

Real to Reel

Newsletter of Oral History Tasmania Inc.



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NEWS FROM THE EXECUTIVE – Jill Cassidy

Seminar and AGM

Attendees at the August seminar enjoyed the day. By coincidence all speakers had some connection with farming and the land which attracted a number of non-members interested in those topics, and they participated enthusiastically with questions and comments.

At the Annual General Meeting, Jen Thompson decided not to stand for re-election. Since joining the committee two years ago Jen has been very active in our deliberations. As well, she volunteered to research our online presence and keep the website up to date, and represented Tasmania on the national conference program committee. We will miss her contributions and hope that in the future her time will allow her once again to put her name forward for election.

New committee member needed

Now that Jen has stood down there is a vacancy on the committee. Meetings are not onerous and are held in daytime hours on a day that suits all committee members. Please contact me on 0418 178 098 if you would like to volunteer.

National conference 11–12 October 2019

Next year’s national conference will be held in Brisbane over the two days of Friday 11 and Saturday 12, with Sunday 13 available for tours. Please put these dates in your diary.

New copyright changes

On 1 January 2019, changes to Australia’s copyright duration laws will come into effect. Amendments to the Copyright Act 1968 will apply new standard terms of copyright protection in Australia to a range of copyright materials. This includes sound recordings, as well as literary, dramatic, musical and artistic works, films and Crown copyright materials. For more information, visit communications.gov.au

Reduced price for Fostex digital recorder

At our recent meeting the committee decided to reduce the cost of Fostex hire in order to encourage members to use this broadcast quality machine. It will now cost \$20 per week instead of \$30; the indemnity form to cover damage will remain the same.

St Matthias Anglican church Windermere

A celebration will be held on the weekend Friday 23 – Sunday 25 November of the 175th anniversary of the first service held there in 1843. The organisers are keen to run oral history interviews with descendants of pioneer families and older current parishioners. Please contact me if you would like to volunteer your services.

Australian IOHA President

At the recent conference in Finland, South Australian Sue Anderson was elected President of the International Oral History Association. Members will know of her as the long-time editor of the *OHA Journal*.



Figure 1. The IOHA Council with new President Sue Anderson in the centre. (Essi Nerg photo)

Feedback on ‘One hell of an inferno: Oral History and the 1967 Tasmanian bushfires’

Member Jane Amos, currently residing in Queensland, wrote to Ian Terry about her reaction, and that of her partner, to his article which was printed in the April edition of *Real to Reel*. Her letter is reprinted here with permission.

My partner and I have just read your article about the Tasmanian Bush Fires in the Oral History Tasmania issue of *Real to Reel*. We found the article very moving and it brought back a lot of memories, particularly for my partner. I have suggested that he write his memories down as he became very emotional on reading the article. Whether he does or not is his decision.

On the day he was an apprentice carpenter working with the Housing Commission and building houses at Chigwell. He could see the smoke and knew it was a bad day for fires. A message came through that one of his work mate's houses at Kingston was threatened, so his mates downed tools and drove down to Kingston to fight the fire. He remembers looking around to find his mates had moved on and he was on his own in the almost pitch black. Terrified, he broke into a nearby house and doused himself with coke from a carton he found in the house, no water being available. When the owner of the house arrived, my partner apologised for breaking into his house and using his coke. Of course, the owner was just grateful that his house was still standing. Michael, my partner, grew up at Hillborough Road, South Hobart, and luckily his house was spared, although for many weeks after the event his mother became almost hysterical when she heard the wind rustling through the dry and singed leaves of the trees nearby. The house overlooked the Cascade Brewery and he remembers seeing pallets of beer bottles that had turned into a molten mass of glowing glass. After reading your article, he was amazed that he had never considered before how the children had been affected.

I remember the day as being my first day of school in Hobart. I had previously attended boarding school in Launceston and had moved to Hobart to complete matriculation at Hobart Matric College. I was boarding in a hostel on the Domain. I recall my fellow boarders from the fire affected areas, frantically trying to ring their parents and family to hear if they were all right.

I only wish that I had been able to visit the exhibition, but as I live in Brisbane, visits to Tasmania are infrequent. Thank you for a fantastic article.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2017–2018

Jill Cassidy

It gives me great pleasure to present the President's report for 2017–2018.

In August 2017 we held a very interesting seminar. Ian Terry gave a fascinating lecture about 'One hell of an inferno: oral history and the 1967 Tasmanian bushfires', illustrating the talk with video clips from his interviews. Dr Jen Thompson then transported us to another world with 'The Secrets of the Shakespeare Ladies', a group of women from the Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club who meet regularly to read Shakespeare aloud. Finally, Dr Nicolás Goc spoke movingly about 'The migrant experience and oral history'. All were well received by the audience.

The organisation of the seminar was somewhat different from previous years. Unfortunately, after several years the Launceston Historical Society decided not to continue as collaborators; nevertheless there was a good attendance. On the other hand, we were delighted with the friendly and efficient technological service provided by a new company, Bent Eared Records, and are using them again for the 2018 seminar.

