

Joan Kerr in context: a biography

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JOAN KERR IN CONTEXT: A BIOGRAPHY

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing
in the
SCHOOL OF ENGLISH, MEDIA AND PERFORMING ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES
2009**

**Thesis supervisor: Professor Peter Alexander FAHA
Advisor: Dr Paul Dawson**

ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

'I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, is explicitly acknowledged in the thesis. I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.'

Signed

Date

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ABSTRACT

Art historian Joan Kerr (1938-2004) championed many little-known artists in her democratic approach to Australian art history. As an architectural historian she held strong views on how ‘heritage’ restoration should be conducted. She was always entertaining, at times controversial. Virginia Spate described her as fulfilling Baudelaire’s definition of a critic as ‘partial, passionate and political’.¹

Using material from Kerr’s personal papers, interviews with Kerr herself and with family members, friends and colleagues, as well as selections from her impressive body of published work, I have aimed to write a sympathetic yet clear-sighted biography of a woman who was, to quote her husband Jim Kerr, ‘a teacher, writer, wife, mother and possum stirrer’.²

Biography has not always enjoyed academic attention and until late in the 20th century it was traditionally consigned to history.³ Yet this has been an uneasy liaison and biography is now considered a hybrid form, between history and literature, with links to autobiography, psychology, sociology and anthropology. In the introductory chapter I explore the potential of these disciplines for interpreting the facts of a life. I also include a survey of literary biographical writing (including useful models), a discussion of the concept of ‘public intellectual’ in relation to Joan Kerr’s reputation in Australian art history and technical issues such as structure, voice and ‘speaking for’.

Subsequent chapters trace Joan Kerr’s private life – childhood, health, education, marriage and motherhood – as well as her academic achievements, her work in 19th- and 20th-century Australian art and architectural history, her curatorial practice and major publications, her use of humour and satire and confrontations with art critics, academics and administrators. The final chapter encompasses Kerr’s tribute dinner at Government House in June 2003, her death on 22 February 2004 and funeral on 1 March 2004.

In writing this biography I have aimed to do justice to Joan Kerr’s life and work as well as to produce an informed piece of scholarship that could be enjoyed by everyone interested in Australia’s cultural heritage.

¹ Virginia Spate, Obituary, ‘Eleanor Joan Kerr’, *Proceedings*, The Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2004, p.46

² *Joan Kerr: Documents relating to the Life of a Teacher, Writer, Wife, Mother and Possum Stirrer 1938-1993*, 1994

³ Brenda Niall, *Walking upon Ashes: the Footsteps of a Modern Biographer*, Humanities Research Centre, the Australian National University, Canberra, 2006

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I would like to record a posthumous vote of appreciation to Joan Kerr not only for stimulating preliminary discussions in 2001 and 2002 about this biography but also for the conversations we shared in the mid 1990s about art, its history and the world in general. I would also like to thank the following people – family members, friends and colleagues of Joan Kerr – for giving generously of their time and memories in face-to-face interviews: Anne Lanham, Dr Heather Johnson, Dr Ellen Jordan, Dr Joanna Mendelssohn, Emeritus Professor Bernard Smith, Dr Lucy Sullivan, Jo Holder, Craig Judd, Dinah Dysart, Anne McCormick, Barbara Thompson (Courtauld Institute), Vivienne Binns, Dr Bronwyn Hanna and Dr Tamsin Kerr.

Emails and telephone conversations with the following people have been of great assistance and I thank them all: Kate Bottger (Archivist at Somerville House), Dr Candice Bruce, Dr Martin Thomas, Jenny Marks, Stephen Scheduling, Dr Beverley Sherry, Dr Sue Boden, Dr Sybil Jack, Peter Watts, Dr Gordon Bull and Dr Anita Callaway.

The generosity of Dr James Kerr (Jim Kerr) in allowing me unlimited access to Joan Kerr's papers and Kerr family photographs can never be repaid but I offer my warmest thanks to him.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable, expert, advice and assistance of my principal supervisor, Professor Peter Alexander. His readiness and open-mindedness to accept detours and sidetracks in the early stages of manuscript preparation, in the spirit of experimentation and discovery, have allowed this biography to develop and mature. I would also like to thank my co-supervisor, Dr Paul Dawson, for his sharpness of remark and mind during review procedures to keep the project on an academic track. Thanks are due also to Dr Anne Brewster and Associate Professor Sue Kossew for their wise advice.

BIOGRAPHER'S NOTE

No biography is ever definitive because that is not the nature of such journeys, nor of the human heart which is their territory. Sometimes all one achieves is another point of departure.

(Richard Holmes, *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer*, 2005)

Venturing into the territory of that human heart can never be a disinterested process and reasons for choosing to write about a particular individual are as varied as the biographies that result. A desire to record someone's life and work, a need to find out what drove a person to achieve what she or he accomplished and admiration for (or perhaps aversion to) a type of personality are all factors that play a part in one's choice of subject. Sometimes, a subject chooses you.

On the other side of the equation are the readers with whom the biographer must foster a positive relationship, one which evokes confidence that the hard questions have been asked and hopefully answered. Why write the biography in the first place? Does the work show a balanced view of the subject – in other words, sufficient critical distance?

I have chosen to write about Joan Kerr because of a fascination as to what inspired and motivated her; what made someone of less than robust physique work on long after others had given up and why she took on projects most people thought impossible to complete. Two opposing facets of her personality intrigued me: she was both a rigorous academic researcher and also a larrikin intellectual fond of puns, pranks and spirited debate. Allied to these was a kind of recklessness with regard to her formal reputation and career advancement. Although Kerr remained within the 'academy' for most of her working life, she never hesitated to attack its institutions and, as I have shown in the thesis, often paid the penalty for her independence.

I was also concerned that Joan Kerr's work was being subsumed under others' ambitions and that some people – albeit well intentioned – had begun to speak for her, and interpret her to me. To counter this I have made as much use as possible of Joan Kerr's own words to create a sense of her singular voice and larger-than-life personality.

Critical distance – that balancing act between empathy for one's subject and the need for a wider perspective – has been a difficult issue in writing about Joan

Kerr, a woman who polarised opinion and who could be both public enemy and private friend. In striving for that balance the issue of copyright is an important factor. No biographer is an entirely free agent and I have had to accept restrictions in writing this thesis. The subject's private papers are controlled by those who own them, permission to quote from them being granted in return for tact and discretion. Discreet judgement also applies to comments made by interviewees, particularly with regard to third parties. A vital consideration was the fact that Joan Kerr's husband, Dr James Kerr, holds copyright over her papers and care was needed to maintain his goodwill.

An informed reader could also ask why the biography relies largely on Kerr's private archive instead of a broader range of sources. Although I have attempted to draw on all material available, and have included comments from Kerr's peers, reviews of Kerr's work and examiners' reports for her postgraduate projects, my thesis is neither a history of art history in Australia nor a comparative analysis with the work of that country's many excellent art historians. Background research was undertaken into the teaching of art history in institutions such as the Courtauld Institute in London and Melbourne University but this material is mentioned only briefly to avoid unnecessary historiographic diversion from the academic milieu in which Joan Kerr worked. Nor is this biography intended to represent a survey of feminist writings in art history – something Kerr aimed to accomplish in her publication *Past Present: the National Women's Art Anthology* (1999), with only qualified success.

Often, in interviews conducted with Joan Kerr's colleagues and friends, I not only became a catalyst for people's memories of their own lives but also a magnet for their views as to what was important to include in the biography: what people thought they remembered Joan Kerr as having done, should have done or wanted to remember her as having done. Had I endeavoured to comply with all opinions I would have become mired in an unwieldy manuscript well beyond the university's requirements of time frame and word length. In selecting what to include and what to omit, I have used my judgement and tried to tell Joan Kerr's story truthfully and accurately, as I came to see it.

Biography is a difficult discipline. Not only is it awkward to classify – history *or* literature/history *and* literature – it also carries the charge of questionable ethics in its invasion of the privacy of other human beings' lives. Although Joan Kerr is deceased, her family (siblings, husband, children and grandchildren) and

colleagues are very much alive and it was imperative not to cause hurt to living persons. In response to potential concerns that I have not interviewed those who might have been hostile to Joan Kerr, I must point out that some participants and protagonists who were ambivalent about Joan Kerr, or had reasons for criticising her – colleagues at the Power Institute of Fine Arts at Sydney University such as Emeritus Professor Virginia Spate, Dr Anita Callaway and Jane Lennon – chose not to speak to me. Perhaps it is naïve on the part of the biographer to expect people to compromise their own careers and reputations; perhaps it is simply too soon after Kerr's death to air their feelings. Others such as Emeritus Professor Bernard Smith and colleagues at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research in Canberra preferred simply to describe Joan Kerr as 'difficult' and declined to elaborate. Some key players in Kerr's projects, such as Dr James Broadbent, did not respond to my approaches. One important figure who had agreed to be interviewed, Professor Greg Denning, died suddenly before this could happen.

Several other unavoidable constraints shaped this thesis. Correspondence (by letter and email) carries special responsibilities, particularly when it is written in the heat of the moment. Material that may adversely affect a person's reputation must be treated with special care; repeating the defamatory claims of another is no defence for a biographer against accusations of libel. Family dynamics is another sensitive issue. Interviews can be occasions to settle old scores but a biography is not the arena to play out others' vendettas.

If Joan Kerr's aim was always to locate an art object or a building within its place and time, her own position within the canon of Australian art history is more difficult to categorise. In many ways her work resists the kind of theoretical analysis expected of literary figures. Her cross-disciplinary work ranges across art, architectural and social history and cannot be neatly pigeonholed. Although some academics would describe her as a postmodernist, Kerr was highly critical of postmodernism's privileging of theory at the expense of history. It was in the recording of all Australian art, and the performance of that recording, that her strengths lay. As I write on page eight-six (introduction to Chapter Three: *Housewife to Historian*), her approach was quantitative rather than a qualitative. She proved her points not with theory, but with what was to become a trademark piling-upon-pile of examples. However this approach creates difficulties for scholars when discussing and analysing her work as they too risk ending up with a kind of list that could seem either bewildering or irrelevant to the reader. If, as

some have said, Joan Kerr's scholarly output represents a series of compilations of data about artworks and buildings, then perhaps she belongs to the tradition epitomized by the influential art historian, Bernard Berenson (1865-1959) whose major, pioneer, books on the art of the renaissance, have been described as 'essentially lists'.

When writing about a flesh-and-blood human being, 'context' is never cut-and-dried. Public figures are also private individuals and I would argue that it is impossible to separate Joan Kerr's often-passionate personal perspective from her status as a public intellectual. Kerr was a woman typical of her time and socio-economic background: well educated and with career aspirations; a young bride; a working woman juggling postgraduate study, employment, marriage and motherhood; an academic art historian and a speaker with a popular touch. There is no one defining context. As in all lives, particularly those of women, the boundaries are fluid and I was tempted to include the word 'chameleon' in the title of my thesis. In its subtitle, 'a biography', I acknowledge the possibility of other journeys.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAANZ	Art Association of Australia and New Zealand
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AGNSW	Art Gallery of New South Wales
ANU	Australian National University
ARC	Australian Research Council
CAS	Contemporary Art Society
CCR	Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (ANU)
COFA	College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales
HRC	Humanities Research Centre (ANU)
MCA	Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney)
ML	Mitchell Library (SLNSW)
MU	Melbourne University
MUP	Melbourne University Press
NGA	National Gallery of Australia
NLA	National Library of Australia
NGV	National Gallery of Victoria
NSW	New South Wales
OUP	Oxford University Press
QLD	Queensland
QU	Queensland University
SA	South Australia
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales
SU	Sydney University
UNSW	University of New South Wales
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia

Chapter One: Overtures

1. Introducing Joan Kerr

It was 1992 and Associate Professor Joan Kerr, editor of the biggest lexicographical undertaking in Australian art history, had come to the College of Fine Arts (COFA), a campus of the University of New South Wales (UNSW), to give a lecture to art history undergraduates, myself among them. At first glance, the woman sitting at the front of the room – a small figure wearing a rather shapeless assortment of clothes – looked quite unremarkable for such a formidable reputation. The only detail out of keeping with this nondescript appearance was a pair of large, square, thick-rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose. She had no notes but behind us next to the projector there were several carousels of slides. For an hour we were treated to a deluge of images accompanied by insights into their provenance and context. It was not so much a structured lecture as a visual and verbal *pot pourri* of artists, places, periods and mediums. Men, women and children – high society and (convict) low life, professional and amateur – all had their place in Kerr's compendium.

In contrast to the formal language of art theory, her delivery seemed understated, un-academic almost, her conversational manner giving the impression of a chat with a favourite aunt. This accords with art historian Virginia Spate's opinion that Kerr was

determined to communicate complex ideas to as wide a range of people as she could so she developed a literary style that gave the impression of immediacy, vitality, informality, but was much worked to give this effect. Colourful, witty and relaxed, it seduces readers into considering serious issues almost without their knowing it.¹

In that lecture, I later realized, Kerr had been leading us subtly towards her democratic vision for Australian art history, arousing enthusiasm not only for scholarship per se, but also for the many exciting possibilities for research into Australia's cultural past; I was hooked. After the successful completion of a Master of Art Theory degree on the work of Australian women sculptors, and a

¹ Virginia Spate, Obituary, 'Eleanor Joan Kerr', *Proceedings*, The Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2004, p.45

foray into family biography, it was time to look for another project. Kerr's name cropped up wherever I turned and I became increasingly attracted to the idea of writing her biography, not only because of my admiration for her scholarship and the way she inspired her students in word and deed but also a fascination as to what made her tick; what made someone of less than robust physical health work on, long after others had given up. When I learnt that Kerr was to retire from her posting in Canberra in 2001, I wrote to her:

If you are moving – have moved – it seems to me that it would be a good occasion to begin recording at least the early/first phases of your career as an art historian. I am therefore writing to you to ask if you have any plans, either to write your autobiography, or to work with someone on your life story as a biography project.

I don't know if this is appropriate or not but I been thinking for some time that if you were going to work with someone – and do not yet have anyone in mind – I would very much like to write your story. I think it is an important one for art and history, for many reasons and from many perspectives. It has always intrigued me that you manage to combine academic rigour with a degree of difference. I hope you do not feel this is an impertinence to put this proposal to you. Apologies for presumption in advance.²

She responded almost immediately saying she was interested in my proposal and would like to talk to me once she had moved back to Sydney. I arranged to visit her in June 2001 in Cremorne for a preliminary discussion. She said I'd recognize the house – a '1910 workers' cottage' – by the overgrown garden and general air of neglect.³

Kerr greeted me on the front verandah, a woman in her early sixties, small and slightly hunched, curly grey hair, alert eyes behind her trademark outsize spectacles. Her husband James Kerr (Jim Kerr), tall and of commanding presence – white hair and beard, an air of country to his dress – came out of his study to say hello. He was as quiet as Joan Kerr was voluble. While Jim Kerr made lunch (a good thick chicken soup), she sneaked outside to smoke a cigarette, as she was not allowed to smoke in the house.⁴ He watched over her; she was very respectful and inclusive of him. I wondered how much of their lives they had given to their two children, Tamsin and James.

² Steggall letter to Joan Kerr, 19 April 2001

³ Steggall, conversation with Joan Kerr, June/July 2001

⁴ Joan Kerr began smoking while at university and although she had managed to stop for a few years the habit returned during their time in Geneva in the 1960s. Steggall, conversation with Joan Kerr, June 2001

The house was undeniably shabby but comfortably so, and it was crammed with books – more books than I have ever seen in any private dwelling. Between them the Kerrs had amassed a huge reference library: architecture (religious and lay); stained glass; tombstones; art history (local and international); Australian history, literature and culture; biographies; 19th-century and contemporary art; Aboriginal art and culture; journals, magazines and an impressive collection of detective novels.

‘Forgotten most of those,’ laughed Joan Kerr, ‘so I reread ‘em’.

‘She can get through two a night,’ added Jim Kerr.

‘Think I’ll write one,’ she replied.

Art works were stacked against walls on which there was no room to hang them although several treasures had their rightful places – a Sophie Steffanoni painting of graves in Rookwood Cemetery and several exquisite petit point pieces by Narelle Jubelin. Even the second bedroom no longer functioned as such, bed and wardrobe having been sacrificed for more bookshelves. A hat rack was to be built near the front door for the numerous Akubras on the hall table, not more shelves. Jim Kerr was adamant about that.

He showed me with pride the floor of black and white marble tiles recovered from the renovation of Sydney’s Town Hall. Each tile had had to be cleaned of cement by painstaking hand chipping. ‘A year and a half’s work by Joan,’ he said. Joan Kerr was careful to point out a rug made by a niece to one of Jim’s designs yet material possessions other than books and art works seemed unimportant to them and yes, the garden was cheerfully unkempt.

At the end of our long conversation, Joan Kerr accompanied me to the front door, gesturing along the way to several favourite paintings, laughing at the memory of some point she had scored in an argument and enthusing over ideas for new projects. Jim Kerr offered to lend me the scrapbook they had compiled when Joan Kerr left Sydney University in 1993, saying he approved of my idea of writing a biography as he felt that his wife had long been under appreciated.⁵ As I drove away, I was already wondering how to tackle the project.

I began work with great enthusiasm, not a little intimidated by the fact that many art historians, eminent friends and acquaintances of Kerr’s could write

⁵ *Joan Kerr: Documents relating to the Life of a Teacher, Writer, Wife, Mother and Possum Stirrer 1938-1993, circa 1994 (Documents)*, Kerr Archive

about her life and work with more authority than I could.⁶ Like Deirdre Bair and her somewhat rash plan to write a biography of Samuel Beckett, I had approached Joan Kerr 'with the courage of enthusiasm and naivety, and the audacity of the wet-behind-the-ears biographer'.⁷ Beckett accepted Bair's proposal because he thought someone new, fresh, and unknown in his own circles, would do an 'honest' job – perhaps my own situation vis-à-vis Joan Kerr.⁸

On learning, early in 2003, that Joan Kerr was seriously ill I was shocked: firstly as a friendly acquaintance, secondly as a neophyte art historian and thirdly, because there was something not quite proper about delving into the nooks and crannies of someone's life when that person was fighting for her life. Months passed. What was I waiting for? Clearly that Joan Kerr would recover and I could write with relief. If she should die, what would I do? Leave a decent interval and then write with that respect for the dead that smoothes out all the interesting folds and whitens all the bright colours of a life? Abandon the project? Yet I felt a debt of honour to continue.

It was several years later when I discovered the interview that Martin Thomas had conducted with Joan Kerr in the latter half of 2003 for the Oral History Section at the National Library of Australia (NLA) that I found the key. The aim of the interview, according to Kerr, was to record her ideas and achievements in Australian art and architectural history and the difficulties she had encountered in her career in academia.⁹ At the end of the interview she observed that she hadn't talked much about family life but that 'that was all right'; it was art and art history she had wanted to talk about. I have taken my cue from this remark to make 'Joan Kerr art and architectural historian' the focus of this biography.

A brief summary of Kerr's achievements, as might be found on the cover of one of her books, would read thus: Joan Kerr taught art and architectural history at Sydney University between 1969 and 1993 (with a break in the 1970s for her doctorate at the University of York, a year teaching art history at the Australian

⁶ As Deirdre Bair experienced when her biography of Samuel Beckett appeared in public, I too could imagine controversy from the coterie of true Kerr scholars who 'thought that all they had to do was sit around and wait and one of them would be anointed to write it', quoted in Angela Bennie, 'The Facts of Life', *Spectrum*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-22 May 2005, pp 22-23

⁷ Bair quoted in Bennie, 'The facts of life'

⁸ Bair quoted in Bennie, 'The facts of life'

⁹ Martin Thomas, 'Recorded interview with Professor Joan Kerr (1938-2004)', Oral History Section (TRC-4878), National Library of Australia, September-November, 2003 (NLA Interview)

National University (ANU) and two years as a research fellow in the History Department at the Research School of Social Sciences at ANU). In 1992 at Sydney University, she published, as editor, major contributor and mentor, the *Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870 (Dictionary)*.¹⁰ She was appointed Visiting Professor in Art History at COFA in 1994 and while there, edited another large collaborative publication, *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book: 500 Works by 500 Australian Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955 (Heritage)*.¹¹ In 1997, Kerr was one of four senior academics appointed to the new Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (CCR) at ANU. After her retirement in 2001, she returned to Sydney and continued her work on the retrieval of women artists and black and white cartoonists. She was again appointed a Visiting Professor at COFA in 2003.

One charge that has been levelled against Joan Kerr is that she was a compiler of lists. A sharp answer to this is 'but what magnificent lists!' A less dramatic but more useful response could be that Kerr's 'original idea' was in the compilation of those lists: that painstaking meticulous and comprehensive documentation of the visual culture of an entire country from first principles. Recording her achievements however, risks compiling another list so that if at times this biography resembles a rollcall of exploits and embattled encounters, then that is how Joan Kerr's life appears to a sympathetic outsider. Her grand ambitions for ever grander exhibitions and publications underpin – no, *are* – the struts and bearings of this thesis and if the result is, on occasions, a leaping, flame-like, from one topic to the next it serves to enhance a sense of 'Joan Kerr' as a restless intellect always seeking new fields of knowledge and a woman forever willing to give her time and expertise to a great many people and a variety of causes.

She championed many little-known artists in her democratic approach to Australian art history and as an architectural historian held strong views on how 'heritage' restoration should be conducted. She was always entertaining, at times controversial – someone who, as Virginia Spate has written, fulfilled Baudelaire's definition of a critic as 'partial, passionate and political'.¹²

Passion for the subject in hand is a necessary quality in a biographer but 'partial' and 'political' are perhaps less appropriate attributes when writing the

¹⁰ Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992

¹¹ Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995

story of a life, which, as Judith Armstrong says, puts an author in ‘a position of wonderful privilege and extreme delicacy’.¹³ According to Hugh Brogan, biography ‘may satisfy the natural human taste for gossip’ but it must do so ‘without malice, triviality or sentimentality’.¹⁴ The need for sensitivity when dealing with the subject’s family and friends, how to reveal a person’s character through his or her work and finding a way to foster a positive relationship with those whom Brogan describes as ‘common readers’ are also key elements to be considered. Overarching all of these is the unwritten contract of faith between biographer and subject to tell the story true.

The delicate balance needed between scholarly research and creative writing to bring a person to life on the written page has long been the grail of biographers. If the primary requirement is ‘the truthful transmission of personality’ then, according to Virginia Woolf (quoting Sir Sidney Lee):

no single sentence could more neatly split up into two parts the whole problem of biography as it presents itself to us today. On the one hand there is truth; on the other there is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one.¹⁵

Although these words were written over eighty years ago, they are entirely relevant today. While acknowledging the magnitude of the problem, the intention in this biography of Joan Kerr is to reconcile the imaginative (rainbow) powers of recreation against the granite-like body of discoverable fact – as Richard Holmes writes, ‘the inventive, shaping instinct of the story-teller struggl[ing] with the ideal of a permanent, historical and objective document’.¹⁶ Victoria Glendinning is wary of the ‘truth’ of biography. ‘Some readers may seek for a final truth, and even find one – but that is their private adventure,’ she says. ‘All writers, whether of fact or fiction, are in the “lies and silences business”’.¹⁷

¹² Virginia Spate, Obituary, ‘Eleanor Joan Kerr’, p.46

¹³ Judith Armstrong, review of *Australian Gothic: a Life of Albert Tucker* by Janine Burke, *Art Monthly Australia*, May 2002, p.27

¹⁴ Hugh Brogan, ‘The biographer’s chains’ in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988, p.112

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, ‘The new biography’, originally published 30 October 1927, *New York Herald Tribune*, reproduced in *Collected Essays IV*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1967, p.229

¹⁶ Richard Holmes, ‘Invention marrying truth’, in John Batchelor ed, *The Art of Biography*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p.20

¹⁷ Victoria Glendinning, ‘Lies and silences’, in Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988, p.49

As a scholar very much in the public eye, staying silent was not Joan Kerr's way. She was also married to a scholar, which introduces an interesting complexity to her story, as architectural historian Bronwyn Hanna realized when she visited Kerr in Cremorne late in 2003. Hanna and Susan McDonald (Assistant Director, NSW Heritage Office at that time) were working on the world heritage nomination for the Opera House, for which Jim Kerr had written the conservation plan. As they were leaving McDonald remarked that she felt very honoured to have encountered 'two pillars of Australian cultural life, in one place'. Hanna responded with: 'I hadn't thought of that, but they are...*both* so significant in their own ways'.¹⁸ Art historian Joanna Mendelssohn put it more simply: 'You can't "do" Joan without Jim.'¹⁹

Here on the one hand, are the very public Dr Joan Kerr AM and Dr James Kerr AM, recognized for three decades of contributions to Australia's intellectual heritage, and on the other, Joan and Jim Kerr, a private couple who shared more than forty years of marriage based on love, respect and scholarship – a challenging marital and intellectual relationship that demands a study in its own right. Yet this is Joan Kerr's story so Jim Kerr must remain a somewhat shadowy presence in the background.

At Kerr's funeral on 1 March 2004, Roger Benjamin reflected on the magnitude of her academic achievements as 'one of the great researchers, the great producers of texts' – from her two groundbreaking, collaborative dictionaries of Australian art, to her twelve monographs, thirty-eight chapters, fifty-two articles, twenty-seven catalogue essays, and thirty-four book and exhibition reviews (not to mention numerous unpublished lectures, exhibition opening speeches and talks to lay audiences). John Thompson highlights the dilemma of writing about such a prolific scholar in his review of *Joan Kerr: a Pictorial Biography, 1938-2004 (Pictorial Biography)*:

It [*Pictorial Biography*] is intended to encapsulate an overview of the life and the achievements of Joan Kerr to sit with and alongside her papers in the National Library of Australia in Canberra and to serve as a guide, not so much to the papers, but rather to Joan Kerr herself...A remarkable index provides in three dense pages a summary of Joan's characteristics, activities and interests. More than we need to know? Perhaps – but only sometimes.²⁰

¹⁸ Steggall interview with Bronwyn Hanna, February 2008

¹⁹ Steggall, conversation with Joanna Mendelssohn, November 2006

²⁰ John Thompson, review of *Joan Kerr: a Pictorial Biography, 1938-2004* by James Semple Kerr, in *Art Monthly Australia*, No.200, June 2007, p.34

Yet to do Kerr's scholarship justice there *is* a need to know more, a situation analogous perhaps to Hermione Lee's experience when she set out on her 'biographer's journey' in 1991 and found that while much of Virginia Woolf's work is 'monumentally established in the canon of modernism and feminism, a great part of it, too, is still under-read and under-valued'.²¹ Although the ambitious *Dictionary of Australian Art Online* project has been created to archive Joan Kerr's extensive databases, her work as a whole (as Juliet Peers points out) has not been given proper recognition. While acknowledging the impossibility of encompassing all of Joan Kerr's *œuvre*, this biography includes as comprehensive a record of her work as has been possible within the time frame and word length imposed by university thesis requirements.

This introductory chapter, *Overtures*, looks at issues underpinning the writing of biography in the early 21st century – psychobiological, feminist and historical for example – grounded in biography's literary traditions, allied to considerations of what is at stake when writing about an art historian who reaches a certain level of public acclaim. The chapter concludes with a brief description of the structure of the thesis.

2. Confronting Biography

Modern biography in the English-speaking world is a British tradition that dates from the 18th century. However the first biography that must be mentioned is one much closer to home – namely *Pictorial Biography*, the very personal memoir published by Jim Kerr in 2006, of his wife and their life together.²² Yet if Joan Kerr is to be accorded her rightful place in Australia's cultural heritage a more dispassionate appreciation of her personality and a more comprehensive account of her work is needed for the public record. John Thompson again:

And yet for all that Jim Kerr offers an abundant account of Joan's life and achievements, his is perhaps not a fully rounded view. In the best sense, his account is partisan – an affirmative and loving portrait, beautifully constructed and written with a superb clarity and assurance that moves easily through the various stages of Joan's trajectory...But while hints are present of a sometimes irascible and difficult Joan, these are not always sufficiently pursued or developed in ways that might acknowledge the possibility of another point of

²¹ Hermione Lee, 'Biographer', *Virginia Woolf*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1996, p.770

²² James Semple Kerr, *Joan Kerr: a Pictorial Biography, 1938-2004*, Sydney, 2006 (*Pictorial Biography*)

view, particularly in the recurring difficulties she seemed to find with her academic employers. Was Joan always right, it might be asked? Were her crusades always temperate and effective? And in not suffering fools might she not also have alienated potential allies and supporters?²³

In her review of *Pictorial Biography*, Juliet Peers voices similar reservations, from a different perspective:

Joan Kerr's career prompts consideration of the nature of fame and validation in Australian art. More than anyone else she established viable alternatives in debate around Australia's visual culture...Whether it was her gender, her 'outsider' status, or because although clearly a player in the system, she was in the end not the most effective, cynical or self-serving of system players, a solid and proper validation of Joan's contribution has eluded public memory. Undoubtedly her relatively premature death contributed to her lack of institutional hagiography.²⁴

As a feminist art historian Peers evokes issues raised by academics and public intellectuals such as Cassandra Pybus, Jenny Hocking and Inga Clendinnen about the writing of biography – debates that centre 'upon the constructed nature of biography, inclusions, omissions and the varying boundaries and definitions of public and private'. For Peers, Jim Kerr's account prompts consideration of 'all these formal and conceptual fault lines'.²⁵

Both book reviews elicit important questions about the nature of fame (or notoriety), considerations of gender and otherness and Kerr's deliberate positioning of herself as an outsider on issues within academe and in the community at large. Also of significance, although not explicitly discussed in the reviews, is the question of who has the right to speak for the subject who is the object of a biography.

It is understandable for family members to want to memorialise the life of someone close to them but why does a biographer choose to write about one particular life and not another? Richard Holmes talks of 'the illogical feeling that your subjects somehow choose you', something he describes as empathy – 'the most powerful, the most necessary, and the most deceptive, of all biographical emotions'.²⁶ Empathy – in terms of public admiration and respect – is no longer the preserve of successful men and the proliferation of biographies across a

²³ John Thompson, review of *Joan Kerr: a Pictorial Biography*, pp 33-34

²⁴ Juliet Peers, 'Unfinished Business', review of *Joan Kerr: a Pictorial Biography, 1938-2004*, *Artlink*, vol 26, #4, December 2006, p.102

²⁵ Juliet Peers, 'Unfinished Business', pp 102-103

broad range of human achievement attests to the opening up of long entrenched (Eurocentric and masculinist) definitions as to which individuals merit biographical attention. The influence of feminism, the improving profile of women in politics, business and the arts, the rise (and fall?) of multiculturalism, the increasing globalisation of culture, and terrorism, and the potential offered by electronic publishing have opened up new possibilities for biography – and new contradictions. As Ian Donaldson writes: ‘It is ironical that theorists should have been busy dissolving the notion of the authorial self at the very time when groups and individuals hitherto ‘silenced’ have been attempting to constitute themselves both as authors and as biographical subjects.’²⁷

Whether or not theory has succeeded in interring the author, the relationship between the biographer’s own experiences and those of the biographical subject has always been strong. In the 1920s Harold Nicolson showed that he was as much the subject of his own irony and observation as his subjects were.²⁸ Nicolson’s belief that there must always be the reflection of one temperament in the mirror of another added a strong autobiographical aspect to biography.²⁹ On a slightly different tack, Ann Thwaite maintains that the biographer must look at a subject’s life in the context of her or his era and what that person’s plays, essays, poems or stories meant to the people who read and saw them at the time they were written, as well what effect they had on those who came after.³⁰ Andrew Sinclair argues that biographers must visit the sites of the past to become aware of the differences between their own backgrounds and those of their subjects. As we explain others to our contemporaries within our shared terms of reference, so we date ourselves in front of the generations that follow.³¹ Each era must create narratives in its own way. As Judith Zinsser writes, ‘All historians have a particular story to tell that reflects our own questions about our own times, even

²⁶ Richard Holmes, ‘A Romantic Premonition: Introduction’, *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer*, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2005, p.4

²⁷ Ian Donaldson, ‘Introduction’ in Ian Donaldson, Peter Read & James Walter eds, *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography*, Humanities Research Centre, Monograph Series, No.6, Australian National University, Canberra, 1992, p.vi

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, ‘The new biography’, p.233

²⁹ Judith Zinsser, ‘A prologue for *La Dame d’Esprit*. The biography of the marquise du Châtelet’, in Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing history*, Routledge, London & New York, 1997, p.205

³⁰ Ann Thwaite, *A.A. Milne: His Life*, Faber and Faber, London & Boston, 1990, quoted in Ann Thwaite, ‘Writing lives’, in Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988, p.32

³¹ Andrew Sinclair, ‘Vivat altius ergo sum’, in Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988, pp 124-128

about ourselves.’³² Perhaps a later age – if it ‘sees’ Joan Kerr at all – will see her differently.

More recently, ambitious experiments in biography have identified with post-modern ‘politics of representation’, as presented by the subject and created by others. Zinsser cites Liz Stanley’s radical model for feminist biography in which nothing separates fiction from the ‘actual’, the story from the storyteller or biography from autobiography. But, Zinsser asks, ‘does this kind of self-conscious deconstruction actually replace the narrative? Make it seem impossible altogether?’ Zinsser is concerned that inserting too much of the biographer’s self and her dilemmas might result in a biography becoming ‘a vast hall of mirrors’.³³

‘Theory’ has a place in biography but for Eric Homberger and John Charmley, the fact that biographies have generally been written outside academe indicates not so much ‘the institutional concerns of a discipline than a range of more traditional and sometimes personal motives on the part of the biographer’: wanting to tell an interesting story; resurrect a wronged or neglected reputation, or reinterpret the role of a singular individual.³⁴ This subjective presence is perhaps the reason that biography has not always enjoyed academic attention. As Brenda Niall pointed out in the 2005 *Inaugural Seymour Lecture in Biography*, ‘in Australian universities in the 1950s and 1960s, no one was interested in biography. If biography belonged anywhere, it would have been consigned to history’.³⁵ Yet this lumping in with history remains an uneasy liaison and biography is more often seen as a hybrid discipline hovering somewhere between history and fiction even though, according to Deirdre Bair, biography has not, until fairly recently, been considered a particularly worthy literary undertaking.³⁶

Adrian Mitchell argues that a class distinction has evolved between scholarly personal histories of public figures and less formal stories of those whom society calls ‘characters’ and it was because formal history had no significant interest in such characters that

³² Zinsser, ‘A Prologue for *La Dame d’Esprit*’, p.202

³³ Zinsser, ‘A Prologue for *La Dame d’Esprit*’, p.205

³⁴ Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988

³⁵ Brenda Niall, *Walking upon Ashes: the Footsteps of a Modern Biographer*, Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 2006

³⁶ Angela Bennie, ‘The facts of life’. Bennie: ‘Biography’s status has changed radically since Bair’s first foray: it is now one of the most popular genres. Could it be that as we were coming towards the end of the millennium as well as a century, we were wanting to see who we were and where we’ve been and what we are?’

the novel got invented; and then followed the literary biographies (which were as likely as not fictions too) and then the popular biographies competing with the local histories in what was really the same market – books about less obviously important subjects...diaries of a nobody – and so to about our place, our mob, our neighbours, our immediate forbears until, inevitably, we are just on the point of writing histories about ourselves as the present, and thinking about how to write histories of the future.³⁷

If the novel flourished in an environment of privacy and solitary fantasy as a result of the creation of studies, small libraries and boudoirs in well-to-do British homes in the late 18th century, biography most likely developed from the growth in 'congenial coffee houses, companionable taverns, and clubs, where gossip, anecdote, and the telling of the "latest story" became a premium'.³⁸ How well or badly this was performed depended on the teller's flair for setting a scene and structuring the tale to hold the listeners' attention.

Shape and form are clearly as important to biography as they are to literature. In this respect, Brenda Niall's work on the Boyd dynasty raises an interesting issue: that of how to deal with several generations of a family in the one book. Janine Burke's biography of Albert Tucker highlights a problem of content: whether to deal with the whole life in detail or concentrate on the subject's most artistically productive period.³⁹ While Niall's work received critical acclaim for its imaginative use of the Boyds' various family homes to structure her chapters, reviewers questioned whether Burke's book was an important piece of Australian art history (it began as a doctoral dissertation) or a biography of an artist. Two-thirds of the book covers Tucker's artistically productive life to the age of thirty-two and here, according to Judith Armstrong, the art historian could have stopped but not the biographer who cannot gloss over nearly forty years of a man's life.⁴⁰ A biography must follow a life's journey to its natural conclusion.

Books such as A.J.A. Symons' *The Quest for Corvo: an Experiment in Biography*⁴¹ and Richard Holmes' *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic*

³⁷ Adrian Mitchell, 'Personal histories: a curious dichotomy', *Newswrite*, Issue 177, March 2008, p.7

³⁸ Holmes, 'Invention marrying truth', in John Batchelor ed, *The Art of Literary Biography*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, p.21

³⁹ Brenda Niall, *The Boyds: a Family Biography*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2002; Janine Burke, *Australian Gothic: a Life of Albert Tucker*, Knopf, Sydney, 2002

⁴⁰ Judith Armstrong, review of *Australian Gothic: a Life of Albert Tucker* by Janine Burke, *Art Monthly Australia*, May 2002, p.28

⁴¹ A.J.A. Symons, *The Quest for Corvo: an Experiment in Biography*, Cassell, London, 1955

*Biographer*⁴² are modelled on physical and emotional journeys – challenging intellectual adventures in which the biographer is very much present in the narrative. In *Quest for Corvo*, reference to a missing manuscript immediately arouses the reader's curiosity about the identity of both the subject of the biography and the author. The 'quest' for the Baron is also Symons' quest for himself – 'the lifelong wandering of all self-conscious artists among the intricate corridors leading to secret or forbidden rooms in "the Arabian palace of the individual"''.⁴³ The narrative device of linking events contemporaneous with Holmes' life (the May 1968 riots in Paris for example) with the upheavals of the late 18th-century French Revolution creates, in *Footsteps*, an ingenious *entrée* to the literary figures who are the subjects of the biography. Yet without footnotes we have no proof that, like the Duc des Esseintes in J.-K. Huysman's novel *A Rebours* (quoted in the Alain de Botton's *The Art of Travel*⁴⁴), the author ever ventured far from home at all.

Niall has written that biography, with all its 'risks and adventures', is not a safe option for the unimaginative. The title of her Seymour Lecture, *Walking on Ashes* (from Samuel Johnson), suggests the dangerous terrain biographers enter when writing about someone's life; there may yet be flammable material in the embers. 'We are all eager to come close to the living fires,' Niall declares, 'although in varying degrees anxious about stepping on hot coals, and if the heat is sometimes alarming, it is also a source of energy'.⁴⁵ Joan Kerr had that energy. In spite of her diminutive physique she had a vibrant, commanding personality and imbued her students, especially those at postgraduate level, with an infectious enthusiasm for the subject in hand, whether it be 19th-century tombstones, the paintings of a woman impressionist or shell-covered models of Sydney Harbour Bridge. Like her mentor Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983), she often worked well beyond reasonable limits of endurance.⁴⁶

Biography has been credited with important achievements: bringing focus on the social problems of individual nations; breaking down sexual and racial taboos;

⁴² Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*, HarperCollins, London, 1995

⁴³ Julian Symons, 'The author and the quest', preface to A.J.A. Symons, *The Quest for Corvo: an Experiment in Biography*, Cassell, London, 1955, p.x

⁴⁴ Alain de Botton, 'On anticipation', *The Art of Travel*, Penguin, London, 2002, pp 9-11

⁴⁵ Niall, *Walking on Ashes*, p.3

⁴⁶ Paul Joyce, 'Notes on Sir Nikolaus Bernhard Leon Pevsner (1902-1983)', 1975, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* article

<<http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait>>

encouraging discussion of minority problems and highlighting important movements such as the emancipation of women. These are grand claims but if, at the very least, biography reflects the spirit of a particular time and place then it makes an invaluable contribution to the cultural and intellectual heritage held in trust for future generations.⁴⁷

To build on that cultural and intellectual heritage it is necessary to acknowledge past traditions. Historical surveys generally attribute the beginning of the modern era of biography to James Boswell's life of Samuel Johnson.⁴⁸ Until the late 18th century, biographies were mainly tales of 'battle and victory' with few details of the personal lives of their subjects. Boswell showed that a life consists of personality as well as action and that men of letters were as important as soldiers and statesmen.⁴⁹ John Morley (*English Men of Letters*) and Leslie Stephen (*Dictionary of National Biography*) contributed to the technical development of biography in the late 19th century by including psychological interpretation of character and the location of the subject's oeuvre within 'the central currents of thought' contemporaneous with the time and place in which he (invariably he) lived and worked.⁵⁰

If Victorian biographers were interested in character, they were relatively incurious about motives and could depict dramatic events successfully because they were untroubled by the thought that they might be dealing with hidden dramas and unspoken ambitions.⁵¹ At the end of World War I, Lytton Strachey strove to dismantle this and judged his characters from a literary perspective, employing the values of the artist to inform the actions of the doers.⁵² Strachey also aimed to demolish the 19th-century great-man-not-a-breath-of-scandal approach and free biography from the 'prudish Victorian sensibility' embodied in the idea of the biographer as family retainer 'whose job it was to ensure that

⁴⁷ Anthony Friedson, 'Summary of questionnaire responses', in Anthony Friedson ed, *New Directions in Biography*, Biographical Research Centre, Hawaii, 1981, (Edited papers presented at the International Symposium on Biography, organized by the University of Hawaii, 1981), pp 83-96

⁴⁸ James Boswell, *The life of Samuel Johnson, LLD: comprising a series of his epistolary correspondence and conversations with many eminent persons and various original pieces of his composition, with a chronological account of his studies and numerous works, the whole exhibiting a view of literature and literary men in Great Britain for nearly half a century*, Centenary edn, Routledge, London, 1884

⁴⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'The new biography', p.230

⁵⁰ Ira B. Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, Macmillan, London, 1984, pp 38-39

⁵¹ Robert Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', in Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1988, p.10

⁵² Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', p.6

nothing went wrong with the literary funeral arrangements'. No longer would the subject be seen in the noblest light without a hint of controversy.⁵³ In this Strachey was following a tradition established by James Froude (1818-1894) who included problematic aspects of personality and marital difficulties in his biography of controversial essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). However, according to Robert Skidelsky, the professionalism that has increasingly made contemporary biographies works of scholarship rather than of imagination, and the biographer's changing relationship with the subject's family, have modified the model pioneered by Strachey.⁵⁴

Scholarly emphasis on original sources has re-aligned contemporary biography with its Victorian forebear. Access to 'original sources' generally includes the subject's private papers that are controlled by those who have them in their possession, permission to quote from them being granted in return for tact and discretion in their use.⁵⁵ The privileging of private papers introduces another important factor that could potentially lead to a less than balanced view of the subject's achievements and actions, namely an incentive by those who reach public prominence to preserve and create material for posterity or manipulate evidence they know biographers will want to use.⁵⁶ Hermione Lee found, late in the 20th century, that Virginia Woolf's archives still reflected the early arrangements made after Woolf's death in 1941, and bore traces of Leonard Woolf's attempts to deal with the complicated chaos of her papers.⁵⁷ In the last months of her life, Joan Kerr produced an extensive annotated CV and worked with art-historian colleagues to ensure the continued existence of her work. Much of that material – articles, speeches, lectures and artist databases – was transferred to the UNSW Library and the National Library of Australia (NLA). Jim Kerr continues to catalogue her letters and papers so that the imposition of an order and emphasis that did not exist during Joan Kerr's lifetime is a possibility.

