

**Newsletter** of the New South Wales Branch  
of the Oral History Association of Australia  
[www.ohaansw.org.au](http://www.ohaansw.org.au)

# VOICEPRINT

41

October 2009

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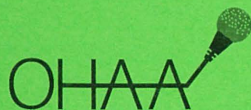
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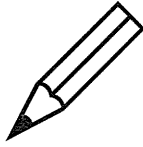
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# Editorial



*This edition of Voiceprint is being prepared at a time when many of you will be enjoying the OHAA conference in Tasmania. Conferences are usually stimulating so hope as you receive this edition you will have returned home with fresh enthusiasm for oral history. Thank you to those who have been generous in their help with reports and articles for this edition.*

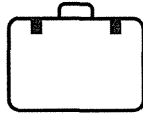
*I have found the topics in this Voiceprint are featured in different ways and help to build up the overall picture for the reader. I hope you enjoy these happy coincidences – wish I could claim it was all due to skilful editing! However, the reality is that I am forever trying to find words to fill the pages. Rosie has told us how the ABC's, John Thompson began with programs called History Biography by interviewing living people about past personalities. We look forward to knowing more of Bea Miles as Frances Rush uses similar interviews to write about Bea. We advance through the technological age but the spoken word adds so much to our understanding. Siobhan McHugh has shared her knowledge and experiences with us, speaking at seminars in the past and we are happy to include an article from Siobhan full of useful information designed for her students – and such an interesting read. I think we are all life long students! Remember to listen to ABC Hindsight in October.*

*We have included a new section headed Member's Projects. It is hoped that this will allowed members with similar interests to make connections that assist with their own work and add to the overall knowledge base. Sandra Blamey intends to add a similar section to our web site. There is much information on the web – do hope everyone is keeping up with all the new information.*

***Please, Sandra and I would appreciate your contributions. I hope to meet some of you at our November seminar and hear about your projects.***

**Joyce Cribb**

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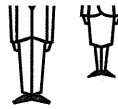


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## Web Site

Remember to look up our website: [www.ohaansw.org.au](http://www.ohaansw.org.au) for all the latest information and news of what's on. If you have news for circulation through the OHAA NSW web site, please email the OHAA webmaster: Sandra Blamey at: [sblamey@ozemail.com.au](mailto:sblamey@ozemail.com.au)

# Membership



Welcome to our new members. It's the beginning of a new membership year for us and it's great to have the encouragement of new 'joiners'! I do hope you'll enjoy our programs and our newsletters and journals. Journal No 31 2009 is due to be mailed in October.

Helen Pitcher	student
Sr. Nola Fox	lecturer/writer
Sue Slowikowski	lecturer
Karla Whitmore	school archivist
John Honeysett	retired police superintendent
Shayne Davy & Mark Vale	community worker and clerk
Vicki Bobotis	producer
Shirley Wishart	retired, interested in oral history
Carol & Geoff Roberts	piano teacher & historian
Jenny Entwisle	flying instructor
David Bucholtz	consultant military historian
David Evered	army officer
Heather Pearce	research assistant
James & Liz Rush	director
Adele Chynoweth	research fellow
Australian Red Cross	
Uniting Church – Parramatta Mission	
Hawkesbury City Council	

**Rosie Block, President OHAA NSW**

# Awards Presented at the OHAA National Conference

*The national conference was held in Launceston, Tasmania during September. In this edition we have included the awards made to our member Janis Wilton. A further report on the conference will be included in the next edition. Members will also be able to read many of the papers presented at the conference in the OHAA Journal. Ed*

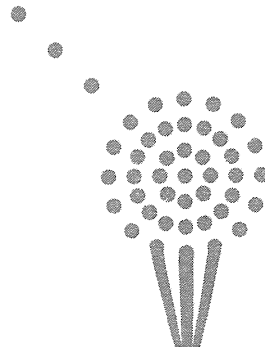
## **JANIS WILTON – nomination for the Hazel de Berg Award 2009**

Janis Wilton first ventured into oral history work in the late 1970's in the spirit of 'letting the people speak'. Her concern was to record the stories of people (specifically European refugees from non-English speaking backgrounds) whose stories were largely absent from the history books. She became captivated with the power and impact of sharing people's life stories and the significance of being able to provide individuals and families with their stories in sound and in print. Janis has a strong commitment to ensuring that these stories become part of the public record through oral history collections and publications of all kinds. Through her growing experience in conducting oral history interviews, Janis came to appreciate the layered messages and intellectual challenges in their analysis and interpretation. She has a primary concern to inspire and assist people and local communities to capture and present the power of oral history narratives and insights. Her passion is evident in the variety of research and community based projects she has undertaken, her teaching of oral history in university courses and community workshops, and active involvement in oral history organisations and conferences.

## **Raising awareness of oral history within the profession**

Janis Wilton was an early member of the Oral History Association of Australia in 1978 and has participated in all OHAA conferences since 1979 in addition to publishing in the *OHAA Journal* as a preferred place of publication. From 1982-86, with Louise Douglas, she co-edited the *OHAA Journal*. More recently Janis has served on the Editorial Committee to support the establishment of peer review as a beneficial and educational process.

Over the past 25 years Janis has served on the OHAA National Council on a number of occasions most recently as the link between OHAA and IOHA. Janis initiated and co-ordinated (with Rosemary Block and Paula Hamilton) the hosting of the very successful 14th International Oral History Conference in Sydney. She has a firm commitment to the importance of OHAA and IOHA as umbrella organisations that can bring together oral history practitioners



from a wide range of backgrounds with a variety of purposes and aims. Janis was elected to the IOHA Council in 1998 and served the maximum term of 8 years including the demanding roles of Journal Editor and President. In 1994 Janis compiled the OHAA's bibliography on Oral History in Australia.

### **Promotion of oral history within the history community**

In 1985 Janis joined Armidale College of Advanced Education (which amalgamated with the University of New England in 1990). Her teaching profile in both institutions has always included courses in oral history: these were among the first to be taught in universities in Australia. Initially restricted to local, family and applied history students, the unit is now offered at undergraduate and postgraduate levels across a variety of disciplines in the university. Most students are distance education students, and the unit attracts between 60-80 students each time it is offered. To Janis' great satisfaction a number of her students have gone on to publish their work. Examples can be found in the *OHAA Journal* and in presentations at OHAA Conferences. Other students have initiated oral history projects within their communities and undertaken further studies in oral history. Janis has written articles and presented papers on the teaching of oral history at universities. The most recent is due to be published in 2009 as a contribution to Donald Ritchie's forthcoming edited collection, *The Oxford Oral History Handbook*.

Participation in community oral history workshops has been complementary to Janis' teaching at UNE. Over the years these have included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Liaison Officers in Queensland Department of Education, regional health and community care workers, secondary school teachers, diversional therapists, and local and family history societies. Janis' keenness to bring the oral history message to diverse audiences sees her regularly giving public talks and other presentations.

In recent years Janis' projects and activities demonstrate her interest in establishing ways in which oral history is informed by, and informs, a variety of public history approaches including an engagement with the possibilities offered by new technologies. Some examples of Janis' multi-faceted approach can be seen in the following recent projects:

1996-2004

*Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional NSW. 1850-1950*

2006-2009

*Different Sights: Immigrants in New England*

2008 ongoing

*Telling Objects: the relationship between memories and objects*

2009 ongoing

*Views of Maitland: Art and History*

From 1996-2005 Janis served as a Trustee of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW and worked with the Trust's librarian to review the organisation's oral history collection, protocols and projects.

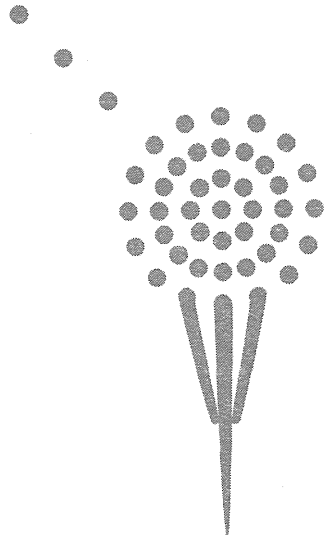
**Recording and documentation of oral history**

In addition to lodging her oral history interviews with the State Library of NSW and other appropriate archives, Janis has utilised a wide range of ways to promote oral history insights. Resource packages for schools, displays, travelling exhibitions (*Golden Threads: The Chinese in Regional NSW was on the road for four years*), websites and data bases all of which link individuals and communities to the documents, images, memorials, objects, oral histories, sites and publications that help to tell their stories. An emphasis in her most recent work is collaboration with museums and art galleries.

The list of Janis' published work is extensive – books, monographs, articles, conference and seminar papers, and reflects her passion for bringing the oral history message to diverse audiences. There can be no doubt that Janis' passion for oral history follows the tradition of Hazel de Berg.



**Jan McCahon Marshall, National President OHAA, presents Janis Wilton with the Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History in Launceston, Tasmania, at the National Biennial Conference of the OHAA in September 2009**





# Dr Janis Wilton OAM, Associate Professor, School of Humanities, UNE

## **Citation for Honorary Life Membership of the Oral History Association of Australia for service to the Association and to oral history.**

Janis Wilton was a foundation member of the Oral History Association of Australia in 1978. She remains a member to this day and served for a number of years as the International Representative on the National Committee of the OHAA.

She has participated in all OHAA conferences since 1979 and has presented papers at many of them. Her preferred place of publication for her papers is the *OHAA Journal*. From 1982-86 with Louise Douglas she co-edited the *OHAA Journal* and more recently has served on the Editorial Committee to support the establishment of peer review as a beneficial and educational process. This has brought the *Journal* and thereby the Association to the notice of academic institutions both here in Australia and overseas.

She was the second, following Beth Robertson, to serve on the council of the International Oral History Association with which our Association is affiliated, and was its first Australian president in 2002/2004. She has attended international conferences regularly and was a participant in the reorganising of the international association. Janis was fundamental in the successful proposal of Sydney as the venue for the 2006 international conference. OHAA (NSW) was the host for the International Oral History Association conference held in Sydney in 2006 and Janis was a co-convenor with Rosemary Block and Paula Hamilton.

Janis teaches in the School of Humanities at the University of New England where

she has taught oral history courses across a number of awards for over twenty years. She always encourages her students to join the OHAA in their state. Many have joined the NSW Branch of the Association and come regularly to the seminars held at the State Library. She gives workshops on the practice and technique of oral history mainly in northern New South Wales and southern Queensland and again promotes OHAA membership for both states. She is an inspiring teacher in both academe and in the wider community and is a much sought-after public speaker.

She compiled *Oral History in Australia: a list*, 1994, which is the seminal guide to published oral history in Australia. This was published principally for the OHAA membership and has been long out of print. At present she is part of a negotiating team suggesting that the National Library of Australia might publish the second edition on-line.

