

ORAL HISTORY AUSTRALIA BIENNIAL CONFERENCE 2022
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
TRAMSHEDS FUNCTION CENTRE, LAUNCESTON
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Good morning and thank you [Oral History Tasmania conference host, introducing HE].

I pay my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community and recognise their enduring culture and continued connection to land, sea, and culture. I recognise a history of truth, which acknowledges the impacts of colonisation upon our First People. I commit to a future that listens to and respects Aboriginal stories, culture and history.

Don and I are very pleased to be here, especially as your conference had to be postponed from October last year.

One of my personal rules is that it is seldom wise for a Governor to lecture to specialists about their speciality. You will be pleased that I have no intention of doing so today. Oral history as record is all-pervasive and fundamental to our past and to our present. I would like to mention three very different examples, as I see them, which touch on your profession.

Before doing so, may I commend you on the strong ethical aspects of your work, and your training to ensure best practice in interviewing.

My first example relates to Herodotus, the fifth century Greek scholar, 480 to 420 BCE approximately, known as the Father of History. There are questions about his oral sources. English historian Tom Holland, a recent translator of Herodotus's *The Histories*, refers to that monumental work as, quote, "the first example of non-fiction, the text that underlies the entire discipline of history."¹

¹ *Herodotus: The Histories*, translated by Tom Holland, London, Penguin Classics, 2014, page vii.

Herodotus travelled widely in Europe and Africa and wrote generally reliable direct observer accounts. Equally, perhaps, Herodotus's sources are not substantial and "are" the work. Here are a random eight sources from Holland's translation:

"Next, *they say*, came the reprisal ...

Well-informed Persian *commentators* ...

Although the Greeks *tell a different version* of the story ...

A generation now passed, *we are told* ...

Now I know for a fact that this is what happened, *because I heard it directly* from the Delphians themselves ...

If the Egyptian account *is to be believed* ...

I have been unable to determine *with any certainty* ...

Even though no poet has ever corroborated the story, the Lacedaemonians *claim ...*"²

End of quotes. For me, as a former judge, part of the job was finding the facts. It is fascinating in much written history to precisely find what actually happened. And Tom Holland makes the point that, above all, Herodotus is "entertaining"!³

My second example relates to the famous Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, written in Old English and relating the deeds of that famous Scandinavian warrior and king. There are three longstanding controversies about this poem: first, when was it originally composed; secondly, to what extent may it be considered a more or less reliable account of the legend with a basis in historical reality; and thirdly, to what extent is it either a pagan or a Christian poem, or perhaps a blend of the two?

² Holland, op. cit., various pages.

³ Holland, op. cit. page vii.

The actual physical poem, of over 3000 lines of alliterative verse, is housed in the British Library. It is described as a copy of a copy, written onto parchment by two unknown scribes, in probably the eleventh century. However, there is a controversy about its date. Many scholars believe the original poem was composed in the late 700s to early 800s AD and, either in writing or orally, passed down – leaving us with the single known manuscript, which is incredibly fragile.

But for your purposes, as oral historians, the ongoing intrigue with *Beowulf* relates to its reliability as a document reflecting history. JRR Tolkien, the great English author, and a *Beowulf* expert, probably accurately gives the poem an earlier rather than later date of original composition. He dismissed its basis in historical reality. For him, and others, it is primarily a poem; and, quote, “cannot be regarded as a guide to history”.⁴

This has been challenged by other scholars. *Beowulf* expert Tom Shippey, a St Louis University professor, has argued, and I quote: “The questions which arise are, how far can oral memory be expected to stretch? And how far can it be trusted?”

Those are questions, no doubt, fundamental to your work as oral historians.

Interestingly, Tom Shippey mentions the Icelandic saga tradition and that a compelling study indicated that the written sagas “may well be based on oral accounts of events two centuries or more older than the sagas as eventually written.”⁵

An interesting Tasmanian example of the use of oral history is in a book written by my Official Secretary, David Owen, *Thylacine: The Tragic Tale of the Tasmanian Tiger*. At the start of each chapter, David begins with a quote from a person, who long in the past, had personal knowledge of a Tasmanian Tiger. One chapter is devoted to a competition for the best true story relating to the Tasmanian tiger, run by Hobart’s *Mercury* newspaper in 1981, with terms as follows:

⁴ Neidorf, Leonard, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment* page 75.

⁵ Neidorf, op. cit., page 76.

“Stories which qualify for entry include personal recollections of the writer (or friends or relatives), stories passed down from those no longer living, or accounts told in letters or diaries from times now past...the inclusion of a factual background, such as dates, and the names of persons and places, is recommended...” End of quote.

Relating to oral history of our famous thylacine, the Acting Premier, Michael Ferguson, told me this week of the oral history about a thylacine given by his grandmother, Nell Constance Gale (Kaine), and published in the *Australian Zoologist* magazine in 2019. In the abstract, Mrs Gale related in detail the capture of a thylacine in her father’s rabbit trap when she was a child. The strapped broken leg of the thylacine and its subsequent transport in a wooden box off to Wynyard was detailed in her oral history.

The significance of this oral history was that, I quote, “with the passage of time, first-hand accounts of the thylacine are now rare ... Recent recollections by one of the last living witnesses to a thylacine capture have enabled us to piece together the life history of one of the last captive specimens...” End of quote.

Oral history is an integral part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and beliefs. The creation and culture stories, historical accounts, and language are passed on from generation to generation. Oral history is important in building our understanding of Aboriginal culture, history and practices.⁶

My third example relates to Government House Tasmania. Edward O’Farrell was the Official Secretary from 1959 to 1983 – nearly a quarter of a century, and serving six governors, experiencing many State Governments and ongoing social and cultural changes. Edward O’Farrell, incidentally, was in the Royal Air Force and was shot down over Germany during World War Two and imprisoned. He came to Australia in 1952 with Governor Sir Ronald Cross as ADC and Private Secretary.

⁶ Gwatkin-Higson, P. “Chent”. (2019). What is the role of oral history and testimony in building our understanding of the past?. *NEW: Emerging Scholars in Australian Indigenous Studies*, 4(1), 39-44. <https://doi.org/10.5130/nesais.v4i1.1538>

In 1993, Edward and his wife, Meg, agreed to a recorded interview, the transcript runs to 17 pages. As you may imagine, it's a unique and valuable document of Tasmanian oral history.

Early in the interview, Edward says, "I've resolutely refused to write my memoirs ... because one was put in a position of such tremendous personal trust and enjoyed confidences."⁷ Indeed a fair part of the transcript should remain as a confidential internal document.

Time prevents me from going into any detail, but here are a few choice question and answer snippets:

Question: "Did it feel like coming to Ruritania, coming to Tasmania?"

Answer: "No, I don't think so (laughs). I'd been with a lot of Australians during the war, and I'd been to Canada, so I had a bit of an idea of the New World."

Edward, as Official Secretary, did not fully answer the question put to him of an investiture at which, when a button was pressed to play the Australian National Anthem, the tape instead played "Tie me kangaroo down, sport."⁸

I think it is time that I tied "me kangaroo down" and I wish you all the very best for your conference.

Thank you.

⁷ "Interview with [Mr] and Mrs Edward O'Farrell, Oyster Cove, 8 March 1993", page 2.

⁸ Interview page 4.