



HISTORY WEST

September 2026

GENERAL MEETING

The next meeting is on Wednesday 16 September at 6pm when Nathan Hobby will present a talk titled 'John Curtin for Fremantle: a future prime minister's electioneering in a marginal seat, 1925-1934'.

History West Centre, 109 Stirling Hwy Nedlands
Refreshments available from 5.30pm



Advertiser, 23 Oct 1925, p.2



West Australian, 15 Sept 1934, p.14

Before John Curtin (1885-1945) led Australia as prime minister during the Second World War, one of his great struggles was to win and hold a seat in federal parliament. In his forties Curtin stood for the marginal federal seat of Fremantle five times between 1925 and 1934, winning three elections and losing two. His election campaigns were a contest of policies and personalities. As an orator and a big-picture thinker, he had to work on the elements that didn't come naturally: personal contact and local issues. Central to his struggle to win the seat were four colourful political opponents who stood against him – the bacon baron and eccentric independent MP, William Watson; the pharmacist and mayor, Frank Gibson; the accountant and secessionist Keith Watson; and the first woman to stand for federal parliament in WA, Florence Cardell-Oliver. Curtin's campaign methods were traditional public meetings mixed with growing professionalisation and changing technology. Tracing Curtin's electioneering in this period before his elevation to the Labor leadership reveals crucial local aspects of a national figure in his political formation.

Dr Nathan Hobby is a biographer based in Perth. His book *The Red Witch: A Biography of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (Miegunyah Press 2022) won the WA Premier's Award for Book of the Year while his novel, *The Fur* (Fremantle Press 2004) won the TAG Hungerford Award. His day job as a special collections librarian/archivist at Curtin University's John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library inspired him to take on the life of John Curtin as his next personal research project. He holds a PhD from the University of Western Australia where he is an honorary research fellow. His website can be found at nathanhobby.com.



Notice of Annual General Meeting

The meeting will be held at 109 Stirling Highway, Nedlands on Wednesday 21 October at 6pm

Nominations for Council 2026-27

The election of President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer and four Councillors will take place at the forthcoming AGM on Wednesday 21 October. If you are interested in nominating, please contact Lesley Burnett (email: admin@histwest.org.au) to obtain a nomination form.

Nominations close at 4pm on Wednesday 16 September

Message to all members

We hope you are enjoying your membership of the Society and look forward to your renewal. 2026-27 membership invoices have been sent. Please visit our website membership portal to sign in to your account.

Welcome to new members

Kerrie Brown, Helen Burston, Richard Coles, Susan & Digby Cullen, Melville Davies, Judith Ewing, Barry & Sandy Fehlberg, Patricia Fynmore, Karrakatta Club (Affiliate), Mary McArdle, Helen Philips, Residency Museum York, Carrie & Brian Smith, Michaelle Taylor, Kiki Williams

Forthcoming Events — Don't forget to book online!

Or ring the office 9386 3841 admin@histwest.org.au

HISTORY IN THE CITY



Perth then and now
Richard Offen

Citiplace Community Centre, Upper-Level
Perth Railway Station Concourse

Wednesday 2 September, 2pm

Have a look at how Perth has changed over the last 150 years! Buildings have come and gone and street scapes have changed dramatically over the years.

Richard will take you on a trip through time, documenting the changes using photographs taken from as near the same angle as possible.

Entry \$10.00 at the door.
Bookings not required

COMMUNITY TALK



Early Albany: exploring Western
Australia's bicentenary

John Dowson

History West Centre
109 Stirling Hwy, Nedlands

Wednesday 23 September, 10 for 10.30am

Come on a pictorial journey through Albany's early rich history when major scientific expeditions brought to Albany talented surveyors, botanists, artists and collectors along with the often brutal sealers and whalers. Commemorate the initial amicable relationships between the local Menang and visitors.

Trace the stories of later settlers. Hear what the brilliant Charles Darwin, surveyor Philip Chauncy and fifteen-year-old James Browne thought of their interactions with the local Aboriginal people. This talk pays tribute to Albany's bicentenary (1826-2026).

Bookings essential

Cost \$10 Members/\$15 Non Members

Please ring the office: 9386 3841

Or click on the link

<https://square.link/u/xE4IPmSC>

Have you remembered to book?



61st Affiliated Societies Annual State Conference
in our centenary year

1926-2026 A Century of Change:
Where to next?

11-13 September 2026

Theatrette State Library of WA
Perth Cultural Centre,
25 Francis St, Perth

For booking and further details see
<https://histwest.org.au/events/2026-state-history-conference/>

More on J P Stokes' quiz in August's *History West*

Member Ian Abbott has pointed out several mistakes in Q1.

First, the question was not accurately posed. The *Batavia* was a VOC ship, not a warship, and it was not wrecked on an island but on a reef in the Abrolhos.

Second, the answers were incorrect.

1a = Pelsaert's name was misspelt

1b = The marsupial described was a Tammar not a Quokka

Did you spot these errors too?

Affiliates Newsletter

If you would like to read about
Affiliates' activities, please visit

<https://histwest.org.au/affiliates-news/>

LAUNCH

One Hundred Years of Treasures

from the Royal Western Australian Historical Society

1926-2026

Amid balloons and celebratory food and drinks a large crowd gathered to welcome *Treasures*, History West's centenary publication. The book celebrates the Society's hundred years of collecting and caring for a multitude of objects that form part of Western Australia's history. They have been safely stored and researched by keen volunteers across the generations from 1926 and have been displayed whenever an opportunity arose. Now current museum and library volunteers have identified a hundred of the most significant and historic to feature in this wonderful book. Each item has been photographed and its story detailed to produce a visually beautiful and informative publication.

