

Louise Douglas 1952–2024

Peter Spearritt

I first met Louise when she was a mature age student at Macquarie University in 1976. She had a fearless personal style, often tested in her part-time job as a barmaid at the Crows Nest Hotel, not a gentrified establishment at that time. A product of Greenwich Public School and Willoughby Girls High School, Louise introduced many of us to some of the leading rock bands of the day, including Midnight Oil.

In the last year of her undergraduate degree Louise had to decide whether to continue to an honours year or seek a more immediately vocational path. She undertook a Graduate Diploma at Canberra CAE in 1977. On her return to Sydney she was appointed a Research Assistant at Macquarie University. Her father, a GP, kept on asking her when she was going to get a 'proper job'. She went on to get a lot of proper jobs.

Louise's organisational skills served her well in her subsequent career. She masterminded the organisation and administration of the Australia 1938 oral history project, at that time the largest oral history project ever undertaken in Australia. In the pre-digital era all the interviews were recorded on cassette tape and the paperwork was voluminous, from copyright clearances to collecting and protecting family photographs. As voice transcription at that time was decades away, the interviews were indexed for topics; and contributors to the *Australians 1938* volume had to be encouraged to use the interviews, which some historians, brought up on a diet of documentary sources, were hostile to. Louise undertook many interviews herself, and all are now publicly available in the National Library of Australia. She jointly authored *Oral History: A Handbook*, with Alan Roberts and Ruth Thompson. Published in 1988, it captured the new-found enthusiasm for oral history and became something of a bible assisting family and community historians to navigate ethical and methodological issues.



Figure 1 Louise Douglas, Powerhouse Museum, 1986. Photograph courtesy of Peter Frankis.

Appointed Senior Curator in Social History at the Powerhouse Museum in 1984, Louise's oral history skills were on display at an institution which, until that time, was controlled by object curators who guarded their collections assiduously. She worked on a wide variety of social history exhibitions, and with Peter Cox wrote *Teen Riots to Generation X: The Australian Rock Audience* (1994). In 1994 she was appointed to the National Museum of Australia where she made a major contribution to exhibition development and public programs, holding a number of senior positions until 2012.

Her lifelong commitment to community involvement saw her take on voluntary roles in both museological organisations and local historical societies. An animal advocate, she served for some years as the President of the ACT branch of the RSPCA, steering it through troubled times. On moving from Canberra to Wollongong in 2018 she developed a passionate interest in the collection and presentation of the history of the Illawarra.

She died, suddenly, of a brain aneurism, on the first of February 2024. A memorial service, organised by her partner Peter Frankis, was attended by her sisters and her many friends and colleagues reflecting all aspects of her personal and professional life. Playing a pivotal role in the development of oral history in Australia, she is sadly missed for her exuberance, good humour, frankness and her commitment to community involvement in the work of museums.



Figure 2 Louise Douglas interviewing Joyce Millican, 1982 (as published in L. Douglas, A. Roberts, R. Thompson, *Oral History, A Handbook*, 1988)



Figure 3 Cover, *Australia 1938: Oral History Handbook*. Photograph courtesy of Al Thomson.