



## OHA President's Report to AGM, 20 October 2024

### Alistair Thomson

Oral History Australia (OHA) is a national committee with membership comprising each State and Territory oral history association. A representative from each State and Territory association serves on the OHA Committee which appoints office bearers.

This will be my seventh and last annual report as OHA President. I'll be stepping aside from the role at the AGM in October 2024 – though I will continue to serve for at least another year as the Oral History Victoria representative on the OHA Committee and will look forward to supporting my successor.

Firstly, many thanks to all our national committee members, who meet bi-monthly via Zoom and undertake a range of roles: David Sweet (Secretary), Kyra Edwards (Treasurer), Jill Cassidy (Tasmania and Vice-President), Elisabeth Gondwe (Queensland), Maria Savvidis (NSW & ACT, and Public Officer), Christeen Schoepf (SA & NT), Susan Hall and then Alison Atkinson-Phillips (WA), William Martin (non-voting member from NT), Judy Hughes (Web Officer), and myself representing Victoria. Voluntary organisations only thrive because of volunteer time, effort and imagination, and in this regard, OHA continues to be blessed. Particular thanks to David Sweet, who has served as an exemplary OHA Secretary for all of my time as President. David has always been a wonderful colleague and a valued source of wise counsel.

Most of the activity of Oral History Australia occurs at the level of the state and territory associations, each of which has an active committee that runs state-based events and activities. Indeed, one of the most gratifying segments of the national committee meeting involves reports from each state and territory about their innovative, inclusive and inspirational activities at the regional level – which are often adopted and adapted by other states and territories.

Over the past year, the main activities at the national level have included:

#### Biennial OHA Conferences

Our next conference is in Naarm/Melbourne on 21-24 November 2024, with the conference theme 'The Power of Oral History—Risks, Rewards & Responsibilities'. The keynote speaker is celebrated Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli, and the closing plenary will focus on 'Victorian First Nations' Truth Telling and Testimony'. Six half-day training workshops are scheduled on day 1. Days 2 and 3 comprise just under 90 presentations as well as masterclasses, meetings and launch events, and a conference dinner featuring a Sharing Stories Through Song concert brought to you by Naarm/Melbourne's iconic multicultural music organisation the boîte, with ARIA award winning folkloric singer Kavisha Mazzella and acclaimed writer and spoken word performer Arnold Zable. On

day 4 the conference concludes with three scheduled tours. By mid-September we reached 165 registrations, the number required to break even financially, which bodes well.

Many thanks to the hard-working Oral History Victoria conference committee led by Alice Garner and including Jen Rose, Eve Lester, Caludia Craig, Marie Nunan, Nicolette Snowden and myself. Thanks also to members of the National Program Committee which reviewed presentation proposals (Jill Cassidy, Alison Atkinson-Phillips, Alice Garner, Anne Monsour, Maria Savvidis, Christeen Schoepf and myself), to Kirby Fenwick for administering the proposal review system, and to Jen Rose for administering conference registrations. Special thanks to the Trinity College Gateway Centre for providing a conference centre with only minimal costs to OHA.

### **OHA awards**

At the conference we will present the three biennial OHA awards: the Hazel de Berg award; the OHA Book Award; and the OHA Media Award. Many thanks to the judges for each award who are currently reviewing nominations: Alison Atkinson-Phillips, Elisabeth Gondwe and Anisa Puri (Media award); Mia Martin Hobbs, Scott McKinnon and Peg Fraser (Book award); Shirleene Robinson, Karen George and Helen Klaebe (Hazel de Berg award). Special thanks to Di Rich who provides a beautiful trophy for the Hazel de Berg award in honour of her mother – Di will present the award at the Melbourne conference welcome event on the Thursday evening.

### **OHA Journal: *Studies in Oral History***

Carla Pascoe-Leahy stepped aside as co-editor after the launch of the 2023 journal ('Oral History in Troubling Times; Opportunities and Challenges') in November 2023. Since then, Carolyn Collins has joined Skye Krichauff as co-editor. Issue 46, 2024 ('Working Lives & Workplaces'), with guest editors Paul Sendziuk and Nicholas Herriot, which will be launched at the Melbourne conference. Issue 47, 2025 will adopt the theme of the Melbourne conference, 'The Power of Oral History—Risks, Rewards & Responsibilities'.

