

This presentation was originally called

***“PRESERVING OUR PAST AND OUR
SENSE OF PLACE IN A RAPIDLY
CHANGING REGION”.***

But later, when asked for a more user-friendly title, I came back with:-

**A TIME MACHINE? –
IT’S INSIDE YOUR HEAD**

We’re talking about Heritage and it is after all a concept – it is inside us - it’s how we look at Landscape and Architecture, read about it or hear its stories- it’s part of our personal memory. As my wife, Jenny, suggested the other day:-

A landscape isn’t simply a picture. It’s also a story.

I’ve just cleared copyright permission to quote her.

Heritage has many meanings – and I’ll try to explore just a few that make sense in our part of the world.

But I’d like to begin with an account from World War Two and from another hemisphere.

At the end of hostilities in Europe in 1945, a wounded British Army Captain finally received notification of his demobilisation three years earlier, in **1942**, together with his back pay for three years. Unfortunately, however, a clerk in the War Office had listed him as having commenced his army career in the year **1042**.

Without hesitation, the Captain wrote back

Dear Sirs,

As you have acknowledged, I officially began my career as a member of the Armed Forces in the 11th century.

I have now added up the costs of this long period of military service and hereby claim the sum of One million pounds for 903 years of service in the English Army.

Please send a cheque for this amount forthwith.

Undaunted, an equal, if not superior wit in the War office wrote back as follows.

Dear Sir,

If, as you now claim, you commenced service in the English (the then Anglo-Saxon Army) you were at least partially responsible for its colossal defeat at Hastings in 1066 and liable for the cost of three thousand arrows, two thousand spears, five hundred horses and three hundred suits of chain mail.

Taken together these losses amount to nine hundred and ninety thousand pounds nineteen shillings and sixpence.

I enclose an unfranked postage stamp for the remaining sixpence.

My next story- also from England - goes back a little further still. In the early 1960s an Anglican diocese in Yorkshire acquired a tactful and persuasive young clergyman. His bishop saw him as a man who could solve a local problem.

Summoned to the Episcopal presence, he was asked to minister to not one but two adjoining parishes. However the Bishop warned him that for some unknown reason these two congregations had never been on speaking terms. Could he somehow bring them together and end this puzzling enmity?

Undaunted, the young vicar went about his task and soon got on well with people from both churches. A year later he invited their respective Parish Councils to attend a meeting in the Registry of one of the parishes. Both groups sat on opposite sides of a long trestle table, arms folded and refusing eye contact.

The young priest tackled it head on. .

“Can you please tell me at least why you folks don’t get on. “

The response from one side of the long table was swift and dour.

“That lot there didn’t help us when Vikings came.”

I suggest that only an appreciation of heritage makes those stories accessible. The English have a long enough history to appreciate this perspective and a refreshing ability not to take themselves and their past always seriously. It’s an understated way of appreciating historical inheritance. Stories are heritage.

Coincidentally, it was in Sheffield, Yorkshire, at an Oral History Conference in 1981 – where I had given a presentation on the work of the ABC’s Social History Unit and after the paper somebody asked an interesting question.

How come that in Australia that you have already documented so much of your oral heritage- we don't seem to have done that here?

Apparently, at this time in the UK not much had been done to record living history of so called ordinary people. However the ABC's Social History Unit, from the early 1980s onwards, had gone back as far as possible in living memory to make oral history documentaries on our nation's past.

I found myself saying something like:-

“Well it's probably a matter of perspective. You have so much history besides the late 19th and 20th already documented – so that recent history is to you only a fraction of what you already have –Roman occupation, King Arthur, Robin Hood etc.; whereas, as a united nation, our story starts at the dawn of the 20th century. It is half of our European time on this continent and it is all we have.

Of course it wasn't all we had – there was a rich Aboriginal oral history which made our European arrival look like the sharp edge of a razorblade in our continent's long story.

And if we need celebratory reminders of our own national heritage there is always the ‘*colonial revenge*’ – an aspect nicely illustrated by author Kathy Lette when she informed her grandmother that she was going to live in England for a while.

Her grandmother was horrified.

“What ever do you want to go and live there for – That’s where all those dreadful convicts came from!.”

But how do we define our **Australian heritage**? And how many heritages have we got?

If we take what I’ll call “***verbal heritage***”, that meant until relatively recently, the written word, family letters, or diaries but now, as audio recording has progressed, the spoken word, also illustrated by the Vikings and the Norman Conquest Stories .

I’ll be able to illustrate this aspect of heritage as we go today - personal testimony of love of place and reflection on changes to the environment.

Some of our heritage – or perhaps our inheritance here in Australia has not always been recognisable. It’s often an **Invisible heritage** and it applies particularly to the way we have sometimes encountered or not encountered Aboriginal society.

