

INTERVIEW WITH CAROLYN  
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INTERVIEWER: STEPHEN JAKUBOWICZ

**Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed, could you please start by telling us a little bit about yourself and how you came to work at the State Library of Victoria?**

I'm Carolyn Fraser and I'm one of the curators here at the Library, and my background is a very roundabout one in many ways. My undergraduate degree is in English and Cultural studies from the University of Melbourne, my honours year I spent on an exchange program at UC Berkley, and while I was there I applied to PhD programs in the US and ended up going to do a degree at Columbia University in the Anthropology Department. At that time the Anthropology program was, this is in the mid-nineties, a kind of theory-driven program. So, I guess coming from a cultural studies background, it was kind of a continuance of that. I really enjoyed studying in the US because at that time in the graduate level, there was a long period of coursework at the beginning of the program and so there was three years of coursework and then a whole series of exams before beginning the dissertation part of the degree, and I did all of that and then did not write a dissertation!

The other thing I was doing at the time was getting more and more interested

in books and book production, hand binding, and printing. There was a centre called the New York Centre for Book Arts and I started doing courses there. I was a volunteer there and became very involved in that area. I moved from New York back to San Francisco where I had been previously and, just by coincidence, there were a group of people beginning a Centre for the Book in San Francisco, modelled on the New York Centre: I became involved again as a volunteer there, and was involved in helping establish it. I was also working for fine press printers in San Francisco, the first being Asa Peavy, and later I worked at a press called Yolla Bolly Press. So, my interest in books and book production kind of took over from my academic work really. I'm going to skip a whole lot of years here, but when I moved back to Australia, I brought back a whole lot of printing equipment with me. I had at that point been making my own books using those techniques, using a letterpress and hand binding works of my own and so intended to do that here, and did do that here, and that led to me, in part, but not entirely, to starting work here in Preservation.

My first role at the State Library of Victoria was in Preservation, and then I had another role later in Conservation. Concurrently, and this is where my academic background and, I guess, my craft interests overlapped, I was doing a lot of freelance writing

about the history of craft practices, particularly books, and book culture more broadly. It then expanded more into writing more generally about interesting topics that were both social history but with a focus on craft practice. I had published in several places before I started a regular gig writing for a Canadian magazine called *Uppercase*. While I was writing for them, I had written almost from the second issue of that magazine so over time I covered a lot of ground. Really, they were very open to having things of interest pitched to them, so we covered a lot of topics. And also, because I worked at the State Library, often I was writing about things I had been exposed to here, things that had perhaps come across my workbench or that I had seen or heard about or talked to somebody about.

My first curatorial role was actually a backfill for someone going on maternity leave. I think that one of the things that drew me when that opportunity was advertised, was that I had always been interested in exhibitions just as a visitor. I had also done a lot of the work on the preparation of objects for exhibitions and had been involved in the installation of exhibitions here at the State Library, so I knew some things about those aspects of the position. But for me, I felt that curatorial work actually brings together some of the seemingly disparate skills that I have developed in different parts of my

life. For example, I have research skills from my academic training. The skills to do with thinking about the display of material objects came from being involved with Preservation and Conservation, and with the installation of works for exhibitions, I knew a lot about it from that direction. Also in my writing, it's very much about the production of material culture and contextualising them through a social history lens that is not just one of chronology, but something like, well, 'why would people be doing something like this at this time?'- whatever it was. So, I actually think that working as a curator brings those three areas of training together. My roles here at the Library continued from that time into various positions and most recently, the latest incarnation of my role involved developing the new Victoria Gallery as part of the redevelopment of the State Library.

**That is so interesting - it's great that you found a role in which you could combine your interests and capabilities. As you just mentioned, recently the 'Velvet, Iron, Ashes' exhibition was opened in the newly redeveloped Victoria Gallery at the State Library. Could you maybe just talk a little bit about the thought that went into the exhibition and the rationale behind its design: both in terms of the structure of the space and the objects chosen?**

The Victoria Gallery was restored as part of the broader redevelopment of the Library: 'Vision 2020'. The space itself, although this is the first exhibition that has been in this incarnation of that space as a gallery, it has, in fact, for most of its life, been a gallery space. So that particular building opened in 1892 and over time has been used both as gallery space for the National Gallery of Victoria, and for the Museum's Natural History collection. So, that room has a storied history as a classic nineteenth century gallery, meaning that when tasked with coming up with a new exhibition concept we needed to take into consideration the room and its history.

