

## Tim Bowden and Ros Bowden

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On 1 September 2024, Tim Bowden, oral historian, broadcaster, writer and all-round collector of yarns, passed away at the age of 87. A proud Tasmanian, Tim cut his journalistic teeth at the Hobart *Mercury*, before moving to the ABC, where he worked as a foreign correspondent, and on the ground-breaking TV current affairs program *This Day Tonight*. Tim was also the first Executive Producer of the long-running news radio program *PM*. While he fronted the ABC television show *Backchat* from the mid-1980s, Tim always said that radio, or audio, was his preferred medium. In a talk in 2002, Tim described how, once he'd discovered the audio tape recorder, it was an 'instant love affair', as he grasped its potential as a 'superb vehicle for the power of anecdote, or the personal story'.



Figure 1 Tim Bowden of the ABC's social history unit, with recording equipment, 1985. Photograph courtesy of ABC Archives.

In 1985 Tim founded the ABC Social History Unit, and with a small team of producers, broadcast a weekly history magazine show, a 15-minute oral history segment *Word of Mouth*, as well as a half-hour documentary slot, which often featured multi-episode series. This slot showcased his own award-winning 24-part series *Taim*

*Bilong Masta: The Australian Involvement with Papua New Guinea*, for which Tim recorded over 350 hours of raw oral history interviews! (Describing himself, with the wry, self-deprecating wit that he was known for, as the ‘*Blue Hills*’ of documentary makers). The unit’s output also featured the work of Tim’s late wife, the fellow oral historian and broadcaster Ros Bowden, including her powerful series *Being Aboriginal* and *Women of the Land*, which comprised oral histories with a broad range of women in rural Australia, from farmers to publicans. Like Tim’s work, Ros’s programs always sought to tell the stories and experiences of people previously absent, or silenced, from the wider historical record.

Another of Tim’s revelatory oral history series was *Australians under Nippon*, where for the first time, Australian POWs told their stories of incarceration during World War Two. It made for compelling and at times shocking listening, and as narrative audio history, stands the test of time. These series, just some of the programs made by both Tim and Ros, played an important role in fostering the growth and popularity of oral history practice in Australia.

Tim retired from the ABC in 1993 (with Ros leaving at the end of 1995), but he continued to work with oral history, including a book about Australians in Antarctica. Again, Tim’s beloved tape recorder played a key role in this work. Curiously, the term ‘oral history’ is not much heard in the corridors of the ABC these days; despite it forming the core of many radio and television programs. Perhaps this is because of the extraordinary groundwork that Tim and Ros Bowden laid out in their productions, over many decades – that the oral history interview itself, as a tool in the craft of audio storytelling – has simply become mainstream today?

Tim and Ros leave a great legacy for the wider oral history community, as well as for contemporary audio makers (podcasters), and, of course, for us listeners. This legacy lives on in the ABC Radio National program that I oversee, *The History Listen*,<sup>1</sup> where we continue to show how the powerful personal story helps to shape and reshape our national history.

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1 <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/the-history-listen>