She was a pioneer in oral history recording and her professionalism in oral history includes promoting best practice in interviewing and also promoting correct archival and storage practice. Her own recordings have been deposited in archival institutions. Janis is invariably available for consultation on OHAA matters and her suggestions and ideas are always pertinent. In sum, the record of her leadership and her service to the OHAA is outstanding.

## Digital Recording Equipment Available to OHAA, NSW, Members Only

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Two Edirol R-09HR Solid State Recorders and microphones are available for short term hire (five days) at a cost of \$20. A refundable deposit of \$100 is required. Borrowers need to provide their own flash cards. Contact: Rosie Block, C/- Oral History Program, State Library of New South Wales Sydney NSW 2000.

Tel. (02)9273.1697  
email: rblock@sl.nsw.gov.au.

Please note: Edirol R-09HR can take a flash card of up to 4 gigabytes. It is recommended, for quality purposes, to buy these from a reputable source

### **Workshops**

*If members are not familiar with this equipment please look out for our hands-on workshops with digital recording equipment. Feed back from the last workshop held on 20 June was very positive. We are very lucky that we have members with the expertise and the willingness to share their knowledge. See our web site for details of forthcoming events – [www.oahaansw.org.au](http://www.oahaansw.org.au)*

## Members' Projects

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*We hope members will tell us about the various projects they are undertaking. I am sure we are all interested to know what is happening in oral history. We hope some discussion and exchange of ideas may be generated. Ed*

### **When We Were Kids**

An oral history project facilitated by **John Hockney** for Penrith City Council.

The idea was to help build community harmony. It seemed that the community was sectarian. One group wouldn't use the community neighbourhood premises if another group were to be there at the same time. The first step in breaking down stereotypes is to sit down and have a conversation with someone and listen to their story. Narelle Smith, a social worker for that community was discussing the problem at home when her 6 year old son suggested, 'if you asked people what it was like when they were kids, they may find some base to agree on – and if primary school kids painted pictures of the stories, everyone might get together'. Simple!

Narelle discussed the idea with her peers and it was agreed that the project should go ahead. Penrith City Council funded the project, and I was invited as a storyteller to interview community members. The



project was discussed with leaders of the community and the consensus was positive. Everyone thought it a good idea. The project is about identifying, acknowledging and valuing the lived experience of every person.

Initially, I was to interview community members individually, but that was changed to inviting groups together. From my work as a storyteller and life story workshop facilitator I knew the value in ideas and memories groups can generate, however recording their input is often a nightmare. I had to set some strict rules that I would ask a question and have each of the group offer their input one by one. This way I could move the Edirolo Rog in front of that particular person. I had to make notes of where people were sitting and mark the sequence of remarks. Even then transcription could be difficult when voice recognition was overwhelmed by interruptive chatter or laughter.

The stories started to be revealed and it was wonderful what was shared. An aboriginal elder shared funny stories of the family of twelve kids all walking in a line after mum and dad. But the story of how she was taken and the deception of authorities saying she was going on a holiday were quite heartbreaking. She was put into state care from the age of 12 to 18 when, on her 18th birthday she was given \$5 and pushed out of the door into the world. The authorities stamped on her papers 'NO VISITORS' so she never saw her family for 7 years. By that time a brother

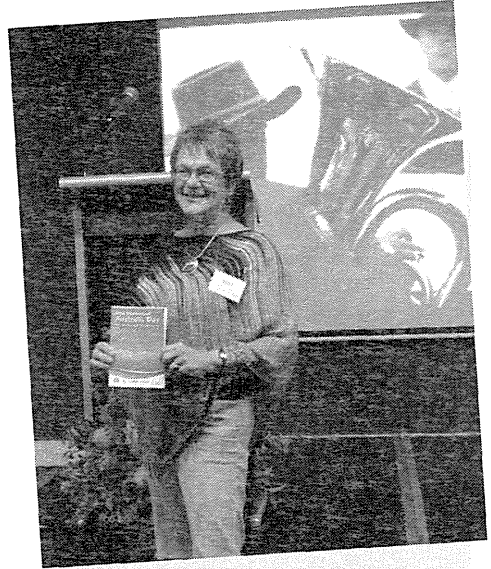
had died in one institution and her mother had remarried. Not easy stories for children to paint. This is where editing came in.

Other stories covered playing in the streets in Glebe – (when there were no trees). Being of a mixed race and what it was like growing up. Spraying the tile floor of a house with water, so the kids could slide across the lounge room floor - because it was hot. An elephant eating a school bag in Fairfield and the owner's homework being digested with it, an excuse his school master found hard to believe but thought the excuse the best he had heard in years. Story sharing was remarkably honest and open. Some grandparents we interviewed told of the early days of Penrith – before the highway and the building of Warragamba Dam. One lady often jumped in the sand buckets for a ride and jumped out again before the bucket travelled too high. This was an engineering feat, where buckets would carry sand from the Nepean river on a series of steel towers covering the 5 miles from Emu Plains to the dam. This could well be an oral history project of it's own.

It was decided that the children's pictures be put on public exhibition with a vignette of each story alongside each picture. Except for one time when I had a problem with the memory card, (which somehow was corrupted and I lost the recordings) – the project took 12 weeks with 2 or more workshops each week. I was transcribing each session after downloading from the

## Nuts & Bolts (cont...)

Ann Smith



Edirol Rog and typing into word format. It was at this time I edited each story.

On June 28th 2009 the project came to fruition with pictures Narelle had procured from Kingswood Public School being displayed on the walls of the Community Centre. Books of stories were left on tables for people to read, remember and laugh about. Because the stories were true, and had been openly shared the project has paved the way for dialogue between community leaders. If nothing else it showed that somebody cared.

*Note: John is working with Penrith City Council – community services on another project 'Celebration of Volunteers'. The 2 years and over 80 interviews will culminate in a book and an exhibition later this year.*

### **Magical History Tour Around the Land of Oz**

This month OHAA member **Anne Smith** is off on a road trip around Australia. Anne would like her Australian free wheeling adventure to become a magical history tour.

En-route Anne is planning to track down former Manly residents and send back their stories to Manly Library to expand the oral history section.

"I'll be looking for Manly people all over Australia. I've already tracked down one to Byron Bay and I'll be writing ahead to editors of local papers to find people. Anne has a master from UTS in local history, is a member of the Oral History Association of Australia and the Manly Warringah Pittwater Historical Association. Her passion for oral preservation of the past began when Seaford celebrated its



centenary in 2007. "We were looking to find centenarians at the time, although nothing came of it. Oral history is adjunct to mainstream history. It puts flesh on the bones – it's the nitty-gritty, finding interesting people who are not necessarily mainstream." Ann said that one local she has recently interviewed for Manly Library is Val Randell, who along with her husband Peter, ran Randell's Dance School at Balgowlah. Anne can be contacted through Vicky Smith at Manly Library on 9976.1720 or directly via email: chinestevo@yahoo.com.au.

**Bundanoon History Group  
Oral History Project  
Oral History Morning Teas – Bundanoon  
History Group Project, from Marianne Ward**

The Bundanoon History Group has been established for over 25 years and during this time a written and pictorial archive has been growing year by year. This is stored in the group's headquarters, The Old Goods Shed, right on Railway Avenue. Membership of the group has grown so much recently that the Shed can no longer hold the numbers, so we meet at The Bundanoon Club (previously the Bundanoon Bowling Club). As a recent part of collecting the history of Bundanoon (which was established in the 1860's as Jordan's Crossing) and the surrounding Southern Highlands villages, the group started an Oral History Project in 2005.

The first tapes were made by Marianne Ward, interviewing Mrs Lucy Rocca, a fifth generation Bundanoon resident who was passionately interested in local history. Only six months after these interviews, Lucy died – which showed us how important it is to collect these stories NOW.

Since then Marianne has interviewed many more families in the district, and the list grows ever longer. A recent Wingecarribee Council grant of monies to fund a digital recorder will speed up the process, as will more volunteers training under the State Library of NSW Oral History course run by Rosemary Block.

For the past three years, the Bundanoon History Group has selected excerpts from master tapes or CDs which are burnt onto a separate CD and played at an Oral History morning tea at The Bundanoon Club for all members of the group, new Bundanoon residents, and most important, the interviewees themselves.

Sharing their stories with old friends, newer members of the community, and potential new residents has proved to be extremely popular. There is always time for questions and another cup of tea at the end of the two hour session. So far, the Oral History morning tea has been held in winter or early spring, and this year it was part of Bundanoon's growing Winterfest program in July.

## Nuts & Bolts (cont...)



**The most recent Bundanoon History Group's 'Oral History' morning tea, where members and visitors heard some more excerpts from the growing archive of wonderful stories**

Visitors and new members of the community have commented most favourably on how these presentations have made them understand so much more about their new community, plus being a most attractive way of presenting the history of Bundanoon and the surrounding area.

The Oral History Project archive – which is still building – may one day have yet another role – a book, a series of radio programs, CDs to be played at seniors gatherings. Who knows...? But we do know how popular these Oral History morning teas in Bundanoon have become.

The Bundanoon History Group meets on the 1st Monday of the month at The Bundanoon Club in Erith Street, Bundanoon, at 10.00am and visitors are most welcome. The Archive is held in the Group's headquarters at The Old Goods Shed, Railway Avenue, Bundanoon and the Shed is open on market days, 1st and 3rd Sundays of each month, 10.00am to 3.00pm.

The Shed is also open by appointment. Please contact: Marianne Ward (Oral History) or Patricia Guy (President) [nedwin@bigpond.net.au](mailto:nedwin@bigpond.net.au)



## OHAA New South Wales Branch President's Report 2008/2009

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It's always a pleasure to start this report off with a tribute to my committee. Members of the committee are Sandra Blamey, Roslyn Burge, Michael Clarke, Joyce Cribb, Frank Heimans, Margaret Park who has just recently retired from the committee on account of relocating to the NSW south coast, Diana Ritch, Sue Rosen, Peter Rubinstein, Frances Rush and Berenice Evans our Treasurer. I have congratulated them in the past for being a marvellous 'think tank' with great ideas which they put into immediate action and this goes on even faster! They continue to be a welcoming and accessible group at all the seminars.

Under Sandra Blamey's expert eye and hands-on construction we have now a beautifully designed website for the NSW branch – [www.ohaansw.org.au](http://www.ohaansw.org.au) This was launched with much excitement at our AGM in August 2008.

It is a marvellous support for oral history in New South Wales and we are linked into the national website and figure now on Google! Sandra is a superb webmaster and the website is fully up to date with all our events as well as listing other relevant activities. Please visit us!

A sub-committee of the branch spent some months investigating the ever-recurring question of how to charge for oral history. After intensive discussion and research they produced 'Determining Fees for Oral History'. This includes all the criteria to be used in determining fees and it has been adopted by the OHAA National to assist professional interviewers in setting fees for projects. Naturally it is present on the NSW website and is linked to the national website. There are also numerous links on our website to oral history associations, both in Australia and overseas, as well as other historical associations, libraries, museums, archives and networks.

