



INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA Inc

NSW Chapter

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Dear Members,

Welcome to ISAA NSW's first issue of the Bulletin for 2021 which promises to be another challenging year. This year we are planning to hold a series of three *Doing Research* meetings commencing with Christine Yeats speaking on the 'Australian Joint Copying Project' on Thursday 4 February via Zoom. The second will take place on 21 April when Prof Grace Karskens will speak about researching the *The Sacred River*. The third is planned for 31 August when Alana Piper will speak (topic TBC).

If you have any contributions for the next *Bulletin*, such as scholarly book notes, notes on exhibitions, films or plays, please send them to me by **18 March** at cjennett@ozemail.com.au.

Christine Jennett, *Bulletin* Editor

DOING RESEARCH: MEETING 1

Thursday 4 February 3-4 pm (via Zoom)

Topic: *Shedding light on the Australian Joint Copying Project*

Between 1948 until 1993 teams of librarians worked on what was probably the longest running microfilm project of its kind in the world. It is known as the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP). By the time the project came to an end there were over 10,000 reels of microfilm covering 1560 to 1984. With funding from the Federal Government, the National Library of Australia has digitised the entire microfilm collection, together with the accompanying handbooks, and turned it into a free online resource. Christine Yeats will discuss the project and provide guidance on how to make the best use of this unique collection.

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Regional Representatives:

John Ramsland

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Dates for your Diary

4 Feb: Doing Research: 1

24 Feb: Public Affairs
Reading Group

21 Apr: Doing Research: 2

27 Apr: Public Affairs
Reading Group

31 Aug: Doing Research 3

UPCOMING EVENTS

DOING RESEARCH: MEETING 1

Thursday 4 February 3-4 pm (via Zoom)

Topic: *Shedding light on the Australian Joint Copying Project*

Speaker: Christine Yeats

Abstract:

Between 1948 until 1993 teams of librarians worked on what was probably the longest running microfilm project of its kind in the world. It is known as the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP). By the time the project came to an end there were over 10,000 reels of microfilm covering 1560 to 1984. With funding from the Federal Government the National Library of Australia has digitised the entire microfilm collection, together with the accompanying handbooks, and turned it into a free online resource. Christine Yeats will discuss the project and provide guidance on how to make the best use of this unique collection.

About the Speaker:



Christine Yeats is President of the Royal Australian Historical Society, Immediate Past President of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia (ISAA), Immediate Past Chair of ISAA NSW and Convenor of the Assessment Sub-Committee of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee.

An archivist by profession, Christine is a researcher and professional historian with a particular interest in Australia's colonial history. Her current research projects include Australia's Romani, colonial women silk growers and the botanist Sarah Hynes.



DOING RESEARCH: MEETING 2

21 April 2021

Topic: *The real Sacred River: truth-telling and the power of regional histories*

Paper for the Royal Australian Historical Society and the Society of Independent Scholars.

Abstract

In 2017 human rights lawyer Professor Megan Davis called for a nationwide program of truth-telling through local and regional Aboriginal histories as an essential step towards Makarrata. These histories must acknowledge dispossession, frontier conflict and massacres, but Davis envisages more: deeper, fuller histories involving Aboriginal people themselves; histories that are alive to cultural and spiritual continuities, strategic negotiations, family and community, and the recovery and recognition of significant Aboriginal places and landscapes.

How might such collaborative projects be established? How can traditional text-based research be revisited and reinterpreted for this kind of history? How can we use other records, like archaeological and art sites, maps and mapping, photographs, oral testimony, linguistics, ecology and landscapes and, most importantly, Traditional Knowledge?

Regional history is a powerful way to explore the implications, possibilities and challenges of truth-telling that includes but goes beyond frontier violence and massacre history. I will present some of the findings from a current collaborative project, *The Real Secret River: Dyarubbin*.

About the Speaker:

Grace Karskens is Professor of History at the University of New South Wales. She is a leading authority on early colonial Australia and also works in cross-cultural and environmental history.

Grace began her career as a public historian and has a lifelong commitment to bringing good history to wide audiences. She is an active contributor to several significant cultural organisations, including Sydney Living Museums, the State Library of New South Wales and the online *Dictionary of Sydney* project.

