

# TIMELINES

No. 20 November 2016

Museum Historians' National Network Newsletter



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## MUSEUM HISTORIANS' NATIONAL NETWORK COMMITTEE

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	Nina Buchan <b>Museums Victoria (Volunteer)</b>

**Museum Historians** is a Museums Australia National Network, and Special Interest Group.

The cost of membership is \$11 and is open to all current members of Museums Australia.

To join Museum Historians please contact the Museums Australia national office:

### **The Membership Manager**

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## FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the Second Issue of *Timelines* for 2016. The year has sped along, and has been full of Social History and History Museum happenings, with more events around the corner in 2017. Our next issue will feature an events page, and if you would like to tell us about an interesting Museum Historians' event, exhibition, public program, or work at your museum, please be in touch.

In this Issue we bring you a feature on the important work of collaboration in social history museums, and we look at the career and philosophy of one of our most prominent network members, and previous network President, Dr Charlotte Smith, in our Members Profile section.

As the new co-editors of *Timelines*, we are delighted to be involved in our network, and look forward to speaking with many of you, by distance or in person, very soon.

With warmest regards,

**Nina and Liz.**

### **CONTRIBUTING TO TIMELINES**

There are two issues of *Timelines* a year, and all contributions are welcome; including articles, press releases, photos and short updates about exhibitions, programs and events.

**Issue One** published: April/May.

Contributions close March 31st.

**Issue Two** published: November/December.  
Contributions close September 30th.

**Contributions should be emailed to the co-editors at: [Timelinesjournal@gmail.com](mailto:Timelinesjournal@gmail.com)**

*Thank you* to the contributors to this edition of *Timelines*:

Dr Charlotte Smith

Ms Deborah Tout-Smith

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

As another busy year draws to a close I hope you enjoy this edition of Timelines during some downtime or over the summer break.

For me the end of the year provides space to slow down and reflect, on what has happened and what lies ahead. I recently attended the MA National Council Meeting in Sydney where the change in the trading name of Museums Australia to Museums and Galleries Australia generated the opportunity for representatives from galleries and relevant peak bodies to join the National Council in reflecting upon where our commonalities are and how we might better work together to address shared issues. The points of difference were many and varied but we could all agree that what binds us is our collections and the work we do with them – as diverse as our approaches and communities of interest are. With the world feeling so divided it was fantastic to so find common ground and a shared passion.

I would like to thank our new Timelines co-editors, Nina and Liz, for putting together their first edition of Timelines and I encourage you all to think about contributing to future editions!

Finally thank-you to our retiring committee member Charlotte Smith for her contribution to Museum Historians over many years and my very warmest wishes for the future.

Best wishes for the New Year and may your own reflections be enjoyable ones.

Michelle Stevenson

President Museum Historians NN

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## MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA HISTORIANS NATIONAL NETWORK BURSARY PROGRAM

Museums Australia Historians National Network (MAHNN) will provide funds of up to \$1,000 per applicant for members to undertake professional development activities. This can include, but is not limited to: Conference/seminar registration fees, travel and accommodation costs to attend professional development activities, and/or research costs.

To be eligible for funding, you must be a member of the network and be working or studying in the museums/galleries/libraries/archives/heritage sector.

A total of \$2000 is available for all bursaries in a given calendar year, with a maximum of \$1,000 per applicant.

Applications will be assessed by the MAHNN Committee bi-annually. Applications can be submitted anytime but must be received by **28 February** and **31 August** in any given year.

A panel consisting of three members of the executive of MAHNN will assess the applications.

Applications should be emailed to:

**Ian Terry**

[Ian.Terry@tmag.tas.gov.au](mailto:Ian.Terry@tmag.tas.gov.au)

Please send your current CV with the application.

## MEMBER PROFILES

DR CHARLOTTE SMITH, MUSEUM VICTORIA



*Opening of the Twycross Exhibition, Benalla Art Gallery, December 2015. Photographer: Owen Jones.*

### **What's your current role?**

I've just retired from Museum Victoria, where for the past eight years I was senior curator, Politics & Society.

