HISTORY WEST

December 2026



Middleton Beach, Albany.
P1999.4533



Crawley Baths, 1910s. P2016.95



Railways workers picnic, Pt Walter.
P2003.775



Perth picnic, 1920s.
P2011.196



Yilgarn picnic. P2011.756



P2004.52

Happy Christmas
Happy New Year
Happy Holidays

and a joyful summertime!

Many thanks to everyone who helped create this year's eleven issues of *History West*.

We couldn't produce a monthly newsletter without the involvement of you all – authors and book reviewers, proofreader, photographers, library and museum volunteers, and the distribution team.

Special thanks to our newsletter designer Barry Sullivan who creates the clever and attractive layouts every month and Community Officer, Lesley Burnett, whose work and skills are essential every month. Thanks also to Marvi at iPrintplus.

History West could not exist without you all. Your involvement is much appreciated!

Photographs from the collection of summer entertainments in past decades.



Cottesloe Beach, early 1920s.
P2014.378



Port Beach, 1962. P2010.371



Cable Beach, Broome. P1999.3154

Holiday Closure

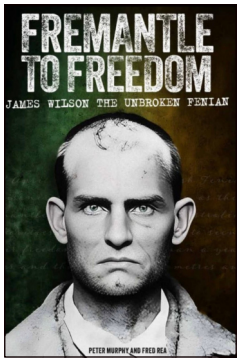
History West Centre will be closed from 4pm on Friday 18 December until Monday 18 January at 10am.

The History West Centre | 109 Stirling Highway | NEDLANDS Western Australia 6009
TELEPHONE: (08) 9386 3841 | EMAIL: admin@histwest.org.au
FACEBOOK: facebook.com/histwest | WEB: www.histwest.org.au | ABN: 43 607 110 473
LIBRARY EMAIL: library@histwest.org.au | MUSEUM EMAIL: museum@histwest.org.au

Forthcoming Events — Don't forget to book online!

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

HISTORY IN THE CITY



Fred Rae & Peter Murphy

Citiplace Community Centre, Upper-Level Perth Railway Station Concourse

Wednesday 2 December, 2pm

Six Irish prisoners dared to escape from the British constabulary in 1876. Did they just escape into the bush and happen to meet with the crew of the *Catalpa* and sail to America? Was there more to the story? The speakers will explain how the plan unfolded well before the Fenians escaped. [Books available]

CHRISTMAS PARTY



Members and their partners are cordially invited to our annual Christmas Party.
Join us for an evening of festive cheer, good company and a touch of 1920s glamour.

History West Centre
109 Stirling Hwy, Nedlands

Friday 11 December, 5-7pm

$45 per person (canapes & drinks included)

Bookings essential
Please ring the office: 9386 3841
Scan the QR code or click on the link
https://square.link/u/CRdNygaL

BOOKED IN FOR A XMAS CUPPA



Wednesday 2 December
10am for 10.30 start

History West Centre
109 Stirling Hwy, Nedlands

SOLD OUT

Enjoy a hot cuppa while listening to our guest speakers on these featured books. Discover perfect holiday gifts for everyone on your list, including top recommendations for children and young adults.

Tickets $10 each Bookings essential
Please ring the office: 9386 3841
Scan the QR code or click on the link

https://square.link/u/T7JFupiY

Welcome to new members

Anthony Edis, Sydney Hall, Historic Victoria Park Ltd, Harry Klein, Rebecca Repper, Beth Schultz, Terri Starcevich



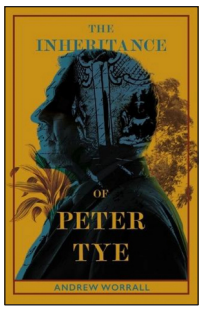
In memory of Sir William Heseltine (1930-2026)

What an extraordinary life he had!
And how well he lived it!
We were all delighted when, in retirement and on return to Australia, Sir William took an interest in the life of the Society and threw his support behind it. He was an active and engaged President from 1998 to 2000, and later agreed to a public interview with then President Richard Offen as a Society fundraiser. It was a most generous gesture. His was a long and busy life and we are happy that he shared a small part of it with us.

Writers' Group

Family history becomes historical fiction

Meredith Wilkie



Some 40 members of the writers' groups at History West and Family History WA, among others, enjoyed an absorbing and provocative talk on Monday morning 12 October. Dr Andrew Worrall discussed his 2025 novel, *The Inheritance of Peter Tye*, for which he was awarded the University of Suffolk's first PhD in creative writing.