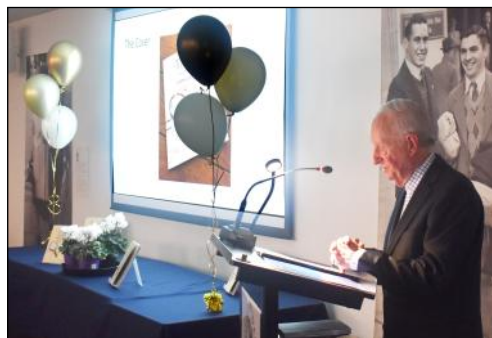
Former president Bob Nicholson launched the book by reflecting on the etymology of the word 'treasure'. He explained that its dominant meaning over time has referred to an object's high monetary value – 'riches, treasury, treasure-house, gold mine, treasure-trove, nest egg, mint, fortune, savings, capital, wealth, hoard, resources, fortune'. However, he recognised, this understanding is quite deficient for our purpose here. The Society's collection was not accessioned and cared for because of the monetary value of any of its items. We need to think more widely.

Turning again to the definition, it goes on to state that to treasure includes 'anything valued and preserved as precious and, in relation to a person, treasure means a jewel or gem'. This sounds more like what the Society has in mind so we must proceed on that understanding...

The items which will be featured in the book of treasured items will be a variety of objects, not necessarily having anything in common. They are treasured because that is a status they have from association with an historical person or event in the past of our State.

Our speaker concluded by thanking all those who were involved in the *Treasures* project — Pamela Statham Drew, Dorothy Erickson, Wendy Lugg, Val Hutch, Jeanette Longwood, Barbara Harris, Heather Campbell, Jennie Carter, Jo Cornish, Steve Errington and current President Richard Offen as well as many others who assisted as needed.

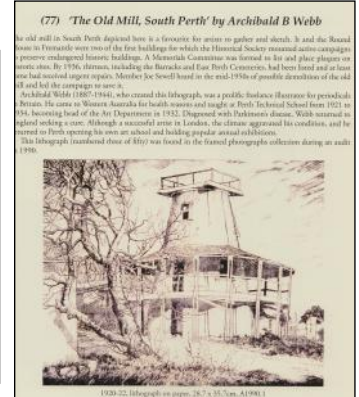
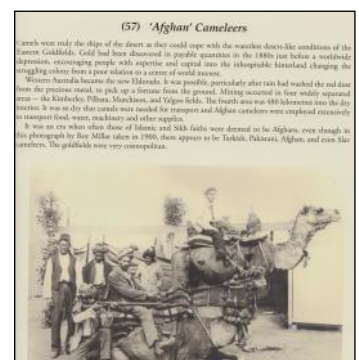
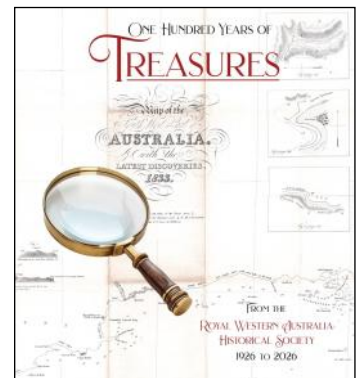
For \$35 and available from the Bookshop you can enjoy a fascinating glimpse into Western Australia's social history. Don't miss the experience!



Former president Bob Nicholson
launches *Treasures*



Presidents across two decades L to R: Clem Mucahy, Lenore Layman, Richard Offen,
Sally Anne Hasluck, Margaret Medcalf, Steve Errington, Bob Nicholson



CENTENARY STORIES

The seventh decade: historical tours and re-enactments

Barbara R Harris

In 1950 the Society introduced a program of regular tours for members to visit districts and places of historic interest, both day trips and extended tours. Annual programs of tours, walks and visits continue today. The first bus tour was organised by Mollie Lukis and Cara Camilleri to Busselton, visiting several colonial homesteads in the district. Other early tours, conducted by Kate Caldwell in 1952, took participants to the Round House in Fremantle and to Garden Island.

Tours have continued over the decades – river cruises, train journeys, bus trips, and bicycle and walking tours. In the seventh decade (1986-1996) the Tours Committee under the inspiring leadership of Lexie Beardmore was particularly active and organised a range of tours that took place in most months. As well as promoting WA history and offering members enjoyable social outings they raised valuable revenue for the Society.

Walking tours were popular. One was a tour of the historic places in the west end of St Georges Terrace, from the Barracks Arch to the Old Perth Boys School. Another took participants through the old parts of East Perth introducing the cemeteries and Victoria Park public gardens. Ron Bodycoat, a conservation architect and a past president of the Society, guided these walks and his commentary touched on the people, buildings and events of interest. Other tours included a Cottesloe historical walk with Ruth Marchant-James, author and historian (March 1994), and a Karrakatta Cemetery Historical Walk Trail that featured the memorials of such luminaries as Joseph Furphy, Bessie Rischbieth and Edith Cowan (September 1996).

Some tours were planned to coincide with WA Heritage Week. In May 1993 a day tour, guided by Professor Sylvia Hallam, anthropologist and Society member, visited places of interest to Aboriginal history, first the Berndt Museum and then the Swan Valley where participants visited a significant Aboriginal site with artefacts dating from both pre-colonial and colonial times, and ancient markings in the limestone roof of Shell Cave, Wanneroo.

Extended tours were arranged to enable members to visit significant sites in regional WA. These included a four-day trip to Quairading, Wagin and Katanning to visit Lake Dumbleyung to see the Donald Campbell Memorial, a visit to the Wagin Historical Village (a working model of a pioneer village) and Wave Rock at Hyden, and an eleven-day tour of historic places in the Kimberley, including the Japanese cemetery, Old Cable Station and historic places associated with pearling (March 1984). Once a year in Spring a tour was held to offer members the opportunity to see wildflowers in bloom. Other tours were organised to coincide with Affiliated Societies Conferences and sometimes the visitors were hosted by Affiliated Societies and enjoyed their hospitality. In October 1995 the Pemberton-Walpole tour included placing plaques along the southwest coast to honour French and British explorers.