*Voiceprint*, our NSW newsletter, continues to appear regularly under the editorship of Joyce Cribb who is ably assisted by Roslyn Burge.

Alistair Thomson conducted our seminar on 1 November with a fascinating and insightful look at what constitutes memory and how memory works with particular reference to history and oral history. The afternoon session followed with the usual workshop on practice and technique of oral history in parallel with another digital hands-on workshop.

## Reports (cont...)

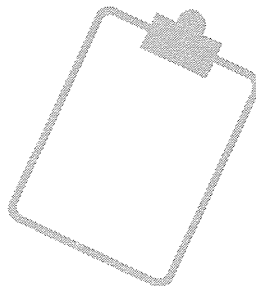
On 9 May Catherine Freyne, executive producer for ABC Radio National's Hindsight, spoke about her experiences in interviewing and editing for the program. This was preceded by Rosie's giving a quick history of the ABC's involvement in and promotion of oral history from the time of John Thompson in the 1950s and 1960s, flowering in the late 1970s with Tim Bowden and Hank Nelson's ground breaking 'Ta'im bilong Masta: the Australian involvement in Papua New Guinea' – and what happened next – right up to the present time.

This information was gathered in true oral history fashion by Rosie's conducting an interview with Jane Connors, General Manager, ABC Radio National who was involved with the Social History and Features Unit from 1989. The accuracy and flow of Jane's memory is truly astounding. I hope I have it all correctly, but no doubt after its publication in the next issue of *Voiceprint* there will be comments from other informed sources – just as there should be with any 'oral history'!

Saturday 20 June saw another group of eager neophytes exploring how to do digital recording. We are blessed in having members of the committee expert in digital recording, editing and logging on line. They are Frank Heimans, Peter Rubinstein, Sue Rosen – and they are ably assisted by OHAA members John Hockney and Ben Oakley. John has published a guide to recording with the Edirol R-09HR. It is the easiest to follow instruction manual ever invented – and in living colour! This particular seminar gave participants even more time for one-on-one consultation with our experts.

Our membership numbers remain pretty steady and we hope with our new program of promotion and networking, as well as our elegant and useful website, we will have new members interested in orally recording life in New South Wales – and enjoying contact with other like-minded people.

**Rosemary Block President, NSW Branch**





## Seminar: 9 May. *The Voice of Times Past: broadcasting memory on ABC Radio National.*

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This was an interesting day. Catherine Freyne, producer, ABC Social History and Features Unit told us about programming and the way the ABC collects its recordings. She was able to illustrate her talk from the ABC collection of recordings and left us all wanting to hear more of the various recordings she used. The ABC has a rich collection of tapes from the past, voices of ordinary people as well as those who spoke on historic occasions. Before Catherine

spoke Rosie Block talked about the history of the ABC and the connection to oral history within the ABC

*Thank you to Catherine and Rosie for a very interesting morning. Rosie has very kindly supplied Voiceprint with a copy of this history. I am sure members present enjoyed the morning and thank you to Rosie for the transcript so we can all learn more of the ABC and oral history connections. Ed*



## A Rapid History of Oral History at the ABC by Rosemary Block

Curator, Oral History, State Library of New South Wales and President of OHAA (NSW)

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This is the talk I gave prior to that given by Catherine Freyne of ABC Radio National. It was to serve as an introduction the history of the ABC in respect of its support of oral history. Much of my information was the result of an interview which I held with Jane Connors, manager of Radio National. I have known Jane for many years from the time that she was a student. She was initially famous for having done the history of the first visit of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh in 1954 when she went up and down Australia finding out how people responded to the Royal Visit and how the Queen was received and perceived.

Jane has been at Radio National for a while now and I will slot her into the history in due course. We sat and had a marvellous session recorded only by my fast-moving pen (thus not a true oral history session of course – and was also conducted in a very noisy café!). Jane filled me in on the history of Radio National including its recognition of oral history some of which I knew, but of which she has first hand experience from the time that she joined the station in 1989.

I must say at this point that as in all matters of history it is essential to question all the records. I imagine that there will

be much questioning of this possibly too hasty an 'overview'. I hasten also to add that the inaccuracies, misunderstandings and lacunae are entirely my fault. I apologise in advance! I also know that Joyce Cribb, our editor, would be delighted to receive your corrections to the record, as would I.

In the 1950s and 60s the ABC's John Thompson saw the potential of oral history in radio programs called History Biography. The Australian Broadcasting Commission Special Features Department had less than adequate funding which Catherine will not find amazing. Everybody knows that the ABC struggles for funds and they came to rely on interviewing as a cheap way of filling air time. It was an odd interpretation of oral history because the radio focused on interviewing people who had known famous people who were then dead.

It was later that this evolved into interviewing prominent people in their life time which is of course very much how oral history first began in Australia. However at this time the programs revolved around a well known person by inviting the memories of people who had known them. The quotation used was that 'one personality was revealed in the mirrors of other personalities, all differently angled and all differently coloured.'



The programs were popular and John Thompson published two books based on these programs. One is called *On the Lips of Living Men*, these words completing Samuel Butler's line '... where dead men meet.'

His first volume included the transcripts of interviews about Nellie Melba, Sir Douglas Mawson which is still played today I understand from Jane, as is also that of Billy Hughes and Sir John Monash. The first excerpt I have chosen from *On the Lips of Living Men* is about Nellie Melba. Peter Dawson, the singer, says this about the diva whom he knew quite well. 'I remember,' he says, 'how she liked to organise things and take charge. Many years ago I was engaged to perform at a charity concert in England. Well I went along to sing and I sang a set of Parry songs, Nellie was sitting at the front of the hall. There were all the elite sitting in the front with Nellie as big as you like. I was about to start and she said, "Peter, wait a minute, don't start yet, no." So I stopped and I looked. And she said, "there's no light on you, where are the technicians? Where are they? Where are the electricians, bring the electricians come on," and I was still standing there and thought Good God what is this. Nellie began stamping around and said "That board – bring that board from over there and do this and do the other and take that away there you want some light on this. You can't see Peter Dawson, he might be a trap door spider." I was enjoying all this and then she said, "Now that one over there, now that's right.

Just a minute and she got up from her seat and she walked back three or four rows in the aisle just like Hitler and then she said "Yes, that's better. All right, Peter", and she came back and sat down. So I said "Thank you very much Madam Nellie. Can I start now? She said "Yes go on, it's all yours". So I sang those Parry songs.'

The other is about Billy Hughes and it is a comment by J.C. Lang who was the Premier of New South Wales. Mr Lang says, 'Of course Hughes became a member of New South Wales but he didn't just walk into Parliament or into the political movement just to get into Parliament. He went around organising and the dogs were set on him. He would go around the suburbs where the doors were slammed in his face. He was called a wrecker. He knew what it was to be without a meal, he knew abject poverty; he was reviled. All the pioneers in the early days went through the same thing and in those early days at a public meeting it was nothing for the chairs or the forms to be pulled aside and be broken to pieces and thrown at one another throughout the hall. A man had to have a fair deal of courage to stand up to it.'

The second book which he called *Five to Remember*, John Thompson included tributes to Ben Chifley and Alf Conlan for whom the Mitchell Librarian, Ida Leeson worked during the war in the School of Pacific Administration. This next quotation concerns Ben Chifley. I have recently been up to Bathurst and gazed at his very modest little home. He was a most

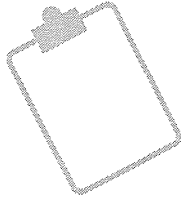
## Reports (cont...)

amazing man. This is an excerpt from a contribution from his nephew Joe Chifley. 'Even when he was Prime Minister Ben Chifley used to come to Bathurst every second weekend. Ray Tracy used to drive him down in a Commonwealth car. When he got here he used to put Tracy out to grass and then he used to drive himself around in his own car to see his friends in the electorate. Early on Monday morning they'd start back for Canberra. And they were on their way one Monday when they got a puncture. They were about three miles out of a little township. Ray pulled up at the side of the road and they both sat there for a minute or two. Uncle Ben told me "I didn't make a move and Ray didn't make a move either." However, eventually Ben said "How about putting the spare tire on Ray?" Ray sort of looked at him and said "I didn't bring a spare" and this is the forties. Why would you go anywhere without a spare in those days and on those roads? Ben puffed at his pipe for a while and then he said "Well, what are we going to do?" and Ray said, "I don't know". Ben said "Well we have got to do something". Ray said, "I tell you what, I'll toss you to see who walks into the township and sends out a mechanic".

Well it was Uncle Ben's turn to look pretty hard at Ray but he said "Right-o, if you want it that way I'll toss you." So they tossed a coin and Ben lost. He got out and started walking and Ray stayed with the car, but when Ben got to the township he thought

he'd have some breakfast so he went to a place he knew and he had a good meal. The proprietor said "Where's your chauffeur Mr. Chifley?" Ben explained the position and then he said to the proprietor, "He'll be in later and he'll want breakfast too. Tell him you've only got Vita Brits. No tea, give him dry Vita Brits for his breakfast. And that's what he did. Ben had quite a chuckle over that.'

And then lastly a quote about Sir Douglas Mawson. As you know he went with Shackleton to the Antarctic, and this is an interview the ABC did with A.L. Kennedy who was a magnetician on Mawson's expedition. He said, 'Mawson had a hand in everything. He had organised the whole thing on the basis of what he had learned from being with Shackleton. He had such a broad outlook that he didn't make any errors at all. We had everything we needed, all the equipment we needed. The only thing we were short of was a sewing machine because it got landed at the wrong place, not Mawson's hut. We had to have a sewing machine in order to make food bags and other essential sort of things like that. When we went on sledding journeys our food was weighed out into bags, 30 ounces a day for each man. A week's supply was put in a calico bag and each man was cook for a week. He'd take a week's supply and the idea was to skimp things a bit without the fellows noticing and then give them a bit of a beano on the last day of the week. If you did that you were a good fellow.'



There is one thing I must mention further in Kennedy's account. He continues, 'Quite a lot of people gave food and various materials to help Mawson's expedition. In those days you had to beg for your supplies and Mawson had got pemmican donated by Bovril, biscuits by somebody else, chocolate, tea and so on partly for the sake of advertisement. But when it came to tobacco, well, Mawson wasn't a smoker. WD & HO. Wills gave the tobacco but it was mostly fine navy cut, good for cigarettes but too light for a pipe. Mawson realised this and he got from the ship a small case of real ship's tobacco, strong stuff, and by mixing the two they were able to make a good pipe tobacco. This was the only flaw I ever knew of in Mawson's organisation of food and supplies.'

So that gives you some idea of the interest that that program engendered – people talking about people, but giving a fair few insights into themselves as well.