Peter Tye, a fictional character, is a professional genealogist who, under-employed during COVID, undertakes research into his own family history. In the archives he discovers Keziah Root living in poverty in Ipswich in 1836, Keziah's son George who joined the British Army to serve in India in 1852, and Charlotte Ellis, George's sister-in-law, who was transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1848 for the theft of two dresses. The outlines of their stories are based on meticulous research as evidenced by extensive endnotes and a bibliography.

And what of the details? Andrew outlined the theoretical approach he took to giving voice, personality and daily lives to these ancestors (whom he shares with Peter Tye), declaring that 'All history is fiction'.

The presentation was organised by Dr Megan Ewing, convenor of the History West Writers' Group, with assistance from Lesley Burnett and Hilary Silbert. Following a splendid morning tea, interested visitors were given a guided tour of the History West facilities.

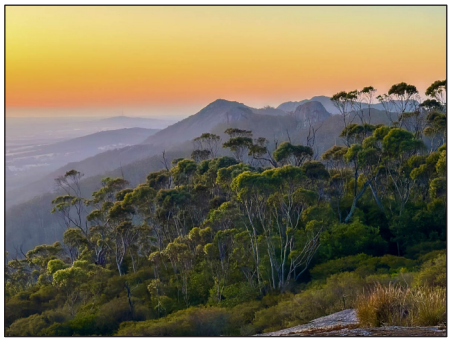




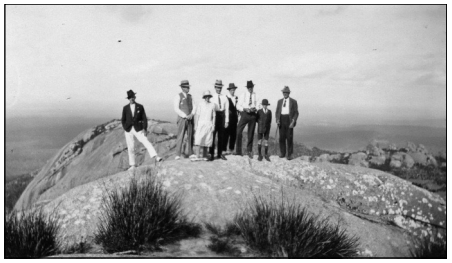

Community Talk

Porongurup – past, place and people

Kingsley Faulkner



Kingsley drew a sell-out crowd to his October talk, and his audience was excellently rewarded with a fascinating presentation of the pre-history and history of this beautiful and much-loved locality. With splendid images to illustrate his story, Kingsley moved from geological time as the land was re-shaped through the long habitation of its Noongar people, who named it Borongurup, to the arrival of European explorers and colonisers at the end of the 18th century. George Vancouver 'took possession' in 1791. The district was part of what became known as the 'friendly frontier', exemplified by the relationship of Mokare and Collet Barker. Explorers were followed by farmers who developed potato cropping, dairying, grazing and fruit growing. The beauty of the landscape and environment encouraged government to support farmers who set up guest houses for holiday visitors and these beginnings led to the opening of the Porongurup National Park, initially as an A Class Reserve, in 1926. This old, climatically buffered, infertile landscape (OCBIL) has produced unique plant and animal communities that make the region a world biodiversity hotspot. It was a great pleasure to be taken on a tour of its past and present.





CENTENARY STORIES
The tenth decade: Affiliated Societies
Barbara R Harris

As early as 1936, one of the objects of the WA Historical Society was the establishment of branches to collect artefacts and stories and make records of early life in the regional districts of WA. In 1937, branches at Busselton and Katanning became affiliated with the Society and, in 1939, the *Early Days* journal reported 'a number of branches had [also] been formed in recent years at Kondinin, Wagin, Northam and Broome'. Some of these early societies struggled to survive, however, but after the war there was renewed interest and *Early Days* 1947 reported the formation of two country branches: Eastern Goldfields HS and Katanning Branch WAHS. Following, in 1954, the Geraldton HS began as the 'Victoria Districts Branch of the WAHS' (with meetings held in the mayor's parlour).

The 1960s saw the growth of regional societies and museums and the Society's commitment to support them. The Society's May 1962 newsletter reported that 'We are hoping to keep contact with our country branches which are growing in importance'; and in 1964, a newsletter reported that there were active branches in twelve country towns (including Albany, Denmark and Kojonup) and, although having only about twenty members each, these 'can hold the keys to the future of the Society'. At this time, the Minister for Education expressed concern that museums were being started without proper control. Council member Ray Oldham, apprehensive that any government intervention would stifle local interest in collecting relics, urged the Society to keep up support for local societies and museums.

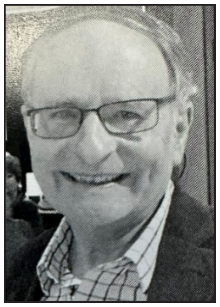
Today, more than 80 historical societies across WA (with over 2,000 members) are affiliated with History West. Societies that have 'objects similar to or in accordance with the objects of the Society may apply to the Council to become affiliated with the Society' (Constitution). Many of these organisations promote awareness and appreciation of the histories of country districts while others are based in metropolitan suburbs (including Bassendean, Guildford, Rockingham and Wanneroo) and some have special interests, including the Maritime Heritage Association, the Australian-Irish Heritage Association and the WA Police HS.