When Europeans first came into contact with indigenous Australians they found little or no evidence of heritage. To them it was simply unseen.

In European eyes heritage meant and often still means structures, churches, temples old buildings, books; objects that we recognise easily.

Aboriginal people did not have this visible evidence but they had equally visible reminders- rocks which were sacred as ceremonial places and also for reasons that were highly practical- rocks were places where water –the source of life - could be collected and stored. As Aboriginal anthropologist Kado Muir once explained to me, cleaning gnamma holes was both practical and sacred, and water, we only have to think of Christian Baptism, if we look at many religions, is sacred to several faiths.

And Aboriginal societies did have *books* - inside their heads - in the form of oral histories handed down from the ancestors, stories that recorded knowledge of the land, its seasons, its sources of food, medicines, its animals and plants - a heritage they still cherish.

And here I'd like to quote one of my incidental mentors, Spike Milligan, famously Eccles in the Goon Show but also writer, performer and perceptive poet. This is a poem from his Book of Milliganimals

It's called *Sardines*.

*A baby Sardine
Saw her first submarine:
She was scared and watched through a
Peephole.*

*Oh come, come, come, said the Sardine's Mum
It's only a tin full of people.*

Sardine's Mum got it right. This zany bit of verse neatly illustrates the concept of recognition.

In this context I've just finished making a 3 part radio feature series for Nyungar people from the Central WA wheatbelt.

It's called Nyungar Voices and in the final program

YOU CAN HEAR THE ANTS BREATHING

people talked about their concern for their heritage and special places in their own country. They spoke about their distress at finding rock surfaces damaged by 4WD vehicles and the unintentional damage done by Shire Road Boards when they damaged gnamma holes during road construction.

That's increasingly of concern now that many shires are asking Aboriginal communities to share their culture with white society and accounts in many cases for some reluctance to do so.

So that heritage is also now a shared responsibility - and just as we have changed this land in our own time, we have also begun to lay down memory of what was and now is.

Day to day records illustrate this.

A young dairy farmer in the Hunter Valley in NSW became the third generation of dairymen on the family farm. Conscious of the need for good milk yield from his paddocks, and not certain that it wasn't declining, he looked up two sets of dairy records and diaries :- his grandfather's and then his father's – both chronicles of the time when they each ran the farm.

His grandfather's diary revealed his belief in good tree cover for the cattle, somewhere to shelter from the hot sun in summer and a bit of protection in winter.

His own son, however, when he took over, thinned out the trees, thinking that he'd gain more pasture space and presumably a higher milk yield.

The two records proved interesting. Grandfather's yield was significantly higher than his son's. The grandson put that down, not only to a kinder environment, shade for cattle and shelter from winter wind, but also the fact that dew formed under the trees and made for more grass in drier times.

He replanted trees and within a few years had got back to his grandfather's yield.

It's an interesting convergence of both written and environmental heritage.

Let's look now at the most 'in your face' heritage -
Built heritage

It's all around us but sometimes disappears before we realise what has gone. Threatened - ironically often through increased prosperity - the new farmhouse –well deserved - often replaces the old farm or from the 1920s the Group Settler Hut. Do the farm or the Hut survive? Do the grandchildren know how their forebears lived?

A visit to any older building gives us a sense of how people managed adversity – often coping with conditions their descendants have not had to face. I often reflect that history is as much about the future as it is about the past. The past, I suggest is of most use to us if it helps us handle the future. Otherwise it may well remain 'a foreign country'.

It is possible, given the possibility of environmental and climatic changes, that our descendants may once again have to live 18th or 19th century lives. In such a situation they may well reappraise such buildings and the people who built them.

Loss of heritage isn't just a rural phenomenon. In our cities and towns the 19th or mid- 20th century pub makes way for the new Shopping Centre in a suburb or large country town.

And in the cities- any acknowledgement of a prior building is often expressed half-heartedly.

Take what one could call **Facadism** – the practice of keeping a remnant of an original building- usually the front portico - often an embarrassing compromise. It tells us more about the *Facaders* than the heritage that's been lost.

A striking example is what was once 514 Hay St in Perth or the building that used to be there. It was in fact Perth's first theatre and witnessed the first performance of Shakespeare's Macbeth in the state.

Macbeth is a play where three witches foretell the future. One wonders if on opening night they envisaged a bulldozer in the wings.

Now only the front portico remains -the sole reminder of what had once stood there. A glass and steel office building towers behind it.

In the 1960s and 1970s with the mineral boom in the North-West our capital city, Perth, began to change rapidly. The rationale was progress- a tall city looked like a city **going somewhere**.

