, which occur in many conversations. Awareness of these agendas, and how they may influence formulating questions and the responses, progresses through the collaboration of the interview. An interviewer must keep in mind that a participant's responses may be genuine misunderstandings of the questions, rather than deliberate acts of evasion or avoidance. It is hard to bare your soul to a stranger, particularly when they may be discussing topics that are personally and/or professionally sensitive.

The biographer must recognize the implicit editorial voice of the subject who decides what will be discussed and avoided and to what extent a topic or issue will be covered. Generating the testimony should not be considered a dualistic process of competitive regulation in which the subject creates the record that is then edited by the biographer, but, as the more subtle and fluid microdynamic exchange between the participants. Awareness of the editorial voice brings the initial problematic to light. Through the interviews the biographer needs to be aware that he or she may never know whether responses were the results of what was remembered, or, what is prepared to be revealed.

## My Historic Career

Keynote address delivered by Tim Bowden at the State History Conference held at Port Adelaide on 16 May 1998.

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*The following article is reprinted from **Word of Mouth**, Newsletter of the South Australian Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia, January 1999, Number 36.*



My historic career. Does this mean it is over? As I am now 60, it is perhaps time to reflect on my shuffle along the mortal coil so far. When a long-time acquaintance asked my nonagenarian father John Bowden last year what he thought of my turning 60, Father replied: 'Well I never thought I'd live long enough to have a geriatric son'.

Although, most of my historical interests have been shaped by the oral record, I had to wait for the tape recorder

to be invented before I got started. But even before that, I did try a spot of oral history dictation in the summer 1947-48 at the tender age of 10 years. My parents and a group of their friends had (with some courage) taken me on a major bushwalk through the Lake St Clair-Cradle Mountain Reserve, an 80 kilometre trek. One of my fond aunts, who was a shorthand typist, took down my recollections of this historic trek in Pitmans when I got back, and typed it up. I came across a copy recently, and although not a tape, it is undeniably oral history. Reading it today is a curious and faintly uncomfortable experience. I was, effectively, an only child as my two brothers and sister were not born until after the war, so there is a decade's gap. 'Post war reconstruction', as my father used to say. I was used to adult company, and as a result I was somewhat indulged as children without siblings often are. There are echoes of a pre-feminist era in my references to 'the womenfolk' going down to the creek to wash. It was, after all, 1948. We had quite an adventurous start to our walk actually:

We got to the service car and we heard that the driver had been drinking beer and sherry until 4 o'clock in the morning. We felt very

encouraged you may imagine. The driver drove very fast and it was very dangerous.

As it happens our party was on the fringes of a tragic and bizarre incident that took place in the Lake St Clair-Cradle Mountain Reserve during that summer. A young woman travelling with a mixed group of hikers-members of a church group I recall, so everything was terribly above board – dropped back for a toilet stop, and unwittingly peed on a tiger snake sunning itself beside the fallen log the unfortunate young woman was using as a toilet seat. She was bitten on the vagina it was later alleged-but that may not have been so. Certainly the bite was in an intimate area because she chose not to mention it to her companions. However, when she collapsed on the track, the seriousness of the situation was soon made clear. Tourniquets were not an option under the circumstances, and the young woman was carried to one of the huts available to hikers, and one of the party set off to try and get a doctor. We saw the unexpected sight of a young man running along the track without a backpack, and he told us what had happened. My father went with him – he stopped him running – and they set off for Cradle Mountain, about another day's walk to the north. Sadly it was all too late. The venom of the Tasmanian

tiger snake is among the world's deadliest. There were headlines in the papers when the story got out. My 10-year-old summary was as follows:

Just as we got [to Cradle Mountain] the doctor who had come from Sheffield told us that the girl was either dead or getting better. We did not know it – but she happened to be dead. A detective and two policemen went out into the bush and lost themselves – that was their contribution. The detective went out to arrest the snake.

When I was 14, another fond aunt, Dottie (my father's three sisters never married so I was well off for aunts on that side of the family), shouted me a holiday in Sale, Victoria, where she worked as a copy-writer at the local commercial radio station, 3TR. It was there I made my first broadcast. Of all things a book review! Aunt Dorothy used to run a book program as well as write commercials (no extra pay of course) and she got me to review one of the CS Forester Captain Hornblower books. Mercifully the script does not survive.

