

June 2007

Collecting Our Performing Arts Oral History Heritage

by Bill Stephens

(This is the third in our series of Friends' favourite memories of the National Library. Please send your contributions friends@nla.gov.au or to the address at the bottom of this newsletter.)

Perhaps I am biased but my favourite area of the National Library is downstairs in the Oral History department, where under the experienced eyes of the Curator of Oral History and Folklore, Kevin Bradley, and the manager of Sound Preservation and Technical Services, Shelley Grant, and their dedicated staff, more than 30,000 hours of recorded oral history interviews have been collected, catalogued and preserved for the use of researchers.

Twenty-five years ago I became aware of this department and its work, through a houseguest, Jenny Howard. Fifty years ago Jenny was a major star on the Tivoli Circuit, performing in variety and pantomime. In 1982 though, Jenny had just turned 80, was terribly proud of her MO Award, and still possessed the ability to hold an audience enthralled with her exuberant singing, dancing and repartee. She was in Canberra to appear with the Band of the Royal Military College in "Strike Up The Band", a series of fund-raising charity concerts in the Canberra Theatre that I was producing and directing.



Bill Stephens interviews Barbara Leigh (May 2002)

For the duration of the production, Jenny stayed with us. We soon discovered that, in addition to all her other accomplishments, Jenny was a wonderful raconteur, and loved talking about her career, and the people with whom she had worked – people like Gracie Fields, George Formby and George Wallace. Jenny regaled us with an endless stream of fascinating details especially about her adventures entertaining Australian troops during the Second World War.

It occurred to me Jenny's stories should be collected for posterity, and I remembered that somewhere I had heard that the National Library had an oral history program. I rang the Library and was put in touch with the then Curator of Oral History, Mark Cranfield. He immediately put arrangements in place for Jenny to be interviewed for the collection.

Later I suggested to Mark that the Library capture the recollections of Bobby Le Brun, a showman and comedian who for many years had owned and toured Sorlies, a travelling tent show which took quality entertainment to the country districts of Australia. Bobby was one of the great Australian vaudeville comedians. Over a period of a week in 1985, I recorded some 12 hours of recollections and anecdotes from Bobby and his wife Gracie.

During a conversation in preparation for that first interview, Mark Cranfield, while explaining some of the reasons for recording oral histories, remarked, "Imagine how interesting it would be to hear a recording of Nellie Melba talking about how she spent a typical Sunday". I never got to interview Nellie Melba, but I did get to interview another famous Australian soprano. That person was of course June Bronhill and in 1987 June came to the National Library to record over 10 hours of recollections. June was also a great raconteur, and her voice sparkled as she recalled her first audition at Covent Garden, and details of her singing lessons with one of Melba's singing partners, Dino Borgioli.

Over the years since I have had the privilege of interviewing dozens of our foremost theatre practitioners and always feel a responsibility to try and capture the personality of the interviewee on the recording. Something a recorded interview can achieve in a way that the printed page could never do.

Of course the information the interviewee has to impart is also very important, particularly their views and opinions of colleagues, productions they have been associated with, and other matters which may not already be available on the public record. As Mark impressed on me "A good oral history captures information that is unique and is to be found between the lines, or behind the official version of the event. It can put material on record which has been kept off the record".

In recent years I have had the good fortune to interview a number of people who were integrally involved in the first production of the musical "The Boy From Oz", the first, and so far only, Australian musical to find its way on to the Broadway stage. Interviews with directors Richard Wherrett and Stuart Maunder, and choreographer Ross Coleman similarly provide insights into the creation of other Australian musicals "Shout" "Dusty" and "Priscilla Queen of the Desert".

Richard Wherrett was also the director of the final segment of the Opening Ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, and his description, recorded a few weeks before his death, of the moments when a technical malfunction threatened to jeopardize the entire opening ceremony telecast, is riveting listening. Equally enthralling is Max Lambert's compelling description of the process involved in preparing all the music for the complicated Opening Ceremony.