### **How did you start working in/with museums?**

After finishing my BA in Art History, I got a job working for Fine Art Auctioneers in London. I realised I was more interested in the cultural value of objects than monetary, so enrolled in an MA in Museum & Gallery Management at City University, London. Whilst studying I did a few voluntary placements to get experience including one year as a volunteer intern at Queensland Art Gallery. I enrolled in a PhD at the University of Canberra, where I learnt lots of museum theory and maintained my practical skills doing voluntary placements. When I

finished my PhD I got a job teaching museum studies at Southampton University. I moved to Melbourne 12 years ago, and was lucky to get an 8-month contract at Museum Victoria as soon as I arrived. Since then, I have had other contracts at Museum Victoria, Deakin University and the Arts Centre. I finally scored my first on-going job 8 years ago!

### **What have been some of your career highlights?**

My all-time highlight came in 2009 when the museum was offered a collection of objects purchased from Melbourne's two international exhibitions by colonial merchant and collector John Twycross. The collection was donated by John's great-grandson, Will Twycross, so accompanying the amazing objects were four

generations of family memories and photographs. Will also donated cash that allowed me to travel to Paris and London to research Melbourne's international exhibitions, which resulted in a book.

Rehabilitating an archaeological assemblage of over 500,000 fragments was another highlight. It took me into a world of collections management theory and practice that I discovered I loved! And I got to work with amazing colleagues from La Trobe University, a team of 30 volunteers, and meet two heroes of mine who presented key-note addresses at a symposium I hosted: Nick Merriman and Terry Childs.

***What is it about working in/with museums that inspires you?***

Collections and colleagues! I love uncovering the stories behind objects and then working with amazingly talented and creative colleagues to find ways to present them to different audiences.

***What is your favourite museum and why?***

I have two: The V&A for its collections, history, building, library, and cafe and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum for the way it brings people's stories to life in amazingly 'real' recreated apartments.

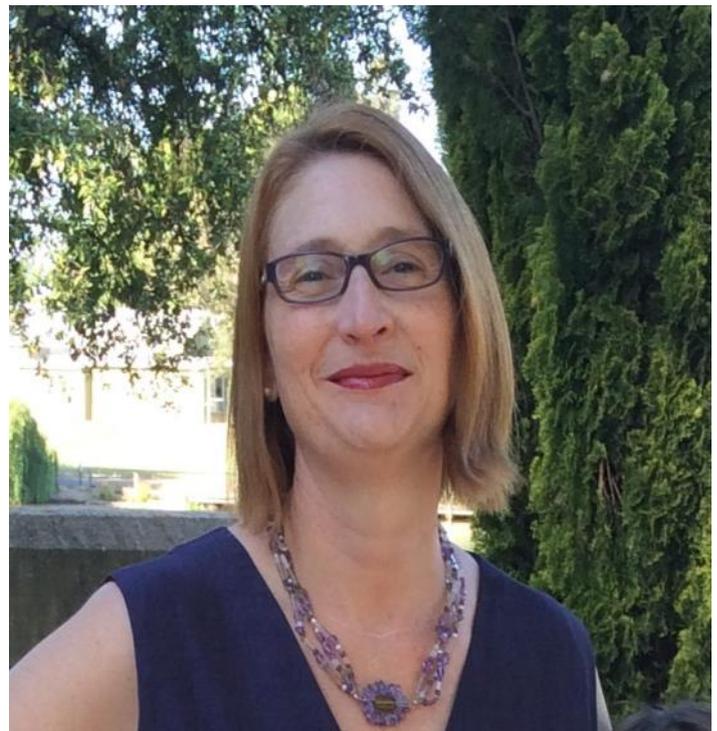
***How long have you been working in/with museums?***

Over 20 years.

***What advice would you give to someone trying to get a job in a museum or trying to progress their museum career?***

You can never have enough experience, so grab every opportunity (paid and unpaid) offered. Join professional organisations, and get involved in their activities. Attend conferences to keep up-to-date with developments in the sector, meet colleagues and build a professional network. Find a mentor (or two) who can provide career advice.