The only ambition I ever had was to be a journalist, and in those wonderful days when jobs were around for young people who wanted them, I scored a cadet reporter's position on the *Hobart Mercury* in 1955, while doing a part-time arts degree at the University of Tasmania. At



two subjects a year, this took forever – or so it seemed to me. It also got up the nose of Richard Fulton, then Chief of Staff of the *Hobart Mercury*. Dick had curious notions about academe. Hauling me over the coals one day for some misdemeanor, he told me how good it was of the paper, and him, to give me time off for my lectures. I said that, in fact, my lectures were in the morning, and I was usually on the afternoon evening shift, so that wasn't a factor. 'But you don't think you can come to work and do a decent day's work after going up there do you?' he bellowed. Dick had a theory that your brain was somehow milked of a quota of efficiency during my morning lectures at the university, which beggared you for the rest of the day for proper work. Maybe he was right – but as the years went on and the old bugger used to delight in putting me on a late night shift before my end of year exams, I was thinking of moving on. But where to? Hobart was, and still is, a one newspaper town. Salvation came in the ebullient form of one James Pratt, an old repertory theatre mate of my parents who hove into town to act as Supervisor of Talks for the ABC. What's the boy doing these days? he boomed (drama was Jimmy's usual job). 'Tell him to come and see me.'

So it was in 1959 that I was sent on my first radio assignment to record the frenetic sounds of a wool auction in the

Hobart Town Hall, and record a profile interview with a wool buyer, for a five minute magazine *Tasmania Today*. I suppose I'm a candidate for an oral history interview myself when I reveal that I was using a clockwork tape recorder. The sound was electrically recorded of course, but the spools were driven by a spring. It had a handle on the side, which you used like an organ grinder. It lasted for four minutes – approximately. I say approximately, because this depended on the condition of the spring. When it started to run down, this had the reverse effect when it was played back on a normal machine. An interviewee's voice began to take on a rising note of hysteria, until it degenerated into complete Donald Duckery. Despite the Goon Show overtones of this operation I was instantly hooked. I still remember the feeling of excitement – the impression the recording gave of really being there, with actuality sound of the strange yippings and yelpings of the bidding, and the laid-back drawl of the wool buyer as he told me about himself. This particular bloke would have talked under wet cement. He was a natural. I was also struck by how much of his personality was revealed by his voice. Just think how many assumptions we make when we hear the first few words of someone speaking on the radio. You are immediately aware of age, sex,

educational background, personality – perhaps, even credibility. And this in a few seconds. How could I ever have created that intimacy in a story? I sold my first item to the ABC and thought, ‘This is for me!’

I quit the *Mercury* and began freelancing for the ABC and, when after five years I eventually got my BA, I took off for England on a ship in 1960, as my generation did. I was by then 23 and felt I had left my run rather late.

I had always wanted to go to England – partly because my father’s elder brother Philip was a don at Cambridge and there was a clutch of cousins around my age I wanted to meet, and because I was going ‘Home’ – wasn’t I? I never considered myself ‘British to the bootstraps’ as Robert Menzies embarrassingly and incorrectly dubbed us, nor did I expect the red carpet treatment – at least as a colonial, I was treated as a British subject at the immigration counter – but I wasn’t prepared for the amused contempt with which Australians in London were regarded by the Poms.

When I fronted up at the General Overseas Service of the BBC at Bush House and tried to get some work, I had a stroke of luck. The head of the Pacific Service, John Terraine – about to make his name as a war historian – liked Australians. This bemused most of his BBC colleagues, but they tolerated this

eccentricity. My other plus was that I knew how to cut and edit audiotape with a splicing block and a razor blade. This fairly basic skill was the jealous preserve of BBC technicians and a few producers. The freelance reporter booked out a BBC tape recorder and went out to record an interview, or cover a public event. The tape was then given to the producer who either had to book an editing suite and instruct a technician to dub or cut the bits out that were needed, or edit it himself – producers were mostly blokes in those days, although there were some women. This was time consuming and eroded precious drinking time. If Tim Bowden did the job, however, you could be down at the BBC Club or the pub much earlier, as he edited his own stuff. The BBC paid four guineas per interview – the cost of a bed-sitter for a week. With one assignment I had a roof over my head, with another I was eating, a third drinking, and the rest was gravy.