Space does not permit me to alert you to all the performing arts treasures in the National Library's Oral History section, but if you go to the website www.nla.gov.au locate Oral History and enter my name in the box marked "Search Our Catalogue" you will find descriptions of more than 120 interviews by performing arts personalities who have recorded their memories for the collection.

Marie-Louise Ayres' Library Fellowship Blog

Friends will recall the announcement in our April 2007 newsletter that the Committee awarded its 2007 Friends Travelling Fellowship to Marie-Louise Ayres, Director of the Library's Manuscripts Branch.



Marie-Louise departs on 11 June and will be back in Canberra by early July. She has very bravely decided to record her experiences on a web log, or 'blog'. Marie-Louise has opened up the blog with this enticing introduction:

Although I have managed the development of two large discovery services - AustLit and MusicAustralia - I am well-known for being incapable of programming my video or DVD recorder, have never blogged and hope I'll manage this new-fangled technology to record my visit to the US and Canada in June 2007 to investigate new developments in archival collection management!

For those you of who wish to follow Marie-Louise's progress, here is the blog address: <http://manuscriptscurator.wordpress.com/>

The National Library of Cambodia

(This is the first of a series of articles about individual National Libraries of the world)

The National Library of Cambodia (NLC) was opened in 1924 in a purpose-built single-storey French colonial-style building, with 2,879 items gracing its shelves. At this time Cambodia was a French protectorate. For the first few decades of its existence the Library's collection was primarily comprised of works in French. The first books in Khmer were not added to the Library's collection until the 1950s.

In September 1996, Maduraivasal Ragavan, a United Nations volunteer, visited the NLC and several other significant libraries in that country. He wrote that "as a librarian, I could assess that the state of these libraries was quite unsatisfactory." That the NLC was still in existence at all, given the unspeakable horrors visited upon Cambodia during the period of Khmer Rouge government in the second half of the 1970s, is quite remarkable.

According to the Khmer Rouge "Four-Year Plan for the Establishment of Socialism in All Fields", one of its key goals was to "abolish, uproot, and disperse the cultural, literary, and artistic remnants of the imperialists, colonialists, and all of the other oppressor classes." Libraries had no place in the new world of Pol Pot and his henchmen.



National Library of Cambodia

Dr Helen Jarvis, an Australian librarian who assisted in the rebuilding of the Library, has provided us with this distressing summation of the impact of the Khmer Rouge takeover on the Library:

On 17 April 1975 the staff were evacuated from the building and from the city by the incoming Khmer Rouge troops. The NLC, like most buildings in Phnom Penh, survived physically, but its collection and catalogue suffered considerable disarray and loss, resulting mainly from the use of the building's noted garden area for keeping pigs, and

the library and archives buildings for storage of food and as living quarters for the pig-keepers. Books were pushed off the shelves to make way for food and cooking pots, and some were evidently used to light cooking fires and as cigarette papers. Catalogue cards were strewn around the building. The current Director of NLC, Um Neang, reported in 1987 that only 20% of the pre-1975 collection (about 65,000 volumes) remained. But it was in human resources that the devastation was greatest. Of some 40 staff members only two returned to work at the Library after 1979. Another four are known to be still living in Cambodia. Others may be living overseas or may not have survived.

These events were a tragic interruption to the life of an important national institution. However, the destruction was not as systematic as had occurred in other totalitarian states. As Dr Jarvis remarked, 'The Khmer Rouge specialty was destroying people, not things'. The fall of Pol Pot in 1979 created the climate for the rebuilding of the NLC. The first tentative steps are described by Dr Jarvis:

"Mao Kin, the former night watchman, was the first person to attempt to restore some order to the library in around April 1979, securing the doors and beginning to pick up books from the verandahs, garden and inside floors and place them on the shelves. Yok Kun, a former professor of art theory at the University of Fine Arts, soon afterwards arrived to help. He described to me how he could do nothing but cry on his first day at the library, looking at the chaos around him..."