Richard Holmes suggests that the power of certain lives continues to fascinate each succeeding generation of biographers just as the classical myths were endlessly retold by the Greek dramatists to renew their own versions of contemporary identity. In this sense, Holmes concludes, a final, truthful, 'definitive

⁵³ Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', p.6

⁵⁴ Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', p.9

⁵⁵ Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', p.8

⁵⁶ Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', p.9

⁵⁷ Lee, 'Biography', *Virginia Woolf*, p.770

account must always be something of a chimera. We get back the answers only to the questions we ask of a life. The picture lives only within the frame we have invented for it'.⁵⁸ Glendinning nicely evokes the experience of a being in a boat with a light shining in its wake to describe the biographer's dilemma:

No light at the front of the boat, only behind. Our suppositions about the water behind us – about its depth, its dangers, and what is likely to lie below the surface – might be hugely modified if we knew what lay just ahead of us...Artists, statesmen, criminals, society figures, rebels, reformers and scholars all look different to each generation, seeing them in a context that contracts in relation to the receding and darkening past, and expands forward into new knowledge and mentalities.⁵⁹

Virginia Woolf was well aware from her own reading and theorising of biography of how lives are changed in retrospect. 'These facts,' she wrote, 'are not like the facts of science – once they are discovered, always the same and not even then sometimes. They are subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change'.⁶⁰ Woolf's own story has been reformulated many times. According to Lee,

[s]he takes on the shape of difficult modernist preoccupied with questions of form, or comedian of manners, or neurotic highbrow aesthete, or inventive fantasist, or pernicious snob, or Marxist feminist, or historian of women's lives or victim of abuse, or lesbian heroine, or cultural analyst, depending on who is reading her, and when, and in what context.⁶¹

All human beings, women perhaps more so given their history of concealment and self-deprecation in the glare of society's long-entrenched view of them as creatures of nature rather than beings of intellect, show elements of the chameleon in their lives and Joan Kerr – historian/raconteur, lecturer/performer, academic writer/journalist, editor/collaborator, scholar/clown – was no exception. She moved as easily among these roles as she did between scholarly disciplines, melding art, architectural, social, feminist and traditional history to contextualize her work.

⁵⁸ Holmes, 'Inventing the truth', p.20

⁵⁹ Victoria Glendinning, 'Lies and silences', p.60

⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'The art of biography', 1939, in *Collected Essays IV*, Virginia Woolf ed, originally published 30 October 1927, *New York Herald Tribune*, reproduced in *Collected Essays IV*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1967, p.226

Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries:

Concepts such as truth versus invention and the role of psychiatry, sociology and anthropology became important issues in biographical writing in the second half of the 20th century and I look briefly at instances of these to set the scene without becoming overly 'sidetracked' as Richard Holmes would have us do.⁶²

Lewis Langness takes an anthropological approach in considering hidden factors in life histories: issues such as what a 'life' is; what the concepts of 'self' or 'person' mean in different cultural contexts.⁶³ Leon Edel's idea of biography as a tapestry or carpet is a less academic but more imaginative way of uncovering a person's private thoughts within a particular milieu. The biographer must first study the figure *in* the carpet – all the patterns and modes of a subject's work, whether it be political, socio-economical or creative – and then search for 'the figure *under* the carpet' to unlock the private mythology of the individual.⁶⁴

A good example of this is the film *In Search of Mozart* (2006), an attempt to look dispassionately at the life and work of the composer. Central to the film was the debunking of some of the more colourful myths that surround the legend 'Mozart' while creating a biography of someone much admired. The director wanted to present his subject as a man of his time without turning him into either a saint or a sinner – in Mozart's case neither sublime genius nor talented but vulgar brat. This approach would counter Friedson's criticism that overemphasis on quirks of personality has too often degenerated into prurient gossip only concerned with the passing show.⁶⁵

At the other end of the spectrum are didactic texts that harness biography for religious or social ends by presenting a life as a moral example. This, according to both Friedson and Edel, makes for 'some very dull books' and has produced what Edel describes as 'graveyard lives' (the 'marble tribute'⁶⁶) that have

⁶¹ Hermione Lee, 'Biographer', *Virginia Woolf*, p.769

⁶² Richard Holmes, Prologue, *Sidetracks*, p.xi

⁶³ Lewis L. Langness, 'Biography and the structure of lives', *Lives: an Anthropological Approach to Biography*, Chandler & Sharp Publishers Inc., USA, 1981, pp 87-89

⁶⁴ Leon Edel, 'Biography and the science of man', in Anthony Friedson ed, *New Directions in Biography*, Biographical Research Centre, Hawaii, 1981. (Edited papers presented at the International Symposium on Biography, organized by the University of Hawaii, 1981), p.9

⁶⁵ Anthony Friedson, 'Foreword: lifting the barriers', in Anthony Friedson ed, *New Directions in Biography*, Biographical Research Centre, Hawaii, 1981. (Edited papers presented at the International Symposium on Biography, organized by the University of Hawaii, 1981), p.viii

⁶⁶ Paul Mariani, 'William Carlos Williams', in Jeffrey, Meyers, *The Craft of Literary Biography*, Schocken Books, New York, 1985, p.147

‘cluttered the history of life-writing’.⁶⁷ From a different angle, although with similarly worthy but dull outcomes, is the problem of how much detail is required to ‘illuminate an author’s work’. In a discussion of the numerous biographies of George Eliot, Ira Nadel argues that the pursuit of a definitive understanding through an obsessive accumulation of verified facts, resulting in an all-inclusive encyclopaedic life that emphasises the newly-gathered materials without sufficient effort made to enter that person’s mind, will fail to present a convincing interpretation of the subject’s personality.⁶⁸ Truth telling, for Skidelsky, is not necessarily equated with length, with ‘telling all, with piling up detail on detail’.⁶⁹ On the other hand, in the case of a major – the first – biography of a significant writer or scholar the biographer has a responsibility to write the text ‘straight’ and not to experiment with the material.⁷⁰

In discussing her biography of Ivy Compton-Burnett, Hilary Spurling reiterates the idea that although there must be fidelity to facts, the biographer will generally be forced to resort to fiction to create a believable character.⁷¹ Here ‘resort to’ seems to imply ‘stoop to’, that there is something not quite right about the presence of creative writing in biography. Yet historian Keith Jenkins and his followers believe it is imperative to use the range of techniques that fiction offers – except in the matter of direct speech. Unlike novelists, biographers are forbidden to invent dialogue, or put thoughts into a character’s head. Michael Holroyd suggests using quotations from letters and diaries to perform a function similar to dialogue in the narrative.⁷² However this too can be problematic as the injudicious use of snippets from such material might shape the story in the direction of the biographer’s prejudices and make, as Edel writes, the life ‘subject to the biographer’s eye’.⁷³

⁶⁷ Anthony Friedson, ‘Foreword: lifting the barriers’, p.ix

⁶⁸ Ira B Nadel, ‘Versions of the life: George Eliot and her biographers’, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, Macmillan, London, 1984, p.102; Jeffrey Meyers, ‘Introduction’, *The Craft of Literary Biography*, p.2

⁶⁹ Skidelsky, ‘Only connect: biography and truth’, p.8

⁷⁰ Jill Roe, on her biography, *Stella Miles Franklin: a Biography*, Fourth Estate HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney, 2008

⁷¹ Hilary Spurling, *Secrets of a Woman’s Heart: the Later Life of I. Compton-Burnett 1920-1969*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1984; Hilary Spurling, ‘Neither morbid nor ordinary’ in Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988, p.116

⁷² Michael Holroyd, ‘How I fell into biography’, in Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988, pp 99-102

⁷³ Leon Edel, ‘Biography and the science of man’, p.10

Mark Holloway describes the process of beginning a biography in practical terms: acquiring a notebook, creating a timeline, collecting his subject's written work (including 'fugitive writings' such as notes, drafts and unpublished pieces) and revising and checking life details.⁷⁴ He gives the impression that writing a biography is like a construction project, with a blueprint for execution, leaving little room for the delays, disappointments and difficulties that will inevitably occur. Rather than superintendent-of-works, perhaps Jeffrey Meyers' 'forensic journalist of the spirit' is a more appropriate analogy for trying to uncover the how and why a particular person achieved prominence.⁷⁵

Historians for the most part now reject the view that historical events are caused by, or bear the mark of, or would have unfolded very differently but for, the unique personalities of leading protagonists and that to treat an individual's achievement as a major, or *the* major, factor perhaps distorts our understanding of an historical event. A more common view is that the hour (or perhaps the place) produces the man, or the woman.⁷⁶

Attachment to place introduces the idea of a 'cultural geography' within biography.⁷⁷ Joan Kerr was dedicated to Australia's heritage in all its topological variations. The fact that Kerr's major focus was on the art and architectural heritage of Australia could raise a charge of parochialism yet the strong currents of feminism and post-colonialism that informed her work mitigate this criticism. This accords with Gillian Whitlock's opinion that recent writing in Australia has striven to generate a more complex sense of Australian cultural life and institutions – a sensibility much broader than a seamlessly British heritage.⁷⁸

James Walter suspects that there is still a resistance in Australia to the practice of psychobiography, possibly because of lingering 'empiricist and

⁷⁴ Mark Holloway, 'Norman Douglas', in Jeffrey Meyers ed, *The Craft of Literary Biography*, Schocken Books, New York, 1985, pp 93-96

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Meyers, Introduction, in Jeffrey Meyers ed, *The Craft of Literary Biography*, Schocken Books, New York, 1985, p.1

⁷⁶ Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', pp 2-3

⁷⁷ James Walter, quoted in Introduction, Ian Donaldson, Peter Read & James Walter eds, *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography*, Humanities Research Centre, Monograph Series, No.6, the Australian National University, Canberra, 1992, p.vii

⁷⁸ Gillian Whitlock, 'From biography to autobiography', in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, Elizabeth Webby ed, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & Melbourne, 2000, p.238

positivist cultural traditions' in a once-settler society.⁷⁹ Whitlock concurs with this. Even as a postcolonial and internationalist society, she writes, Australians are still more confident in the charting of public and political events and institutions, and the dilemmas of migration and expatriation, than with less tangible and more unsettling inward and personal enquiries.⁸⁰ 'Inward and personal' leads towards psychoanalysis and biographers are often tempted to apply psychoanalytic methodology to break open the public façade – 'the mask behind which a private mythology is hidden – to reveal the thoughts and dreams that guide a person's life, and 'their ways of wooing the world or disdaining it'.⁸¹

Psychoanalysis may provide useful conceptual tools for interpreting human behaviour but it would be erroneous to reduce all events and actions to a psychoanalytical framework. According to Glendinning, 'only the most doggedly psychoanalytical biographers still want to explain the "because" of actions and achievements, all the time'.⁸² William Runyan argues that one danger inherent in psychobiography is the privileging of psychological factors at the expense of social and historical factors, thus focussing excessively on psychopathological processes with insufficient attention to normality and creativity. He maintains that too many psychobiographies have suffered from overemphasising the influence of childhood conflicts rather than studying formative influences throughout the subject's life span.⁸³ In attempting to build a study of a person's life around a certain 'key' period of development or conferring on some important episode in a person's life not only the prototype of his or her behaviour but *the* turning point from which all subsequent events and work are derived, the biographer risks 'impos[ing] unnatural order, shape and direction to the often rather amorphous nature and fitful course of a human life, even that of a great man'.⁸⁴ Although psychoanalytic theory can generate interesting and different interpretations of the same events, its application clearly requires specialist qualifications and experience and so should be used with restraint.

⁷⁹ James Walter, 'Biography, psychobiography and cultural space' quoted in Introduction, Ian Donaldson, Peter Read & James Walter eds, *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography*, Humanities Research Centre, Monograph Series, No.6, the Australian National University, Canberra, 1992, p.vii

⁸⁰ Gillian Whitlock, 'From biography to autobiography', p.236

⁸¹ Leon Edel, 'Biography and the science of man', p.8

⁸² Glendinning, 'Lies and silences', p.49

⁸³ William Runyan, 'Alternatives to psychoanalytic psychobiography', in William Runyan ed, *Psychology and Historical Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, pp 224-225

Yet that 'great man' seldom lived alone and Hugh Brogan introduces the idea that biography can show the cost of greatness to the people surrounding the hero or heroine.⁸⁵ Jean Strouse, for example, discovered that Alice James (daughter of Henry James) was actually a more interesting person in her own right than the person she is usually considered to have been. In a family with a famous father, it was Alice's fierce ambition, to be more than 'just a girl, a waste and a failure', that provoked the 'tyranny of illness' she levelled against her family.⁸⁶ Strouse also showed that the florid tributes paid by the James children to their parents contained inverse truths that subverted the myth of perfect parenthood.⁸⁷ In *Pictorial Biography*, Jim Kerr hints at difficult family times but invariably shrugs them off with a 'my shoulders are broad' attitude. In the life of a person as ambitious and dedicated to her work as Joan Kerr, there would inevitably have been conflicts. She sometimes displayed a kind of benign neglect towards those closest to her and cavalier treatment of friends, especially during the busy phases of finalising a manuscript for publication or organizing an exhibition.⁸⁸ Rather than stray too far into the positive and negative psychological forces in family dynamics, it is perhaps better to accept that Joan Kerr was typical of many women who juggle public and private responsibilities.

The psychobiographical approach could also encompass an analysis of the masculinist domination of biography. Zinsser is of the opinion that feminists have been justifiably harsh in their criticisms of traditional history (and by extension, biography), not only for its omissions but also for its lack of awareness of the significance of gender in the shaping of human experiences:

If we had been blind or reluctant to reveal the interplay between research, writing and subjective predilections in broad histories of the past, biographers have been even more wedded to what the feminist theorist, Liz Stanley, calls 'a realist fallacy'...creat[ing] seamless, uncritical narratives, linear progressions from birth to death.⁸⁹

Feminist historians may have been successful in breaking down the entrenched hegemony of men artists over art history, especially the privileging of the so-

⁸⁴ Mack, 1971 quoted in Runyan, p.224

⁸⁵ Hugh Brogan, 'The biographer's chains', in Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, *The Troubled Face of Biography*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1988, pp 110-112

⁸⁶ Jean Strouse, 'Alice James: a family romance', in William Runyan ed, *Psychology and Historical Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, p.92

⁸⁷ Strouse, 'Alice James: a family romance', p.93

⁸⁸ Steggall, Interview with Lucy (née Harrison) Sullivan, December 2006

⁸⁹ Zinsser, 'Afterword', in Robert Rosenberg & Alun Munslow, *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, London & New York, 2004, p.204

called high arts of painting and sculpture over all other forms of visual creativity and the perception of 'career' as a linear progression from student to emerging practitioner to master, but there is considerable leeway to be made up with regard to women art historians for whom biographies lag behind those of their male counterparts.

Biography – As History, Like Literature:

Anthony Friedson argues that the most important recent contribution to biographical practice and theory has been an increasing perception of biography as literature, something that allows biography to transcend conventional chronological structure.⁹⁰ And if literary biography is regarded as a bridge between the academy and the common reader, then freelance biographers can cross that bridge and take their place beside those who work within universities. John Batchelor explores the professional experience common to these two different kinds of writer in the anthology *The Art of Literary Biography*.⁹¹ 'Art', however, implies creativity. If non-academic biographers must comply with the rules of scholarly research to gain critical acceptance, so academic biographers must conform to the standards expected of literary fiction. On reflection these might not be so very far apart. Over recent decades there has been a shift in attitude towards scholarly writing, particularly in history. In his seminal work, *Rethinking History* of 1991, Keith Jenkins recognized that 'the histories we assign to things and people are constructed and created' – are, in short, literature, incorporating novelistic devices of emplotment, trope, voice, shape and expression.⁹² According to Leon Edel, the biographer can also adopt other techniques that give narrative strength to fiction such as flashbacks, retrospective chapters, jumps from childhood to maturity, glimpses of the future and forays into the pasts that reflect the way people live and move.⁹³

Robert Rosenstone suggests that history written 'in the first person of the historian, in the voices of historical figures, in the language of poetry and fiction', in forms such as parody, mystery, pastiche, humour and the miniature can

⁹⁰ Anthony Friedson, 'Summary of questionnaire responses', pp 83-96

⁹¹ John Batchelor, *The Art of Literary Biography*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995, pp 1-2

⁹² Alun Munslow, Editorial Abstract, *Rethinking History*, Dec 2006, vol 10 Issue 4, pp 473-477; Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, Routledge, 1991

⁹³ Edel, 'Biography and the science of man', p.10

‘revivify our sense of the past’.⁹⁴ Another effective way of bringing the past into the present is by using the technique of self-reflexivity. In *Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan*, Rosenstone narrates the past and within its narration, acknowledges some of the conditions of its composition through his own experiences when visiting Japan, for example shifts in understanding caused by the sights, sounds, smells and visual, verbal and personal encounters that the traveller experiences in a foreign land.⁹⁵ By making the teller part of the tale (as when the author appears in the narrative to complain about the problems involved in creating the text), Rosenstone undercuts the notion that history already exists and somehow ‘tells itself’. Direct address to the reader in sharing problems with sources and composition, ‘shows the written page less a place where wisdom is handed down from author to reader than as one where author and reader meet to make sense of the past’.⁹⁶

Another writer who embeds the teller firmly in the tale is Stephen Scheduling. In his book *The National Picture*, which charts the author’s physical and intellectual search for Benjamin Duterrau’s (presumed lost – or was it ever painted?) grandiose eponymous painting (circa 1840) of the ‘conciliation’ of the Tasmanian Aborigines with their protector George Augustus Robinson, Scheduling positions his ambitions, emotions and intellectual thought processes at the heart of the narrative.⁹⁷ His physical embodiment – hunger, thirst or headache – is always present as he searches for the painting.

Contemporary Australian historical and biographical writing has also produced some imaginative solutions. In *Malinche’s Conquest* Anna Lanyon overcomes the problem of scarce primary material by including her self-as-researcher in the narrative to create a fascinating snapshot of modern-day Mexico *and* the 16th-century world of Cortez and the Spanish conquistadors.⁹⁸ Greg Denning gives equal voice to Tahitians and Europeans in their South Sea encounter by writing

⁹⁴ Rosenstone, ‘Introduction: practice and theory’, in Alun Munslow & Robert Rosenstone eds, *Experiments*, p.2

⁹⁵ Rosenstone, ‘Introduction: practice and theory’, pp 3-5

⁹⁶ Rosenstone, ‘Introduction: practice and theory’, pp 3-5

⁹⁷ Stephen Scheduling, *The National Picture*, Vintage Books (Random House), Sydney, 2002

⁹⁸ Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1999

from the 'other side of the beach'.⁹⁹ Inga Clendinnen in *Dancing with Strangers*, and Nicholas Thomas in *Discoveries: the Voyages of Captain Cook*, have also taken risks in looking at first contact events in Australia from both sides of an almost incommensurable cultural divide.¹⁰⁰ Robert Dessaix blends fact, fiction and authorial intrusion to great effect as he traces Ivan Turgenev's peregrinations around 19th-century Europe.¹⁰¹

To break with convention, however, requires courage and both Robert Rosenstone and Alun Munslow agree that to experiment with historical writing is to relinquish the comfortable certitude of knowing the 'truth' about some action or event and to 'step into the unknown':

As soon as we talk about 'representation' and 'meaning', then our everyday concept of truth gets much more messy... We are now faced with the problem of how the historian as author makes the connection between the content of the past (what happened) with the form or shape it is given (as history).¹⁰²

If literary works unfold in imaginary worlds, history is supposed to deal with the 'real' world of dates and events, leaving aside human qualities such as kindness and compassion, contemplation and imagination. R.G. Collingwood's idea of the study of history as the science of the mind – 'a science which is at one and the same time a form of self-knowledge and a mode of self-making'¹⁰³ – would seem more generous and his opinion of what is and is *not* history works equally well for biography:

A great many things that deeply concern human beings are not, and never have been, traditionally included in the subject matter of history. People are born, eat and breathe and sleep, and beget children and become ill and recover again, and die; and these things interest them, most of them at any rate, far more than art and science, industry and politics and war. Yet none of these things have been traditionally regarded as possessing historical interest. Most of them have given rise to institutions like dining and marrying and the

⁹⁹ Greg Denning, 'Writing, rewriting the beach', in Alun Munslow & Robert Rosenstone eds, *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, New York & London, 2004, p.31. See also *Mr. Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power, and Theatre on the Bounty*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1993

¹⁰⁰ *Dancing with Strangers*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2003; *Discoveries: the Voyages of Captain Cook*, Allen Lane/Penguin, London, 2003

¹⁰¹ *Twilight of Love: Travels with Turgenev*, Picador, Sydney, 2004

¹⁰² Rosenstone, 'Introduction: practice and theory', p.6; Alun Munslow, 'Introduction: theory and practice', in Alun Munslow & Robert Rosenstone eds, *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, New York & London, 2004, p.7

¹⁰³ R.G. Collingwood, quoted in Lionel Rubinoff, 'Historicity and Objectivity', *Objectivity, Method and Point of View: Essays in the Philosophy of History*, W.J. Van Der Dussen & Lionel Rubinoff eds, Brill, USA, 1991, p.133

various rituals that surround birth and death, sickness and recovery; and of these rituals and institutions people write histories; but the history of dining is not the history of eating, and the history of death-rituals is not the history of death.¹⁰⁴

Those ‘things that deeply concern human beings’ are fundamental to biography. Richard Holmes likens the importance of social interaction (physical contact and verbal communication) to a handshake across time, an arm wrestle or a ‘coffee-house’ form, both talkative and reflective.¹⁰⁵ ‘Arm wrestle’ is certainly apt as metaphor for taming a vast amount of material, and describing biography as ‘both talkative and reflective’ opens up interesting possibilities for creating a dialogue between biographer and subject.

Many stimulating conversations took place between Joan Kerr and myself in the mid 1990s in her office on the closed-in verandah above the library at COFA in Paddington. Perched high above the ground on spindly wooden posts, her room was like an eyrie, its air of makeshift casualness giving an impression of a seaside house, a Queenslander perhaps.¹⁰⁶ It was also akin to a ship sinking under an unstable cargo of shelves filled to overflowing with books and journals and a desk submerged under piles of papers. Kerr’s treasure trove of art-historical knowledge, wry observations and gleeful laugh had gone by the time I began this biography in earnest. *Now* I would like to ask her: How would *you* have written this? What would you think of *that*? What do *you* think makes a good art historian?

Biography and Art History:

Marcia Pointon defines an art historian as ‘a scholar who is engaged in exploring and analysing the construction and form of artefacts and their functions, both practical and symbolic, in the time they were produced’.¹⁰⁷ More imaginatively, according to John Banville, ‘the chief function of the art historian [is] to synthesise, to concentrate, to *fix* his subject, to pull together into a unity all the

¹⁰⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 1965, p.46

¹⁰⁵ ‘Coffee-house form’ – in the sense of a centre of social interaction, a place to congregate, talk, write, read, entertain one another, or pass the time, as well as a source of light nourishment.

¹⁰⁶ On one occasion, in January 1994, the isolated position of Kerr’s office vis-à-vis the main premises of the Department of Art History and Theory left her exposed to two young intruders who casually marched in and stole her wallet and other possessions. Kerr Archive

¹⁰⁷ Marcia Pointon, ‘How art historians work’, *History of Art: a Students’ Handbook*, Routledge, London and New York, 4th edn, 1997, p.58

disparate strands of character and inspiration and achievement that make up this singular being [the artist]'.¹⁰⁸

An art historian is thus something of a hybrid – not only a scholar who must use words technically to contextualize often difficult or obscure works of art within time, place and culture, but also a writer who must use language creatively to describe, interpret and communicate the essence of such objects to the viewer *and* the reader. An art historian must 'think' with both mind and eye – become 'myriad-sided', as Banville writes in his novel *The Untouchable*, a fictionalised account of the life of art historian Anthony Blunt.

Biography's ambiguous position as neither history nor fiction is often reflected in a book's title, the length of the subtitle perhaps in negative correlation to the author's confidence about the kind of biography it is supposed to be. Biographers of scientists and scholars usually describe their work as intellectual biography, those of writers, poets and playwrights as literary biography, those of artists as 'aesthetic' or 'artistic'. A biography of an art historian must encompass elements of all of these.

It would seem that to justify a biography, an art historian must not only be an exemplary scholar but also be able to reach beyond academe to engage the broader public's imagination, for example Kenneth Clark who became a well-known personality through the medium of television and the series *Civilisation*, or Anthony Blunt who became infamous because of his multifarious lives. Art-historian biographies represent a modest contribution on bookshop and library shelves yet such biographies that do exist often provide, if not actual models for writing about Joan Kerr, then interesting correspondences in their subjects' personalities and ways of working.

Aby Warburg: an Intellectual Biography is a weighty publication by the distinguished art historian Ernst Gombrich who used his considerable knowledge to trace the development of Warburg's ideas on the source of imagery in Italian Renaissance art (Botticelli in particular), and Warburg's struggles to formalise these in writing. In qualifying his biography of Warburg as 'intellectual', Gombrich placed major emphasis on Warburg's scholarship with a minimum of 'biographical scaffolding' to cover Warburg's private life.¹⁰⁹ Gombrich set two aims for this biography, both of which could apply to a project about Joan Kerr. Firstly

¹⁰⁸ John Banville, *The Untouchable*, Picador/Macmillan, London, 1997, p.343

he wanted to introduce the reader to the ideas and the personality of a scholar who exerted considerable influence on the course of art-historical studies through his publications and through his students, many of whom became eminent scholars in their fields. Secondly, Gombrich intended the book to make available an overview of the unpublished writings, projects and drafts that Warburg accumulated during his lifetime to help round off and explain the guiding ideas informing his research.¹¹⁰

Aby Warburg's library continues to be an invaluable, if idiosyncratic research resource for students. Similarly, Joan Kerr's databases for the *Dictionary* and *Heritage* continue to be invaluable research resources rich in unexpected detail.¹¹¹ Like Warburg, Kerr also worked within the context of social history. (She carried out research at the Warburg Institute and both Joan and Jim Kerr attended Gombrich's lectures there.) Warburg focused on minor works of art and imagery from popular sources such as postage stamps, which he considered had 'the misfortune of being regarded as products of the lower faculties of *homo faber* and of being relegated to the basement of the museum for the history of the human mind where, at best, they are shown as creations of technical interest'.¹¹² Kerr wanted to empty those basements so that all creative endeavour would have its place in the main gallery.

Warburg's aim of weaving images into a vast tapestry of symbols has resonances in Kerr's agenda for an all-inclusive Australian art history, one that allows room for so-called 'lesser' arts, which usually means craft-based practices. Warburg, like Roger Fry after him, often referred to art history as a mosaic or a patchwork, yet for Gombrich there was something elusive and unsettling in Warburg's kaleidoscopic array of ideas.¹¹³ Kerr's scholarly interests were similarly eclectic but the many diverse strands in her work do blend into a colourful, street-smart history-wise pageant to show the way in which artists and architects adopt, transmute and add value to the ideas and styles that migrated to Australia's shores.

¹⁰⁹ E.H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: an Intellectual Biography (With a Memoir on the History of the Library by F. Saxl)*, The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1970

¹¹⁰ Gombrich, Introduction, *Aby Warburg*, p.1. Warburg's influence also continues through the Institute that bears his name.

¹¹¹ Now available within the resources of the *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online*, website <<http://www.daaao.org.au>>

¹¹² Warburg, 'Bayonne', *Notebook*, 1927, p.12 quoted in Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, p.265

¹¹³ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, p.148

Warburg was not interested in orthodox art historical approaches and his ideas and methods were often misinterpreted.¹¹⁴ Through her mission to find every possible artist in Australia Kerr was similarly, erroneously, misunderstood as a compiler of lists, akin to Anthony Blunt who was once described as a 'file clerk who knew all the names, dates and places' but nothing else.¹¹⁵

Gombrich shied away from the intimate details of Warburg's personal life (notably his fragile health and psychological vulnerability) by retreating to the conventions of traditional history writing in which there is no trace of the author and very few personal details about the subject's family life. It was safer, Gombrich wrote, to break off

than enter these dangerous labyrinths (of the mind and sexuality) where not only laymen can easily get lost. For even if it were possible to lay bare the unconscious motivations behind Warburg's interest, the real issue would still be to what extent this personal background matters to his reader.¹¹⁶

By the end of the biography however Gombrich was forced to admit that Warburg's personality, with its alternating periods of depression and buoyancy, was too much part of the traditions of art history to permit such a shrugging withdrawal: 'Everybody's interests, after all, have a personal unconscious determinant, and no historian worth his salt is likely to have devoted all his life and energy to a subject in which he was not consciously or unconsciously involved.'¹¹⁷

At the other end of the objective-subjective spectrum lies Virginia Woolf's biography of Roger Fry in which she disregards scholarly constraints (such as footnotes) and imaginatively combines the facts in her possession to portray Fry not only as a scholar striving to articulate his ideas about the relationship between art and craft but also as an artist struggling for recognition.¹¹⁸ *Roger Fry* is a flattering portrait of a man whom Woolf very much admired. However her family's close involvement with him resulted not only in frequent authorial intrusion in the biographical process but also in considerable glossing over of problematic aspects of Fry's personal life. Yet this biography contains many perceptive insights into the man, his milieu and the time in which he lived and although these are far from Joan Kerr's world, there are resonances in

¹¹⁴ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, pp 307-310

¹¹⁵ Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives*, Pan Macmillan Ltd, London, 2001, p.394

¹¹⁶ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, p.305

¹¹⁷ Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*, p.305

personality traits and attitudes to art between these two engaging individuals. Fry was a fearless and outspoken critic of institutions, castigating bodies of trustees as being bound to compromise,¹¹⁹ a position with which Kerr would have found sympathy. He was also a charismatic lecturer, catching and holding the public's imagination. Kerr, like Fry, had a theatrical sense of presentation in her lectures and similarly captivated *her* audiences.

Fry had an insatiable curiosity about all kinds of craft. He took lessons in potting for example, to see how it was done, as Joan Kerr took lessons in painting and embroidery. He was impatient with bad workmanship, as when writing about Reims Cathedral: 'no bombardment can do anything like the damage that the last restoration did'.¹²⁰ Joan Kerr was highly critical of much heritage 'restoration' in Australia: a building should look old when it is old, and not like a primed up cosmetically enhanced travesty of its former self. Both Fry and Kerr were curiously indifferent to physical comfort; neither seemed to notice domestic disorder.

Woolf wrote ideas in her notebooks on how to proceed with the Fry biography. Initially it was to 'find out what his qualities were and proceed to illustrate them by events. To be very free with sequence of facts'. This proved illusory as 'plans for an impressionistic and experimental Life quickly got buried in facts and details'. The writing of Fry's life story became 'an unsatisfactory struggle to "cut loose" from facts, to maintain a vivid portrait against the tyranny of chronology'.¹²¹ Hermione Lee's observation that the writing of *Roger Fry* suffered not only from the 'grind of factuality, but also from too much pressure from [well-meaning] relations and friends', is a salient one for all biographers.¹²² Perhaps the lesson to be learned from Woolf's *Roger Fry*, by a neophyte biographer such as myself, is how to sharpen the senses (eye and ear) to nuances in both the public record and the private memoir. And for all that there were similarities, Roger Fry and Joan Kerr remain unique, each in their time and place.

Two comprehensive biographies of art historians – Meryle Secrest's of Kenneth Clark and Miranda Carter's on Anthony Blunt – are aimed at general audiences rather than art-world professionals, with emphasis on controversial

¹¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: a Biography*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1940

¹¹⁹ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p.113

¹²⁰ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p.202

¹²¹ Hermione Lee, 'Biographer', *Virginia Woolf*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1996, p.708

¹²² Lee, 'Biographer', *Virginia Woolf*, p.709

aspects of their subjects' lives rather than on their scholarship. In *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* Miranda Carter signals in the title that the role of art historian is only one of many facets of this complex individual's double – triple? – life as a gay man, a spy and an art historian.¹²³ For the purposes of Carter's biography, 'art historian' is probably the least important of these lives. Her first sentence – 'From the moment of his exposure as a former Russian spy by the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, in November 1979, Anthony Blunt became a man about whom anything could be said' – sets the scene for a story of betrayal, intrigue and excess.¹²⁴

Carter's book includes discussion of Blunt's achievements in art history, but this serves principally to interpret his motives and actions – particularly his not always successful or satisfying reconciliation of political with personal beliefs – rather than to enlarge upon the significance of Blunt's scholarly contributions. Carter does however provide insights into the establishment of art history as an academic discipline in England and the development of the Courtauld Institute as a major site for its study. In continental Europe in the 1920s, particularly in Austria and Germany, art history was a respected field of scholarship that did not exist in British educational institutions.¹²⁵ In Australia, art history was only recognized at tertiary level in the 1940s with the 1946 appointment of Joseph Burke (1913-1992) as the first *Herald* Chair of Fine Arts at Melbourne University. It was not until the 1960s, when Australian-born art historian Bernard Smith was appointed the first director of the newly-established Power Institute, that fine arts was formally studied at Sydney University.¹²⁶

After Blunt was denounced as a traitor and a spy, the 'evils of academia' was a common theme among intellectuals, revealing a kind of 'embarrassment at their status in the chilly world of Thatcherism'. Carter ties society's flagellation of Blunt to an increasing philistinism in the British population. 'Ten years later,' she writes, 'it would be hard to imagine any academic dispute making front-page news, except as a joke'¹²⁷ – a situation analogous to the Australian government's attitude to culture (especially contemporary art) in the last eight years of Joan Kerr's life. The lives of Anthony Blunt and Joan Kerr could not have been more

¹²³ Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives*, Pan Macmillan Ltd, London, 2001

¹²⁴ Carter, Prologue, *Anthony Blunt*, p.xiii

¹²⁵ Carter, *Anthony Blunt*, p.51

¹²⁶ See Chapter Three for more details of the study of fine arts in Melbourne and Sydney

¹²⁷ Carter, *Anthony Blunt*, p.493

different but there was one important parallel in their careers, namely a privileged relationship with lecturers who became important mentors, in Joan Kerr's case a lifelong respect for Sir Nikolaus Pevsner.¹²⁸

Meryle Secrest begins her biography of Kenneth Clark with a 1978 visit (in the company of Clark and author Margaret Slythe) to Saltwood, the castle in Kent that Clark bought in the 1950s.¹²⁹ The old man was overcome with sadness at the dust and decay they found there. In her poignant description of this event, Secrest sets a scene and a tone consistent with an important theme of her book, namely that fame and scholarly success do not necessarily bring personal happiness. Secrest shows throughout the biography that although Kenneth Clark was publicly successful, his relationship with his wife Jane was in many respects a failure.

Jane Clark's frequent bouts of illness (referred to as 'invalidism') developed into obvious but unacknowledged alcoholism. Although her tantrums and publicly embarrassing behaviour made Clark miserable, her problems made him feel superior: he was a man and could rise above them. In a book such as Secrest's feminism has no place, as it would have had no place in Kenneth Clark's intellectual and social milieu, and yet some kind of feminist approach to 'Jane Clark', similar to work by Ros Pesman and Barbara Caine on Mary Berenson, wife of art historian Bernard Berenson,¹³⁰ or Jean Strouse's work on Alice James, daughter of Henry James,¹³¹ would make fascinating reading.

As a child Kenneth Clark suffered parental neglect, particularly by his mother, and Secrest astutely uses photographs to reveal his bewilderment, indignation and wariness allied to a sense of isolation. Clark's father was indulgent and warm towards his son but through alcohol could turn into a shameful spectacle. Secrest draws an analogy between Clark's father's alcoholism with that of his wife's as a case of history being allowed to repeat itself.¹³² In the dynamics of father-child relationships, I draw a very different analogy between Joan Kerr and *her* father, Bob Lyndon. He was athletic with a love of sport and a high regard for sporting people and did not understand Eleanor Joan, a bookish sickly child who suffered

¹²⁸ 'Talking Heads', *Art Club Newsletter*, No.3, February 1986, based on a questionnaire distributed to all lecturers and tutors

¹²⁹ Meryle Secrest, *Kenneth Clark: a Biography*, Fromm International Publishing Corporation, New York, 1986, p.xv

¹³⁰ Presented in a joint paper at the *Transnational Lives* Conference, Humanities Research Centre ANU, July 2006

¹³¹ Jean Strouse, 'Alice James: a family romance', p.92

frequent and serious bouts of asthma. Ironically, her father's opinion that this illness would be a serious drawback to marriage gave her the chance to attend university where she met, and married, an athlete who had been successful at national-level rowing competition, one whom her father greatly admired.

Clark had been influenced by Aby Warburg's theory that paintings spoke in symbols and that the purpose of research was to put them into historical perspective. He was also influenced by Roger Fry's teaching that art was about the union of form and matter.¹³³ The flaw in Fry's reasoning was, Clark believed, that it concentrated only on form and he set out to work on the problem before abandoning it in 1971. Perhaps he had set himself an impossible task.¹³⁴ Would Joan Kerr's dream of rewriting Australian art history also have been an 'impossible task'?

Although Joseph Burke, Franz Philipp, Ursula Hoff, and later Bernard Smith, are the acknowledged pioneers of the academic study of art history in Australia, Ethel Anderson and Sydney Ure Smith were both dedicated to Australian art and its history well before there were any formal university courses in the discipline. Bethia Foott's memoir of Ethel Anderson is not so much a critical look at the life and work of a woman who was an enthusiastic and intelligent champion of Australian artists in the middle decades of the 20th century as it is a fond portrait by a dutiful and loving daughter.¹³⁵ Yet it reveals many interesting similarities in the personalities of Joan Kerr and Ethel Anderson. Both women were quite uninterested in domestic affairs, especially when matters of art and scholarship were pressing, and both wanted to share their knowledge as widely as possible, oblivious to the fact that other people might not have the same enthusiasm – and energy – as they for esoteric and little known aspects of art history.

In her book on Sydney Ure Smith, Nancy Underhill provides an overview of Australian art history, from the time of Federation to the first colour reproductions of artworks published by Ure Smith in *Art in Australia* in 1916, and his continuing commitment to Australian art and its institutions until his death in 1949. A major theme of Underhill's work is that as cultures evolve so too does the process of their interpretation. The book is therefore as much about the dynamics of

¹³² Secrest, *Kenneth Clark*, pp 35, 228-255

¹³³ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design*, New American Library, New York, 1974 (first published in 1920)

¹³⁴ Secrest, *Kenneth Clark*, p.209

¹³⁵ Bethia Foott, *Ethel and the Governors' General. A Biography of Ethel Anderson (1883-1958) and Brigadier-General A.T. Anderson (1868-1949)*, Rainforest Publishing, 1992

Australian art history as it is a biography of Sydney Ure Smith.¹³⁶ It is interesting to note that Joan Kerr was one of the few people to appreciate this dense, awkward book. Although she clashed on occasions with Underhill,¹³⁷ Kerr would have had sympathy with her ideas.

Andrew Riemer's *Hughes*, is an extended essay that explores important formative influences from school days on art critic Robert Hughes' character, career path and attitudes to the visual arts. Riemer has opted for a limited 'life' in service to a specific theme, namely that Hughes' ambition to locate spiritual and metaphysical values in contemporary art and society was profoundly influenced by his rigorous Jesuit education with its emphasis on the classics.¹³⁸ Similarly, it would seem that the Anglican values instilled into Joan Kerr during her school years at Somerville House in Brisbane had some influence on the way she conducted her life and her work.

Another solution to the portrayal of a life could be to move squarely into fiction, as for example John Banville's *The Untouchable*, based on the Anthony Blunt 'story',¹³⁹ or Iain Pears' novel *The Portrait* that examines a love-hate relationship between a prominent artist and his chief critic.¹⁴⁰ While fiction allows authors to enter into their characters' innermost thoughts in a way not possible in conventional biography, this approach would not do justice to Joan Kerr's rigorous scholarship and dedication to forensic (art)historical detail. She did not live in an imagined world but was very much grounded in a public space inhabited by real scholars, artists and architects.

3. Public Intellectual

Kerr was a woman of many parts: daughter, wife, mother and friend as well as an academic. She was also a feisty intellectual who was often in the public eye. In Joanna Mendelssohn's opinion, 'Joan Kerr was the model of a public intellectual whose writing can be found in the mainstream media combating the bombast of

¹³⁶ Nancy Underhill, *Making Australian Art 1916-49. Sydney Ure Smith, Patron and Publisher*, Oxford University Press, 1991, pp 6-7

¹³⁷ NLA Interview, p.45

¹³⁸ John Conomos, review of *Hughes* by Andrew Riemer, *Art Monthly Australia*, April 2002, pp 34-35

¹³⁹ John Banville, *The Untouchable*, Picador/Macmillan Publishers, London, 1997

¹⁴⁰ Iain Pears, *The Portrait*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 2005

the self important, in the pages of scholarly art journals, and in her books'.¹⁴¹ Not only is it therefore salutary to define 'public intellectual' but also to consider issues that come to the fore when writing the biography of individuals in the spotlight. Richard Holmes' four criteria – ethics, authenticity, celebrity and empathy – provide a useful place to start.¹⁴²

Ethics:

Ethics encompasses the varieties of thinking that guide human conduct on an individual and a social level. Among particular concerns are the rightness and wrongness of actions, the virtue or vice of the motives which prompt them and the goodness or badness of the consequences to which they give rise.¹⁴³

In beginning with Joan Kerr's 'ethics', I quote Peter Watts:

In the sometimes-spiteful world of art history and criticism, and heritage, Joan stood out as a person with immense integrity. She always played the issue, never the person.