The idea was to record interviews on topics and with individuals that reflected Britain to the Pacific region. Although what is now known as the BBC World Service was government funded, it was broadminded about what was broadcast. I even managed to sell two – but only two – interviews with Barry Humphries, as a younger Edna Everedge lambasting the Poms in London. The concept I put up to the Pacific Service

was that of 'negative projection'. By broadcasting this and British stuff, it showed what a tolerant society British people enjoyed.

It was a dream job really. It gave me carte blanche to seek out people I had always wanted to meet, and interview them. For example, I had long admired the work of Frank Muir and Denis Norden in classic radio comedy shows like *Take It From Here*, and of course the wonderful *My Word* and *My Music* series. By the time I got to London Muir and Norden had shifted to television, and were working at the BBC's White City studios. I was overawed by these two huge men (both two metres tall), and set up my green BBC EMI recorder and embarked on the first of my earnestly engineered questions: 'Could I ask you both, first of all, how it is that you manage to combine on the writing of your comedy scripts?'

Muir flashed a sideways glance at Norden and began: 'In the first place it was very difficult to find a pen big enough for two hands to hold...' 'Oh God,' I thought, 'they're going to send me up'. But they were actually quite merciful to the rookie colonial, and I escaped with a useable tape.

Being desperate for my four guinea fees, I gained something of a reputation for having a go at anything. One assignment I recall VIVIDLY was on the training of savage guard dogs. I dressed

up in protective padded clothing and was set loose in the woods while a huge Alsatian with slavering jaws and red eyes hunted me down. My screams as the dog savaged my arm made great radio though – I got an extra guinea for that one.

I returned to Tasmania in 1963 and joined the staff of the ABC as Talks Officer in Launceston. Talks Officers did current affairs as well as some local history. An old bloke called Jack Lefroy used to wander in to the ABC's Brisbane Street offices and insist I record his reminiscences. Jack had been in the Boer War, among other things – he was ninety in 1963 – and was driven by a compulsion to share some of his bushcraft and life with others. I didn't even have to find him! It was my first fair dinkum recording of oral history I guess. There wasn't much of a structure to the talks. I had a program slot that took 15 minute talks, and Jack used to yarn away companionably and fill them up. I suppose I must have done about four or five of these program with him. Fascinating stuff, about early bushcraft and local history. He was, after all, born in 1873. Sadly, none of these talks survive. The tapes burned in the Tasmanian bushfires of 1967.

In 1965 I won a job as ABC correspondent in South-East Asia, based in Singapore. Confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia was boiling over, Singapore separated from Malaysia, and

President Johnson was putting half a million American troops into Vietnam. All this was exciting grist to a foreign correspondents mill – Vietnam was the world's biggest and best story and I was there. Current affairs and news took over my professional life, and that continued to North America when I was transferred to New York in 1967. By 1969 I was back in Sydney to start the current affairs radio program PM, and a year later, went to television as a producer with *This Day Tonight*. All history of course, but I was merely a hack, caught up in the news and current affairs machine. There was no time for essays. I was given time to ponder less frenetic pastures when the current affairs faction in the ABC which I belonged to (known as SEAP – the South East Asian Push because of the number of returned foreign correspondents in its ranks) was overthrown in an internal ABC coup, and I was bounced back to radio current affairs.

It was not a happy situation, and I took long service leave and headed outback with my partner Ros and our then 18 month old son Barnaby in a battered VW Kombi for an extended safari. While in Alice Springs I did use my tape recorder to gather some oral history at the Old Timers' Home there. Some of the old Kidman stockmen were still around. One of them, Tom Finlayson, was plaiting a raw – hide whip at the back of his little cottage when I interviewed him.

Most of the old bushies preferred to live alone because they were used to it. It wasn't really an interview because Tom couldn't hear me. He was almost completely deaf. As it turned out, this wasn't such a bad thing. I would just yell a key word at him: 'Camels, Tom'. 'Oh I had a wonderful old camel once ...' and off he'd go. Tom preferred camels to horses, and was eloquent in his enthusiasm. Then I'd say, 'Droving, Tom'. 'What?' 'DROVING!!' And away he'd go. His stories were evocative and moving, funny and cruel. He featured in a program I made when I got back to Sydney called *The Top End-It's Different Up There*.