*Our thanks and best wishes to Dr Charlotte Smith –Ed.*



*Opening of the Twycross Exhibition, Benalla Art Gallery, December 2015. Photographer: Owen Jones.*

## Reflections on Collaborative Research



*Ms Liz Bramley researching with the archivist at Caulfield General Medical Centre. Photo: Deb*

As we were putting together this issue of Timelines, I was reminded of a small incident during the research phase of *WWI: Love & Sorrow* that led to a wonderful collaboration between two unlikely institutions: a hospital and a museum.

In retrospect, it now seems almost inevitable that there would have been some form of collaboration. We were trying to tell personal stories of WWI and many of those (if not all) involved a hospital of some form or another.

Nonetheless, it seemed like a longshot when I first started to look further into the notation: "No.11 AGMH" that had appeared several times in the service records of the various servicemen I had been researching.

A quick check of the Australian War Memorial's abbreviation glossary revealed that this short phrase was a reference to the No. 11 Australian General Military Hospital (Caulfield). A Google search uncovered more about the history of the hospital: how it had once been the mansion house 'Glen Eira' before becoming a military and then a rehabilitation hospital for servicemen from both World Wars. Most exciting of all, the hospital was still in operation—now as the Caulfield General Medical Centre—and there was an archivist. Despite his interest and generous

offer to share whatever resources he possessed for the exhibition, I must admit that I did not hold out high hopes for my visit to the hospital.

But I was wrong.

Although the archive was not very large, and seemingly unloved by anyone except for the dedicated archivist, it was full of treasures. Not the least of which were some WWI-era prosthetics that we were lucky enough to borrow for the exhibition. The small but important collection also boasted photographs and a publicity booklet, all almost a hundred years old and unique.

The No.11 AGMH ended up being one of the many threads that linked the various servicemen and their families in the exhibition together. Research into the hospital also provided greater context for their experiences and resulted in some unique loans for the exhibition itself.

The Caulfield General Medical Centre is one of the last places I ever expected to end up in the course of my research, but it is in those unlikely relationships and discoveries that history is born. And, for me, that was one of the most exciting things about *WWI: Love & Sorrow*: we weren't just telling the story of WWI in a more personal way, we were also showing how those stories continued to impact on the present.

## Collaboration in Social History Museums

**INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH TOUT-SMITH, SENIOR CURATOR OF HOME AND SOCIAL LIFE, MELBOURNE MUSEUM, MUSEUM VICTORIA.**

When Dr Marina Larson's work *Shattered Anzacs* was published in 2009, it attracted a wave of public interest, and shed new light on part of Australia's darkest past. Revealing the untold story of the social and familial cost of war, Dr Larson's book immediately brought the lives of women, children and the home front into the narrative of Anzac, and Australians at war.

This powerful history helped to dramatically shift the way we understand our post-war past, and redressed issues of censorship and purposeful forgetting.

One such person for whom the work made a large impact was Curator of Home and Social Life, at Melbourne Museum, Ms Deborah Tout-Smith. Larson's revelations dovetailed with Deborah's own curation of Victoria's past, and immediately she knew that further collaboration was warranted. With a view to the upcoming Centenary of World War I, in 2014, Deborah and a small team at Melbourne Museum began framing a commemorative exhibition that would involve collaborating with leading academics in the field.

**We talked to Deborah Tout-Smith about this process, and the value of collaboration in general in social history museums.**

**Nina Buchan:** Hi Deb, and thanks for agreeing to be interviewed for *Timelines*.

**Deb Tout-Smith:** My pleasure.

**NB:** Deb, you were the Lead Curator on the *Love and Sorrow* exhibition, at Melbourne Museum for Museum Victoria, which has been received with great acclaim and recently had its display time extended from 2 years to 4 years (2014-2018). That's quite a long time! I was just wondering, how many years before the exhibition did the planning stage start, and how did you begin?

**DTS:** Well, (Dr) Charlotte Smith and I took over the co-curation of the Military History collection I think some nine years ago. And, as we began to work on this collection, both of us became aware of how significant it was really quickly, and not all of it was even registered, and certainly there was a huge amount of work to be done to properly document it, and work out what we had. [The collection became part of two key areas of curation at Melbourne Museum, Home and Social Life, and Politics and Society - Ed.]