John Thompson died in 1968, but quite separately in Hobart in Tasmania a young man called Tim Bowden was busy starting as a journalist for the Hobart Mercury and for a change he was given an assignment, lent a very old fashioned battery operated clockwork recorder and told to go and interview a wool buyer at a local auction. And so he did. He took his wind-up tape recorder and he interviewed a major wool buyer against a background of terrific noise, auction happenings, people shouting,

stamping, quarrelling, buying and the like. As many of you know I always warn putative oral historians that oral history is addictive and after that Tim was hooked on the whole idea of sound as opposed to print journalism.

He then came to Sydney in the early 1960s and worked for the ABC as a foreign correspondent mainly in south east Asia. Meanwhile at the BBC in England Daniel Snowman was developing his huge program called 'The Long March of Everyman' which went to air in 1971. It was an attempt to present the history of the British Isles in voice because this was for radio and to that end he journeyed up and down the countryside checking on and recording people's accents which he used to illustrate his radio program. In the beginning there was nothing relevant to oral history, but as he got nearer to 1971 he did in fact do some interviews with people living then.

Michael Mason was one of his producers at the time and he was inspired to do that famous program, 'Plain Tales from the Raj' not long afterwards. This was played in Australia in the late 1970s. Tim Bowden by 1979 was working for the Radio Drama and Features Department with some recorded interviews and music and he received a letter from a listener in 1979. This suggested that the ABC might consider a series on Papua New Guinea similar to Michael Mason's 'Plain Tales from the Raj'. This struck the producers of the day with great force and Tim says that he

## Reports (cont...)

wishes that he could still find the letter, 'It's gone somewhere into the archives I suppose or it may have been destroyed.'

So, it was decided that in collaboration with Hank Nelson, an historian and lecturer at the Australian National University, and Daniel Connell who was with the ABC, that he would interview people in Papua New Guinea. And that was the beginning of the famous pioneering series 'Ta'im Bilong Master.' Oral history had arrived at the ABC. In documenting Australia's involvement in Papua New Guinea, Tim was to interview planters, miners, Australian women and children, entrepreneurs, patrol officers and many others. He said to the producer, 'I think it will probably take a year to collect the material,' and the producer said, 'No it will take longer.' It took nearly four years.

Now Catherine will know that something like that would be impossible in today's Radio National. If you are working for the radio you just don't get four years to prepare the program. 'Ta'im' was 350 hours long and was broadcast in 1981.

The Oral History Association of Australia was formed in 1978 in the teeth of a great deal of criticism from academe. The professors of history said 'rubbish' and 'light recollection of pleasant events', they said and we don't like it, and there are still people in academe, although very few now, who don't 'trust' oral history. However, that year, 1978, was towards the end of that marvellous decade when so much intellectual life, so much activism flourished in Australia. Labour history

became of great interest, the history of the Great Depression, migrant history, all were subjects of serious study in those years. There were other endeavours including the Humanistic Society, Abortion Law Reform was actively proposed, the Feminist Movement began – all flourished in that decade. Oral history has never looked back of course.

In 1983 Hank Nelson proposed another project. Since in 1985 it would be 40 years since World War II prisoners had been released he suggested that Tim and he should do an oral history mainly with former prisoners of the Japanese in South East Asia. They would interview mostly men, but some women, almost all nurses who had been prisoners of war. The series was called 'Prisoners of War, Australians under Nippon'. It took two years to make and it was also very successful and excerpts are still played today. In 1985 Tim established the Social History Unit having gone to the Education Unit for support and in the Education Unit at that time was Bill Bunbury, Jenny Palmer, and the same Daniel Connell. In 1987 they established 'Talking History'. Stephen Rapley who was a member of staff at that time used to go to history and oral history conferences. I first met him in Brisbane in 1991.

There, as in other conferences he interviewed the history makers and the history recorders. At the conference Stephen was always seen crouched in a



corner with his recorder, talking to one of either the speakers or one of the organisers of the conference. He was particularly interested in the latest research in history and developments in the history world. The ABC's 'Talking History' was a fifteen minute showcase for good interviews largely based on these interviews. 'Word of Mouth' was for a single voice, the interview rigidly plain, the interviewer never heard – until it was cut in 1992 by Norman Swan.

In 1989 Jane Connors, now, as mentioned earlier, the manager of ABC Radio National had a student placement at the radio. In 1990 she was formally employed, working with Stephen Rapley. Ros Bowden, successor to Tim, was the executive producer, She loved the practical details of everyday life, also Aboriginal life, and she and Tim did a huge amount of travelling around this country, gathering recordings from various people, Tim for his purposes, Ros for hers. The unique thing about Ros was that she saved her tapes. They are all on reel to reel and she saved them. Most radio people re-used the tapes as a cost-saving imperative. However, Ros preserved hers and presented her collection to the Mitchell Library. There are hundreds of reels of her interviews during her travels around Australia. She interviewed all sorts of people from miners and camel drivers to bush people in remote areas - anybody and everybody and all had a story to tell. It is a truly significant archive and adds great value to the oral history collection here in the Library.

Through the late 1980s the Social History Unit had six producers as well as research and sound support. Their programs were 'Talking History', 'Hindsight', and 'Word of Mouth', later 'Verbatim'. However in the early 90s the Unit was diminished, but not abolished. 'Word of Mouth' had gone in 1992. 'Talking History' – its title changed to 'That's History' (Jane says it was a remarkably unmemorable title) was the only program left. Tim retired in 1993 because he wanted to write books. Jane Connors became producer and Ros continued as administrator. Knowing in 1992 that the Unit was under threat she held a think tank on future directions and the Unit was saved. By 1995 after Ros' retirement Jane Connors, Michelle Rayner, who had joined in 1993, and Bill Bunbury, one of the Unit founders as mentioned earlier, and located in Perth, were now in charge. Stephen Rapley had already gone to new media.

Michelle Rayner had a very different style. To this day - and since 2002 she has been the executive producer - she prefers the dramatic. As opposed to Ros whose programs were unadorned, she liked textured presentations with music and layered noise and theatrical effect. Together they reinvented 'Verbatim'. They had big ideas and Jane herself, interested in history, liked the broader look at Australian history. She completed a program on the history of Australia's perception of the AIDS Crisis for

## Reports (cont...)

instance, which is a very valuable document today. Both Jane and Michelle pushed for Hindsight to be re-established and they wanted it re-established under that name.

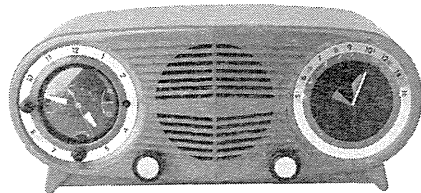
In 1998 Radio National abolished The Women's Unit and two and a half staff came to the Social History Unit. 'Street Stories' was more about ordinary people rather than the famous and was not historical. 'Verbatim' was very much established. It's a 24 minute program now. Usually there is one speaker or a couple with a little bit of illustration using music, newspaper quotes and the like. Bill Bunbury recording mainly in Perth on many topics was particularly interested in constitutional issues so that made a nice mix. He talked to eminent historians including Geoffrey Bolton, Stuart McIntyre, also Paul Keating, on his (Paul Keating's) interpretation of history of which he is a keen student. He also spoke to migrant people, to historians of the migrant experience and also investigated history-writing for children. Bill has recently retired, but is still very much engaged in oral history activities.

Renamed the Social History and Features Unit it continued to the beginning of this year, 2009. In the light of some on-line requirements the Unit was closed and the program makers now work across various programs, some of which are listed below.

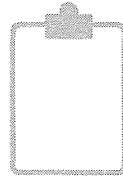
Michelle Rayner has been the executive producer since 2002 and it was a big

challenge for her, working with non-historians. But as Jane says, what they always did at Radio National, they 'employed boffins (often non-historians) and then retro-fitted them with radio skills.' However, Catherine Freyne who will speak to us today is an historian 'boffin' and gained her radio skills at the ABC with Margaret Throsby on Classic FM.

'Street Stories' morphed into '360' in a separate unit and is in a feature form rather than historical. So, what are still extant on ABC Radio National? – Hindsight, which is on Sunday at two o'clock and repeated on Thursday at one. Verbatim is on Monday at five o'clock and '360' which incorporates 'Street Stories', 'Radio Eye' and 'Earshot' is on Saturday at two o'clock and repeated on Wednesday at one o'clock. History, especially oral history, is alive and well at the ABC. Michelle and her staff are valued supporters of the Oral History Association of Australia. They always participate in oral history conferences and were much valued sponsors of Sydney's International Oral History Conference in 1996.







## Seminar 25 July: Oral History – *Family and Photographs*

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Three of our members, George Imashev, Sue McClean and Frances Rush talked about recent and an ongoing project. George spoke of his family history, Sue about Burdekin House and Frances is looking at the life of Bea Miles. They all had photographs to add not only interest but information to the historical subjects.

George told us about researching his family history, especially that of his mother; Anna Jochman and her journey from Bohemia to Batemans Bay. George's mother never learnt to speak English well, though she was fluent in several European languages, so George used his limited German to interview her. George spoke of the difficulty of firstly interviewing your own family member and then communication was not easy because of the language barrier. His mother had been an actress when she was young and as shown by her photo, a very beautiful young woman. The family came to Australia in 1950. George played several excerpts from the recordings he had made – we needed no translation to hear the drama and emotion in the recordings. It was a perfect example of how much is gained from listening to an original tape and not just reading transcript.

Sue McClean had researched the history of Burdekin House, a very substantial residence in Macquarie Street, Sydney. The

house had been a family residence, and the stylish venue for Sydney social gatherings. Later as the city grew around it and after WWI it was used for various purposes – at one point a number of artists had studios and accommodation in the building. Sue showed us a number of photos which confirmed what a well designed house it was. It seems that this fine building was in the depression years not valued for the fine building it was and was sold for the land. The house was bought by the Presbyterian church and was demolished in 1933. St Stephens church was then built on the site.

Frances Rush has become interested in the life history of Bea Miles. Bea was an interesting and rebellious character who was well known in Sydney. She lived from 1902 until 1973.

Frances has reviewed the literature on Bea and has talked with people who had first hand experiences of her activities. She was indeed a larger than life character and we can look forward to the biography which Frances hopes to write. In the discussion that followed, a number of members had interesting stories to relate about this interesting character.

Overall a very enjoyable morning – thank you to our members who shared their work.

**Joyce Cribb**

## Field Trip – 8 August 2009 Visiting The Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection of the Historic Houses Trust; At The Mint

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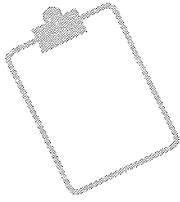
It was one of those balmy Sydney Saturdays when members gathered at The Mint (headquarters of the Historic Houses Trust in Macquarie Street) on 8 August, keen to learn about the Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection. Megan Martin, Head of the Collection, spoke about the work of the Trust, the history of the Mint and the way the Collection is utilised. The Collection supports the interpretation and management of the Trust's properties, provides a specialist research resource for scholars and professionals working in heritage and conservation and is a remarkable resource for the general public.