But was it? In the early 1960s St George's Terrace was a pleasant tree- lined street, self-deprecatingly referred to by the locals as the Paris of the southern hemisphere.

It almost certainly didn't have good coffee then but it was on a human scale and you could walk down it in comfort- unassailed by hi-rise generated wind.

These considerations are perhaps aesthetic but they are also practical. Two cities in Europe come to mind, Amsterdam and Copenhagen both of which have retained their original harbour and urban character. Both have, as a result, high tourist and lifestyle status.

They are simply pleasant cities to be in, less overwhelmed by the car and with good public and personal transport systems.

On our patch, Fremantle, York, Kalgoorlie and Toodyay are vivid examples of what can be done in this direction. They remind us of an earlier era which faced considerable difficulties but yet made something memorable of its built heritage.

The other consideration when we talk about loss of **built heritage** is relationship to our present and to the people who are part of that present. When we lose a building however humble we can lose more than bricks and mortar.

At an everyday level it occurs in the loss of a corner store or a local hardware shop where you know the owner, only have to walk five minutes to buy something from him, and often meet your own neighbours. Corner stores are notoriously missing from many new suburbs and with them much of a community spirit.

Sometimes too we kill with kindness. There are examples, in my view, where preservation can miss the message. A 19th century homestead in the South West of WA is a case in point. Over a hundred years or so outbuildings had been added to the original wattle and daub house and the original house now rambled at will..

But when restoration took place all the additions were knocked down and only the original building remained.

Fair enough in one way- if you want to see an original but the house, like a landscape, was also a story and the story was a century of additions made by various owners. If a building or a set of buildings, like a landscape, is also a story, then we are now only left with Chapter One. Missing pages have been torn out. The continuity is missing.

And continuity, I believe, is important for human beings. In a world now dominated by rapid communication and equally rapid building technologies, like Tilt Concrete - there is a danger of yesterday's building being as forgotten as a shepherd's temporary hut in the Darling Ranges. Not many of those left either.

It was interesting recently to talk with Maggie Beer (*The Cook and The Chef fame*) about her journey back to rural New South Wales to find the home of one of her male ancestors, a convict -but also a surgeon - forced by injury to give up his work and who, in ill health, ended his life in a slab hut in remote countryside.

Maggie told me she felt an enormous sense of empathy and understanding by being able to walk through this building, still reasonably intact and imagine how his last days were spent.

Coming to terms with how our predecessors lived is a very important step in understanding oneself. And here I'd like to speak personally.

My father was born in Busselton in 1901- the year when Australia became one country and at a farm called Cattle Chosen- because the cows thought it was the best grazing they'd seen since coming north from Augusta

But most of his life was spent far from the South-West of Western Australia.

Divorce of his parents, then far less acceptable than now, prompted his mother to send her children to relatives in England and my father at the age of 12 would not see Australia again until 1968, when he was 67.

By that time I had come to WA myself in 1963, aged 23 and, married my wife Jenny, also with Australian connections. Both of us were born in England but in both our childhoods Australia loomed large.

In my own childhood there was fragmentary talk of Australia. We were taken to see *The Overlanders* at the local cinema and in our house in South-West England there were group photos of moustached pioneers and fearsome looking indigenous axes hanging on the walls.

I managed later to return a Koj axe to the WA Museum—to the great delight of the Nyungar people of Kojonup. Apparently it was a rare specimen.

But the reality of my father's childhood only became apparent on his one and only return visit in 1968 some years after Jenny and I had made Australia our home.

As we drove down to his birthplace, Busselton and further south I began to realise that during or after the break-up of his parents' marriage he had been farmed out to relatives in Nannup, had been tutored in Margaret River and had stayed at the Leeuwin Lighthouse- built only 6 years before his birth. My father didn't talk about why he went to all those places, only that he had been there.

These recollections explained a great deal about my father as a person. He was a conscientious father and I owe him a lot but he often found it difficult to express himself emotionally to his children. As a schoolmaster of his time he was also stern with his sons.

I should add that before coming to Australia myself I knew none of the circumstances of his leaving Australia before WW1. He never talked about it, and, like most children it never occurred to me to ask him why he had ended up in England. Such is the self-preoccupation of youth.

Perhaps for him too it was a difficult subject. I also knew nothing of his relationship with his own father, who sometime after the divorce, put down his age - he was 46 –went off to World War One but never saw action. He died of fever on a troopship, somewhere off the coast of Carnavon.

These discoveries helped me understand my father better and I am still grateful for that experience. What I learned from him in those trips round the South-West was what his life had been like as a child, passed around to different members of the family.

Did it explain his own strongly reserved character? A boy without perhaps the close warmth of family life- and not certain of a permanent habitat- a place he could call home with the security of united parents.