These societies are active today. As well as mounting museum exhibitions, they campaign to preserve historic buildings, as Bassendean HS did, unsuccessfully, to preserve the old Pensioner Guard cottage in Surrey Street; and they organise celebrations of significant events in their community's history. In 2018, the Maritime Heritage Association recognised the 150th anniversary of the *Hougoumont*'s arrival and retold the story of the Fenians and their Catalpa escape; Bridgetown HS commemorated the100th anniversary of the end of the war with a photograph exhibition; and the Busselton Historical Society, housed in Busselton's old Butter Factory, celebrated the centenary of the factory with a Grand Opening Day with entertainment, demonstrations of old skills (butter making, spinning, blacksmithing), a display by the Vintage Car Club, coffee, food stalls and historical displays. The celebration was a great success but, shortly after, disaster struck when the building caught fire causing substantial damage and destroying precious artefacts. In 2019, Midland & Districts HS commemorated the 1904 Poison Gully train accident near Bushmead with a bush walk and morning tea; and, in 2019, Fremantle HS commemorated the centenary of Bloody Sunday on 4 May 1919 when wharfie Tom Edwards was killed in a violent struggle on the waterfront intended to stop non-union labourers unloading a ship that had arrived from the eastern states with influenza patients. Tom Edwards' death caused widespread community distress and anger, and his funeral was a major public event.

History West provides assistance and advice to affiliated societies regarding setting up and management of the society, organisation of materials and support when applying for grants. Each year, at the Annual State Conference, an Affiliated Societies Committee is elected and this Committee acts in the interests of Affiliated Societies and is represented on the Society's Council. Nick Drew is the current Convenor of the committee and other representatives include Fiona Bush and Tracey Willet (Mundaring & Hills), Ashleigh Murch (Denmark), Marilyn Gazeley (Cervantes), Lyn O'Hara (South Perth), Rosie Stroud (Eastern Goldfields), Richard Offen (President History West),



Some 2020 Affiliates Committee members



Nick Drew



Helen Henderson presented FAHS Fellowship by Nick Drew



Fiona Bush

Jacqui Huntley (Wanneroo & Districts), Trish Parker (Irwin Districts), Wendy Garstone (Bayswater), Susan Hart, Rosie Stroud (Eastern Goldfields) and Elizabeth Craigie (Busselton). The committee meets monthly at the Society's Nedlands headquarters, with some members using Skype to save the long journey to Perth. As well as providing advice, the committee supports the Society that is hosting the Society's annual History Conference.

The Annual State History Conference of Affiliated Societies is overseen by History West and hosted by one of the affiliated societies, on alternate years in regional and metropolitan centres. A two-day weekend event, the conference is chaired by the President of the Society and usually commences on the Friday evening with a reception arranged by the host local authority. Over the weekend, a number of speakers present topics about WA history, and the conference includes an Affiliates meeting where each affiliated society has one vote.

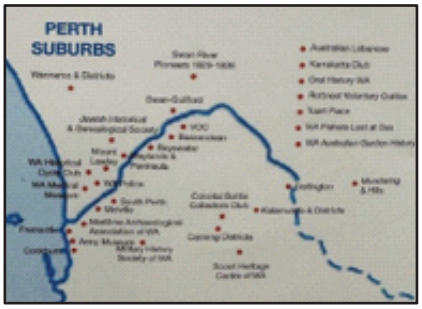
In 2014, the RWAHS hosted the State Conference - its 50th Anniversary - and the theme was 'Perth's Passing Parade'. The Friday evening reception was held at Council House, the Conference on Saturday at the State Library, the 'Gold Anniversary Dinner' at the Parmelia Hotel on Saturday night, and on Sunday morning participants were invited to join various tours around Perth's historic sites guided by Richard Offen and Ruth Marchant James. To acknowledge the 78 Societies and Museums affiliated with the RWAHS at the time, the Museum Committee exhibited items associated with these societies. These included Justice Onslow's court wig (on loan to the Old Court House Law Museum), a silver pocket watch (used to get directions when lost in bush north of Southern Cross) and a cake plate with portraits of Lord and Lady Baden-Powell commemorating their visit to WA in 1931.