Grace's books include *Inside the Rocks: The Archaeology of a Neighbourhood* and the multi-award winning *The Rocks: Life in Early Sydney*. Her book *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* won the 2010 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Non-Fiction and the US Urban History Association's prize for Best Book 2010. Grace's essay 'Nah Doongh's Song' won *Australian Book Review's* 2019 Calibre prize, and her latest book, *People of the River: Lost Worlds of Early Australia*, was published by Allen & Unwin in 2020.



REPORTS ON RECENT EVENTS

Writing art into fiction

My fascination with this genre stems from a life-long interest in visual creativity and postgraduate training in art history. In a presentation to NSW ISAA in October 2020 (via Zoom) I combined both in a discussion of novels whose plots revolve around art in some way. The books ranged across genres of historical fiction, mysteries, biography and literary fiction epitomised by Gail Jones' novel *The Death of Noah Glass*. Robyn Cadwallader lit up the world of 14th-century manuscripts. Heather Rose framed her story around a 2010 performance by artist Marina Abramović. Iain Pears painted a masterly portrait in words of an artist hellbent on revenge.



A selection of novels discussed

Fiction transports readers far from their everyday lives, 'art' fiction perhaps more so because, as Carol Cram writes, readers have 'a fascination with the act of creation and the mysteries of inspiration'. Gail Jones and Dominic Smith believe art works speak to us across time and nations. So much of how we see ourselves is a result of visual culture that interweaves the personal and the historical (email communications).

Sometimes the artworld is called upon to explore political, social or ethical issues, such as *The Lacuna*, in which Barbara Kingsolver featured the muralists and surrealists of the 1930s through the lives of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. Paintings – lost, stolen or copied – are popular subjects. Novels involving forgeries often centre around relatively recent art, it being easier to obtain materials contemporaneous with the artwork than their equivalents from earlier centuries. In all good art mysteries, seemingly impossible situations must arise logically, and invented artworks must pass the 'could be real' test.

Whatever its provenance, art in fiction enhances any reading experience. I left the last word to Robyn Cadwallader:

While language, belief, politics (and in the Middle Ages, food, dress and culture) are very different from ours, we can reach back and connect with them in the beauty of their creativity. Such delicate and fine artwork ... shows us how these 14th-century artists saw transcendence, playfulness and beauty in the world around them (email communication).

Susan Steggall

OPEN FORUM 2

5 November 2020

This Forum was held on 5 November via Zoom and presented by Professor Richard Kemp, a cognitive scientist and forensic psychologist at the UNSW. Richard's topic *The Psychology of Eyewitness Memory* was wide ranging around the issues of identity research and evidence, the reliability of human memory and concerns about false identification. He also elaborated on the memory process with its three stages of encoding, storage and retrieval, noting that errors can occur at each stage. Why do we make errors of identification? Richard suggested that we construct the world we live in – make our own hypotheses – which are often ambiguous and incomplete and often guess work, so that we sometimes get it wrong. We make false or incorrect identifications. Our memory, while excellent in many respects, is often incorrect and fails us. Richard also spoke about the science of memory and its evidential relationship with the law.

Throughout the presentation our attention was engaged by Richard's use of interactive video exercises, for example, when we were asked to identify the thief in a line up after having just viewed his criminal action. The presentation was followed by some interesting questions from participants with pertinent answers from Professor Kemp. **Lesley Potter**



BOOK NOTES

All Our Shimmering Skies

Trent Dalton

Fourth Estate, HarperCollins, 2020

ISBN: 9781460753903

Dalton's strongly promoted, powerfully written bestseller with a beautifully designed paperback cover of clustered Australian wildflowers sprinkled with gold is walking out of every bookshop in the country to a huge, devoted audience. The author tells a compelling quest combined with an escape from bondage story in a highly original, inventive and picturesque style, enhanced by suggested parallels with a wide range of literary sources including – but not limited to – Greek mythology, Dickens and Shakespeare.

To see a world in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.
(‘Auguries of Innocence’, William Blake)

Either consciously or unconsciously, Dalton draws particularly from William Blake, the mystical poet, in his delicate evocative descriptions of wildlife that are woven into the human story. Of the many in Dalton's lively text, here is but one example that is an active description with a challenging ending.

