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Immersive Histories

Sydney Writers' Festival panel presented by the History Council of NSW

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Overview

Historical narratives can create a powerful experience for the reader when grounded in evidence and embedded with a strong sense of place. Winners of the 2017 New South Wales Premier's History Awards – Peter Hobbins and Adam Clulow – and Senior Judge, Paul Ashton, talk to Caroline Butler-Bowdon from Sydney Living Museums about the awards and how they immersed themselves in evidence and place to create rich and engaging narratives.

Our Speakers

Paul Ashton is an adjunct Professor at the University of Technology, Sydney, where he co-established the Australian Centre for Public History, and at Macquarie University and the University of Canberra. He has authored, co-authored and edited over 37 books including *Once Upon a Time: Australian Writers on Using the Past* and a history of Centennial Park. Paul is also co-editor of the journal *Public History Review*. On six occasions he has been a judge for the NSW Premier's History Awards.

Peter Hobbins is a historian of science, technology and medicine and is drawn to danger, tragedy and failure. In writing about subjects ranging from smallpox to snakebite, and from forgotten scientists to aircraft crashes, he explores how our difficult pasts reveal moments of imagination, discovery and perseverance. Based at the University of Sydney, Peter's co-authored book, *Stories from the Sandstone: Quarantine Inscriptions from Australia's Immigrant Past* (Arbon



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Publishing, 2016), won the Community and Regional History Prize at the 2017 NSW Premier's History Awards.

Adam Clulow is an Associate Professor of History at Monash University. He is the author of *The Company and the Shogun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (Columbia University Press, 2014) which won multiple awards including the Jerry Bentley Prize in World History from the American Historical Association and the W K Hancock Prize from the Australian Historical Association. He is the creator of *The Amboyna Conspiracy Trial*, which won the 2017 NSW Premier's Multimedia History Prize.

Dr Caroline Butler-Bowdon is the Director of Strategy and Engagement at Sydney Living Museums. Spanning 20 years her career has been dedicated to cultural leadership that connects diverse audiences to arts and heritage through a broad range of public engagement programs. She is the winner of multiple awards for projects including festivals, exhibitions and books exploring urban life, architecture and design across the centuries.

Presentations

Peter Hobbins

'Stories from the sandstone: History and archaeology at North Head'

- Peter's latest co-authored book, 'Stories from the Sandstone: Quarantine Inscriptions from Australia's Immigrant Past' saw him examine the inscriptions that have been left behind at North Head Quarantine Station. He told the audience that this project was a mixture of history and archaeology informing one another.
- Spending time with the physical landscape he was researching changed how he now approaches history and how he 'does' history. Working with archaeologists showed him the value of immersing yourself physically in the place/ area you are researching. He had previously been suspicious of other academics who argue that you should visit the site you are writing about.
- By visiting the site he was researching he came to discover that sites develop their own sense of historicity. Peter told the audience he was able to experience the 'mood of the site', and how it felt to actually be residing in that area.
- Archaeologists taught him about touching. He had to slow down and look, touch, and sketch. This allowed him to emphatically connect with the people who created the inscriptions at the quarantine station.



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- It's important to listen to the voices in the archive. Peter found that both the detainees of the quarantine station and the landscape itself left shaped the history of the quarantine station.

Adam Clulow

'Crowdsourcing A Seventeenth Century Conspiracy Case'

- Adam spoke about the website he has created called the 'The Amboyna Conspiracy Trial'.
- He was inspired by the podcast Serial which charted the story of a murder in the US city of Baltimore in 1999. He wanted to do something different with the material he was working with and take his 5,000 pages of research and put it online to get the same public interaction and engagement that the popular Serial podcast received.
- Adam put his research on the Amboyna conspiracy case online and crafted a website which is used by undergraduate history students to learn about the past. Students have to imagine they are a juror, and examine the Defense and Prosecution evidence and make a decision.
- The website encourages students to Immerse themselves into the past. Adam suggests that the next generation of immersive history will be virtual online sites where students with 3D goggles can physically place themselves into time periods and places in the past.

Paul Ashton

'Miss Carmichael and the Midshipman or how Hugh Gibson's farm was wrecked by rabbits and selectors.'

- Paul has been a juror for history awards and prizes for many years and the work that stands out are those historians who think of themselves as not just as historians but also as writers. He notes that today historians do not often think of themselves as doing literature – however they are.
- He also told the audience that it is important that historians take the time to consider who their audience is.
- Recently Paul has into writing creative non-fiction for children. transitioned to children's books. He shared some of his forthcoming book, 'Miss Carmichael and the Midshipman or how Hugh Gibson's farm was wrecked by rabbits and selectors.' It is about Australia in the 1870s, a shipwreck and a rabbit plague and tells how these two stories went viral at the time.



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Audience Discussion

How has visiting the physical site of his research changed Peter as a historian?

Peter: We had to think about how to include inscriptions at the quarantine site that were not in English – non-English inscriptions were “hidden in plain sight”. Learned by being there that a quarantine station has a ‘mood’ and how a place can change over time and it challenged his assumptions about what a place might be.

What were the difficulties in traversing a topic about torture?

Adam: Justifications for torture (e.g. waterboarding) in the past are so similar to those of today (e.g. 2002 President Bush administration). Students don’t have to justify it morally but legally. Started as a way to condemn torture but on the website it forces the students to defend the torture in 1623 when torture was a fundamental part of the legal system. He was surprised that they examined it in relation to the rules of the past and why it was justified in that particular period. ‘The purpose of history is to put ourselves in these periods’ in order to better understand.

What is Paul’s advice to historian’s?

Paul: Consider your audience vary carefully and understand that history is a literary act. Use people that are good writers to check your work and help examine your writing style.

Adam: you have to tell stories, which is something historians aren’t taught to do. Get away from a dry style of history and instead focus on the characters and the stories - that’s what people want!

Why doesn’t Peter use footnotes in his book?

Peter: terrifying decision as an ECR. He wanted the book to reach a wider audience, especially for those who want to visit the site. He wanted to play at ‘crafting’ different stories. He knew that everything in there was able to be traced back to a source. It meant the stories were grounded in the archival material but allowed him the freedom to create a freer book.



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What are the different audiences you can reach by doing history in different modes?

Adam: The website gets 10,000 hits every month's compared to his most popular book (sold 600 copies). Our research is read by fewer and fewer people today. There is a fundamental disconnect between the way we do history and the people we actually want to reach. It's important for universities to understand that research can appear in all sorts of different forms.

What did you learn from the silence?

Peter: Becoming aware of what's not being represented. Almost none of the inscriptions spoke about women. They struggled with the concept of what does it mean when a man carves his name into the rock at the quarantine station. Was he writing as himself as a man or as the head of a family.

Useful links

- The Amboyna Conspiracy Trial website:
<https://amboyna.org/>
- NSW Premier's History Awards:
<http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/nsw-premiers-history-awards>
- Review of *Stories from the Sandstone*, from SMH:
<https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/stories-from-the-sandstone-review-how-immigrants-left-their-mark-for-eternity-20161216-gtcxuq.html>