Lexie Beardmore was indefatigable in organising multiple tours in this decade and Ally Drake Brockman successfully planned the overnight stays while other Society volunteers also played significant roles, often as guides. These included Ray Oldham, Ron Bodycoat, Clem Mulcahy, Bill de Burgh, Rica Erickson, Ruth Marchant-James, Ian Heppingstone, and Pamela and Len Jackes.



Ron Bodycoat



Lexie Beardmore



Rica Erickson



Ruth Marchant-James



Clem Mulcahy

After one memorable trip Bill de Burgh wrote in his diary that ‘There were many pleasurable incidents and happy times representing the Society and joining with other members on outings arranged by the Tours Committee’. In particular, he described ‘the incomparable Lexie with a sheaf of papers in her hand, and her eagle eye upon us, [making] sure that we and our gear were safely aboard’.

As well as excursions the Society planned re-enactments to commemorate significant historical events: a re-enactment of Captain Stirling’s landing on 1 June 1829 on Garden Island (1979) and the Spring in the Valley tour (1995) which retraced the steps of Dr Ludwig Preiss, a botanist and collector who was in the colony from 1838-1841. Employed by the Russian and Austrian governments to collect plants in WA, with two other men Preiss walked about five miles to a 100-foot-high waterfall. The Society’s tour followed in the steps of the three men in bushland on the edge of the Swan Valley and the Darling Scarp and, guided by Dr Neville Marchant (Director of CALM’s WA Herbarium), Rica Erickson and Clem Mulcahy, participants observed a diversity of native plants.

In 1991 the Society undertook its most ambitious re-enactment, to commemorate the sesquicentenary of Edward John Eyre’s four and a half month, 1,500 km trek in 1841, along the southern coast of WA from Fowlers Bay near Ceduna in South Australia to Albany. The exploration party, consisting of Eyre, John Baxter and three Aboriginal men (Wylie, Joey and Yarry) had set off on 25 February 1841 but, after Baxter was killed on 29 April, Eyre and Wylie completed the grueling trek alone. Bill Graham was the inspiration for the memorial event and tirelessly coordinated its planning. Three walkers, Fred Champion (from Adelaide), Judy Shaw (from Perth) and Rob Gulley (from Victoria) trekked the full distance, following in Eyre’s footsteps in accord with his diary while some Society members met the walkers along the way and accompanied them for sections of the journey.

An enthusiastic committee arranged celebrations to give the trekkers a spirited send-off on 25 February 1991. Near Twilight Cove, at the site where Baxter was murdered, the walkers passed a memorial that had been erected there by the Society in 1930 and, on 11 March, arrived at the WA border. Two plaques were unveiled to mark the event. The Deputy Premier, the Hon Ian Taylor, flew to Eucla to carry out the ceremonies and offered seats in his aircraft to Lesley Waters and Margaret Medcalf and a TV crew from the ABC. A party from Perth was also there to welcome the walkers. Civic receptions were arranged for the walkers in Esperance and Albany and they visited schools along the route, talking to students. On Sunday 2 June at Rossiter Bay, there was a recreation of the meeting of Eyre and Wylie with Captain Rossiter and his crew from the French whaling ship, the *Mississippi*. This was followed by an official welcome to the three walkers by a Shire representative, students reading lines from Eyre's diary, discussions in French between the 'French' crew and students and then a barbecue. On 3-4 June 1841 Eyre and Wylie spent much time aboard the ship being well fed, re-clothed and re-supplied but this wasn't re-enacted. Instead there was a talk and volunteers carried out work for CALM.

On Tuesday 18 June, passing through Esperance, the walkers were guests at a civic luncheon and there was the unveiling of another plaque, presentation of banksia cones collected from near Point Cuylyver (noted on 1 May by Eyre) and the exchange of a 'First Day Cover' mailbag supplied by Australia Post.

On Sunday 7 July there was a re-enactment of Wylie's meeting with his Menang people arranged by Albany Aboriginal Corporation members. The re-enactment was followed by the final 11km walk into Albany via Middleton Beach for the formal welcome by His Excellency the Governor outside the Town Hall. Some Society members went to Albany to participate in these events. Following this, a reception and afternoon tea was held at Stirling House on 9 July with Bill Graham and the Eyre re-enactment party. In addition, an exhibition was presented by the Alexander Library in association with the Society to celebrate the sesquicentenary of Eyre's exploration in 1841.



Rossiter Bay Memorial Plaque



Hon Ian Taylor (Deputy Premier)
unveiling the memorial plaque



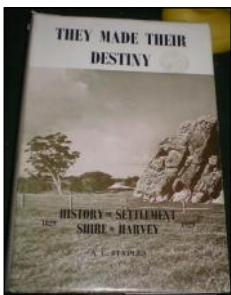
The walkers arrive at Eucla

The Tours and Events committee continues to be active today with Georgina Wigley as convenor. In recent years there have been walking tours to the Maylands Peninsula (Oct 2025), a community walk through Nedlands streets to see black cockatoos (May 2025), a heritage walk around central Perth led by Richard Offen (Nov 2024) and in June this year a guided bus tour to Garden Island.

VOLUNTEERS

A C (Charlie) Staples

Ed Jaggard



They made their
destiny

Arthur Charles Staples (1910-1997) was a well-known and respected member of the Historical Society in the postwar decades, serving as Vice-President 1947-1957 & 1961, and President 1958-1959. Between 1948 and 1994 he published seven articles in *Early Days* on Harvey, the Prinsep family, Marshall Waller Clifton and James Stirling. He also undertook research for the National Trust on two of their colonial homesteads, the Blechynden family's 'Bridgedale' at Bridgetown and Alfred & Ellen Bussell's home, 'Ellensbrook'.