So that was one thing on my mind, how to make a new type of exhibition within a space that already has a very grand footprint as an exhibition space. There were probably three main things that were on my mind in the beginning. The first was that this new exhibition would be a permanent exhibition. Permanence, of course, in exhibitions means something different- I mean the word is used differently than in any other context. So, the permanence is really about the curatorial concept, not about the exhibition it is in or the stories or the objects. So those stories and objects will get swapped out, but that curatorial concept will remain the same. So 'Changing Face of Victoria' and 'World of the Book'

(which was previously 'Mirror of the World'), those concepts developed by Clare Williamson and Des Cowley and others, are going into their fifteenth year. The curatorial concepts underlying those exhibitions have been broad enough to have endured that many years, and changeovers, and still be productive sites for people to make sense of them as exhibitions. So, whatever the concept was for this space, I needed it to be as flexible and as durable as that. We don't know, in advance, how long that kind of gallery will be used in that way, but the fact is that we have used those other two for fifteen years, and in an exhibitions context, five to ten years is probably the average lifespan for a permanent gallery.

Another thing was the fact that it would need to work in concert with the State Library's other existing exhibitions, our two permanent exhibitions in the Dome, 'Changing Face of Victoria' and 'World of the Book', the Cowen Gallery space, and our temporary gallery space, the Keith Murdoch Gallery, which will come online again sometime next year. So, this new exhibition would need to work in concert, or at least be part of a suite of exhibitions conceptually tied together as a kind of whole. I was very keen that we not do something that either replicates something that we are already doing, or something we have done in the past, or that would somehow disrupt the way that

those exhibitions work. And getting the balance right was partly about the concept, and partly about the materials- there are some materials in our collection that because of the cycles of rest that objects go through, we might not have the kind of collection that can support 'X', whatever that idea might be. So that needed to be taken into consideration.

The other thing goes back to the room itself. That room has two entrances, now this is a terrible thing from an exhibitions perspective, because from my experience organising exhibitions as a curator and as an exhibition designer, it's very helpful to have a controlled way which people move through the space. That way you can control the narrative, the visitor experience can be orchestrated in such a way that we know when people will get information, and when different kinds of experiences and touch points will happen. With two entrances, that is impossible to plan. So how could we make a feature out of that, rather than that being problematic. What would have been problematic would have been to have a privileged entrance. We were keen not to have that, so the concept would need to allow for that, so what could that be?

The third thing that was very key in my thinking was knowing that there was a desire that the Kelly armour be included in the first iteration of the exhibition. The armour has been

part of the display in 'Changing Face of Victoria' since its inception. Every year there have been new stories told around that item, meaning that a lot of work and stories have been told over the last fifteen years. Is there some aspect of that story or some way to contextualise that story that we haven't done before? That was a question in my mind. So those were probably the three higher level things that I knew were things that I needed to grapple with. Ideally, I would have liked some longer period of time to develop a curatorial framework. Then have that decided upon and have everyone happy with that and then move to the kind of population of that with the stories, objects, and all of that. That did not happen because of the timeframe. Both of those things needed to happen concurrently. So, at the same time as I was trying to develop a framework, I was also investigating the collection and thinking about objects and which stories were suggested by those objects. There was one object which when I was first appointed to the role was very keen that we include. I wasn't entirely certain that we would include it in the first iteration, but at some point, I knew I wanted to display the Jessie Clarke costume.

### **The Pageant of Nations costume?**

Yes. I knew of this costume because Shelley Jamieson, who is the head of conservation at the State Library,

had a picture of it on her office wall. I knew that the costume needed quite a lot of work. Although it is in very good shape structurally, the cloak is encrusted with glitter and it's lead glass glitter, commonly used in the era of pre-plastic glitter.