The Annual General Meeting approved the change to the constitution which will allow us to hold the AGM and seminar in October, i.e. within four months of the last financial year, rather than the three which the constitution had previously specified. It is unclear if this will ever occur but the option is now available should there again be difficulty in choosing a date which does not clash with other events.

Three Tasmanians attended last September's biennial national conference in Sydney which was a record. Rena Henderson proved a very worthwhile recipient of our scholarship, participating enthusiastically in the program and writing a comprehensive and insightful report for *Real to Reel*. I am grateful to the committee for helping to pay my expenses and allowing me to represent the state at the conference and in the national Annual General Meeting. The third Tasmanian, Anthony Black, is one of the speakers at the 2018 seminar.

The retractable banner which was bought last year has been commented on favourably. Regrettably, it was damaged in a strong wind during the last workshop and the banner itself had to be re-done, although the hardware that holds it in place was able to be re-used.

I was asked last year to write a history of Oral History Tasmania to be included in the upcoming book, *The Kaleidoscope of Launceston: Shedding More Light on the Fabric* (a follow-up to 2016's *The Fabric of Launceston*). The task proved very interesting and, importantly, it will provide the association with more publicity.

This year's Oral History Workshop was held at the new venue of the St Johns Parish Centre. The major reason for moving from the Queen Victoria Museum at Inveresk is that it now closes earlier and there is not enough time to cover everything by 3.30. The location was a good one although more expensive. It was unfortunate that in their publicity the National Trust inserted the wrong date, but luckily this did not seem to cause problems for anyone.

The committee is still running smoothly, with Alison Johnston continuing to take the minutes and Lana Wall keeping track of the finances. In addition, Leonie Prevost undertook to keep the list of correspondence while Pauline Schindler helps with the production of *Real to Reel*. Jen Thompson volunteered for several tasks including keeping the website up to date, and also agreed to be the Tasmanian representative on the national conference planning committee. It is therefore with regret that I have to announce that she has decided not to continue on the committee due to increased work commitments. I wish to thank them all, along with Terry Fritsche and Andrew Parsons. And as always I would like to thank the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery for its continued support.

* * *

STATEMENT OF RECEIPTS AND PAYMENTS

Oral History Tasmania Inc	2018	2017
For the year ended 30 June 2018	\$	\$
	<i>Notes</i>	
Receipts		
Equipment hire	150	120
Interest received	24	24
Membership	1,660	1,475
Sale of handbooks	243	158
Seminar/AGM	635	156
Term deposit interest	205	277
Workshop	260	510
Total Receipts	3,177	2,720
Payments		
Audit fee	100	100
Equipment	-	244
Executive expenses	116	297
Filing fees	62	61
Handbooks	275	229
Insurance - equipment	559	558
National conference	-	900
OHAA capitation fees	510	465
Scholarship	103	897
Seminar/AGM costs	595	36
Website	350	816
Workshop	315	297
Total Payments	2,985	4,900
Net surplus/(deficit) for the year	192	(2,180)
Accumulated funds at the beginning of the financial year	12,236	14,416
Accumulated funds at the end of the financial year	12,428	12,236
Represented by:		
Commonwealth Bank - cheque account	4,704	4,717
Mystate Financial - term deposit	7,724	7,519
	12,428	12,236

I have examined the financial records and supporting documents of Oral History Tasmania Inc for the year ended 30 June 2018.

I report as follows:

I have obtained the information required.

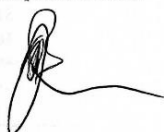
The attached accounts are properly drawn up so as to exhibit a true and correct view of the financial position, according to the information at my disposal and the explanations given to me.

The rules relating to the administration of the funds have been observed.

Date: 21 July 2018

Name: Phillip James Brown

Signed:



THE SECRETS OF THE SHAKESPEARE LADIES

Dr Jen Thompson

Talk given at the Oral History Tasmania seminar on 5 August 2017. Jen Thompson had recently moved to Tasmania and was a member of the OHT committee.

When I was invited to a meeting of the Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club in 1999, at the age of 40, I was one of the youngest women there. The women ranged in age from 60 to 94 years. I later learned there had been nine nonagenarians and five octogenarians in the club's history. The Shakespeare Club had been meeting in members' homes every three weeks to read aloud the works of Shakespeare since 4 July 1904. Readings are held between the months of February and November each year, so I estimated the Shakespeare ladies had conducted over one and a half thousand readings of Shakespeare. Through the course of two world wars, a depression, the nuclear bomb, a cold war and the spectre of the millennium bug, these women kept reading. At one point in the club's history, the women read while they knitted socks for soldiers. They also sent care packages to the Vicar of Stratford well into the 1950s. Many of the women held active memberships of between 29 and 66 years. Each of these women were actively reading sonnets and taking part in the Shakespeare plays and living to a great age. This club seemed to have found the Elixir of Life and I sought to discover it without upsetting the cup.