Thanks to our journal editors Carla, Skye and Carolyn, Reviews Editor Gwyn McLelland and Reports Editor Alexandra Mountain, to theme issue editors, to OHA webmaster Judy Hughes for her work on production and dissemination, to chair of the Editorial Board, Alex Dellios, and to new and continuing members of the Editorial Board. National Committee continues to pay the cost of a copy editor, Katie Connolly, to ease the workload of the journal editors, and the journal designer Karen Wallis.

### **OHA website**

Judy Hughes continues her terrific job keeping the redesigned national website up to date; coordinating with state and territory association websites to ensure shared resources and to avoid too much overlap or repetition; and coordinating national communications. Judy has also been responsible for the 2024 biennial conference website.

In the past year Judy has continued coordinating the work of developing a shared website design for the national and state associations (with a sub-committee of state representatives). WA and Victoria are now included and work is underway to include Tasmanian and SA / NT.

## Finances and Capitation fee

Treasurer Kyra Edwards will report on finances. At the 2023 AGM, the Committee agreed not to change the capitation fee (set at \$10 per head since 2021) for the next financial year. I want to thank our Treasurer Kyra Edwards for all her efforts, including the difficult task of moving the OHA account to a bank that is more amenable to online banking by a small national voluntary organisation. CBA proved to be a very unhelpful option, and Secretary David Sweet and Kyra are now pursuing a Bendigo Bank online account.

## Public Fund

At the 2022 AGM it was agreed that the OHA would work toward developing a 'Public Fund' for donations that would then be available to support OH national and state and territory association activities, such as conference bursaries. Al Thomson agreed to work with Eve Lester from OHV, with a view to getting a Public Fund set up by the time of the November 2024 conference – but our work on the conference made it impossible to make time for the Public Fund application. I plan to work on the application after the conference, and will welcome support from anyone with appropriate expertise.

## Saving our Oral Histories

Since I started as OHA President, I've been highlighting the issue of community, professional and academic oral history recordings that may be lost because they are not preserved in a secure, future-proof state or national repository. I initially tried to drum up support from the state and national libraries to develop a 'Save our Stories' project along the lines of the well-funded British Library 'Save our Sounds' project, but without much success. The Oral History Network of the National & State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) has, however, developed a position statement regarding access to legacy oral history collections (<https://www.nsla.org.au/resources/oh-access-legacy-oral-history-collections/>) and in late 2021 produced Guidelines for Risk assessment in oral history recordings, available at <https://www.nsla.org.au/resources/procedural-guidelines-risk-assessment-in-oral-history-recordings/>

Over the past few years, I've realized that Australia's federal system of libraries and archives makes it difficult to coordinate a national oral history preservation project, and that it is probably more feasible to work with appropriate partner organizations at the state and territory level. Along those lines, I'm very pleased to report on two developments initiated in 2024.

First, academic linguists at Language Data Commons of Australia (LDaCA), with funding from the Australian Research Data Commons, have employed oral historian Anisa Puri to develop a state-based pilot project which will locate precarious oral history recordings, with a view to developing a process and protocols that might be used in other state-based projects. The 'Identifying Precarious Victorian Oral History Collections Project' will be launched by Anisa at the Melbourne conference.

Second, Oral History Victoria was successful in winning a 2024 Victorian Local History Grant for a project titled 'Creating and Preserving Victorian Community Oral History'. The funding will be used to employ Way Back When Consultant Professional Historians to create a web-based guide and online training for Victorian community groups that wish to create and preserve oral history collections,

making use of platforms such as Victorian Collections Online. Way Back When will introduce the project at the Melbourne conference.

I anticipate that these two projects will coordinate their activities, and that both projects will learn from and contribute to comparable work in other states and territories. By working with projects like these, and through the other activities mentioned in this report, Oral History Australia is ideally positioned to continue to play a crucial role in preserving and promoting the practice of oral history across the nation.

**Alistair Thomson, President OHA, October 2024**