Joan was politically catholic. She supported an individual and their cause – especially of an underdog – never a party...She used her huge intellect for the public good. She worked tirelessly for many organizations. She fought for any cause she believed in – despite any personal consequences for herself. She said what she thought was right and she was always prepared to take more radical action if she thought it appropriate.¹⁴⁴

Kerr's upbringing was not particularly strict but it was defined by the dominant culture of the mid 20th century, one in which duty to God (Church of England), Queen (Elizabeth II) and country (more often than not represented by Sir Robert Menzies as prime minister) was all-important. This elicits the question of whether an ethical sensibility is an innate or a learned response. Steven Pinker maintains that ethical behaviour is connected to a sixth, a moral, sense with an evolutionary history and neurobiological foundations.¹⁴⁵

The themes suggested in a 2008 *Sydney Morning Herald* article – the avoidance of harm, the promotion of fairness and community (group) loyalty, deference to legitimate authority and a very interesting take on purity – have, for

¹⁴¹ Joanna Mendelssohn, Joan Kerr (Eleanor Joan Lyndon)', *cofa*, issue 10, 2004

¹⁴² Holmes, 'Inventing the truth', p.17

¹⁴³ *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Alan Bullock, Oliver Stallybrass & Stephen Trombley eds, 2nd edn, Fontana Press, London, 1988, p.285

¹⁴⁴ Peter Watts, Funeral oration for Joan Kerr, 1 March 2004, p.6

¹⁴⁵ Steven Pinker, 'Goodness, gracious me: there is scientific evidence that evolution has endowed us with ethical impulses', Spectrum, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2-3 February, 2008, p.26

Pinker, deep evolutionary roots. How these moral spheres are ranked in importance, and which is called upon to moralise which area of social life, may depend on a particular culture but Pinker argues that all human beings are born with a rudimentary moral sense and build on it with a mode of moral reasoning that forces us to some conclusions but not others. In many situations, our moral sense tells us that even when our adversaries' agenda is most baffling, they may not be amoral psychopaths but in the throes of a moral mind-set.¹⁴⁶

Whether supporting academic staff against unfair salary and promotion conditions or speaking out against a flawed interpretation of John Power's will, Joan Kerr had a strong sense of fair play and a keen eye for detecting subterfuge and expediency. She honoured her duty towards others and showed great generosity of spirit in sharing information and in passing on opportunities for employment in the fields of art and architectural history to her postgraduate students. However Kerr's relationships with her peers in the field of Australian art history were often stormy and perhaps, unlike Pinker's optimism that however baffling, we recognize other people's moral mind-sets 'that appear to them to be every bit as mandatory and universal as ours does to us', Kerr could not recognize that the other person was 'acting from moral rather than venal reasons'¹⁴⁷ and find common ground.

Finding that common ground – 'playing the issue not the person' – also applies to the responsibilities of the biographer. According to Holmes, the ethics of research into another person's life have always been questionable. 'By what right, by what contract?' he asks, 'does a biographer enter into another's zone of activity and privacy? Even an actual legal contract with a dead author's estate does not necessarily cover this issue'. The intrusive nature of biography often sees the biographer cast in the villain's role – as a 'pursuing hound', a 'publishing scoundrel' or in James Joyce's opinion, a 'biografiend' – with the practice of biography adding 'a new Terror to Death'. Some biographies, such as those of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, have ventured into very slippery ethical terrain.¹⁴⁸

For Leon Edel, 'ethics' not only applies to the respect owed the biographical subject but also to the degree of confidence or distrust it creates in the reader.¹⁴⁹ Malcolm Knox also acknowledges the reader's claim on the author's integrity: 'at

¹⁴⁶ Pinker 'Goodness, gracious me', p.27

¹⁴⁷ Pinker 'Goodness, gracious me', p.27

¹⁴⁸ Holmes, 'Biography: inventing the truth', p.17

¹⁴⁹ Edel, 'Biography and the science of man', p.10

its baldest, this is the distinction between non-fiction and the novel. In non-fiction, your reader assumes you are telling the literal truth, unless you inform her otherwise'.¹⁵⁰

Authorial integrity is also at stake in the proper conduct of interviews with people who knew the person at the centre of the biography. For this thesis, permission was required from the University of New South Wales' Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel. My application was successful and interviews (face-to-face, by telephone and by email correspondence) were conducted with members of Kerr's family as well as with friends and colleagues, although perhaps not as many as initially envisaged. There are so many people who knew Joan Kerr that had I decided to track down every one of them, the project would have become a never-ending quest, much like Joan Kerr's endeavours to track down all art works ever produced in Australia and every detail about their production. In spite of potential difficulties with interviewees – refusal, antipathy, a change of heart or a change of opinion – all those who responded did so with warmth and enthusiasm.

According to Jacqueline Kent, every biography holds at least three very different but closely-linked stories: firstly the story of a person's life as told on the page; then just beyond this, the story residing in the bits left over – 'all those awkward jagged pieces of raw or irrelevant data that have been eliminated', some sooner than others, regrettably, later, often 'taken out at the last minute after much thought'. In the third instance, although not directly part of the narrative, there are the experiences and opinions of people whose own life stories are woven into the narrative.¹⁵¹ This raises the possibility of a too close dependence on the words of friends, family and colleagues. As John Rickard writes in a review of Anthony Meredith and Paul Harris', *Malcolm Williamson: a Mischievous Muse*, large indented slabs of interviews may be useful and entertaining but 'they can also be repetitive, and there is a danger of the narrative voice being drowned in the din of quotation'.¹⁵² Initially there was a temptation to quote at length from Jim

¹⁵⁰ Malcolm Knox, 'Should I... Or shouldn't I?', *Australian Author*, December, 2005, p.11

¹⁵¹ Jacqueline Kent, 'The third element in biography', *Australian Book Review*, April 2008, p.16. Kent is speaking about her book *An Exacting Heart: the Story of Hephzibah Menuhin*, Viking, Penguin Australia, 2008

¹⁵² John Rickard, 'Her Majesty's grand eccentric', *Australian Book Review*, April 2008. (A review of Anthony Meredith and Paul Harris, *Malcolm Williamson: a Mischievous Muse*, Omnibus Press (Music Sales Ltd), London, 2007, p.19

Kerr's memoir *Pictorial Biography*, but the words and phrases in it are his – neither Joan Kerr's nor mine.¹⁵³

Another problem detected by Kent in her interviews with people who knew Hephzibah Menuhin, was a strong feeling of ownership. Kent argues that this 'probably says something about celebrity – people are often eager to claim a well-known or glamorous person as a friend'. Hephzibah's 'warmth of manner, candour and apparent guilelessness often seduced people into thinking they were closer to her than they really were'.¹⁵⁴ Across *her* broad network of acquaintances Joan Kerr was genuinely enthusiastic towards people and their ideas and ambitions yet I sense the same element of performance in her nature as there was in Menuhin's.

Integral to the interview process is the matter of appropriate questions to ask. As Hilary Spurling writes: 'Biography, if it can be said to be an art at all, seems to me in the first place an art of formulating the right questions, and asking them energetically enough.'¹⁵⁵ There is also the matter of keeping interviews on track and the need to restrain some interviewees from talking more about themselves than the subject of the biography. Nick Moore provides checklists for constructing questionnaires and processing the information acquired as well as ideas on how to establish the objectives of the research, including moral issues such as who will be affected by the project and who will benefit from it.¹⁵⁶ While Moore's book is aimed at sociologists, the methods outlined are of benefit to all researchers for whom people and their memories of the past are primary sources of information. David Sylvester's interviews with the British artist Francis Bacon have long been considered models of the genre. Bacon was a fascinating but difficult artist whose often-turbulent personal life should have made the interviewer's task a problematic one yet Sylvester was able to draw from his talks with Bacon an insightful portrait of the man, the artist and his confronting images.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Jim Kerr provided the following insight into the writing of *Pictorial Biography*:

...It was a purely personal account, Joan's brief to me being: 'this is your story, not mine – you write it the way you want', but she did make corrections and adjustments up to the middle of p.53 and we discussed the balance on the content. *Comment on Joan Kerr in Context: A Biography, prepared for Susan Margaret Steggall by James Semple Kerr*, 17 May 2009, p.3

¹⁵⁴ Jacqueline Kent, 'The third element in biography', p.16

¹⁵⁵ Hilary Spurling, 'Neither morbid nor ordinary', p.120

¹⁵⁶ Nick Moore, *How to Do Research*, The Library Association Pty Ltd, London, 2nd edn, 1987

¹⁵⁷ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon: 1962-1979*, Thames & Hudson, United Kingdom, 1975

The film version of Raymond Gaita's memoir *Romulus, My Father* (1999), the story of a migrant family struggling to cohere in the rural Australia of the 1950s, provides a thoughtful example of dealing with sensitive material. As Nick Prescott writes, Gaita's book was

significant not simply because it was a strikingly revealing personal narrative written by a renowned philosopher, but because it managed to present a story that contained large doses of personal tragedy without rendering the experience of reading it either falsely uplifting or overwhelmingly depressing.¹⁵⁸

Unlike the biographer (Gaita) who wrote the book after his father's death, the director (Australian actor Richard Roxburgh) and the author of the screenplay (British poet Nick Drake) had to deal with a very-much-alive author, which made the dramatization of such intensely personal material 'fraught with risk', carrying a 'great weight of responsibility'.¹⁵⁹ Drake perceptively describes the demands of competing agendas:

When I'd written a first draft, I came out to stay with Rai [Gaita] in the countryside, and he took me around the places that I'd actually written about second-hand...and we ended up at the Maryborough graveyard, on a very hot afternoon, standing at the graves of the three characters who I was trying to write into a screenplay. And I tell you, it's not the same as adapting a novel when you have stood at the graves of the characters you're writing; you have a sense of responsibility towards the truth of their souls, if you like, and their lives, and I *really* like that. I think it brings on all of us a responsibility to be truthful.¹⁶⁰

Although not physically 'standing at the grave', I have spent many hours working on Joan Kerr's papers in the same rooms in which she wrote them. 39 Murdoch Street Cremorne (Sydney) was Joan Kerr's home for many years. Jim Kerr still lives there. It is a man's place now, perhaps a little shabbier than when I visited in 2001 and 2002. In her study, the books are still on the shelves in the order in which she left them; her artworks are on the walls. Her memory lingers in every room. Hermione Lee said she felt like 'a biographer, a tourist and an intruder' when she was standing in the garden of Talland House (Woolf's home in St Ives, Cornwall), although she did allow herself to suppose that she was seeing

¹⁵⁸ Nick Prescott, 'Note-perfect paeon', *Australian Book Review*, July/August 2007, p.24

¹⁵⁹ Prescott, 'Note-perfect paeon', p.24

¹⁶⁰ Prescott, 'Note-perfect paeon', p.24

something of what Woolf saw, Lee's view 'overlay[ing] with, just touch[ing], hers'.¹⁶¹

Sitting at the table in the back room of the Kerrs' home, surrounded by box files and gazing out at the back garden that was once Joan Kerr's pride and joy, I too feel something of an intruder. I also feel a mix of emotions: sadness for a life cut short and nostalgia for the lively and challenging art history Kerr defended; frustration too that I will never know what she might yet have achieved.

Authenticity:

A discussion of authenticity could start with the problematic nature of sources, which by their very (human) nature are inherently unreliable. Memory is fallible, memoirs are almost inevitably biased and letters are pitched to their recipients. Private diaries might record dates and places of particular activities with accuracy but they have long been recognized as literary forms of self-invention rather than truthful records of private feelings. Previous or 'authorised' biographies often contain fabrications, however well intentioned, that gloss over rough patches and romanticise aspects of a person's life.¹⁶²

When researching the life of Georgiana McCrae, Brenda Niall found that Hugh McCrae had done a great deal of embellishment and 'some strategic pruning' when editing his grandmother's journals for publication. 'Hugh McCrae had not been editing in the sense in which we understand it,' Niall claims, 'he had been re-creating his grandparents'.¹⁶³ His biography was taken on trust as the authentic version of Georgiana's life not only by her descendants but also by distinguished historians who used it as a primary source without checking the originals. Hugh McCrae's text was produced for Angus & Robertson in 1934 to coincide with the celebration of one hundred years of settlement in Victoria so it is understandable he wanted to present Georgiana as a colonial heroine. As indeed she was, but she was a much more complex human being than her grandson's portrait of her. Niall would like to think that her own biography 'wins the argument' but concedes that McCrae's version is so firmly lodged in public memory that it will probably outlive her more scholarly but less romantic account.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ Hermione Lee, 'Biographer', *Virginia Woolf*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1996, pp 771-772

¹⁶² Holmes, 'Inventing the truth', p.17

¹⁶³ Niall, *Walking upon Ashes*, pp 18-19

¹⁶⁴ Niall, *Walking upon Ashes*, p.20

In the interviews I conducted, each family member, friend or colleague remembered Joan Kerr in a singular, insightful way. Yet sometimes these same people were, collectively, caught up in a kind of euphoria, as occurred at the bittersweet farewell dinner for Kerr at Government House in June 2003 where superlatives were the order of the evening – not only in the formal speeches but also in the informal entries in the guest book. While it is tempting to go with this flow in the spirit of presenting Joan Kerr in the best possible light, hagiography serves no one well and the biographer has a duty of care to do the most authentic job possible.¹⁶⁵

Authenticity as a quality in a human being is a nebulous attribute. Famously, in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, 'authenticity' is defined as the coincidence of the consciousness of the subject (*pour-soi*) with its own objective reality (*en soi*) – an interpretation linked to the philosophy of existentialism, at several removes from actual human behaviour.¹⁶⁶ An understanding of authenticity as embodying qualities of originality, reliability and steadfastness evokes a more down-to-earth approach to describing Joan Kerr's *modus operandi*. She put a high value on her work and often reminded interviewers that her texts on Edmund Blacket and colonial women's sketchbooks were the first of their kind.¹⁶⁷ She was adamant that Australians see themselves as an autonomous cultural force, independent of British antecedents and American influences. She was an authentically local product.

Kerr spent part of the 1960s overseas, and returned to England for several years in the 1970s yet she 'came back', as James Elder notes in an interview in 1999. 'Yes I was part of that generation, the expatriate mob,' she told him. 'You discovered your interest in your country while away from it. We did think about staying away for a while and it was important and I am really pleased that we both came back.'¹⁶⁸ So perhaps there are elements of expatriate pride and bemused tolerance in Kerr's attitude to her homeland. Deborah Bird Rose has explored the ambivalent attitude of white Australians towards their country, particularly in relation to its colonial beginnings.¹⁶⁹ In British imperial imagery,

¹⁶⁵ Holmes, 'Inventing the truth', p.17

¹⁶⁶ *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, p.60

¹⁶⁷ Joan Kerr, Annotated CV, 2003

¹⁶⁸ James Elder, 'The Joan Kerr Phenomenon', *Reflections*, Autumn 1999, pp 17-18

¹⁶⁹ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Rupture and the ethics of care in colonised space', in *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, Tim Bonyhady & Tom Griffiths eds, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp 190-215

Rose writes, England was mapped as Home (the north, the socio-economic zero-point), and Australia as colony (south, producer of primary material but derivative culture).¹⁷⁰ Kerr however found pragmatism rather than pastiche in the process whereby Australian art and architecture, although derived from European sources, has been distinctively transformed by country and culture. Rather than adhere to the bourgeois sentiment that the source of value in the world emerged solely from overseas, Kerr believed the very opposite. 'The centre of the world,' she once said, 'is wherever we decide we are standing'.¹⁷¹

Just as the convicts subverted and rejected old-world hierarchies such as the arrogance of the 'high born' and 'the subservience of the lowly', scoffing at pretension and believing that 'Jack was as good as his master',¹⁷² so Joan Kerr saw all creative endeavour as equally valuable contributions to the recording of Australia's art history. Kerr's vision for Australia's cultural heritage remained steadfast: it was unique, authentic, and should be respected as such. It was this belief that often led her into public debate.

Celebrity:

Richard Holmes again: 'Because biographers are always drawn towards the famous, the glamorous and the notorious, it [biography] is pulled, perhaps unnaturally out of the orbit of the ordinary and the average.'¹⁷³ This may be inevitable given humankind's penchant for notoriety yet authenticity and celebrity make uneasy bedfellows in this age of spin. Adrian Mitchell maintains that a person does not become great until he or she has the 'requisite Life'. 'The conferring of greatness, and the entering into the register of History,' he writes, 'is a well-orchestrated procedure, however it happened, and still happens, whether self-written, ghost-written, over-written'.¹⁷⁴ Mitchell himself is more concerned about the not-so-great. 'What about those interesting people who are not controllers, nor even constituents, of what we call History?' he asks. 'And what if the people who do manage to steal the limelight are not exactly interesting when you get to meet them or read them?' He aired these ideas during a panel

¹⁷⁰ Rose, 'Rupture and the ethics of care in colonised space', pp 203-204

¹⁷¹ Rose, 'Rupture and the ethics of care in colonized space', p.206; Joan Kerr, 'Art begins at Bouliá', p.20

¹⁷² Rose, 'Rupture and the ethics of care in colonized space', p.205

¹⁷³ Holmes, 'Inventing the truth', p.18

¹⁷⁴ Adrian Mitchell, 'Personal histories: a curious dichotomy', *Newswrite*, Issue 177, March 2008, p.7

discussion at a Sydney Writers' Festival. Like many of the writers present, he had a new book to promote (a history of the citizens of Adelaide) so one could suspect he geared his discussion of fame, public recognition and the dubious quality of many biographies of those who achieve such, to a call for the celebration of ordinary lives as well as the day-to-day existence of those who 'achieved valiant things on the national and international stage'. Mitchell is more interested in who these people are 'when they are not sporting a baggy green cap or a parliamentary pension':

They got our attention when they were doing what they were paid to do, and we listened when they spoke with the sanction of their position, their 'office'. But the tallying up after that is all over is of rapidly diminishing concern. Would we have paid any attention to them if they had been a nobody?¹⁷⁵

Here Mitchell is making a point – or rather twisting a point – to justify the real reason for his article which was to privilege the 'territorial divide between that which gets written for, by, and about the man or woman of office, and the way the "unofficial" subject struggles to achieve a voice, and through it, public attention'. Yet most of us are interested in people who 'make it', 'do it', and why and how *they* arrive at such accomplishment, and not someone else. As Inga Clendinnen writes, 'It is the world-makers we want, and we are desperate to know how they do it'.¹⁷⁶ As readers, we are curious to know more about such people and expect their biographies to illuminate the achievements for which they are remembered.¹⁷⁷ However biographers sometimes feel the need to justify their efforts by adding what Skidelsky calls 'unwarranted complexity', seeing achievements as 'something else displaced' and privileging this even though the achievement furnishes the actual 'claim to fame' of the biographical subject. One solution is to relate achievement to tradition – the 'intellectual present' in which the subject thought, wrote and acted. Another approach is to substitute the democratic notion of 'fulfilment' for the aristocratic notion of 'achievement' as the criterion of biographical worth.¹⁷⁸ I would argue that rather than 'aristocratic', the process of relating achievement to Skidelsky's intellectual present, is a way of *democratising* the base of biography.

¹⁷⁵ Mitchell, 'Personal histories: a curious dichotomy', p.7

¹⁷⁶ Inga Clendinnen, 'Secret meeting, secret lives' (1997) reproduced in *Agamemnon's Kiss*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2006, p.186

¹⁷⁷ Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', p.2

¹⁷⁸ Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', pp 12-16

Joan Kerr was a maker, or rather a re-maker, of Australia's cultural world in her many successful attempts to unearth not only every fact about a particular artwork but also pretty well every artwork created in Australia – at least for the first one hundred and fifty years of white settlement. She often worked through her ideas by mounting exhibitions and welcomed interviews with both specialist journals and commercial magazines in the interests of publicising her projects. Kerr's collaboration with James Broadbent on the exhibition *Colonial Gothick: the Gothic Revival in New South Wales 1800-1850* was, according to Bernard Smith, 'perhaps the first comprehensive attempt to define the taste of a period of Australian history'.¹⁷⁹ In 1983 Kerr curated an exhibition on the life and work of Edmund Blacket (1817-1883). This was also a great success and reinforced her reputation as a serious scholar with a popular touch.¹⁸⁰

Joan Kerr achieved a great deal in her career, much of it in the public eye, although describing her as a 'celebrity' – someone who commands a very high degree of media attention – is perhaps an exaggeration for any Antipodean academic. Yet in the 1980s and 90s, other than Bernard Smith (chiefly because of his books) Kerr was the face of Australian art history.¹⁸¹ She was highly regarded within organizations such as the National Trust and Historic Houses Trust, as well as among antiquarians and art dealers, and whenever such people were planning curatorial projects, or requiring exhibitions to be opened, Joan Kerr was the first person contacted.

David Carter defines a public intellectual as someone who is 'distinguished from the academic specialist...by his or her ability to step outside a narrow,

¹⁷⁹ Bernard Smith, *Proceedings*, Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1982-83

¹⁸⁰ Interviews with Dinah Dysart, January 2007 and Heather Johnson, August 2006. The Edmund Blacket exhibition went on to win the 1983 Museums Australia Best Exhibition Award. Kerr consolidated this with the publication of *Edmund Thomas Blacket (1817-1883): Our Great Victorian Architect*, National Trust, Sydney, 1983, which, according to an annotation in her CV of 2003, was still the only published *catalogue raisonné* for an Australian architect'. Nick Vine Hall, Blacket's grandson, published his own commemorative book *My Name is Blacket*, in *The North Shore Times*, 9 March, 1983, p.17

¹⁸¹ Bernard Smith, *Place, Taste and Tradition: a Study of Australian Art since 1788*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1945 (2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979); *European Vision in the South Pacific, 1768-1850: a Study in the History of Art and Ideas*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1960 (3rd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989); *Australian Painting 1788-1970*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1971; *Australian Painting, 1788-1990* / B Smith; with the three additional chapters on Australian painting since 1970 by Terry Smith; 3rd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1991

professional field and address issues of general cultural concern'.¹⁸² According to Inga Clendinnen, one part of the public intellectual's ill-defined job is to examine complex technical analyses, try to classify muddled intentions and actions under larger concepts to render them apt for moral judgment, and report them to the general public. This is the responsibility of independent-minded scholars since, 'we can't expect journalists to do that. Their concern is with the lightning-flash "now". We can't expect the researchers to do it, either. They have to report to their departmental employers, or to their peers, so their work will typically need translation for a general readership'.¹⁸³

In 'speaking his mind', Robert Dessaix describes a public intellectual as:

an independent thinker and performer who, working from some core of expertise, takes as his or her subject issues related to the public good (particularly issues of social justice) and, by the grace of the media and an outstanding ability to communicate with many publics (even society as a whole), has the attention of a considerable segment of educated Australia.¹⁸⁴

If Joan Kerr fulfilled Clendinnen and Dessaix's requirements of a public intellectual – the ability to translate complex and/or technical issues into non-specialist terms and to communicate with many different sections of society – she excelled in a third, that is, to have the courage, or foolhardiness, to put her ideas and opinions on the line.

Humphrey McQueen quotes literary critic and law professor Stanley Fish who, in 1995, advised his literary colleagues that if they wanted 'to send a message that will be heard beyond the academy, get out of it'.¹⁸⁵ Although Joan Kerr remained within the 'academy' for most of her working life, she never hesitated to attack academic institutions whenever she thought it necessary and often paid the penalty for being independent in a culture in which subservience to the institution is the norm. McQueen points out that academics are public servants, reliant upon the nation's taxes or profits for their salaries and research funds in

¹⁸² David Carter, 'Critics, writers, intellectuals: Australian literature and its criticism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*, Elizabeth Webby ed, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & Melbourne, 2000, pp 258-293

¹⁸³ In this instance anthropological/scholarly analyses of alcohol abuse and petrol sniffing in the *Bringing Them Home* report. Inga Clendinnen, 'Plenty humbug', reproduced in *Agamemnon's Kiss*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2006, pp 145-146

¹⁸⁴ Robert Dessaix, *Speaking Their Minds: Intellectuals and the Public Culture in Australia*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1998, p.29

¹⁸⁵ Humphrey McQueen, 'Professions of power', in *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, Tim Bonyhady & Tom Griffiths eds, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, p.216

return for training future professionals. This means that although not all intellectuals are academics, all academics are public intellectuals in that they are employed to service corporations and governments.¹⁸⁶

Intellectuals are often accused of being critics of the system on which their existence as a group depends, yet they have the same (or perhaps greater, because of their training) duty as any other citizen to go public and perhaps a responsibility to go public *more often* than other citizens in return for advantage.¹⁸⁷ Joan Kerr would have concurred with this. Academics, she once said, had special responsibilities even though their haven (tenure) was weak and increasingly insecure. Academics needed to recognize their obligations in return for privileges. At the top of the list was the duty to speak out.¹⁸⁸

‘Speaking out’ yes, but to whom? McQueen quotes Edward Said’s opinion that ‘telling’ is the preserve of the expert as social regulator who possesses a right to speak directly to the ruling circles. Jean-Paul Sartre’s intellectuals are characterised by addressing as many ordinary citizens as possible.¹⁸⁹ An example of the latter is the Australian magazine *Dissent*, a forum, according to its co-editor Lesley Vick, for serious analysis of public policy issues in plain and accessible language. ‘To be an effective public intellectual something more than either uncritical acceptance or simple disagreement is required,’ Vick says.¹⁹⁰ I would argue that this definition applies to Joan Kerr as someone who rarely accepted matters at face value and never used impenetrable jargon to impress her audiences.

Empathy:

The question of why a biographer is drawn to a particular subject – not in the sense of some sort of telepathic access to the subject’s mind but a positive, caring interest in that person’s views and opinions, aims and ambitions – accords with Zinsser’s definition of biography as ‘the interpretation of one mind by another, the attempt to understand and assess the values of one who lived in the

¹⁸⁶ McQueen, ‘Professions of Power’, pp 217-219

¹⁸⁷ McQueen, ‘Professions of Power’, pp 233-234

¹⁸⁸ Joan Kerr, ‘Architectural history and practice in Australia’, Paper presented at the combined sessions of the Annual Conferences of the Society of Architectural Historians (ANZ) and the Art Association of Australia, Melbourne University, May 1986, (published in *Transition* 21, September 1987, pp 35-38), p.11

¹⁸⁹ McQueen, ‘Professions of Power’, p.239

¹⁹⁰ Email from Lesley Vick, 27 February 2008

past, by one who lives in the present'.¹⁹¹ This is not such a recent idea. In the 1920s, Harold Nicolson studied the need to balance empathy and esteem with realism in biography. In so doing he prefigured techniques and goals pertinent to the modern practice of personality assessment.¹⁹²

On a technical level, empathy as a research tool is usually associated with the method for interpreting historical evidence espoused by British historian R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943). In *The Idea of History* (1936), Collingwood described the state of being in touch with the thoughts and situation of the historical agent as 're-enacting' the past.¹⁹³ This concept had its basis in hermeneutics, a discipline which was developed by post-Reformation Protestants to interpret the Bible and which evolved over the 19th century to signify an author's likely intention through analysis of grammatical and psychological elements. This process of interpretation was extended by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) to include the drawing of analogies between the likely intentions of the author of a text and the scholar's own experiences (influenced by contemporaneous social attitudes and conventions) as interpreter of that text.¹⁹⁴

Joan Kerr would have agreed with Collingwood's view that it is the task of historians to re-enact the past in their minds. As a social historian she immersed herself totally in any particular period of Australia's cultural heritage on which she was working and brought to life long-ago times and places – a photographer in colonial Sydney or the world of 19th-century women painters – with a vividness and an energy that caught the imagination of those who heard her speak or who read her articles. In 1984 Kerr told a *Vogue Living* journalist that she aimed to make 'historical figures and acquaintances, their eccentricities and achievements as vibrantly alive as if they, too, sat chatting in the comfortable chaos of a university office'.¹⁹⁵ She always presented the scene of an artwork or a building's creation much as a *tableau vivant*. In this her working practice was similar to that of a much-admired historian colleague, Greg Denning (1931-2008), for whom

¹⁹¹ Zinsser, 'Afterword', p.205

¹⁹² Kenneth Craik, 'Assessing the personalities of historical figures', in William McKinley Runyan, *Psychology and Historical Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, p.200

¹⁹³ Alun Munslow, 'Glossary', in Alun Munslow & Robert Rosenstone eds, *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, New York & London, 2004, pp 181-182

¹⁹⁴ Munslow, 'Glossary', p.182

¹⁹⁵ Deborah Bartlett, 'Living interview: culture with Kerr', *Vogue Living*, August 1984, reproduced in *Documents*, pp 145-146

history was a performative art:

History – the transformation of a past, no matter how recent a past, into words or paint or dance or play – is always a performance. An everyday performance as we present our selective narratives about what has happened at the kitchen table, to the courts, to the taxman, at the graveside. A quite staged performance when we present it to our examiners, to the collegiality of our disciplines.¹⁹⁶

Performance is a gamble, Denning argues, in that it is always in front of an audience, however small. It is a two-way process. Tom Griffiths describes Denning's performances as taking into account not just literary abilities, but details such as presence, posture, voice and capacity to catch the rhythm of the writing – 'the sorts of things that might be relevant to radio, TV, lecture hall, interview appearances and the ability to perform a piece in a set time'.¹⁹⁷ Joan Kerr always confronted with relish the problem of how to create a narrative that matched the excitement of her discoveries and used all of the above techniques in developing the range and style of her presentations.

Some academics have tried to confine Kerr within post-modern boundaries but this is not the whole story and she would not have been satisfied with that epithet. She had a way of making it acceptable to pursue interests that were not mainstream, to put forward ideas that were personal and, by transforming art history into theatre, to believe you could change stale outmoded beliefs that exclude, as Peers writes, 'the art of the ordinary, the unfashionable, the devalued excluded by race or gender, the "non-A-list"'.¹⁹⁸

Denning too was critical of compartmentalising knowledge. If you give something a name, he says, 'someone will create an association, a journal, and department, and will begin to put boundaries about it'.¹⁹⁹ It is this territoriality in disciplines and departments that smothers the creative imagination – something that many historians find troublesome anyway, since imagination is often equated with fantasy. Not for Denning. 'Imagination,' he says, 'is taking the cliché out of something that has been said so many times before. Imagination is finding a metaphor that someone will see, a word that someone will read...Imagination is not breaking the rules of scholarship but taking the function of those rules and

¹⁹⁶ Greg Denning, 'Voyaging "Ethnoggging" in Hawai'i (1967)', *Dialogue*, 2/2002, Academy of the Social Sciences 2002, p.15

¹⁹⁷ Tom Griffiths, 'Professor Denning's exercises', *Dialogue*, 2/2002, Academy of the Social Sciences 2002, p.27

¹⁹⁸ Juliet Peers, 'Unfinished business', p.102

¹⁹⁹ Greg Denning, 'Voyaging "Ethnoggging" in Hawai'i (1967)', p.14

making them fly'.²⁰⁰

Iain McCalman describes how Dening, unlike many academics who have become blasé about their discipline (particularly historians), 'excites students to make the subject fresh for themselves...to struggle to overthrow its orthodoxies, as every generation must'.²⁰¹ Likewise, Kerr inspired her students to push boundaries in their work. She did not ask anything of them that she was not willing to do herself. She was always prepared to take risks and to experiment, her 'constant rigour, good advice and generosity of spirit' inspiring a 'whole generation of students'.²⁰² Many of them wrote to Kerr when they left university in appreciation of her energy, professionalism and guidance.²⁰³

The idea of empathetic re-enactment can also be applied to Kerr's strategies for dealing with life's vicissitudes. Understood in term of the verb 'act', re-enactment implies performance – either a theatrically staged, public portrayal of a character or a privately constructed version of the self to present to the world. Two opposing 'portraits' of Joan Kerr – a woman of seemingly sunny disposition, ever ready with a perceptive quip, *or* a workaholic warrior intellectual who pounced on lazy research practices and facile assumptions – often puzzled and misled people. Her long-time friend Lucy Sullivan recalls a response to an observation about the contrast between husband and wife ('Jim silent and austere, Joan diminutive and naïve') that Joan was not naïve at all but very calculating; that she just acted naïvely.²⁰⁴ At university in the 1950s Joan Kerr was keenly involved in student revues – writing, directing *and* acting – and her dramatic flair was evident in the presentation of lectures and talks throughout her professional career. There were also instances of role-playing in her private life. As Jim Kerr writes:

One of Joan's odd characteristics is her ability to strike a relationship, or become congruent with, her setting usually without forethought. Sometimes it is simply by body language as at the Swiss Expo. She had only a second's glimpse of a hunched beast [a sculpture] before striking an accurate mimic pose for my camera.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁰ Dening, 'Voyaging "Ethnogging" in Hawai'i (1967)', p.21

²⁰¹ Iain McCalman, 'The teacher', *Academy of the Social Sciences*, 2002, p.24

²⁰² Letter to Joan Kerr from Dr Phillip Kent, reproduced in *Documents*, p.168

²⁰³ Letter to Joan Kerr, 5 November, 1987 from Maria Gianoutsos, reproduced in *Documents*, p.190

²⁰⁴ Steggall, interview with Sullivan

²⁰⁵ *Pictorial Biography*, p.34



2. *Life imitating art: Joan Kerr at the Swiss Exposition, Geneva, 1964*
(Photograph by Jim Kerr)

This is consistent with a remark made by Lucy Sullivan about the early years of the Kerr marriage:

It was quite surprising that Jim could have persuaded Joan to go bush because she was a very 'city' person. Her acting ability was wonderful. Put Joan into the scene and she assumed the personality it needed. You can see it in the photos. It wasn't a stagey sort of thing it was just instinctive.²⁰⁶

When living in Geneva in the 1960s, Joan Kerr assumed with ease the supporting role of company wife to her husband's leading one as a Qantas executive. She was both *comédienne* and chameleon but whether her responses were as 'instinctive' as her husband and friend suggest, belongs to the uneasy ground described by Brenda Niall.

Pictorial Biography is, understandably, a very personal attempt by Jim Kerr to come to terms with the loss of his wife and with his own life after her death. The publicity flyer describes the book as being 'concerned with the attitudes and perceptions of Joan and her companions rather than with a balanced account of the issues of the time'. It is certainly a visual biography of Joan Kerr since the many photographs in it chart her life in rich detail, but the text is largely Jim Kerr's story and too subjective to be considered a clear-sighted analysis of Joan Kerr's career. In parts, especially those describing Joan Kerr's last days, it is so raw and intimate, with a sense of medical events moving out of human control, that in reading it I felt as if I were spying on her death agonies. At other moments there

²⁰⁶ Steggall, interview with Sullivan

was too much order, too much a feeling of the pre-ordained to her life's pattern, as if both Jim and Joan Kerr knew she was going to be 'famous'.

Jim Kerr's strong presence in *Pictorial Biography* raises the issue of who has the authority to speak for the subject after she is no longer able to speak for herself. Do close family members have the automatic, the only, right to do so? Brenda Niall highlights the pitfalls of having to deal with sensitive material in her biography of Martin Boyd (evidence of a never-mentioned convict great-grandfather) and gate keeping by a self-designated family butler in her work on Georgiana McCrae (a happy or an unhappy marriage – depending on who was holding the pen).²⁰⁷ An erudite, physically commanding presence, of course Jim Kerr speaks with much authority. This, however, leaves a problematic and rather restricted space for interpretation by someone outside the family, like myself.

4. Thesis Structure

In spite of innovations in style and technological improvements in information gathering, most biographies maintain a linear narrative, starting with ancestors, moving to birth and formative years and then through a roll call of leading events ending in death.²⁰⁸ As the dominant parent of biography, history reinforces this model, with historians continuing, for the most part, to tell the past as stories narrated in the third person, stories with a clear sense of cause and effect and a beginning, a middle and an end.²⁰⁹ While I have not departed radically from this tradition I have endeavoured to tell Joan Kerr's story in chapters that deal with a particular aspect of her career while also moving forward in time along her life's journey, beginning conventionally enough with the developmental milestones in Kerr's early years.

Almost immediately however 'early years' raises the thorny issue of appropriate form of address when writing about a woman whose claim for that biography rests on her adult career, after she married, when she took her husband's name and left her father's behind. I sympathise with Hermione Lee's fear of presuming an unscholarly level of familiarity:

²⁰⁷ Niall, *Walking upon Ashes*

²⁰⁸ Skidelsky, 'Only connect: biography and truth', p.8

²⁰⁹ Robert Rosenstone, 'Introduction: practice and theory', in Alun Munslow and Robert Rosenstone eds, *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, New York & London, 2004, p.1

All readers of Virginia Woolf's diaries (even those who have decided to dislike her) will feel an extraordinary sense of intimacy with the voice that is talking there. They will want to call her Virginia, and speak proprietorially about her life.²¹⁰

Neither of the Kerrs ever stood on ceremony and 'Joan' and 'Jim' are liberally sprinkled throughout eulogies given and obituaries written after Joan Kerr's death as well as in reviews of Jim Kerr's memoir *Pictorial Biography*. In discussing Joan Kerr's years as a child and a teenager, 'Joan Lyndon' and 'Joan', (like Lee's 'Virginia') appear in the narrative. After her marriage, and as she becomes 'Joan Kerr art historian', the more formal term of address assumes prominence. There is also a more than usual repetition of her Christian name to avoid what Peter Watts referred to as the nightmare created for scholars 'when referencing the work of the two Dr J. Kerrs'.²¹¹

In an essay entitled 'A prologue for *La Dame d'Esprit*. The biography of the marquise du Châtelet', Judith Zinsser presents three different beginnings for the biography to demonstrate the malleability of the past, the interweaving of past and present and the dilemmas common to all story-tellers.²¹² In each of these possible introductions Zinsser has chosen the when and where to begin the narrative and with such choices, which aspects of her subject's life and personality to expose, which part of her contemporary reputation to highlight – the self-proclaimed 'géomètre' and 'physicien', the woman acknowledged in her own lifetime as a genius, or the woman accorded the title of 'philosophe' by her contemporaries.²¹³ This sense of being confronted with several equally valid choices for portraying the subject, and the accompanying misgivings that something else might be better, is probably the way of all biographies, of all histories. As Shirley Fitzgerald writes, 'in the end, the historian has only got the thing approximately right. Or approximately wrong'.²¹⁴

Perhaps the most useful aspect of Zinsser's work is that it has brought my attention to the parallels between the inauspicious, conventional first twenty years or so of both women's lives and the important questions this raises about their

²¹⁰ Hermione Lee, 'Chapter One: Biography', *Virginia Woolf*, p.4

²¹¹ Peter Watts, Government House Dinner Speech, 6 June 2003

²¹² Part II, 'New voices', in Alun Munslow & Robert Rosenberg eds, *Experiments in Rethinking History*, Routledge, London & New York, 2004, p.87

²¹³ Judith Zinsser, 'A prologue for *La Dame d'Esprit*', p.198

²¹⁴ Shirley Fitzgerald, 'Getting it right: telling it well', in *Telling Stories: Fact or Fiction, NSW Chapter Papers & Proceedings*, Gretchen Poiner ed, Independent Scholars Association of Australia Inc, 2008, p.30

later successes.²¹⁵ To paraphrase Zinsser: How did the highly successful art historian come to be? What is the reason for her subsequent unorthodoxy? What was the source of her passion for knowledge and for the recognition she believed it would bring her? Some answers, it is hoped, lie in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Two, *Setting the Scene*, covers Joan Kerr's life in its first three decades: childhood, health, education and a burgeoning talent for acting; marriage and motherhood.

Chapter Three, *Housewife to Historian*, encompasses Kerr's postgraduate studies and subsequent scholarship in architectural history, in particular her impressive body of work on Australian 19th-century architecture.

In Chapter Four, *Life's Stage*, I look at the theatrical nature of Joan Kerr's working practice. She was a charismatic speaker and much in demand for opening exhibitions and launching books. She knew instinctively how to set a scene and use her voice to good effect.

Joan Kerr's sense of humour surfaced in many of her presentations (written and oral) and this, allied to confrontational facets of her personality, is the theme of Chapter Five, *Taking the Mickey*. I have made use of ideas on humour in the work place (Janet Holmes), the origins of Australian 'larrikin' humour (Deborah Bird Rose) and theories of performance, (in particular Erving Goffman). Comparisons are made with academic, author and geographer Griffith Taylor who always needed to 'lead the pack from a marginal position'.²¹⁶

Chapter Six, *Big Ideas-Grand Ambitions*, focuses on the compilation of Kerr's two large collaborative dictionaries, the efforts required to achieve their publication and the books' reception in academic circles.

As its title *Black, White and Everything in Between* suggests, Chapter Seven comprises the eclectic range of work achieved during Joan Kerr's years at the CCR from 1997 to 2001: the culmination of her research into cartoon art; a developing interest in Aboriginal sculpture and a strengthening theoretical position on 'quotation' in art in relation to cross-disciplinary practices.

In the Epilogue, *Farewell to a Woman of Words*, I have concentrated on the dinner given at Government House Sydney on 6 June 2003 in Joan Kerr's honour. The evening, to the general surprise and appreciation of all present, was an amazing outpouring of good will and camaraderie, due in no small part to Joan

²¹⁵ Zinsser, 'A prologue for *La Dame d'Esprit*', p.201

Kerr's way with words. Her funeral at St Stephen's Church in Newtown on 1 March 2004 is also mentioned and in the very last pages, I quote from the letter Kerr sent when I first approached her to write the biography.

To conclude this introduction I quote from Michael Shmith's review of Brenda Niall's biography of the Boyd dynasty:

Biography can be difficult to achieve. There is the balance between too much detail, where one can't see the wood for the family trees, or not enough, which can be disappointing all round. One also bears in mind possible antipathy.²¹⁷

Moderation or overload, intimacy and hostility – these are perplexing challenges facing any biographer, especially when the subject is a prolific writer and a woman who never said 'no' to an invitation to launch, teach or talk. As a consequence, there is much *publicly* available material (speeches, books and scholarly articles) produced by Kerr the academic while personal information about Joan Kerr the woman remains *private* – within sensitive letters and poignant memories. She is there, just out of sight, not in a quiet place but in an exciting energized space in my head, beyond my ears, challenging me to write better and question the status quo. I have searched within my own experiences and harnessed the concept of empathetic re-enactment to write 'Joan Kerr': authentic, ethical and irascible, a scholar and a celebrity.

While reading Drusilla's Modjeska's *Time Pieces* I found inspiration in her idea of an 'apprentice piece', a gift in keeping with the craft being learned, from student to teacher.²¹⁸ This biography is my 'gift' to Joan Kerr.

²¹⁶ Carolyn Strange & Alison Bashford, *Griffith Taylor: Visionary Environmentalist Explorer*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2008, p.156

²¹⁷ Michael Shmith, *The Houses of Boyd*, review of *The Boyds: a Family Biography* by Brenda Niall, *Australian Book Review*, April 2002, p.14

²¹⁸ Drusilla Modjeska, *Time Pieces*, Picador, Sydney, 2002

Chapter Two: Setting the Scene

Acting is not confined to the theatrical stage. It also colours the ways in which individuals present themselves and their activities to others.¹ On stage, a player presents herself as a character to characters projected by other actors in front of an audience, but in 'real life' when an individual plays a part she is asking people to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes she appears to possess.² Perhaps this is what Kerr's mentor British art historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner meant when he once described her as 'very good at putting things over'.³ And persuasive she proved to be, not only in presenting her ideas in lectures and talks but also in co-opting dozens of scholars to contribute to her *Dictionary* and *Heritage* projects. Both of these were collaborative efforts but it was Kerr's 'forceful and seemingly fearless personality' that made them happen.⁴

Joan Kerr's dramatic flair was also evident in instances of role-playing in her private life. From childhood she developed a persona that was at ease in front of an audience, all the while acquiring a manner of negotiating an often-difficult, off-stage world. And if, as Timothy Murray argues, mime, mimesis, self presentation and identity conflate to form the 'reality within which human subjects move and maintain themselves',⁵ central to the 'maintenance' of identity is a need to know where we come from, where we belong, all the more important for non-Indigenous Australians whose forebears arrived here, sooner or later, from somewhere else. Joan Kerr was very proud of her Queensland origins and often mentioned these in public appearances, as in her 1988 Brisbane Lyceum Club

¹ Erving Goffman, Preface, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin Books, England & Australia, 1959

² Erving Goffman, 'Performances', in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, p.28

³ Photocopy of letter from Sir Nikolaus Pevsner reproduced in *Documents*, p.75; also NLA interview, p.23

⁴ Virginia Spate, Speech, Government House Dinner, 6 June 2003, Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection, Historic Houses Trust, Sydney

⁵ Timothy Murray, quoting, Martin Heidegger's 1954 essay, 'Science and Reflection' (in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans William Lovitt, New York, Harper, 1977), *Mimesis, Masochism and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, Timothy Murray ed, University of Michigan Press, Michigan, 1997, p.11

Inaugural Lecture when she thanked the organisers for inviting her back to her 'family place'.⁶

This chapter draws back the curtain on Joan Kerr's early years in Sydney and Brisbane: childhood, illness and the pleasures of reading; the trials of school; the exhilaration of university life and the challenges of marriage and motherhood.