The Library re-opened early in 1980 and was soon attracting several thousand readers a year. Then and since, thousands of books have been donated from foreign sources, including the National Library of Australia. A librarian from the National Librarian of Vietnam assisted in these early days and described how he and local staff *"collected books from along the streets, from the ruins of bookshops and stores, and from abandoned houses..."*

In 1989 Cornell University began a program to preserve scarce and unique library and archival materials in Cambodia. Many other countries have assisted the rebuilding and further development of the NLC, including Australia, the former Soviet Union, Vietnam, Germany, France, the United States, and a number of private benevolent and development organisations. Over the years the NLA has provided substantial assistance to the NLC, including on-site computer cataloguing and provision of web-access.

By 2005, the Library held nearly 104,000 books in various languages, special collections comprising 8,327 national documents, plus some books and documents published in the Khmer language dating from between 1955 and 1975. The Library has a collection of 710 *sastra* or palm leaf manuscripts, which are available on microfilm. In 2005 the NLC commenced lending to the public and there were soon almost 400 registered borrowers. In that year the Library received between 35 and 50 fifty visitors a day.

Despite the best efforts of its staff and very strong support from governments and libraries around the world, the NLC still faces many challenges. The Library was closed in 2002 until 2004 following the collapse of part of the ceiling. Training and retaining appropriately qualified staff is an ongoing problem, as is funding for collection acquisition.

Nevertheless, the NLC is slowly but surely re-establishing itself as the repository of the intellectual life and national memory of a once shattered and still very vulnerable country. The accumulated wisdom and recorded human experience contained within its



walls will hopefully help Cambodia avoid a repeat of the terrible cataclysm that nearly destroyed the Library, not to mention the Khmer people, thirty years ago.

(See 'The National Library of Cambodia - Surviving Seventy Years of Drastic Socio-Economic Impact' by Dr Helen Jarvis, delivered at the Ninth Congress of Southeast Asian Librarians, 2-6 May 1993; 'Cultural Reconstruction in Cambodia and Vietnam' by Diana Giese, National Library of Australia News, July 1995)

Henry Lawson Tour

To the accompaniment of Henry Lawson's evocative verse, a busload of Friends set off on 1 May for a trip round western New South Wales in the footsteps of the bard who represented the rough and tumble world of rural Australia before and during the First World War. The trip was organised with supreme efficiency by our Friends Chair, Terry Birtles, who did a fine job of blending geographical and historical fact with beautiful scenery and excellent facilities.

Our first morning tea was at Cowra, where we were fascinated by the holograph presentation of the Japanese prisoners' breakout from their wartime captivity at Cowra Camp. The site lay barren but peaceful as we rode past, with our imaginations full of the tragic loss of life there more than sixty years ago.

After viewing the POW camp ruins and the Break Out Point memorial cairn we set off through drought desiccated sheep country to the National Trust township of Carcoar, where Ross Townsend opened up the Royal Hotel especially for our lunchtime stop. The town was surveyed in 1838 as the third town to be established west of the Blue Mountains, and its Georgian and Victorian buildings, including a lovely Blakett church, were evocative of times past.

Passing Blayney and Bathurst, our journey continued with a walk through the gold mining village of Sofala where beautiful weather added to the impressions gained from the handful of miner's cottages and inns that remain from a township that once stretched for 16 kilometres along the banks of the Turon River.

Dinner in our Mudgee hotel was a convivial affair, with a presentation of Lawson's poems to add to the local wines and a delicious meal. We also enjoyed the company of library enthusiasts from the Mid Western District, and look forward to closer relationships with them in future.

Next day we spent time at Gulgong, the site of the gold mine that inspired Henry's father Peter. Here we spent several happy hours, enjoying a presentation at the Henry Lawson Centre, the extraordinary Gulgong Museum and excellent craft and design facilities as well as a delicious lunch. With readings from Lawson's works ringing in our ears we visited the site of Peter Lawson's farm cottage and the school



Tour participants at the Grenfell Henry Lawson memorial

young Henry attended, before sampling Oakley's local wines and exploring the vineyard museum.