Charlie was born near Bunbury where, after leaving high school, he became a teaching monitor. In 1929 he enrolled at Claremont Teachers' College, graduating in 1930. For the next twelve years he taught at a succession of small country schools before serving in the Army in World War II. Based in Perth, during this time he enrolled part-time at UWA, graduating with a major in history in 1946 and completing a MA in 1950. His thesis on the Harvey District to 1895 provided a basis for much of his later research.

His research interests gradually broadened to include colonial WA's place within the Indian Ocean world and, in 1965, he completed a thesis on 'The Trade of the Eastern Indian Ocean,

1830 to 1845' at London University. At the same time his teaching career progressed to senior positions in high schools and later to appointments in teacher education, culminating in his role as an innovative vice-principal of Mt Lawley Teachers' College.

Retirement in 1973 meant more time for travel to London and research, especially into the history of emigrant families. This research eventually led to the publication of his local history, *They made their destiny: history of settlement of the Shire of Harvey 1829-1929* (Shire of Harvey, 1979).

A firm believer that historical studies enriched the life of a community, he was an active member of the WA working party of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, a foundation member of the National Trust of WA and a board member of the Fremantle Maritime Museum. Charlie was always affable, patient and willingly assisted young scholars with suggestions on archival sources. A diligent researcher who wrote in clear prose, he made an original contribution to the WA's colonial history. Furthermore, to encourage the publication of research on the southwest region, in 1984 he and his wife donated \$100,000 to UWA to establish the *Charles and Joy Staples South-West Region Publications Fund* for that purpose.

VOLUNTEERS

William (Bill) John de Burgh & Ian Heppingstone

Bill de Burgh and Ian Heppingstone became key volunteers at the Society on their retirements and made Stirling House their second home from the 1960s to the 1990s. They worked together in the library and on Council and were both made Fellows of the Society. As well as assisting others with their research they were keen researchers of their own family and district histories. Bill explained his and Ian's knowledge of WA history.

I soon became an admirer of Ian and his knowledge of Western Australian history, especially things around about Perth and the southwest. I had a pretty fair knowledge of much of other parts as all four of my grandparents were born and lived out their lives in this colony and State and my mother was a keen raconteur of the tales she had been told. She had herself been a member of the Society for almost twenty years when she died in 1966.

Bill became active in the Society in 1978 when he retired to Perth after a lifetime farming at Cowalla on the Moore River. He recalled the immediate appeal of the Society:

It soon became obvious to me that the Historical Society was ... interesting and to my liking. This was reinforced when Margaret [his wife] and I met many enthusiastic members, including Bert Williams, the President, on a bus and boat excursion to Mandurah and Ravenswood, and again at the Pioneers Memorial Service at the Old East Perth Cemetery in June, and a trip to Rottne in November. A delightful Christmas party at Stirling House on 2 December cemented our attachment to the Society and its members and to Claire Macklin, the Honorary Secretary, and Mary Shepherd, her assistant.

He became a library volunteer and dedicated almost every Wednesday for 25 years to this work which he described as 'a very pleasurable and fulfilling association with that wonderful collection and the people who make use of it'. The library benefited greatly, member Michael Nind recalling the library rooms as a hive of activity.

I often visited the library on Bill's rostered days. Ian Heppingstone was there most days. Bill's cousin Geoff Lefroy was often there contributing conversation and managing the garden. In one corner Ron Wright and Bert Williams would be working on radio scripts. Further over Nancy Kelly was working on the photograph collection. I acquired a great deal of insight and understanding about WA history in this group. Different insights and understanding came from the tea break in the kitchen.

Bill was quickly brought on to Council and served as Vice President 1979-1983. Ian joined the Society in 1962 and was a Councillor 1965-1984, Research Secretary and convenor of the Memorials Committee. Ian and Bill worked together on the Memorials Committee which placed plaques at historic sites. And Bill turned his hand to a variety of additional tasks as needed: tending the garden and reticulation, sometimes printing the newsletter and undertaking small maintenance and carpentry jobs. When the museum and library committee was split in 1982, Bill convened the library committee.

Both men found time for their own research and writing. Ian contributed eight articles to *Early Days* between 1964 and 1993, four on whaling in which his family were engaged in the earliest decades of the colony, three on the Bussell family (working with Margaret Wilson), and one on pioneer droving in the northwest. Bill published prolifically, drawing on the wonderful collection of personal correspondence, diaries and farm records that his family had preserved from their arrival in the colony in 1841. Most notable were *Neergabby (where the brook and river meet): a history of the Moore River and Lower Gingin Brook, 1830-1960* (1976, 2003); *The Breakaways* with E M de Burgh (1981), a history of the de Burgh family; *The Old North Road* (1986, 2002), the story of the old stock route between Perth and Geraldton; *Dacresfield: a history of the Dacres Williams family* (1993), a biography of Margaret de Burgh's great-grandfather, the Revd W Dacres Williams, first headmaster of Perth Boys School and Colonial Chaplain at Guildford; and *Phoebe Ruth Lefroy: her life and letters* (1995), a book remembering her commitment to Sr Kate's Home. Bill also co-authored with Graeme Henderson *The Last Voyage of the James Matthews* (1979) and wrote about the Champion Bay stock route and Smith's steam mill in two *Early Days* articles in 1989 and 1991.

Bill delighted in this research and combined both documentary and boots-on-the-ground research methods. For instance, his diary tells of travelling the old north stock route with Nan Broad in 1983.

The following week was spent following, as nearly as possible, the entire route from Walkaway to Perry Lakes. Although the track was clear enough on old maps it had reverted to wild bush over much of its length. However, with much help from others with local knowledge along the way, we were able to visit all the most notable places and relive, in our minds, those journeys of old.