3. Edna Lyndon with Joan aged 15 months, Sydney, May 1939
(Leicagraph Co, courtesy of Jim Kerr)

Origins:

Joan Kerr's parents, Robert Christopher Lyndon and Edna May Richards, made a handsome couple on their wedding day in Brisbane on 11 January 1937, thirty-nine-year old Robert (Bob) Lyndon, sporting a short back and sides that did not quite tame his thick straight hair, was formally dressed in dinner suit and bow tie.⁷ Edna Lyndon, eleven years younger, wore a softly draped dress with beading at the neck and a lace veil pinned to her dark wavy hair. Bob had an air of sturdy athleticism. Edna, with high cheekbones, large dark eyes and well-defined mouth, presented a more enigmatic face to the world.⁸

In their first year of marriage, the Lyndons moved to Sydney where Bob became general manager for the English company Berger Paints (now British Paints). Eleanor Joan, the eldest of six children, was born on 21 February 1938

⁶ Joan Kerr, 'A New Art History for Australia'. Inaugural Lyceum Club Lecture, Brisbane, 2 June 1998, Kerr Archive

⁷ Joan Kerr gave her parents' ages in an interview with Susan Steggall, June 2001

⁸ Wedding photograph reproduced in *Pictorial Biography*, p.1

at Lynton Private Hospital, North Sydney.⁹ She was followed by Brian (b.1940), Anne (b.1941), John (1944-2003), Chris (b.1946) and Sue (b.1948).¹⁰

Bob Lyndon loved the sea and the surf lifesaving movement and moved the family to Cronulla, at first several streets from the water, then right at the beach.¹¹ In the 1950s Cronulla was on the edge of Sydney's suburban sprawl, a village of modest houses and blocks of flats, with one long street leading to the railway station – the last on the line. The main road did not pass through Cronulla, isolating the village even further, but as Joan's sister, Anne Lanham, recalls 'it was a pretty good childhood, growing up with the beach at your doorstep'.

Joan Lyndon developed into a pretty child with a mass of dark curly hair and a broad smile but at about seven years of age she contracted bronchitis, which led to asthma. From that time onwards she spent many months each year severely ill in bed. 'That was in the days when there wasn't anything much you could take besides adrenalin by injection,' Anne Lanham says. 'My mother took her to all kinds of doctors and quacks and would-be experts who had cures. We went through all the different types of medication'. Even when acutely ill, Joan did not go to hospital but was nursed at home by her mother with the doctor calling up to three times a day.¹²

When she was well enough Joan attended primary schools in Cronulla and South Cronulla but in an attempt to improve her health she was sent (during 1947-48) to Springwood Ladies' College, a boarding school in the Blue Mountains.¹³ According to the adult Joan Kerr the school was 'pathetic'. Only the art teacher, commercial artist Kathleen (Kate) O'Brien, was interesting because she drew the cartoon strip 'Wanda'.¹⁴ Joan also attended St George High School in 1950 and part of 1951 but there is no record of her scholastic abilities other than an unsubstantiated reference to an essay she was supposed to have

⁹ Certificate of registration of birth, *Joan Kerr: Documents Relating to the Life of a Teacher, Writer, Wife, Mother and Possum Stirrer 1938-1993*, Sydney (Documents), unpublished, 1994, p.2; Birth Certificate, Kerr Archive

¹⁰ Steggall, interview with Anne Lanham, July 2006 (Birth places of Joan Kerr's siblings have not been ascertained)

¹¹ Steggall interview with Joan Kerr, June 2001

¹² Interview with Lanham

¹³ Interview with Joan Kerr, June 2001

¹⁴ In her NLA Interview (p.3), Joan Kerr wondered whether this had not been an early, albeit subliminal, catalyst to her later scholarly interest in cartoons.

written, on Aboriginal and non-Indigenous children in Cronulla, as having won the Frank Cridland Memorial Prize (circa 1948).¹⁵

The Lyndon parents were not great readers and the magazines and books lent to Joan when confined to bed constituted the bulk of the reading material in the house. Nor did the parents go to church although allegiance to the Church of England was unquestioned. All the children were required to go to Sunday school and Joan was confirmed in November 1951 at St Andrew's Church in the Anglican parish of Cronulla-Caringbah.¹⁶

Although Bob Lyndon leaned towards the Liberal rather than the Labor Party, the Lyndons did not hold strong political beliefs. Edna Lyndon's value system was conventionally middle class – don't shock the neighbours, do the right thing, be modest and respectable, have the right sort of background¹⁷ – in conformity perhaps with the social standards espoused by the popular and influential *Australian Women's Weekly*. Yet Edna Lyndon was not socially ambitious and disliked the idea of playing the role of the company hostess.¹⁸

The '*Weekly*' has been a major force in Australia's popular press since its inception in 1933. In 1950 approximately 600,000 copies were sold every week when the population of New South Wales was just over three million and that of the whole of Australia, a little over eight million. Copies were often passed around among families and friends so that the magazine held considerable influence over women's fashion and social mores. A glance at several issues of the *Australian Women's Weekly* from 1946 gives a snapshot of a country emerging from six years of war. In the 5 January issue for example, there are indications that the time of austerity and gravity was beginning to fade. An article entitled 'What is beauty', by an American model agent, John Robert Powers, while not to the taste of today's women, would have provided a welcome relief in its

¹⁵ Jim Kerr says this text was a 'novel' – a very ambitious literary undertaking for a girl of 11-13 years – and that the family's copy was lost, *Pictorial Biography*, p.4. Frank Cridland (1873-1954) was an eminent citizen of the Sutherland region in the first half of the 20th century. He was involved in the Australian Comforts Fund during World War I and made a Commander of the British Empire in 1920. Two of his sons were killed in World War II: Arthur in 1942 and Walter in 1945. Although his grandsons, Frank Cridland (son of Walter) and Ian Walker (son of Ethel Walker née Cridland) both recall such a prize – Frank Cridland senior was known for his generosity and sponsorship of sporting prizes (golf) – it has not been possible to find formal evidence of the Frank Cridland Memorial Prize. Steggall, telephone conversations with Frank Cridland's grandsons, 2007

¹⁶ *Documents*, p.2

¹⁷ NLA Interview, p.13

¹⁸ NLA Interview, p.7

discussion of beauties rather than battles.¹⁹

Weeklies of this period followed a formula that would not change for decades. There was a large fiction section that usually included a serialised Agatha Christie mystery and several short stories – invariably romances and often set in England. Horses figured prominently in the stories, as did problems of re-adaptation for both men and women when soldiers returned from war service. General interest articles centred around the lack of affordable rental housing that was making it hard to set a wedding date for many young women; two jobs were needed to buy a house and trousseau items were not yet available in pre-war quality.

Photographs were plentiful: a page of ‘Palm Beach Beauties’ in high summer; wedding photographs with the men still in their service uniforms (like my father); a dance at London’s White City with the Queen and two princesses in attendance (it was a time when ‘Home’ meant England, even for those several generations removed from their British forebears); released POWs and war repair work that was underway throughout Europe. A full page was given to the comic strip ‘Mandrake the Magician’ and each issue carried a page-length film review with a six-scene scenario (image and text) of the story’s development. Unsurprisingly many of the films had war-related themes.

Reading the advertisements liberally sprinkled through each issue of the magazine brought back my childhood: decorous swimwear and beach fashions; Yardley of London; Vincent’s APC (‘safe, speedy, sure, reliable’), Rexona soap; Mum deodorant; Nugget Shoe Polish; Miss Muffett junket; the latest in Courtauld’s rayon fabric; Craven A cigarettes (‘quality and smoothness’); Coca Cola (for a quartet of sophisticated forty-somethings playing bridge); Ponds face cream and Shelltox. Young woman featured frequently in advertisements for bicycles and Kodak cameras, the editors aware perhaps of the increasing participation of women in sport. Features such as designs for outdoor play areas and open plan living, and fashions from the USA (considered more stylish than Australian fashions) hinted not only at burgeoning middle-class affluence but also at a growing fascination with all things American and a diminishing British influence.

In the 19 January magazine, an article about ‘the much-travelled Mrs Evatt’ was accompanied by a photo of the lady herself with one of her favourite

¹⁹ *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 5 January 1946, p.2

paintings – *La Bicyclette* by Fernand Léger – indicating a sophisticated appreciation of contemporary trends in European art, at least among the well-to-do, William Dobell's controversial win in the 1943 Archibald Prize with his portrait of Joshua Smith, notwithstanding. The Davis Cup was being played in Adelaide and there were photographs of yachts that had competed in the Sydney-Hobart Yacht Race – a media delay that would be considered incredible given today's demand for instantaneous pictorial gratification.²⁰

The 1950s was a time of freedom in childhood, freedom to ride bicycles in the streets unsupervised and, like many Australian children, the Lyndon children in Cronulla had the beach as their playground. Although Joan was restricted by her frequent and debilitating bouts of asthma, and she was not as physically strong as her siblings, she used to 'boss them all around' – a combination of being the big sister, a natural inclination to command and an indomitable will to have things done her way.²¹ Fifty years later Anne Lanham recalls:

Joan was our leader, our mentor and quite literally our teacher. Wet days or school holidays she would assemble us around the kitchen table with books, pencils and rulers and conduct school classes...And on Saturday nights, following a week of rehearsals, we would entertain the long-suffering neighbours with a Joan Lyndon production, directed by Joan and starring Joan.²²

Although Joan Kerr said later she preferred producing and writing to acting, Anne Lanham insists that in these backyard plays, Joan always took the leading role, with herself 'play[ing] the ugly sister to [Joan's] Cinderella, the tree to her little Red Riding Hood'.²³ (Later in secondary school in Brisbane Joan acted in class plays and always fought to get the leading roles.²⁴ 'It was one of those families that liked performing,' school friend Ellen Jordan, née Harrison, says. 'I went to them a couple of times. Not Christmas but some sort of family party or birthdays. The whole family was there...cousins and so on. They were all expected to participate.'²⁵)

Joan and Anne had piano lessons but Joan showed little talent for music. She also had 'some exposure' to classes in weaving, pottery and painting at the Cronulla School of Art. This institution had a library where Joan read the *William*

²⁰ *Australian Women's Weekly*, 19 January 1946, p.9

²¹ NLA Interview, p.11

²² Interview with Anne Lanham; also in Lanham's speech at Joan Kerr's funeral in *Record of the Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr*, March 2004, p.8

²³ Steggall, Interview with Lanham; also in Lanham's speech at Joan Kerr's funeral, p.8

²⁴ NLA Interview, p.11

series and Enid Blyton's books, 'more respectable' books as she got older but remembers nothing more specific about her early reading. (Common among people who have been voracious readers in childhood is the enveloping experience of being immersed in the world of books. It is that which stays with the adult rather than individual titles.) In high school Joan's favourites were Jane Austen and Charles Dickens as well as the *Women's Weekly's* serialisation of Georgette Heyer's regency-romance novels. She did not start owning her own books until university years.²⁶

When she was about thirteen, Joan went to Melbourne to stay with cousin Elvie Ferguson, who took her to the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV). 'It was an eye opener,' the adult Joan Kerr remembered. 'I was just overwhelmed'. One work that particularly aroused her interest was a painting attributed to Goya. It was an image of a woman 'with a face like a butcher and gorgeous lace around her neck'.²⁷ Goya's depiction of both 'a vicious sort of inhuman toughness and this beautiful beautiful fabric' excited the teenager. Here the adult Joan Kerr could have been layering a retrospective patina over this memory but it was, nevertheless, a foretaste of her adult penchant for unexpected juxtapositions.

Moving North:

At Edna Lyndon's insistence the family moved back to Brisbane in 1951 and settled into a large rambling house at 43 Raby Road, Coorparoo.²⁸ Bob Lyndon established his own wallpaper business and during school holidays Joan occasionally helped in her father's shop. She even thought she would like to go into the business with him but he was only interested in a son (the eldest, Brian)

²⁵ Steggall, Interview with Ellen (née Harrison) Jordan, November 2006

²⁶ NLA Interview, pp 11 & 12. In the 1950s and 60s many girls read Georgette Heyer's novels. Heyer (1902–1974) was a prolific writer who, from 1921 to 1972, created the Regency England romance genre, as well as writing other historical works, mystery/crime and contemporary fiction. The books were well written, entertaining and historically informative but, as Joan Kerr observed, not perhaps the only diet you would want girls to have.

²⁷ NLA Interview, p.9

²⁸ Edna wanted to be near her family and according to Joan Kerr, 'she nagged him into it', NLA Interview, p.3

taking over the company.²⁹ Wallpaper was not popular in Brisbane with its weatherboard houses and Bob Lyndon often 'cried poor'. However their life appeared comfortably middle-class: a large house (a 'Queenslander' – very spread out and chaotic according to Anne Lanham) with a bedroom for each child; help in the house for Edna; two cars and an overseas trip for the parents in 1953. All the children went to private schools.³⁰



4. Lyndon children in Brisbane, 1951. Back: Eleanor Joan, Robert Brian, Patricia Anne. Front: John Richard, Susan Ruth, Christopher Brice (Betta Snaps, Wallace Bishop Arcade, courtesy of Jim Kerr)

The family's close connection with the Church of England continued. The young Lyndons attended Sunday school at St Stephen's Church (Coorparoo) every week with Joan in charge. She became 'very fervent' in her early teenage years and qualified to teach Sunday school.³¹ At one stage she wanted to be a missionary but according to Ellen Jordan this was only in the way that all idealistic teenagers were going to be missionaries. Later Joan transferred to the high-Anglican All Saints in Wickham Terrace, probably because many of her

²⁹ NLA, Interview, p.5. Although Joan always referred to her father as 'Daddy', and he helped her by driving her to airports and train stations when she visited Jim Kerr in Sydney before their marriage, there is an impression (from her letters to Jim Kerr) that Lyndon privileged his eldest son, helping him significantly with travel expenses, while complaining that Edna, Joan and Anne were overspending (Interview with Lanham and Kerr Correspondence Archive).

³⁰ Brian (Barney) began working with his father as planned but it developed into an unhappy partnership. After Bob Lyndon's death in July 1963 at St Helen's Hospital in Brisbane, Barney worked out an arrangement for their mother to have an income and continued to run the business. The firm struggled on for a while and then collapsed. Interview with Lanham

³¹ NLA Interview, p.13; *Documents*, p.16

school friends also went there and the church's Rector, the Reverend Peter Bennie, offered regular and well-organized dances for young people.³²

Although Joan enjoyed the rituals, she believed less and less in the teachings of the church as she grew older. This, she later reflected, was rather a pity because 'it's quite consoling and very attractive and it gives you community'.³³ Although Kerr's faith might have waned, like many lapsed Anglicans she maintained links with religious affairs throughout her life. In 1973 she joined the Blake Society for Religious Art and was soon on the committee, remaining there until 1975, and in 1982 and 1988 she was a judge with the Blake Prize. Peter Bennie was also a judge at least five times between 1965 and 1986.³⁴ When, in 1986, Joan Kerr was asked whether, or how, her religious and political beliefs affected her work as an art historian, she replied 'as much as most people's...although less than some'. As a way of deflecting the question she said somewhat facetiously that she tended to have irrational convictions rather than religious and political beliefs, the major one at that time being a commitment to maintaining high academic standards in the Fine Arts Department.³⁵

Family Matters:

Although Bob Lyndon had acceded to his wife's request to return to Queensland, he would have preferred to stay in New South Wales. In Brisbane he became a diminishing presence in the family home. Joan Kerr said that at one stage he moved to a motel close by but Edna would never admit this as a separation, just that her husband 'was not himself'.³⁶ 'Bob Lyndon was thirty-nine when he married,' says Anne Lanham of her father. 'He had lots of stories (she described him as a 'gallivanter'), so I suppose he'd been around and done a lot of things

³² All Saints Church, the oldest existing Anglican Church in Brisbane (and a leading centre of the Catholic Revival within the Anglican Church), opened for worship in September 1869, replacing an earlier structure of 1862. Its style is 19th-century gothic revival with buttressed walls of rough faced rubble, porphyry and sandstone, and a metal clad roof. By the early 1900s, All Saints had developed as the high-church Church of England while St Johns Anglican Cathedral remained Low Church. <www.allsaintsbrisbane.com>

³³ NLA Interview, p.13

³⁴ The Blake Prize for Religious Art (named after artist and poet, William Blake) was established in 1949 as an incentive to raise the standard of contemporary religious art. Sydney architect Joseph Fowl was elected President of the Blake Prize Committee (since 1959 the Blake Society) a post he held until his death in 1971. Dr Felix Arnott became the first Chairman; Reverend Peter Bennie, on his retirement as Chairman, became the first Patron. R. Peterson, <http://www.blakeprize.com/blake/history.html>

³⁵ 'Talking Heads', *Art Club Newsletter* (Sydney University), No.3, February 1986

before they were married'.³⁷ Both daughters' versions indicate, albeit indirectly, significant incompatibilities between their parents in an era when such things were managed in private and personal feelings were often sacrificed for the greater good of the family.

Lanham remembers her father working every day except Sunday although he did take her and the boys to the local swimming pool in the early mornings to train. At weekends she and her brothers participated in sporting activities but they were expected to be self-reliant and as soon as they could fend for themselves, they caught the tram or rode their bicycles.³⁸ Except for Sue (the youngest) and Joan (because of her asthma), the rest of them were 'packed off' regardless of how they were feeling: 'If you were sick you had to have a dose of castor oil otherwise you went to school. It didn't do to complain too much.' Joan's bookishness stood out in such a sporting family and the boys would taunt her by throwing her books out the bedroom window.³⁹

They were a rowdy bunch but, as Anne says, 'with six kids you'd expect some squaring off. We'd get up in the morning and choose sides...[and] at night we'd sit around the table and fight and carry on'. Anne now thinks they might have 'overdone it a bit'. After cooking dinner, their mother used to pick two people to wash up and go and sit in the lounge-room with the door closed to listen to the radio. Prior to the introduction of television in Australia (in 1956), radio was a popular form of entertainment and families often gathered in the evenings to listen to musical hit parades, drama serials, light entertainment and quiz programs. Edna however, was clearly after some peace and quiet.

In 2003 Kerr told Martin Thomas that when she was young she was 'always on mum's side against wicked dad', but when she grew up, she reacted more the other way.⁴⁰ This was probably a bit hard on Edna who had to look after Joan in

³⁶ Interview with Kerr, June 2001

³⁷ Interview with Lanham. Edna, who was a doctor's receptionist when they met, was much younger than Bob.

³⁸ Interview with Lanham. Brian Lyndon was successful at state-level surf lifesaving championships. John played soccer.

³⁹ Interview with Lanham: 'They, all the family, were surprised and I suppose nobody really knew what Joan did or the people she knew, of that she had this sort of respect [the Government House Dinner]...She wasn't the sort of person who would tell anybody. She wouldn't skite about it at family reunions or anything. They all knew she was an academic and worked at university: Sydney University and then it was Canberra. She was writing a book and she wrote lots of books. She'd say she was writing another book and if it was about Australian art that didn't mean much [to the family] so no one was really interested in art the way Joan was, not at all.'

⁴⁰ NLA Interview, p.8

what appears to have been a less than harmonious family situation, with a husband who did not easily tolerate weakness and Joan's asthma a constant worry.⁴¹

'Perhaps Mum was a bit distant,' Lanham has observed. 'I don't know that she particularly liked kids. But then with six kids, you'd think you'd want to have children, wouldn't you? She certainly didn't want to have much to do with the grandchildren...I remember when my brother got married a few years after me, and said, "Oh well, we'll have Mum to baby-sit", she replied, "God, no"'.⁴² Yet Anne did not blame her mother for not wanting to tie herself down with grandchildren. Edna Lyndon was only in her fifties when Bob Lyndon died in 1963 and had many years of life ahead of her.⁴³ Once her children were off her hands, she took up bridge, became a Grand Master and represented Queensland at a high level.⁴⁴

Edna appears to have been a dutiful mother but not a particularly loving one. Perhaps it was a generational dynamic. Closeness and familiarity were not encouraged; duty was all-important. Perhaps there was an element of envy in Edna's feelings towards her eldest daughter who had the advantages of a good education and the chance to attend university, both of which Edna never had. 'She was the one who wanted us to go to private schools,' Lanham says. 'She wasn't snobby but she wanted us to experience refinements that she hadn't had. She wanted more of a cultured atmosphere in the house and yet she was up against a common problem. She had a husband who was devoted to sport.'

Much later, in a letter to Joan when she was living in London (31 July 1967), Anne described her own relationship with her mother as being like 'fairly good acquaintances,' exchanging recipes and comments on the weather. However Anne was careful not to tell Edna anything she did not want 'repeated across all the bridge tables in Brisbane'.⁴⁵

School Days:

From 1952 to 1955 Joan Lyndon attended Somerville House, a prestigious Brisbane girls' school established in 1899, one that espoused Christian values

⁴¹ NLA Interview, p.8

⁴² Interview with Lanham

⁴³ Edna Lyndon died on 16 January 1992

⁴⁴ Interview with Joan Kerr, June 2001

⁴⁵ *Documents*, pp 60-61

and encouraged scholastic excellence.⁴⁶ Somerville House was also progressive in that the Bible readings at morning assemblies were usually passages that, according to Ellen Jordan, praised and valued women to give the girls positive views of their own worth.⁴⁷

Ellen met Joan Lyndon in 1952 and the two girls became firm friends through a shared passion for reading. Although they came from different backgrounds (Ellen's father was a law professor, Joan's father 'in business'), they had similar tastes in literature. 'All the time we were growing up we were nutting out ideas,' recalls Ellen. Joan had her driver's licence while still at school and after parties she drove Ellen home and they would sit in the car and talk late into the night.⁴⁸ While Jordan's remark creates a snapshot of two soul mates it also reveals Joan Lyndon as adventurous in gaining a driver's licence as soon as legally allowed *and* a relaxed parental attitude in the matter of curfews for teenage offspring. Another friend from schooldays Jenny Marks (née Wornham) describes Joan as a very positive and tenacious person whose illness was not going to stop her from achieving.⁴⁹ Anne Lanham wonders now if Joan's passion and energy was partly due to being one of six. 'You had to compete for your parents' attention,' she says. 'All kids do that. You want to do well in whatever area you can, in your own way, to stand out from the others.'⁵⁰

Like many teenage girls Joan Lyndon did not want to be singled out because of her illness and aspired to fit in. However at Somerville House, 'you had to be a sporting or a social success and I was neither', she said.⁵¹ Joan was among the girls who were good at history and English and asked questions in class. Yet she did not want to be seen with the swots ('they were pasty, wore glasses and had spots') but lacked the confidence to keep up with the 'fast' girls – the sporty and social ones.⁵² So she hovered on the fringes of the social set. Lucy Sullivan (Ellen Jordan's younger sister) corroborates this:

Joan really did feel bad about not being in the social group rather than being prepared to accept that she was something different. She wanted to conform, to belong, and of course, later, she didn't want to conform; she wanted to lead. I've been surprised when we've had

⁴⁶ Email from Kate Bottger, Archivist at Somerville House, 2 June 2006

⁴⁷ Interview with Jordan

⁴⁸ Interview with Jordan

⁴⁹ Email from Jenny Marks, 17 May 2007

⁵⁰ Interview with Lanham

⁵¹ Interview with Joan Kerr, June 2001

⁵² Interview with Joan Kerr, June 2001

reunions, how many of the girls say they hated Somerville. I think it was because they had felt left out of that group. You wonder now who was actually in 'the group'.⁵³

At a reunion forty years later, Joan Kerr found to her surprise that all the girls whom she had thought very silly at school had become 'real people, with worthwhile lives and careers'.⁵⁴ This is consistent with her opinion of herself as having been an 'intolerant youth' who was not only critical of her school mates but also of the strict codes of behaviour of some of the older women who attended the Reverend Bennie's discussion groups.⁵⁵ It was only towards the end of her life she recognized that other people were also entitled to hold strong views.

Even if considered one of the smart girls in the class, Joan's results in both the Junior Public Examination in 1953 and Senior Public Examination in 1955 were modest. Yet it is erroneous to infer that her frequent absences from school were entirely to blame.⁵⁶ As Ellen Jordan sees it:

Four students used to get the prizes but she wasn't one of them. There was never any suggestion that she was brighter than her results showed. It wasn't missing school that affected her scholastic results. I just don't think she cracked how you wrote exams, how you wrote things that got you the high marks. She did perfectly well, but there was never any suggestion that she was not realising her potential.⁵⁷

If a picture emerges of Joan as a bright articulate girl interested in all kinds of knowledge and learning, her sister Anne was much quieter and teachers often asked her why she wasn't like her sister.⁵⁸ 'They wished I was more...interested and lively,' she says – a pretty harsh thing to say to a teenage girl. But then the 'Christian' values in Protestant schools committed to preparing their students for tertiary education were not for the faint-hearted.

⁵³ Interview with Sullivan

⁵⁴ Interview with Joan Kerr, June 2001

⁵⁵ NLA Interview, p.14

⁵⁶ Certificate (dated 23 January 1954) for the Junior Public Examination (November 1953):

A passes in English, French and Physiology; Bs in Latin and History; Cs in Maths A & B and Chemistry.

Certificate (dated 31 January 1956) for the Senior Public Examination (November 1955):

A in English; Bs in Modern History, Ancient History and Art; Cs in Maths I & II and Zoology; a pass (for matriculation purposes) in Junior French, Latin and Chemistry. Kerr's results entitled her to matriculation in the Faculties of the University of Queensland, Brisbane and entrance to the courses of Arts, Commerce and Law. *Documents*, pp 6&8

⁵⁷ Interview with Jordan

⁵⁸ Interview with Lanham

At Somerville intelligent girls studied physics, average students art.⁵⁹ Since Latin (required for matriculation) was 'for the bright girls' [and] art for the dumb girls', Joan Lyndon was unable to study art at school. Moreover, in this uncompromising choice of subjects there was very little that related to life in Australia. As Jill Ker Conway has written of her own education at Abbotsleigh, a renowned Anglican girls' school in Sydney:

Our curriculum was inherited from Great Britain...we read English poetry...we read English fictions, novels, and short stories...Each year we studied a Shakespeare play, committing much of it to memory...We learned about Roman Britain...In geography, we studied the great rivers of the world...Australia was defined once again by default.⁶⁰

Typically for the times, science was considered more progressive as a career option than the humanities. Professions with an overtly commercial intent were also discouraged. According to Lucy Sullivan, even to do something like journalism was a bit 'low'. A friend of hers who had wanted to do commercial art, felt the pressure of disapproval: 'You could become a real artist, but not a commercial artist'.⁶¹

In the 1950s, science was seen on the one hand as a Pandora's box of threatening accomplishments. The building of the hydrogen bomb, together with the Korean War, the beginnings of the space race and Cold War hostilities between the USA and the USSR, were giving rise to a growing fear of nuclear annihilation. On the other hand this was a period of near miraculous achievements: Watson and Crick's unraveling of the mystery of the DNA molecule; Salk's polio vaccine; the development of the first anti-cancer drugs and the first organ transplants. Scientists like Linus Pauling (1901-1994) and Julius Sumner Miller (1909-1987) became worldwide celebrities.

On the socio-economic front, many parents thought that educating girls at tertiary level was a waste of time because they would marry, have children and drop out of the workforce. Others saw education as a good thing. 'So of course you would give that good to all your children,' observes Lucy Sullivan. 'You'd treat them equally well'.⁶² Bob Lyndon was one of those who did not approve of girls receiving a higher education but because he thought Joan might not marry (her

⁵⁹ NLA Interview, p.10

⁶⁰ Jill Ker Conway, *The Road From Coorain*, Minerva edition, Mandarin Paperbacks, London, 1992, pp 98-99

⁶¹ Interview with Sullivan

asthma seen as a serious drawback for a potential husband) in 1956 he allowed her to enrol in an arts degree at Queensland University, the first of her family to undertake tertiary education.⁶³

Salad Days:

It was the 'misfittingness' that had made school a miserable time but all that was to change at university where many of the students (perhaps 'misfits' from other schools) were interested in intellectual pursuits and Joan Lyndon discovered that life could be fun on her own terms.⁶⁴ She was a petite and pretty girl (one hundred and sixty-two centimetres tall according to her 1967 passport) with curly hair.⁶⁵ Her face was lively, with sparkling eyes, a wide mouth and a generous smile. She was popular; her enthusiasm was infectious. She adapted quickly to university life, began writing for the campus newspaper and getting into trouble (her words), describing it all as 'enormous fun', which might account for her first-year results being a modest mix of credits and passes.⁶⁶

The 1950s in Australia was not only a decade of post-war affluence and new technologies (the advent of television and transistor radios to name just two) but also of conformity to a conservative, older-generation status quo against which young people were beginning to react. The decade also ushered in the age of youth-oriented popular music when Elvis Presley shot to fame as the 'King of Rock 'n Roll' in 1954. This music craze swept onto Australian shores in 1955 with the release of Bill Haley's hit song *Rock Around the Clock*.⁶⁷ School friend Jenny Marks recalls how she and Joan spent many happy times talking, listening to the new music and dancing.⁶⁸

In the period following World War II, films (mainly American) presented idealized, conventional portrayals of men and women. Then Hollywood began to respond to the demands of young people with the appearance of exciting symbols of rebellion – anti-hero actors like James Dean, Paul Newman and Marlon Brando and sexy anti-heroines such as Ava Gardner, Kim Novak, and

⁶² Interview with Sullivan

⁶³ 'He didn't think I needed an education', said Anne Lanham. 'Barney was probably one of the brightest in the family and should have gone to university. John went to university but did not complete his engineering degree.'

⁶⁴ NLA Interview, p.16

⁶⁵ Email from Jenny Marks, 17 May 2007

⁶⁶ *Documents*, p.12

⁶⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_Around_the_Clock>

⁶⁸ Email from Marks

Marilyn Monroe.⁶⁹ Young people, including Joan Lyndon and her friends, attended outdoor drive-in cinemas that showed cheap (often B-grade horror) fare aimed at the teenage market.

Joan Lyndon liked to paint a portrait of herself as somewhat eccentric and different – someone who stood out in a crowd. Yet her late teenage years were very similar to those of many bright young women who revelled in the freedom of university after the regimented environment of elitist, church-oriented secondary schools. Half a generation younger than Joan Kerr, but with a similar educational background, I draw on my own experiences to sketch the attitudes and opinions of young Australian women in the 1950s and 60s.

As University students we displayed an element of intellectual snobbery towards popular culture, 'we' being mostly above it, especially what was perceived as lowbrow literature – magazines like the *Australian Women's Weekly* and *anything* our mothers were reading. But we loved the music and the fashions and even though not particularly rebellious, dressed, when the occasion allowed it, as outlandishly as possible – 'wedgie' shoes, shift dresses, long earrings and strange sunglasses. Participation in student pranks and stunts was common as was involvement in mild civil rights demonstrations.

After her marriage, Joan make outfits for herself and later, her children.⁷⁰ Again this reveals her to be a young woman of her time. In the 1950s and 1960s university colleges held social evenings to which the men and women were expected to wear formal attire. Such clothes were expensive for student budgets and many girls (even the 'swots' and the domestically inept) made their own clothes, something almost inconceivable today.

A Bigger Stage:

In her first year as an undergraduate Joan Lyndon began acting in plays staged by drama groups. Student union subsidies allowed her to travel interstate with the university dramatic society and debating teams. It was a 'wonderfully scintillating place', she said, 'for someone who had come from a family that 'despised intellectual life except through church'.⁷¹ 'Despised' is perhaps too strong a word as the Lyndons were typical of many middle-class families who were mistrustful of progressive, socialist and avant-garde ideas. Ironically, church – All Saints at

⁶⁹ Tim Dirks: www.filmsite.org/50s

⁷⁰ *Pictorial Biography*, p.21

Wickham Terrace – was an intellectual as well as a spiritual meeting place for Joan Lyndon. Its Rector, the influential and charismatic Father Peter Bennie, fostered gatherings of artists, musicians and writers where ‘you discussed things very seriously’, something the young Joan craved far more than religious instruction.⁷²

In second year (1957) Joan Lyndon applied for a job as cadet broadcaster. The letter of recommendation written by a staff member of the French Department – ‘She is intelligent and trainable...and has played an enthusiastic and capable part in French dramatic activities...has shown herself strong in comedy character parts from Molière to modern farce’ – indicates her interest in drama.⁷³ In a second letter of recommendation her English lecturer, E.H. Flint, considered Joan’s class work in drama ‘outstanding’:

In tutorial discussions she appears to have a natural ability to understand and to interpret drama and a knowledge of it wide for her age. In class she often gives valuable leads to discussion...Her practical abilities in drama appear to be considerable, and capable of development.⁷⁴

On the same subject the Reverend Bennie wrote:

She has definite and marked literary and dramatic ability, has wide interests and is, I should say, of a highly developed social sense. She is a very good mixer and is very popular amongst her own contemporaries and a natural leader. She should be very effectively employed in a creative undertaking, which required imaginative and artistic ability.⁷⁵

⁷¹ NLA Interview, p.7

⁷² The Reverend Alexander Peter Bennie (1915-2002) was born in Geelong and educated at Scotch College and the University of Melbourne where he graduated with first-class honours in English in 1936. His MA followed in 1938, after he had taken another first in the licentiate in theology. He was ordained priest in 1939 and served his curacy at the Anglo-Catholic All Saints, returning again as rector at All Saints for ten years from 1953. Throughout his time in Brisbane, Bennie also lectured in a range of subjects at St John's and St Francis' Colleges and at the University of Queensland. Bennie was Warden of St Paul's College at Sydney University from 1963 to 1985. Beyond his professional and priestly duties, he was president of the Blake Society for Religious Art and made notable contributions to controversies such as the *Oz* obscenity trial, where he was a witness for the defence. Barry Spurr, 'Champion of a liberal, educated life', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 November 2002, p.32

⁷³ Letter dated 10 September, 1957 on University of Queensland letterhead from Kathleen Campbell Brown, French Department, *Documents*, p.14

⁷⁴ Letter from E. H. Flint, also on University of Queensland letterhead and also dated 10 September 1957, *Documents*, p.15

⁷⁵ *Documents*, p.16

There is no record of whether she was accepted for the broadcasting job. In any case she did not pursue this career option. Yet these letters not only reveal just how passionate Joan was about acting but also give clues to strengths of character that would stand her in good stead in her future role as an academic.

Joan Lyndon's second and third year (1958) results were again modest but good enough to allow her to enrol in English Honours in 1959, to write on E.M. Forster.⁷⁶ The thesis progressed well but not the course work, mainly because of Joan's lack of interest in this aspect of the project. 'I had to try and find out what was on the course at the last minute,' she admitted, 'and read it quickly so I didn't do terribly well there'.⁷⁷ It would again appear incorrect to overemphasise her illness as cause for less-than-hoped-for results and to attribute some blame to her lack of engagement with routine work. This has been corroborated by another university friend, Beverley Sherry (née Chadwick) who felt that Joan often showed a 'lack of application'.⁷⁸

In 1960, Joan Lyndon began a Master of Arts thesis on Katherine Mansfield but seemed more interested in active participation in the Political Science Club, the Debating Club and the Dramatic Society. In that year she was also co-editor (with Bill Sparkes) of the University of Queensland student publication *Semper Floreat*.⁷⁹ It was a position she embraced with enthusiasm. In covering themes such as 'university politics, sport, commem [Commemoration Day], catholic action and Mr Truman, religion, international events, art, music, theatre, philosophy and nihilism', *Semper* was, Joan declared, *the* voice of the University of Queensland Union, its primary purpose being to stimulate discussion and student participation. 'The task of making *Semper* worthwhile does not belong to the Editors and their staff alone,' she wrote. 'It belongs to each and every

⁷⁶ 2nd Year: credits in English II, English II (Hons) and French II and a pass in Philosophy I. There were indications that Lyndon's business was not prospering and when Joan was a third-year undergraduate, her father said he could no longer afford to keep her at university. Because she had won a Commonwealth Scholarship, which paid her fees, she was able to apply for and obtain a living allowance of a few pounds per week to enable her to continue her studies, NLA Interview, p.4

⁷⁷ NLA Interview, p.16

⁷⁸ Email from Beverley Sherry, 6 June 2008

⁷⁹ *Semper Floreat*, Queensland University's student newspaper. The 50th anniversary issue, 18 October 1982, p.19 (reproduced in *Documents*, p.26) *Semper Floreat* (Latin: 'May it always flourish'), the student newspaper of the University of Queensland, has been published continuously by the University of Queensland Union since 1932, when it began as a small fortnightly newsletter produced by one editor. By 2005, *Semper* had become a 60-page, bi-monthly magazine with three full-time editors who are elected annually by the student body.

student...use it but use it responsibly.⁸⁰ Joan Lyndon was clearly a good communicator who actively encouraged dialogue and collaboration – a characteristic that became a benchmark for her (art-historical) working practice. She also put her communication skills to good use in another direction.

The University Revue had been languishing for several years, its repertoire little more than tired double entendres. It was revived in 1958 with the staging of the first 'Scoop' show for which several students performed a send up of Shakespeare and David Malouf wrote some very funny sketches. In the following year Joan began to write for 'Scoop'. Her sketches were not as linguistically witty as those by Malouf but, according to Ellen Jordan, her sense of timing, drama and visual effect made them very good. She knew instinctively what would be terrific on stage and became more and more involved in the productions.

Semper published a favourable report of the Scoop III Revue, which 'fortunately, continued the tradition set by its predecessors and was well written, well produced and well acted'.⁸¹ The paper described the revue as satire 'directed mainly at kulchur – with-a-capital-K, with the traffic regulations as a subsidiary subject'. Joan Lyndon's *Une Affaire Tragique* in which five heroines bewailed, or made the most of, their fates, was described as the best of the scripts, 'well-written, well-cast and well-acted'. The climax of the act was the 'eruption onto the stage of the only Lyndon herself as a blood-curdling Medea – a side of her personality that is usually seen only at Union meetings'.⁸² Dressed in dark clothes, fierce expression and dramatic pose she performed a parody of Flanders and Swann's *Madeira M'Dear*.

*Be a Medea, m'dear / It's really the fashion this year
Just chop up your kiddies / They make a good stew
Or even a pudding – I leave it to you.*⁸³

Ellen Jordan describes the Medea sketch as a 'knock-out, very melodramatic, even if the story was somewhat muddled'. Joan of Arc ('get me to the stake on

⁸⁰ *Semper Floreat*, 3 March 1960

⁸¹ *Semper Floreat*, 28 April 1960, p.8

⁸² *Semper Floreat*, p.8, *Documents*, p.27

⁸³ *Documents*, p.31. The British duo 'Flanders and Swann' comprised the actor and singer Michael Flanders (1922-1975) and the composer, pianist and linguist Donald Swann (1923–1994) who collaborated in writing and performing comic songs. Between 1956 and 1967 they performed their songs in their long-running two-man revues *At the Drop of a Hat* and *At the Drop of Another Hat*. Both revues were recorded in concert along with several studio-based tracks. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flanders_and_Swann>

time') was hilarious, Romeo and Juliet sweet and sad.⁸⁴ Joan also wrote, acted and sang *The Ballad of the Short-Sighted Viewer*, described as 'a remarkable virtuoso performance containing some even more remarkable rimes'.⁸⁵ As Joan was very short sighted, this would appear to be a good example of making light of one's afflictions. Her valedictory entry in *Semper Floreat* sums up her character nicely:

Joan Lyndon: also known as 'Crazy Jane' and lots of other things. Hates greasers who complain about their badge, Brisbane employers, 'Truth' – otherwise of an amiable disposition. Ostensibly doing an MA in English but more concerned about getting married. Looks like succeeding at last. Also a star of 'Scoop', the dramatic society (except when she steals their costumes), debating, National Union, art exhibitions. She says of *Semper*, 'all my own work', thus taking credit for the big picture, no matter who might have helped along the way!⁸⁶

Looking to the Future:

In participating in such a wide range of social and cultural activities at university Joan Lyndon had a large circle of friends. She also had several boyfriends – intelligent young men who were involved in the dramatic and debating societies as well as *Semper Floreat*, and who liked to party. Yet a very different kind of friendship had been developing during her undergraduate years.

Joan Lyndon met James (Jim) Semple Kerr in the winter of 1956.⁸⁷ Although he was attending the university for its rowing team's training facilities rather than its educational opportunities, he was required to enrol in several subjects and chose philosophy, history and German.⁸⁸ Joan learnt that he had notes for several history lectures she had missed through illness (provided to Jim Kerr when he was absent from campus, in Victoria training with the Queensland eight). When Joan went to ask if she could borrow the notes she was astonished to find his room full of rowing pennants and cups. He was *the* 'Kerr' – captain of the Commercial Rowing Club and stroke of the eight – whom her father (then

⁸⁴ Interview with Jordan

⁸⁵ *Semper Floreat*, November 1960, p.8 (the words have been lost)

⁸⁶ *Semper Floreat*, November 1960

⁸⁷ James Semple Kerr was born in Rockhampton on 6 July 1932, son of James Kerr and Iris Rudd whose father had been a travelling salesman in far-west Queensland before his marriage. Iris defied her father to married Kerr (a returned soldier) in 1921 and they settled on an undeveloped soldier settlement at Kununa between Winton and Cloncurry. (*Heritage*, entries pp 143&447)

⁸⁸ *Pictorial Biography*, pp 6-7

president of the Brisbane District Rowing Association) had been talking about for years.⁸⁹ It was apparently a pleasant meeting but as they moved in different circles at university nothing more came of it.