The following day we travelled to Cowra through Wellington, Molong, Cudal and Canowindra, arriving at the Japanese Garden and Cultural Centre restaurant in time for lunch. Then we were off to Grenfell, Henry Lawson's birthplace, where we inspected gold mine remains. We also visited the site of the Lawson's first cottage, now commemorated by a huge Eucalypt planted as a memorial by Henry's daughter.

It was cold and dark when we got back to the National Library, but the gold light and exciting history of our journey will warm our thoughts for months to come. Thanks, Terry, for a truly outstanding trip.

Yvonne Cramer

Weston - A life of horticulture

Charles Weston, Charles Scrivener and Walter and Marion Griffin left us a spectacular city legacy; a garden city. Charles Weston worked in Canberra between 1911 and 1926 and in this time was responsible for greening an open, windswept, and largely treeless, plain. He is the person primarily responsible for planting two million trees and shrubs to create the garden city. What background did he have as a foundation to achieve this substantial landscape success?

Next month the Friends committee, in conjunction with the Australian Garden History Society, will present the lecture '*Weston – a life of horticulture*'. This lecture will be given by Dr John Gray OAM, a retired landscape architect who spent much of his professional career in Canberra. His last appointment was as the Director of Landscape Architecture for the National Capital Development Commission. Dr Gray has been researching Canberra's landscape history for many years and has lectured and published books and articles on the subject, as well as completing a doctoral thesis on horticulturist Charles Weston.

The lecture will be held at 6pm on Thursday 19 July in the Conference Room at the National Library. Entry fee is \$10 for Friends and Garden History Society members and \$15 for non-members, payable at the door, which includes light refreshments after the lecture. To book, please contact the Friends office on (02) 6262 1698 or email friends@nla.gov.au.

Kenneth Myer Lecture

Bookings are coming in steadily for the Kenneth Myer Lecture on 9 August 2007. This year's lecture will be delivered by well-known and respected political journalist Michelle Grattan. Michelle has selected the topic "Is Politics Still a Vocation".

At the time of printing this newsletter, more than half of the available seating in the Library Theatre has been booked and those interested in attending should reserve a seat quickly. To guarantee your seat, call the Friends office on (02) 6262 1698.

Friends of the NLA Book Club

The Friends Book Club is held on the last Tuesday of each month, from 7-8.30pm in the Friends Lounge at the National Library. The June meeting will be held on 26 June and the book for discussion will be *The Infidel* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali.



If you would like to participate in the June Friends Book Club, please RSVP to Sharyn in the Friends Office on (02) 6262 1551 or sobrien@nla.gov.au. Numbers are limited to a maximum of 30 participants. The National Library bookshop has copies of *The Infidel* available for sale, and don't forget that as a Friend of the NLA you receive a 15% discount on all purchases at the bookshop.

Friends Brisbane Tour cancelled

Due to an insufficient number of expressions of interest for this tour, the Committee has decided not to proceed with this event. We do apologise to those who had registered an interest in participating, but without larger numbers this tour could have posed a significant financial risk to the Friends of the NLA.

The committee will instead focus on organising several one-day tours in the Canberra region. Stay tuned for information on our planned spring tour, which will take place in November and include a tour of the gardens at Dick Smith's property 'Bowlyie'.

Dracula after Dark: a bookclub report

On an appropriately cold and blustery Wednesday evening in late April, 40 people gathered in the Friends Lounge to explore the themes in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. *Dracula* is probably the best known mythical character in print and on screen and it was the primary antagonist in the novel, the vampire Count Dracula, which has influenced the hundreds of interpretations we find in popular culture - from Sesame Street to Francis Ford Coppola. Dr Rich Pascal encouraged book club participants to delve a little further into the novel over a few glasses of red wine, and discuss the role of women and conventions as presented by Stoker, as well as the similarity between the character Dracula and other larger than life figures in history.

For those of you who enjoyed this event, or for those who are sorry to have missed it, Dr Rich Pascal will be running a course on Gothic narrative at the Centre for Continuing Education (ANU) entitled 'Children of the Night'. At the time of this newsletter going to print, dates were not yet available for the course, but it will be run on a weekday evening for 8 weeks during the second half of 2007. Full course details and prices should be available soon at www.anu.edu.au/cce/cecourses/index.php or call (02) 6125 2892.