We spent time in the open space of the Central Courtyard behind the Mint while Megan explained the history of the collection of buildings that make up the Mint and its diverse prior occupants. Untrammelled by decoration (other than a solitary tree and a casual arrangement of old-fashioned cloth deck-chairs on the lawn) the clean lines of the courtyard, the scale of the space and its enclosure by mellowing sandstone boundaries provided a calm buffer from Macquarie Street.

Indeed, so inviting is this space that an anonymous city worker comes regularly at lunchtime to sit and read.

When the Trust had the opportunity to move from its cramped offices in Lyndhurst in Glebe to the Mint in 2001 an architectural upheaval and adaptation of buildings was required, as was great care to appropriately augment the 1850s Coining Factory for contemporary use. The Trust's needs included conference facilities, accommodation for Trust staff (previously scattered in different locations) and an appropriate space for the Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection.

One of the guests at the official opening of the Mint in November 2004 was a very elderly man in his 90s. Though his grandfather was long dead, as the ninth child of a ninth child this man's own personal history reached back to 1854 when his grandfather came to Sydney as part of the contingent of Royal Engineers which built the Mint. Megan recalled, *He remembered his father's stories of his father and The Mint, and was bowled over by being in the actual building, and by being able to see enough original fabric to allow him to imagine his grandfather here.*



Megan pointed out some of the architectural features and the pleasures of working in a building so beautifully adapted – exposed walls and beams, traces of paintwork – and the peculiarities of working around the substantial walk-in safe.

The Trust's headquarters and the Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection are now part of a wonderful resource at the city's centre. The Collection is located on the ground and first floors of the Coining Factory buildings and includes an eclectic range of materials such as pattern books, wallpapers, trade catalogues, passementerie, personal papers, publications, hardware and fittings, as well as pictures and library catalogue and a colonial plants database. Part of the collection of garden ornaments (an ornate seat, a replica Sydney Harbour Bridge and a gathering of gnomes) is displayed in the glassed display area as you enter the building.

While the Trust was still headquartered at *Lyndhurst*, one of the Trustees well known to OHAA members, Janis Wilton, was keen to review the accumulation of tapes and paperwork in the Trust's oral history collection: Siobhan McHugh undertook this project and prepared a report to guide the Trustees on its potential uses.

Siobhan was engaged by the Trust to interview Harry Seidler, particularly his recollections about his design of his parents' home, the Seidler House, which is one of the Trust's properties. With

any oral history interview there can be glitches in the process and Siobhan shared her experiences of technical difficulties encountered at the OHAA seminar in May 2004. This interview highlights the remarkable resource that this Collection provides, not only for the Trust in its interpretation of Seidler House and the architect's recollections of the changing face of Sydney's architecture; but also for the public and as a resource for OHAA members who might wish to learn how other members practice interviewing. It is impossible to imagine the range of uses such a recording will bring to the future.

Given the Collection's focus is to support the interpretation of the Trust properties, oral history has also been utilised in understanding how spaces within its buildings have been used. Megan highlighted recent work at Susannah Place where 'new' spaces have become available and the task of interpreting their use and decoration during the 1940s has begun.

The Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection is open Monday to Friday. It was only on this special occasion that the Trust allowed members of the OHAA to visit on a Saturday. We are grateful to Megan Martin who very generously came to work on her weekend solely to show us some of the treasures and resources of the Collection. She set out a wonderful morning tea of scones and impossibly thick cream served in pottery and bowls brought in from home, which induced us all to linger round

## Reports (cont...)

the large central table as though the space was our own!

For further information about the history of The Mint, see the Historic Houses Trust website:

[www.hht.net.au/museums/the\\_mint](http://www.hht.net.au/museums/the_mint)

The Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection is at:

[www.hht.net.au/research/library](http://www.hht.net.au/research/library)  
and the catalogue can be searched online:  
[//library.hht.net.au](http://library.hht.net.au)

**Roslyn Burge**

## *The Talk about Town, urban lives and oral sources in 20th century Australia.* 27-28 September 2009

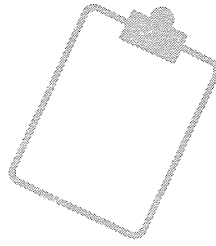
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Held at the State Library of Victoria's Conference Centre in Melbourne the conference presented a cohesive view of some of the aspects heralded in its title.

Of course the decision to invite Professor Alessandro Portelli who teaches American Literature at Sapienza University in Rome, to give the keynote address – and in addition an interview on the evening preceding the conference – was a coup. The interview was conducted by Alistair Thomson and Paula Hamilton and 'Sandro' gave a frank and delightful review of his life and how he had come to be interested in oral history, which was initially through an abiding interest in music. Those of our members who met him at the International Oral History Conference in Sydney in 2006 will attest to his being both a friendly man and a stimulating companion and speaker. His clarity of expression and thought as he

took us back through his life brought many of the issues of oral history to the fore. His latest book is on the Nazi massacre in Rome where as is his wont he uncovered the truth underlying the myths. To audience acclaim he stated unequivocally that an historian naturally has to research all the sources – but where the history is within living memory then oral history is mandatory. It was worth going to the conference to be able to quote that in the future and from such a source!

In his keynote address he discussed his views on the ThyssenKrupp workers and globalisation. The global aspect was invoked because it was announced in 2004 that the electrical steel plant at Terni in Turin run by ThyssenKrupp, a multinational German company, would close. This



occurred, not because of any local decision, but a global one. As it transpired the company meant to open another factory in Mumbai, India – which in fact they have.

Picketing by the workers in Terni was followed by a strike and general protest and unrest as well as a fear of full closure of all the plants. Consequently there followed a year devoted to public relations and ‘fence mending’ and no jobs were lost. At the end of that time the electrical steel plant then closed. To add to the distress of the workers there was a fire because of deteriorating conditions and seven workers died.

The strike was unlike that of 1953 at another steel factory in Terni already documented by Portelli in a groundbreaking work about the death of Luigi Trastulli, because that was a protest against local powers. The 2004 event in Terni was a struggle – which failed – against global powers. In his documenting this Portelli examined human paradox, misunderstanding, fear, pride and loyalty. He also mused on Wordsworth’s idea of the ‘romantic sublime’, the beauty and the terror of, in this case, the immensity of the steelworks, rather than nature, and the perception of this ‘sublime’ by the ‘common man’. He was as ever an inspiring speaker and guide.

The sessions which followed were well planned and very interesting, each one dedicated to exploring different aspects of the city in memory and memorialisation. They included ‘Senses of the City’ where Paula Hamilton explored her present

interest in the senses in relation to memory. Margo Beasley, who will be addressing the November seminar, took us through some of Richard Raxworthy’s interviews in central Sydney while Lisa Murray examined Redfern, Alexandria and Waterloo. Gwenda Davey, June Factor and Kate Darian-Smith explored the lore/law of the playground where just the size and management of the project are amazing, let alone the volume of the material emerging.

The second keynote speaker was Janet McCalman, professor in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at Melbourne University who – in the spirit of Portelli’s interview – reflected on 25 years in urban history which preceded her present occupation, in a very frank, personal and engaging fashion.

I was a presenter in one of three workshops and very pleased that the organisers gave this time to the practicalities of conducting oral histories. At the conference I was accompanied by two good companions, Janice Howie and Rachel Blackbourn who are sharing my position at the Library at the moment. Both are engaged in learning all they can about oral history and it is a pleasure to be their mentor. They went to others of the parallel sessions so we could cover the whole conference. I hope they may write a report if not for this issue of Voiceprint, then the next.

**Rosie Block**

## Remembering Rock Valley: oral history of Eddie Green *by Dr Margaret Park*

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*The main part of this article was published in Heritage in Trust: Journal of the National Trust of Australia (ACT), Autumn 2009, pp9-11. (Voiceprint is grateful for permission to republish granted by the journal and our member Margaret Park)*

### **Background to the Interview Process**

The oral history with Eddie Green was a grant funded project made available by the ACT Government under its Heritage Grants Program. The ACT National Trust received this grant and contracted me to conduct interviews with Eddie Green at the historic Rock Valley Homestead with in the grounds of the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, ACT and also at his home in Batlow, NSW. The result was three recorded interviews of 3 hours 56 minutes in total. The first and second interviews were conducted at the Rock Valley Homestead on Thursday 25 September 2008. I conducted the first interview as a guided tour of the site – the homestead and its surrounding outbuildings, gardens and orchards. Eddie Green led us around the site to enable James Warden and his students at the University of Canberra to gather important land-use information to guide their project, restoring and landscaping the gardens after the 2003 bushfire. The Homestead, its construction and features was the focus of the second interview, which I conducted with the assistance of Dr Peter Dowling, Heritage Officer of the ACT National Trust. The life and times of Eddie Green, his

family and other Tidbinbilla residents was recorded in the third interview conducted at Eddie's home in Batlow, New South Wales on Thursday 16 October 2008.

Eddie Green's knowledge of the Rock Valley Homestead site, his former home is of immense value to the ACT's history and heritage. The ongoing restoration of the Rock Valley Homestead, after the 2003 bushfire, has been made possible with the assistance of Eddie Green and his family and friends within the Tidbinbilla Pioneers Association (TPA). Their interest in the European history of the Tidbinbilla/Tharwa area has led not only to the formation of the TPA, but also to an archive of rich documentary and pictorial information which provides a detailed and memorable view of this region's past and its pioneering spirit. Eddie's words, thoughts, recollections and stories demonstrate a vibrant history. This is a history which can be shared and experienced today by visiting the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and viewing it for its landscape, its past Aboriginal and European land-use, as well as its natural beauty and native flora and fauna. Listening



to Eddie's words helps us to gain an understanding of the Australian Capital's Territory's story as told by a descendant of one of its settler families.

### **Difficulties Encountered with the On-Site Recordings**

The interview was recorded on a Sony DAT professional portable digital recorder and transferred to CDs. The sound quality of the recordings conducted at the Rock Valley Homestead varies greatly. The day was very windy, quite gusty in parts. As the interview was conducted outdoors, the interference is intermittent and therefore some sections are not very clear. However, the verbatim transcription includes all which could be deciphered from the voices clouded by the wind. As many people were present (11, including Eddie, myself, Peter Dowling, James Warden and several of his University of cultural landscape students) and participating in the questioning, overlapping voices or words not spoken directly into the microphone also add to the lack of clarity from time to time.

As Eddie was holding the microphone and doing most of the talking during the first interview, and held the microphone too close or too far way at times, the sound quality differs from section to section. However, the outdoor segment invokes the sounds of its bushland setting, including lovely bird songs, and presents a perfect backdrop to the themes of the interview. Overall, the interview's content outweighs the sound problems encountered.

The second interview conducted within the Homestead is much clearer, although it too has some intermittent sound interference due to the same reasons as outlined above. The third interview, which was conducted with Eddie at his Batlow home, resulted in a good sound as it was held indoors. Several pauses equate to potential sound disruptions which did not affect the quality of the interview (included Eddie attempting to shoo a fly and a cat fight immediately outside the kitchen where the interview was taking place!)