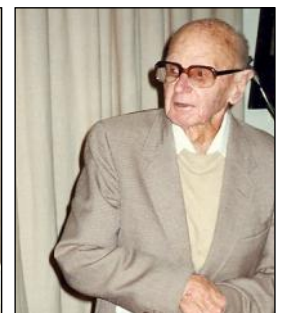
Both men lived to be 99 years old – Ian dying in 1999 and Bill in 2012. Ian remained on regular weekly library duty until 1998 while Bill continued until 2003 although he maintained an interest in library affairs until his death.

References

W J de Burgh, 'Notes from the Diary of a Volunteer', typescript, 2024.



Bill with Nancy Kelly at Ian's 97th birthday celebration at Stirling House, 1997. P2009.4674



Ian speaking on the occasion. P2009.4672.

Community Talk

By his own hand: commentary on the loss of C Y O'Connor Western Australia's engineering genius

Mercurio Cicchini, clinical psychologist



A packed house, which included several of C Y O'Connor's descendants, was keen to hear this talk on the death of WA's most famous Engineer-in-Chief who suicided on 10 March 1902. As a clinical psychologist our speaker asked – why did a man with such a brilliant mind, record of outstanding accomplishments and excellent capacity to problem-solve, make a seemingly rash, finite decision to end his own life violently? Mercurio's talk suggested an influence on O'Connor that historians have not considered.

O'Connor's death is a well-known fact of WA history, a great misfortune for O'Connor, his family and WA and a source of deep regret. It was an action which had clear precipitating causes in the fierce and unjust attacks on his integrity both in parliament and the press together with the absence from his side of his strongest public supporters. Observers noted his growing anxiety and depression. Speaking as a clinical psychologist, Mercurio provided an added dimension to our understanding of the tragedy. He explored a key event in O'Connor's childhood life to suggest that the lifelong effects of childhood trauma might have been of significance in the adult O'Connor's sensitive nature and specifically in his final tragedy.

We were taken on an historical journey first through O'Connor's professional engineering life in New Zealand from 1865 to 1891 where he succeeded but felt his abilities were not recognised. His move to WA produced great engineering achievements, chiefly:

- the port of Fremantle (commenced in 1892 and opened in 1897);
- a railway network and rolling stock that helped the more efficient transport of produce from the agricultural regions;
- the Goldfields water supply scheme pumped from the damming of the Helena River on the outskirts of Perth – over 500 kilometres.

With Premier John Forrest's departure to federal parliament the WA government became volatile and unstable; at the same time O'Connor lost his strongest supporter and protector. He had not taken leave from employment in eleven years and lived with major work overload.

Mercurio took us back to O'Connor's childhood in Ireland. He was born in 1843 to a family with five children just prior to the Great Potato Famine of 1845-1861. The famine resulted in O'Connor's parents losing their farm and, at the age of seven, the life of the boy himself changed significantly. He was sent to live with an aunt and uncle and remained there for approximately four years before returning to his parents. There was no suggestion at all of ill-treatment. However Mercurio suggested:

from a modern enlightened perspective this dislocation from his parents is most likely at the root of O'Connor's psychological sensitivities which emerged in response to prolonged stress and absence of emotional support – factors which underpinned his emotional breakdown, and the decision to end his life.

Mercurio outlined the important social and emotional conditions babies and children need for strong psychological growth. Meeting attachment needs for safety and security, feeling protected and safeguarded from potential harm and not feeling at risk – these conditions are essential for a child's psychological growth to confident adulthood. Vulnerability created by childhood experiences can be triggered and re-emerge in later life; adult stresses hit harder. The disruption in O'Connor's childhood life, Mercurio suggested, was likely a factor when stresses in his professional life overwhelmed him in 1902.

This was a most stimulating talk taking us into the realm of psycho-history and inviting us to open our minds to psychological influences on historical individuals and events. The audience enjoyed his talk and Mercurio was engaged in a number of discussions after formal proceedings closed.

Sad News

It is with deep regret that History West advises members of the death of Christine Foulkes Taylor. Christine was an active member and volunteer and until recently was the New Members Liaison. We remember her with respect and gratitude.



Can You Help?

Member Mrs Margaret Little from Albany is researching the history of Perth's Australian Red Cross ambulance service during World War II. Margaret's mother was a Red Cross ambulance driver, the majority of whom were women working in their spare time, and a strong camaraderie existed between them.

Do you have a family member who also drove a Perth RC ambulance during the war?

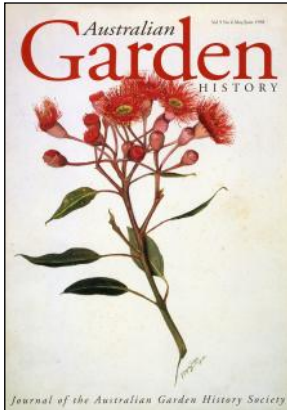
Can you help Margaret with her project – with photographs or any other information?

If so, please contact –
Mrs Margaret Little - 0417 097 969 or
marglittle@gmail.com

A recent donation to the library collection

Australian Garden History journal, Oline Richards & Government House grounds

Gillian Lilleyman



Australian Garden History, 9(6)1998 cover: May Gibbs, *Eucalyptus ficifolia* (red flowering gum), AGWA.

John Viska's recent donation of a set of the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS)'s journal *Australian Garden History* is a welcome addition to our information on historic gardens and their design, conservation and restoration. The journals, especially the earlier editions, are mostly from a collection of papers that landscape historian Oline Richards gave to the WA branch chairman when she and her late husband Duncan moved to Sydney to be nearer family in 2007. Their provenance is hence noteworthy.



Government House - gardenesque pleasure grounds on the lower level, 1890s. SLWA.