The great bird [a wedge-tailed eagle] has a fanned and wedged tail almost two feet across ... and a hooked grey beak appropriately shaped like Dido's Death scythe ... But the raptor is burdened. It moves through the sky with laboured flaps of its wings because somewhere along its endless hunt for easy prey – a moving and pitiless ground feast of rabbits and brown hares and foxes and koalas and wombats and small wallabies – its long black talons have hooked a strange treasure more cumbersome than even this raptor's normally impressive endurance and leg strength can accommodate: a howling human infant nestled in a baby sling, which now hangs from the eagle's vice-grip talons by its woven cane and paperbark carrying strap. (pp 325-6)

Dalton brilliantly evokes the historical setting. The Darwin bombing on the morning of 19 February 1942, the first of sixty-four Japanese attacks, as a cataplexy exposing the pitiful, vulnerability of northern Australia to invasion.

These events, ironically, set twelve-year-old Dickensian Molly Hook, ‘the grave-digger girl’, free from a labour bondage to her violent father and uncle, the drunken, lazy gravediggers of a small old cemetery. Molly is required to do most of the digging of new graves as well as all the household work of the graveyard house now that her mother Violet has died. Her father, Horace, is killed in the bombing and her uncle Aubrey, the evil protagonist, is badly wounded, but later recovers unexpectedly and becomes a terrifying pursuer .

The newly orphaned Molly escapes south into the deep country with her older faithful female companion Greta May, a local actress. We follow their subsequent adventures across the landscape, including the rescue of the Aboriginal baby from the talons of the eagle.

As a historical war story of escape from the devastating bombing, there is plenty of magic realism combined with Gothic horror, thriller film-like sequences and comedy. As a plot, there is more than a nod to L Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and the iconic MGM film based on it. Paralleled with Dorothy’s quest for the Wizard of Oz along the yellow brick road to the Emerald City, Molly seeks Longcoat Bob, an Aboriginal sorcerer and elder dressed like a French admiral, to plead with him, to remove the deadly curse placed on her family on her mother’s side for stealing Aboriginal land and gold. Molly and Greta are joined by a lone renegade Japanese pilot Yukio Miki who has parachuted to earth from his Zero. With his traditional short sword, Yukio becomes their faithful protector on the perilous journey which is like that in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Throughout the tale, Dalton’s prose is as mesmerising as a good Hollywood thriller with non-stop momentum. Some sequences go on too long and needed editing. And yet, these are nightmare experiences that keep the reader enthralled in the mystical journey through forests, in rivers, into dark caves and several end-of-world encounters with the richly evoked natural world of the north and the Aboriginal owners of the land that is never empty.

All Our Shimmering Skies is the most significant novel of northern Australia since Xavier Herbert’s majestic and much neglected *Poor Fellow my Country*. **John Ramsland**



What the colonists never knew: A history of Aboriginal Sydney

Dennis Foley and Peter Read

Canberra, National Museum of Australia Press, 2020

ISBN: 9781921953 39 2, 236 pages

This is a story of identity attacked, occluded, stolen and recovered. Also the story of a place – the area from Sydney Harbour north to Broken Bay. It was occupied for a least 12,000 years by people we know as the Gai-mariagal, a ‘saltwater people’ with expert knowledge of land and sea transmitted through beautiful origin-tales. Dennis Foley learnt law and lore from his grandmother in Curl Curl and uses this customary knowledge to reinterpret Sydney’s colonial and later history. It is a fascinating text, written in direct, expressive, occasionally sardonic, language. His work is enlarged on by Peter Read, a non-Indigenous historian whose interspersed comments create a lively dialogue between the two men. It is an exciting book and should be compulsory reading for anybody who thinks that Sydney Aboriginal people are extinct.

Fair-skinned Dennis was removed from his family when he was ten and spent two horrendous years in ‘protection’, first in a detention centre where he was repeatedly raped, then in quasi-slavery on a pig-farm near Bathurst, NSW. He managed to escape, finished school, played football, served in Vietnam, and is now an academic and an advocate for the Gai-mariagal. They achieved land-rights recognition through the creation of the Narrabeen Lagoon State Park in 2014.

This year has also seen the publication of Grace Karskens' magnificent work on *People of the river: Lost worlds of early Australia* (Allen & Unwin 2020) which reinforces some of the themes of survival described by Foley and Read and also by Paul Irish in *Hidden in plain view: The Aboriginal people of coastal Sydney* (NewSouth 2017), which deals with the area south of Sydney Harbour.