### **Eddie's Rock Valley**

*Rock Valley Homestead was always the entertainment centre... it was the meeting place of all the relatives because of being the ancestral home ... we were related to nearly everybody – so everybody came back here.*

As we approach the centenary of Canberra – a celebration of a century of life in the Australian Capital Territory – we are reminded how important it is to recognise not only our achievements as the nation's capital, but also to acknowledge our social and cultural heritage. We can best understand the patterns of development and the layering of our history by appreciating the commitment and contributions of the people who settled here. The ACT National Trust has pursued this complex task in many ways for many years. One way is to record the stories of those who have descended from Canberra's pioneering families and at the same time preserve the collective memory of the ACT.

## Articles (cont...)

In 2008, via an ACT Heritage Unit grant, Eddie Green was interviewed as part of this program.

Eddie's story provides us with an image of a young ACT rising out of the Limestone Plains of New South Wales. His knowledge of his family's migration story, adventures and journeys on the way to the Tidbinbilla region and involvement in the growth of the district was recorded in two separate interviews.

A prominent place in the nature reserve, *Rock Valley* offers visitors another layer of its history – that of its European settlement and transition from a bush to a rural landscape before its return to bushland. Utilising the recordings of Eddie Green, students from the University of Canberra will produce a landscape plan for the Homestead's garden. Eddie's knowledge of the garden, assisted by a collection of photographs carefully preserved by the TPA, was recorded step by step, plot by plot, plant by plant. His words bring the former rose garden, shaster daisies, vegetable plots and orchards back to life.

*On this side of the pathway opposite the triangle garden was a bed of shaster daisies. They [were] waist high... There are two Czechoslovakian eucalyptus cutters standing in front. It was on Christmas Day... You can see the big trees down behind. It was right along this path. [The eastern side of the house]. It was only a narrow garden, just enough for the daisies, nothing else.*

Although Eddie arouses our interest in the height of the shaster daisies, his fleeting

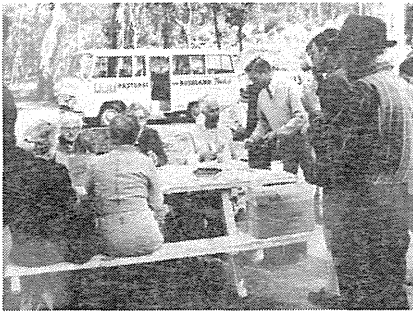
mention of the eucalyptus cutters presents an air of intrigue. Why were these men photographed in the daisy garden of the Homestead? Who were they and what were they doing in the Tidbinbilla area? Why were they 'cutting' the eucalyptus tree? Eddie recounts that they were from Czechoslovakia –

*That part which is now Slovakia is where they came from. There was Martin Teckle. He was the oldest and he was the father-in-law of Jan Jandora Lucek, who was the first naturalised Australian, and Steve Lajcin, who went back to Czechoslovakia, after the war, which everybody thought 'going back to a Communist country might be the last we'll ever see of him'. Then he came back to Tidbinbilla and went on eucalyptus cutting and then eventually he went back to Czechoslovakia. ... Martin Tekle also went home to Czechoslovakia, but Jan Jandora stayed in Australia and he worked at the glassworks area in Sydney for years and years. ... I don't know whether they went to Melbourne or Sydney. I think Melbourne because that's where the oil used to go to. All the eucalyptus oil was processed and sent on from Melbourne. They were sent to Queanbeyan to W. C. Cranswick who used to be some sort of real estate agent. ... He took them out to Tidbinbilla. That's how they came here... I think they knew that [eucalyptus oil] was a good market, which Australians didn't – they were too busy farming sheep – and these eucalyptus cutters in the Tidbinbilla Valley, not that the locals knew, were actually making much*





**Top: ACT Pastoral & Bushland tour bus  
Bottom: Eddie Green with the tour group at tea time**



*more money than what people were with probably 1,000 sheep or something.*

Edward George Green (Eddie) was born at the Allawah Private Hospital, Queanbeyan, New South Wales, on 16 April 1933. George Thomas Green from Rock Valley and Mary Elma Woods from Paddys River were Eddie's parents; he had one older brother, Keith and a sister, Dulcie May who sadly died only hours after her birth. George Green, Eddie's grandfather, along with George Hatcliff migrated from England to Queensland before ending up in the Tiddinbilla Valley. Having learnt the art of pise building, Green and Hatcliff constructed the earliest building on the site in this method. They proceeded to build other pise homes and structures throughout the area and became well-known for their craft and ability.

*Outside the fence about where the car park starts there was a pise building which was an old hay loft on the top and it was a machinery shed for buggies and horse drays and things on the bottom. The top part had a floor in, and that was mainly put there to store hay and fodder and things like that, but later on it became just a storage shed. Later, on the left-hand-side of that, about where the road comes down more, or just this side, there was a double carport put alongside as well. ... George Green and George Hatcliff built this. That was one of the first things the nature reserve bulldozed down when they came, unfortunately. It was part of the heritage. It should have been left there ... It was in the late 60s. ... It was built around about 1900... they were great builders of pise in this area.*

During Eddie's school years he helped his parents at home and on the property, but he also attended the local 'Gibraltar School' until it closed in 1942. For a short time during the Second World War, he went to Hall School finishing his schooling at the Tharwa School. Most of Eddie's school time memories focused on the amount of time it took to get to and from the school as the only method available was either on foot or at times by bicycle. Pumping out air raid shelters at Hall is but one memory Eddie easily recalled when discussing his time at school, walking long distances was another.

*I do remember going to school because we used to have to walk from Rock Valley to the Gibraltar school, which was down about a kilometre east of the present-day visitors'*

## Articles (cont...)

centre. ... It was three miles. And of course I had to walk with my older brother, who was five years older, and he took bigger steps. So I used to be dragging along behind. And for some reason, instead of walking down the road, he always thought it was shorter to take a short cut over the hill, which I'm sure was longer by the time you climbed up over and down and up again. Then the school teacher, Norman Cornwall, would give us a lift off to Tidbinbilla turn-off in the afternoon, which cut off a little over a mile. So it wasn't quite as far to come home in the afternoon. But in the winter-time it used to be so cold coming back in the snow and the sleet, and the winters were so cold then that the little pools and things along the way used to freeze. When we came home from school at half-past-three or 4 o'clock in the afternoon, quite often we could still skate on the pools with our boots. They were still frozen.

I went to Gibraltar until it closed in February 1942. The teacher just announced, after we all assembled and went inside that the school was closed and we could all go home. Well, we all cheered and laughed and thought it was great. We were mystified why our parents didn't think likewise.

After that I went to Hall and boarded with Mum's sister, Beryl Fisher and Uncle Pat for the rest of that year. That's where I knew something about the war because we had to dig air-raid shelters at school because Canberra was so small that they thought the Japanese might mistake Hall for Canberra as they came here. We enjoyed

Monday morning, us kids, because we had to pump the air-raid shelters out. There were no lessons.

After completing his schooling, Eddie continued to work at the Homestead. Following the death of his parents in 1957, Eddie and his brother, Keith, inherited the Rock Valley property. Public land had been set aside for a nature reserve in the Tidbinbilla area as early as 1936. By the early 1960s, the Government's land acquisition program had progressed with the Reserve officially gazetted in 1971. The newly established Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve included the Rock Valley Homestead land. The Green family was pursued for years to sell its lease and over the years parcels of land had been resumed. After a protracted battle to receive proper compensation, Eddie finally sold what remained of his property and moved to the suburb of Lyons, ACT. He relates the story of the government's land resumptions beginning with the initial offer in 1916.

In 1916 they offered all the properties in Tidbinbilla to be resumed, which most people thought, "This is a really good idea because we can get paid for them and still go on and live there and just pay this rent". But what they didn't think about with the leases: the rents would keep going up and up and they didn't have any secure tenure over them even though they could sell them. But Grandfather Green wouldn't agree to having his resumed, so that's why we still had the freehold. ... I had negotiations with them over a period of time because



*they kept taking little bits. Then eventually the homestead block was gone and then I had just 35 acres where Turkey Hill is now. ... Then eventually there was a change of government from the Department of the Interior to whatever it became after that and they decided: oh no; they couldn't have 35 acres of freehold sitting in the middle of the national park. They decided that they were going to take it. So I negotiated with them and couldn't get any satisfaction. Eventually – we had Canberra and Bushland Tours in those days. Then one day I went out there and they had bulldozers working on my property where they were going to build the visitors' centre. They hadn't come to any arrangements with me whatsoever, so I just went over to the guys who were working there asked what was going on and they told me. The next morning I got up bright and early and took the bus out and parked it across the gate. ...I said 'nobody's getting into that property'. And I said, "If I haven't heard by this afternoon I'm going to the press and it'll be in the paper tomorrow." Then about 4 o'clock Dave came over and said, "You can come over to Rock Valley and ring your solicitor, and you'll find out that your money's there and been paid."*

It is no surprise that local knowledge and experience along with a great love of his homelands led him and his brother to take on a tour operating business. Calling themselves Canberra and Bushland Tours, they conducted guided tours of Canberra's landmarks and scenery. On the itinerary was always a stop at Tidbinbilla.

*But I also drove for Canberra Mini Tours. That was the main tourist company in Canberra. I liked showing people round Canberra, and I was so enthusiastic and I knew everything in those days. ... The Canberra City Tours – the War Memorial, Parliament House, all the embassies, Red Hill, the National Mint, and National Library when it was built, and general sight-seeing. Oh, the Academy of Science. Things that probably wouldn't rate a mention now, but there wasn't much in Canberra back in the '60s – and then with the Canberra Bushland Tours – we had an arrangement with the people who had the boat cruises on the lake at that stage – Barry Myer and Mrs Reid. They'd meet us up at the Fyshwick Bridge, Dairy Flat, from the airport, they'd just come straight there and pick them up and then put them on the boat. And that was their introduction to Canberra. You'd arrive by boat, go down and under the bridge and down to the Acton Ferry Terminal and then we'd pick them up there on the bus and the first stop would be Tuggeranong Homestead, where McCormicks lived. One of the guys would shear a sheep for them and then we'd go out across Point Hut, which was always just a fjord in those days, even though it was concrete and people always thought that was marvellous driving across the Murrumbidgee and the water. We'd go to Lambrigg Homestead, William Farrer's old place, then up to Gibraltar Falls, where we'd have a picnic lunch, and then on to Corin Dam and from there back down to the nature reserve. There wasn't much there then, but there were always kangaroos. We knew where to find kangaroos. And then,*

## Articles (cont...)

*of course, when the tracking station was built we'd finish up there and end up about 4 o'clock in the afternoon at Casuarina Sands for afternoon tea because that kiosk was operating then. ... It was a marvellous introduction to Canberra because you'd come in the airport, which was terrible in those days, and just drove about and got on the boat and leisurely down, and then suddenly you had all this beautiful view.*

Eddie and other Green family and friends held a reunion at the Nature Reserve in January 1983 to commemorate their 100 years of Australian settlement. Having a strong link and commitment to his former family home and its surroundings and as a result of the successful reunion, they formed the TPA. This is still a vibrant organisation that meets on a regular basis, produces a newsletter and advises the government on matters relating to the restoration and preservation of the Rock Valley Homestead and the extant buildings within the Tidbinbilla nature reserve

Eddie's lifetime association with Rock Valley and its environs has resulted in a passion and commitment beyond family ties. At the end of the last interview I asked Eddie if he could describe his feelings when he sees Rock Valley today. His words remind us how important it is to have a sense of place in a rapidly changing world.