Oline and Duncan Richards practised as heritage architects, Duncan in the built environment and Oline in gardens and landscapes. Following the establishment of the Australian Heritage Commission in 1975, historic gardens and precincts were surveyed as part of the National Estate and in

WA much of this research was undertaken by Oline, sometimes in collaboration with Duncan or others, mostly under the auspices of the National Trust WA.

Oline's impressive body of work includes a tree study of the Kimberley region, and conservation plans for Ellensbrook at Margaret River, East Perth Cemeteries, Supreme Court Garden, the Thomson Bay settlement at Rottne and the grounds of Government House. She is the author of *Designed landscapes in Western Australia* published in 1997 and contributed to the AGHS publications *Planting the Nation* and *The Oxford Companion to Australian Gardens*. A founding member of AGHS, Oline presented a paper at its first conference in Victoria in 1980 and was the WA representative on its inaugural management committee. With membership spread across the continent and interstate travel not lightly undertaken in the early 1980s, communication was an imperative: the initial newsletter was published from 1989 as a quarterly journal.

Oline made regular contributions to the journal. Writing about Government House and its grounds, for which she prepared the conservation plan in 1995, Oline discussed the domain as a historical record of Perth's development and looked at the topographical features of the site: the ravine that necessitated siting the current building on the western boundary of the upper terrace, and the lower terrace where in 1831 colonial botanist James Drummond planted cuttings and plants provided by the Horticultural Society of London. Misunderstanding between Governor Stirling and Drummond over the management of the garden after Stirling revised his plan to locate Government House on Mount Eliza, compounded by the Colonial Office's refusal to fund his appointment, meant Drummond's association with the garden was short-lived. His intended acclimatisation and botanic garden and nursery became a kitchen garden for Government House.

Since no inventories exist, any knowledge of early plantings comes from private letters and diaries or from photographs. Lady Broome, who wrote under the name of Lady Mary Anne Barker, described the garden when she and her husband Governor Broome arrived in 1883 as extremely pretty, with its sloping terraces down to the water's edge and profusion of geraniums and violets. She listed oaks, oleanders, olives, willows and gum trees and noted that there were several large fig trees as well as peach, apricot, apple, pear and almond trees. Large beds of strawberries ran almost to the river and grapevines, either espaliered or growing as long arcades, stretched in all directions.



Dense planting of fruit trees, trellised vines, vegetables and flowers in kitchen garden on lower terrace with Governor Broome and Mr Amherst, c1880s. SLWA.



Ponds in the lower gardens, c1930s. These ponds were laid out by Henry Campbell on reclaimed foreshore land in 1905. SLWA.

Photographs show that the lower terrace has undergone the most change. A plan prepared just after the first Government House was demolished in 1887 shows the kitchen garden and orchard laid out in rectangular plots separated by raised earthen paths. With less need for a productive garden, by 1897 this area had been redesigned for pleasure with curving gravel paths, lawns and flower beds. This work was initiated by Jeremiah Sheath, an English-trained landscape gardener who was reputedly brought to the colony by Governor Broome for that purpose in 1885. After Sheath left Government House to work in the private sector, Daniel Feakes supervised the garden until Governor Bedford put his foreman, Henry Campbell, in charge in 1906.

During Campbell's tenure, rose parterres were introduced on the central terrace and ponds on the lower terrace, features that Campbell later incorporated into the Supreme Court Garden, and the remaining fruit trees were replaced with palms and other ornamental species. A comprehensive survey of the trees undertaken in 1995 identified 550 trees and palms. Some trees are among the oldest in the city but, as Oline noted, the collection on the whole is relatively young, especially on the lower terrace, the kitchen garden having been relocated to an area near the stables and poultry sheds. This eastern precinct, where Lady Broome had found lots of room for her cows, chickens and pigs, is now the site of the Perth Concert Hall.

Oline mentioned historically significant built features: the limestone wall and ponds marking the river shoreline before reclamation (another of her journal topics), and the rendered wall fronting St Georges Terrace, its low height a record of changes to the city landscape. Pondering potential challenges in the 21st century, she suggested the vice-regal establishment should have a function in which all citizens can participate. With the grounds open on a regular basis, this function is now beginning to be realised.

References

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Jumbo Second-Hand Booksale An outstanding success!



Held over two days – 1-2 August – in the carpark of our home at 109, the sale raised \$18,455 after expenses, a wonderful result delivering needed funds to sustain History West's ongoing life.

First and greatest thanks to Joint Convenors Pamela and Nick Drew who worked over many months planning, collecting, pricing and storing a vast array of books. They then led the weekend event.

Councillor Michael Nind instigated the sale. Already terminally ill, Michael was determined that his last contribution to the Society would be a book sale where his large personal library would be offered for sale together with the donations of a great many others. Michael led the initial planning, began the book pricing and maintained his involvement as he grew weaker. We are so sorry he died before he could witness the success of his venture!

Special thanks to Daniel Ranshaw who organised and sponsored the coffee van, printed 1,000 flyers, led a letter box drop and contributed throughout.

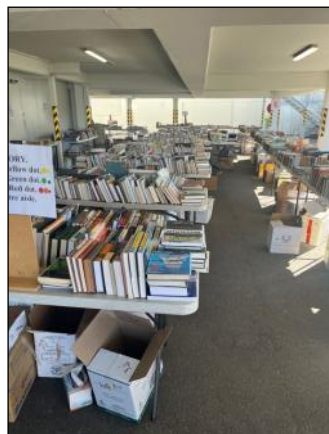
Many thanks to President Richard who organised the loan of fourteen tables and to Steve Brockman for the transport.

Thank you to Linda and her bookshop team for staffing the bookshop over the weekend.

Thanks (as always) to our wonderful Community Officer Lesley. Could we function without her? Certainly nowhere near as successfully as we do!

In all, 25 volunteers helped make the sale such a great success – work much appreciated!