### **So, safety standards!**

Well that's not so much the problem, although I am sure the manufacture of lead glass glitter was not great! That was not our problem at that point, the problem was really that the adhesive had failed, not completely, but in parts, so there was – well, I've been describing it as a 'giant glitter problem', so that was really something that was going to need conservation treatment. Sometimes the desire to display an object will give the impetus for that to be scheduled for conservation treatment, and very early on I flagged that I was thinking about displaying the dress so there could be time to plan for, and raise money for its treatment. It was in thinking about that costume that was kind of key in what ended up being the development of the concept because that costume was worn by Jessie Brookes, who was later Jessie Clarke. She wore that in 1934 in a Pageant of Nations held at the Town Hall as part of the year-long celebration of European settlement in Victoria. She was the personification of Victoria, and the costume includes both man-made and natural resources

of the state, that, at the time, were symbols of Victoria's prosperity. So, there are the buildings on the skirt: Government House, the Town Hall, and Flinders Street Station. The cloak is symbolic of the Murray Darling River and Irrigation system. The headpiece represents the transmission tower at Yallourn. So, the costume is more or less an exhibition unto itself as something that could be used to tell a great number of stories.

I started looking into the costume, the stories that the costume was telling and Jessie's own history. One of the things was that I knew the headpiece was a symbol of a transmission tower, but I didn't know much about the story of Yallourn, and once I looked into that I discovered that it is a tremendous story. It is a tremendous story in its own right, but, for an exhibition it is a particularly good one. The stories that work really well in exhibitions, and that I think are 'exhibition gold' can be stories that essentially have that kind of onion-like quality, where there is a story and there are so many layers, and that that key story ends up being a stand-in for much bigger – either issues or other stories – connected to it. Those stories are – I mean perhaps they're just the best stories – but I think in exhibitions they work particularly well.

**And I think the Pageant of Nations costumes embodies those ambiguities and complexities**

**so well. Especially the focus on women's history and on Janet Clarke, and the connections made between the Kelly armour and the Ashes urn, which is on temporary display at the moment. Could you maybe talk a little bit more about centring the history of people whose histories perhaps haven't been told before?**

Well the connections are really important, because thinking about the history of Yallourn led to a connection with that costume. It was also, in reading about Jessie Clarke's personal history, that I realised that she was a relation by marriage, to Janet Clarke. Janet Clarke, again, I didn't know a great deal about her, but it was actually while reading a history about her, and this will not come as any surprise to any historians, about the fact that often it is through reading something randomly that sparks a much bigger, more productive avenue of thinking. So, I was reading a history that was written by Michael Clarke, who was an MP but also a family historian of the Clarke family. He had published a book about his family called- well it was really about William Clarke, called *Clarke of Rupertswood*, which tells a lot of vignettes that form a broader history.

Reading that book, I discovered that Janet Clarke's uncle was Francis Hare, and my instincts were heightened at that moment because I knew that

Francis Hare was shot by Kelly at Glenrowan. I had not known that there was this connection between him and the Clarkes. I also knew that Janet Clarke was the person who had presented the original miniature urn that became known over time as the Ashes Urn. That was an interesting connection to me, that here was this connection to the Kelly's, and that there was also this connection to the Ashes story. The connection to the Kelly's became more interesting when I read into that further because what I discovered was not only that they were related, but that when Francis Hare was shot by Kelly, he went to Rupertswood to recuperate and while he was there he wrote a great deal of letters which are on display in the exhibition- we have a number of these letters in our collection and I also borrowed letters from the University of Melbourne Archives, who also have a collection of Hare letters.

These letters tell a story of the way in which Hare was very keen to souvenir the Kelly armour and believed that as the first person to be shot, as well as having been the superintendent in Benalla at the time, that he deserved the armour. Eventually, it's not clear in the letters how it gets resolved on an official level, but what does happen is that Hare gives a suit of armour to Janet Clarke as a thank you gift for having looked after him while he was recuperating. That armour went on display at Rupertswood at

the end of 1880, so within six months of the siege at Glenrowan. So that was fascinating to me because the history of the armour as an exhibition object is a very interesting history and I think that one of the things in the exhibition that I hope is of interest to people is that these two objects; the urn and the armour, have given rise to national myths and iconic stories in which an object is central to both the development and the continuance of those stories. If there were no suits of armour, and very early on there were calls for the armour to be destroyed, to be smashed into pieces...