The art of holding a teacup provides a good analogy for the research I embarked upon. The teacup is a fragile artefact of an earlier genteel English society; it is operated using culturally and historically nuanced understandings of social intercourse. It is a vessel for a warming and sometimes exotic brew. It carries connotations of domestic comfort, inclusivity, relaxation and civility. Roughly handled it can be broken.

In the course of my research I was to learn the importance of confidentiality and trust. I had been a member for five years before I presumed to offer to write the Club history. By that time I was known as a regular member and acculturated into the observances of the Club. This was a learning curve for a young modern woman. I was a protégé of Gough Whitlam, a working class girl from a mining town who studied Asian cultures, spoke Indonesian and travelled to Jakarta, Bandung and Sanur at the age of sixteen. Although I enjoyed English literature and Shakespeare, I saw a republican future for Australia in a South-East Asian context. I had benefited from free university education, a global perspective and the intellectual and sexual liberation of the 1970s. I wondered if a conservative, anglophile, upper middle class pastoral literary club would suit me. I doubt I would have been admitted in 1904. The club has demonstrated an ability to change with the times while maintaining a central focus, egalitarian inclusiveness and economy of time. I came to understand the nuances of self-effacement and confidentiality that had ensured the longevity of such a group. Where personal opinions or political persuasions differed, they were not stridently argued as they were not usually relevant to the harmonious operation and social discourse of the Club.

Many of the women were unknown to each other outside of the meetings. This seems almost unbelievable in a small town, but the meetings were not for idle chat or gossip and the readings could not be interrupted by conversation. Through my interviews I was able to make connections between the women and their stories that they were unaware of. For example, before their marriages and arrival in Wagga Wagga, two of them had trained as architects, three were painters, four were elocution teachers, most were university graduates. The women who remained single were teachers, artists and businesswomen. Yet none of these professions had relevance to the reading of Shakespeare's plays and private matters were not discussed. I had to be aware that my role was to collect the information for the purpose of the history rather than pass along anecdotes from the past that may not be relevant or may even be upsetting. I was aware of the danger of altering the nature of the Club by passing on information that might alter the behaviour of the subjects of my observation. The research also disrupted my own expectations. For instance, I found there were relatively few actresses, only two or three in the long history of the club. This was a reading rather than a performing group and almost all of the women interviewed were nervous about their own abilities and shy of public performance. So, how does one get an invitation to such a select and private gathering of women?

I was admitted to the Club by a time-honoured method. A member of the community had heard of my arrival in town through the educational and social networks, and had invited me to attend a meeting as a guest. I arrived at an address, an old federation house in a leafy street, punctually at 2 p.m. The hostess for the day greeted me at

the door and showed me to the lounge room where a dozen smiling ladies welcomed me. The business meeting began with the President briefly introducing me by name to the attendant members. The business meeting was chiefly about fixing upon the next play to be read and appointing a casting director to organise the parts and notify members of their roles. A donation to the Eisteddfod Society was voted upon. Certain members were to adjudicate and present the Shakespeare Cup in honour of the founding president. The secretary was to send flowers to a member in hospital. The treasurer delivered a quick report on the finances, the balance of which, I later learned, was usually kept in a tin under the bed. The meeting lasted thirty minutes with no chit-chat. Each member drew out their copy of Shakespeare. I was lent a copy belonging to Mrs Holmes and inscribed in 1937 to her husband from a friend, 'as an aid to wooing.'

For the next two hours the chosen play was read, each character anticipating her cue and falling into the cadence and rhythm of Shakespeare's time. We laughed and sighed and were transported by the dramatic events conjured by the antiquated language and its careful melodious delivery. We were transported far from the dusty paddocks of Wagga Wagga to an England of Elizabethan customs and intrigues for an exploration of the human condition that was both strange and familiar. The women read with varying degrees of practice and expertise, but always with patience and consideration of the other members of their ensemble. At 4.30 the hostess put on the kettle and we adjourned to the dining room for a spread of sandwiches and biscuits. My acquaintance explained that each meeting was held in the home of a different member but that the food was to be kept simple and easy to prepare. There was no competition in the hosting or the cooking. During the years when the profession of 'housewife' often called for fierce competition in the kitchen and decor of the home, this was an important consideration. It placed all of the members on an equal footing. The conversation was about the play or upcoming art and cultural events in the town. I would not be invited to the next meeting as the members would be discussing my visit and voting on whether to extend an invitation to join the club.

Although I have never heard of any guest not being invited to join, some have declined due to work or the inability to regularly attend. Some paid a visit and realised it was not their cup of tea. One lady publicly questioned the authorship of Shakespeare and was invited to attend a meeting to put her case. She was then invited to join as a member but she declined the opportunity. In another instance, the invitation to attend as a member took many years. For some time, a well-known actress was considered unsuitable for membership even though she was frequently a guest performer. Perhaps there were social constraints based upon the perceived lax morality of the theatre, or a belief that actors and directors had too much ego to fit in with such a modest gathering. Social mores change and the actress became a Club stalwart, leading the members on to new fields of educational endeavour.