Finally we are most grateful to all our donors and buyers – we couldn't do without you too!



A Part of Perth

In 1895 James Thomas Peet moved to WA to establish his firm Peet & Co as real estate developers. He and the company prospered greatly and the Peet family developed an ongoing friendship with the Society. This is a relationship of which we are proud and we are pleased to be able to sell prints of ten Peet & Co's 20th century suburban plans. They make most attractive posters as well as containing interesting historical information.

Available from our Bookshop



Peet & Co Suburb Plans A2 size, printed on acid-free paper, \$50 each

Mr Peet's top hat



In 2015 James Thomas Peet's top hat was donated to the museum collection and museum volunteer and researcher **Jo Pearson** explained its historical significance.

Fashion trends come and go usually with some speed, but occasionally one lingers, capturing the imagination of fashion followers. Top hats are a case in point. The top hat originated in France but debuted in London in 1797 when hatter John Hetherington wore his 20cm tall black silk plush topper in public. Its height was said to have incited terror and panic on the streets, 'causing women to faint, children to cry and dogs to bark'. Hetherington was fined £500 for 'disturbing public order'. However, the *London Times* predicted his hat would set a new fashion trend, one that soon all gentlemen would be wearing. And so it followed. The beaver top hat, preferred to silk or felt, was the most desired male hat of the 19th century, more popular than the bowler or boater.

The quality and condition of a gentleman's hat was viewed much like a character reference, a judgement on the social status of the wearer and, as such, beavers were even worn by gentlemen players on the cricket field. One London hatter reckoned he could tell the standing of a customer by the way he shopped for his hat. A request for a silk one showed suburban respectability, a plain 'top hat' implied the City or Stock Exchange but a man who asked for a 'topper' indicated he was out of the top drawer.

The Swan River colony's Advocate General George Fletcher Moore desperately needed a new beaver to consolidate his position and to wear for state occasions as his old one had accidentally been cut in half and was bald. The first shipment of beavers had arrived from Launceston in 1833 priced at 30 shillings each but Moore dismissed them as old-fashioned 'villainous looking silk ones'. By 1859, however, Swan colony newspapers were advertising 'the finest London gentlemen's beavers, black and white' as well as beaver hats for boys. As the local price of an imported London topper soared from 30 shillings to £10, Cornishman William Barrett was transported to Fremantle jail for stealing a beaver.

James Thomas Peet acquired his silk plush top hat in Perth in 1901 and left no doubt he was a man of commerce, printing his name, profession and business address inside the hat alongside trademarks of hat maker Christy's of London and retailer E C Shenton & Co Perth.

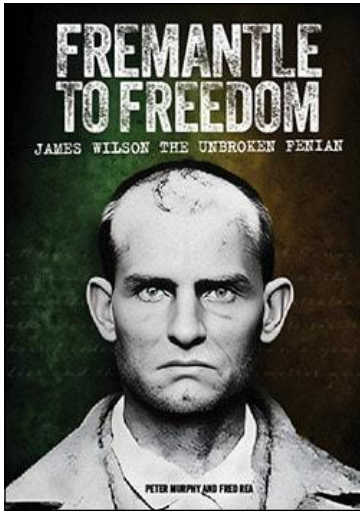
His well-used tanned hatbox suggests Peet was a prosperous gentleman who frequently travelled even, reputedly, to attend the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary. It has a leather strap handle, is stamped with cabin travel labels and secured with a heavy metal lock indicating that this topper was a coveted asset and therefore prone to theft. Padded and lined with elegant green striped sateen, the hatbox firmly cushions the top hat against rough sea journeys.

Such was the demand for pelts for making beaver toppers the animals came close to extinction, a fate ironically shared by hat makers. Mercury compounds used to treat beaver fur poisoned the hatters, slowly driving them insane and to an early death. Yet the workplace practice continued until the 1940s. The commonly used phrase 'mad as a hatter' is a reminder of their tragedy.

Book Reviews

Peter Murphy & Fred Rea, *Fremantle to Freedom: James Wilson the Unbroken Fenian*, self-published, 2026. In Library & Bookshop \$55.

Reviewer: Hilaire Natt



Among the more exciting incidents in West Australian history was the arrival on Easter Monday 1876 of an American whaling barque the *Catalpa* off the coast at Rockingham to rescue a group of six Irish Fenian prisoners 'entombed' in Fremantle gaol. They were among 250 convicts, including 62 Fenian political prisoners from the failed Irish uprising of 1865-1867, who were tried, condemned and transported by the British government to far off Western Australia. The three-masted Blackwall frigate, the *Hougoumont*, had arrived in Fremantle on 10 January 1868 on a final voyage which officially ending eighty years of penal transportation to Australia.

The Fenians were 19th and early 20th century Irish republican revolutionaries operating chiefly through the Fenian Brotherhood in the USA and the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland (IRB) whose goal was to end British rule and establish an Irish Republic. The name derived from the *Fianna*, ancient Celtic warriors who defended Ireland from invading pagan tribes 1,000 years ago.

This comprehensive account of the role of the Fenians in Irish, Australian and American histories is told through the eyes of the last survivor of the six 'military'

Fenians rescued from WA by American sympathisers in the *Catalpa*, namely 'James McNally Wilson the Unbroken Fenian' who gazes menacingly at us from a black and white prison photograph on the book's cover.