Research by these scholars and many others over the past twenty years is finally disproving colonial and White Australia versions of the past, but there is still much to be done in a nation which continues to incarcerate children of colour. **Aedeen Cremin**



FILM NOTES

The Skin of Others: A review

Director, Producer & Scriptwriter: Dr Tom Murray, Macquarie University

Documentary Film: 91 minutes

Tarpaulin Production, Australia, 2020

Shown at the (pandemic-style) 67th Sydney Film Festival – no foyer crowds, no packed audience fascinated with the silver screen – Murray's finely-wrought historical documentary deserves much more acclaim. His visual life-study of Douglas Grant, famous Aboriginal World War I hero, goes well beyond a stereotype 'bio-pic' into fresh territory of race representation beyond the legend and the struggle against societal racism over time.

Ten years in the making, it is an insightful achievement in historical truth telling. I produced a parallel project in book form : *The Legacy of Douglas Grant. A Notable Aborigine in War and Peace* (Brolga, 2019) which gave me a prior understanding of the film's subject. Murray's sophisticated visual work complements rather than competes with the written word. It makes a profound case for screen-history to express aspects of history that struggle to be communicated in the written form. Murray has shown that the audio-visual form can create authentic historical storytelling.

The intrepid filmmaker set out at first to make a biographical 'docu-drama' with actors performing in the sequence over the lifetime. Tom E Lewis Balang – famed for his striking performance in Schepisi's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* in 1981 – was recruited to play Douglas as a middle-aged man who was thirty when he enlisted in the 1st AIF in 1916 and lived an extraordinary life until 1951. Balang proved a perfect choice and some scenes were filmed with him: a hilarious encounter Grant had visiting Henry Lawson, to whom he was devoted, and a stark emotionally-charged scene where a destitute Grant is found, broken on the wheel by racial prejudice and suffering from alcoholic-induced despair, wandering the streets with a cutthroat razor in his hand. (He was then placed in Callan Park Mental Home for treatment that lasted for eight-and-a-half years.) While Balang was producing a brilliant performance, he died suddenly in 2018.

Murray almost abandoned the project, but then returned to shape the film in a completely new direction, combining the scenes already canned, with a multi-layered collage of images from historical sources: family photographs, newspaper photos and headlines; magazine illustration; moving colour film of the Queensland rainforest with its natural sounds suddenly silenced by fearful gun shots; interviews with authorities in Germany and Australia and the now elderly members of the Scottish immigrant Grant foster family from industrial Lithgow – all seamlessly bound together by multiple narrators and voice-overs, engendering time-slip historical story-telling.

Watching the ninety-one minutes by television screen (and without disclosing the full story to readers), I was 'blown away', especially with Balang's visceral masterly performance and the terrible sadness and unintended irony of his comment in an interview that, with the roles of Jimmie Blacksmith and Douglas Grant, he had been given 'parts of a lifetime'. In a dramatic situation, his character cries: 'The sound of the guns never goes away!', evoking two massacres in Grant's experience: his tribal clan when he was an infant and then on the freezing battleground at Bullecourt as a man.

Highly recommended. **John Ramsland**

BOOK DISCUSSED AT THE DECEMBER MEETING OF THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS DISCUSSION GROUP

A Rightful Place: A Road Map to Recognition

(ed) **Shireen Morris**, Black Inc, Carlton, Vic.

ISBN: 9781863959131 (paperback)

Foreword and Chapters 1 & 2

The Uluru Statement was widely supported by Indigenous Australians from many different mobs who had for generations been working for a recorded acknowledgement of Indigenous rights and position. It is the inspiration for the approach in this book of those like Galarrwuy Yunupingu who promotes the ceremonial song cycles that embody the energy of the mob. Noel Pearson, who shared this strong conservative instinct alongside his Christian beliefs, similarly argues forcefully in his chapter for a change to the Australian Constitution that would enable the three percent of the population that are Aboriginal – *the mouse* – to face the ninety seven percent of non-Aboriginal people – *the elephant* – to maintain their sovereignty, the spiritual notion that embodied the ancestral tie of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to the land and which had never been ceded and so co-exists with that of the crown. **Sybil Jack**

Chapters 2, 3, 4

Megan Davis discusses international law, and goes into the history of the notion of self-determination, as envisaged in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Davis sees the need for a ‘first nations voice’. Jackie Huggins and Rod Little discuss the Barunga Statement of 1988 which called for an elected body to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. However, the ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission) was abolished by the Howard government in 2004. They envisage a building in the parliamentary precinct for an Indigenous body to advise government. Damien Freeman and Nolan Hunter discuss the effect of agreements in New Zealand and Western Australia. They consider cultural redress may be more important than material compensation. A difficulty is the tendency to avoid negatives, thus negating memory and truth, and they consider this a barrier to real progress. **Rodney Nillsen**

