

1. An occasional newsletter of the History Program, RSSS

Bubble baths and history wars - the Melbourne Writers' Festival

Rebe Taylor

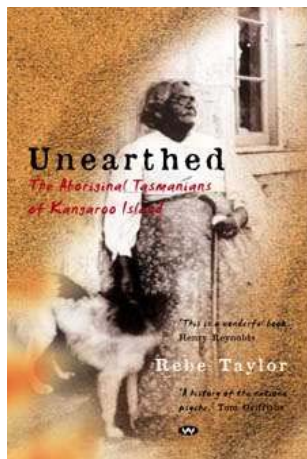
I was asked to participate in the Age Melbourne Writers' Festival on 23rd of August. They flew me down, picked me up at Tullamarine and put me up in the Hotel Windsor on Spring St. The Windsor was almost as exciting as the Festival – soft pillows, thick towels and a lux bubble bath.



But I had worked hard to prepare two short pieces for two panels, and I was extremely nervous. The first session was called 'Can We Change the Past?' with Stuart Macintyre and Iain McCalman as co-panelists and chaired by Marilyn Lake. The second session was 'Contested Sites', chaired by Tim Bowden with Margaret Simons (*Meeting of the Waters: the Hindmarsh Island Affair*) and Bruce Pascoe (*Ocean*, amongst other novels).

The first session was the most electric. The audience was packed and the questions were good. Several people wanted to know about the current 'history wars' being fought over Keith Windschuttle. I was asked how I thought this debate would be written about in thirty years. One person wanted to know how to find the 'truth' in history writing, and another how to find a 'balance'. And there was quite a bit of discussion about making history writing more popular by extending the media from books to television and the internet.

Afterwards it was a buzz. I was complimented by strangers, and had to sign books. I can't say I signed as many as Malcolm Fraser who was sitting a few tables up from me, but I got my moment in the sun. It's funny how years of relative impoverishment and solitude spent writing a book can be so completely contrasted by a few days of opulence and popularity. But this is no complaint. The Festival was a wonderful experience.



Rebe's book, *Unearthed: The Aboriginal Tasmanians of Kangaroo Island*, was published by Wakefield Press in 2003, and has been nominated for several prizes.

The Journey's Journey

Frances Peters-Little reports on a film première

We are accustomed to think that the work of historians is writing, yet it is possible that people now get more of their ideas about the past from films and television than they do from books.¹

On October 23rd 2003, the one-hour biographical documentary entitled *Jimmy Little's Gentle Journey* finally premiered at the Chauvel Cinema in Sydney, after seven long years of a 'not-so-gentle' journey for director/writer Sean Kennedy. The Sydney première aroused perhaps as much anxiety and eagerness for the filmmakers as it did for my family, but it proved a huge success and relief for all involved.

The making of the film - which Kennedy so cannily refers to as the 'Journey's journey' - was a result of firm dedication and eager persistence from numerous family and friends. Denied financial support from the indigenous branch at the Australian Film Commission, and conditional

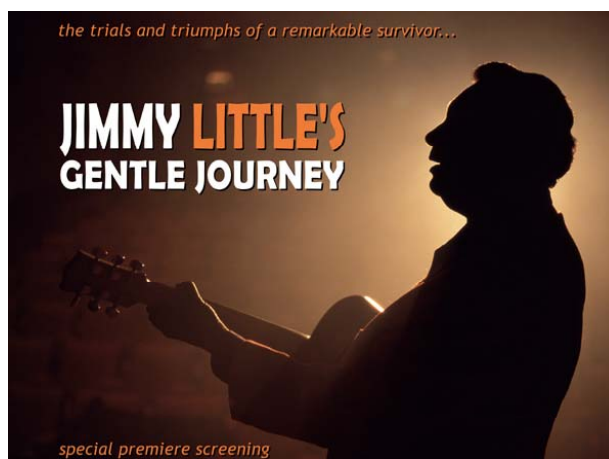


Photo courtesy of Mark Rogers 2003

on the ABC pre-selling the film for a half-hour program, it was miraculously able to survive and expand. The crew resolved to beg, borrow or steal in order to shoot the remainder of the documentary and so sought the necessary post-production funds from just about anywhere, including a fundraising event at the Paddington RSL Club.

My part in the film was a most peculiar one, including being someone 'in front of the camera', providing consultation and research material, and taking advantage of my sources for the Jimmy Little biography - which incidentally will be published by ABC Books. Even more out of character for me was to participate in a film project made by non-Aboriginal filmmakers about Aboriginal people; however, this was never going to pose a problem for my family or me. From Kennedy, the film's director/writer, to the cinematographer Simeon Bryan and producer Frank Haines and soundtrack by Brendan

Gallagher, all curiously had been fellow undergraduate colleagues of mine from our days at UTS.