Benefits of Membership

This month we have a new business offering discounts to the Friends of the NLA:

Cabinet of Discoveries

Cabinet of Discoveries are a Canberra based business specialising in the sale of antique maps and prints. They are now offering all Friends a 10% discount on purchases. Visits to the business are by appointment only, but opening hours are quite flexible. Please call to arrange an appointment. Cabinet of Discoveries can be contacted on (02) 6247 6337 or info@oldmapsandprints.com, or visit their website at www.cabinetofdiscoveries.com



Special Offers

True Stories – Bangarra Dance Theatre

From Washington and New York to Beijing and London, Bangarra is acknowledged as one of Australia's most exciting contemporary dance companies. Inspired by two diverse indigenous cultures, 2007 sees the company premiere of its dynamic new work – *True Stories*.

Thanks to the Canberra Theatre, Friends of the National Library may purchase tickets to the Canberra performances of *True Stories* at concession rate of \$43 (a saving of \$7 on full price ticket). For reservations, please call Canberra Ticketing on 02 6275 2700 or book online at www.canberraticketing.com.au

The Jerusalem Quartet and Australian String Quartet

As part of the 2007 Musica Viva program, the Jerusalem Quartet and Australian String Quartet are joining together for an octet tour, performing Mendelssohn's *Octet*, the masterpiece of the genre, and Ross Edwards' meditative and moving *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Each quartet also takes the spotlight to present powerful works by Janacek and Schubert.

This concert will be performed at the Llewellyn Hall, ANU School of Music at 7pm, Thursday 7 June. Friends of the National Library are entitled to a 10% discount on single tickets. For bookings and further information visit www.musicaviva.com.au or call 1800 688 482.

Lettin' Loose

Art Song Canberra presents *Lettin' Loose* with Rebecca Collins (soprano) and Carl Rafferty (piano) at the Wesley Music Centre, National Circuit, Forrest on Tuesday 26 June, 6 for 6.30pm

Rebecca Collins and Carl Rafferty again join forces, this time exploring the influence of jazz, pop and folk on conventional classical art song. The program will include works by Gershwin, Walton, Ives, Stravinsky, Bernstein, Milhaud and many more. It will surprise and delight, containing quirky unfamiliar works as well as some of the best loved jazz standards of all time!

This twilight concert will offer an opportunity for the working music lover to relax and unwind after a day's work, enjoying a high-quality vocal recital preceded by complimentary wine and cheese. And there will still be plenty of time for dinner after the one-hour concert.

Friends of the National Library are entitled to admission at the discounted price of \$22. This includes program and refreshments. Tickets at the door ONLY. Enquiries: Oliver Raymond, 02 6295 9613 or artsong@cyberone.com.au



Coming Events June 2007

The full programme of events can be consulted in the 'What's On' section of the National Library's website at <http://www.nla.gov.au/apps/events/>

<p>Friends Events Canberra Series Lecture: Professor Penny Sackett. Wednesday 6 June, 12:30-1:30pm Conference Room Entry fee: \$5.</p>	<p>Professor Penny Sackett, Director of the Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics Mt Stromlo and Siding Spring Observatories, will present a lunchtime lecture on the development of the Giant Magellan Telescope Booking: (02) 6262 1698 or friends@nla.gov.au.</p>
<p>Friends Book Club Tuesday, 26 June 7:00-8:30 pm Friends Lounge</p>	<p>The Friends Book Club meets on the last Tuesday of each month at 7pm. The book for discussion at the June meeting will be <i>The Infidel</i> by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Bookings required on (02) 6262 1551 or friends@nla.gov.au.</p>