There are many instances of mothers being superseded in the Club by their daughters over time. Long-standing member Libby Blake came to the Christmas parties to sing Shakespearean songs, her sister accompanying Libby on the violin or piano. Libby's mother Kath Higgins was president from 1959 to 1960. When Libby asked about membership she recalls her mother's reply, "'Oh, no, dear. No, no, no. Not your thing at all'; in other words, 'It's my field. I'm here, you stay away'".¹ Libby was a member of the junior Calliope Club which operated for younger women. Ten years after her mother passed away, Libby retired and had enough time in the day to join the Club. She was a member for over twenty years and served as treasurer, secretary, vice-president and president in that time.

For most members, there is less familiarity with the club when they join and the first reading is memorable. Sarah Holfstead, a volunteer from the School of Arts who joined in 1998, wrote:

My first meeting was terrifying. I became acutely aware of my own shortcomings as I listened to the others read. My body failed me, as it does in times of stress, and my stomach gurgled like a drain, my own voice sounded appallingly rough and I felt thoroughly humiliated by my inability to capture and express the spoken rhythms of Shakespeare's words the first time I was called upon to do so. But to listen to the other members of the group was a revelation: the rich range of voices, the hearty enjoyment of some of Shakespeare's saucier puns, and startling observations on the characters in the plays as if they were real people. These were all important aspects of my education in the delight of verbal Shakespeare. The simple fact of reading out loud, and hearing others read out loud, was so moving an experience, it changed my understanding of Shakespeare forever.²

¹ Libby Blake interviewed by the author, 19 February 2004, recording held by Riverina Regional Archives.

² Sarah Holfstead quoted in Jen Thompson, *The Shakespeare Ladies: A history of the Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club*, 4WPress, Wagga Wagga, 2004, p.70.

In due course, the secretary's letter arrived inviting me to join the Shakespeare Club for an annual fee of ten dollars. I received a copy of the rules. I paid my membership and entered the selective circle of what I was to learn was a remarkable group of well-educated, culturally and socially active, kind and courteous women. It was and is a great privilege.

Four years later, the centenary of the club was approaching. The history of the Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club had been summarised for brief presentations: a time capsule in the Civic Centre, the opening of the Shakespearean Knot Garden, an annual Christmas party. There was nothing more than a few pages. With the approval of the club, I successfully sought funding from the Wagga Wagga City Council, Charles Sturt University and Eastern Riverina Arts to research and write the history of the club. I wanted to discover how the club had persisted for so many years when so many others had failed. I wanted to celebrate the lives of the women and pass on their lessons in longevity.

The project consisted of archival research, the collection of letters and biographies of past members and their families, recording and transcription of the oral histories of current members, and the writing and production of the book. My first questions were about the emergence of such a club in this location. What was Wagga Wagga like at the turn of the last century, and how did the Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club emerge in that historical context?

If the growth of a town may be likened to the process of human development then Wagga Wagga in 1904 had reached its adolescence. It had outgrown the infancy of the frontier: a time when the newspaper editor was horsewhipped in a public house; when the Police Magistrate galloped out of town with a posse of men only to be wounded by the bushranger Dan Morgan; when a common butcher claimed an English title and sparked the longest running trial of English history; and when a convict called Angel who accompanied Hume and Hovell to Victoria, retired to grow grapes at Lake Albert.

White settlement in this area began when the sons of former convicts moved their herds 'further out' beyond the settled areas looking for new grazing lands. The Government sent explorers who enlisted the local Wiradjuri tribesmen as guides and interpreters to chart new territory.³

A collection of stores, huts and inns sprang up at the intersection of routes south to Melbourne, west to Adelaide and north-east to Sydney. The Court of Petty Sessions followed frontiersmen like flies followed the meat cart and so the district was governed from the courthouse by 1847. The first buildings had already been erected on the river flats of the 'Morum Beja' or 'Big Water' by the time the official survey commenced in 1849.⁴ Wagga Wagga was gazetted as a village in that year. Surveyor Townsend tidily drew up streets and lots in the path of mighty floods that were to beset the residents for the next century.

Despite these early devastating floods, Wagga Wagga grew fat from the trade routes and the supply of provisions to fossickers on their way to the goldfields of Victoria or the central west of New South Wales. The land was fertile and plentiful. Agricultural advances were pioneered at the experimental farm where crops were tested and Shropshire sheep were being bred.⁵

By the turn of the century the squattocracy was established, and the town boasted graceful churches, public and private schools, robust businesses and the favour of banks. Its citizenry enjoyed the fruits of the labours of their forefathers.

The breadbasket of the Riverina had contributed to the prosperity of the state and in turn the success of the colony. By the new century this once distant colony of Britain had become a Commonwealth of independent states and the annual credit expenditure was 11,600,000 pounds.⁶ However, the sons and daughters of Federation still called England 'Home' and the literature and fashion of the motherland dominated all social intercourse. Many dreamed of booking a saloon on the Orient Pacific steamer to London.

³ Sherry Morris, *Wagga Wagga – A history*, Bobby Graham Publishers, Wagga Wagga, 1999.

⁴ William R Ellis, *The Street Names of Wagga Wagga*, Council of the City of Wagga Wagga, 1990.