I think most of us can think of special places which were part of our childhood, places in which we spent a long time and became part of our persona. They are also our personal heritage. My father and his brother did sometimes talk too about the beauty of growing up in the bush and the wonder of nature- part for them of heritage lost.

I'd like now to return to **Environmental** heritage – perhaps the most vital concern for our century.

Whether the world is warming or not –it is still vital to examine all the available information we have to see what has already happened to our planet.

Carbon-dating and tree and ice core records can tell us a lot about pre-history, while written records only cover a minute fraction of our time on earth.

Station rainfall records and diaries like the ones quoted earlier are useful complements to more recent data acquisition.

But personal observation can also help

Recently I had the good fortune to write a book for the Department of Water on the history of Hydrography and Hydrology in Western Australia.

TILL THE STREAM RUNS DRY

A title I chose as a tribute to the professionalism and dedication of a remarkable group of people- field hydrographers whose meticulous work in charting rivers, analysing water quality and counting rainfall is vital evidence in the current debate about climate change. Their recent carefully collected data has been integral to understanding of our water resources.

Their own observations were important too. Hydrographers are trained to read rivers and are often the first to see changes in their flow and their health.

Farmers too observe change. I also recall vividly an interview for an ABC documentary on **Land restoration**, the deep regret of a Pingerup farmer. We were looking at a shrunken and now highly saline lake on his farm – once a wide stretch of blue water where he and Aboriginal companions had enjoyed fishing and boating as children.

The damage has been done but these kinds of memories remain. And if those memories ingrain themselves into the next generation then there is some hope. It would be appalling for our descendants to read a hundred years from now that we neither cared nor acted at this time. They may well be reminded, if the testimony of radio, television and good press reports survive, of our early 21st century response to this situation.

And perhaps our philosophical and cultural, not to say religious heritage has not always helped. Indications from the Bible that we are the top rung of creation:-

Man shall have dominion over the earth, the fowl of the air and the fish in the sea etc.

have perhaps often blinded us to a need to respect the planet and its wonderful bio-diversity.

From the 1980s onwards I became more and more aware of how important the notion of preserving environment is, even to those whose work involves potential conflict. Aboriginal people talked with regret about their work in Land clearing in the depressed 1930s, a time when few manual workers, black or white, had much choice.

And in the forests of the South-West I met Jack Thomson, a remarkable forester and a key figure in a documentary I made in 1983 called:-

SOMETHING UNIQUE SOMETHING MAJESTIC

The title came from a woman living in Manjimup, a timber town if ever there was one. I had asked her what the forest meant to her.

She replied with great simplicity and dignity,

The forest is:-

Something Unique Something Majestic

Jack Thomson, himself, a skilled tree-feller, was very conscious of not – almost literally - sawing off the branch he was sitting on.

He expresses reverence for the forest describing it as “*Cathedral –like.*” Other forest workers speak of the trees “*being like friends*” and once inside the majesty of the forest finding it hard to understand “*how the world behaves as it does.*”

These comments are all the more striking if we remember that they come from people whose living depended on the timber industry but who still loved the karri forest for its intrinsic beauty and its majesty.

So what do we lose if we lose not only parts of the forest but the sensitivity among people like Jack Thomson to its innate beauty and its uniqueness?

Under debate already is the notion that due to declining rainfall the Karri forest would grow more vigorously if these trees grew two hundred kilometres south of the present south coast.

Only time will tell whether the karri will adapt to reduced rain but a key issue is also whether we care enough to ensure that our descendants can see and rejoice in its beauty as Jack Thomson did.

In an age where household gadgetry, entertainment, faster communication and instant gratification have changed our lives, there is a danger that we can lose sight of the things that really hold us together and the way the natural world has nourished us both physically and spiritually.

That is a key part of our heritage and it is often taken for granted or worse still unfamiliar, even unknown, especially, to take a day to day example, when supermarkets not gardens are where people first see the food they eat .

Two years ago my then three year old grandson, SaM, who lives in the city, offered to help in our Margaret River vegetable bed. I asked him to pull up some leafy foliage.

Oh'! he exclaimed with amazement –

A carrot!

So they don't grow inside plastic bags.

Nor does heritage. But it does grow inside our heads- it is a time machine and its working parts are stories. It's an early story in Sam's life and he may not remember the incident. But it has made its impact. As it has, over time, for working people who came to call the karri forest *Something Unique, Something Majestic*, and for South West Group Settlers who show their grandchildren the house they lived in, the townsfolk who remember a community rather than a suburb, the hydrographers who read our rivers and for the Nyungar people who have always read the land like a story.

Our country and its scattered settlements is more than a landscape- it's a continuing story. We just need to tell it to ourselves.