

PRECIOUS

Launch of Precious by Dr Gwenda Davey: 12 April 2023

Thank you for the invitation to come here today, and to launch this fine publication. It's a great pleasure to be here.

Congratulations to the many people who lent their precious objects for the exhibition, and told their stories. Congratulations also to Geordie Dowell for curating the exhibition and to Bronwyn Silver for the fine photography and catalogue design.

Anthropologists and folklorists refer to significant objects, like those in the exhibition, as material culture. These are things which you can see and touch, they are tangible objects. But every object of material culture has intangible elements. These are the stories, the feelings, and the meanings which these objects hold for the people who own them.

And what a lot of different elements these intangible aspects possess! They can reflect great love or nostalgia. Many of these objects hold great poignancy and sadness – family death, especially of the young, like Lieutenant Percy Shirres and his brother. Also, deeply moving are the stories of family separation through emigration, like Julie Butler's grandmother Rosa Cavedon. She was left in Italy for three years in 1924, with three young children, while their father travelled to Australia to make a better life for his family. And how much we owe to these Italian migrants, who worked in our factories, who brought us real coffee (not the awful coffee and chicory in a bottle, which I remember from my childhood!). And who also enriched our food habits, with pasta, passata and a range of new vegetables!

The precious objects also invoke love, such as Roslyn Lambert's quilt, and nostalgia, such as Bob Clutterbuck's so-called 'old bike'! It doesn't look old to me! But what stories that bike could tell! I also have to mention the humour in Geordie Dowell's 'flying purple people eater' comic.

I have to apologise for continually referring to your curator Gordon Dowell as Geordie. I can't think of him as anything else. Today is only the latest of several projects we have been involved in together, over the years. The Graduate Diploma of Australian Folklife Studies at Monash University in the late 1990s. The Australian Research Council Project *Childhood, Tradition and Change*, which ran from 2007 to 2011, and which studied primary school children's playground lore all round Australia, and many of their traditional games and rhymes. Somewhat earlier, there was the National Folk Festival in Canberra in 2004, where we presented an exhibition of material culture, such as eucalyptus distilling, lace-making, Ukrainian Easter egg decoration, Indigenous shell necklaces from Flinders Island, quilt-making, woodworking, and a number of other traditional trades, occupations and pastimes. This was somewhat different from this exhibition, in that we had the practitioners of these activities actually present, and demonstrating the activities.

There were two of these 'rare trades', as they're often called in Museum circles, which I wasn't able to bring to Canberra. The first one is obvious. I'd recorded an interview for the National Library of a master stonemason called Tom Carson in the 1990s. Tom had been commissioned to restore some carvings on the outside of St Patrick's Cathedral in Melbourne, and in a centuries-old tradition, chose a prominent personality to model for his gargoyle waterspout, namely, the controversial premier, Jeff Kennett. Clearly, I couldn't take that to Canberra.

The second item could have gone to Canberra, but we were defeated by weather and agriculture. I'd been very taken with some traditional haystacks on Melbourne's western outskirts, haystacks really worthy of the famous Monet paintings. They were at a location called Truganina, and Geordie had taken some fine photographs. We had farmers ready to build a traditional haystack at the Festival in Canberra, but alas, the weather at the time had prevented a sufficient crop of the special oaten hay needed for the haystacks. I really missed that haystack. I subsequently wrote an article for the National Library News which I titled **The haystack that got away.**

Alas, the National Library News is long gone, a victim of the cost-cutting which has bedevilled all the major collecting institutions in the last ten years. I'm currently most closely associated with the National Film and Sound Archive as the chair of the Melbourne Group of the Friends of the NFSA. We are all sweating on the Federal Budget in May, when we've been promised that the near-bankrupt state of the big cultural institutions will be addressed by the Albanese Government.

When I mentioned the folklife course at Monash, it reminded me of how delighted I am to catch up with Chris Johnston again. She had written a pioneering study of intangible cultural heritage, which was one of our most precious references in the program. I think it was Chris who first alerted me to the importance of the old clocks at Flinders Street Station. Remember when the railways proposed to replace them? There was practically a revolution – people remembered 'meeting under the clocks', something which had so many memories and so much meaning, especially in wartime! I'm so glad that the clocks are still there!

A few years ago, I was teaching about intangible cultural heritage at Deakin University, in what was then the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific. The focus there was on Asia and the Pacific, but I've always been interested in the culture of many other, different nationalities, and other groups, such as the culture of occupations, or of places.

Many years ago, I had worked for a year on a grant from the Australian Government's Children's Commission, a fine body which only lasted for a short time, and which fell along with the Whitlam Government. The project became known as The Multicultural Cassette Series – the reference to 'cassettes' gives you an idea of how long ago it was! We recorded songs, stories and rhymes in eight different community languages, for use in kindergartens and primary schools with migrant children arriving without any English. The Series is now archived in both Museum Victoria and the National Library, with little follow-up over the years. I'm now delighted to say that a number of local governments are actively supporting their immigrant populations, including the City of Banyule in Melbourne, which is running a recording program in the local Somali community, similar to the Multicultural Cassette Series – though with more modern equipment! Led by Somali women and with help from my friend and colleague Heather Russell, they are helping to preserve Somali culture and assist children with early literacy.

I think this exhibition says a lot about the culture of this particular, Newstead, area. The contributions to this exhibition were made by people who live in this area, and who care about it. I'm delighted to launch this fine publication.

Thank you to you all.

Gwenda Beed Davey