⁵ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 16 May 1903, p.2 col.4.

⁶ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 5 January 1904, p.1.

Federation had rendered many changes but animosity between the states did not evaporate by act of parliament. Even in 1904, separationists were still actively recruiting citizens who wanted to withdraw from the 'Federal Union.' A meeting convened by Mr J Haynes, MLA, in Sydney addressed 'the antipathy existing throughout New South Wales to the slavery into which we have been sold.' The speaker was requesting a referendum by state parliament on the question of separation. He appears to have been dismissed by the bulk of the attendees but opinions as to the role of women in politics and social life are highlighted by the report of the incident in the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*:

SOME POLITICIANS

There are some politicians who wage keen but ineffective struggle in our state parliament against the enfranchisement of women. These gentlemen would probably have experienced much delight, and would have used the time-honoured and well-worn phrase 'I told you so' had they...been present. There were a number of women present in the front seats who applauded Mr. John Haynes, the principal speaker with much vigour. When, however, a gentleman spoke against Mr. Haynes' views and characterised the gathering as 'a movement for rebellion' some of the women became wildly excited. One in particular cried out in strident tones, 'Rats' and 'Bunkum', whilst others demanded that the speaker 'sit down' and yet others dubbed him a 'Victorian traitor'.⁷

An election was held in 1904 and at least one politician thought it wise to 'court' the newly enfranchised women voters. Mr TI Campbell, candidate for the Murrumbidgee electorate, announced his address to the electors in the Oddfellows Hall and added, 'Ladies Specially Invited'.⁸

The earliest documentary evidence of a local reading of Shakespeare comes from the cast list of the Wagga Wagga Literary Club. This was a reading of *The Taming of the Shrew* at the President, Mr LS Crackanthorpe's home on 21 June 1895. The cast was of mixed sex and included such notable names as Mr Mitchelmore, Mr and Mrs Coleman, and Mr Halloran.

On 30 August 1895 Mr WC Hunter noted in his copy of *The Merchant of Venice* an evening rehearsal at the home of Mr George Coleman.⁹ This literary society continued to perform the works of Shakespeare in the private homes of members and appears to have grown in membership by 17 May 1897 when sixteen of them read *The Comedy of Errors*. Mrs Copland had joined the group. She later became a foundation member of the Wagga Shakespeare Club.

This early literary society shares features in common with the Wagga Shakespeare Club which have persisted to the present day. The membership was limited to the number of people comfortably accommodated in the homes of members. Readings were not public but organised for and by the members. Members shared a common philosophy and socio-economic status. However, the literary society membership differed in that it was open to men and women, including married couples. It was not solely established for the study of Shakespeare.

The earliest record of a Shakespearean Club is that of the St John's Shakespeare Club formed on 20 January 1903. This club began as a special interest group within the St John's Young Men's Club that met every Thursday night in St John's Hall. By December 1902 it consisted of thirty members who aimed at 'mutual helpfulness, mental and moral improvement and national recreation'.¹⁰ The 'objects' of the club were 'to save our youths and to develop the complex man.' The president, Reverend AC Mosley, elaborated on the process of 'saving our youths' by drawing attention to St George fighting a dragon on the back of the old sovereign. No pun intended, he paid respect to 'our late beloved Queen' Victoria as he introduced the analogy. 'Sin', the president explained, was 'a hideous monster to be fought, and many men are fighting the dragon of some besetting sin, which sin they may never have contracted if they had been forewarned by some kind friend in their youth'.¹¹ The president and associates aimed therefore to be 'the confidential friends of the younger members of the club and to pilot them through the rocks and the breakers and save them from the quagmires and the quick sands which they will meet on their journey through life.' This was to be accomplished by a weekly program of table games, ping pong and

⁷ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 2 January 1904.

⁸ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, July 1904.

⁹ Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club, document CSURA RW 1454 /228.

¹⁰ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 20 December 1902, p.3 col.4.

¹¹ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 20 December 1902, p.3 col.4.

chess, a lecture on something of an educational character and half an hour on the horizontal bar or Sandow Developer.¹²

These aspirations are important indices of the moral climate of the time. They may also give a clue as to why the Wagga Shakespeare Club later developed as a ladies club to the exclusion of males. There was a strong delineation between the sexes and a striving for moral rectitude. It also illustrates the 'didactic' value placed upon the works of Shakespeare at the time. The 'lecture on something of an educational character' was devoted to 'Shakespearean recitations'.

The reading of Shakespeare was not confined to specialised clubs. A production of *Hamlet* was reviewed in the *Wagga Advertiser* in August 1902. Travelling players such as the Alfred Dampier Company held short seasons of plays in Wagga. In December 1902, they presented *For the Term of his Natural Life* and the detective drama *From Clue to Capture*.¹³

There were a number of literary and debating societies active in Wagga Wagga at the turn of the century including the Hibernian Society, the St Michael's Literary Society and the St Andrew's Literary and Debating Society. Of these, the Presbyterian St Andrew's Literary and Debating Society is of most relevance to a history of the Wagga Shakespeare Club. In 1902 this society met on a Tuesday evening each month. The President was Reverend Charles Bell. In July they presented a reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the cast included Mrs David Copland and Miss Violet Copland. Both of these women were foundation members of the Wagga Shakespeare Club in 1904. Mrs Charles Bell served as the second President of the Wagga Shakespeare Club and Mrs David Copland succeeded her in the Presidency between 1904 and 1908. By July of 1904 the stage had been set for the establishment of a Shakespeare club for women.