Since 2010, each year at the annual conference, the Society has awarded a Merit Award to one of its Affiliates which is judged to have been outstanding in promoting the history of their community. A requirement of affiliation with History West is that affiliated societies provide an annual report on their activities for the past financial year, and the responses received were until recently used to determine the recipient for the annual Merit Award. The inaugural award went to the Carnamah Historical Society for being a 'dynamic, but very different society'; and in 2026 the Narembeen Historical Society won the award for its Emu Hill Information Bay, located approximately four kms south of Narembeen at the former Emu Hill townsite.

The Society encourages a close association with Affiliated Societies. Tours and events are from time to time conducted in partnership with Affiliated Societies and tours to regional areas often include the hospitality of the local historical society. In 2018, a group of 24 RWAHS members embarked on a tour to Katanning and visited the Katanning HS headquarters to view their collections, including the relocated old Katanning school where they were treated to a sumptuous morning tea and a lunch. In July 2023, RWAHS welcomed members of the Toodyay HS with a display of books about Toodyay and a tour of the collections, including advice on archival storage. In September 2023, RWAHS president Sally Anne Hasluck unveiled a commemorative plaque by the entrance of the Beverley HS museum.

The Society's monthly newsletter *History West* has regularly reported on Affiliated Society events until, in 2024, Affiliates Committee member Rosie Stroud initiated the Affiliates Newsletter which is now available at https://histwest.org.au/affiliates-news/

In 1977, the Federation of Australian Historical Societies (FAHS) was established as the national peak body representing the interests of approximately 1,200 historical societies and 100,000 members around Australia. The Federation communicates with governments and public officials to inform them about issues affecting historical societies and museums, and to advocate their interests. History West is a constituent member of the National body and Nick Drew and Richard Offen are currently its delegates. Each year the FAHS awards Fellowships to individuals in recognition of their outstanding contribution to the community history and heritage movement at the national level and these WA Society members have been honoured with a Fellowship: Margaret Medcalf (2000), Lennie McCall (2015), Lenore Layman (2020), and Helen Henderson (2023). In 2008, Sally Anne Hasluck was accorded a Merit Award in recognition of her contribution to the community history and heritage movement at State level.



Metropolitan Affiliated Historical Societies



Emu Hill Information Bay


Sally Anne Hasluck unveiling plaque at Beverley HS

Council 2026-2027



New President
Nicholas Hasluck



Retiring Secretary
Fiona Bush



New Secretary
Peter Farr



New Councillor
Jeanette Longwood

October's AGM was a busy occasion, under the guidance of outgoing **President Richard Offen**. We were delighted to confer two honorary life memberships – on Wendy Lugg and Nick Drew – and to award the Williams/Lee Steere book publication prize. Details of these awards follow later.

The President and Chair of Council's annual report traced an extraordinarily busy year following our move to new premises. This has been the WA Historical Society's centenary year, and we made sure that the milestone was celebrated. Undoubtedly a high point was the official opening in March of the History West Centre at 109 Stirling Hwy. What a major achievement this was, viewed from the perspective of the Society's long struggle for suitable premises to house our collections and sustain our ongoing life. The President's report reminded us of all the other highlights of the year, which have been reported monthly in *History West* newsletter. Treasurer Klara Haselhurst followed with a review of the Society's annual accounts and audit, and the meeting thanked her for her continuous work to manage the Society's finances.

Council elections produced changes in the membership of Council. President Richard Offen has served for the maximum of five years (2021-2026) and members thanked him most warmly for his lively and committed leadership. Nicholas Hasluck was elected unopposed and welcomed as new President.

President – Hon Nicholas Hasluck AM KC

Nicholas has been a member of the Society since 1994 following the death of his parents who had been involved since its formation in 1926. He grew up with WA history in his blood. Over the years he has served within the Arts on boards of many organisations such as WAAPA (ECU), Australia Council and the Commonwealth Literature Prize. Since his retirement as a Judge of the Supreme Court, he has served as Chair of the Art Gallery of WA. These previous commitments have given a strong background in governance and the promotion of organisations. Nicholas has been involved with the journey of this Society to the new premises through the work of his wife Sally Anne Hasluck as Chair of the Planning Committee. He is also a published writer of poetry, essays, fiction and non-fiction giving history different perspectives.

The Society's splendid **Secretary, Fiona Bush**, did not stand for re-election to that position and the meeting thanked her sincerely for her work on what we all know are the relentless administrative tasks that the role of secretary entails!

Peter Farr was welcomed as new Council Secretary.