Although an invitation was extended to RSSS History Program, the Sydney premiere made it too difficult for people to come. However the good news is that there will be a screening of the documentary at the *Art of Documentary* conference on Saturday the 29th November, at 2.15pm in the *Visions Theatre* at the National Museum of Australia. Filmmakers of the documentary will be there to answer questions.

¹ Tony Barta 'History, Film and Video for First Year History Students: History 1HF at La Trobe'. In T. O'Regan & B. Shoemith eds. *History on/and/in Film*. Perth: History & Film Association of Australia, 1987. 174-78.

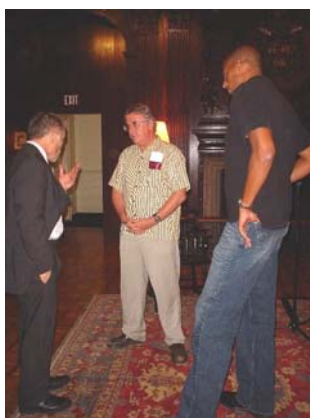
Letter from America

Tim Rowse has temporarily joined the History Department, Harvard University, as Visiting Professor of Australian Studies. He writes:

There are over fifty people in the Department, many of whom I have not yet met and quite possibly will never meet, as their interests are very diverse and the occasions few when they are all present. However, they are friendly when I do have some reason or opportunity to speak to them, and I have got over my feeling of being a stranger. I am teaching a course called 'Governing Indigenous Australians' to seven students - some of whom have had some contact with Australia, others thinking about it for the first time. The theme of my course is the variations - through space and time - in the modes of colonial authority. Perhaps there is a book in it, one day. About half my week is spent auditing two courses in US History - one focusing on some autobiographies written between the Revolution and the Civil War, the other reviewing themes in US History up to the Revolutionary War of 1775-83. I am 'discovering' another nation's history and historiography, and it is fun being a student again, as American courtesy and warmth is hard to match, and I have been told that I don't 'act like a Professor' when I am in these classes.

Thanks to email, I can keep contact with a few Australian students with whom I was working closely when I left. When I add to all these commitments the many occasional lectures and seminars that are on offer, I am at full stretch, and loving every week. For example, in the last two days I have attended a commemorative round-table on Edward Said and a lecture on some African-American musical responses to Arab nationalism in the period 1955-65. (The intellectual expression of the African heritage here is impressive and engaging.)

With my head planted firmly in this cornucopia, I have done little about contacting academics elsewhere - but a



Tim talking to Professor Tom Conley, Master of Kirkland House, and to BJ Trach, a student, on the night that Tim addressed the Senior Common Room of Kirkland House on the theme 'Arguing About Massacres'.

few trips are scheduled. I look forward to visiting Charlottesville Virginia soon; I will be in Washington and Toronto in February, and next April a conference in Chicago will be followed by a trip to the plains of Nebraska. Maybe that's as far west as I'll get. I will be teaching a course on 'Indigenous Autobiography' in second semester, and much remains to be done to prepare it.

Tim's fortnightly travel diary can be obtained from Kay Nantes.

Congratulations

Congratulations to Helen and Bernard Pfeil who are expecting a baby next year.

Ins and outs - Summer scholars

Two summer scholars will be arriving soon to pursue research projects in the History Program:

- ➔ Catherine Arscott, University of Queensland, 24 November - 8 February. Catherine will be doing research on the Displaced Person Resettlement Scheme (1947-1952), working mainly at the National Archives.
- ➔ Moksha Watts, University of Sydney, 30 November - 7 February. Moksha will be studying issues surrounding human fertility in late 19th century Australia

Native Title Business Forum: The Power Of Cultural Evidence

The National Museum of Australia in collaboration with the Australian Centre for Indigenous History with support from the ANU Institute for Indigenous Australia invite you to attend the free public forum held in conjunction with the *Native Title Business* art exhibition.

Native Title claims are confined within legal and text-based parameters. There is however other proof of connection to country. This forum is about assembling a diversity of cultural evidence into powerful statements of title to country.

Speakers include:

Artists, Fiona Foley and Bronwyn Bancroft
 Historians: Professor Ann McGrath, Frances Peters-Little, Dr Christine Choo and Dr Gordon Briscoe
 Museum Professionals: Phil Gordon, James Warden and Dr Ruth Lane
 Yorta Yorta Community Representative, Monica Morgan
 Sociologist/Curator, Vivien Johnson
 Native Title Mediator, Dr Gaye Sculthorpe
 Lawyers, Professor Larissa Behrendt and David Ritter

Thursday 11 December 2.00pm-5.00pm Yowie Room, National Museum of Australia

Friday 12 December 8.45am-5.30pm SAS Visions Theatre, National Museum of Australia

RSVP by Fri 5 December 2003 or email: rsvp@nma.gov.au

A full program is available from p.roberts@nma.gov.au