**So that it wouldn't become an object of worship?**

Yes. And this tiny little urn was a joke presented in response to another joke. There would have been absolutely no sense of that becoming a museum object at the time. Would these stories, that are key to Australian identity, be the stories they are now, were it not for those objects having taken on interesting histories as exhibition objects, histories that have allowed that symbol to remain in the public imagination. Again, telling this story can present the way the exhibition was conceived of as a linear process, but these ideas were all swirling around in my head. By the time I had made that connection between the armour and the urn I realised that in fact, what I had been thinking about with the exhibition was whether there

would be a theme, but that I realised in fact the theme was not - which is a usually way to develop an exhibition - that in fact that was not the way to proceed. In fact, really the theme or the sort of curatorial concept, or the conceit actually, is about connections, that the exhibition is really about how stories are linked. And this speaks to something that I was also thinking about that was really a product of this kind of thinking. I was trying to imagine whether we could develop an exhibition that was somehow reflective of the fact that we're a Library: we're not an art gallery, we're not a museum, but we have collections that are reminiscent of both of those institutions.

So for me, I started talking about this as being, investigating, what a library-style exhibition could be. Exhibitions that we have done at the State Library, I imagine many of those exhibitions could be picked up and either put at the National Gallery or picked up and put at Melbourne Museum without anyone being any wiser because they are made in a manner that is reflective of those kinds of institutions and collections. Could we do something that perhaps is reflective, and not just at a level of subtext, but in terms of the experience of it, of libraries and specifically of our Library? The notion of connections between stories, rather than the thematic concept or the story or narrative that we're going to tell: could the notion

of connections speak to that idea? Because I think that's what libraries do well, and they facilitate those kinds of journeys that people make on their own through the collection. For example, the experience people have of coming to libraries: even the most casual visitor is often here to find something out, even if it's just using the Wi-Fi, all the way through to the major research projects that people come here to undertake. That idea of a library-style exhibition has been an animating one to the development of the concept. One of the beautiful things about the development of a permanent exhibition is that this will develop over time. This is, in a way, a living prototype for future iterations of the exhibition. I'm hopeful that that notion about connection will be a productive one so that in future years, there will be a wildly different set of stories, but that the focus on stories will still be the DNA of the exhibition.

**It almost reminds me of the seventeenth and eighteenth century house museums that you read about, where objects are almost idiosyncratically collected together because of the stories they tell: it's almost like we're coming back to that in an age where information has been democratised, and where knowledge is spreading and traditional distinctions are breaking down. Distinctions between rationality and irrationality and other concepts like that, it is no**

**longer enough to have an exhibition strictly on one theme or another. And that reflects how we live today much more accurately.**

Yes, perhaps. I think for me, one of the differences would be that we no longer live in a world in which the only way people can see an object is by coming to an exhibition. So, the history of exhibitions, or the genesis of exhibitions was that idea that this was the only opportunity that you might have, and that private collector might have, to see an object. I think for me now, because that is not the only way that people access objects or imagery of objects, the question is what can exhibitions do that digital opportunities can't do? I think there is still, certainly, the aura of the object, and that is something that is probably one of the main reasons that exhibitions still exist. But also, I think that for me I see exhibitions as a way to use objects in service of narratives and stories. I'm less interested in objects in and of themselves: if there wasn't a strong enough story to tell I wouldn't be as interested in the display of objects no matter how interesting or valuable they are as an item.

**I guess that's something that academic historians can learn from. The value of object-based histories and object-based learning and the value of going and seeing these connections being made. And then**



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**maybe the boundaries of academic and public history coming together more to the extent that people can see these connections and how they are made.**

I guess what I hope is that, because I think that my experience is that most people, when they go to exhibitions, their imaginations are sparked about things that it reminds them of. An object might remind them of something, and I wanted to celebrate the making of those sparks in this mode of exhibition building.

**Is that what you want people to walk out the exhibition with a sense of?**

I think that would be one element. I think that for me, I don't know that this is a metric that is easily measured. But for me, the exhibition is a success if someone leaves the exhibition and tells one of those stories to someone else. That's my main kind of personal - that's not to say that's the metric by which we are evaluating exhibitions as a Library - but personally, as the curator, I am interested in people being interested enough in that story that they would want to tell someone else. Perhaps, you know, to inspire that person to either come and see an object or learn more about that story.

**I think that's a really great note to end on, thank you so much for that, for your reflections on your role and on the exhibition itself.**