By this stage I knew I did not want to go back to current affairs radio. Richard Connolly, classical scholar, Latinist, composer and head of the Radio Drama and Features Department agreed to take me on board – although my drama skills were zilch. I had, however, already made a radio documentary feature for his department called *The Making of an Australian Communist*, moonlighting while I was still working with radio current affairs. I was by now well hooked on oral history – based documentary making, and lucky enough to work for the ABC at a time when there was money for some travel and a progressive department head. Now Dick had absolutely no personal interest in the kind of work I was doing, but was

catholic enough to appreciate that there was a place for my work on ABC airwaves.

Following my long service leave perambulations around northern Australia in the battered Kombi, I had made contact with Ted Egan, whose gutsy bush songs, accompanied percussively on his 'Fosterfone' – a cardboard beer carton-featured in *The Top End-It's Different Up There*. Ted had also given me insights into aspects of Aboriginal culture in the Northern Territory. We traveled together on several forays through the Northern Territory recording traditional Aboriginal music in the bush from the Tiwi people of Bathurst and Melville Islands north of Darwin, to the desert Warlpiri people of Central Australia, now living in settlements like Yuendumi – where Ted had once been superintendent in the mid 1950s.

Drawing on these Northern Territory field expeditions with Ted Egan, I produced several documentaries, which attempted to examine the impact of European life on Aboriginal culture: *Will The Singing Have To Stop – Booze Or Culture? Yidaki* (the Aboriginal name for the didgeridoo) and *Singing For Survival*.

Then, in the deep south, I was able to indulge my Tasmanian origins in a number of projects, the most enduring I suppose was a two-hour feature – later put on 7 audio cassette by the ABC - titled *The West Coasters*. Former Huon

pine timber getters and miners talked compellingly of a way of life now long gone, where the piners set off into the bitterly cold and constantly wet forests with their horses and rations for periods of three months at a time – effectively more isolated than astronauts in space are today. It was a project done on the run, recorded in the bush. There was no fancy production. The voices carry the listeners forward. At the time I thought it was what oral history radio programs were all about. I still do.

At about this time, towards the end of the 1970s, I was deeply influenced by a series of BBC documentary programs broadcast here called *Plain Tales from the Raj*. Using a blend of natural sound, music, and anecdote, the programs attempted to capture the smells, feel and flavour of British India.

Then, in 1978 Richard Connolly forwarded a listener's letter on to me for reply. It said simply: 'Why doesn't the ABC do some radio documentaries like *Plain Tales of the Raj* on Australia's colonial experience in Papua New Guinea? Dick had written across the bottom, 'What do you think'?

Two-and-a-half years later and more than 300 hours of oral history recordings in Australia and Papua New Guinea later, *Taim Bilong Masta—the Australian Involvement with Papua New Guinea* was broadcast. There were 24 programs of 45 minutes duration, broadcast in



series of eight. I had become the *Blue Hills* of documentary radio producers.

I cannot claim all credit for this idea. An ABC colleague, Daniel Connell, on secondment to the PNG Broadcasting Corporation, had independently begun to record long interviews with key figures like Dame Rachel Cleland, wife of a former administrator, and Sir John Guise (later Governor General), with the idea of making similar programs, but had not been able to move ahead. He generously passed over his material to me, and joined in as Associate Producer when he returned to Sydney. I knew almost nothing about PNG, and needed expert help. I heard that an academic at the Australian National University, Dr Hank Nelson, had lectured at the University of Papua New Guinea and had an interest in PNG history. Daniel and I met him at his home in Canberra on 8 September 1989, testing his patience right from the start. Being Sydneyiders we were ignorant of the VFL Final being played in Melbourne, and Hank was a passionate Aussie Rules fan. He seemed strangely distracted, rushing off every 15 minutes or so for a quick footy fix. But he did agree to help. (He said later that the football made him blissfully unaware of the magnitude of the project.)

Hank agreed to prepare a research brief – so that Daniel and I as interviewers, would not neglect important areas – and also to establish a

basic interviewing procedure so that common questions could be put to different groups, like planters, patrol officers, medicos, missionaries, administrators and the wives of Australians living in isolated areas. He would also keep a watchful eye on accuracy, where necessary testing florid oral testimony against other written sources. At the end of it all, he wanted the option to publish. In other words, we would do the radio programs, and he would write the book. And that is how it worked out. The 24 programs attempted to move from the background of the German and British colonialism to Australia's, on to issues like administration (the patrol officers and their masters), exploration, first contact experiences, violence (volcanos as well as labour relations), gold rushes, race relations, missionary activity, legal and medical systems, the legacy of World War II and the emerging politics of independence. We had attempted an enormous sweep of history and topics – more than had been attempted in any written publication on Papua New Guinea and the Australian connection.