Secretary – Peter Farr FAICD FAIM C.Eng

Peter is very well versed in corporate governance having a wealth of experience on Councils, Committees and Boards – often as President, VP, Vice Chair, Hon Treasurer or Hon Secretary. His close relationship with the Society started in 2018 when he contributed to the revision of the Constitution. Also, in 2018, the RWAHS Council appointed the management consulting firm Peter Farr Consultants Australasia Pty Ltd to undertake the Feasibility Study and Business Case/Plan for new premises. He was appointed to the History West Planning Committee and worked tirelessly on the project, including corporate fundraising, working with the Hon Architect Maria Gilman, the successful submission of a Business Case to Lotterywest, and seven years on – in late 2024 – the Society's purchase of its grand new premises in good time for the Society's Centenary year.

Continuing Councillors

Council elections and councillors in mid-term resulted in the following Council membership for 2026-27 – Fiona Bush, Nick Drew, Megan Ewing, Darren Foster, Susan Hall, Sally Anne Hasluck, Wendy Lugg, Pamela Statham Drew, Georgina Wigley. To this number a new face has been added.

New Councillor – Jeanette Longwood

Jeanette has been Honorary Librarian since November 2022, managing the collection and assisting with research and reference queries. She encourages both members and the wider public to use this significant collection having overseen its move and resettlement from 49 Broadway to 109 Stirling Hwy during 2025. Jeanette is also a member of the Readings & Publications Committee and the Disaster Preparedness Plan Committee. Previously she was a Medical Librarian at Royal Perth Hospital and later at Graylands Hospital managing the statewide Psychiatric Services Library. After gaining a BA at UWA followed by a Graduate Diploma in Library Studies, Jeanette worked in the Parliamentary Library in Canberra, an interesting exposure to political life! She is a member of Family History WA, Friends of Battye, National Trust of WA and Swan River Pioneers.

Celebrating two new Honorary Life Members

In recognition of exceptional service to the life of the Society

Nick Drew



Nick Drew became a member of the Society in 2000 and immediately volunteered, joining the Marketing Committee and, by 2004, organised the annual Pioneers Memorial Service. Later that year he accepted nomination for a place on Council and was duly elected for a two-year term, a period which has now reached 22 years. In 2007 he was made Council delegate to the Affiliated Societies Committee of which he subsequently became long-term Convenor. Nick has always undertaken whatever has needed doing.

In 2017 he was made Assistant Treasurer on the new Finance Committee. He set about revitalising our tired term deposits, and Council became accustomed to hearing good news as our reserves expanded.

As well Nick took charge of distributing *Early Days* with a view to saving postage and, soon afterwards, joined the small group who meet monthly to fold and post monthly print issues of *History West*. Around this time he good-naturedly accepted the distinguished title of 'Wine Purchasing Officer', securing delicious wine supplies for monthly meetings and social functions.

As a keyholder of both the old and new premises he has for years been constantly on call for emergency messages from security firms and for out-of-hours openings and closings.

Events of recent years have witnessed a huge physical effort when he and Pamela stepped up to ensure that the secondhand book sale and its vital fundraising continued. Nick's role involved handling hundreds of boxes of books multiple times with countless trips around the suburbs collecting carloads of donations. More recently he has taken on another role by organising much-appreciated book launches.

For many years Nick served on the successful History West Community Centre Committee and was also part of the small organising committee for our Centenary State History Conference.

Nick will find this focus on his contribution an affront to his natural modesty but his sustained and vital contribution makes him an outstanding Honorary Life Member.

Wendy Lugg



Wendy became the Society's Honorary Artist in Residence in 2009 and soon became a key volunteer and Museum Committee member. In 2026 she became co-convenor of the Museum Committee and remains central to its success. She has served actively on Council since 2018.

Wendy brings significant professional expertise as an internationally recognised artist, curator, writer, teacher, speaker and administrator. She has held solo exhibitions in seven countries, received a Churchill Fellowship and an Australia Council Established Artist New Work Grant, and holds qualifications in fine art, education and museum studies.

For more than a decade Wendy has led the museum's exhibition program. Her first major achievement as Artist in Residence was the award-winning 2011 SLWA exhibition *Mapping Memory: family, place and contemporary art*, later placed online. She contributed to *Perth's Passing Parade*, sourced material for *Beyond the Battlefields* to mark the World War I centenary and arranged the repatriation of the Red Cross 3rd Field Ambulance C Section flag raised at Gallipoli. She also advised on *Western Land* and played a leading role in the Society's 2017 contribution to *Botanical Wonderland* with WAM and SLWA.

