

TELLING TRAVELLERS' TALES

Ann Nugent reports on the National Library's two-day conference, *Travellers' Tales: Writing about Journeys, Journeys through Writing*, which was held in April

In his opening address to the conference, *Travellers' Tales*, Sir James Gobbo, Chair of the National Library of Australia Council, made a strong case for the link between travel and literature. With the exception of Indigenous Australians, 'we are all immigrants,' he said, a theme developed in the conference papers.

The 19 conference speakers, including dinner speaker Linda Jaivin, then took us on a series of physical, emotional, intellectual and imaginative journeys. Here were journeys to and away from Australia; journeys completed and interrupted; journeys from the past that catapulted into the present; journeys of the mind and imagination—all yielding multiple levels of meaning and emotional resonances.



In his introductory remarks, Ian Britain, editor of *Meanjin*, sketched ways in which writers travel in their work, asserting that 'the creative process is an act of travel in itself'. Scholar, poet and Jesuit priest Peter Steele reflected on a poem by the late Joseph Brodsky, exiled Russian poet and Nobel Laureate, and on poems by the Irish poet Michael Longley. Steele suggested that readers of poetry are 'mental travellers' and that 'every poem makes for new zones of the imagination—new countries of the mind'. Canberra-based poet Alan Gould compared the process of creating a poem with making a journey to an unknown land, 'the place we arrive at without knowing how'.

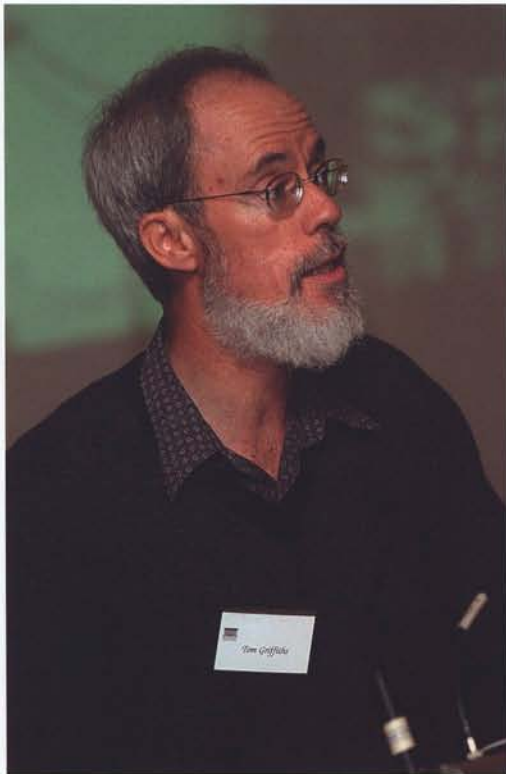
More than 200 participants attended the *Travellers' Tales* conference over two days
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Writer Delia Falconer led us on a virtual journey through the terrain of language.

And then there was Glenda Adams' little gem, her imaginative reconstruction of travelling as a young child with her mother on bus and train to the centre of Sydney. Adams contrasted her experience of a safe homecoming with the fate of another child—James James Morrison Morrison of the A.A. Milne poem 'Disobedience'. James' mother is last seen wearing a golden gown as she 'Drove to the end of the town' without James. In Adams' little sketch, James' lost mother is emblematic of the interrupted, disturbing, forever incomplete journey. Adams' final bird's-eye view of children crisscrossing the suburban streets of Sydney was completely non-threatening, a gentle farewell to the human-scale city of her childhood.



Sir James Gobbo and Ros Pesman
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Tom Griffiths
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Journals were a feature of the talks on the first day—either purposefully kept for current writing, or journals from the past which are now being used as the basis for analysis and commentary.

Tom Griffiths' account of his voyage to Casey Station on the Australian Antarctic Program supply vessel, *Polar Bird*, was, like Glenda Adams' paper, both a celebration of, and a lament for, a receding world. The *Polar Bird's* 2002 voyage was to be its last to Casey. Griffiths referred to journals kept by earlier Antarctic travellers and so extended and deepened his account. The photographic images accompanying his talk gave some idea of the immensity and beauty of the Antarctic. Griffiths described the shift from the grandeur of nature to the mundane 'legoland' buildings at Casey Station as being 'both a reassurance and an absurdity'. Although awed by the magnificent scenery, he was at the same time troubled by the detrimental effects of human occupation. 'Humanity has impoverished wildlife, even right out here,' he said.

In her paper, Ros Pesman, Professor of History at the University of Sydney, drew on women's journals, travel letters, novels, and even newspaper accounts, from the nineteenth

century to the present. Pesman suggested that Australian women used travel to forge their own personal and, in the case of writers and artists, their professional identities. She hypothesised a connection between the identities that women projected and versions of Australian national identity current in a particular period. 'We are,' she said, 'the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories that are told about us.'

At the conclusion of her paper, Pesman raised the issue of refugees—'people who don't have homes or [a] destination'. Linda Jaivin addressed this issue in greater detail in her dinner

speech, when she described her visits to Villawood Detention Centre and spoke of experiences told in story form by the detainees. The subject of refugees was re-visited the next morning when Arnold Zable related his friendships with refugees and detainees.