We may not know what inspired Mrs Joel Horwood to form a Club dedicated to the reading of Shakespeare. We can speculate that the idea came from her previous experience. Mrs Horwood travelled to Wagga Wagga from Bendigo where there had been an active Shakespearean Society since 1862. Arriving in Wagga she would have found active church-based literary groups such as St Andrew's and St John's. The Wagga Wagga Literary Club is not mentioned in the newspapers of the day, although public readings were not their forte. She must have perceived a need for a ladies group to read and enjoy Shakespeare in the privacy of their homes. The name chosen was 'The Calliope Club.' The rules have changed little since 1904 in respect to the focus on the reading and study of Shakespeare.

During World War One it appears the readings were suspended in favour of war projects. The club members met to knit socks and scarves for the soldiers. Many members volunteered their time for war work. Mrs Copland, writing after the war, described the club as follows:

The popularity of the Shakespeare Club never wavers, many wishing to join but we keep the number of members to sixteen or eighteen, many not having accommodation for more. It has been the source of much interesting conversation and the music, singing and papers contributed have given much joy and entertainment to us all. In fact, we are a happy family, but we try to make it instructive and 'Lord defend us from being a Mutual Admiration Society'.¹⁴

In the 1920s Mr Allan Wilkie, his wife Miss Hunter-Watts and their Shakespearean theatrical company stayed at the Copland residence, *Hillside*, overlooking the town. Allan Wilkie had been born in Liverpool in 1878. He made his first stage appearance in Cambridge at 21 and spent six years touring with his own company of actors in South Africa, Japan, China and India. He was invited to Australia by JC Williamson in 1914 with his wife Frediswyde Hunter-Watts.¹⁵

Wilkie formed his own company in Melbourne in 1920 and began touring New Zealand and Australia with 25 Shakespearean productions. His sets were said to be minimal but his costumes lavish. In 1924 he was honoured with the Order of Commander of the British Empire in the King's honours lists. This was 'solely for his

¹² Eugen Sandow (1867–1925) is called by Wikipedia 'the father of modern bodybuilding'.

¹³ *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 6 December 1902, p.2 col.4.

¹⁴ Mrs David Copland, Correspondence, Riverina Regional Archives, CSURA RW1254/227.

¹⁵ Advertisement, *Wagga Wagga Progress*, 1969.

educational services as a Shakespearean actor in Australia'.¹⁶ He left Australia in 1930 for New Zealand and Canada. He died in Scotland at the age of 91 in 1969.¹⁷ After their visit to Wagga in 1921, Mrs David Copland wrote:

*We had the pleasure of welcoming you, Miss Hunter-Watts and your talented Company, to Wagga but I am afraid Wagga is a very dull town our people do not appreciate the works of Shakespeare nor the Players, for which I can't forgive them.*¹⁸

It may be assumed the houses were not as full as the Company would have liked. The letter may also reflect a sense of cultural isolation that is evident at other points in the Club's long history. Allan Wilkie was later to write in his journal, the *Shakespearean Quarterly*,

One of the magnificent features of Shakespeare study in Australia and New Zealand is found in the smaller towns where people gather together and form societies for reading and enquiry. I have found literary societies in such towns as Gisborne and Havelock North, in New Zealand, and in Australia towns of the size of Wagga Wagga, where a society meets to read the plays and consider the million aspects of Shakespeare study that provide mental exercise and pleasure.¹⁹

From a review of the rules one can see that self-improvement and a standard of excellence were fundamental to the activities of the club. As Mrs Copland explained,

It is essentially a reading club, many of us very indifferent readers, but gradually warming up with the pleasure and practice of reading the wonderful and inspiring language of Shakespeare, have attained a very high standard of excellence and have become imbued with the real spirit of, and love for his works only attained by real study and infinite care on the part of our Club members.²⁰

The archives of the club were at first difficult to locate. Under the presidency of Joan Osborne in 1979 our records were sent to the Birthplace Trust in Stratford for safekeeping. They were hand-delivered to Dr Levi Fox by Mr David Gilbey. The archivist at the College of Advanced Education, D Brech, lamented this turn of events in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Advertiser*:

Your article in the *Daily Advertiser*, March 29th, conveyed the good news that the few surviving records of the former literary club and the archives of the Wagga Shakespeare Club are being preserved—but 12,000 miles away in the United Kingdom! Such a few papers but what a rich portion of the archival heritage of our town and region....and how sad that the Wagga Shakespeare Club cannot consult its own archives without travelling around the world to do so. And where, when its centenary comes up in 2004 AD, will its early history be? Regrettably not here in the Riverina.²¹