Having missed out on selection for the 1956 Olympic Games, Jim Kerr moved to Sydney in 1957 to row in the NSW eight, aiming for Commonwealth Games selection. In 1958, on a visit to Brisbane, he and Joan met again, quite casually. After returning south he wrote to her; she replied. From then onwards they corresponded regularly, sounding out each other's ideas on life and literature and finally, love.⁹⁰ Jim Kerr's family lived in St Lucia at the time but he gives the impression of having been something of a loner. Although Joan was thoroughly integrated into university life, she had often been excluded from family and school activities because of her illness so they shared a common bond in an 'outsider' sense of themselves. Jim Kerr, a tall man of few words and an air of authority and dependability and Joan Lyndon, short, voluble, inclined to flights of fancy and still vulnerable to debilitating attacks of asthma – it was a classic case of attraction of opposites. According to their daughter Tamsin Kerr they 'constrained each other', and kept the extremes of each other's personality in check.⁹¹

Although she accepted Jim Kerr's proposal of marriage in August 1959 Joan Lyndon would not commit herself to setting a date for the wedding.⁹² Family life had not been 'a rosy picture of mum, dad six kids and domestic bliss' and one reason for her procrastination was the need to ensure they were compatible.⁹³ In December 1959 she wrote:

I feel sure I could never love anyone else as honestly and as much as I love you – ever. And I don't want to be a career woman any more. I want to have someone to love and who loves me – but not just yet...I just wish you didn't want to get married.⁹⁴

She visited Jim Kerr in Sydney several times during 1960, travelling by plane when she could, on other occasions by train. On her return to Brisbane she often wrote immediately, pouring out her anxieties – 'feel[ing] dead, sick and somehow stupid to be back in Brisbane. Perhaps I'll liven up after a sleep, but right now I just want you'.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ NLA Interview, p.17

⁹⁰ *Pictorial Biography*, p.7

⁹¹ Steggall, conversation with Tamsin Kerr, June 2008

⁹² *Pictorial Biography*, p.11

⁹³ NLA Interview, p.8

⁹⁴ Joan Lyndon to Jim Kerr, 15 December 1959, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.15

⁹⁵ Joan Lyndon to Jim Kerr, 19 January, 1960, Kerr Correspondence Archive

Many of her friends were amazed when they announced their engagement in January 1960.⁹⁶ One lecturer commented, 'I never thought you would marry a sporting hearty, Joan'.⁹⁷ She had not initially thought he was 'her type' either and so had not talked about him to her friends, but now she was eager for their approval.⁹⁸ 'It's like displaying a story, painting or thesis that is yours and which you like but which you feel no one else can possibly understand or appreciate properly,' she wrote in a letter to Jim. 'However after a few have, you gradually gain more confidence and "display" your object with great self-complacency'. She was also keen for Jim's acquaintances to approve of her. 'I like being liked', she wrote shortly after the announcement of their engagement.⁹⁹

She was quite prepared to give up her friends if they didn't immediately warm to him.¹⁰⁰ However one friend who appeared genuinely pleased was Joan's *Semper* co-editor Bill Sparkes who wrote to her with 'very sincere congratulations' on her engagement, sure that her 'transformation from political into domestic animal [would] be quite successful' and hoping she would write an article on her 'first attempt at cooking a roast dinner'.¹⁰¹ Although Sparkes' correspondence adds colour and flavour to their life at university, the letters are verbose, full of student 'erudition' (bravado) – nothing particularly quotable. What is interesting is just how much and how often they wrote amongst the circle of friends. Many of the letters in Jim Kerr's files are between Joan and the young male acquaintances with whom she worked on student affairs (union, newspaper, dramatic society). From these letters it is obvious that Joan Lyndon was one of the gang, her intelligence, drive and energy respected – certainly *not* the one to make the tea and hand around the sandwiches.

In spite of vacillating between the idea of marriage (or perhaps the strength, dependability and companionship that marriage to Jim Kerr would bring) the prospect of losing her independent lifestyle, and worry about the problems associated with her asthma, Joan Lyndon finally agreed on a date for the

⁹⁶ Interview with Sullivan

⁹⁷ NLA Interview, pp 17-18

⁹⁸ Letter to Jim Kerr, Kerr Correspondence Archive

⁹⁹ Letter from Joan Lyndon to Jim Kerr, 24 January 1960, Kerr Correspondence Archive

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Joan Lyndon to Jim Kerr, 24 January 1960, Kerr Correspondence Archive

¹⁰¹ Letter from Bill Sparkes to Joan Lyndon, 15 August 1960, 5 pages, Joan Kerr Correspondence Archive

wedding.¹⁰² Initially they intended to marry in Sydney but family pressures probably decided otherwise and they were married at All Saints Church Wickham Terrace, Brisbane on 30 November 1960.¹⁰³ Determined not to stand on ceremony, and declaring that she 'wasn't going to waste money on bloody clothes you'd never wear twice', Joan borrowed 'the girl next door's Child of Mary dress and a veil from the dentist's daughter'.¹⁰⁴ Ellen Jordan, who also did not approve of elaborate weddings – "I'm not getting married; I'm not having a reception; not having a bridal dress", that sort of thing' – feels she may have influenced Joan.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps neither of the Kerrs wanted a grand ceremony. Very likely the Lyndons could not afford a lavish affair.¹⁰⁶

After their wedding, and a honeymoon spent in leisurely exploration of the countryside between Brisbane and Sydney, they settled into Jim Kerr's room in the boarding house at 39 Murdoch Street, Cremorne on Sydney's lower North Shore where he had been living prior to their marriage. Conditions were cramped and somewhat primitive, but being of an adventurous spirit, Joan Kerr found her new life exciting.¹⁰⁷

From 1958 to 1960, Jim Kerr had been earning an erratic but sufficient income through modest buying and selling on the stock exchange in Sydney plus freelance work in forensic and clinical photography. (He was also taking art courses at North Sydney Technical College at night.¹⁰⁸) Once he decided to marry he looked for more stable employment. Qantas offered him a job as a booking officer, to start in January 1961.¹⁰⁹ The next step was to have their own home. In 1960 Jim Kerr had bought a half-acre block at 86a Provincial Road Lindfield and it was there they had constructed one of the early Pettit and Sevitt designs (a

¹⁰² *Pictorial Biography*, p.11. 'if you had to wait on me hand and foot for about ten weeks a year at least, in which time I looked absolutely repulsive, couldn't eat, sleep, move and only just breathe (I can't even get up to have a bath...), I am therefore smelly and dirty as well as uncombed and shapeless... if you had to witness all this and live with it I would love you less just as much as you would love me less' (Joan Kerr to Jim Kerr, 17 August 1959).

¹⁰³ *Documents*, pp 36-37

¹⁰⁴ NLA Interview, p.15

¹⁰⁵ Jordan returned to the subject later in our interview and thought she might have attached too much importance to her influence over Joan Lyndon

¹⁰⁶ Bob Lyndon had already told his daughter he could pay for the wedding or she could have a 'big fridge'. Joan opted for the fridge. NLA Interview, p.15

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Joan Kerr, June 2001

¹⁰⁸ *Comment on Joan Kerr in Context: A Biography*, prepared for Susan Margaret Steggall by James Semple Kerr, 17 May 2009, p.4

¹⁰⁹ *Pictorial Biography*, p.16

pleasant flat-roofed, window-filled house, set on low pylons) that were very popular with young married couples.¹¹⁰

Before the advent of women's liberation in Australia, there were strong expectations that the husband would be head of the household regardless of the wife's level of education. According to Ellen Jordan, it was Jim Kerr who wanted to live the suburban dream of stability: house and children, with himself as the breadwinner and Joan the company executive's wife, albeit a well read and intelligent one. 'He didn't control her ideas but he did control the shape their lives took,' Jordan says. 'He'd say "we'll do this" and they did it; "we're going to live in Sydney and we're going to have children" and they did.'¹¹¹ Jim Kerr writes that he although he knew by mid 1959 that he wanted to marry Joan it was probably a long time after their marriage that he realized he was truly in love with her. He also writes that it took him many years to appreciate that the 'concepts of gender relationships' under which he had been brought up had significantly changed.¹¹² As Joan Kerr did not keep diaries in the interesting sense of the term (she mainly used a diary for notes, appointments and commitments and for the last fifteen years or so of her life, turned to the computer for this function), there is no record from her side of the state of affairs.

Whatever her status as 'wife', Joan Kerr wanted to continue acting and writing for the theatre such as the Phillip Street Revue (a form of entertainment that flourished during the 1950s and 60s at the Phillip Street Theatre in Sydney). In 2003 she told Martin Thomas that perhaps she had always preferred writing and producing to acting.¹¹³ Yet evidence is against this: in Geneva in the mid 1960s she joined the English Drama Society (playing the part of the widow in a production of Chekov's *The Widow*) and when in London auditioned for an amateur theatrical company, the Ealing Light Classical (and was rejected because of her Australian accent, the excerpts she chose to interpret and lack of recognition of her Queensland University experiences as bona fide qualifications).¹¹⁴

However her plans for a career in theatre did not eventuate. Instead Joan Kerr

¹¹⁰ Pettit and Sevitt: a construction company, operating in the 1960s, that produced architect-designed affordable housing that were particularly popular among the young middle class, especially on Sydney's North Shore.

¹¹¹ Interview with Jordan

¹¹² J.S. Kerr, *Metamorphoses*, NLA MS10099, 21 February 2008, pp 50-51

¹¹³ 30 September 2003

¹¹⁴ Interview with Joan Kerr, June 2001

returned to her interest in journalism and early in 1961 applied for, and was accepted into, a position as a 'D-grade journalist' (her description¹¹⁵) on the magazine *Weekend* with academic and author Donald Horne (1921-2005) as its editor. Horne's strongly held opinions made him one of the most instantly recognizable and controversial figures of his day. In his own words his life, like Joan Kerr's, was in part a problem of enthusiasm management. One could also say that Kerr, like Horne was 'addicted to keeping the conversation going'.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless he was a good editor and an excellent mentor for young journalists.

In 1954 Horne had been asked by Frank Packer to launch *Weekend*, a magazine full of 'light, amusing material', evoking relaxation and escape, and including plenty of visual material, especially pin-up girls. Horne described the content of *Weekend* as 'all these little bits of rubbish' and 'a series of sideshows'. Its sales pitch however proclaimed it 'Australia's brightest newspaper'.¹¹⁷ Joan Kerr was given two to three pages per week in which to write stories and edit contributions on 'Old Australia', which meant covering any aspect of popular heritage she fancied. The Kerrs often travelled out into the countryside at weekends, Joan to write and Jim to take photographs for her stories.¹¹⁸ Although Kerr later credited Horne and her apprenticeship on *Weekend* with helping to hone her writing style, she could only have worked on *Weekend* for about six months, and near the end of the magazine's life. Perhaps she had much stronger memories of the experience than the magazine's editor had of her. Horne certainly does not mention her in his memoirs. Whatever her status Joan embraced the work wholeheartedly.

Lucy Sullivan remembers one occasion when her sister Ellen was very upset with her friend. Jim had taken a photo of Joan pretending to get her foot stuck in old leg irons, saying "Arrgghh!" Ellen was disgusted and told Lucy that Joan was going against everything they believed in about history as a serious discipline that one did not demean with frivolity. When Lucy confronted Joan she merely said, 'Oh I thought I was doing a good thing, at least making ordinary people interested in history'. Joan Kerr wasn't making fun of history – she was simply 'getting an

¹¹⁵ As Kerr describes herself in her CV, 2003

¹¹⁶ Donald Horne, memoir of his life from 1958 to 1999, *Into the Open*, HarperCollinsPublishers, Australia, 2000

¹¹⁷ Donald Horne, Part 2: Adventurer (1954-1958), Ch 9: 'The Temptation of excitement', *An Interrupted Life*, HarperCollinsPublishers, Australia, 1998, pp 724-730; Donald Horne, Ch1. 'Fun and Improvisation: The Court of Sir Frank Packer', *Into The Open*, p.1

¹¹⁸ NLA Interview, p.20

interest in history into a popular newspaper', a working practice that stayed with her for the rest of her career.¹¹⁹



5. Joan Kerr re-enacting history, Penzig verandah Wallacia, 1961
(Photograph by Jim Kerr)

It was generally an enjoyable time in their lives even if Joan's health continued to cause stress. As a child she had had to submit to many dubious treatments but as she grew up the most effective treatment for her asthma attacks was a long-term cortisone regime prescribed by a locum in Brisbane. A doctor in Sydney, John Mutton, decided to wean her progressively off steroids and replace them with a schedule suggested by her own Brisbane doctor, Ion Morrison, of intramuscular aminophylline and subcutaneous adrenaline four times per day, an onerous regime for both Joan and Jim who had to administer the injections, but one which appeared to bring improvements in Joan's condition.¹²⁰

Motherhood:

In 1961, Frank Packer asked Horne to bury the *Australian Woman's Mirror* by putting *Weekend* and the *Mirror* together into a new publication, to be called *Everybody's*. Although its first issue sold nearly half a million copies, Horne's aim

¹¹⁹ Interview with Sullivan

¹²⁰ NLA Interview, p.8; *Pictorial Biography*, p.19; Note from Dr Ion D. Morrison (allergist) Brisbane, Kerr Archive

of turning away former readers was quickly fulfilled.¹²¹ At about the same time, Joan had to tell Horne she was pregnant. He simply said, 'Oh what a pity. I loved having you as a journalist. Isn't that sad? Bye-bye'. According to Kerr, it wasn't unfair, it was just automatic: 'You accepted that pregnant women simply didn't work; it never occurred to me that I should feel resentful'.¹²²

It was a time when bright young women struggled to find their way in a world that admitted them to the challenges and freedom of university life but required them to conform to society's rigid conventions once they married. After the reforms brought about by the worldwide student and worker uprisings of 1968, this changed radically, as I know from my own career when as a university graduate employed in a professional environment in the early 1970s, I could work to within weeks of the births of both my children. But in 1961 Joan Kerr had to retire from the workforce – not easy for a bright intellect used to the cut-and-thrust challenges of Sydney's media world. Her life was also remote from the university campus although she wrote pieces for the 'Scoop IV' Revue and kept in contact with her Brisbane friends, particularly those on the *Semper Floreat* editorial committee.

Tamsin's birth on 11 April 1962 was a difficult one requiring early hospital admission, anaesthetics and a forceps delivery, followed by hallucinations for several days.¹²³ Joan's recovery was complicated by pyelo-nephritis and a potassium deficiency thought to have been caused by earlier steroid use. Altogether she needed five weeks' expert care – both in the Royal North Shore Hospital and at home by registered nurses.¹²⁴ Joan found the transition from the stimulating life of a journalist with its passing parade of unorthodox people and interesting places to that of a suburban mother with a new baby, virtually no family support and erratic post-natal health frustrating and depressing.¹²⁵ She would have benefited from the experience and advice of older female relatives but there were none on hand. She found she did not have much empathy with the baby and later admitted she probably left Tamsin alone too much in her pram: 'I

¹²¹ Donald Horne, Ch1. 'Fun and Improvisation: The Court of Sir Frank Packer', pp 56-60. *Everybody's* began to lose sales week by week and by March 1962 it was in serious trouble.

¹²² NLA Interview, p.20

¹²³ Full name Thomasin Joan Kerr, as listed on Joan Kerr's passport of 1967, personal details page reproduced in *Pictorial Biography*, p.29

¹²⁴ Royal North Shore Hospital documents, 26 April, 1962, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.23

¹²⁵ *Pictorial Biography*, p.23

wouldn't talk to her for a while,' Joan said, 'and then I suddenly realized I should pay more attention'.¹²⁶

A Broader View:

Early in 1962 Qantas appointed eight trainees (Jim Kerr among them) to move through its marketing, passenger and freight operations to gain a broad view of the company before being dispatched overseas. Jim Kerr was to be sent to Singapore but at the last moment he was posted to Switzerland and left for Geneva in February 1963. Joan (already pregnant with their second child) and Tamsin joined him there two months later.

Given Joan Kerr's frustration with maternity and domesticity, one wonders how their marriage would have fared, how her life might have unfolded, if they had stayed in Sydney. It is difficult see her remaining a fulltime, stay-at-home mother. She would surely have gravitated towards intellectual fulfilment and a career. A chance to live in another country, and experience the rich artistic and literary culture of Europe was to have a beneficial, positive, effect far in excess of the simple excitement of travel abroad.

However it was not easy living in a foreign culture with two very young children (James Semple Kerr was born in Geneva on 21 August 1963¹²⁷) in an expatriate community that, to Joan's generous nature, was quite narrow in attitude. She had studied French at university and was able to converse with shopkeepers and market people but found none of the intellectual conversation she craved. As a rising young executive (manager of Qantas in Switzerland) Jim Kerr was required to entertain business colleagues. Joan once again called on her theatrical talents and carried out her role of hostess with laid-back Aussie charm although she told Martin Thomas decades later that she hated entertaining, hated being the company wife – 'very boring'.¹²⁸

One of society's most entrenched beliefs is that women are naturally maternal

¹²⁶ NLA Interview, p.21. Joan later showed this attitude of benign neglect towards her grandchildren, Steggall conversation with Tamsin Kerr June 2008. According to Tamsin, Joan Kerr only started taking in interest in Katrina (the eldest of the Kerr grandchildren) when the girl was in her teens. Across a certificate sent to Joan Kerr on becoming godmother to Sally Jane Monroe (7 December 1959) Kerr later wrote: 'Oh neglectful godmother!', indicating a lack of empathy (albeit unintentional) for all young children, *Documents*, p.22

¹²⁷ Joan Kerr's passport, No: G 219038, dated 21 August, 1967, photograph page reproduced in *Pictorial Biography*, p.29

¹²⁸ NLA Interview, p.21

with no need of guidance in rearing children. That this is not always the case places a heavy burden on many women. Lucy Sullivan recalls that when she visited Joan in Geneva in 1964, James (junior) was about seven months old but did not seem to be achieving the expected developmental milestones. Sullivan realized that he had not learnt how to take things in his hands. 'You don't think you're teaching a baby to hold things but you do,' Sullivan says, 'and Joan hadn't ever done anything like handing him objects. So I got him and it only took two goes'.¹²⁹

Although she was calm and affectionate with the children, Joan appeared to have none of the 'instincts that are evident in many families, that you stimulate a child, you bring it along. She more or less just accepted that they were there'.¹³⁰ According to Ellen Jordan, not paying much attention to the children was 'partly this thing of Joan's exhaustion' when at times she would just collapse and have no choice other than to leave the children to their own devices.¹³¹ The *au pair* system as well as visiting Australian friends provided much-needed help, which meant that Joan Kerr could move freely in public again and visit galleries and museums with her husband.¹³²

In 1964 Jim Kerr was posted to London as the European marketing manager for Qantas. It was a more interesting job for Jim and a better situation for Joan, as she no longer had to entertain.¹³³ Yet she was still frustrated with her life as a stay-at-home mother. The avant-garde fashions of Mary Quant, the mini-skirts worn by the waif-like model Twiggy and the statuesque Jean Shrimpton, the Mersey-Side new wave of British pop music (not to mention pop art) and the thousands of young Australians pouring into London's Earl's Court from the P&O liners, represented a world very different to Kerr's domesticated existence. Many years later, Joan Kerr ruefully remarked to journalist Murray Waldren, that although sixties London 'swung' around her, with two kids to look after, she couldn't 'swing that much'.¹³⁴

In spite of this Joan never lost her appetite for cultural adventure. As Lucy Sullivan recalls when in London in 1965, Joan kept her in touch with 'the latest

¹²⁹ Interview with Sullivan

¹³⁰ Interview with Sullivan

¹³¹ Interview with Jordan

¹³² NLA Interview, p.19; *Pictorial Biography*, p.29

¹³³ NLA Interview, p.21

¹³⁴ Murray Waldren, 'The rewriting on the wall', *The Australian Magazine*, 19-20 September 1992, p.34

thing – what everyone was talking about. She had a good ear for that. You'd visit her and whatever had been in the *Sunday Times* or something, she'd be talking about it...With Joan you were pulled into a world that was exciting'.¹³⁵

Changing Times:

The Kerrs found a reasonably priced, albeit old and somewhat shabby flat in Knightsbridge. Although on the eighth floor, it was large (three bedrooms), within walking distance of the Qantas office in Piccadilly and had a view across the rooftops to Westminster Abbey.¹³⁶ They again profited from the *au pair* system by renting the spare room on the condition that the tenant baby-sit for three nights a week to allow freedom for the theatre and study, marking the end of Joan's commitment to full-time motherhood. Tamsin Kerr maintains that in London she and her brother were virtually brought up by the *au pairs* whom they saw more often than they did their mother.¹³⁷

Joan's health continued to cause anxiety, particularly the development of skin cancers, for which a doctor in Geneva had confirmed a 1950s arsenic-based 'cure' as their cause. The dry ice treatment at St John's Hospital for Diseases of the Skin was ineffective and when she left London four years later, her torso was covered in a range of carcinomas.¹³⁸ Asthma caused problems on only two occasions. The first was in England when she spent a fortnight in the Brompton Chest Hospital. The second episode occurred on their last trip to France in 1968, when they were following the western pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela – a distressing incident as the quality of medical care and accommodation in isolated French villages was poor.¹³⁹ It was to be Joan's last disabling attack as the emergence of a new generation of drugs such as Intal, were to keep her asthma under control.

The Kerrs soon became familiar with London's many landmarks and, through the cheap airfares available to Qantas employees, those of Europe especially Greece and France during the long summer holidays. On weekends the family explored England's coastline and wilderness areas, cathedrals, art galleries, stone-age monuments and ruins of mediaeval monasteries.¹⁴⁰ Lucy and her

¹³⁵ Interview with Sullivan

¹³⁶ 52 Knightsbridge Court, Sloane Street, S.W.1, *Pictorial Biography*, p.36

¹³⁷ Conversation with Tamsin Kerr, June 2008

¹³⁸ *Pictorial Biography*, pp 44&71

¹³⁹ *Pictorial Biography*, pp 44-45 (Intal: Cromolyn Sodium Inhalation Aerosol)

¹⁴⁰ *Pictorial Biography*, p.46

husband John Sullivan often looked after the children. 'It was nice for us to come up and live in Knightsbridge or Kensington,' Sullivan recalls. 'They were a sort of settled, well-off family whereas we were living on a shoestring.' Joan had developed into a talented and inventive cook with a particular way with soups and casseroles. Ellen Jordan also remembers Joan as being 'a superb cook' – 'when we were in London, nothing but beautiful food there' – with an interest in the history of cooking as well.¹⁴¹ A decade later, Yorkshire friend Anne Hilton, talked about Joan's ability to produce 'copious soups out of nothing. The story was that they were concocted from the stuff being thrown out at the end of market day. Whether this is true or not...those soups also made for some great social evenings'.¹⁴² If the Kerrs shared their food and lodgings with friends, offspring of friends and acquaintances of friends, they in turn were invited to spend weekends with likeminded people, often with cultural sightseeing on the agenda.



6. Joan and her children, Tamsin and James, in France, September 1967
(Photograph by Jim Kerr)

Lucy Sullivan sensed that even so, Joan still felt isolated from intellectual life and longed to replicate the environment of her university days – an environment where people were enthusiastic about challenging ideas and wanted to discuss them in depth. A male friend who acted as *au pair* for the Kerrs for a time in London told Sullivan he thought Joan was frustrated by the lack of intellectual conversation at home. Sullivan thinks the Kerrs resolved this tension by studying together 'where Joan could see all the capabilities Jim had'.¹⁴³ Sullivan thinks Jim

¹⁴¹ Interview with Jordan

¹⁴² Anne Hilton, 'My memories of Joan', 17 March 2004, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.67

¹⁴³ Interview with Sullivan; corroborated by Tamsin Kerr, June 2008

was the influence that ‘moved Joan into art’ but according to Tamsin Kerr, it was a mutual development, one reason her parents gravitated to architectural history being to learn in depth about the buildings they had been visiting.¹⁴⁴

At university, Joan Kerr had been so firmly oriented towards the spoken and written word – drama, literature and journalism – that her move to the visual at a time when art was not ‘really the thing for intellectuals’, still intrigues her friends especially as when Jordan met up with Joan Kerr in London, late in 1964, they renewed their passionate conversations about books.¹⁴⁵ As well as Charlotte M. Yonge, they read Anthony Powell, Dorothy Sayers, Rose Macaulay, Jane Austen and Barbara Pym.¹⁴⁶ They also read Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, a book Jordan says, that ‘opened women’s eyes and enabled them to make decisions’.¹⁴⁷ With this in mind, Ellen Jordan sees the Kerrs move into art somewhat differently to her sister. Joan, she thinks, was going through a ‘Betty Friedan stage’, feeling the need to do something else with her life, something more than being a ‘company wife’. By early 1966 Tamsin was four and James nearly three; they were no longer babies dependent on their mother and she was approaching thirty.¹⁴⁸ Surrounded by the cultural riches of Europe, it was now time to commit to acquiring a level of knowledge beyond that of informed tourist. Chapter Three, *Housewife to Historian*, charts Joan Kerr’s journey to recognition as a renowned art and architectural historian.

In November 1968 Qantas posted Jim Kerr back to Australia. The Kerr family returned to Sydney and almost immediately bought a house in Turramurra.¹⁴⁹ While both Kerrs would spend time overseas – quite long periods when undertaking further courses of study – and live in Canberra twice (for several years each time) Sydney’s North Shore would be their home, for the rest of Joan Kerr’s life.

¹⁴⁴ Interviews with Tamsin Kerr and Lucy Sullivan

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Jordan

¹⁴⁶ Charlotte M. Yonge (1823–1901), British teacher and Victorian era author of many fiction and non-fiction works, including her best-seller, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853). The Reverend John Keble who was credited with the revival of High Church Anglicanism in the Tractarian or Oxford Movement, influenced Yonge's fiction and educational writings as an exponent on morality and popularising High Church teachings. Her influence on the women educators of her day and generations to come was profound. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Mary_Yonge>

¹⁴⁷ Published in paperback, c.1963

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Jordan

¹⁴⁹ 4 Terrigal Avenue, *Pictorial Biography*, p.47

Chapter Three: Housewife to Historian

In an interview in 1986 Joan Kerr described Sir Nicholas Pevsner as ‘an inspirational teacher’ who changed her from a housewife with two small children into an architectural historian.¹ It is a remark that neatly sums up the journey taken by Kerr from a stay-at-home twenty-something mother to the mature scholar and author of major publications in Australian art and architectural history. Not content simply to accept established traditions in these scholarly fields she developed her own sense of historical production by privileging context – time and place – to bring to life the societies in which artworks, designs and buildings were created.² Joan Kerr first made her mark in architectural history so the focus of this chapter is on her progress through the history of the bricks and mortar of Australia’s built environment.

Her approach was quantitative rather than a qualitative. She proved her points not with theory, but with what was to become a trademark piling-upon-pile of examples. If in 2002 Julie Willis and Bronwyn Hanna were ‘rather apologetic about privileging “empirical recovery over feminist readings of the history of women architects in Australia”’, Kerr urged them not to be. ‘Only through this sort of exemplary detailed research can the old master myths be laid to rest,’ she wrote.³

However this approach creates difficulties for scholars when discussing and analysing her work as they too risk resorting to ‘lots and lots’ (a favourite Kerr expression) of examples and ending up with a kind of list that could seem either bewildering or irrelevant to the reader. It is easy to get caught up in Kerr’s cornucopia of knowledge but very difficult to know when and where to stop.

¹ ‘Talking heads’, *Art Club Newsletter*, No.3, February 1986, based on a questionnaire distributed to all Sydney University lecturers and tutors

² Email (19 September 2008) from landscape architect Sue Boden who studied Fine Art at ANU from 1979-1983

³ Joan Kerr, review of *Women Architects in Australia 1900-1950*, Julie Willis & Bronwyn Hanna eds, (Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2001) in *Art Monthly Australia*, 152, August 2002, pp 18-20

Pastures New:

Before the Kerrs left Australia for Switzerland in 1963 Joan Kerr was interested in art in the way she was interested in all things cultural and creative. In Australia Jim Kerr had been a keen photographer, interested particularly in the relationship between figures and landscape – ‘art photos, not just family snapshots of Joan’, Lucy Sullivan recalls.⁴ Jim Kerr owned books on art but neither of them had shown any inclination to consider art-related fields of study as a career.⁵ Although Joan Kerr is on record as saying she would have liked to study architecture, the combination of subjects required for university admission to this faculty would have been impossible within her particular educational environment. There are ways and means of overcoming such handicaps (bridging courses for example) but Kerr did not pursue these. Her primary focus at university lay clearly in literature and drama.

In London in 1966 the Kerrs’ first foray into further education was a series of lectures on the great buildings of Europe. The course proved to be low key, with little commitment required from the students, and not nearly challenging enough to satisfy Joan Kerr’s restless intellect and thirst for knowledge. According to Jim Kerr, she then ‘spotted’ an advertisement for a two-year diploma certificate on mediaeval art and architecture at the Courtauld Institute, and enrolled both of them (he was working fulltime with Qantas, she had a more flexible daytime agenda).

The Institute, which opened in October 1932 with W.G. Constable as its director, was the brainchild of Lord Lee of Fareham who wanted to set up a centre for the study of art in Britain to rival similar institutions in Europe and America. Lacking funds for his project, Lee co-opted two distinguished and wealthy art collectors, Sir Robert Witt and Samuel Courtauld whose generous donation of his grand house in Portman Square is acknowledged in the Institute’s name. Its aim was to teach art and archaeology, from prehistory to the mediaeval, renaissance and baroque periods to prepare students for museum work and postgraduate research. It was a tall order for a fulltime staff of three. However Constable had at his disposal an impressive group of occasional lecturers such as Roger Fry, Kenneth Clark, Herbert Read and, as the 1930s progressed, an increasing number of eminent European art historians who were

⁴ Interview with Sullivan

⁵ *Pictorial Biography*, p.21

fleeing fascist regimes, including Erwin Panofsky (en route to America), and Nikolaus Pevsner.⁶

The first year of the Kerrs' certificate course consisted of a once-a-week lecture over three terms on topics ranging from early Christian art and architecture through to 13th-century architecture, sculpture and painting. A comprehensive bibliography included major texts published in the 1950s and 60s in both English and French. Although this diploma offered a more serious engagement with architectural history than the Kerrs' first attempt at further education, both Joan and Jim Kerr found it 'a very funny course'. Joan Kerr maintained that the Courtauld Institute ran it simply to make money from 'outsiders who wanted to have a bit of culture'.⁷

She took the two-paper examination in June 1967 very seriously and was one of the best in the class. Exasperated by the casual attitude of the lecturers, she wrote a cheeky memo to the examiners about how they could improve the course as well as asking questions such as, 'Does Mr Hohler stack his class with honours students because he can't bear us or because he thinks we're beneath contempt?' Julian Gardner – 'one of the good lecturers' – was impressed by the quality of her examination papers and although 'reluctantly unable' to award her a distinction (this being beyond the framework of the course), indicated in his reply to Kerr that there were facilities at the Institute for a degree in art history.⁸

However this was not what the Kerrs wanted. Perhaps their expectations for the course were higher than the level for which it had been designed so their opinion of the lecturers as 'high profile and sometimes shameless' seems a little harsh. Yet the lecturers were certainly 'high profile'. Christopher Hohler (1917-1997) and Sir John Summerson CH CBE (1904-1992), for example, were both very influential postwar English architectural historians. Summerson was noted for his somewhat elitist approach, which might explain a lack of empathy with students.⁹

The Kerrs also attended evening lectures at the Warburg Institute given by German art historian Ernst Gombrich, lunchtime talks at the Victoria & Albert

⁶ Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt*, p.86

<<http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/degreeprogrammes/undergraduate/ba.shtml>>

⁷ NLA Interview, p.21

⁸ *Documents*, p.55, Julian Gardner, letterhead of University of London, Courtauld Institute of Art, 6 July 1967. Kerr told him she did not want to do another undergraduate degree at the Courtauld.

⁹ www.dictionaryofarthhistorians.org/hohlerc.html;

Museum and lectures on the baroque by Anthony Blunt.¹⁰ It was however Sir Nikolaus Pevsner who made the greatest impact on them.¹¹ 'We absorbed his meticulous methodology,' Jim Kerr writes, 'particularly the process of reconstructing history from complex physical fabrics'.¹² Pevsner was very unlike the 'gentleman lecturers' of the Courtauld Institute. At times he could display an abruptness bordering on rudeness but the Kerrs admired him as a man and a scholar and he developed a respect for their intelligence and enthusiasm.¹³ When the Kerrs asked Pevsner if they could audit his lectures at Birkbeck College, he hesitated at first but his concerns about occasional students attending only occasionally were unfounded in the case of Joan and Jim Kerr who were now committed to art and architectural history.¹⁴ Joan Kerr was extremely proud of a reference Pevsner wrote for them:

Joan and Jim Kerr were...infinitely the best students I had at that time and, in fact, looking back over my twenty years at Birkbeck College, they were amongst the best students altogether. It was a bit of a game to see whether in any...examination she came first or he came first.¹⁵

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Summerson

¹⁰ 'He was a very good lecturer but a very withdrawn man', Kerr's opinion of Blunt, NLA Interview, p.22

¹¹ British architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983) was brought up in Leipzig by wealthy Russian-Jewish parents. He attended various eminent art faculties including the universities of Munich, Berlin and Frankfurt before returning to Leipzig to write his dissertation on the baroque architecture of Leipzig in 1924 under Wilhelm Pinder. He married Karola Kurlbaum in 1923, the daughter of a distinguished Berlin lawyer. During the 1920s and early 30s Pevsner worked as curator and art critic and began publishing articles. He also travelled to England to study art. He used his connections in Britain (his maternal grandparents lived there) to secure a two-year fellowship at Birmingham University in 1934. The following year, certain he would never find work in Germany, Pevsner sent for his family.

In 1936 Pevsner published his first English-language book, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement*, and also worked for the editor of the *Architectural Review*. In 1940, he spent time in a Liverpool internment camp but was released through the efforts of well-connected friends. The first volumes of Pevsner's *Pelican History of Art* appeared in 1953. He received British citizenship in 1946 and also in that year joined the BBC to give talks on European art and culture, in all, delivering around eighty talks, including the BBC's Reith Lectures for 1955. In 1959 Birkbeck College at the University of London created a lectureship for Pevsner as well as a full professorship. Pevsner taught as the Slade Professor of art at Oxford, 1968-69. He retired from Birkbeck in 1969. Paul Joyce, 1975, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* article: www.oxforddnb.com.

¹² *Pictorial Biography*, p.39

¹³ Lucy Sullivan confirmed that Pevsner was on friendly terms with the Kerrs, even being invited to parties at their home in London, Interview with Sullivan

¹⁴ NLA Interview, p.23

¹⁵ Photocopy of letter from Sir Nikolaus Pevsner reproduced in *Documents*, p.75; Joan Kerr makes a similar comment in her NLA Interview, p.23

On Home Ground:

At the end of 1968 Qantas recalled Jim Kerr to Australia but well before this Joan Kerr had been looking for career opportunities in Australia. A December 1967 letter from her *Semper* co-editor Bill Sparkes – in which he wrote that he didn't know much about the new Fine Arts Department at Sydney University – indicates that she had been making enquiries.¹⁶

Because of a series of circumstances that saw European artists and art historians settle in Victoria in the late 1930s and early 1940s – either forcibly as war internees or as refugee immigrants – it was in Melbourne that art history was established as a formal academic discipline in Australia. The first incumbent of Melbourne University's *Herald* Chair of Fine Arts, appointed in 1946 by a committee led by Daryl Lindsay (then director of the NGV), was Joseph Burke (1913-1992), an ambitious and gregarious Englishman who had studied at the University of London at a time when many of those displaced European scholars were teaching there. Burke's aim for the fledgling department was to emulate the high standards of scholarship that emanated from European, especially German, universities. Ursula Hoff (1909-2005) who studied art history at the University of Hamburg was the most significant scholar to migrate to Australia at this time. She had worked in London at the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes for several years before arriving in Melbourne in 1939. Three years later she was appointed to the NGV where she worked for over forty years, playing a large part in determining the gallery's acquisitions and in internationalising the institution. She also lectured at Melbourne University.¹⁷

Another important arrival was Franz Philipp (1914-1970) who studied at the University of Vienna in the 1930s. After spending six months in Dachau (in 1939), he escaped from his native Austria and fled to England but was interned and shipped to Australia on the *Dunera* as an enemy alien. After being released from internment in 1942 he gained first class honours in history at Melbourne University. His academic excellence was soon recognized and he was appointed lecturer in the new Department of Fine Arts.¹⁸

During a lecture trip to Sydney in 1948, Joseph Burke met Bernard Smith, then an arts student at Sydney University. Burke must have seen him as potential

¹⁶ Letter from Bill Sparkes, 24 December 1967, in *Documents*, pp 66-67

¹⁷ Sheridan Palmer, Introduction, *Centre of the Periphery: Three European Art Historians in Melbourne*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 2008, p.2

¹⁸ Palmer, Introduction, *Centre of the Periphery*, p.2

academic material since Smith later joined the group at Melbourne University, first as lecturer, then senior lecturer from 1955 to 1963 and Reader from 1964-1966. Smith had earlier studied at the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes in London. He taught in the NSW Department of Education from 1935 to 1944, served as an education officer for the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW) country art exhibitions program from 1944-54 and had written his doctorate at ANU.¹⁹ Smith was thus the logical choice to become the founding Professor of Contemporary Art and Director of the newly created Power Institute of Fine Arts, at Sydney University in 1967.²⁰

In 1969 Joan Kerr applied to the Power Institute to undertake an MA. Because Bernard Smith believed students needed a proper grounding in the European tradition (as taught in Melbourne) in order to understand Australian art and culture, he insisted she first undertake Fine Arts I and II. Joan Kerr was determined to follow the path she had chosen and completed both courses in one year.²¹ (Jim Kerr had obtained permission from Qantas and also enrolled in the Fine Arts II pass course as an irregular student.²²)

It was the art history students in Melbourne in the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of whom went on to obtain important academic or professional positions in Australian universities and museums or at prestigious international institutions, who were Joan Kerr's peers rather than her fellow students in Sydney in 1969. At

¹⁹ Palmer, 'Art history scholarship in the Antipodes', p.155 & Introduction p.7 (*Centre of the Periphery*); *Who's Who in Australia*, Information Australia Group Pty Ltd, 2001, p.1636 and short biography on jacket for *Australian Painting 1788-1970*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2nd edn, 1971

²⁰ Appointments, Resignations, Supplement, *Vestis: the Australian Universities' Review*, Vol.X, No.2, June 1967, p.133

²¹ Susan Steggall, interview with Bernard Smith, December 2006.

Fine Art I (1968 to at least 1976) offered a study of art from the 1880s to the present day and included developments in architecture, sculpture and painting. Fine Arts II & III included aspects of painting, book illumination, sculpture and architecture of 15th-century Northern Europe. Courses were also offered in European art and architecture of the High Renaissance, Baroque and Rococo periods (1500-1750), European art and architecture from 1750-1880 (Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Realism and Impressionism). Students were expected to study work in the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, the Art Gallery of NSW, the Public Library of NSW and were encouraged to visit 'the National Gallery of Victoria and selected Melbourne buildings'. Honours students were required to attend an additional weekly seminar on art theory and also expected to acquire a reading knowledge of one European language, 'preferably Italian', *Dr John Power and the Power Bequest. The Power Institute and The Power Foundation: An Illustrated Survey*, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1976, pp 9-11

²² In a 1976 publication Jim Kerr is listed among students undertaking graduate studies abroad, *Dr John Power and the Power Bequest. The Power Institute and The Power Foundation: an Illustrated Survey*, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1976, p.15

thirty-one, she had come relatively late to art history so perhaps there was already a sense of being an outsider, or at least of being different, in her professional life as had been the case on many occasions in her private life. Illness and poor eyesight had isolated her from the rough and tumble of childhood and peer acceptance at sport as a teenager; maternal duties had excluded her from the excitement of Geneva and London. That she overcame all of this showed a fierce determination to succeed.

Art historian Joanna Mendelssohn first met Kerr in the 1969 Fine Arts II honours group. Mendelssohn remembers her as 'good fun, very incisive' and someone who took excellent notes. Since Kerr was older than Mendelssohn, and already had children, she became something of a role model for the younger woman. Although at times Joan Kerr's demanding schedule (and Jim Kerr's double life as businessman and student) overshadowed parental duties, Mendelssohn thought it quite advantageous for Tamsin and young James to have both parents studying as it provided the youngsters with a good work ethic.²³

After coming first in both Fine Arts I and II Joan Kerr enrolled in an MA. She was also offered a tutorship by Bernard Smith and spent five years in the post although it was not always plain sailing. Smith appreciated her qualities as a teacher and scholar but the fighting force of her personality ensured that theirs was not an easy relationship.²⁴ However confrontations with Bernard Smith did not dampen Kerr's enthusiasm for scholarship – both within and outside the university. In 1969 she became a life member of the National Trust (NSW) and was keenly interested in its work, travelling extensively around NSW (with her family) on Trust outings. She also took her Fine Arts students on excursions to examine buildings as well as art, sometimes extending the official agenda with interesting detours along the way.²⁵

In February 1971 Joan and Jim Kerr bought the old house at 39 Murdoch Street Cremorne where they had begun married life. It had been a boarding house for many years and even though they were able to move in, extensive renovations were required. With the assistance of architect Clive Lucas the entire

²³ Steggall, conversation with Joanna Mendelssohn, November 2006

²⁴ See Chapter Five, *Taking the Mickey*, for discussion on this subject

back section of the house was remodelled and a study installed in the space under the new roof. Work was still being carried out in May 1972 when Jim Kerr (with Joan's encouragement) applied for voluntary retirement from Qantas. With his payout (and heavily discounted airfares), he decided to continue his 're-education' in Britain and from July 1972 embarked on a year-long Diploma of Conservation course at the University of York, finding accommodation with David Alexander, an expert collector of mezzotints who was also undertaking the course. It seems a big step for Jim Kerr to leave his wife with all the domestic and parental responsibilities as well as her own work, but it appears to have been a mutual decision. At least Joan and the children were able to spend three months with him in York during the Christmas break of 1972-73.²⁶

While Jim Kerr was away, Anne and Ray Lanham and their daughter Elvira moved into Murdoch Street. Although it was a 'bit of a squeeze', Joan Kerr was happy with the arrangement as Anne took over most of the domestic duties. During this time a second significant exchange of letters took place between Joan and Jim Kerr. As well as practical matters about life at home and her heavy teaching load, an important topic in Joan Kerr's letters was family tension. The children were finding their father's absence difficult to handle and often behaved badly. After one particularly angry clash between them Joan wrote in a letter to her husband that 'Tamsin really went off the deep end'.²⁷ Tamsin has acknowledged that she and her brother fought, often simply to get their parents' attention, and since most childish squabbles are not one-sided affairs blame could perhaps be apportioned more even-handedly.²⁸

With an absent husband, house renovations, teaching duties and research for her MA, Joan Kerr was a typically over-extended 1970s' mother. She was, however, committed to the family's education. She enrolled Tamsin at SCEGGS Redland and sorted out some confusion over an entry test to have James accepted into the opportunity class at Neutral Bay Primary School. She was also thinking of her husband's career and, mindful of the 'then relatively inflexible

²⁵ *Pictorial Biography*, p.50. Joan Kerr continued this practice later as a lecturer. Jo Holder remembers an excursion to Melbourne to visit an exhibition (circa 1980), and stopping to look at every building along the way that Kerr deemed of interest. For Holder, this showed the influence of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner. 'It was an excellence experience in empirical fieldwork, in both architectural and general art history'. Steggall, interview with Holder, December 2006

²⁶ *Pictorial Biography*, pp 51-52

²⁷ Letter from Joan Kerr to Jim Kerr, 22 September 1972, Kerr Archive

²⁸ Steggall, conversation with Tamsin Kerr

nature of Australian university access', wrote to him suggesting he apply to undertake a PhD at the University of York before returning to Sydney.²⁹

Embracing the Gothic:

Under Pevsner's influence Joan Kerr had intended to concentrate on the mediaeval sculpture and architecture of France and England. Once back on home soil she seized the chance to stake a claim in an under-researched field by changing her focus from Europe to Australia and convincing Bernard Smith to allow her to undertake an MA on colonial church architecture.³⁰

Kerr was interested in the way gothic architecture had been reinterpreted in Australia, not only as a revivalist style but also to evoke memories of English towns. Her MA thesis – *The Development of the Gothic Taste in New South Wales as Exemplified in the Churches of the Colony: from the Beginning of Settlement up to the Establishment of the Victorian Gothic Revival Style at the End of the 1840s* – was, ultimately, quite controversial in that it crossed boundaries between art, architecture and history before such practices became acceptable in Australian universities.