While the programs were still going to air, Hank Nelson rang me. There had been no discussion about doing another project. We were all too exhausted. But Hank was relentless: 'We've GOT to do the Australian prisoners of war in Asia. It has never been done properly. It's coming

up to forty years since the fall of Singapore. Their health is poor, and that's what we're going to do next'.

So we did. A survey of all the prisoner of war camps from Timor to Manchuria. Such an overall view had not been attempted by anyone. The experiences of prisoners of war are not dealt with in any depth by military historians who are more interested in battles and campaigns. Although, in round figures, 22 000 Australians became prisoners of war of the Japanese in 1942, and only 14 000 survived their three-and-a-half years of captivity, the official war history deals with their experiences only in appendices. Some 350 hours of raw oral history testimony later and another two-and-a-half years work, I finished the 16-part series *Prisoners of War- Australians Under Nippon*, and Hank had a book of the same name.

It is certainly arguable that *Prisoners of War – Australians Under Nippon* raised the national consciousness of the experiences of captured Australian service men and women under the Japanese. Nigel Triffitt's explosive drama *The Fall of Singapore* used voices from tapes of the POW programs, and David Malouf acknowledged us in the forward to his Booker Prize winning novel *The Great World*.

It is not possible to accurately plot the reach of both the PNG and POW series in terms of audience. Both series have been

repeated on Radio National over its 60 plus transmitters all around Australia. Many of thousands of tapes have been sold by ABC Audio. The POW series has just been reissued on cassette, fourteen years after its first broadcast. Arguably millions of Australians have heard at least part of each series. Both books of the series were reprinted at least three times. I recall the initial print run of *Australians Under Nippon* was 75000.

Before *Taim Bilong Masta* and the POW series, primary research was almost always released in learned journals or books with footnotes. *Prisoners of War – Australians Under Nippon* was the most comprehensive coverage ever attempted of those events, and was certainly the first time such a serious historical treatment has been released in oral history documentary form as a radio series. Neither Hank nor I had any qualms about gripping an audience.

Before *Taim Bilong Masta* it was not possible to find in the literature accounts of the emotional trauma endured by Australian patrol officers, kiaps, who had on many occasions risked their lives in hostile territory and explored where no Europeans had gone before. Most Australians were unaware of their work and sacrifices. They returned before and after PNG's independence, to a country they did not know, and to a nation that in a collective sense, had no appreciation of what their life's work had been all

about. One said to me as I left, after a recording session: 'Be careful with our memories – it's all we've got.'

Let me give another example of breaking new ground. The relationship between master and servant in PNG has always been gently dealt with in the literature. Actually hitting a Papua New Guinean, or native as they were called in past times, was a criminal offence. Of course it went on. There were a handful of Australians trying to control a tough, stropy, wild, aggressive people. If they hadn't exerted control, the Australians would have been attacked. The first patrols into the Highland were a graphic example of this. But you seldom, if ever, read that physical punishment occurred, let alone shooting. Rod Collins ran a sawmill in the Highlands in the 1950s and 60s. He told me during our interview that the problems of controlling labour became harder in 1962 when changes in the liquor laws allowed PNG citizens to drink:

They all knew the score, and you had to thump them if they got out of control. You only thumped for a reason, but you gave them a good talking to before you thumped them. You warned them, and if they didn't take any notice, well, you had to take the law into your hands and give them a good thumping. This was an example that you'd have to set in front of the whole [labour] line ...

You'd mostly thump them with your open hand to make plenty of noise, and sink the boot, but you never closed your hand because it cut them too much – their skin was like tissue paper. You'd just have to do it.

We found many interviewees prepared to speak frankly of this aspect of black and white relations. If this seems gross – which it is of course – we also recorded revealing stories of patrol officers' lives – first contact experiences, for example, that were gently remarkable: where young white Australians were as spirits who had come down to earth from the sky.