Wendy led the Society's participation in the City of Perth's 2024 Boorloo Heritage Festival with *Going to Town*, an exhibition of street photography 1930s-1980s, complemented by costume displays in London Court and Trinity Arcade. In 2026 she again led the Society's Boorloo Festival contribution, *MEMENTO, WA history reimagined through contemporary fashion*, created with North Metropolitan TAFE fashion students. Held at Perth Town Hall, it attracted approximately 1,000 visitors.

Wendy also works behind the scenes to protect and preserve the museum collection. She has encouraged external groups to engage with the collection. Her May 2026 workshop, *Safely Storing Heirloom Textiles*, attracted several country affiliates, and she hosted the Fashion Narratives Project, *Celebrating Western Australian Fashion*, at the Society's premises.

Our recent move of premises placed many demands on museum volunteers and Wendy guided the process. She planned the new shelving and drawers required to house the museum and library collection and became responsible for the planning, measuring, ordering the fit-out and meeting various suppliers on site. By the end of May 2025, when the move went ahead, she had worked around the clock for six months!

Wendy has also presented numerous successful talks and workshops at the Society. She is the Society's unofficial photographer, attending major events and producing photographs for *History West*, the museum collection and high-quality reproduction requests for members and the public.

As a Councillor, Wendy is adviser to various committees, including on rebranding, the collections digitisation program in conjunction with UWA and with the IT committee which also includes currently updating the Collective Access program.

Wendy is strongly supported by her husband Ian who is always willing to help behind the scenes and to set up displays.

Wendy's Honorary Life Membership recognises her invaluable and ongoing contribution to the life of the Society.

WILLIAMS/LEE STEERE PUBLICATION PRIZE 2026

The AGM provided an excellent occasion for the award of the Society's prize for a Western Australian history book publication. We were delighted to receive a record 24 entries, and Reading & Publications Committee members (assisted by members of the Writers' Group) read and assessed a great variety of histories. Each book had interest and worth, and the Society congratulates entrants on their engagement with WA's history in all its diversity. After careful reading and discussion, we decided on the winner and runners-up and congratulate the authors on their achievements.

Winner

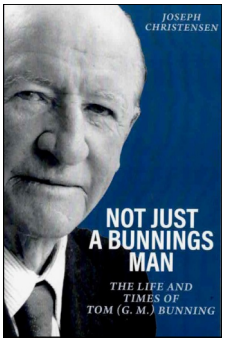
Joseph Christensen, *Not just a Bunnings Man; the life and times of Tom (G M) Bunning,* UWA Publishing, Nedlands, 2026.

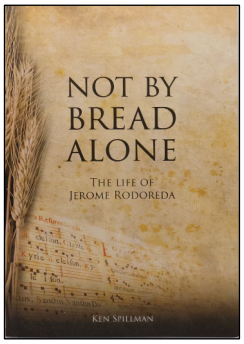
High Commendations

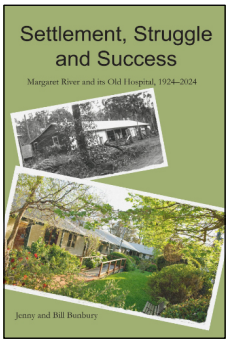
Ken Spillman, *Not by Bread Alone: the life of Jerome Rodoreda,* Abbey Press, New Norcia, 2025.

Jenny and Bill Bunbury, *Settlement, Struggle and Success, Margaret River and its Old Hospital, 1924–2024*, UWA Publishing, Nedlands, with assistance from Charles & Joy Staples South West Publications Fund.











Winner Joseph Christensen



Highly commended Jenny & Bill Bunbury

Commemorating the Dutch in Western Australia



Jeanette Longwood (Hon Librarian), Natalie Richards (Co-convenor Museum Committee) with Prof Andrea Whitcomb and Prof Alistair Paterson

Prof Andrea Whitcomb (Deakin University) and Prof Alistair Paterson (UWA) are researching the history of commemoration of the Dutch in Western Australia as part of an Australia Research Council-funded project, 'Mobilising Dutch East India Company collections for new global stories', led by UWA. Prof Whitcomb is in Perth as part of a fieldwork trip looking at the way the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the various shipwrecks along WA's coast have been commemorated and memorialised.

Their combined aim is to write an article on the history of commemoration and memorialisation, including the production of various replicas/reproductions. At History West they viewed 21 artefacts and artworks from the Museum and heard how they were collected.

For more information from the WA Museum on the Dutch East India Company (VOC) collections see – https://collections.museum.wa.gov.au/collection/southern-collections-global-connections







Vintage Textile & Map Sale

Thank you to everyone who donated items for our fundraising textile and map sale and to our many customers on the day who came to shop and help us raise money to care for our collections. A steady stream of visitors passed through, everyone finding some treasure among the varied selection on offer, including vintage linen, craft books and fabric, haberdashery, old papers suitable for junk journaling and even some vintage crockery and a sewing machine.

