

President's Newsletter June 2011

Abouttime

The largest history festival in the world? No-one who glanced at the massive schedule of events (some 514 in all, presented by 325 groups, according to the official website) held throughout South Australia under the Abouttime banner last month would want to question that claim. Putting it all together was a remarkable achievement on the part of Margaret Anderson, Mandy Paul and their colleagues from History SA (the former History Trust, as some still think of it). Let's hope that the effort of maintaining the momentum over a full four weeks and three days has not entirely exhausted them – we still have the State History conference to come, just over two months from now!

The Historian's Dilemma

The History Council's contribution to Abouttime was a well-attended public forum held on 4 May at the State Library's Hetzel Theatre, a sequel to the successful inaugural event we staged for History Week 2010. This year's theme was the historian's responsibilities in presenting and commenting on the past, and in particular past injustices. How, how far and by what standards should historians pass judgement on 'the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind' (as Edward Gibbon notoriously characterised the main subject matter of history)?

After a warm welcome by Alan Smith, Director of the State Library, the four panellists each put their own particular viewpoint on this perennial question. John Bannon spoke from the viewpoint of a biographer, who needs to work out the actions and views of his or her subject 'in the round', as the product of circumstances and values which may be very different from those of the present day. Rosa Garcia, Education Manager in the Migration Museum, told of her "Whose History?" education program which aims to develop "critical literacy" by presenting students with two plausible narratives of South Australian history, one from the viewpoint of a white colonist, the other from that of the dispossessed original inhabitants. Rebecca Richards, who is shortly to leave for Oxford as Australia's first Indigenous Rhodes Scholar, then discussed the role of history and archaeology in her own personal development, and the inextricable but complex relationship between objectivity and value judgements in all understandings of the past. Lastly Alan Mayne of the University of South Australia also spoke of his research, both on the Barrow Creek 'massacre' (or 'incident') in the 1870s, and then on the historical stereotype of the 'slum', and its unfortunate continuing consequences in India today – both examples of how the historian's probing can raise uncomfortable questions about accepted verities.

The near-capacity audience followed these thoughtful and diverse presentations with a flow of comment and questions, which might have continued almost indefinitely if only time had permitted.

Should you have missed the forum, or were there and would like the opportunity to hear some or all of it again, a podcast of the proceedings is now available: go to <http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/site/page.cfm?u=734#e1203>

The History Council is very grateful to the four panellists, to our kind hosts at the State Library, and to all who supported this venture, including our new sponsors Brick Kiln Wines, whose excellent shiraz was among the refreshments available before proceedings commenced.

Banner and Website

Last month's forum was notable not only for all the reasons mentioned above, but because it provided the first occasion on which the History Council's new banner was displayed – notwithstanding apparent successive attempts by the chair (myself) to knock or indeed merely blow it over! (Next time we'll make sure that there is a heavy weight on the base, to forestall any further such distractions.) The banner's striking design by Alison Fort, incorporating a variety of images (local, national and international) chosen to suggest the diversity of historical interests represented among our members, attracted a good deal of favourable attention and comment. We plan to display the banner at all our future events – part of the 'branding' exercise which now seems essential for organizations like ours.

And now you can see it for yourself, at www.historycouncilsa.org.au/resources/downloads

For yes, indeed, after many months and much deliberation, research and (towards the end, increasingly copious email interchanges between designer Alison Fort, builder Ursh Richards, numerous holders of image copyrights, and your humble servant) the History Council's new website has gone live. It is still very much a work in progress, and we are still working out how best to keep it up to date and relevant to our whole membership. But the basic structure is there, telling enquirers who we are and what we do, besides drawing attention to current issues affecting the historical community in South Australia, and listing future events of likely interest.

On this last point, I should like to repeat the plea in my March Newsletter for our corporate member organizations to send to secretary@historycouncilsa.org.au details of their forthcoming meetings and other activities, so that these can be publicised on our website. This seems to me a vital part of the History Council's prime role, that of promoting history throughout South Australia.

Further, we would welcome comment and feedback on the new website, in particular any suggestions about how it might be made more useful and/or user-friendly. We don't want to duplicate what other groups and organizations are already doing. But there may well be important niches which remain unfilled. One thought which has crossed my mind is the possibility of an on-line current and cumulative bibliography of South Australian history, which could bring together in one place all the various sorts of publications – books, articles, theses, chapters, conference papers, lectures, talks, exhibitions, etc. – appearing in the course of a calendar year which touch on aspects of South Australia, colony, province and state. I don't think that there is anything quite like this available at present, and it seems to me that it might be of considerable value, as the amount of

published information on South Australian history grows inexorably larger and larger every year. Please let me know what you think.

Book launches

Among the most enjoyable aspects of Abouttime for me personally were the book launches. Indeed last month saw not only a plethora of historical exhibitions, guided tours, talks and walks, but the public debuts, comings-out, or christenings of some major new publications on very diverse aspects of South Australian history. Three in particular must be mentioned.