At the same time, I picked up Marina Larson's *Shattered Anzacs*, which I think had also just been released, so I think you could probably date it from that. I thought: It's so important now, 100 years on that the war's ended, that there's a much more strong recognition about the longer-term impacts of war. And the people who come back wounded or never come back at all, how that impacts on that generation, and future generations, and how the stories and objects we had in the collection reflect those impacts.

## Collaboration in Social History Museums cont'd...



*Deb Tout-Smith and surgical cast of the face of Bill Kearsley. The Standard, 19 July 2014. Photo: Joe Armao.*

And also the horror of the experience; there's no getting around the fact that war is the worst thing that humans do to each other.

**DTS:** So, after we began to work on the material, we began to recognise that perhaps there was an opportunity, with the Centenary of World War I coming up, that perhaps we could get this material out there in some sort of exhibition.

**NB:** Wow, absolutely. So you were getting inspired early on by these academics, like [Dr] Marina Larson. And then, as you moved on through those years, closer to the centenary and the exhibition, you also collaborated more broadly with other members of the academic sector, and from the museum sector. Was that a large part of this exhibition? What were some of the benefits in collaborating in this way?

**DTS:** It's a really interesting thing, because I think it gives you intellectual authority, and also it provides you with a whole network of both people and information, that you can build on.

Eight or nine years is a long time for an exhibition, but actually, thinking of the work of Al Thomson [Professor Alistair Thomson] or [Professor] Joy Damoussi, or [Dr] Bart Zino, or [Professor] Peter Stanley's work, or [Dr] Marina Larson...thinking of their suite of work...

**NB:** Decades of work...

**DTS:** Yes, collectively more than 50 years of research, which they most generously shared with us. Some of the key stories in the exhibition, Frank Roberts for example, Peter and Joy had already looked at, and the content was shared with us. So, there's the intellectual work but also the community and willingness to engage. So I think the Academic Advisory Panel was incredibly

## Collaboration in Social History Museums cont'd...

important to us. And, of course, [Dr] Kerry Neale [of the Australian War Memorial - Ed.] and the work she was finishing on facial wounds, which was quite ground-breaking, while we were working on *Love and Sorrow*.

**NB:** So there was a spirit of generosity and willingness that went with it?

**DTS:** Yes, and there was a lot of support for the honesty with which we were telling the story. We almost felt that we had a moral obligation to tell these stories, and so while we were applying for State Government funding, I cheekily went off and approached these academics, whose work most closely aligned with the way I was thinking, and whose work most influenced my thinking, and fortunately everyone said 'yes'.

**NB:** So, once you had quite a strong concept, people were able to join you, or get on board with it. Did that include donors, and other members of the museum community?

**DTS:** Yes, that's right. And we found that when we went out into the community and [to] families and donors, and were saying 'this is the first time we're really going to tell an honest story' it made all the difference.

For instance, John Hargreave's [one of the key people featured in the exhibition - Ed.] daughter, Joan, was one of the people that Marina Larson had worked with and profiled, for her book *Shattered Anzacs*, and when we first talked to Joan, Marina came with us, on behalf of Museum Victoria, to ask if she would be involved and lend us the material. And Joan's first response was 'I

don't want to be involved in anything that glorifies war, I'd rather not'. It was when Marina explained what we going to do, and how, this was the first high-profile opportunity for a re-visiting of what the war meant and what it did to people, then Joan said 'yes, I need to be involved'. So she was so supportive. And we found that, with the families, once we explained the concept, they really came on board.

**NB:** And you also liaised with other members of the museum sector, such as other institutions?

**DTS:** Yes, we also worked with the RSL [Returned Services League] and they were really supportive of this way of representing World War I and wars generally...

**NB:** At the end of the exhibition, there is a very evocative and moving section, of short films, with descendants of WWI service people, talking to camera, about their own experiences. I suppose it was important to handle this sensitively; so, did you also have some good collaboration with some film makers?