In acknowledging those who had assisted her, Joan Kerr made special mention of Pevsner 'whose general principles of architectural history' she had tried to apply to her topic. She had also aimed to emulate Pevsner's comprehensiveness and thoroughness in her intention to document *all* churches in NSW in the first fifty or so years of the colony's existence. Such a survey leaves little room for reflection on social aspects of a taste for the Gothic/k and although Kerr makes frequent reference to the idea of associationism – that practice of 'dotting the Australian countryside with faithful copies of English mediaeval churches'³¹ – there is no deeper examination of 'why', other than the obvious one of nostalgia.

Kerr began her MA thesis with the churches that introduced the Australian Gothic revival in the Macquarie era (1810-1822) although, she argued, they only did so because of later additions and alterations to their fabric.³² To examine this 'primitive and unwitting historicism' Kerr included a large amount of detailed building history, not only to establish the type of the late Georgian church built in

²⁹ Letter from Joan Kerr to Jim Kerr, May 1973, Kerr Archive

³⁰ NLA Interview, p.24

³¹ MA thesis, p.84

³² MA thesis, p.1

the colony but also to explore an attitude of sentimental Romanticism in Australian colonial architecture.³³ She also developed a secondary theme – along the lines of ‘architecture without architects’ – in her conviction that amateurs were designing and remodelling churches. In so doing, Kerr introduced the idea of the *bricoleur*, do-it-yourself ethos in colonial settler society well in advance of the 1992 Sydney Biennale and its theme of the enterprising ‘Boundary Rider’. A good example was Elizabeth Macquarie who was a competent landscape gardener although her tastes were closer to the Picturesque ideals espoused by characters in Jane Austin’s novels than they were to architectural theorists.³⁴

It was Elizabeth Macquarie who had insisted on an evocation of the mediaeval Reculver church ruin (in England) as a suitable model for a church in the Parramatta landscape.³⁵ A ‘more obvious case of pure associationism’ was the first real ‘Gothick’ church in the colony – Christ Church Newcastle, built in 1817 under Macquarie’s direction by Captain James Wallis, Commandant of the Coal River Settlement. According to the Bigge Report, after the first plan for the church was discarded, convict Joseph Lycett was asked to prepare a new plan for a larger building.³⁶ Kerr discovered that Mrs Macquarie employed Lycett as a draughtsman and put a case for the design of the Newcastle church as being by the Scottish-born Elizabeth Macquarie. Kerr backed up her claim with the fact that the church at Newcastle was quite unlike any other in the colony, its only apparent stylistic source an 18th-century Scottish kirk where the bricks were covered with rough-cast cement and the dressed free-stone corners left exposed – a common masonry technique called ‘harling’.³⁷

If the Macquarie era was the heyday of Francis Greenway’s career as colonial architect, after the Macquaries left there was a significant downturn in his fortunes. He found it difficult to make a decent living from his profession and his wife supported both of them by keeping a school. In the 1820s he turned his hand

³³ MA thesis, p.2

³⁴ MA thesis, pp 12-18

³⁵ MA thesis, p.18; also in Kerr and Broadbent, ‘The English background’, in *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*, Joan Kerr and James Broadbent eds, David Ell Press (in association with the Elizabeth Bay House Trust), Sydney, 1980, p.39

³⁶ MA thesis, p.19. John Thomas Bigge (1780-1843) was commissioned in 1817 by the Earl of Bathurst to examine the effectiveness of transportation as a deterrent to felons. His royal commission, issued on 5 January 1819, authorized an investigation of ‘all the laws regulations and usages of the settlements’, notably those affecting civil administration, management of convicts, development of the courts, the Church, trade, revenue and natural resources < <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs>>.

³⁷ MA thesis, p.25

to almost anything – from landscape gardening to extortion.³⁸ In her Franz Philipp Lecture at the 1992 conference of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ), Joan Kerr developed the theme of ‘Somersaults in the Antipodes’ to evoke the perceived ‘upside-downness’ of *terra australis* allied to a similar invertedness of moral and social values.³⁹ This theme gave Kerr the chance to introduce a pair of early 19th-century oil paintings depicting the interior of Newgate Prison at Bristol – ‘rare possibly unique survivals, attributed to Australia’s first official colonial architect Francis Greenway, an inmate of the Bristol Newgate in 1812 before being transported to NSW for forgery’.⁴⁰ While Greenway’s convict past has never been denied in Australia, his importance as the architect of many of New South Wales’ early colonial buildings has pushed his image as a felon into the background. Kerr relished the chance to re-visit these fascinating glimpses of the flesh-and-blood man behind the elegant architecture as a way of bringing alive the colourful and dynamic aspirations of the young colony.

The construction of a Georgian Gothic parish church before 1820 was (here Kerr quotes Kenneth Clark) normally motivated by conservatism rather than by fashionable upper-class Romantic ideas. Francis Greenway’s 1819 design in an English Gothic-style for St Andrew’s Cathedral would not only remind people of Britain and look striking in its proposed setting, but would also be layering ‘Gothic dress on a Georgian church’ – a normal Scottish practice.⁴¹ Across town, the initial somewhat idiosyncratic design for St Mary’s Catholic Church (1821-1830) came from a very different, although equally associationist source. The man in charge was Father Therry, a known Francophile who wrote fluent French and left property to the French Jesuits so it is not surprising that he was inspired by cathedral plans from Catholic France rather than Anglican England.⁴²

Next Kerr looked at ‘Georgian ‘Gothick’ churches extant in NSW from 1824 to 1836. Again she privileged a previously unacknowledged contribution by a woman, Lady Isabella Parry wife of Sir Edward Parry, Commissioner for the Australian Agricultural Company based at Stroud. Kerr claimed her as the likely

³⁸ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, p.45

³⁹ Joan Kerr, ‘Somersaults in the Antipodes’, *Australian Journal of Art*, Vol. II, 1993, pp 9-29

⁴⁰ Joan Kerr, ‘Somersaults in the Antipodes’, p.10

⁴¹ MA thesis, pp 34-36

⁴² MA thesis, pp 38-41

designer for Stroud's St John's Church of England, although she felt Parry lacked the 'architectural tastes of Mrs Macquarie'.⁴³

The section in Kerr's thesis on the 1836 Church Act (which aimed to encourage new church construction through the provision of Government subsidies) is exceptionally lengthy because of much new material she unearthed about the building history of Church Act churches.⁴⁴ She wanted to establish a 'comprehensive typology' for each of the major denominations and trace the growing importance of the architectural profession in NSW between 1836 and 1844, a period that was strongly controlled by the central ecclesiastical authorities.⁴⁵ Even though a combination of amateur designer and artisan builder was typical of the period, the role of the adventurous amateur was coming to an end and when Edmund Blacket (1817-1883) arrived in 1842, the architect began to assume total responsibility.⁴⁶

In exploring the relative importance of the amateur and the professional, Kerr found that the major figures responsible for introducing and encouraging innovation in the Victorian Gothic Revival Anglican churches in NSW were senior clergymen, often bishops who played a hands-on role in church design for example Bishop William Grant Broughton (1788-1853).⁴⁷ Broughton possessed an extensive collection of books on architecture and the dispersal of his library, plus a general ignorance about architectural books, were seen by Kerr as major disadvantages to a comprehensive knowledge of English influence on church architecture in the colony. Until all material concerning source books had been adequately catalogued, she wrote, no comprehensive judgements on stylistic sources could be made.

⁴³ MA thesis, p.70

⁴⁴ *The Church Act* of 1836 provided Government subsidies for clerical salaries and for new church construction. Church communities that raised a minimum of £300 pounds were subsidised on a 'pound for pound' basis up to a maximum of £1,000. Additional land grants were also made available for churches and schools. Originally intended for Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian denominations Governor Bourke later extended the provisions of the Act to other denominations including the Jewish, Wesleyan and Baptist communities.

www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/history_nation/religion/places/act.html

⁴⁵ Kerr included particularly detailed analysis of the five major churches in the 'Church Act' style: St Andrew's Anglican Cathedral Sydney (1837-42); St Paul's Church of England, Cobbitty (1840-42); Holy Trinity Church of England, Miller's Point (1840-45); St John the Evangelist's Church of England, Camden (1840-49); St Patrick's Catholic Church, Church Hill (1840-45); MA thesis, pp 235-236

⁴⁶ MA thesis, p.291

⁴⁷ MA thesis, pp 253-254

Kerr concluded her thesis with a regret that so few early churches had survived and virtually none in their original condition. 'There is not a single Church Act church extant in NSW that one can point to as an unaltered example of the style,' she wrote. 'The future of church buildings in Australia,' 'looks even blacker than the future of the Church.'⁴⁸

Her examiners, architectural historian Professor John Freeland (1920-1983) and historian Associate Professor Ken Cable (1929-2003), found positive and negative aspects in Kerr's thesis although neither was sure whether to position it as history, architectural history or art history.⁴⁹ Freeland described her gathering and interpretation of evidence as 'even too diligent as it has a certain mole-like quality to it which sometimes seems over-concerned with very minor matters'. He did however conclude that Kerr's thesis would make an 'important contribution to the knowledge of Australian architectural history both because of its scope and because of its soundness and reliability'.

Cable commended the candidate's 'ingenuity in locating and interpreting a massive range of local sources' and the 'degree of judgement and perspicacity in the assessment of many small and often imperfect pieces of evidence that would do credit to any historian'. Although Cable found the work 'attractively presented' and easy to read, he had reservations about Kerr's hybrid approach and were he examining the thesis for an Honours degree in history, he would have liked more of an overall historical perspective that included an account of the development of 'taste' in the colony in relation to its British background. He also thought Kerr had not paid sufficient attention to religious developments in NSW. Cable praised Kerr (as a fine arts student) for having made a 'more than useful contribution to the development of the Gothic style in Australian cultural and religious history' although he sometimes had the impression that the story was being told for its own sake (too much irrelevant detail) with insufficient discipline in editing.

Joan Kerr must have felt somewhat uneasy about the reception of her thesis as she contacted Ian Jack, a scholar of Australian history and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Sydney University. Jack began a letter to her by saying that although her work might suffer from falling between disciplines, she was underrating the thesis:

⁴⁸ MA thesis, pp 293-294

⁴⁹ Examiners' reports dated 19 August 1976, accompanying a letter from Ian Jack to H. Bryan, University Librarian, Fisher Library, 3 June 1977 enclosing the index Jack had compiled to be filed with the library copy of Kerr's thesis, Kerr Archive

Naturally a historian can snipe at some aspects of the historical approach; naturally an architect can find some fault. The whole problem of doing theses on topics which are not obviously mainstream to the department in which they are located worries me very much...I think that your thesis was essentially a first-rate study in historical Archaeology, which is the reason for my not just tolerating it but wanting it on my bookshelves.⁵⁰

While it is easy to see the pertinence of these remarks in a 21st-century cross-disciplinary age, in the 1970s no one was looking at the architecture of the fledgling colony in such a holistic manner. And if there were some instances of writing not far removed from Kerr's student and *Weekend* pieces in the use of words such as 'a lot', 'bits' and a few chummy 'we's', the thesis was a major step in introducing Joan Kerr to the world as an architectural historian.

One of Kerr's earliest publications on Australian architecture, written during her MA candidature, was a review of the history of Glebe (Sydney) by Bernard and Kate Smith – both eminent historians and residents of that locality.⁵¹ Since Kerr was in the process of completing her postgraduate degree it would seem quite a bold move to critique her professor and supervisor. In hindsight, her review of the Smiths' book, together with reviews of two books published by the Australian Council of National Trusts, give pointers to her later scholarly strengths as a pioneer academic in the developing discipline of heritage architecture.⁵²

The most 'compelling and attractive quality' of the first of the Trust's books, *Historic Houses of Australia*, was the photographs that made it 'the sort of coffee-table volume that justifies the species'. However a major defect for Kerr was the absence of properly dated plans that would have made the 'accretions and alterations' comprehensible:

Their absence is even more felt than the apparently deliberate omission of such desirable pedantry as footnotes, bibliographies and an index...It would surely not affect the popular appeal of the series if the Trust similarly realized that such books could profitably aim to be something more than a collection of pretty faces animatedly

⁵⁰ Letter from Ian Jack to Joan Kerr in York, 6 September, 1976, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.57; Letter from Ian Jack to Joan Kerr, 6 September 1976, Kerr Correspondence Archive

⁵¹ Joan Kerr, Review of *The Architectural Character of Glebe Sydney*, by Bernard and Kate Smith, University Co-op Bookshop, Sydney, 1973, in *Art & Australia*, Volume 12, No.2, 1974, p.133

⁵² Joan Kerr, review of *Historic Houses of Australia* (Australian Council of National Trusts – Cassell, Melbourne, 1974); and *Early Colonial Houses of New South Wales*, by Rachel Roxburgh, (Ure Smith, Sydney, 1974), in *Art & Australia*, Vol.13, No.1, 1975, p.42

chattering about their pedigrees.⁵³

The second book reviewed, that by Rachel Roxburgh on the 'rather over-exposed topic of the early colonial houses of New South Wales', was praised by Kerr for not being a 'regurgitation of the tired clichés of many of the previous volumes on the topic, but a re-creation of a vanished world through detailed architectural drawings and plans, and a comprehensive analysis of the architecture of each house'. In saying it was 'the work of an amateur in the literal and most complimentary sense of the word', Kerr was giving genuine praise. Later she would work with many amateur researchers and well understood their passion for unearthing little known aspects of Australia's cultural heritage. It is interesting that Kerr describes Roxburgh's approach as 're-animating' houses, 'making us almost capable of experiencing their life and beauty in their heyday'.⁵⁴ Bringing to life houses and their occupants was to become a cornerstone of Joan Kerr's own way of 'doing history'.

Ambitions Abroad:

The Fine Arts Department at Sydney University was not only proving stressful as a teaching environment but also intransigent in its attitude to Ph.D topics, so Kerr decided to look elsewhere, even before she had submitted her MA thesis.⁵⁵ It seems a tall order to overlap two major postgraduate projects but Joan Kerr was a scholar in a hurry when both she and Jim Kerr enrolled for doctorates at the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, University of York, to commence in 1974. Since their subjects concerned Australian architecture they were allowed to spend the first year carrying out fieldwork at home. However in spite of delays in the marking of Joan Kerr's MA, by mid 1975 the Kerrs could no longer postpone their departure for York. They left the house in Murdoch Street and the whole family left for England in August 1975.⁵⁶

Again they stayed with David Alexander. Joan Kerr managed well on a stringent budget, dressing herself and the children in second hand clothes and

⁵³ Joan Kerr, review of *Historic Houses of Australia*, p.42

⁵⁴ Joan Kerr, review of *Early Colonial Houses of New South Wales*, p.42

⁵⁵ *Pictorial Biography*, pp 54-55

⁵⁶ Joan Kerr's MA was awarded in May 1976 and she was admitted to the degree of Master of Arts (Honours) Class II, in November 1976 (*Documents*, p.100). Certificate from the University of Sydney, signed by Bruce Williams Vice-Chancellor and Ian Jack, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, 1 November 1976

eke-ing out groceries in imaginative if at times unorthodox cooking.⁵⁷ Parenting duties were shared: Jim Kerr made breakfast and took the children to school; Joan Kerr did the shopping, collected the children and cooked dinner at night. During the day they went on field trips to inspect buildings, sometimes co-opting other students to look after the children in the afternoons.⁵⁸ The Kerrs also took turns to conduct research in London, making good use of British Rail's cheap excursion fares. It was a punishing, physically demanding schedule yet Joan Kerr said she loved her time in York.⁵⁹ What Tamsin and young James made of their life there is hard to determine but from Tamsin's comments, the teenagers were pretty much left to fend for themselves and often had to depend on adults other than their parents for assistance and guidance.⁶⁰

During the summers of 1976 and 1977, the Kerrs travelled by rail and bus throughout the British Isles to explore buildings and ruins.⁶¹ Sometimes the children were taken on excursions by visiting friends, with or without their parents. In a postcard to Joan on one such visit to the Lakes District, Tamsin informed her mother that she was glad she hadn't come along since

we took all that day getting to and seeing (from the car) the lake district. Very nice, you might think...but the car smelt all the way of petrol. We had to keep getting out – white all over (especially James – the terrible) and re Cooperating [sic]. Just imagine if there were three of us stuffed in the back all smelling petrol.⁶²

Although Joan Kerr had been awarded a travelling scholarship,⁶³ resources were limited so theses had to be completed in the shortest possible time. She maximised use of her earlier research so that her D.Phil thesis, *Designing a Colonial Church: Church Building in New South Wales 1788-1888*, was heavily based on her MA, differing only in the extension of the cut-off date from the late 1840s to 1888, with condensation of the original material and new material added

⁵⁷ *Pictorial Biography*, p.59

⁵⁸ Steggall, conversation with Joan Kerr, July 2001

⁵⁹ Steggall, conversation with Joan Kerr, July 2001

⁶⁰ Interviews with Anne Lanham and Tamsin Kerr

⁶¹ *Pictorial Biography*, p.64

⁶² Tamsin Kerr to her mother circa May 1976 following a visit to the Lake District with James Broadbent, *Documents*, p.96

⁶³ Eleanor Sophia Wood Travelling Scholarship, awarded for 1976 from Sydney University, letter of 24 July 1975 from Jean D. Foley, Registrar to Mrs E.J. Kerr, *Documents*, p.89

to cover the extra decades, beginning with the establishment of Early Victorian associational Gothic in the second half of the 1840s.⁶⁴

Kerr researched four hundred churches in all, grouped into five main periods: early colonial Georgian and Regency; 'Church Act' buildings of 1836-1846; Early Victorian archaeological Gothic churches; High Victorian styles, and Late Victorian local and English designs. Her compilation of a preliminary listing of architectural books known to have been in NSW at the time, plus a comprehensive bibliography of Australian and English material, made good her intention to remedy the 'state of ignorance' (mentioned in her MA) with regard to the cataloguing of source books.

Kerr introduced her D.Phil thesis with a quotation from Horace Walpole's Preface to *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1788) about wanting to divert as well as inform, to 'enliven the dryness of the subject by inserting facts not totally foreign to it'. Although she was not hopeful of 'affording much entertainment', the use of Walpole's words indicates Kerr did want to entertain as well as instruct. As for inserting facts, she certainly did that, but whether her work was truly a 'comparative study that attempts to place Australian ecclesiastical architecture in its international context as a colonial dependency of Britain', with research carried out in both countries,⁶⁵ is less certain. Research *in* England yes, but not *about* England. Perhaps a truly comparative study, over the time frame of a century, would have been an impossibly large topic, even for Joan Kerr.

She selected churches ranging from primitive buildings of rammed earth and wood to elaborate Gothic Revival cathedrals because they represented a type or movement, and sometimes 'just because they [we]re there' – social artefacts that illuminated the tastes of their colonial designers, architects and builders. As in her MA thesis, Kerr highlighted the importance of the amateur designer in the colony and the relatively minor role played by the professional architect before the middle of the 19th century.⁶⁶

Again Kerr begins her thesis with a discussion of the attempt to reproduce a rural Georgian church in the colony's first two permanent churches at Sydney and Parramatta as expressed in the work of Francis Greenway, followed by examples ranging from the Reverend Johnson's 'temporary place of worship', to Governor King's 'Saxon' additions to St Phillip's, Mrs Macquarie's Reculver towers, the

⁶⁴ Joan Kerr, D.Phil thesis, p.426

⁶⁵ D.Phil thesis, p.1

harled church at Newcastle, and the Gothick follies of Father Therry (St Mary's Cathedral).⁶⁷ With the passing of Governor Bourke's Church Act in 1836, church building became more standardised in scale and appearance since architects had to be employed to qualify for government grants – and possibly less interesting to Kerr who was always on the lookout for a creative amateur designer.⁶⁸

In England, Kerr noted, Gothic churches had to be large, cheap and urban but since Australian society was sparse and rural, it was neither possible nor desirable to impose English styles wholesale on Australian communities. The best of the later Victorian architects was John Horbury Hunt (1838-1904) who was able to modify the English High Victorian Gothic style to suit local conditions, as in Armidale's splendid 'rogue Gothic cathedral'.⁶⁹ There were other significant attempts to design for local conditions, for example orientation towards (or away from) the sun and in favour of prevailing breezes, or Bishop Polding's desire for stone tracery in the windows of St Patrick's Cathedral to prevent the glass breaking in Sydney's westerly ('brickfielder') winds.⁷⁰ Later Kerr would view the creative pragmatism of local architects and craftsmen as a positive transformation into something uniquely Australian.

Joan and Jim Kerr finished their work on their target date of 24 October 1977, submitting their theses together, to the Registrar at four that afternoon. The examiners completed their assessments with great efficiency and apparently conducted both the Kerrs' vivas three weeks later in a friendly and informal atmosphere.⁷¹ On 7 July 1978, Eleanor Joan Kerr and James Semple Kerr were each awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the University of York.⁷²

⁶⁶ D.Phil thesis, p.2

⁶⁷ In architectural terms, a 'folly' is an ornamental building, usually a tower or mock Gothic ruin (*The Oxford Concise Dictionary*, 8th edn R.E. Allen ed, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990). Kerr was also using the term in the sense of an eccentric, over-elaborate or excessively costly design. (Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation)

⁶⁸ D.Phil thesis, p.425

⁶⁹ D.Phil thesis, pp 428-430

⁷⁰ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, p.126, for discussion of Polding's ideas

⁷¹ *Pictorial Biography*, p.63

⁷² *Documents*, p.104. *Designing a Colonial Church: Church Architecture in NSW 1788-1888*, was published by British Theses in Print, Wetherby, West Yorks (UK), 1978 (D.Phil. in microfiche and hard copy); also lodged in microfiche at the Library of the University of NSW. Jim Kerr's D.Phil thesis, *Design for Convicts: an Account of the Design for Convict Establishments in the Australian Colonies During the Transportation Era*, was published by the National Trust of Australia (NSW) in 1984. An exhibition and book from this, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Australia's Places of Confinement, 1788-1988* with an introduction by

On Her Way:

When she returned to Sydney in December 1977 Joan Kerr did not seek employment at Sydney University. Perhaps no position was available. Perhaps it was a decision (in the light of her crisis of confidence about her MA) to move away from the confines of academia. In any event, she applied to the Recruitment Division of the Public Service Board for the position of Senior Education Officer, AGNSW and was advised on 28 December 1977 that she had been accepted. However change was in the air again as Jim Kerr was to take up the post of Assistant Director, Australian Heritage Commission in Canberra at the beginning of 1978.⁷³ Joan Kerr withdrew her application for the position at the AGNSW as she did not relish the idea of another separation. Jim 'hates travelling,' she wrote to David Alexander. She also said she wouldn't have enjoyed Sydney without him and the house would be 'ridiculously large' for just Tamsin and herself.⁷⁴ So the Kerrs bought a house in Braddon and Tamsin moved to a secondary school in Canberra. Young James continued as a boarder at The King's School in Parramatta, Sydney.

Joan Kerr did not particularly like Canberra – a city she described as architecturally 'dreary', 'designed by a board' and seriously lacking in bookshops – but was determined to make the most of it.⁷⁵ She applied for a job in Fine Arts at ANU and was offered the position of tutor, to cover art from the late 19th century to the emergence of Modernism.⁷⁶ She enjoyed the interaction with the students although there were frustrations: the department lacked slides, books and money and her relations with the director Sasha Grishin were often strained.⁷⁷ She became reacquainted with historian Humphrey McQueen whom she described in a letter to David Alexander, as a 'major intellectual solace', indicating a level of loneliness for like-minded individuals.⁷⁸ Yet family life appeared lively with the play readings from her childhood making a comeback.

Joan Kerr, was published by the National Trust of Australia (NSW) in 1988.

⁷³ Draft of a letter from Joan Kerr (Cremorne address), 21 December, 1977 to the Selection Committee of the Public Service Board, declining the position of Senior Education Officer at the AGNSW, *Documents*, p.101

⁷⁴ Joan Kerr to David Alexander, 11 January 1978, Kerr Archive

⁷⁵ Joan Kerr to David Alexander, 26 February 1978, Kerr Archive

⁷⁶ Confirmed in a letter from G.E. Dicken, Academic Registrar ANU, 26 February 1978

⁷⁷ NLA Interview, p.26; conversation with Joan Kerr, 2001

⁷⁸ Joan Kerr, letter to David Alexander, November, 1978, Kerr Archive

A Canberran friend, Ann Foley, remembers Joan's pumpkin pie from that time with admiration and respect: 'a revelation to me for whom vegetables were vegetables and sweets were sweets'. Foley also remembers reading *The Importance of Being Ernest*, with all those present taking parts. In a letter to Tamsin Kerr, Foley provides a sympathetic snapshot of Kerr family life:

My household at that time was full of kids and football and bikes and swimming. Yours was adults, travel, tea chests and bookcases and tables and chairs full of books...In my memory she [Joan] was always generating projects, forever devising ways of fitting more in...I remember her cherishing texture and style, particularly a grey-silver silk shirt and lots of black leather boots and skirts.⁷⁹

Lucy Sullivan remembers Joan Kerr wearing men's shirts and jumpers, mostly black, and 'dressing like fifties students' far longer than anyone else. In a display of inverse snobbery Kerr once referred to a dress by a renowned Australian designer, as 'old rags'. 'Anyone could see that it was something good,' Sullivan said. 'But she was saying, "my real thing is old rags"'.⁸⁰ Candice Bruce also remembers Kerr's indifference to fashion:

[She had] long messy hair, never wore make-up, jewellery or high heels...I think she had one of those floppy felt hats in the '70s – sort of hippyish. Later in life she began to wear bright colours as well as black and the occasional brooch...She wore enormous glasses that she was always cleaning because they were always finger-print-smearred.⁸¹

Tamsin Kerr corroborates these impressions. 'She was still dressing terribly, like a student,' Tamsin said, 'and didn't see why she should dress respectably'. (Yet as a student in the late 1950s Joan Kerr dressed smartly and for the times.) Tamsin thinks the *Vogue Living* interview in 1984 might have made her mother realize that if she wanted to advance in the academic world she would have to dress more respectably so she 'went and bought some boring clothes'.⁸²

To advance her research, Kerr applied for a post-doctoral fellowship at ANU and approached Professor Ian Jack for a reference. Although Kerr's ambition to have her D.Phil thesis published in Australia was never realized, a core chapter of

⁷⁹ Ann Foley, letter to Tamsin Kerr, 26 February, 2004, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, pp 70-71

⁸⁰ Interview with Sullivan

⁸¹ Email from Candice Bruce (August 2006) who met Joan Kerr in her first or second year at the Power Institute, in 1970 or 1971. Kerr was Bruce's tutor in Australian art and architecture and she recommended her for her first art job as a research assistant in 1975; also telephone conversation with Bruce, 12 May 2009

⁸² Steggall, Interview with Tamsin Kerr, June 2008

it, plus a glowing letter of recommendation from Jack, won her a two-year fellowship at the Research School of Social Sciences at ANU (1979-1980). Jack's letter is interesting for its contemporaneous assessment of Kerr's work.⁸³ He praises her as 'a thorough, imaginative and enthusiastic scholar' and her work in 19th-century Australian ecclesiastical architecture as 'important and progressive, applying a first-rate background in fine art and architecture to a historical context'. He also notes that her work was more properly appreciated by English scholars than by their Australian counterparts.⁸⁴

Although living in Canberra Kerr also worked on projects in Sydney. Most significant was her collaboration with James Broadbent on the inaugural exhibition at Elizabeth Bay House in March-April 1979 – *Colonial Gothick: the Gothic Revival in NSW 1800-1850*.⁸⁵ Kerr also wrote reviews of exhibitions on architectural themes. The first of these was for another exhibition at Elizabeth Bay House on the work of colonial architect John Verge who

arrived in the colony voluntarily, but with the ambition to make his fortune as a gentleman-farmer. It was fortunate for NSW that he was forced to return to the building trade he had learned in London for, in less than eight working years (1830-1837), he gave his new country the most elegant buildings it was ever to know.⁸⁶

For Kerr, the exhibition was of 'real historic importance' because it gave Australians a chance to see what was at present known of Verge and his work. The use of 'at present' gives those same Australians an interesting slant on Kerr's view of scholarship as fluid, never 'done and dusted', to which her constant updating of texts in the future attests. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the exhibition for Kerr was the production of a comprehensive catalogue as a permanent public record. Although it was 'thorough and not too weighty to be of immediate use in following the exhibition', Kerr would have liked a rather 'more lasting memento' with more photographs to make the catalogue both a souvenir and a permanent research tool – a theme picked up on later in an article on major galleries and the catalogues of their collections.

Kerr also reviewed an exhibition in the King's Hall, Parliament House Canberra of the work of architect Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) and his artist-

⁸³ Sydney University, 22 August 1978, reproduced in *Documents*, p.105. Ian Jack's interest in Kerr's work came from his involvement in colonial archaeology (as head of department at Sydney University from 1974-1977); NLA Interview, p.27

⁸⁴ Letter from Ian Jack, *Documents*, p.105

⁸⁵ See Chapter 4, *Life's Stage*, for more details of the exhibition

designer wife Marion Mahony (1871-1961).⁸⁷ Again the fact that the exhibition added to the public record of Australia's cultural heritage was its most important feature.

Reviews of exhibitions on more general themes such as *Aspects of Australian art 1900-1940*,⁸⁸ *Sydney International Exhibition 1879*⁸⁹ and *Converting the Wilderness*,⁹⁰ and of books such as *The Convict Artists* by J. Hackforth-Jones, *Conrad Martens in Queensland* by J.G. Steele⁹¹ and *Artists in Early Australia and Their Portraits* by Eve Buscombe,⁹² showed Kerr to be broadening her scholarly interests to encompass the visual arts even if her main focus was still architectural history.

The year after the successful *Colonial Gothick* exhibition, its catalogue (written largely by Kerr since Broadbent was in England at the time) was published as *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*. Kerr was excited about this, calling it her 'first real book'.⁹³ She had good reason to be proud of it. According to Clive Lucas OBE, Broadbent and Kerr had brought to life for the first time, a neglected aspect of colonial society:

The governor's palace and the workman's cottage, the creations of sophisticated professionals and ham-fisted amateurs, monuments to the taste of bishops, Scotsmen and ladies have been chosen to illustrate the particularly antipodean flavour imposed on this imported style.⁹⁴

In the wealth of entertaining anecdotes in the book, readers could easily imagine themselves in a 19th-century house or garden. Bringing to life colonial society was an effect Kerr increasingly strove to inject into her writing and her aim of re-enacting a slice of colonial life was transforming her work into what historian Greg Denning calls a 'performative art'. Her descriptions of 'Gothic' objects popular with those who could afford them could almost read as stage directions for a play:

⁸⁶ Joan Kerr, 'Mr John Verge', *Art & Australia*, 16/1, 1978, p.34

⁸⁷ Joan Kerr, 'Walter Burley Griffin', *Art & Australia*, 17/1, 1979, pp 36-37

⁸⁸ *Art & Australia*, 15/4, 1978, pp 352-353

⁸⁹ *Art & Australia*, 17/4, 1980, pp 330-331

⁹⁰ *Art & Australia*, 17/4, 1980, pp 330-331

⁹¹ *Art & Australia*, 17/1, 1979, pp 36-37

⁹² *Art & Australia*, 17/2, 1980, pp 117-118

⁹³ Joan to David Alexander, 5 December 1979, *The Personal Correspondence of Joan and Jim Kerr with David Alexander, 1978-2008*, prepared by James Semple Kerr for the National Library of Australia, 2008

⁹⁴ Clive Lucas, Foreword, *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*, Joan Kerr and James Broadbent eds, p.7

Houses with fireplaces modelled on mediaeval tombs, garden follies made of tree trunks or plaster copies of tree trunks, paintings – or even lamps – depicting mourning ladies wilting beneath Gothic ruins, were all visual equivalents of the Gothick novel. Their purpose was to arouse the emotions rather than the intellect and to conjure up moods and associations rather than to represent genuine mediaeval objects accurately.⁹⁵

Associationism, a term favoured by Kerr, has meaning across several scholarly disciplines. As an aesthetic theory, popularized by Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (published in Edinburgh in 1790 and available in the colony), it refers to that affection for the architecture of the past strongly dependent on the associations that old buildings arouse.⁹⁶ In Australia romantic associations were of even greater importance than they were in Britain because of a longing for the faraway English countryside and its Picturesque ideals. From the very foundation of the colony the rocky landscape lining Port Jackson had been likened to Europe's ancient ruins of towers and battlements. Again Kerr argued that the earliest and most enthusiastic advocate of Picturesque possibilities was Elizabeth Macquarie in her designs for the grounds of Government House and the Orphan School in Parramatta and the area around the Domain in Sydney.⁹⁷

By the 1840s 'the trickle of Gothic buildings had turned into a flood, an inundation that was greatly assisted by English architectural pattern-books' often owned by women. It was Jane, not Sir John, Franklin who owned a copy of John Claudius Loudon's *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture*, 1833.⁹⁸ Designs by artist Georgiana McCrae for the houses she and her husband erected in the early 1840s are the only proven instance of female 'vernacular' design but, Kerr argues, a growing accumulation of circumstantial evidence makes plausible the suggestion that women were largely (albeit anonymously) responsible for the popularity of the Gothic *cottage orné* in NSW in the 1840s and

⁹⁵ Kerr and Broadbent, 'The English background', *Gothick Taste*, p.11

⁹⁶ *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Alan Bullock, Oliver Stallybrass & Stephen Trombey eds, Fontana Press HarperCollins Publishers, London, 2nd edn, 1988, p. 55; *Encarta World English Dictionary*.

⁹⁷ Kerr and Broadbent, 'The English background', *Gothick Taste*, pp 13-14

⁹⁸ John Claudius Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm and Villa Architecture and Furniture: containing Numerous Designs for Dwellings ... Each Design Accompanied by Analytical and Critical Remarks*, London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green and Longman, 1833. Edmund Blacket owned a copy of the 1836 edition of Loudon. From the late 1830s copies of this book were available in Sydney's fledgling libraries even the Mechanic's Institute.

1850s.⁹⁹ These picturesquely gabled and barge boarded cottages built by the professional classes were also designed by their owners including Colonial Architect Mortimer Lewis, lawyer and politician Robert Lowe and artist Conrad Martens.¹⁰⁰ One large but 'stylistically confused' *cottage orné*, the extant *Bronte House* (c.1843), is described by Kerr as 'an amusing mongrel Gothic-Italianate design' that probably owes much to the picturesque tastes of Georgiana Lowe, its first chatelaine.¹⁰¹ On a grander scale, Government House and its 'attendant embellishments', composed as if set in a painting by 17th-century neo-classical landscape painter, Claude Lorrain (1600-1682),¹⁰² marked the apogee of Picturesque Gothick and Sydney University's buildings signified the triumph of the Early Victorian Gothic Revival style. Whether Australian Gothick evolved in either a 'light-hearted and amusing aristocratic English manner' or a 'crude and serious' provincial way, by the mid 19th century, English heritage had become Australian tradition.¹⁰³

Occasionally Kerr gives readers a glimpse into the personalities of those who worshipped in the churches, as when describing Bishop Broughton as open-minded in allowing the use of the term 'altar' rather than 'communion table' although he baulked at stone altars as 'an unwelcome perversion that 'encourag[ed] the notion of an actual and not a spiritual sacrifice'. The reasons for building many of the churches also enabled Kerr to provide insights into colonial life. William Boydell, the owner of the Cam-yr-Allyn property, reputedly erected St Mary's at Allynbrook as a condition for marrying Broughton's daughter, Phoebe. Lieutenant Charles Close provided an amateur design for St James' at Morpeth (1837-41) and built the church and parsonage at his own expense (apart from a government grant of £1,000) as a result of a vow he made when his life was spared in the Peninsular War.¹⁰⁴

In her parade of priests and settlers Kerr creates a vibrant tableau of a society of energetic people, at least the white and mostly well-off ones (although she does discuss the terrace houses and workers' cottages of Paddington and The

⁹⁹ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, p.34

¹⁰⁰ A bargeboard is an ornamental board fixed to the gable-end of a roof to hide the ends of the roof timbers; Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, pp 96-99

¹⁰¹ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, pp 96-109

¹⁰² Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, pp 93-94

¹⁰³ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, p.8

¹⁰⁴ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, pp 74-76

Rocks¹⁰⁵), determined to find themselves a place in the sun. Emotions, ambitions and creativity (good and not so good) plus a little folly added colour, texture and vitality to what could be a dry and dusty record.

In an interview for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Kerr presented herself as a pioneer and her book and exhibition on Gothick taste as the first study of what happens when a European cultural movement (Early Gothick Revival) is imported to a remote and alien land with a small population. Later, in the Victorian period, respect for nature and admiration for the distant past went hand in hand with a concomitant disregard for the immediate past and Kerr regretted that so much early 19th-century architecture had been demolished in the rush to modernize.¹⁰⁶ In publicizing the book *Gothick Taste* Kerr hoped to encourage people to delve into their own history and send her information to add to her growing database – a pattern that was to be repeated many times over the next twenty years.¹⁰⁷

Broadening Horizons:

From 1978, Joan Kerr joined (and served on committees of) the National Trust (ACT), the Royal Australian Historical Society, the Art Association of Australia & New Zealand (AAANZ) and the Australasian Victorian Studies Association. As well as her regular lectures in Fine Arts at ANU, Kerr lectured in the History Department and at the School of the Built Environment, University of Canberra.

By December 1979, she was 'getting bored with the dead white males of colonial architecture' and began working on 19th-century women artists, initially through her interest in their domestic designs.¹⁰⁸ Her article 'Colonial ladies' sketchbooks' (according to Kerr, the first publication on this subject) led to the book *From Sydney Cove to Duntroon* on the women of the pioneering Campbell family, in particular Sophia Campbell (1777-1833).¹⁰⁹ In Kerr's opinion Campbell was the 'earliest and most outstanding' of colonial women artists and her view of the Sydney Barracks in George Street (1817) of significant historical importance since '[e]verything in this

¹⁰⁵ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, p.120

¹⁰⁶ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, pp 137-138

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Smith, 'Book reveals women's role in the early architecture of NSW', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 September 1980, reproduced in *Documents*, p.111

¹⁰⁸ Steggall, conversation with Joan Kerr, February 2002

¹⁰⁹ Joan Kerr, 'Colonial ladies' sketchbooks', *Art & Australia* 17/4, 1980, pp 356-62; Joan Kerr, with introduction by Hugh Falkus, *From Sydney Cove to Duntroon*, Gollancz, London, 1982

view has long been gone'.¹¹⁰ This recurring regret, nostalgia even, for a long lost urban heritage untainted by time and human interference was something that strongly coloured Kerr's developing views on heritage restoration.

In advance of her major project on Edmund Blacket, Kerr wrote a lengthy essay 'Early and High Victorian: the Gothic Revival architecture of E.T. Blacket and Horbury Hunt', which appeared in a *Festschrift* to Bernard Smith.¹¹¹ Smith thought it a very good article, closely argued and well shaped. He admired Kerr's enthusiasm and forensic knowledge of her topics although he once dismissed her work as 'just a lot of 'wombat grubblings',¹¹² a description more apt perhaps than he intended. His evocation of the habits of that quintessentially Australian animal nicely reflect Kerr's devotion to digging deep into Australia's cultural soil to find that extra juicy titbit about an artwork or a building.

The main thrust of Kerr's argument in the essay was that Hunt had always been praised for producing 'highly-individual buildings mostly ahead of his time' while Blacket's Gothic designs were seen as mere 'assemblages of details culled from copy-books'. The aim of her paper therefore was to defend Blacket as a man of his time against architectural historians who denigrated him for being an imitator. Kerr also aimed to show that 'Hunt's wider and more inventive borrowings have been entirely overlooked for the curious reason that to trace specific sources and influences on his architecture is somehow assumed to demean its quality'.¹¹³ Instead of judging 19th-century architects by modern standards of originality,' she argued, 'it would be more useful to examine them in the light of their own architectural context as 'typical products of their respective generations'. According to Kerr, the two architects' maiden works – Blacket's design for the church of Holy Trinity at Berrima and Horbury Hunt's design for the Anglican Cathedral at Newcastle – 'perfectly exemplify the Early Victorian imitator and the High Victorian eclectic'.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ NOTE, 12 May 2009: Recent work by David Hansen of Sotheby's has re-attributed this sketchbook to Edward Close (1790-1866), son-in-law and nephew of Sophia Campbell. According to Sotheby's online catalogue (p.3), 'this re-attribution represents a substantial shift in the canon of early colonial art'.

www.sothebys.com/app/live/LotDetail.jsp?lot_id=159521198

¹¹¹ Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian: the Gothic revival architecture of E.T. Blacket and Horbury Hunt' in *Australian Art and Architecture: Essays Presented to Bernard Smith*, Anthony Bradley & Terry Smith eds, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1980, pp 17-32

¹¹² Interview with Sullivan

¹¹³ Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian', p.17

¹¹⁴ Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian', p.17

If Blacket arrived in 1842 with the aim of creating replicas of mediaeval parish churches on Australian soil, twenty-one years later Hunt was inspired by the High Victorian Gothic movement to create something more personal out of the culture of the Middle Ages. Blacket brought with him books and designs by the Pugins plus copies of the new English *Building* magazine. Hunt also relied on books and trade journals but his 'Gothic heroes' belonged to a younger generation of British architects who had begun to explore mediaeval buildings from other countries and obscure locations. Blacket's most ambitious early building was the Late Perpendicular/Early Tudor style main block of Sydney University (1854-59). Unusually, this did not derive from the colleges at Oxford or Cambridge despite the fact that, traditionally, university architecture was dependent on such prototypes. As Blacket wrote, 'It is impossible for an Englishman to think of a University without thinking of Medieval Architecture'.¹¹⁵ Here Blacket reveals something Kerr does not explore in depth – namely a 'why' for the use of the Gothic style (at least in the case of a university) other than an unexamined nostalgia for 'home'.