The sale provided an excellent opportunity to introduce first-time visitors to our collection and activities. Many were impressed and fascinated by what they found and expressed their intention to return and learn more about us.

We are grateful to all the volunteers who made the day possible. And very special thanks to museum volunteer **Lynette Robinson** who has worked tirelessly for many months, meticulously planning every detail and preparing the donations for sale.

The day was a great success, with $3,485 raised by the museum team and $750 worth of maps, plans and posters sold by the library. Congratulations to everyone!













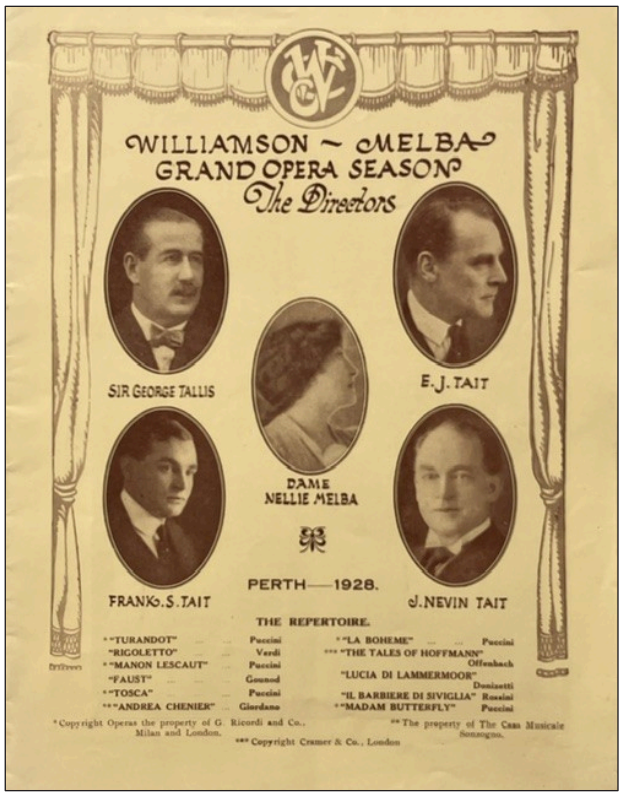


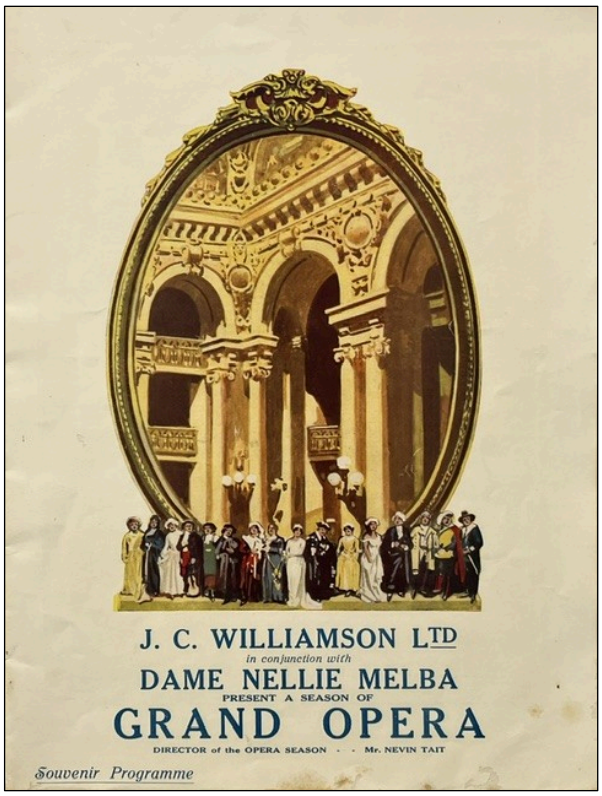
LIBRARY NEWS

The library holds a large collection of theatre programs and advertisements dating from 1854 to 1999 and numbering 288 individual items. While these ephemera have been preserved together they have only now been catalogued, providing researchers with greater understanding of and access to the collection than previously existed. With librarian Jeanette Longwood's guidance, library volunteer Tom Hunt has produced a catalogue of concerts, recitals, plays, operas, amateur theatricals, vaudeville, circuses, films, skating and pantomimes. He has documented the types of theatre, names of the events, venues, dates, and often additional details about performers, directors and companies. Our thanks to Tom for this valuable voluntary work! Here is a small taste of his findings.