**DTS:** Well, we used Day Break Films to do the filming, and they did a superb job I think in terms of the direction, and the visual affect. For instance, you'll see the close-ups of people handling letters, and objects, and also perhaps an eye with a tear in it, which is not easy to capture without being maudlin. I myself did the interviewing, and did the pre-interview discussions with the descendants, because I knew what I was hoping to get out of it.

### Collaboration in Social History Museums cont'd...



**Love and Sorrow exhibition, Melbourne Museum, Museum Victoria. Photo: Benjamin Healey, 2015.**

Sometimes we needed to film them, and for other pieces (such as the *Storyteller* audio app) we needed to record them in a sound booth.

**NB:** So I guess for people who hadn't done that before, having those pre-discussions and an element of trust was important to working well together?

**DTS:** Yes, and having the support of colleagues and other museum staff members was important, too. For example, Antoinette Smith, my colleague from the Indigenous Cultures Department [Museum Victoria], sat in on our interviews with Kevin Murray, a descendant of the Murray brothers [key people in the exhibition – Ed.], and did a really good job of calming and reassuring our interviewee because they were one of several people who'd never been on camera before...

**NB:** Yes, it can be really nerve-wracking can't it?

**DTS:** Yes, so it was about giving people confidence to tell their story.

**NB:** And I guess, they have trust and confidence in the museum, that it is a place where their voices, and their stories can be heard.

**DTS:** Yes, and just going back to your earlier question, it does take a long time to build up trust with donors, lots of museum briefs, and checking of texts, home visits...

**NB:** Lots of emails, and phone calls? I guess it may not be what people immediately think of, with museum work, but it's an important part of the process?

**DTS:** Yes, and we had a lot of lead time, so we could do that.

**NB:** I know a lot of regional museums might be a little bit smaller than Museum Victoria, but do you think the collaborative approach is an approach that any size museum might be able to have a go at? Reaching out to their academic community, or their local community?

## Collaboration in Social History Museums cont'd...

**DTS:** Yes. I think both. I think it's quite exciting when regional museums take the opportunity to tell local stories, and work with their local academics, and academics that are based in cities, but may well be researching local, regional stories.

And of course, there's nothing more exciting than working with your local community, and the techniques that we've used are all relatively low-cost; telephone, email and letters are essentially the main way we communicate with people and build those relationships. And not everyone has the money for a film-crew, and you can use quite low-tech media that you can use to record people.

Organisations like Museums Australia (Victoria) have release forms and example forms that community organisations and museums can use to get the sign-off [consent and copyright clearance for participants-Ed.] There're some relatively cheap ways of getting interviews transcribed, and putting videos online.

**NB:** So there's a whole host, really, of media available these days, and toolkits...I know that Museums Australia (Victoria) has an Oral History toolkit, and Museum Victoria has a Making History toolkit...

**DTS:** Yes, and the other thing is there's a Roving Curator Program, too. And there are grants, and that sort of thing. So there are opportunities if you've got a good idea, to come and talk to someone. And have a think about – can you get a mentor from a larger organisation? Is there someone who has already done that work, at Museum Victoria or someone at Museums Australia (Victoria)?

Like Kitty Owens, who will go out and talk to smaller museums.

The other thing to think about, are the interpretive principles. Narratives and chronology, a clear pathway for the audience to follow and absorb material. Exhibitions like *Love and Sorrow* also demonstrate that people in an audience learn better when there is some emotional or affective content. So having that big-picture image that just grabs you, like as a close-up image of someone crying, is important. So just have the courage to do the stuff that is hard or difficult sometimes.

**NB:** Some great advice in there for museums of all sizes. Thank-you very much Deb.

**DTS:** You're most welcome.

**You can find out more about the Museums Australia-Victoria Roving Curator Program and the Museum Victoria toolkits on their websites, at:**

[http://mavic.asn.au/exhibition\\_services](http://mavic.asn.au/exhibition_services)

<https://museumvictoria.com.au/discoverycentre/websites/making-history/>



**Dr Marina Larson. Source: Latrobe University 2011.**