There are still those who say that oral history projects are suspect – that people's recorded memories are not as reliable as the written record. But in the case of *Taim Bilong Masta* and the POW programs, we were not just recording isolated yarns. What we taped had to be measured against what others said, who may have been in the same place or been present during described events – and against the written record where such a record existed. Sometimes we recorded stories that seemed too bizarre to be true. We did not use them unless they could be verified. I was particularly interested in Australians who had survived long periods in a dreadful place called Outram Road Gaol in Singapore. It was a military prison, a place of

punishment and death, where Japanese soldiers who had committed crimes were also sent, although they were fed better than the Allied servicemen. Signaller Chris Neilson had been sent there for trying to escape – but insisted that he had been turned over to the Japanese for punishment by his commanding officer, Lieut. Col. R.F. Oakes, at the Adam Park prison camp in 1942.

Oakes, a World War I veteran, is now dead. He wasn't at the time I taped my interview with Chris Neilson, although he was a very old man. Hank and I were concerned about publishing such a serious allegation. Then Hank discovered a statutory declaration made in 1946 by one of Neilson's fellow would-be escapers, Reg Morris – who also survived Outram Road Gaol. 'Col.Oakes', he wrote, 'saw fit to hand us over to the Japanese'. We went with Neilson. Since then, because I am still interested in the Outram Road Gaol story, there has been further confirmation of Oakes' extraordinary behaviour.

In 1985, I convinced ABC management that we should start a unit which specialised in the collection and broadcasting of oral history based material. I am happy to say that the Social History Unit still lives in Radio National, although its staffing is slim to say the least. The emphasis has shifted from showcasing oral history material to what

one might term 'historical current affairs'. But there is still time for occasional essays in recorded memory which feature on *Hindsight*, the former *Talking History*. (Since this talk was given, the Social History Unit has been allocated more staff and a new program, *Verbatim*, is on the air.)

I have always been happier making programs than organising them, and in 1986 I was delighted to do a lateral arabesque in favour of Jenny Palmer who became Executive Producer of the Social History Unit. In 1987 she convinced me – she claims that I was reluctant at the time – to do a series of documentaries on Australians who went to Antarctica with ANARE (Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions) after World War II.

In 1989 I convinced the Antarctic Division to take me south on one of the annual resupply voyages, and later wrote a book *Antarctica and Back in Sixty Days*, drawing on my tapes recorded at the time, and my diary. It was written with a light touch, but the Antarctic Division can't have minded too much, because in 1993, (after I had left the staff of the ABC after 29 years and 11 months service) I was commissioned to write the jubilee history of ANARE, *The Silence Calling- Australians in Antarctica 1947-97*.

I was helped with research and taping by Annie Rushton, who worked at the Antarctic Division in Hobart – where

all the records were – while I beavered away in Sydney. Unlike oral history for broadcast, where you can edit an interview only by cutting irrelevancies or inaccuracies out, I adopted a technique where interviewees could check their own transcripts and add or amend material if they wanted to. This, I hoped, would not only increase accuracy on place names and dates, but would encourage interviewees to think further about what they had said. And hopefully not withdraw the good stuff!

*The Silence Calling* was a commissioned corporate history – but at the same time, it was the history of Australian activity in Antarctica over half a century, because the Antarctic Division had a moratorium on access to the continent. I convinced the Division that they should commission a book that the general public might want to read, as well as documenting their corporate history. In addition the ABC agreed to produce a six-part television series *Breaking the Ice* hosted by me, and a companion documentary to the written history also called *The Silence Calling* featuring the Division's extensive previously uncatalogued film archives. The written history, published by Allen & Unwin, has to date sold almost 6,500 copies. The television programs have been put out on video by the ABC, and have also been popular.

Like the kiaps of Papua New Guinea, the expeditioners who worked on our southern, frozen frontier have not had their due recognition. Australia claims some 42 per cent of the Antarctic continent. Until 1954, geographers did not even know what was there. The achievements of the surveyors, geologists and pilots who first glimpsed the vastness of the Prince Charles Mountains, south-east of Mawson Station, in turn holding back the Lambert Glacier – the biggest glacier in the world have not captured the public imagination. Through the combination of oral history, written history, and television, I hope the awareness of the pioneers of Australia's forgotten frozen frontier has been to some extent redressed.

All my published books have been based on oral testimony – except *The Backchat Book* for obvious reasons.