NLA talks and events

<p>Afternoon book reading with Judy Horacek Sunday, June 10, 2:00-3:00 pm Foyer, Theatre</p>	<p>Join award winning illustrator, cartoonist and author, Judy Horacek, as she reads from her latest children's book <i>The Story of Growl</i>. Book signing to follow the event. This is a free event. Bookings: (02) 6262 1271</p>
<p>Bodyline - The Miniseries (1984) Sunday, 17 June 10:30 am - 5:00 pm Theatre</p>	<p>DVD, 330 min plus 3 intervals. In conjunction with the <i>How's That!</i> Exhibition. <i>Bodyline</i> explores the Australian/English relations during the 1930's Ashes tour when things were 'not just cricket'. Starring Hugo Weaving and Gary Sweet. Bookings not required.</p>
<p>Reader Education - Hatch, Match and Dispatch: Finding Records of Life Events @ the NLA Tuesday, 19 June, 12:30-1:30pm Ferguson Room</p>	<p>Explore the rich resources held by the NLA for birth, deaths and marriages, as well as parish registers and cemetery records. Discover how to use these records and find clues to fill in those vital details on your family tree. Bookings not required.</p>
<p>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) Thursday, 21 June 6:00 - 8:00 pm Theatre</p>	<p>DVD, 115 mins, Rated M An epic love story and a martial arts drama, set in China during the Qing dynasty. Bookings not required. Entry by gold coin donation</p>
<p>Winter Tales - Indigenous Leadership and Social Justice Sunday, 24 June, 1:30-5:00 pm Conference Room</p>	<p>Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination's Kerry Tim marks the 40th anniversary of the 'Yes' vote in the 1967 Referendum. Presented in association with the Australian Women's Archives Project. Fee: \$15, afternoon tea included Bookings: (02) 6262 1161</p>

<p>Wintering: Surviving the Antarctic Night Wednesday, 27 June 6:30 - 7:30 pm Theatre</p>	<p>Author and ANU Professor Tom Griffiths discusses understanding and surviving Antarctic winters - the ultimate test of sanity. Book signing follows. This is a free event</p> <p>Bookings: (02) 6262 1271</p>
<p>The Griffyn Ensemble - Far Horizons Friday, 29 June 7:00 - 8:30 pm Foyer</p>	<p>Relax to an evening of exquisite chamber music, exploring music written and inspired by Australia's finest women composers.</p> <p>Tickets: \$18 Adult; \$12 Concession & Friends of NLA; \$8 under 18. For tickets call The Street Theatre: (02) 6247 1223</p>

NLA exhibitions

<p>Coee: Australia in the 19th Century Opens Thursday 14 June Exhibition Gallery</p>	<p>Evoking an era that saw the establishment of towns, the expansion into the countryside and the changes wrought by the discovery of gold in the middle of the century, Coee uses drawings, watercolours and photographs to tell the story of who we were and how we lived then.</p> <p>The exhibition concentrates on everyday happenings. It demonstrates the growth of the colonies and the hardships and successes of those who came to a new land hoping to build a better life for themselves. Drawn entirely from the National Library's pictorial collection, the exhibition gives a tantalising glimpse of the 19th century riches it holds.</p>
<p>Mr Gilbert's Beautiful Parrakeet Opens Friday 22 June Visitor Centre</p>	<p>John Gilbert (1812–1845) was an English naturalist and explorer who travelled to Australia with John Gould in 1838. While visiting the Darling Downs he discovered a parrot that he described in a letter to Gould as 'without exception the most beautiful of the whole tribe I have seen in Australia'. Sadly, there have been no confirmed sightings of Gilbert's 'beautiful parrakeet', later known as the paradise parrot, since 1927.</p> <p>This display focuses on the almost certainly extinct paradise parrot as a symbol of all those birds and animals which have ceased to exist due to hunting or habitat destruction. Visitors will have the opportunity to view special items from the Library's collections such as the work of John Gould, Gregory Macalister Mathews and Gracius Broinowski and the watercolours of William Cooper, E.E. Gostelow and Neville Cayley.</p>
<p>How's That! Until Sunday, 17 June 2007 Visitor Centre Free</p>	<p>The National Library holds a significant collection of cricket memorabilia, particularly from the pre-World War II period, and it continues to acquire the memoirs of past and present players. This exhibition features some of the key pieces from this collection.</p>