Since Hunt was able to modify the conventional English Victorian Gothic Revival style to suit local conditions, he was a more stylistically sophisticated architect than Blacket who, encouraged by patrons yearning for a romanticized past founded in mediaeval parish churches, only wanted to reproduce England. Yet if Blacket's method of designing might have been the *common* way of constructing a medieval revival building in England it was the *only possible* design method for Australian conditions because of the lack of original examples.¹¹⁶ Each architect, Kerr concluded, achieved his aim and 'if today we prefer the local adaptations to the English parish church replicas it is probably because we no longer see ourselves as a society of exiled Englishmen'.¹¹⁷

Edmund Blacket:

Any examination of Anglican church building from the mid 1840s to the late 1860s is necessarily a study of churches designed by Edmund Blacket who is

¹¹⁵ Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian', p.24

¹¹⁶ Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian', p.25

¹¹⁷ Joan Kerr, 'Early and High Victorian', pp 31-32

said to have been employed on one hundred churches in his lifetime, of which about sixty have been proven to be entirely his design.¹¹⁸

As a prelude to her 1983 exhibition of Blacket's work, Kerr published an article entitled 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture'.¹¹⁹ In this she concentrates on the man rather than his work, set within the context of the social and ecclesiastical milieu of the new colony. Bishops and builders, congregations and canons, governors and the governing class all come to life in Kerr's evocation of life in New South Wales.

In a letter of introduction from the Archbishop of Canterbury Blacket is described as 'conversant with all that is essential to the successful management of schools for General Education' so that on his arrival in Sydney in November 1842, he was assured of a good position. Since his supporters and mentors within the Anglican Church were the Bishop of Sydney, William Grant Broughton, and the rector of Christ Church St Lawrence, William Horatio Walsh, it was perhaps inevitable that Blacket became an architect. According to Kerr, Bishop Broughton had been waiting years for someone like Blacket – 'a gentleman, a churchman, a medieval architectural enthusiast, a draftsman who could draw details that an illiterate builder could get more or less right without supervision and a reliable estimator of costs and time of building programmes'.¹²⁰

Blacket's energy and enthusiasm made him a man after Kerr's own heart – a man to be admired for putting up his 'elegant house plate inscribed "Architect and Surveyor" with some bravado and a little private trepidation'. As Blacket wrote to his brother Frank, 'there is nothing to be gained here by hiding one's talents in a Bushel' and, confident of his own abilities and judgement, he 'hop[ed] to have a great hand in improving the taste of the discerning Public upon Ecclesiastical Architecture'.¹²¹ Like Kerr, Blacket was not afraid to buy into controversy. He maintained his allegiance to correct medieval construction 'in spite of all the efforts of its church building committee to thwart the architect', giving people what he thought was good for them rather than what they liked.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Joan Kerr, Introduction, *Our Great Victorian Architect: Edmund Thomas Blacket (1817-1883)*, The National Trust of Australia, Sydney, 1983, p.5; MA thesis, p.288

¹¹⁹ Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', *Heritage Australia*, Summer 1982, pp 38-49

¹²⁰ Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', p.38

¹²¹ E.T. Blacket, letter to Frank Blacket, 22 December 1849, ML 697, quoted in Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', p.38; *Gothick Taste*, p.136

¹²² Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, p.138

The first parish church designed *and* built by Blacket was the small rural church of Holy Trinity, Berrima (1846-1849), an almost complete copy of St Peter's in Biddestone, Wiltshire, a 15th-century building illustrated in A.C. and A.W.N. Pugin's *Examples of Gothic Architecture* (London, 1838-40).¹²³ The highest form of praise one could give a Blacket church, Kerr writes, 'was to say that it looked just like an old village church at Home'.¹²⁴ She argues that it is difficult, late in the 20th century, not only to grasp the concept of wanting to perfect a common ideal while working in isolation twelve thousand miles from one's sources, but also to understand

a culture for which Britain meant everything. Yet both concepts are fundamental to an understanding of Blacket and his work [and] the typical parish church still found throughout Australia was entirely a 19th-century creation introduced to New South Wales by Edmund Blacket.¹²⁵

In 1983, Kerr produced *Edmund Thomas Blacket (1817-1883): Our Great Victorian Architect* as a catalogue for the eponymous exhibition.¹²⁶ What was probably intended to be a relatively modest publication became a significant book since Kerr saw 'Mr Blacket' as considerably helping her chances of wider public and academic recognition:

[I]t is at least a lot of words, even if written too rapidly and presented very cheaply so people can actually buy it. The exhibition...is the first architectural exhibition that has been presented in this way in Australia – that is, with a scholarly and original catalogue/book and a comprehensive look at the work – although there have been, of course, numerous exhibitions in England of this sort. The *Marble Halls* catalogue was one of my major inspirations.¹²⁷

The Introduction to the book begins with prose suitable for an educated lay audience – catchy and informative, not 'talking down'. It also introduces Edmund

¹²³ Kerr and Broadbent, *Gothick Taste*, p.130

¹²⁴ Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', pp 43-44

¹²⁵ Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's contribution to Australian church architecture', p.46. Joan Kerr's work on Blacket made a strong impression on those who worked to safeguard Australia's built-environment heritage and this article on Blacket re-appeared in 1985 in an anthology published by the National Trust: Joan Kerr, 'Edmund Blacket's church architecture', in *Australia in Trust: a Selection of the Best Writings from 'Heritage Australia'*, Australian Council of National Trusts, William Collins Pty Ltd, Sydney 1985, pp 135-145

¹²⁶ Published by the National Trust, Sydney, 1983

¹²⁷ Joan Kerr, letter to David Alexander, 14 January 1983. *Marble Halls: Drawings and Models for Victorian Secular Buildings*, catalogue of the exhibition of the same name held August-October 1973 at the Victoria & Albert Museum, curated by John Physick and Michael Darby. Kerr regularly made requests to Alexander to send books to her in Australia.

Blacket as a man slightly daunted by the variety of buildings he would be required to design: churches and domestic buildings; abattoirs and asylums; banks, barns, breweries and bridges; factories, warehouses, woolstores and chimney stacks; clubs, universities, schools and hospitals; hotels shops and theatres; furniture and furnishings, memorials, tombstones and cemetery vaults. His remark, 'I have a strange variety of matters, and I find that every single scrap of knowledge that I ever picked up anywhere is of service to me'¹²⁸ – and Kerr's observation that 'Picking up "every single scrap of knowledge" and using it for "a strange variety of matter" was to characterise his career' – could equally apply to her own.

Kerr discovered well over a thousand drawings in the Mitchell Library in Blacket's own hand and prized these as essential keys to understanding the colonial past, not only of Sydney and its suburbs but also that of many country towns. 'Blacket,' she writes, 'can almost be said to have built Victorian New South Wales and he certainly was the major creator of Victorian Sydney'. It was to be regretted that Blacket's vision of England in Sydney had largely disappeared and could now only be re-created through photographs and designs.

The publication of Morton Herman's book *The Blackets* in 1963 meant that the Blacket archive could be revised and corrected although Kerr was critical of aspects of Herman's scholarship. His 'greatest flaw', Kerr believed, was to have recreated his subject in his own image, something Kerr considered 'all biographers tend to do', admitting that her new interpretation was probably 'no exception' – as the 'picking up every single scrap of knowledge' remark indicates. Herman's Blacket – 'a Georgian gentleman fighting a polite rear-guard battle against the hideousness of Victorian ornamentation, although occasionally succumbing to its blandishments' – was, Kerr argued, 'the creation of a modernist architect fond of purity and proportions and therefore unsupportable within a proper analysis of all Blacket's work'.

Writing in the 1980s, a generation after Herman, Kerr saw a growing 'enthusiasm for Victorian architecture' as something that enabled her to give a 'more balanced understanding of Blacket's role'. Kerr believed Blacket was 'quite up to date – a cumulative rather than a progressive architect' – one who did not abandon a style just because England no longer found it fashionable. Since so much of Blacket's work had been destroyed Kerr welcomed the opportunity to

¹²⁸ Letter from Edmund Blacket to his brother Frank in London, 22 December 1849, quoted in Joan Kerr, *Edmund Thomas Blacket (1817-1883): Our Great Victorian*

expand the record and preserve Blacket's oeuvre. She intended the book as a guide for anyone wishing to make a 'Blacket pilgrimage'. Her call for notification of errors and omissions was a feature of Pevsner's scholarly practice and not surprisingly, Kerr dedicated 'this modest colonial descendant to him'.

Into the Ring:

In 1980, Joan Kerr was offered a probationary lectureship in Fine Arts at Sydney University, to commence in 1981. Jim Kerr resigned from the Heritage Commission and the Kerrs returned to Sydney to live once again in the house in Murdoch Street, Cremorne. According to Jim Kerr, part of the motivation for his resignation was the fact that for many years his wife had followed his career and it was now her turn to pursue her academic ambitions:

For twenty years she had 'gone where I went' and for the next twenty-four I would follow her. With hindsight 1980 was not a Great Decision Year – merely the occasion for a natural and seamless transition through which we both slipped with comfort.¹²⁹

Lucy Sullivan has a tough comment on this to the effect that it is nice for a man to make such a generous offer when the children are grown up.¹³⁰ Regardless of the timing of Jim Kerr's gesture, it does back up Tamsin Kerr's assertion that Joan Kerr relinquished responsibility for domestic matters around this time and plunged enthusiastically into academic life in Sydney. In addition to a fulltime teaching schedule in three different years of Fine Arts, she was

attempting to do a million other things, apart from rapidly having a total nervous and physical collapse...The move from Canberra to Sydney is to go from a rest home to a mad house. There's actually something wrong with me too. I'm quite enjoying it.¹³¹

Joan Kerr was clearly relishing Sydney's melting pot of people and ideas, unlike her husband whom she described to their friend David Alexander, as 'not a very sociable creature [who] enjoys working from home on his own'.¹³² In their

Architect, p.5

¹²⁹ *Pictorial Biography*, p.71. Jim Kerr continued to work as an independent consultant and completed many important conservation plans during the 1980s such as those for Admiralty House, Cockatoo and Goat Islands, Fort Denison, the Haymarket and many of the major prisons in New South Wales and in the 1990s, Sydney Observatory and Sydney's Opera House.

¹³⁰ Interview with Sullivan

¹³¹ Joan Kerr, letter to Noel Hutchison, 24 April 1981, Kerr Archive

¹³² Joan Kerr, letter to David Alexander, January 1983, in *The Personal Correspondence of Joan and Jim Kerr with David Alexander, 1978-2008*, prepared by James Semple Kerr for the National Library of Australia, 2008

home the Kerrs had separate studies, both rooms overflowing with books. Reading – anything from high art history to low (detective) fiction – was one of Joan Kerr's lifelong passions and Jim Kerr nicely evokes a moment of stillness in a woman who was seldom at rest:

Whatever the subject, Joan read at speed. She would be on her third book when I was completing the first...Joan had an individual and characteristic body language. When reading, she was relaxed, mouth shut and lower lip protruding.¹³³

Yet their house gives little impression of a place in which to relax. Dark rooms and passageways are made darker by plain heavy furniture (although several pieces show Gothic styling) with few upholstered comforts. It is a house belonging to people for whom the richly furnished spaces of the mind are of far greater importance than material and physical ease. Jim Kerr writes that they always worked in the garden together, enjoying it as a place and a time for companionable conversation. He describes the garden as 'very Mediterranean' with a 'pleasant sense of enclosure and shade'.¹³⁴ Perhaps it was so in the 1970s, but when I visited there in June 2001 the grounds were overgrown with little evidence of any flair for gardening.

Although their work was in different aspects of 19th-century architecture, the Kerrs often checked each other's drafts: Jim Kerr to resolve recalcitrant problems in the wording of conservation policies, Joan Kerr mostly for offensive or potentially libellous statements in her articles, particularly those in the area of architectural criticism.¹³⁵

Kerr began her article 'Making it new: historic architecture and its recent literature', with definitions for adaptation, restoration, reconstruction and preservation as compiled by the International Council on Monuments and Sites Australia (ICOMOS), 'since,' she insisted, 'defining what one is doing is a promising step towards knowing why one is doing it'.¹³⁶ Kerr's principal credo for restoration was that 'a building should look old when it is old' and she roundly criticised what she saw as a boom in opportunistic architectural restoration

¹³³ *Pictorial Biography*, p.107

¹³⁴ *Pictorial Biography*, p.99

¹³⁵ *Pictorial Biography*, p.96

¹³⁶ Kerr, 'Making it new: historic architecture and its recent literature', *Meanjin*, 3/1980, pp 364-373. ICOMOS Guidelines to the Burra Charter conservation policy of November 1999 cover the development of conservation policy and implementation strategy. Prominent among the 1999 changes are the recognition of less tangible aspects of

practice in Australia.¹³⁷

This 'boom' was allied to an increase in heritage publications, both scholarly and popular. Kerr had moderate praise for *Australian Pioneer Technology – Sites and Relics*¹³⁸ because the authors' aim to recreate the total environment of 19th-century industrial development in Australia was a 'laudable one' and anything about such neglected material would have been worth publishing since 'minerals, machinery and maltings [were] as vital to the fabric of our past as grand houses or cathedrals'.¹³⁹ She was however critical of the 'heritage' books published by the National Trust because of the absence of plans, diagrams and comparative or technical architectural analyses on the grounds that they would put off the general reader. 'Too many of the chapters in these books', Kerr wrote, 'have always tended to be a summary of the history of the place, with unrelated pretty pictures'.¹⁴⁰

Kerr also criticised *Australian Colonial Architecture* by Philip Cox and Clive Lucas, principally because of the book's concentration on so-called 'vernacular' architecture, a categorisation Kerr considered more fashionable than accurate.¹⁴¹ She was concerned that Cox and Lucas, and to an even greater degree less knowledgeable architects, were being 'seduced' by the presumed original buildings 'to the detriment of the extant'.¹⁴² The problem of restoration to a set date and of which new work should be removed to reveal the old needed careful consideration and Kerr could not condone 'ripping out all the window frames of an 1820s building because they date from the 1880s and installing one's hypothesis of the original windows'.¹⁴³

'Re-animation' was Kerr's preferred option – as in Lucas' restoration work at Elizabeth Bay House in Sydney, Clarendon in Tasmania and Hannibal Hume's cottage at Cooma – rather than either 'rebuilding' or that lamentable 'architectural penchant for destroying the continuous history of a building in the quest for the

cultural significance including those embodied in the use of heritage places, associations with a place and the meanings that places have for people.

¹³⁷ Kerr, 'Making it new', p.364

¹³⁸ Judy Birmingham, Ian Jack and Denis Jeans, *Australian Pioneer Technology – Sites and Relics*, Heinemann Educational Australia, 1979

¹³⁹ Kerr, 'Making it new', p.366

¹⁴⁰ Kerr, 'Making it new', p.367

¹⁴¹ Philip Cox and Clive Lucas, *Australian Colonial Architecture*, Lansdowne Books, Sydney, 1978. Kerr recommended a more systematic approach to classification such as Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's *History of Building Types*, 1976

¹⁴² Kerr, 'Making it new', p.368

¹⁴³ Kerr, 'Making it new', p.371

building as it was, or even as it might have been'.¹⁴⁴ For Kerr, a fundamental problem with restoration architects was that they could not bear to 'leave a building looking old, shabby and untidy' and she was particularly scathing about the fate of Cadman's Cottage in Sydney that had been 'submitted' to restoration in 1973:

If it burned out tomorrow it would not lose a single shingle or stick of wood that predated this restoration...If a building has all the attributes of age it ought to keep them. The restorer's job is merely to make sure it doesn't deteriorate further, and to make it safe for visitors.¹⁴⁵

Kerr concluded that perhaps one reason old buildings in Australia were not simply made structurally sound was that 'clients like to see something for their money'.¹⁴⁶

In 1981 Kerr was made a member of the Architectural Advisory Panel of the National Trust of Australia.¹⁴⁷ She also wrote several articles for the Australian Heritage Commission including one on Macquarie and College Streets in Sydney – the precinct that represents 'the evolution of the public face of Australia's oldest city...from colonial prison to national power' with its range of architectural styles by almost every Colonial Architect of NSW.¹⁴⁸ In it Kerr sets the scene for a lively society ever on the lookout for a quick profit, as she was always on the lookout for a Gothic touch. In summarizing the precinct Kerr writes:

School, museum, cathedral, hospital, office blocks, convict buildings and the seats of the nation's political and legal systems are all found here. They date from almost the beginning of white settlement in Australia. A walk along these streets and through the buildings lining them shows us what local architects made of their European architectural inheritance. More importantly, they contain the institutions, which symbolized civilization to our ancestors.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Kerr, 'Making it new', p.370

¹⁴⁵ Kerr, 'Making it new', p.371

¹⁴⁶ Kerr, 'Making it new', p.372

¹⁴⁷ Letter to Joan Kerr from John Morris, Director, National Trust of Australia, 12 February 1981, informing her officially of her appointment as a member of the Trust's Architectural Advisory Panel — a body that was to have its composition and role expanded, in view of the increasing pressure on the Trust to give expert advice in relation to alterations and additions to buildings.

¹⁴⁸ Joan Kerr, 'Sydney, Macquarie Street, Queen's Square and College Street Precinct', in *The Heritage of Australia*, Australian Heritage Commission & Macmillan Australia, Volume 2, Melbourne, 1981 p.95

¹⁴⁹ Joan Kerr, 'Macquarie Street, Queen's Square and College Street Precinct', p.97

Many times Joan Kerr unearthed plans for buildings far grander than the fledgling colony could afford and which therefore came to nothing. This neither deterred nor depressed her, as it was the *record* of these dreams and the *process* of becoming an established society that was of prime importance.

Kerr introduces an article on Norfolk Island with the obvious point that the island owes both its historical and natural significance to its isolation before beginning a discussion of the three distinct periods of permanent human settlement.¹⁵⁰ Each left behind mementoes now valued as an irreplaceable record of a vanished era. Only traces remain of the first settlement of 1788 to 1814 and although these pre-1815 relics may not seem 'especially impressive' it should be remembered that here was the only equivalent of First Settlement Sydney NSW, where virtually nothing survives.¹⁵¹ In 1856 Norfolk Island became the home of the Pitcairn Islanders, offspring of some of the *Bounty* mutineers and their Tahitian wives, but little remains of their years on the island after they were evicted in 1908. To those who have never visited Norfolk Island, Kerr's article evokes a strange place, forever inhabited by the ghosts of convicts and islanders and the traces of the buildings in which they lived and died.

Saving the ghosts of mainland Australia had never been a priority and even after the National Trust of Australia (NSW) was established in 1945, awareness of the heritage value of Australia's built environment was slow to gather support. In the late 1960s, when major redevelopment was planned for The Rocks area of Sydney, Australians began to realize that although they did not possess those 'ancient piles' of European and British tradition, they did have a rich legacy of colonial architecture. It was worth saving and rapid action was needed to prevent it going under the developers' bulldozers. A consequence of this increasing desire to preserve Australia's early built environment was a growing conservation 'industry', which spawned a new breed of scholars – the architectural historians. Some of them had backgrounds in architecture but others who did not, challenged the right of architects to position themselves as leading experts in the field. Joan Kerr was one of these. She was often critical of the 'too violent scrapings...and renewings made in the furious pursuit of authenticity', especially the 1960s' approach of 'stripping down' (which usually meant tearing down) and the 1970s' fashion of 'doing up' to some approximation of a bygone age.

¹⁵⁰ Joan Kerr, 'Norfolk Island, *The Heritage of Australia*, Australian Heritage Commission, Macmillan Australia, Volume 2, Melbourne, 1981, pp 227-234

‘Conservation should mean giving the existing fabric a renewed lease of life,’ she declared, ‘not destroying the past it has had for the purpose of recreating an imaginary original’.¹⁵²

Elizabeth Farm at Parramatta, reputedly Australia’s oldest building was being restored at the time Kerr was writing this article. The roof, for example, with some of its early shingles under a second roof of galvanised iron dating from 1880, was subsequently repaired with a mix of old and new but in the final result nobody could tell the difference between originals and their replicas. For Kerr this was unfortunate:

Elizabeth Farm should look like the oldest building in Australia after it has been restored. It should not look exactly as it *might* have looked to Elizabeth and John Macarthur in 1793, 1828, 1834, or any other date arbitrarily chosen.¹⁵³

What Kerr meant by this in practice is not easy to articulate but, like the scars and wrinkles acquired on the human body during a lifetime, she wanted a building to carry its wear, tear and weathering – evidence of the ‘half inch that is gone’ evoked by John Ruskin whom Kerr quoted on several occasions:

What copying can there be of surfaces that have been worn half an inch down? The whole finish of the work was in the half inch that is gone; if you attempt to restore that finish, you do it conjecturally; if you copy what is left, granting fidelity to be possible (and what care, or watchfulness, or cost can secure it?), how is the new work better than the old?¹⁵⁴

For Joan Kerr a building should retain some mystery ‘of what it had been and of what it had lost; some sweetness in the gentle lines which rain and sun had wrought’.¹⁵⁵ Overzealous restoration would create nothing but ‘brute hardness’ leaving little room for subtlety – and memory. Over a decade later in her address at the opening of the exhibition *Sisters and Spinsters: the Misses Swann of Elizabeth Farm*, Kerr was ‘especially thankful’ to Elizabeth Swann and her nine daughters for what, at first glance, seem negative gestures: *not* demolishing Elizabeth Farm, *not* selling it for development, *not* wrecking the Macarthur ruin with inappropriate additions, demolitions and reconstructions as later occurred

¹⁵¹ Kerr, ‘Norfolk Island’, p.228

¹⁵² Kerr, ‘Making it new’, pp 370-373

¹⁵³ Kerr, ‘Making it new’, p. 371

¹⁵⁴ Quoted from John Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), in Kerr, ‘Making it new’, p.373

¹⁵⁵ Quoted from John Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in Kerr, ‘Making it new’, p.373

when the NSW Public Works Department removed all traces of the Swanns in the million-dollar restoration that preceded the house's acquisition by the Historic Houses Trust.¹⁵⁶

Another important example of the misguided conviction that 'reconstruction is the same as preservation' occurred at Hyde Park Barracks where 'every shred of evidence relating to the life of the barracks as district courts' had been removed. 'For one hundred years,' Kerr wrote, 'those barracks were used as law courts, which seems pretty significant, yet there is nothing, not one single stick of furniture or bit of floor from then. That's all been ripped out as if it didn't exist'.¹⁵⁷ For Kerr this 'vandalising' of Australia's social history was as serious as the destruction of actual bricks and mortar.

In her 1984 paper, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', Kerr called for 'architectural historian' to be recognized as an independent discipline and approached the need for this through the restoration history of several well-known buildings.¹⁵⁸ Her first example was Philip Cox's revamping of Sydney's Fruit and Flower Markets, which she described as 'a splendid example of international Post-Modernism with a distinctively Australian flavour'.¹⁵⁹ Sections of the old markets had been retained and the tower isolated and enhanced in its new setting to become a major justification for both the brickwork and the decorative detailing in the contemporary design. 'The fabric of this tower,' Kerr wrote, 'is almost entirely unchanged in its upper parts but stands on a base that is all 1980s, so the new paradoxically appears to have been built before the old – a complete inversion of the historical process'.¹⁶⁰

It was a disappointment to Kerr that having lost their place within the general context of Edwardian market buildings, the old components of the complex had been transformed into examples of Jean Baudrillard's 'simulacra', acquiring a status that was neither 'original nor imaginary re-creation'. Kerr acknowledged that every architect creates a new edifice out of fragments of the past and shapes

¹⁵⁶ Curated by Patricia Prociv and Fiona Davies at Elizabeth Farm, Parramatta, 20 September 1998, Kerr Archive

¹⁵⁷ Bartlett, 'Living interview: culture with Kerr'

¹⁵⁸ Joan Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', *Architectural History Papers: Australia and New Zealand, Papers delivered at the Conference 'Architectural historians in Australia'*, Departments of Architecture, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, August 1984, pp 134-142

¹⁵⁹ Opened in 1911 in the Haymarket, Sydney, it was reconstituted as the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), in 1988 under an Act of NSW State Parliament.

¹⁶⁰ Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', p.135

them into some sort of hierarchy, 'yet value need not be assigned according to current taste; no hierarchy has to place the present at the top of the pyramid. Above all, the theoretical values behind such selections and omissions need not be imported'. Kerr believed that Australians should develop a more acute sense of their own history and stop judging everything against overseas models, so that buildings once seen as 'flawed emulations' could be accepted as worthy examples of a European derived but locally established heritage.¹⁶¹

Kerr continued to regret that so few early 19th-century public and domestic buildings exist today in unaltered form. While a laudable sentiment it is also utopian in that it is virtually impossible to escape alteration, especially in Australia where renovation has become a national pastime. Yet Kerr never gave up and in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1998 about the proposed redevelopment of the Sydney Conservatorium site, she set out five (suspicious) reasons why developers insist on 'improving' old Sydney:

- The new bit is so modest (hidden underground, delicately poised above the old or set so far away from it) that it will hardly be noticed;
- The old fabric is worthless in comparison with the proposed 'beautiful new building, wonderfully integrated';
- This is a masterpiece, unlike all other recent developments in Sydney;
- You can trust the heritage architects, world-famous names and/or Government Architect advising on the project. They are experts and you're not;
- Australia cannot afford *not* to develop this site.¹⁶²

Kerr of course believed none of these and a glance at current issues of *Trust News Australia*, reveals that similar battles are still being fought in what is probably an unwinnable war.

¹⁶¹ Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', pp 136-137. This contributes to an understanding as to why she constructed and compiled the *Dictionary of Australian Painters, Sketchers and Engravers from 1788 to 1879* and *Heritage: the National Australian Women's Art Book, 500 Women Artists to 1955* as she did. As with Australian architecture, Kerr claimed Australian art as unique although influenced and descended from European traditions. It was a culture evolving from 'local needs'. She also refused to divide Australian art into 'high style' fine art and low vernacular craft.

¹⁶² Joan Kerr, Letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July 1998, p.38



*7. Joan and Jim Kerr, circa 1987
(Photographer: Tamsin or James Kerr,
Courtesy of Jim Kerr)*

She did not confine herself to 19th-century architecture however and in 1984 turned her attention to the new National Gallery in Canberra (NGA). She was highly critical of its design, especially what she called ‘masterpiece rooms’ that dominated the artworks displayed in them. The design of the NGA, she wrote, had as much to do with ‘the desire for personal immortality on the part of the architect’ as it did with aesthetic considerations.¹⁶³ Kerr took particular exception to the extensive use of chipped concrete – a fashionable process that architects Edwards, Madigan and Torzillo had employed to create the ‘bush-hammered’ surfaces of the High Court of Australia. For Kerr, a technique carried out by a man with a drill and involving ‘thousands of hours of totally mind-destroying work’ was an ‘extraordinary perversion of technology’ and ‘too expensive a price to pay for a surface against which to hang pictures or enjoy because of its subtlety’. She likened the process to the manufacture of glass beads and quoted John Ruskin’s critique of this. According to Ruskin these unnecessary objects demeaned and exhausted the men required to make them. The ‘bush hammering’ on the NGA and the High Court was thus a denial of Ruskin’s rule that a rational society

¹⁶³ Joan Kerr, ‘Does art need bush-hammering? The Australian National Gallery building and its rationale – an architectural and philosophical discussion’, *Artlink*, 3/6, 1984, p.7. This consists of a series of extracts from Joan Kerr’s paper ‘Architecture and art museums in Australia: a context for the Australian National Gallery’, presented at a short conference held on 30 August of that year. (Kerr had been interested in the new National Gallery, from its conception and had written short articles about it, for example, ‘Genesis of a gallery – Part II’ (NGA): *Art & Australia*, 16/2 (1978), pp 130-131

should 'never encourage the manufacture of any article not absolutely necessary'.

Past-Future:

In 1986 Joan Kerr introduced a review of an exhibition of drawings and plans of lighthouses with references to the many 'heart-rendering tales of shipwreck, suffering and heroism' that surround lighthouses.¹⁶⁴ 'The Age of Romanticism will never be over,' she declared, 'as long as the notion of lighthouse continues to conjure up the spectre of the last surviving lighthouse-keeper (new claimants being regularly proclaimed by the popular press in order to sustain the myth) or his brave and beautiful daughter (long dead, but eternally immortalised in purple prose and lonely marble monument)'. She described the lighthouse as a powerful, Janus-faced icon, in 'its perpetual representation of darkness and light', looking out to sea and over the land, standing in the present yet anchored in the past. Many times during her career Kerr referred to Janus, the 'god of gates, doors, doorways, beginnings and endings',¹⁶⁵ to evoke a process of looking back into Australia's heritage to safeguard it for the future, firm in her belief that 'our architecture makes our history, but the reverse is equally true'.¹⁶⁶

By the mid 1980s Joan Kerr was established as an important figure, not only in the teaching of Australian art and architectural history but also in public debate about how art and architecture should be recorded and how Australia's cultural heritage should be preserved. Her talent for putting across complex ideas and large quantities of information was much admired in both lay and academic circles. Integral to this was her love of drama and acting, at ease on life's stage.

¹⁶⁴ Joan Kerr, Review of the exhibition, *Designing Lights: Drawings for Colonial Lighthouses 1817-1899*, *Architecture Bulletin*, 8 (August), 1986 (no page number), at S.H. Ervin Gallery.

¹⁶⁵ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janus_\(mythology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janus_(mythology))

¹⁶⁶ Joan Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', p.141

Chapter Four: Life's Stage

Joan Kerr was directly responsible for a handful of exhibitions (although advisor and mentor to many others), but her lectures and talks numbered in the hundreds.¹ Many of these have been published and are relatively easy to find and categorise. Much of Kerr's unpublished material on a wide range of topics has been preserved but this has not been a systematic process. The biographer therefore has to shape her narrative out of the material at her disposal, much as an archaeologist uses shards and fragments to understand the creative and intellectual intent of the person who made the object or wrote the text. Consistent with Joan Kerr's belief that a curator must have a thorough knowledge of 'available, relevant objects before a valid story line can be invented',² so too must a biographer explore 'available, relevant objects' with an open mind. Thus, there is no pre-ordained story line to this chapter's collection of 'objects' (texts) although limited order has been imposed by presenting a selection of them through themes such as Kerr's coming of age as an art historian, her way of re-enacting Australia's past by mounting exhibitions and her skill in talking to a diverse range of audiences.

Regardless of the form or content of her presentations, Kerr aimed to integrate art, artists and architecture into their historical communities. She once advised students to read her books if they wanted to discover her methodologies. 'I'm not too keen about short slick labels,' she said, 'but if I have to select one I'd pick "contextualist"'.³ If, as a social historian Kerr aimed to put culture in context, she was also a performer who understood art history in theatrical terms rather than as text confined to the written page.

In lectures and conference papers, book launches and exhibition openings Joan Kerr was a lively and informative speaker. Whether in a formal setting such as a university or museum lecture theatre, the social spaces of a church, art gallery or book shop – even *en plein air* – Kerr was good at pitching her delivery

¹ Joan Kerr, CV 2003

² General Chronology Files, Kerr Archive and UNSW Library

³ 'Talking Heads', *Art Club Newsletter*, No.3, February 1986

to a particular audience, slipping in local references where appropriate and including wry jokes to set the mood. The many letters of thanks that came through her letterbox after speaking events attest to the inspiration and enthusiasm she aroused in her audiences, in spite of the occasional bout of intellectual indigestion caused by the surfeit of detail and imagery.

It takes some trouble, however slight, to write a letter at all and people usually only do so if they feel strongly about something – for or against. The preponderance of compliments in Kerr's archive might give a one-sided impression of an always-rosy world but there is no denying Joan Kerr's instinct for rising to the occasion. The fact that her lecturing and writing were accessible and entertaining sometimes attracted the charge of 'populist'. She would, I think, have been satisfied with that description as it meant her work was appreciated by all audiences.⁴

Kerr always animated her talks with slides and when the necessary equipment was not available, she used actual artworks much as an actor uses theatrical props, as in a talk she gave to the Society of Women Writers NSW Inc. in August 2002 at the Mitchell Library. She brought with her paintings by Indigenous and non-Indigenous women artists, a satirical cartoon by Jane Cafarella, a rare cartoon by Grace Cossington Smith (on German rearmament in 1920), a petit-point piece by Narelle Jubelin and a shell covered cardboard Sydney Harbour Bridge by Lola Ryan to illustrate her ideas for an all-inclusive Australian art history. The work of both Jubelin and Ryan is craft based yet it has been collected by the AGNSW. If Lucky Morton Kngwarreye, a traditional painter from the Utopia community in Central Australia, could also execute a figurative work inspired by a television program rather than a handed-down legend, and Sophie Steffanoni could create high-quality embroidery for military regalia as well as impressionist oil paintings, then rigid definitions of what constitutes art, and who can be called 'artist', no longer apply.

Underlying Kerr's art acquisitions was a desire to support artists she admired and although many of the works she purchased had 'autobiographical overtones', she was also attracted to art that related past and present in an original way.⁵ To

⁴ Steggall, interview with Craig Judd, January 2007

⁵ Joan Kerr, 'The "Collectors" from the Fine Arts Department', *At Least it's Gone to a Good Home – Women Artists and Collectors at the University of Sydney, 1971-1991*, curated by Joan Kerr, Therese Kenyon, Sue Best and Bronwyn Hanna, The Tin Sheds Gallery. Power Institute of Fine Arts and the Art Workshop, University of Sydney, Sydney, 1991, pp 16-17

a query about the art she would ideally like to choose (in a questionnaire distributed to teaching staff in the department of Fine Arts in 1986), Kerr replied with a mix of quirkiness and feminist commitment:

I quite like what I've got – works by contemporary Australian artists: Noella Hills, Toni Robertson, Pippa Walker and Vivienne Pengilly. I realize these are all women, but I haven't got anything against male artists – if they're good enough. I also like Victorian modern history and 'marble' painters...I wouldn't want to own a Giorgione because of the responsibility, and I don't like being burgled. In any case great monetary value adds things to paintings that I don't think attractive on one's living room walls.

I wouldn't refuse a really good Victorian architectural perspective such as one of Axel Haig's but on the whole if offered an unlimited choice I think I'd take the money and buy books. I'm a bibliomaniac when it comes to books on Fine Arts.⁶

Kerr chose carefully the location of the launches of her own books, beginning in 1980 with *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*, launched by William Wentworth at a garden party 'in the Gothick taste' at Vaucluse House built in the 1830s by his forebear, William Charles Wentworth.⁷ During September and October 1992 Kerr held several launches for the *Dictionary* in locations with strong links to Australia's cultural heritage: Hyde Park Barracks; MacLaurin Hall at Sydney University and the State Library of Tasmania. In 1995 *Heritage* received the same treatment with launches at the Fremantle Arts Centre WA, the NGV in Melbourne and the NGA in Canberra.⁸ The latter occasion was also the launch of the *National Women's Art Exhibition*. The date? The twentieth anniversary of International Women's Day (March 1995). The theme? The indisputable (e)quality of women's achievements epitomised in a magnificent mudcake proclaiming 'Women Hold up Half the Sky' in its icing.

An Art Historian Comes of Age:

After five years abroad during the 1960s, Kerr became 'passionate' about studying Australian visual culture.⁹ 'I've always liked being a pioneer,' she said in an interview with *Vogue Living* journalist, Deborah Bartlett. 'And if anything was pioneering, it [the local art and architecture] was that. After all, here was this whole visual history of Australia that no one had ever done, so rather than being

⁶ 'Talking Heads', *Art Club Newsletter*, No.3, February 1986

⁷ Joan Kerr, *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*, Joan Kerr and James Broadbent eds, David Ell Press, Sydney, 1980

⁸ Joan Kerr, CV 2003

[the] ninety-ninth person to write on Patrick White, you could be the first!¹⁰

Being 'the first' gave impetus to many of Kerr's research projects and once she had settled back into Sydney life in 1969, she set about writing herself into the (art-historical) record. In addition to tutoring commitments in Fine Arts at Sydney University, Kerr began to branch out into activities beyond the university's walls. In 1970 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) she gave lectures on topics ranging from Late Gothic and Renaissance painting and sculpture in France and Germany to Neo-Classicism, Early and Late Victorian painting and Pre-Raphaelite painting. In the Gallery's 1971 *Grand Visions* series, Kerr presented the June lecture on 'Bosch: deadly sins and other earthly delights'.¹¹

She was again involved with the AGNSW in 1973, giving weekly lectures in August and September on aspects of 18th- and 19th-century culture: 'Patrons and patronage'; 'The Royal Academy'; 'Public buildings and their contents: public affluence and private squalor'; 'Artists and artists' houses (High art and its rewards)'; 'Churches and church furnishing: the opiate of the masses' and one with the fascinating title of 'Aesthetes and Edwardian greenery-gallery, or red, white and blue'.¹²

In the first term Fine Arts II program in 1974 Kerr lectured on subjects ranging from Palladian and Neoclassical Architecture in Britain and France to the Picturesque and the Greek revival, after which she officially ceased tutoring to complete her MA.¹³ However just days before she left for York in July 1975 she gave two lectures at the AGNSW – 'The Royal Academy' and 'Victorian painting and taste' – for which she was warmly thanked: 'There is no doubt that these lectures proved to be most successful and the interest in your lectures indicated by the attendance has caused us to look for better lecture accommodation in the art gallery.'¹⁴

From August 1975 until the end of 1977 Joan Kerr was offstage, in York, completing her doctorate. After taking on the job of tutor at ANU (once back in Australia) she returned to the limelight, giving many lectures and talks not only to undergraduates at the Canberra School of Art but also to students in the Fine Arts

⁹ NLA Interview, p.24

¹⁰ Deborah Bartlett, 'Living Interview: Culture with Kerr'

¹¹ *Documents*, p.73

¹² AGNSW Library Archives

¹³ *Documents*, p.87

and History Departments at ANU (1978-1980). The 1980s was a busy decade and Kerr was doing 'an immense amount' of writing as well as working on the *Dictionary* and curating exhibitions.¹⁵ She also opened exhibitions, gave talks at National Trust, Historic Houses Trust and AGNSW events as well as sitting on several architectural advisory panels and art prize selection committees, the most notable being the Blake Prize for Religious Art. She also gave conference papers and was often a keynote speaker.¹⁶ In 1981 Kerr was made a member of the National Trust of Australia's Architectural Advisory Panel, which was to have its composition and role expanded in view of increasing pressure on the Trust to give expert advice on alterations and additions to buildings.¹⁷

In the same year, Joan Kerr began her tenure as lecturer in the Department Fine Arts at Sydney University. She was passionate about Australian art and was determined to impart to her students, 'a visual awareness of what we've got and what we've had, that there is a cultural inheritance'.¹⁸ She was somewhat critical of colleague Terry Smith's conservative, formalist, approach to art history because 'he never looked at ownership and things', and preferred to lecture on 'pictures with three dots in the corner'. Kerr saw herself as possibly more Marxist than Smith because her work took into consideration dealers and collectors and how objects became famous and valuable. She was more positive about Terry Smith's influence on the growth of the Power Institute as a department with an emphasis on theory, French theory in particular. Kerr remembered him giving a lecture on the interesting idea of 'what if' Michel Foucault came to Botany Bay. Several students developed the idea further and Kerr herself used it in a paper about enclosure and space and surveillance (Bentham's Panopticon) in New South Wales.¹⁹ 'It did look as if we would end up with a new shape to what art

¹⁴ *Documents*, p.88. Letter from Kevin Maling, Executive Officer of the Art Gallery Society of NSW, 31 June 1975, to Ms Joan Kerr, c/- Power Institute of Fine Arts, Sydney University

¹⁵ NLA Interview, pp 35-36

¹⁶ Joan Kerr, CV 2003

¹⁷ Letter to Joan Kerr from John Morris, Director, National Trust of Australia, 12 February 1981, informing her officially of her appointment as a member of the Trust's Architectural Advisory Panel. In 1984 she was appointed to the Curatorial Committee of the S.H. Ervin Gallery at the National Trust Centre, Observatory Hill (Letter from P.C. James to Joan Kerr, 29 November 1984, *Documents*, p.119)

¹⁸ Bartlett, 'Living Interview: Culture with Kerr'

¹⁹ NLA Interview, pp 31 & 39-40. 'Terry Smith gave lots of lectures too; he was also a tutor. He was sort of a barefooted, protesting contemporary art tutor and I was the young wife doing historical things and lecturing on 19th-century art...But we both went on protest marches and did things.'

history was going to be,' she told Martin Thomas.²⁰ However, as on so many occasions, reality did not match the dream. Art history disappeared leaving a situation in which theory was applied to everything indiscriminately. 'In a way it was a new sort of internationalism that wasn't going to help local intellectual enterprises at all,' Kerr regretfully observed.²¹

She was frustrated by the 'cultural dependency' of art students who continued to rate Australian art against an outside exemplar. 'They're comparing it to something that isn't the same,' she said, 'something that had different intentions and was influenced by a different environment'.²² She never failed to proclaim her message that all cultural endeavour in Australia was valuable and deserved proper recording. 'All' meant her lectures took the students on a thrilling – at times rollercoaster – intellectual ride. Deborah Malor recalls how Joan Kerr would come into a room laden with slides. She would give an hour's lecture dense with facts, go outside for a cigarette in the break and then plunge in again, leaving the students' heads reeling. There was one disabled student and as the normal classrooms did not have wheelchair access the lectures had to be held in a basement room in the Mills Building. The space was far too small and everyone was crammed in, sitting on the floor – 'it was sheer madness!'²³ The decidedly un-academic by-line for Kerr's *Vogue Living* interview reveals a similar level of animation:

Bubbling with enthusiasm for her subject, author, lecturer and indefatigable delver into Australia's past, Dr Joan Kerr brings history vibrantly alive as she chats to Deborah Bartlett. Meet Joan Kerr and you find yourself mentally darting through the conversation, pouncing on and storing away eye-opening pinches of history that season discussion with the ease and intimacy of long familiarity.²⁴

Kerr's working day often stretched from 'ten to ten' and into the early hours of the morning if circumstances demanded it. With a 'voracious appetite for everything', Kerr welcomed 'more teaching, more writing and more research', and, to ensure a bright future, declared to Bartlett that what Australia's cultural

²⁰ NLA Interview, p.40

²¹ NLA Interview, p.40

²² Bartlett, 'Living Interview: Culture with Kerr'

²³ Steggall conversation with Deborah Malor (a student in Kerr's classes at that time), December 2006

²⁴ Bartlett, 'Living Interview: Culture with Kerr'

heritage needed was more people like herself.²⁵ Jim Kerr has tried to rationalise Joan Kerr's somewhat frenetic *modus vivendi* in *Pictorial Biography*.