Chapters 5, 6 & 7

The last three chapters offer varied perspectives. Believing a Constitutionally prescribed Voice will fail politically, Warren Mundine prefers symbolic recognition. But his fundamental point is that a centralised, national Voice ignores the complex diversity of First Nation ‘mobs’ and the heart of Indigenous identity. He advocates a decentralised network of bodies, each representing an identifiable First Nation people. Shireen Morris endorses Uluru proposals and undercuts major objections around equality, identity politics and negative nationalism, personal responsibility, sentimentalism, and secret, separatist sovereignty. She dissects how each misreads the Uluru Statement and misrepresents existing Constitutional protections. Stan Grant supports Constitutional recognition but points to the evolving composition of the Australian populace due to migration and intermarriage. This demands an all-inclusive national story and statement for which he offers his own Makarrata Declaration of Country. **Jan Todd**



BOOKS THAT SHAPED ME

Having learnt to read at an early age I became a voracious reader – in the bath, on the way to school, under the blankets or wedged behind lounge chairs (‘just one more chapter, please!’). Most books however, consisted of stories set in countries where it snowed at Christmas. It was a revelation to discover Ethel Turner’s Australian stories and Mary Grant Bruce’s *Norah of Billabong*. Further revelation was reading Pixie O’Harris’ *The Fortunes of Poppy Treloar* set around familiar bays of Sydney Harbour. By the age of nine, having exhausted the local library (the category ‘Young Adult’ did not exist in the 1950s), I turned to what my mother was reading. She was a busy pharmacist and read popular fiction to unwind – mostly Mills & Boon romances from a private lending library. I

devoured them all, especially the complete works of Georgette Heyer – not the best education for an impressionable girl on the cusp of adolescence.

In my late teens and twenties, my focus was the non-fictional world of biosciences but in moving to France I took on that language in fiction. Antonia Fraser's biographies of Mary Queen of Scots and Oliver Cromwell (borrowed from the American Library in Geneva) sowed the seeds of my attraction to biography. Churchill's six volumes on World War II (lent by an English expat) aroused an interest in history.

Returning to Sydney I undertook degrees in art history and theory. Those years encouraged me to write, first biography for which Brenda Niall on Georgiana McCrae, the Boyd family and Judy Cassab (plus Niall's instructive *Life Class*), Hermione Lee's *Virginia Woolf*, and *Body Parts: Essays on Life Writing* were significant publications. Turning to fiction, Umberto Eco's *Postscript to the Name of the Rose* (the notion that the writer has to know everything about the period in which she/he is writing but the reader doesn't) – was a strong influence. Kate Grenville's *Idea of Perfection* showed how to write flawed but very human characters with a delicate touch.

Vis-à-vis Australian history, *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia* by Paula Hamilton and Kate Darian-Smith and *Love and Freedom. Professional Women and the Reshaping of Personal Life*, by Alison Mackinnon, gave me new perspectives, as did the work of Ken Inglis, Tom Griffiths and Inga Clendinnen.

While Joan Kerr's *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book: 500 Works by 500 Australian Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955*, has been a stepping-stone reference for my work on Australian women artists, it was Kerr's democratic vision of Australia's cultural past (eschewing elitist distinctions of 'high' art and 'low' craft) and ability to reach beyond the university to engage the broader public's imagination that attracted me to her scholarship.

Susan Steggall



If you have any comments on the Book Notes or other items that are published in the Bulletin send them to the editor at cjennett@ozemail.com.au and they will be published in the next issue of the Bulletin (deadline is 18 March).

Verbalising can Clarify

Do you wonder what other people might think of your ideas?

Tired of keeping them to yourself?

Want some genuine, helpful and considered discussion of *your* work-in-progress?

If an ISAA Work-in-Progress meeting interests you, please contact:

cjennett@ozemail.com.au

Book Notes Exhibition Notes Film Notes

If you have read a book, seen an exhibition or a film of substance lately that you would like to share with fellow ISAA members send in a piece (up to 300 words) containing its key insights and arguments to: cjennett@ozemail.com.au by 18

March