The Queen of Song silenced by Illness

Tom Hunt





While cataloging historical opera programs, my eye was caught by a program for J C Williamson Ltd in conjunction with Dame Nellie Melba's season of Grand Operas in Perth in 1928.

This concert was highly anticipated and we can surmise that many were deeply disappointed when, on the morning of 12 August, it was announced that Dame Nellie Melba, who was to have sung the role of Mimi in a complete version of *La bohème*, was suffering from a cold and thus would be unable to appear.

Several people immediately applied for refunds of their money. Nonetheless, a large audience turned up at the time of the performance and, before the rising of the curtain, the news of Dame Nellie's illness was announced from the stage. The announcement included the offer that anyone who wished would receive a refund from the box office. Only a few people left.

Signorina Lina Scavizzi, a noted singer with the Williamson Melba Grand Opera, was called upon at short notice to take up the role of Mimi and did exceptionally well, proving herself as an artist and an actress.

La bohème was composed by Puccini between 1893 and 1895 to a libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. It is based on *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851) by Henri Murger.

Melba had a particular affinity with the work and she decided that she should be Mimì, and in August of 1898 she took herself off to Lucca, Puccini's hometown in Tuscany, in order to study with the composer. Aged 37 and at the peak of her career, Melba may well have realised that her pre-eminence in *bel canto* roles—in Donizetti, Rossini, Gounod, Verdi and others – must become more and more difficult to maintain as the years went by. This new *verismo* school of operas, with Puccini at its heart, would be so much easier on the voice and might enable her both to make a transition from the old to the new, and at the same time to stretch out her career at the top of her profession.

Emus for Queen Isabella

Hilaire Natt

Among WA's mid-19th century Benedictine Brothers, disillusioned by the lack of missionary opportunities who decided to leave New Norcia and return to Spain, was diarist Brother Francisco d'Assisi Marsa. He informed Bishop Serra of his decision in June 1851 and obtained work with printer Arthur Shenton to save his fare home.

However, before he left, he wrote to Bishop Serra and 'informed me he wanted to send a present of two emus to the Queen of Spain and a little chair for her daughter and asked if I would take care of this. I told him as usual that his wish is my command' (*Marsa Diary*, p.236).

The gift was to thank Queen Isabella II for her enthusiastic support of the New Norcia Mission, and for providing Bishop Serra and his group of missionaries with free transport to WA on board the Spanish battleship *Ferrolana*, which had arrived in December 1849.

So Brother Marsa, helpful and good natured, enlisted the assistance of two young Brothers, John Perejuan and Jerome Rodoreda, to capture two emus.

He also booked a passage for himself and the two emus on a small ship travelling to Spain via Mauritius and, when he told the Bishop, 'he immediately hurried the nuns to finish the (sandalwood) chair for the Queen's daughter'.

On 22 February 1852 all was ready and 'This morning Bishop Serra, Perejuan, Rodoreda and I went to take the emus and the rest to the ship. When everything was safely on board the *Fanny Fisher*, for that is the ship's name, we returned to land'. After lunch 'I said goodbye to the Bishop ... farewelled the others on the dock and boarded the ship which left early the next morning. Thus was the departure of this miserable sinner from Australia' (*Marsa Diary*, p.238).



Queen Isabella II, 1860



Two West Australian Emus, watercolour by Aurelie Yeo, courtesy Anne Harse

Epilogue

The arrival of the two emus in Barcelona on 23 August 1853 caused quite a stir. They were described in a local paper *El Ancora* as 'two emus, male and female, larger than ostriches' and were housed temporarily in the courtyard of a 'stately house' before being transported to 'El Retiro' (House of Beasts) in Madrid, the second oldest zoo in Europe.

Santos Salvado in Spain described the outcome in a letter to his brother, Bishop Rosendo Salvado, in WA on 26 December 1853.

> When the King finally saw the emus he ordered they be set free to wander the park. But in order to catch them again one leg of the male emu was broken. When being treated by the Royal Veterinarian the emu resisted so violently it broke the other and the RV ordered the emu be killed. A few days later the female died also.

'The Queen did not see the emus. I believe that the palace gave orders for the emus to be stuffed and delivered to the Museum of Natural History'. A sad ending indeed for the emus! And for Brother Marsa who, despite all his efforts, never met the Queen (*Marsa Diary,* pp.224-6).

Reference

The Marsá Diary, translated by Marta Perez-Rey, Benedictine Community of New Norcia, 2025.

Volunteers 2026

The Society recognises that its volunteers are the core of every part of its life and concludes a successful centennial year by highlighting the outstanding team.

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