When the Shakespeare Centre Library in Stratford-upon-Avon was contacted in 2002 the correspondence between the former Trust Director, Dr Levi Fox and the Club was traced. There was a receipt dated 1979 for the materials. The Head of Library and Information Resources replied:

I am optimistic that we shall trace your records spurred on by the knowledge that at all costs we must avoid fulfilling the prophecy that once the records came to Stratford they would be lost to the Society.²²

The Stratford records never surfaced. Fortunately only laminated copies and photocopies of the documents had been sent. Dr Brech was invited to inspect the club records in April 1980 and in June accepted the offer to make copies for the Regional Archives. Mrs Beryl Baxter volunteered to write up the history from the records and to use the scrapbook kept by Margaret Read to help compile it. She said it 'was a happy occasion grown out of a mistake.'²³

In 1991, prompted by the discovery of a letter from Dame Mary Gilmore in our records, Mrs Anne Brassil made enquiries about the storage of our original documents in the Riverina Regional Archives at Charles Sturt University. This is where the Club's archival materials and the new oral recordings and book are now stored.

¹⁶ Syllabus, NSW Shakespeare Society, 1925.

¹⁷ Article, *Wagga Wagga Progress*, 1969.

¹⁸ Mrs David Copland, Correspondence, Riverina Regional Archives, CSURA RW1254/227.

¹⁹ Allan Wilkie, *Shakespearean Quarterly*, October 1922.

²⁰ Mr David Copland's letter to Allan Wilkie circa 1921, Correspondence, CSURA RW1454/226.

²¹ D Brecht, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Advertiser*, 31 March 1980.

²² Dr Brock, The Shakespeare Centre Library, 2 September 2002.

²³ WWSC Minutes April 1980.

The archive is a rich collection of minutes, notes, play bills, programs and study notes. There are letters from prominent literary and theatrical figures who visited the club: Dame Mary Gilmore, Sybill Thorndike, Miss Anne Erskine, Mr Clewlow (Drama Director of the ABC Commission), Ian Bell, John Bell, John Trevor (founder of the Young Elizabethan Players), and Tony Burdiss who spoke on 'Elizabethan costume'. Many more directors and actors visited the Club over the years for readings and discussions or met members during their touring performances. Robert Helpmann was a dance partner and close friend of life member Phoebe Andrews. When Googie Withers and Keith Michell performed *The First Four Hundred Years*, the Shakespeare ladies were dressers and hair stylists for the stars. These memories are now captured in the Oral History recordings of the senior members of the Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club.

The collection of oral history recordings of the club members was essential to the writing of this history for three main reasons. Firstly, voice and the spoken word are the essence of the club. The written history had to capture this performative aspect of the life of the club members. Minutes, letters and rules were not sufficient. Secondly, the work of collecting and storing the oral histories expanded the archival trove for the Regional Archives. The lives of these women touch upon so many of the social and cultural organisations of the town which many of them were instrumental in establishing. The women's voices carry within them the aural codes of dialect, register, education, culture and era. Thirdly, and much to my amazement, the oral record preserves the voices of members who have now passed away. I take it as an unexpected blessing that the book with transcribed oral interviews has been read to our elderly members in hospital and read aloud by their families at public eulogies. Our longest serving member Mrs Joyce Holmes, a member for 66 years, passed away in 2012. She was 104. Her interviews are recorded on video and audio tape. The Shakespeare Club celebrated her centenary birthday and at 102 years of age she attended a meeting in my home and read her part with a voice as strong and clear as only sixty-six years of practice can deliver.

What have I discovered about the secret of longevity for such a Club? By asking the current members and reflecting upon the biographies, minutes and documentary evidence it would seem that a sturdy set of rules is important, one that can flexibly adapt to modern changes in technology and the availability of members while maintaining the original focus. A commitment by all members to the Club is evidenced by their attendance and effort. Membership by selection is used to determine compatibility rather than as a vehicle for social mobility. But there is something else, many members agree, that accounts for the longevity. Shakespeare himself.

Anne Brassil, past president, put it this way:

I have been thinking about that question since you mentioned it, the longevity of the Club. One of the reasons I think it has longevity is that there is a closeness because you are in each other's homes and also because you are reading. You are reading so much ... you know you go through the same emotions. I particularly felt that in the reading of *King Lear*. People become very involved with other people, with the emotions of the characters, and that's a bond in its own way I think. Particularly if it carries on for years. It's just a thought.²⁴

So I followed that thought up with Cherry Lindsay, past president and long-standing member. I asked, 'If it had been a reading club for some other writer do you think it would have lasted as long or had the same appeal?' She replied:

I don't think so. More and more I find it absolutely fascinating. The philosophies that come through in the writing and the absolutely brilliant way they are worded just again and again astound me. The process of actually reading aloud to each other. It can be, if it is well done, the most exciting and exhilarating feeling.... A feeling of community and of being together. There's no doubt about it, as in any group, you become very fond of the other members. You become a group.²⁵