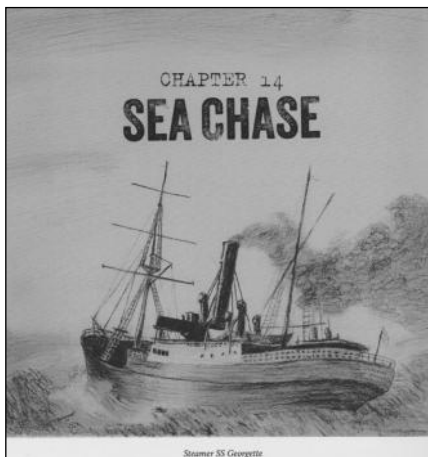
Described as a 'fictional history inspired by real characters and true events', this is self-published by two dedicated and experienced Irish historians Peter Murphy and Fred Rea with extensive support from fellow enthusiasts, united in the aim of revealing details of what actually happened before, during and after the event. The fictional element uses James Wilson's storytelling as a stylistic device to shape the book, linking numerous historical elements together.

Patriots or traitors?

It depends who you ask. James Wilson, who had joined the British army and served in India and Ireland, unwisely took the Fenian oath, was betrayed, tried by a British military court as a deserter and condemned to death as a 'traitor'. His sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. After a decade in various 'hell-hole' prisons, he was one of 62 Fenians, military and civilian, transported to WA. He comments: 'My only crime was to help to set my country free'.

Details of the voyage to Australia and life in Fremantle Prison are all vividly described and illustrated with appropriate photographs. Over the next few years, well-behaved Fenian prisoners were released as ticket-of-leave men, free to live and work in WA but not to leave or return to their beloved Ireland; but the 'military' Fenians would never be pardoned. Some of their comrades had reached the USA and it was from there that plans were hatched to rescue the remaining seven Fenian prisoners, including James Wilson.

The rescue by the *Catalpa* is told in exciting detail. An elaborate 'mad plan' allowed the six Fenians, 'gardening' outside the prison, to be picked up by a horse and cart, taken to the beach at Rockingham, loaded into a small wooden boat and rowed through choppy waters to the *Catalpa*, anchored in international waters off Garden Island.



Pursued and confronted by a government guardship, the *Georgette*, heroic Captain George Anthony hoisted the American flag and, denying and defying the order to return the prisoners, retreated at speed to the high seas. Then, after a few months whaling, the *Catalpa* and the rescued Fenians made a triumphant entry into New York harbour.

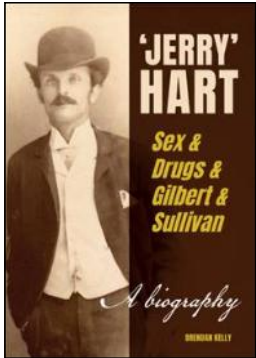
The remaining chapters of the book detail the bloody but ultimately successful Irish rebellion against British rule in Ireland and track the fate of the six rescued Fenians in the USA.

This is the flip side of the Ireland of Bing Crosby and popular music with its nostalgia for 'Erin's green valleys' and salutes to 'glorious St Patrick'. It reveals a phenomenal amount of research and will be of particular interest for those concerned with Ireland's darker history. If there is anything you would want to know about the Fenians in Australia and Ireland, this is the book for you.

The steamer Georgette in pursuit

Brendan Kelly, 'Jerry' Hart. *Sex & Drugs & Gilbert & Sullivan. A Biography*, Gaelforce Promotions, 2026. In Library & Bookshop \$30.

Reviewer: Ed Jaggard



Brendan Kelly is an accomplished writer with an eye for an apt quote and a love of language. He understands where there are gaps in history waiting to be filled. This is certainly so in the case of WA's late 19th century cultural history, so Kelly proceeds to partially fill it by examining the career of someone who might be labelled a cultural entrepreneur.

From the day in 1878 when he landed at Swan River, Francis Jerome (Jerry) Ernest Hart was a man on the make, a conman exploiting the circumstances in which he found himself – a small, inward-looking colony that craved almost any form of cultural activity. Hart's sojourn in WA from 1878 to 1896 coincided with the three terms of Governor William Robinson (1875-1895), allowing the two music lovers to publicly indulge their passion and to encourage enthusiastic amateur performances.

In the last decades of the 19th century Hart was a notorious Perth presence, someone who was constantly in the news and being talked about. Kelly writes about him with gusto, exposing his career through the skilful selection of short vignettes presenting different personal or contextual episodes in Hart's life, almost all revolving around music and reporting/journalism. Undoubtedly talented in both, he assisted the Perth Musical Union and the Perth Amateur Operatic Society to flourish. The same could be said of his newspaper reporting in the *Fremantle Herald*, *West Australian* and *Daily News*, Hart gleefully exposing the foibles and weaknesses of others.

Allowing for the occasional overlap, the Hart story unfolded in three phases, the first from 1878 to 1883 when he established himself as a popular performer (stage, orchestra, opera) and organiser in a colony craving popular entertainment. The second stage from 1884 to 1888 were spent mostly in Geraldton where Hart edited and contributed to the local paper, the *Victorian Express*. Locals endured his lacerating prose while at the same time they appreciated his cultural forays into concerts and drama. Finally, returning to Fremantle-Perth accompanied by his wife Lillian, also a talented writer, the Harts flourished in the 1890s. They observed Perth's cultural life and endlessly contributed to it while also enjoying the patronage of the viceregal Robinsons.

As Kelly also relates, there was a dark side to this successful 'composing and performing, producing and publicising', personal episodes that attracted some attention: there was mining interest puffery, association with individuals of doubtful character, difficulties with cheques and other unfortunate occurrences. Eventually in 1896 Hart travelled to London where he found that his colonial reputation counted for little and he gradually disappeared from public view.

The book is unusual in its episodic structure; nevertheless it provides an entertaining life story told with zest. There are colourful descriptions, such as this one of Hart – 'In full view a squirt of a man with a huge ego, stage presence, alluring wit and a lacerating pen'. There is often free-wheeling prose but all of it is based on sound research, making this book a valuable contribution to WA's social history and to be recommended.

**New Norcia Studies Day 2026
Friday 2 October**

For program details & bookings:
www.newnorcia.com.au/events/studies-day-2026

Community Officer: Lesley Burnett
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