*In lots of ways I feel proud to be associated with it. I feel sad for the people of Tuggeranong and places like that where their properties have gone under housing and you can't even recognise where the*

*place was, whereas Rock Valley is still there, even though it might be in the state it's in. It'll never be built out and it's still home. It still retains that, even though it's going back to scrub, which it was in the original state when my ancestors, the Sheedys, first came there.*

Eddie Green's knowledge of the Rock Valley Homestead site, his former home is of immense value to the ACT's history and heritage. The ongoing restoration of the Rock Valley Homestead, after the 2003 bushfire, has been made possible with the assistance of Eddie Green and his family and friends within the Tidbinbilla Pioneers Association. Their interest in the European history of the Tidbinbilla/Tharwa area has led not only to the formation of the TPA, but also to an archive of rich documentary and pictorial information which provides a detailed and memorable view of this region's past and its pioneering spirit. Eddie's words, thoughts, recollections and stories demonstrate a vibrant history. This is a history which can be shared and experienced today by visiting the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and viewing it for its landscape, its past Aboriginal and European land-use, as well as its natural beauty and native flora and fauna. Listening to Eddie's words helps us to gain an understanding of the Australian Capital's Territory's story as told by a descendant of one of its settler families.



# The Aerobic Art of Interviewing

by *Siobhan McHugh*,  
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Michelangelo believed that a piece of marble already contained a work of art – his role was to liberate what was inherent. But the majesty, grace and beauty he saw in the stone that became David remained invisible to sculptors who had previously tackled it. In a similar way, the interview can be all or nothing to writers, journalists and oral historians. A person sits across a table, with stories to tell, ideas to impart, facts to confirm or deny, perhaps a lifetime of emotions to convey – but our ability to perceive who is before us, and to engage with what we are hearing, will critically affect what ensues.

I once interviewed a man who worked down a coalmine outside Sydney, shovelling shit – the human alternative to a Portaloo. A beefy bloke in regulation singlet and stubbies, he spoke matter-of-factly about hanging around deep underground, waiting for his mates to have a crap. I asked him what he did to pass the time. He pulled a delicate piece of white crochet out of a pocket, pointing out the intricate patterns with the enthusiasm of a mother

expounding the charms of her children. I was astonished, having subconsciously written him off as Macho Man. Instead he showed me that you can transcend your circumstances. Surrounded by shit, he created beauty.

Although I have preached the need for interviewers to maintain an open mind, my own preconceptions continue to ambush me. Happily, my subliminal labelling is often subverted by the messy contradictions that are real people. The genial farmer is also an implacable racist, the bloodless lawyer reveals a passion for light opera, the ruthless media mogul retains the sadness of a wounded child. To 'profile' people, you have to be able to see their frailties as well as their more public strengths.

The acclaimed Italian oral historian, Alessandro Portelli, describes an interview as 'an exchange of gazes' [1]. You, as interviewer, may be the one asking the questions, but you are also being observed, and your demeanour, tone and line of questioning will feed back into

## Articles (cont...)

the responses. Other factors come into play – for example the setting (in the interviewee's home or an impersonal venue, in private or before an audience) and the purpose (how was it instigated and how will it be used) – but the personalities and backgrounds of both parties shape the chemistry that can create a profound intimacy between strangers during formal interviews.

I have felt that intimacy with people far removed from me in terms of age, life experience and social and cultural background. Analysing it now, I think it comes down to simple empathy. The pain of a Cambodian woman recounting how her sons starved to death before her eyes is no different from the pain of an Aboriginal woman describing being taken from her family, or a Vietnam veteran describing the victim of a mine explosion – all incidents related to me. Likewise joy, anger, regret, pride – the feelings are universal, however different their context.

Empathy obviates the need to like or dislike someone. You can clinically record a distasteful action by your informant, without abhorring him; judgement is withheld. Instead you seek to understand his point of view. This does not mean you let him off the hook. You still ask the hard questions, but because the informant feels you can truly hear him, you're more likely to get a real answer.

A few years ago, I stumbled across what became a documentary on Aboriginal Stolen Children in the Kimberley region

of Western Australia [2]. I was introduced to several women who had been forcibly removed from their families and reared by Catholic nuns (from the Irish St John of God order), as part of the assimilation policy of the day. Their stories of separation and loss were heart breaking, but to my surprise and even irritation, they had nothing but praise for the nuns. Didn't they realise, I thought, that they were victims of cultural appropriation, at the hands of church and state?? Confused, but still clutching my righteous anger at the religious women who inculcated indigenous girls with their white Christian beliefs, I interviewed one of the nuns. Having read of grim contemporary children's homes run by sadistic overseers, I was unprepared for her description of how the nuns and their Aboriginal charges shared limited food and resources and jointly battled isolation, poverty and the sexism and rigidity of the church hierarchy. Instead of religious doctrine, Sister Pat spoke of how she loved the girls and tried to give them education – in spite of the authorities' injunction to avoid creating 'smart blacks'.

But the elephant was still on the lawn and this is how the question came out, spoken slowly and evenly, for I was trying to avoid an accusatory tone: 'did it ever occur to you to wonder why these children were being taken from their parents?' Sister Pat paused, then said with a deep sigh. 'No. I don't think it did. Religious life didn't allow for that. We didn't have access to newspapers or the wireless. We were told they were there for education. How they got there, we didn't



question.’ Later, she expressed deep regret for having been part of what she described as ‘a terribly wrong’ policy.

The program illuminated the complexity of the situation – the indigenous women lamented the loss of their families and their culture but insisted the nuns had loved them and given them a great start in life; Sister Pat, at nineteen not much older than her charges, knew in hindsight the grave implications of what had been done, but also felt the sisters had provided a stable and nurturing environment. Had I been blinded by moral outrage and dismissed Sister Pat as an Enemy of the People, how much less would I have learned about the paradoxical reality.

Asking the Hard Question is never easy (unless you’re a bully at heart, as some media interviewers seem to be), but it’s particularly hard when your interviewee is scary, or famous. Harry Seidler was both. Scary not just because of his international reputation as an architect, but because of his renowned insufferance of fools and philistines – and when it came to architecture, I had zero cred. But three weeks of intense research acquainted me with the basics of the Bauhaus and, having absorbed the colourful details of his journey from Austrian refugee to Australian aesthete, I began a marathon filmed interview, commissioned by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales [3]. Curators and other staff watched as I engaged with the testy artist, his intellect still formidable at 83. I had prepared thirty

pages of questions and quotes, committed to memory for the day as once I crammed for exams.

The technical crew was late setting up and the great man was distinctly tetchy to start. Instinct told me to jettison chronological order. Instead I plucked a quote from Walter Gropius, his mentor, that good architecture incorporated ‘firmness, commodity and delight’ and asked him to nominate examples. He frowned. Gropius, he said, was merely rehashing the words of Vitruvius, from ancient Rome. My first question and I was two thousand years out! But I had honed in, however clumsily, on one of his passions and he was off, expounding on the solidity, minimalism and aesthetics of his favourite buildings.

Although we could not have been more ill-matched, my research enabled me to bat the ball back and forth. More importantly, my curiosity and interest were real, and they fed his passion. By the time we broke to change tapes at the end of an hour, we were bonded, oblivious to the audience, locked in the exchange of gazes. Desperate to avoid a return to everyday banality while the crew moved about, I offered to tell him a real Irish joke (I come from Dublin). He winced, but I took the risk. This was no ordinary joke.

*A Dublin university student goes to London to work on the building sites during the holidays. The foreman looks at his weedy frame and suspiciously pale skin. ‘You done this before?’ he asks. ‘Sure’, lies the student. ‘Okay then – what’s the difference between a*

## Articles (cont...)

*girder and a joist?’ The student smiles.  
‘That’s easy. Goethe wrote Faust and Joyce wrote Ulysses.’*

Seidler exploded in what a watching curator said was the biggest laugh he’d ever seen him give. We resumed the interview on the warmest terms. The trouble was I now had to ask him about his *bete noire*, the infamous Blues Point Tower adjacent to the Sydney Harbour Bridge, whose plain modernist appearance had attracted much criticism and even been satirised as a brutal totalitarian condominium. Basking in our newfound connection, Seidler warbled happily to me about its proportions, its economy, and how much those who lived there loved it. That was my in. ‘But don’t you think that’s a little Marie-Antoinetteish?’ I heard myself say. ‘What about the rest of us, who are looking at it from the outside?’ (Somehow I refrained from saying what had first come into my head, who have to look at it from the outside – for I was no fan of BPT.) He bristled. ‘They are entitled to their opinion’, he said icily. ‘I still say it’s one of my finest buildings.’

Before his hauteur could escalate into hostility, I interpolated a question about *Neue Donau*, the massive social housing project he was currently building in Vienna. As I hoped, he became animated again, enthusiastically unfolding his vision for his native city. By the fourth hour, so solid was the ground beneath us that I felt able to ask him about the delicate topic of a reputed family feud. In an emotional tribute to his late brother, he explained that

the ‘feud’ had never happened. When we finished, I felt as if I had seen into his soul – a humbling experience that I have had more than once during an interview.

Most of the people I’ve interviewed of course are ‘ordinary’ folk, not tall poppies. The American writer Janet Malcolm marvels at ‘the careless talk’ that interviewees let slip to journalists, their ‘childish trust and impetuosity’ [4]. She has obviously never met a laconic Australian bushie. The most taciturn man I ever met was a retired depth sounder, whose forty years in the Public Works department had been spent swinging a lead line, the method by which river depths were gauged in the pre-digital age. His former employer was documenting the work and flew me to Jim’s home up the coast to interview him.

Jim met me at the airport – with his wife Wendy. All the way home, Wendy talked non-stop at breakneck speed, while Jim drove, steadfast and silent. I knew I had to get rid of her – but how? ‘As soon as your little interview is over’, she prattled, ‘we’ll have a barbecue.’ A strategy formed. ‘Barbecue?’ I interrupted. ‘That’s very kind, but I’m a vegetarian.’ A pause. She was shocked, but not defeated. ‘What do THEY eat?’ she asked, suspiciously. I cast about wildly for something she would not have. ‘Tofu’, I said solemnly. ‘I only eat silken tofu.’

