



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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### **DATE PALM PRODUCER WINS PRESTIGIOUS HISTORY FELLOWSHIP + HISTORIAN OF THE YEAR NOMINATIONS OPEN**

Riverland date palm producer David Reilly has won the prestigious 2024 History Council of South Australia Fellowship for his project which will trace the introduction and cultivation of date palms across the state.

Mr Reilly's project is a historical journey from the military parade grounds in Adelaide to remote outback towns. It is intertwined with the history of the Muslim cameleers, the Overland Telegraph, the Ghan railway, Mound Springs, Great Artesian Basin, indigenous lands, and outback cattle stations, and engages with figures such as botanist Baron Ferdinand von Mueller, the Chaffey brothers, industrialist Essington Lewis, and Reverend John Flynn.

The annual HCSA Fellowship aims to foster the researching and writing of South Australian history, with the winner receiving \$2000 as well as support accessing the State Library of South Australia (SLSA) collection and the opportunity to share their research with a keynote lecture.

Fellowship judge and co-director of the Marsden Szwarcbord Foundation, Dr Susan Marsden, was impressed by Mr Reilly's novel topic and scope with a potential for arousing broad public interest, and for demonstrating how historical projects can be done by all Australians, not only professional historians.

Chair of the judging panel, South Australia's History Advocate Dr Kiera Lindsey, highlighted the potential for this environmental history to explore new connections between regional and urban contexts while also drawing attention to the distinctive ways humans are constantly shaping and reshaping South Australia.

For fellow judge and SLSA team Leader of Research & Discovery, David Brooks, it was the project's ability to tell a surprising and engrossing story about South Australia's multicultural history while also examining the state's agricultural and environmental histories that proved most compelling.

"The project certainly promises to provide South Australia with a unique 'date with history,'" he said.

In 2024, the History Council of South Australia received nine applications for the annual HCSA fellowship program on a range of topics from the institutional life of women and children, to the impact of art and architecture, religion and immigration and the biographies of famous and infamous South Australians.

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*For media interviews, please contact judging panel chair Dr Kiera Lindsey on 0408 456 393 or [klindsey@history.sa.gov.au](mailto:klindsey@history.sa.gov.au), or fellowship winner David Reilly on 0487 770 871 or [reilly@gurradowns.com.au](mailto:reilly@gurradowns.com.au).*

Mr Reilly said he was delighted to win the fellowship.

“The first historical record of date palms in South Australia can be traced to the Lutheran missionaries who planted this species in Tanunda during the 1850s,” he said.

“The early colonial government went to extraordinary efforts to establish a date industry in South Australia, and since then, species have also been imported from Karachi, while the French Government has also gifted the state Algerian date palms. And, although few passersby know their stories, many of these original date palms still stand tall and proud today.”

***About the winner: David Reilly***

Growing up across rural Australia, David Reilly is well-acquainted with the nation’s inland. His first career as a stock agent took him all throughout the country where he witnessed firsthand the arid and harsh landscapes, along with the challenges and opportunities they present. In 1993, when exploring options for salt-tolerant crops, he first came across date palms. What originated as research for his own foray into growing dates quickly became a fascination with the rich history of date palms in Australia. Stumbling across previously unknown records fuelled his interest in the idea of a publication about this often-overlooked history.

Following his research around the globe – from the deserts of the Middle East and North Africa to the arid western United States and Mexico – Mr Reilly has dedicated his life to the understanding of date palms. On Gurra Downs, an intergenerational family farm in the Riverland, Mr Reilly and his family have spent the last 26 years expanding their date palm operations, importing over 40 cultivars, becoming a registered research and development site, and quickly making their name as the date palm experts of Australia. He is passionate about exploring forgotten histories and leaving a legacy behind for future generations to build upon.

**2025 HISTORIAN OF THE YEAR AWARDS - NOMINATIONS OPEN**

Nominations are now open for the 2025 Historian of the Year Awards, which seek to recognise the outstanding achievements of an individual or group who have made a major contribution in the field of history in South Australia.

Nominations are sought in seven categories: Historian of the Year, Emerging Historian, Life Long Historian, Digital Technologies Award, Regional History Award, Community History Award, and Oral History Excellence.

Nominations close 5 April 2025. Further information can be found at [www.historycouncilsa.org.au](http://www.historycouncilsa.org.au).

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