Lady Jane Franklin, journal-keeper and inveterate traveller, proved a first-class candidate for this conference. Her diaries have been edited by Dr Penny Russell under the title *This Errant Lady: Jane Franklin's Overland Journey to Port Phillip and Sydney, 1839*, a National Library publication (2002). Russell revealed the stratagems Lady Jane resorted to in order to 'legitimate' her unconventional journeying, as the wife of Sir John Franklin, then Governor of Van Diemen's Land. Lady Jane saw the new land as an inviting terrain for travel, but, in order for her travelling to be socially acceptable, it had to be presented as being of use to her governor husband.

No such justifications are needed for women travellers today. Tony Wheeler, co-founder with his wife, Maureen,

of the *Lonely Planet Guidebooks*, shared with us his passion for maps. They are, he said, 'another kind of virtual reality'. However, in his view, the true traveller must get on the ground. Today, Wheeler has replaced his back-pocket maps with a Global Positioning Satellite device that tells him exactly 'where it is that he is'.

Whereas journals and maps were the focus of many papers given on the first day of the conference, the memory of a particular house, and the recollection of actual journeys, were at the heart of papers given on the second day.

Novelist Arnold Zable described how, as a child, he had overheard his parents talking, and had discovered the 'other world' they carried in their heads. It is impossible to communicate the depth of feeling in Zable's paper, but two points deserve notice. The first is his method of listening with 'nose and eye ... with all your senses'; and second is the imbuing of objects with meanings that hold across time, whether the object is a gold brooch in the shape of Ithaca, or a small illustrated book in Arabic. These objects are not mementos; they are powerful symbols of exile, the last tangible contacts with home.

Myra Jean Bourke, one of the editors of *Weaving a Double Cloth: Stories of Asia-Pacific Women in Australia* (2002), said a capacity for 'eavesdropping' as a child stood her in good stead in editing the book. Bourke and her fellow editors worked from submissions—200 were received and 30 selected. Bourke said their aim was 'to give voice to the stories of women', in this case women of the Asia-Pacific region.

In a dual presentation, Anna Haebich and Doreen Mellor, co-editors of



Professor Brij V. Lal
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Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation, published by the National Library in 2002, described the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Mellor said the practice of removal was 'a Diaspora in their own land'. A tape recording was played, with the permission of the now adult Aboriginal woman speaker. Her words made painfully evident the exiled Aboriginal child's desire to return home and her need to validate her memories by finding the house she remembered from before her 'removal'. Hearing the woman's words of longing followed by her joy and vindication when she entered the house—'I knew I did not make it up,' she said—brought tears to my eyes.

The subjects of two major works by poet and writer Barry Hill are men who 'crossed' from white to Aboriginal society: escaped convict William Buckley (1780–1856) and linguist-anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow (1908–1978). Hill describes his own 'crossing' into Aboriginal society as 'a journey of listening, layers of silence and different kinds of silence'. Despite his closeness to Aboriginal people, he says: 'All the time I was an outsider, a mere listener.' Even Strehlow, who knew Aboriginal landscape and literature so well, was too weighed down with his universalising Christian religion to 'cross', according to Hill.

The visual artist and writer Kim Mahood did make the crossing forward and back. Her biographical novel, *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000), records her return to the country of her childhood and her meeting again with Aboriginal people there. Hers was a crossing, not over map boundaries but through grief. Mahood spoke of her intense relationship with her father and the shock and sorrow of his sudden death. She knew then, she said, that she would go back.

Diane Armstrong, daughter of Polish-Jewish immigrants, spoke of her journeys in search of her parents' story. Her book, *The Voyage of Their Life: The Story of the SS Derna and its Passengers* (2001), records the three-month voyage in 1948 of the SS *Derna* as it sailed from Marseilles to Melbourne. The book became, in her words, 'an attempt to comprehend

the voyage of my own life'. Most touching was Armstrong's account of her meeting with the old priest who saved her life and the lives of her family during World War II. After a difficult start, her parents settled into life in Australia and grew to love the country and its 'tyranny of freedom'.

This sense of relief, of the opportunity to lead an 'ordinary life', is also the culmination of Colin McPhedran's account of his journey as a refugee from war-torn Burma, via India and England, ultimately to Bowral, Australia. McPhedran started his journey aged 11, in the company of his mother and siblings. One by one, his mother, brother and sister, died. Before her death, his mother had urged him to go on—'the world is full of good people,' she said, 'find them'. *White Butterflies* (2002), the story of his physical, intellectual and spiritual journeys, breathes hope, not simply of survival, but of the possibility of making something good, of creating what McPhedran calls 'an ordinary life'.

In another story of displacement, this time from Fiji, Professor Brij V. Lal recounted the discoveries he made when writing the history of Fiji's Indian indentured labourers. Brij Lal says he discovered India, the land of his forebears, and in doing this he discovered 'just how un-Indian I was'. These discoveries set him to write history in a new way, of which *Mr Tulsi's Store: A Fijian Journey* (2001), is the 'first fruit'. Such writing is 'imaginative, interpretative but not too far from the facts,' Lal said.

At the end of this well-organised and wide-ranging conference, I felt that I had circled several worlds in less than two days. And if the buzz of conversation was any indication, the 200-plus participants also found the papers thoroughly stimulating and enjoyable.

Director-General Jan Fullerton brought the conference to a close, thanking all 'the travellers who told their tales'.

ANN NUGENT is a freelance writer living in Canberra. The conference papers were recorded for the National Library's Oral History and Folklore Collection and will be available at a later date; the conference proceedings will also be published in *Meanjin*



(top) Colin McPhedran
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(middle) Arnold Zable
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(bottom) Dr Penny Russell
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