As soon as the door shut, I sprang into action. I had maybe half an hour, I reckoned, while she trawled the hippie co-ops.



## Articles (cont...)

*When you were out on the Clarence river, on a king tide, under a full moon, with Paddy there beside you, swinging the lead line... did you ever think about what it was all for, the people who'd been to these places before you, and the ones who would come after...*

I was struggling to make a word picture that would somehow kick-start long-dormant emotions. Before I got any further, Jim sat bolt upright in his chair, hugely agitated.

*Yerr, there was this little girl, she was only eight and she died of a snakebite I read it in her father's diary, he was a surveyor and he come out this way in the 1860s and he camped right where we done Paddy always knew the best spots, he'd been in the army see, had to get out 'cause his nerves went after the Japs got him, but he could tell how much she'd rise in a flood just by looking at the banks further down...*

On and on it went, a stream-of-consciousness soliloquy about Jim and Paddy's adventures on land and water, in bushfire, drought and floods, crossing the bar at a harbour mouth or rowing up a river tributary, diligently gathering figures for the faceless men at head office.

*These days, they get it to within two decimal points and they think they're bloody great – but we gave it forty years and we done a bloody good job.*

He sat back, exhausted. I felt drained too, by his passion. We heard a key in the door – and into the scene waltzed Wendy, bearing a dripping packet of tofu. She stopped and

almost sniffed. The current between Jim and me was still crackling. Eating near-mouldy tofu while they tucked into steaks seemed a small price to pay. As I left, Jim gave me a sweet childlike smile that made my heart sing.

When I told that story to my students, one, a psychologist, ventured an explanation. 'When you fed him back that word-picture, it was confirmation that you had heard him – obviously a rare thing – and it enabled him to access those buried memories. He felt validated enough to allow them out.'

I don't know if that's what happened. It sounds as plausible as anything else. But ever since then I have believed that there is passion in every one of us. It might seem unlikely on the surface, and it might take a lot of time and effort to tap into – but it's there.

Sometimes the problem is not getting the person to talk, but understanding what you're hearing. Dissemblers will feed you misinformation, in an attempt to distract or confuse you. When I was researching the Australian cotton industry [5] one of my final interviews was with a spokesperson for the cotton growers' body, the Australian Cotton Foundation. For two years, I had been accumulating evidence about the use of toxic chemicals in the industry. I had heard from residents in cotton country how impenetrably scientific the spokesman's answers were. I had in another life obtained a B.Sc, so I wasn't afraid of the lingo. But the volume of data was huge, and I knew I



had to retain it mentally in order to pick up instantly on any telling admissions.

I asked him first about a well-documented incident near Moree, in north-west New South Wales, in 1991. A team of chippers was hoeing weeds when a plane started spraying in an adjacent field. Soon a chipper smelt 'something like fly spray', and her eyes began to sting. The chemical from the plane was evidently being blown onto them by the wind. The foreman radioed the news to the pilot and asked him to stop, but he did not. By the next morning, most of the chippers had experienced headaches, sore eyes and throats, and coughs – symptoms consistent with having been exposed to endosulfan, the active ingredient in the spray. A government Agricultural Health Unit fortuitously in the area examined sixteen workers and filed a report. The case went to court – and despite the fact that the magistrate observed that there was no doubt that he 'deliberately sprayed pesticide' onto fields where he was aware the chippers were working, the pilot walked away scot-free. This was because the woefully inept legislation required the workers to prove that he had not only deliberately sprayed them, but also 'wilfully' caused a risk of injury by a pesticide.

Nonetheless the case was embarrassing for the industry. The spokesman opposite me now played it down, stating that 'none of those people, until the symptoms were described to them, exhibited any symptoms.' In fact, as I knew from reading the report, the Aghealth doctor took

pains to point out that the chippers were interviewed in such a way as to eliminate any form of autosuggestion.

When he added that the pesticide used was 'a cholinesterase inhibitor', my antennae moved up a notch. (Cholinesterase is an enzyme whose blood level can indicate exposure to certain chemicals.) 'When they tested the people', he said, 'there was no depression of cholinesterase... now that is a direct link of exposure. That is one of the reasons the case was dismissed.'

From my reading, I knew two things. First, the chemical in question, endosulfan, was an organochlorine – a type that did not respond to cholinesterase. So to imply that the lack of depression of cholinesterase meant there had been no exposure to endosulfan was nonsense. Cholinesterase worked on totally different pesticides, like organophosphates. Secondly, the case had not been dismissed on those grounds, but on the interpretation of the word 'wilfully'.

When I pointed out these discrepancies, he blanched. My mild manner and heavily pregnant condition had perhaps led him to underestimate my understanding of the issues – on which I grilled him for the next ninety minutes, in what was one of the most satisfying interviews of my life.. After the book came out, the laws on aerial spraying changed for the better.

Misinformation is not always deliberate. Sometimes people will, in good faith, tell you something you know to be untrue. Critics of oral history often cite these factual aberrations as proof of the

## Articles (cont...)

unreliability of personal testimony – but in fact, these ‘errors’, which Alessandro Portelli has termed ‘wrong narrative’, can be instructive. For example, when Portelli interviewed workers in the Italian town of Terni about the killing of a factory worker called Luigi Trastulli, the informants sometimes transposed the date and manner of the killing. But these ‘mistakes’ were significant. The date given related to another, key, battle in the ongoing fight between the workers and the Fascists, and the manner of Trastulli’s death, often described as shot against a wall, arms extended, was permeated with strong cultural motifs, from the Crucifixion to the execution of partisans in the area a few years before. Analysing the changed ‘facts’, Portelli surmised much about the political environment of the day, and how it had changed in the interim, causing the informants to subconsciously alter their view of what had happened [6].

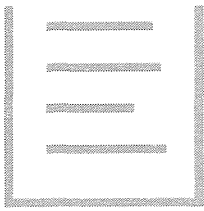
I had a similar experience of ‘wrong narrative’ when gathering interviews from workers who built the tunnels of the Snowy Mountains hydroelectric scheme [7]. Person after person mentioned that men had died while concrete lining the tunnels and their bodies had been entombed in the rock. No one could offer me the full names of the supposed victims and the locality and time of the supposed entombings varied. Yet the story persisted so strongly I felt it had to mean something. Through the picture I built up of the dangerous nature of the concreting, the hegemony of the crew, and the key role played by migrants who were

often desperate and vulnerable, I surmised that what was real was the fear the miners had of being told to go behind the forms and do the dangerous task of concrete lining, which could indeed be life-threatening; and that the migrants at the bottom of the pecking order were most likely to do such work – Australians I interviewed had quit the job rather than comply.

I examined 112 inquests into men who died in the construction. None described someone dying while concrete lining a tunnel - but in one horrific accident concrete lining a dam shaft, three men, all migrants, were pinned under collapsed formwork. Their workmates had only two hours in which to get them out before the concrete set. The three men could not be freed and died at the bottom of the shaft – effectively buried alive in concrete, as the ‘myth’ had held.

It was mostly Italians who undertook the concreting – an image that brings me back to Michelangelo. In the Accademia Gallery in Florence, where his magnificent David stands, several of his unfinished sculptures are also exhibited. These striking, semi-sculpted figures are entitled ‘Prisoners’ – still captive in the stone, powerful with potential. Of the act of liberation that was his sculpting, Michelangelo wrote [8].

*The great artist has no concept  
what a marble may have confined  
within its depths; that can be divined  
only by the hand subject to the intellect.*



Perhaps it is not too fanciful to imagine the best interviewing as an art, whose purpose is to reveal the full humanity and depth of the person before us – depths that can be divined only by engaging the heart subject to the intellect.

## **Siobhan McHugh**

### **Footnotes**

1 Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Gullia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin and London 1997, pp 72-78

2 *Beagle Bay – Irish Nuns and Stolen Children*, finalist, Walkley Excellence in Journalism awards, 2000. Broadcast ABC Radio National, May 2000.

3 Part of our interview can be seen in the award-winning short film 'Frozen Music', held by Historic Houses Trust of NSW.

4 Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer*, p.32, p.45, Knopf, New York, 1990

5 McHugh, 'Cotting On', Hale and Iremonger, Sydney 1996

6 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991, pp 45-48

7 McHugh, *The Snowy – The People behind the Power*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 1995

8 Franca Falletti, Michelangelo's David, sillabe, Livorno, 2002, p.54

Note: Siobhan McHugh is an award-winning writer and broadcaster, the author

of five non-fiction books based on oral history. Her work has won the New South Wales Premier's Award for Non-Fiction and been shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier's History Award, a United Nations Media Peace Prize, a Eureka Science Award and a Walkley Award for Excellence in Journalism. She lectures in Journalism at the University of Wollongong, outside Sydney, where she is also researching a doctoral thesis on the theme of mixed marriage between Catholics and Protestants in Australia, from the 1930s-1970s. Further information: [www.mchugh.org](http://www.mchugh.org)

### **Special Note**

Siobhan McHugh's series on mixed marriage and sectarianism between Catholics and Protestants (1920s-1960s) airs on Hindsight, ABC Radio National, 11 and 18 October 2009.

See [www.mchugh.org](http://www.mchugh.org)

This program results from three years of research and is the subject of her forthcoming doctorate.

*(We are always grateful to our members for copy for Voiceprint and look forward to hearing more about this topic Ed )*

# Diary of Events



## 16TH INTERNATIONAL ORAL HISTORY CONFERENCE

Between Past and Future: Oral History, Memory and Meaning, July 7-11, 2010. Prague, Czech Republic [www.iohanet.org](http://www.iohanet.org)

The 2010 Conference will focus on finding and making meaning of the past and human identity through oral history. We will focus on a number of research fields where oral history can contribute to better understanding not only of our past but our lives in general. Also, for the first time our conference will take place in an ex-totalitarian country. This enables us to analyse the specific role of oral history research in societies where other, especially official records about the past have been submitted to censorship or have been discarded.

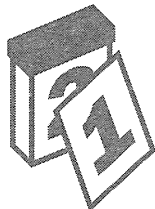
### Committee Meeting dates for 2009

October 20

Members are encouraged and welcome to attend meetings held at the State Library at 5.30pm. Please meet at the Mitchell Wing vestibule at 5.25pm. (Staff will direct you if you miss the group)

### Seminar dates for 2009

November 7



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Contact Paula Hamilton:  
[paula.hamilton@uts.edu.au](mailto:paula.hamilton@uts.edu.au)  
or Paul Ashton:  
[paul.ashton@uts.edu.au](mailto:paul.ashton@uts.edu.au)

# Noticeboard



**Website** Oral History Association of Australia <[www.ohaansw.org.au](http://www.ohaansw.org.au)>

Do bookmark and visit this site from time to time to keep up to date with what is happening around Australia and especially for details and links to the International Conference.

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