



'...instant experts for a while...'

In preparing for some oral history work recently, Sue was browsing through Australian Biography Online. This terrific resource offers transcripts and short clips of footage of interviews with significant Australians, undertaken for Film Australia's Australian Biography TV series. Dame Roma Mitchell, Australia's first female Supreme Court judge and later Governor of South Australia, was interviewed by Robin Hughes in 1993. In talking about what its like to work in the law, Mitchell said:

There's a lot of excitement attached to it. But apart from that of course, there is the interest. The law itself is interesting and we do tend to become instant experts for a while. You have to study a particular form of science or anything of that sort and for a while you really become quite knowledgeable about it, you forget it again of course afterwards. But there's all that interest and variety I think.

This really caught Sue's attention, as it seems so like what we do in our heritage and history work. To understand the story and the significance of a place or a group of people, we immerse ourselves in the technical detail, the concepts and the day to day experience of a place or a process. We've been temporary experts in banana ripening, road making, livestock slaughter, chemistry, maritime insurance, dairying and many other things. Interest and variety indeed.

Rites of Passage



An Archival Recording can be a condition of development consent where a building or place is to be a demolished, altered or retained in a changed context. HAAH has managed Archival and photographic recordings of places ranging from a former industrial premises, the Meterhouse in Stanmore; to the Star Hotel in Newcastle, a landmark in the history of Newcastle's gay community, and residential dwellings.

One of these, a Woollahra house, had grown higgledy piggledy over more than a century after starting life as a private school. Demolition had been approved, and the house was in an advanced state of dilapidation. We were sure our recording was a final rite of passage before the bulldozers moved in. But the house came back from the dead only a few months later with nothing short of a miraculous adaptation. Our recording must have unleashed some unseen potential...

Rosemary recently tried out the new Heritage Office guidelines for digital photographic recording for a terrace in Paddington, prior to alterations. For large projects, we have professional photographers Scott Wajon and Jack Carnegie at the ready.

Our Place... get involved!

Refreshed by the Christmas break, we've come up with some great new ideas for the development of the Our Place project (profiled in our September issue). We plan to publish these great stories of life in the inner city as a serial primarily for a local readership. A story will come out each month, and be available at local pubs, cafes, newsagents and real estate agents for under \$5 each. Come to our website to see an extract from the Our Place '*Stories of Erko and Alexandria*' series, '**Bill Schwebel: The Knockabout Kid**'.

We're currently carrying out market research and we've had a very encouraging response from local business and the community in Erskineville. On Sunday 11th February Sue, Rosemary and Emma attended the Back to Erskineville reunion and our ideas were greeted with enthusiasm.

Your comments, local contacts or any help you can offer would be much appreciated.



Not in the News...

What do we have to do to get noticed?... stand on the Town Hall steps naked?!?

An inane but nevertheless inflammatory opinion piece appeared in the *Herald* on Australia Day - Michael Duffy's article 'History becoming a thing of the past'. Duffy connects the fate of history in Australia to Australians' enthusiasm for waving flags on January 26th. He also seeks measurable economic value and direct health benefits from history. (I bet you've never taken history to cure a cold...) When he finds none, he finds that history is 'overrated', in decline and unpopular. Duffy canvasses the argument that:

...a shared sense of identity, based in part on knowledge of and respect for the nation's history, is necessary to maintain the welfare state. In other words, fifth-generation Australians will be reluctant to pay taxes to provide pensions for immigrants who don't know about Federation.

In fact, he claims, we're chugging along nicely because no one cares about history, not the migrants nor the fifth-generation Aussies, and with no detrimental effects to our health! He invokes globalisation to negate any need for national histories, concluding with the catch-cry 'The world is our culture'.

Incensed by this attack, and the poor quality of Mr Duffy's arguments, Rosemary and Emma flew to the defence of history in a stunning display of wit and evidence based argument. The *Herald*, however, refused to heed our scholarly outrage, and has not published our letters. But we're dedicated to our cause, and have decided to publish our letters right here in HAAH News! Take that Mr Duffy!

History Does Matter

Michael Duffy claims that 'the 'educational value of history is vastly overrated.' ("History becoming a thing of the past", January 26). The value of history is not only in its content, but in the training it provides in critical thinking, analysis of sources and the development of coherent, logical arguments based on the careful assessment of evidence. Such skills are of enduring value in many occupations – journalism included - though lacking in Duffy's article

Maybe he's been talking to the wrong people or has a selective and short term memory. History is not valued by our society solely in economic terms, as evidenced recently by the public outcry over the proposed sale of the Snowy Hydro-Electric Scheme, which threatened a symbol of our national (and multicultural) heritage. Would Aboriginal Australians agree that some knowledge of their history was irrelevant to building understanding and empathy between present and future generations?

Perhaps Duffy is right about one thing - historians do have to work harder at promoting history's relevance and value to the wider community. Professional historians working in heritage conservation, native title, media, film, cultural institutions and as authors – not just in academe - are well placed to take up that challenge. Go historians! The world is our oyster!

Rosemary Kerr – Professional Historians' Association

Dear Herald,

Poor Michael Duffy! As he peers through his Ned Kelly helmet at Australian History, he sees only Federation and the flag. (*History Becoming a Thing of the Past*, January 26). Thank goodness there's more to it. The globalisation that seems to Duffy to menace Australian history has in fact spawned a whole new way of looking at our past. Students flock to the World History courses at our universities for a window into our continent's 'dealings with foreigners' since the Big Bang; migrants tell their stories of coming to Australia to the Migration Heritage Centre and to their grandkids; and Indigenous history is beginning to get enough of a fair go to shake up the old Australian identity. When the history of the world gets a bit too big, we can turn to the world of local history - where the buildings, roads, trees and people right near us can enhance our understandings of ourselves. We just need to take our helmets off!

Emma Dortins, Consultant Historian