Ian Henschke, latterly of Stateline fame, now ABC Radio 891 morning anchorman, pushed off *Germans: Travellers, Settlers and their Descendants in South Australia*, edited by Peter Monteath of Flinders University for Wakefield Press, whose Michael Bollen also figures among a long list of distinguished and knowledgeable contributors, including Peter Muhlhausler, Christine Lockwood, Bill Edwards, Mary-Anne Gale, Lois Zweck, Horst Lucke, Angele Heuzenroder, Maurice Schild, Catherine Speck and Barbara Ponierwierski (whose incisive chapter on 'National Socialism in South Australia' has deservedly attracted considerable media coverage). This really is a must-have book for anyone who wants to understand one of the most distinctive and fascinating characteristics of our state, its complex and varied German heritage.

Philip Jones, who writes about German naturalists and museums in nineteenth-century SA for the Monteath volume, also provides a free-standing account of some of the first surviving visual impressions of South Australia and the Northern Territory in his *Images of the Interior: Seven Central Australian Photographers* (South Australian Museum and Wakefield Press). This book could be regarded as an extended catalogue of the collection of photographs and other illustrative materials now on display at the SA Museum, where it was launched by the Museum's Director, Dr Suzanne Miller. Besides the relatively well-known Francis J Gillen, and perhaps Rex Battarbee, Jones includes a selection of outstanding black-and-white images of people and places captured by (to me at least) less familiar names, including the ornithologist Captain S A White, the Swiss evangelist Ernest Eugene Kramer and the medical anthropologist Cecil John Hackett. These photographs supplement the evidence of written sources, providing another and very striking way to appreciate some of the nature of life on the South Australia frontier in the formative era between the late nineteenth century and World War II.

Finally, yet another Wakefield Press good-looker, this time Patricia Sumerling's gorgeous and evocatively-illustrated social history of *The Adelaide Park Lands*, launched appropriately enough by Keith Conlon (who, as they say, surely needs no introduction) at the Adelaide Bowling Club on Dequetteville Terrace, the last survivor of what were once three lawn bowls clubs, each occupying a large parcel of park land leased from the Adelaide City Council. Generously subsidised by the ACC, this handsome coffee-table volume of 288 pages is only the shorter version; those requiring the fully-referenced unabridged text are referred to a transcript in the Council's Archives. But there is plenty here to whet the appetite, if not to satisfy it fully, in Sumerling's lively account of how the parklands were used by people of all kinds in all sorts of ways (it was the chapter entitled 'The Dark Underbelly of the Park Lands', with its accounts of crime, gaming, suicides and sexual activities of various kinds which predictably attracted the *Advertiser's* attention). No less interesting, however, is

the second half of the book, which traces the changing physical appearance and management of the park lands from the first map drawn by William Light down to the present day. The relevance of this detailed background to the current fierce controversy over the proposed transfer of park lands surrounding the Adelaide Oval to the new Stadium Management Authority goes without saying.

PS: it is reliably reported that the launch of Jack Cross's *Great Central State* (mentioned in my March Newsletter) was the centrepiece of Northern Territory 'independence day' centenary celebrations in Darwin some months back. However local honour is saved, for Jack and Wakefield Press are staging a second, Adelaide, launch later this month at the Central Art School in Norwood (where Jack fills in any spare moments left over from running the Friends of SA Archives, and teaching at various tertiary institutions around town...).

State History Conference

The full programme for the combined State History Conference and the inaugural Australian conference of Professional Historians Associations was released last month, and is available at <http://www.history.sa.gov.au/2011-conference-brochure.pdf>. Our own contribution to this historical extravaganza takes the form of the annual History Council lecture, 'South Australia and Australia, Reflections on their Histories', to be delivered by Dr John Hirst on Thursday evening 4 August at 6 pm in Napier Theatre 102, University of Adelaide, with light refreshments to follow. Admission by gold coin; registration necessary, via the History SA website, or by telephone to (08) 8203 9888.

[The Napier Building is the high-rise tower facing North Terrace, and Theatre 102 is on the first floor, with lift access; parking is available from 4.30 pm in the adjacent underground carpark, by Gate 23 on North Terrace just east of Pulteney St; \$5 in coins to the ticket machine lets you park until 8 am the following day if so inclined].

National History Teachers Conference

Another major forthcoming conference which should certainly not be forgotten is that of the History Teachers Association, to be hosted this year by the History Teachers Association of South Australia at Loreto College from 3-5 October. The theme of this year's conference is 'History with a Difference'; particular emphasis will be given, perhaps not surprisingly, to the new National History Curriculum

For further details of speakers and registration forms, etc., go to the HTASA website, www.htasa.org.au

National Archives Advisory Committee

It is pleasing to report another happy sequel to the recent highly successful campaign in which the History Council joined with many others to protest against the planned closure of the regional offices of National Archives of Australia in Adelaide, Darwin and Hobart. Dr John Bannon, Immediate Past-President of the HCSA, has been appointed to chair the body which advises the management of

National Archives on the needs and views of those who use its collections throughout the country. Given John's prominent role in persuading all concerned to reverse the Federal government's previously-announced and strongly-defended closure decision, we may be confident that his wise counsel will help ensure that regional users' interests are not henceforth easily brushed aside.

With best wishes from Wilfrid Prest

6 June 2011