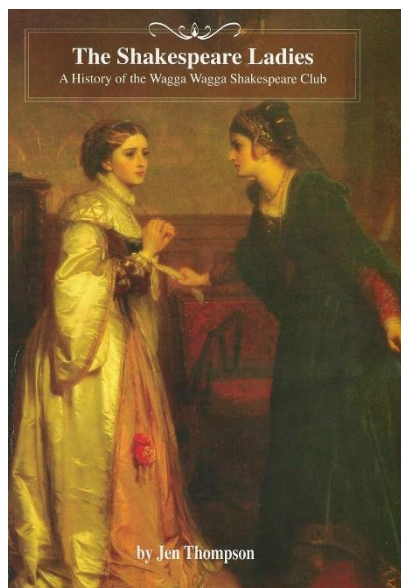
But it is also the nature of Shakespeare and the cultural role his texts have played in the development of our language and thinking. Lest you think that this is an argument for elitism, I refer you to the reflections of Mary Chiswell. Mary was a TAFE teacher in Textiles and first joined the Shakespeare ladies in 1973.

Well, my husband isn't knowledgeable on Shakespeare but his mother, who had only gone through very little school and had a very basic education in England at a little village school, she absolutely loved English and she was so good at it ... she brought them up on Polonius' speech to Laertes. My husband said all through the war he took that with him, 'neither a borrower nor a lender be.' When we had our boys he got it put up on their wall because to him it was one of the biggest influences of his young life ... The sayings of Shakespeare had so much entered into

²⁴ Anne Brassil interviewed by the author, 7 May 2003, Riverina Regional Archives.

²⁵ Cherry Lindsay interviewed by the author, 18 November 2003, Riverina Regional Archives.

everyday life, every time you are reading it you think, 'Oh, that's where it came from'. It's just part of the English living language, isn't it?²⁶



To launch the book, the Club orchestrated a week-long community celebration of the centenary with public performances. These included an exhibition of the First Folio of Shakespeare's work on loan from the State Library of New South Wales in the Civic Library and a restaging of *The Heroines of Shakespeare* in the Historic Council Chambers. The performance was based upon a text written by a past president, the late Kath Higgins, in 1940. Actors were high school and university students of Charles Sturt University directed by Rohan Maloy under a Country Arts Support Program grant. *The Heroines of Shakespeare* was presented before a full house and the guest of honour was the Shakespearean actor and director, Mr John Bell of the Bell Shakespeare Company. The book was launched on 4 July 2004, when members and friends gathered in the Shakespeare Knot Garden, Botanical Gardens, Wagga Wagga.

The Wagga Wagga Shakespeare Club now meet to read Shakespeare in the Wagga Wagga City Council rooms due to the difficulties of hosting the readings in the homes of elderly members. They continue to create an oral tradition. The historian Tom Griffiths in his book, *The Art of Time Travel*,

notes:

When records are officially preserved, they often leave the locality of their origin, go to the city, become institutionalised and thereby become subject to local suspicion. For anyone schooled in the professional discipline of history, it is a shock to encounter the proud oral culture of rural Australia. Academic historical practice, founded as it was on the craft of documentary scholarship, has often viewed oral tradition with distrust. In a small community, however, oral sources of history are often regarded as the pre-eminent means of access to the local past. History is a possession of the town's elders, the approved custodians of the past, sometimes the oldest resident.²⁷

Long may the oral tradition of the Shakespeare Ladies of Wagga Wagga continue.

Jen Thompson's email address is jen_thompson_2@hotmail.com

* * *

Other states' newsletters

Oral History Tasmania receives newsletters and other digital news from the mainland states. Please email president@oralhistorytas.org.au if you would like to be put on the list to receive them.

Do you have a project to tell us about?

We are always looking for items for the newsletter, anything from a few sentences to a lengthy article. All members are interested in knowing what is going on in the state, and you may make some good contacts through responses to the article.

²⁶ Mary Chiswell interviewed by the author, 1 May 2003, Riverina Regional Archives.

²⁷ Tom Griffiths, *The art of time travel: Historians and their craft*, Black Inc, Carlton, 2016, p.147.

WEBSITES

Oral History Tasmania: www.oralhistorytas.org.au

Oral History Australia: www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au

IOHA (International Oral History Association): www.ioha.fgv.br

EQUIPMENT HIRE

A **Fostex digital recorder** is available for hire to members. It comes with its own lapel microphones and *User Guidelines*. Cost of hire: \$20 a week, plus transport costs if necessary. You will also be required to sign a form agreeing to pay to replace any part that is damaged or lost while you have the recorder, up to a maximum of \$250 for individuals or \$500 for groups or institutions.

To make a booking, contact Jill Cassidy on 0418 178 098 or email president@oralhistorytas.org.au

THE OBJECTIVES OF ORAL HISTORY TASMANIA

promote the practice and methods of oral history
educate in the use of oral history methods
encourage discussion of all problems in oral history
foster the preservation of oral history records
pursue common objectives and maintain links with other Australian oral history
associations through membership of Oral History Australia Inc.

MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS

Individuals	\$40.00	Households	\$55.00
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