In *One Crowded Hour* – Neil Davis, *Combat Cameraman 1934-85*, Neil Davis recorded many hours on audiotape for me before he was killed in Bangkok on 9 September 1985. At that point I had to step in as narrator, and draw on others to complete his biography. Despite that, some 75 per cent of the book is Neil's testimony, speaking directly to the reader.

The most indulgent book project of all, I suppose, is *The Way My Father Tells It – the Story of an Australian Life*. Still,



oral historians are always bullying people to record their relays, so I suppose I made a virtue of that. I would just like to say a couple of things about that book – apart from it being an extraordinarily pleasant exercise.

Autobiography – including the ‘as told to’ variety – can often be a platform for self-aggrandisement, particularly if the subject is a tall poppy. In the case of my father, he was faintly bemused by the prospect that anybody outside the immediate family might be interested in his life and recollections. If anything he was self-deprecatory about himself and I believe, totally honest. His ability to recall the detail of growing up in Hobart around 1910-20, I found quite wonderful.

We decided to tape his memories, not with a book in mind, but because my father was the last of his generation, the youngest of six children, with access not only to his own recollections, but earlier generations as well. The first thing I got him to do was to identify all the old family photos -who WERE those old ladies in black toques?

As the tapes came in I became aware that I was dealing with oral history of a very different kind than had I been doing the interview. Normally the interviewer controls the agenda, following up on some points, changing the topic-and often pursuing their own interests. Although my father had asked

for general headings to work from, you could actually hear him recalling extra things as he went along. He asked me what he should do about this, and I said go with it! We can always bring you back to unfinished business if and when we need to.

But in the case of John’s tapes his mind was ranging freely over the very general brief, and quite clearly anecdotes and impressions were occurring to him as he went along. This was often expressed in what I thought were very amusing anecdotes which would occur to him as he was taping, uninterrupted by me.

One of the great strengths of oral history is that it enables ordinary people to go on the record in a way that would never happen if we had to rely on people writing their stories down. Not many people write stylishly, instinctively and well. Yet almost everyone can tell a good story.

However it is important to keep in mind the sage advice of the patron saint of oral history, Samuel Langhorne Clemens – better known as Mark Twain. Clemens once said: ‘The further back I go, the better I remember things – whether they happened or not’.

# Diary of Events



## **Executive meeting Dates for 1999**

Members are welcome to attend the Management Committee meetings held at the State Library at 5.30pm on the following dates: 9 August; 11 October; 29 November or 6 December. Our AGM 31 July, 9am, followed by seminar

## **Seminar Dates for 1999**

31 July; 6 November

## **National Biennial Conference**

'Tales of the Century'

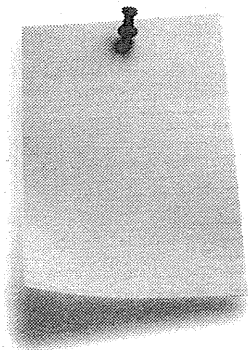
Oral History Association of Australia  
2 – 5 September State Library of Victoria,  
La Trobe Street, Melbourne.

Note these dates for this Conference being conducted by the Victorian Branch in Melbourne. This is the 21st birthday year of OHAA. And many interesting papers are promised, including some from overseas.

## **An invitation from America to attend Oral History Association National meeting in Anchorage, Alaska 7-10**

October 1999. The theme is Giving Voice: Oral Historians and the Shaping of Narrative. Further information– Susan Armitage, Editor, Frontiers, Women's Studies Program, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164 4007. Email <armitage@wsu.edu>

## Noticeboard



### **National Library of Australia**

*Bringing them Home oral history project Expressions of interest*

The National Library would like to hear from Indigenous and non-Indigenous oral historians who might be interested in recording interviews for this project.

The *Bringing them Home* oral history project is recording the stories of persons involved in the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

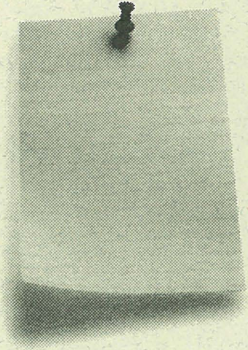
Interviews are being sought with separated persons and their families, and with administrators such as police, public servants, missionaries and health workers.

Please contact Dr Gwenda Davey on 1-800-353-907 or email <gdavey@nla.gov.au>

### *Oral History Transcription Service*

Professional transcriber. Reasonable rates. Contact Gabrielle Godard on Ph 9310 3940 Fax 9310 3941. Urgent work accommodated

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