There was too extraordinary a mix of concurrent activity going on in Joan's life to deliver a coherent narrative...After twenty pages I therefore abandoned the chronological narrative with its cast of 'thousands' (including heroes and villains) and retreated to a selective account of some of the happenings that occupied her time. It offered a more personal and less fraught picture of Joan, which, after all, is what I originally set out to do – not so much a warrior princess as a human being.²⁶

I sympathise with his dilemma as I too have found the process of bringing narrative order to the 'cast of thousands' and Joan Kerr's thousand-and-one tales an exhilarating but overwhelming experience.

Kerr achieved the rank of Associate Professor with 'a fairly easy run in terms of promotions'. At times, looking after departmental affairs such as staffing, teaching and course curricula, she felt little more than an amanuensis to Virginia Spate (Professor of Fine Arts and Director of the Power Institute from 1979 to 1994). 'It was an invidious situation,' Kerr said, 'having a director who was above the head of department and who made all the decisions and was financially independent; that did not occur in other university departments'.²⁷

Virginia Spate, Terry Smith and Joan Kerr were all ambitious scholars and there were frequent clashes over policies and promotions. At one stage there was such a negative atmosphere in the department that a conflict resolution expert was called in.²⁸ Kerr had a very determined kind of vision for her major projects and let nothing stand in the way of their execution, something that on occasions must have contributed to the tension. She commandeered as much of the department's resources as she felt a project needed, especially for the *Dictionary*. Sometimes the junior academics doing the spadework research resented Kerr taking most (all) of the credit. 'In actual fact they wouldn't be doing anything if it hadn't been for Joan setting it up,' Heather Johnson says.²⁹

Kerr allowed people from all walks of life to enter her world. As Craig Judd observed, she was not an intellectual snob. She realized that if you create social barriers, you prevent a whole range of people from engaging with your project.

²⁵ Bartlett, 'Living Interview: Culture with Kerr'

²⁶ James Kerr, 'Art Warrior and an explanation', in *Pictorial Biography*, p.72

²⁷ NLA Interview, pp 34-35

²⁸ NLA Interview, pp 42-43

²⁹ Steggall, interview with Heather Johnson, August 2006

She was an important role model as a teacher and as a researcher who had a very broad attitude to cultural production. Until the 1970s, Australian art history had privileged men artists of European origin within a narrow definition of what constituted art. Women, with a very few notable exceptions – not to mention all those men and women practising the so-called 'lesser', craft-based, arts – were absent from the narrative. Kerr insisted that art history was much broader than that. 'No, hold on,' she said. 'It's not about a vacuum, people were making things, doing things, there has always been an active visual culture. It was just that no one had actually recognized what composed that visual culture'.³⁰

The absent presence of this visual culture meshes nicely with the ephemerality of Kerr's own performances. While theory could never entirely transform Joan Kerr's life and work into a 'coherent narrative', some theoretical reflection on performance helps create a framework for her activities. As Mark Franko and Annette Richards write:

The exuberant presence of performance masks an intrinsic absence. Necessarily temporal and temporary, performances are always in a state of appearing and vanishing; by definition transient, they are immediate yet quickly become historical. Performances of the distant past however, those precluding personal or collective memory, raise with particular urgency the issue of absence. When the historian, archival inscriptions in hand, revisits the deserted site of display, the vivid presence of the performance is long gone. It is then that memory passes through theory by virtue of cultural necessity and the historian's interpretation becomes the prosthesis of an imaginary performative practice, returning theory to its etymological roots in vision and speculation.³¹

Etymology might provide a framework for the formation of words and the development of their meanings, but words on a page give only frustrating glimpses of the-flesh-and-blood Joan Kerr. Language provides us with a version of self and identity yet terms such as 'I', 'me' and 'she' are not connected to an internal essence but belong to a pre-existing symbolic order. Language reminds us that although we would like to use it to discover our subjectivity we are pawns in its impersonal game.³² Yet language is often all that is left and it is the

³⁰ Interview with Judd

³¹ Mark Franko and Annette Richards eds, 'Actualizing absence: the pastness of performance', in *Acting on the Past: Historical Performance across the Disciplines*, University Press of New England, Hanover New Hampshire, 2000, p.1

³² Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor eds, 2nd edn, Introduction, *Escape Attempts: the Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*, Routledge, London, 1992, p.6

wordsmith's job to give them life. In his oration at Kerr's funeral, Roger Benjamin reflected on Kerr's way with words:

Joan delighted not only in the sound and value of words, but in the turning of an elegant sentence. Beyond that, she loved the shaping of an argument, always stated with the minimum of waffle and the maximum impact. One of my pleasures...was to hear her give a paper. She would sit and declaim lovingly from a short text, one utterly polished. The smile in her voice as she came to one of the witticisms that always graced her writings was matched by the passionate flash of feeling she could show when rising to her feet in question-time at conferences.³³

If absent performative events move between a present and a past in which 'archive and act, fragment and body, text and sounding, subject and practice, work in provocative interaction',³⁴ then evaluating Kerr's performances becomes a double act, a palimpsest of scenes from a drama being rehearsed beyond 'the thin door of the past'.³⁵ Joan Kerr, 'archival inscriptions in hand' revisits, say, the churches designed by Edmund Blacket to bring his era alive. In her footsteps the biographer, clutching Kerr's texts as well as her own and others' memories, moves through the spaces of *her* mind's eye to try and recapture the visible and audible evidence of Kerr's re-enactments.

Re-enacting Australia's Past:

Kerr often worked through her big ideas by mounting exhibitions, for example one exclusively about the work of women artists. This does not seem such a grand ambition unless you aim to involve every art gallery in Australia.³⁶ For most people that would have been an impossible task but Kerr convinced almost one hundred and fifty galleries to answer the call and this grand collaborative project developed into something important and memorable.³⁷ According to Dinah Dysart, long time friend and colleague on many National Trust projects, Joan Kerr was an entrepreneur who made things happen; she never gave up. 'As you all

³³ Roger Benjamin, Address, *Record of Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr* (1 March 2004), compiled by James Semple Kerr, 6 March 2004, p.9

³⁴ Franko and Richards, 'Actualizing absence: the pastness of performance', p.1

³⁵ 'Pushing at the thin door into the past', Sebastian Faulks, *Engleby*, Vintage Random House, London, 2008, p.225

³⁶ The *National Women's Art Exhibition* project, 1995

³⁷ Conversation with Heather Johnson, 2006, & 2007

know', said Dysart, 'once she has an idea in her head one has no alternative but to go with the flow'.³⁸

One of Kerr's first exhibitions took place in 1979 when she and James Broadbent curated *Colonial Gothick: the Gothic Revival in New South Wales 1800-1850*. The Gothick architectural style was fashionable in early 19th-century Britain and was naturally transported to the new colony along with its emigrants but no one before Kerr had thought to look at how this style had been interpreted in colonial Australia.³⁹ The venue, Elizabeth Bay House, had only just been restored and the exhibition was something of an adventure for the curators. Kerr was especially pleased to have the actual bricks and mortar of a colonial house as backdrop for the exhibition rather than needing to present 'props' – photographs and cardboard models – to evoke 19th-century Sydney.

At a meeting in 1981 between Sydney University (custodian of important examples of Blacket's work), the Mitchell Library, the National Trust and the Art Gallery of NSW, Joan Kerr was appointed honorary curator for an exhibition, proposed for 1983 to coincide with the centenary of the death of the architect Edmund Blacket (1817-1883).⁴⁰ The S.H. Ervin Gallery (National Trust) shouldered the administrative and financial burden of the exhibition and provided Kerr with two researchers.⁴¹ Although Dinah Dysart and her assistant Robyn Christie checked and culled images and drawings held in the Mitchell Library, Kerr made the final decision as to what was to be included.⁴² She also set up a Blacket Archive and held a preliminary exhibition of Blacket's designs for the Great Hall of Sydney University in November 1982 to give members of the public the opportunity to come forward with information.⁴³ As well as Blacket's descendants and dignitaries of the Anglican Church, experts in Australian colonial history were called in. Terry Smith and Virginia Spate had to take on extra administrative duties at the Power Institute while Kerr mounted the exhibition and completed the catalogue.

³⁸ Dinah Dysart speech, Government House Dinner, 6 June 2003, Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection, Historic Houses Trust, Sydney

³⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 1979, p.53

⁴⁰ Joan Kerr, *Our Great Victorian Architect: Edmund Thomas Blacket (1817-1883)*, The National Trust of Australia, Sydney, 1983, *Documents*, p.113

⁴¹ Anne-Marie Willis (1981) and Christine Dixon (1982)

⁴² Steggall, interview with Dysart, 2006. Dysart was appointed director of the S.H. Ervin Gallery in 1981.

⁴³ 'Edmund Blacket: work of Great Hall's Architect on display', *University of Sydney News*, 30 November 1982

Her aim was to exhibit all relevant Blacket material: photos, plans and drawings plus architectural books owned by him, amounting to about one thousand designs, including houses, hotels, churches, university buildings, a lighthouse and, in the churchyard at St Stephen's, the tombstone of surveyor Thomas Mitchell along with the headstone for Blacket's wife (and later himself).⁴⁴ This attention to detail was later recognized by P.C. James who thanked Kerr on behalf of the Council of the National Trust for the huge amount of work she had put into it.⁴⁵

A 1981 article by Susanne Coleby entitled 'Edmund Blacket Centenary: study reveals new facets of his work', gave advance publicity for the exhibition.⁴⁶ In the article Kerr repeated her message that although Blacket believed he could reproduce English architecture in Australia, distance from sources and influences meant combining necessity with pragmatism to develop an Australian Gothic style. True to form, Kerr provided Coleby with a favourite anecdote: Blacket had not modelled the front of the Great Hall and Main Building of Sydney University on Westminster Hall in the Palace of Westminster in London as was generally believed, but on a design for a College for Congregational Dissenters, something Kerr was sure members of the Senate would not have approved had they known.⁴⁷

Much of Blacket's work had been destroyed so the exhibition aimed to provide a thorough appreciation of its range. The accompanying catalogue was not only intended to expand and preserve this but also to act as a guidebook and Kerr vigorously encouraged readers and viewers to make a 'Blacket pilgrimage' to draw her attention to 'the inevitable errors and omissions'.⁴⁸

This concentration on Blacket at a time when Australians were becoming aware – and proud – of their cultural heritage shows Joan Kerr with a keen eye to the main chance. It was a project consistent with her approach to scholarship *and* a good career move as she confidently expected that her ability to attract the

⁴⁴ Kerr located over one hundred country churches, listed in 'The life and work of Edmund Thomas Blacket', *Royal Australian Historical Society Journal and Proceedings*, Vol XXXII, Part III, Sydney 1946

⁴⁵ *Documents*, p.133, Letter from Executive Director P.C. James National Trust, 10 May 1983

⁴⁶ Susanne Coleby, 'Edmund Blacket Centenary: study reveals new facets of his work', *The University of Sydney News*, 29 September 1981, p.203; reproduced in *Documents*, p.113

⁴⁷ *The University of Sydney News*, 29 September 1981, p.203

⁴⁸ *Documents*, p.113

favourable attention of grants committees would be appreciated by the university. She was also gaining a reputation as an academic with a popular touch as evidenced by a number of newspaper articles about the exhibition (it went on to win the 1983 Museums' Australia Best Exhibition Award).⁴⁹ One, on 8 February 1983, gave advance notice of a public lecture Kerr was to give at St. John's Church, Canberra, not only to provide ACT residents with the chance to learn about Blacket but also, more importantly, to encourage them to travel to Sydney to visit the exhibition.⁵⁰ The next day Kerr gave the Edmund Blacket Memorial Lecture in Sydney (the actual centenary of his death) and followed it up with a series of lectures to National Trust members on Blacket and his architectural practice.⁵¹ In the eyes of many people Kerr had become *the* Blacket expert. Tenure as a lecturer gave her a financial freedom perhaps not seen today. Apart from Alan Cholodenko, whose projects at that time were essentially within the university, few academics had the drive to branch out of the academy the way Joan Kerr did.

Kerr's curatorial initiatives then moved forward in time and to an entirely different aesthetic: The Tin Sheds Gallery and art workshop, administered by Sydney University. Although in the 1980s, the dominance of theory in the Department of Fine Arts resulted in the practice-based teaching of art becoming a secondary consideration, Virginia Spate and Joan Kerr continued to support the Tin Sheds in its agenda of showing the work of minority groups who might not be accepted in other venues.⁵² In 1991 Kerr jointly curated an exhibition around the idea of women's art collections with Tin Sheds director Therese Kenyon. *At Least It's Gone to a Good Home – Women Artists and Collectors at the University of Sydney 1971-1991* featured artworks that had been collected by female academics in Fine Arts.⁵³ The inclusion of short biographies of artists and academics in the catalogue meant that the exhibition was not only a practical exercise in empowerment but also a contribution to the process of reversing the cultural amnesia that has so often dogged women's intellectual and creative achievements.

⁴⁹ Interviews with Dinah Dysart and Heather Johnson

⁵⁰ Jane Button, 'The man who designed churches', *Canberra Times*, 8 February 1983, p.11

⁵¹ *Documents*, p.131

⁵² Therese Kenyon ed, *Under a Hot Tin Roof*, State Library of NSW Press, Power Publications, Sydney 1995, p.104

By the time Kerr proposed the *National Women's Art Exhibition* she had a much grander stage for women's art in mind. As Jim Kerr writes:

She set out to encourage, cajole (and prod) galleries, libraries and museums around Australia into holding exhibitions as part of a 'great collaborative national women's art exhibition' mounted in conjunction with the publication of *Heritage* on International Women's Day in March 1995. Most of those written to (early in 1993) were, like the National Library, 'eager to join in'.⁵⁴

In March 1994, Kerr mailed a news update to participating museums and galleries:

It looks as if almost every public art institution in the country will turn over at least some of their exhibitions spaces to this project. Responses so far received range from the National Gallery of Australia – which plans to show women's art exclusively throughout their Australian galleries for three months from 8 March 1995 – to the Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery at Townsville, which will exhibit work by women artists (to 1955) who worked in North Queensland...This ambitious inclusive plan will create a representative, coherent and novel catalogue for a great (imaginary) exhibition.⁵⁵

A kit comprising poster, flier, logo and information sheet was made available to each venue. 'We hope you feel as enthusiastic about this national women's (art) day as we do,' Kerr wrote. An 'overwhelming response' had already been elicited and she was sure that 'this sense of unity' would be reinforced in television interviews and magazine articles. She was confident that 'the inclusion of work in all media from every major institution around Australia must result in a dramatically different view of women's artistic contribution to our cultural life'.⁵⁶

In November 1994, a comprehensive sixteen-page tabloid-size guide, the *National Women's Art Exhibition Calendar 1995 (Calendar)* was distributed to all venues and major art outlets.⁵⁷ The *Calendar*, featuring satellite events with an overview of the activities of the participating institutions, was an upbeat, accessible yet scholarly promotion that provided much information about the project, as well as advance information regarding the launch at the NGA:

⁵³ Kenyon, *Under a Hot Tin Roof*, pp 123-124. The exhibition was assisted by Bronwyn Hanna, Sue Best and Noel Grey.

⁵⁴ 'Eager to join in', *NLA News*, March 1995, p.2, quoted in James Kerr, *Pictorial Biography*, p.109

⁵⁵ Joan Kerr, editor; Anita Callaway, senior research assistant; Jo Holder, Exhibitions Co-ordinator, *News Update* 1, 23 March 1994

⁵⁶ *News Update* 1, 23 March 1994

⁵⁷ Media release for the *National Women's Art Exhibition* and Book, 21 November 1994

In a great collaborative project almost one hundred and fifty exhibitions will open simultaneously as part of the *National Women's Art Exhibition*. The largest exhibition ever mounted in this country...will be launched on 8 March 1995 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of International Women's Year...The project proudly proclaims an art that is not divisive but comprehensive, not remote from Australia's cultural history but an integral, essential part of it. The exhibitions are autonomous and the range of curatorial initiatives is extraordinary: from historical shows to contemporary exhibitions.⁵⁸

Kerr had at most four people at any one time employed (part time) on the project and most galleries also 'number[ed] their paid staff on one hand'. She regretted that the scope and significance of women's art should always be revealed through exceptional but largely voluntary effort: 'the lamington drive of the art world, never the lavishly-funded norm'.

She was modest about her own role in conceiving the *National Women's Art Exhibition*. 'Making this ambitious dream a triumphant reality was entirely the work of the institutions', she insisted, 'all working independently and indefatigably from conception to closing ceremony'. Yet curators of those institutions were occasionally torn between toeing the regulation line and committing to Joan Kerr's vision, as the following comment by Victoria Lynn, senior curator at the AGNSW, reveals:

There is no one guiding principle or theme that unites the work by women in the contemporary collection. These art works have not been acquired because they have been made by women artists – indeed, this range of art represents some of the most important artistic achievements of our time. As the American artist Eva Hesse once said, rather optimistically, 'The way to beat discrimination in art is by art, excellence has no sex'.⁵⁹

Perhaps so, but Kerr's point was that the social, educational and financial climate in which men and women artists worked in the decades covered in *Heritage* and the *National Women's Art Exhibition* was very different in terms of recognition and reception.

Another area where Kerr saw discrimination in terms of proper recognition, reception and documenting was in the area of black and white (cartoon) art and during the second half of the 1990s Kerr worked on retrieving and recording

⁵⁸ *National Women's Art Exhibition Calendar*, published at the College of Fine Arts, UNSW, 1995

⁵⁹ Victoria Lynn, *The National Women's Art Exhibition Guide*, 1995, p.2

Australia's rich legacy of this material.⁶⁰ Once again, she had plans for a grand all-inclusive exhibition with a catalogue to match. That the project did not quite live up to her expectations was not due to any lack of commitment by herself and her dedicated co-workers but an unfortunate entanglement in a web of bureaucratic politics. The process of staging two exhibitions, and compiling a catalogue developed into something of a nightmare and Kerr observed that 'there is a clear but unappreciated distinction between making fun and having fun'.⁶¹ Nevertheless, making sure her audiences had a good time, and learnt more about their country's culture, was an all-important facet of Kerr's oral presentations, regardless of her own experiences.

Talking to Australia: Inside and Outside the Academy

From 1975 to 1985, architectural history was very much Joan Kerr's focus. In July 1983, she gave a lecture in the Octagon Series at the University of Western Australia. The topic of her paper, 'Architecture: a contradiction in terms', revolved around questions such as: 'To what extent in the past have overseas models determined the way we judge our local architecture, from the vernacular to the grandest public monuments?' and 'Has Australia any real architectural style of its own?'⁶² True to form, Kerr argued that although Australia might have borrowed its architectural ideas from a variety of sources, these were invariably altered to suit local conditions. The end result was always Australian: from city buildings to rambling country homesteads. Again she attracted articles in the local press, one journalist noting that Dr Kerr could have stayed in any of Perth's high-rise luxury hotels but instead opted for one of the city's older hotels, which was 'brimming with historical interest'.⁶³

In what was to be one of many well-received media occasions, Kerr moved away from architecture to talk on ABC Radio National in April 1985 about art museum catalogues.⁶⁴ Her style was conversational and informative with a

⁶⁰ Joan Kerr, *Artists and Cartoonists in Black and White: the Most Public Art*, at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney (January-March, 1999); and at the State Library of New South Wales (February-June, 1999); the catalogue published by the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, ANU, Canberra, 1999

⁶¹ Kerr, Introduction and Acknowledgements, *Artists and Cartoonists*, p.7

⁶² *Documents*, p.136a

⁶³ 'Looking beyond skyscrapers for history', *Daily News*, 13 July 1983; 'Australian architecture, a contradiction in terms', *West Australian* in *Documents*, p.136a

⁶⁴ *Books & Writing*, ABC Radio April 1985, requested by Anne Gray, curator of Art, for the Director of the Australian War Memorial

challenging sting in the tail: Ursula Hoff and Bernard Smith might have made good beginnings in cataloguing the collections of the state galleries in Victoria and New South Wales but there was much work still to be done.⁶⁵ Kerr castigated the NGA because 'it should be – or should be seen to be – the model to the whole country of a gallery's role in the community'. According to Kerr, the gallery's practice of compiling 'popular texts' without proper background research so that 'no scholarship [was] needed by either maker or reader', created an objectionable form of censorship. Cataloguing temporary exhibitions of works *not* owned by the gallery with lavishly illustrated texts displayed a cultural inferiority complex, indicating that the Gallery was 'ashamed and embarrassed by the tat it does own, but [was] happy to exert its curatorial talents on "real" art'.

Today, when perusing the bookshop shelves in any major Australian art gallery, it is clear that exhibition catalogues are no longer the transient publications they once were in that the dates of exhibitions are deliberately omitted to extend the marketable life of the 'book'. Perhaps Joan Kerr would still have the last word since the new trend has little to do with scholarship and everything to do with profit.

The importance of photography in a scholar's arsenal was the topic of 'The user's view', a presentation to the Australian Photograph Access Network conference, in February 1987. Kerr pitched her talk from the perspective of a teacher of Australian art history who, in her lecturing and research, relied on

⁶⁵ According to Sheridan Palmer, Ursula Hoff produced as professional a catalogue of the National Gallery of Victoria's collection as was possible at the time, in the absence of a critical reference library and restrictions imposed on correspondence with international museums and experts during World War II. Hoff set in motion an appropriate reference library as soon as she was able. The 1945 catalogue was followed in 1949 by the publication of a large hardback, *Masterpieces of the National Gallery of Victoria* with Hoff collaborating with Joan Lindsay and Alan McCulloch. Sheridan Palmer, 'The remaking of the National Gallery of Victoria', *Centre of the Periphery: Three European Art Historians in Melbourne*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, Melbourne, 2008, pp 124-125

Kerr's declaration that 'no catalogue of any part of its [AGNSW] collection has been seen since', was remedied when a *Check List of the Australian Collection* was compiled in 1988. Edmund Capon, Introduction, *Check List of the Australian Collection*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, c. 1988:

This checklist of Australian paintings, watercolours and sculptures on the Collection originated in 1982 in a list typed form existing catalogue cards at the direction of the Senior Curator of Australian Art, Barry Pearce. Deborah Edwards became responsible for the project in 1986 and over the past two years has compiled the short entry catalogue with the voluntary assistance of Mrs Mollie Gowing, a long time supporter and patron of the Gallery.

photographs both for their artistic interest and subject matter.⁶⁶ For every Australian photograph, however obscure, Kerr wanted to know where it was, what it looked like, the identity of the photographer if possible, as well as the place, time and reasons why the photograph was taken and the history of its ownership. 'All we need,' Kerr concluded, 'is agreement, expertise, co-operation, vision, time and money'.⁶⁷ A tall order, but one she never ceased to request.

As a recognized expert on Australia's 19th-century cultural heritage, Joan Kerr was much in demand in 1988. Her powerful and positive promotion of colonial 'Australia' would have been popular with those firmly wedded to the heroic mode of Anglocentric tradition even though Kerr subscribed to a much broader church. She used her guest lecture on 26 April 1988 at Sydney University, one in a series entitled *Critical Approaches to Australian History, 1988*, to talk on 'Bicentennial Art Gallery Exhibitions'.⁶⁸ 'Critical' well beyond the brief of the series, Kerr was scathing about exhibitions that relied on formulaic displays as wasted opportunities for creating something unique and challenging.

Yet she was not always on the attack, as when discussing, in Launceston, 19th-century Tasmanian art in relation to the art of colonial NSW. In showing why work from Van Diemen's Land was of much greater interest and quality than that of the mainland, Kerr knew how to please her audience.⁶⁹ This must also have been the case in a lecture she gave to a group of Sydney teachers in July 1988. Although the transcript is (so far) unavailable, a thank-you note Kerr received contains a useful summary of the style and substance of her presentation:

I appreciated the depth of specialisation represented in this lecture. Both historical and up to date material was presented that would not normally be available to students or teachers under general research conditions. Such a lecture shortcuts the expense of money and time individuals must pay in order to gain similar information...It is almost impossible for individual teachers to draw such informed

⁶⁶ Joan Kerr, 'The user's view', *Australian Photograph Access Network* Conference, 23 February 1987, Kerr Archive

⁶⁷ Joan Kerr, 'The user's view'

⁶⁸ *Documents*, p.201. Other speakers included: Prof. Manning Clark 'Australian history today'; Prof. Anne Curthoys (UTS), 'Writing and teaching Aboriginal history'; Prof. Graeme Davison (Monash), 'Cities and Australian legends'; Dr Patricia Grimshaw (Melbourne University) 'Writing a woman's history of Australia'; Dr John Hirst (La Trobe), 'Making a new society: the birth of democracy in NSW'

⁶⁹ Lecture to accompany the 'Tasmanian Vision' exhibition, Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery April 1988, *Documents*, p.199

interpretations in a specialised area...A generous learning experience that fills rather than emptying.⁷⁰

As the 1990s arrived Joan Kerr was working around the clock to finish the *Dictionary* – at considerable cost to her health. On 25 March 1991, she suffered a minor stroke. Whether this was brought on by the stress of completing the manuscript or whether it would have happened anyway, can never be known. Although it gave her several weeks of ‘long overdue enforced rest’,⁷¹ a letter from Professor Isabel McBryde, saying how much she enjoyed Kerr’s stimulating Foundation Day lecture on 15 May – ‘all the new things to see in views that one thought were familiar and well understood’ – indicates that Kerr was soon back at work.⁷² It took her a year of determined physiotherapy to overcome lingering disabilities but she did not slow down. If she wasn’t lecturing or writing she was doing favours for colleagues and ex-students who wrote to her for advice about potential speakers for conferences (or asking her to speak herself) as well as references for jobs and requests for information.⁷³

Kerr opened 1992 with an address to the Australiana Society’s annual Australia Day Dinner on 26 January. A letter from Graham Cocks, Honorary Secretary, conveyed the Society’s appreciation not only for the depth of research and knowledge imparted during her presentation but also for Kerr’s time, effort and interest in the Society.⁷⁴ She was also a popular choice of speaker at art shows, for example one on 3 September 1992 for the Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney. A letter from Hilary McCullagh, the Centre’s Chief Executive Officer found it a pleasure to have ‘both an intelligent and humorous speaker’. It was a fundraising event and on the strength of Joan Kerr’s spirited presentation three paintings were donated to the Centre.⁷⁵

On a formal note, Kerr presented the Franz Philipp Memorial Lecture at the Australian Art Association Annual Conference in September 1992 with a paper entitled ‘Somersaults in the Antipodes’.⁷⁶ Even though this was a serious

⁷⁰ Lecture to Sydney Metropolitan West Teachers, 20 July 1988, *Documents*, p.211

⁷¹ *Pictorial Biography*, pp 79-80

⁷² Letter, 18 May 1991, *Documents*, p.285

⁷³ Fay Brauer, 27 November 1991, *Documents*, p.298. Brauer contacted Joan Kerr, to ask her to be a convenor of a conference session and for her advice she (Brauer) was convening at the 1992 Leeds Conference on Cultural Colonisation: ‘Modernisms; and the Construction of the ‘Other’.

⁷⁴ 24 February 1992, *Documents*, pp 282&305

⁷⁵ *Documents*, p.331

⁷⁶ The paper was published as ‘Somersaults in the Antipodes’, in *Australian Journal of Art*, 11, 1993, pp 9-30

gathering of art historians Kerr used the playful image of childhood acrobatics to deal imaginatively with the perennial 'down under' status accorded Australia with regard to Eurocentric culture. 'Standing on one's head to look at art,' she said, 'is not only an unnatural and uncomfortable position, it distorts the view [and reinforces] the belief that early artists could only see with *English eyes*'.

In March 1993 the Art Gallery Society of NSW was 'really thrilled with the response' to one of her presentations – having Kerr as a lecturer was 'a great drawcard'.⁷⁷ The National Trust thanked her for another successful evening ('the best launch for years') in no small part due to Kerr having allowed the National Trust to 'auction' her for the Heritage Quiz.⁷⁸ Her most important presentation in 1994 was probably her conference paper 'Art and life' at the Australian Academy of the Humanities (AHA), Silver Jubilee Symposium.⁷⁹ In this paper she promoted, once again, the idea that art should be considered 'an activity within society – an integral part of everyday life, not a rarefied activity separated from it'. If this were achieved, she said, not only could a quite different range of artists be welcomed into the 'pantheon of the past', but the public's recognition and reception of many art works would be enhanced.⁸⁰

The ability to look beyond the received wisdom of Australian art history – or rather to map and anchor it differently – reached its zenith in the ambitious *Heritage* 'dictionary' of five hundred women artists working from 1788 to 1955, with over two hundred contributing writers. Throughout 1995 Kerr waged a very public campaign to promote the book. She gave lectures to the Art Gallery Society of NSW, a lecture in the AGNSW's *Speaking of Women*, Daytime Lecture Series, another to the Australiana Society, a public lecture on events linked to the *National Women's Art Exhibition* at Bunbury Regional Art Gallery (WA), three lectures (colonial, post-colonial & women's art), in Christie's *Australian Art History* series, as well as lectures to National Trust (NSW) audiences. She also gave a lecture and a graduate seminar in the Art History Department, University of Western Sydney Nepean (UWS). Philip Adams interviewed Kerr on Radio

⁷⁷ Letter, 2 March 1993, from Prue Allen, President of the Art Gallery of NSW Society

⁷⁸ Letter to Joan Kerr, 5 April 1993, on behalf of Wendy McCarthy the Special Events Committee and the National Trust; A Fax to Joan Kerr 2 March 1993 from Stephanie Britton, Executive Director, *ArtLink*; *Documents*, pp 394 & 395; *Documents*, p.400. Later Kerr wrote: 'I made \$265 – the second highest price after Margaret Whitlam and more than the three celebrity men fetched.'

⁷⁹ Published in *The Humanities and a Creative Nation: Jubilee Essays*, D.M. Schreuder ed, Canberra, Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1995, pp 109-130

⁸⁰ Kerr, 'Art and life', p.109

National's *Late Night Live*. She also appeared on the *Sunday Afternoon Show* on ABC-TV and on Channel 9's evening news program.⁸¹

Kerr spoke on women artists at the La Trobe Valley (VIC), Fremantle and Bunbury (WA), Newcastle and Wagga Wagga (NSW) regional art galleries. She also opened exhibitions that gave further opportunities to speak about her work on women artists: *Secure the Shadow* by Anne Brennan and Anne Ferran at Hyde Park Barracks; *Australian Women Printmakers and Illustrators* at the Baillieu Library Melbourne University; *A Changing Landscape: Women Artists of the ACT* at Nolan Gallery; *Australian Women Artists of the Twentieth Century* at Penrith Regional Art Gallery & Lewers Bequest; an exhibition at Wesley College Sydney University; *Through Our Eyes (Migrant Women Artists)* at Casula Powerhouse (NSW) and an inaugural exhibition on migrant artists at Stein Gallery, Fairfield Regional Heritage Centre.⁸²

In this punishing schedule Kerr also found time to give conference papers: one at the Australian National Maritime Museum conference *Redefining the Norm-Gender, Ethnicity & Sexuality in Museums* on 31 March 1995 and another at the *Art Off Centre* seminar organized by the Queensland Studies Centre, Griffith University in April 1995 to acknowledge the centenary of the Queensland Art Gallery. The good press coverage gained by all these appearances confirmed Joan Kerr as a major Australian art historian. However she did not claim personal success (nor was she taking any profit from the book) but insisted that *Heritage* was 'a public good' project, in the cause of women.

Kerr made a foray into political activism on 8 August 1997 when she opened the exhibition *Artists Against Racism Collaborate for Tolerance and Respect* in the Canberra School of Art foyer gallery in conjunction with the Humanities Research Centre conference, *Indigenous Rights, Political Theory and the Reshaping of Institutions*.⁸³ The exhibition exemplified Kerr's belief in the social power of art and she could not resist reminding the audience of the old saw that a picture was worth a thousand words. Kerr was convinced that art could change society, 'both for better and worse', citing the Aboriginal bark petitions presented to Parliament in 1963 that would have been much less effective had they 'merely

⁸¹ Joan Kerr, CV 2003

⁸² Joan Kerr, CV 2003

⁸³ The exhibition was in support of AAAR (Australian Artists Against Racism) – an informal coming together of more than 500 artists, art historians, curators and art writers, which was launched with a page-size advertisement calling for a multicultural Australia, *Weekend Australian* of 26-27 April 1997

been white fella documents'.⁸⁴

What Kerr did not highlight on that occasion was the need for words, objects and images to relate to each other and never more so than in exhibition design. She aired her views on this subject at *Unlocking Museums*, the 4th National Conference of Museums Australia Inc. in Darwin in September 1997. Her talk 'The baby and the bathwater' included a strong critique of Christopher Heathcote's *Exhibition Handbook*.⁸⁵ According to Kerr, the first step in Heathcote's preparation for an exhibition was to choose what story to tell. This then determined what was to be exhibited, how it was presented, what information would accompany the show, and which pieces would be focal points. In such a schema exhibits act as 'evidence of, and an illustration to, the story that is to unfold...like illustrations in a story book'. Kerr believed this advice to be back to front:

Any exhibition needs a general subject or theme, but any curator needs a comprehensive knowledge of the available, relevant objects before a valid story line can be invented. Objects are *not* points in an unfolding narrative, but independent documents as important as any verbal text and any story-line still needs to fit available material evidence, not vice versa.⁸⁶

The original objects and images were the baby, Kerr insisted, the story line merely the bathwater whose function was to 'improve the baby, not drown it'.

Kerr liked to link her public presentations to significant events in the wider community in keeping with her aim of putting creative endeavour in context. Her talk, 'A new art history for Australia' as the Inaugural Lyceum Club Lecturer in Brisbane on 2 June 1998, just after National Reconciliation Week, was 'a happy and most appropriate coincidence'. Her message for the occasion was about reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and the hitherto dominant non-Indigenous visual arts.⁸⁷ Australia's rich visual past was

⁸⁴ Kerr Archive

⁸⁵ Christopher Heathcote, *The Exhibitions Handbook: a Practical Guide for Organising Exhibitions in Australian Museums, Galleries, Libraries and Community Centres*, Museums Australia Inc. (Vic), Melbourne, 1997

⁸⁶ Kerr Archive

⁸⁷ Kerr Archive

inextricably connected with its social and cultural history, she said, and deserved 'to be recorded by more than European-style paintings of gumtrees'.⁸⁸

The Centenary of Federation was a major occasion for reflecting on Australian society and, like the bicentenary year, it provided opportunities for Kerr to present to the public her version of Australia's visual heritage as far more than masterworks of eucalypts, for example 'Australian art before Federation', her paper for the Australiana Society conference, at Government House, Sydney on 31 March 2001. It was also a good time to acknowledge that classifying art into 'high' and 'low', Indigenous and non-Indigenous, permanent and ephemeral, arts and crafts – then dividing the results between picture galleries and object museums – had never suited Australian conditions. Artists, Kerr said, had long realized the irrelevance of such boundaries and worked across genres for a great variety of locations but art historians had been slower to re-read Australia's visual past as something more than weak emulations of European models, especially British ones.⁸⁹

Kerr was highly critical of the less-than-impressive contributions made by visual-art exhibitions to the centenary year's activities, in particular funding wasted on displays of style rather than substance:

Official art commissions at Federation were largely confined to immortalising the appearance or aesthetic tastes of politicians and their mates. One hundred years later, a large part of the billion-dollar Centenary of Federation funding went to commissioning feel-good public spectacles from a multinational company specialising in commercial image creation.⁹⁰

She reserved her greatest ire for the expensive *Federation: Australian Art and Society 1901-2001*, described as 'John McDonald's curate's egg exhibition', at the NGA. Kerr's position was vindicated as most art experts considered the exhibition a failure due to McDonald's inability to leave anything out in his 'eclectic mix of trash and treasure'.⁹¹ Kerr concluded that 'the absence of any

⁸⁸ Seven years later Dr Cathryn Mittelheuser wrote that Joan Kerr was remembered by her peers for having transformed the history of Australian art and by art lovers for her scholarship, her willingness to share her knowledge and her gentle, kindly manner. Cathryn Mittelheuser, 'Professor Joan Kerr', *Lyceum Club Newsletter*, June 2004

⁸⁹ Kerr Archive

⁹⁰ Joan Kerr, 'Artless history: the spectacular results of Centenary of Federation funding', *Nation/States* Conference, Adelaide University 13-16 December 2001. Later published with the same title in *Art Monthly Australia*, April 2002, pp 16-19

⁹¹ There are other agendas at stake here and Kerr's relationship with John McDonald, if it could be called a 'relationship' will surface again in Chapter Five.

worthwhile artistic record of the official Centenary of Federation events was ultimately the enemy of both our art and our history'.⁹²

Kerr had always considered herself a cross-cultural scholar who bridged art history, architectural history and social history. In 1988 she had thought seriously of transferring to the History Department at Sydney University and although she remained at the Power Institute until 1993, her application to the Vice-Chancellor reveals some of her ideas about teaching and the role of images:

Since my days as a post-doctoral fellow in the History Department at the Research School of Social Sciences (ANU), I have had a missionary zeal to teach historians how fully to integrate visual imagery within their primary source materials. Apart from gaining knowledge of images and the sorts of histories, which have been constructed around them, this would also have many professional benefits for historians in the light of current job and publication markets.⁹³

Kerr ultimately left Sydney University at the end of July 1993 and after several years at COFA, began her tenure as a founding professor in the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (CCR) at ANU in 1997 with high expectations that the Centre would produce cross-cultural history that consisted of more than 'just adding blackfellas, women, workers, members of the underground, street artists or other "outsiders" to the canon'. She hoped scholars working at the CCR would 'break open confining boundaries to find a different kind of framing for art history, something that would not automatically happen 'just by crossing any old cultures'.⁹⁴ The greatest challenge, in Kerr's view, was to remain uncomfortably innovative – in keeping with Greg Denning's exhortation to be mysterious, experiential and compassionate, performative and reforming.⁹⁵ This was not an easy position to maintain as many scholars were arguing that that *was* what they were doing. Kerr saw some of them as merely having climbed onto an intellectually fashionable bandwagon.⁹⁶

⁹² Kerr Archive

⁹³ *Documents*, p.208

⁹⁴ 'What is this thing called cross-cultural research?' a talk given by Kerr at one of the regular Centre of Cross-Cultural Research (CCR) gatherings of staff, post-doctoral researchers and post-graduate students, mid 1999

⁹⁵ Greg Denning, 'Writing true stories', *Challenges to Perform: Seeing, Hearing, Narrating, Reflecting*, A Centre for Cross-Cultural Research Visiting Scholars Program, May-June 2000, pp 3-6

⁹⁶ Kerr Archive

In a lecture given at the *Challenges to Perform: Seeing* seminar, Kerr acknowledged the importance of Greg Denning ('a truly cross-cultural historian') whose advice she would have appreciated when choosing her doctoral topic:

The only advice I had from my eminent English male supervisor was that architectural history wasn't meant to be amusing. What I also had, however, were two major disadvantages that prevented me spending my life investigating the influence of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin on Edmund Thomas Blacket's Australian churches – I was of Queensland ancestry (so was my partner) and I was a woman. Conventional white Australian art and architectural history was so exclusively male and metropolitan...that I could never accept that this was all there was. As soon as I began teaching in the late 1960s I was inserting 'lesser' art and artists into the canon in ways that aimed to undermine the structure.⁹⁷

Yet Kerr never rejected the canon altogether. She wanted her work to be read widely outside the university. She also wanted her writing to 'affect everyone to change popular perceptions of art'. She appeared somewhat bitter about the fact that although the value of colonial art had risen dramatically because of the *Dictionary* (her claim), the market for scholarly works of Australian art history and theory was too small to be viable,

let alone influential beyond the few surviving staff in our heavily depleted and rapidly diminishing university art history departments. If one aims at making hitherto unknown artists and art works famous, that inevitably means higher prices. But it also means that the general picture of art has to change to encompass a different story.⁹⁸

In this same talk, Kerr returned to her idea of a 'Janus-like' face in reference to Aboriginal art's response to 'both to its own, largely collaborative and anonymous heritage as well as to the European individual genius myth'. Including Indigenous work as a continuous, integral part of the history of Australian art, she said, 'nicely complicates the agenda for cross-cultural art theorists'. She argued that new forms of art can originate and evolve in remote regions, but that such creations are invisible and valueless until claimed and interpreted by the metropolis.⁹⁹

Nevertheless, that 'metropolis' was the venue for many of Kerr's speeches for opening exhibitions and launching books.

⁹⁷ Kerr Archive

⁹⁸ Kerr Archive

⁹⁹ Joan Kerr, 'Introduction: Art begins at Boulia', *Art off Centre: Placing Queensland Art*, ed. Glenn Cooke, Queensland Studies Centre, Griffith University, South Brisbane, 1997 (papers from April 1995 conference), p.8; Kerr Archive

'I Hereby Declare'...

Kerr enjoyed the informality of this kind of public speaking as a way of encouraging people to look at objects and buildings from new perspectives. September 1983 saw her opening *Monsieur Noufflard's House* by S.T. Gill, an exhibition organized by Historic Houses Trust (NSW) at Elizabeth Bay House. Noufflard was a French wool merchant who commissioned artworks from the talented but often inebriated artist, Gill. In her talk, provocatively entitled 'The visual art of lying', Kerr spoke on the subject of truthfulness – not truth in terms of the politics or personalities of the time – but the 'truthfulness' of the paintings in the exhibition. An early colonial Australian painting, she said,

is often the only evidence we have of the appearance of a person, place or event before the camera took over the role of the apparently dispassionate witness. Therefore we feel we have to accept that artist's verity, even if it is only on the principle that *some* evidence is better than none.¹⁰⁰

Kerr used the metaphor of an 'Australian accent' many times in lectures and articles to evoke the idea of a local identity, for example her 1987 address at the opening of *Cheer up Children* at the S.H. Ervin Gallery in which she argued that we were still looking at Australian art incorrectly.¹⁰¹ When viewed from France, Tom Roberts appeared quite insignificant but once Australians stopped trying to 'label him M. Monet with an unfortunate Australian accent and started looking at him in his own terms' the shearing pictures became more interesting and important than if the shed had been located on the outskirts of Paris.

Kerr returned to this theme of 'whose viewpoint?' in her lecture on 14 October 1992 at the exhibition *Completing the Picture – Women Artists and the Heidelberg Era* also at the S.H. Ervin Gallery. According to the Gallery's director, the public response to the evening was 'unbelievable'. 'We have had extraordinary feedback,' Anne Loxley wrote in a letter to Kerr. 'Everyone (over

¹⁰⁰ *Supplement to the Historic Houses Trust Newsletter*, No. 1, August 1983, 'Monsieur Noufflard's House' exhibition, *Documents*, pp 139-142

¹⁰¹ *Cheer up Children*, S.H. Ervin Gallery 1987, curated by Robert Holden. The exhibition was a re-presentation of large watercolours of nursery rhymes and children's games that had been painted for the Prince Henry Homeopathic Hospital in Melbourne in 1910, by well-known Australian women artists. (Kerr's presentation was later published as 'What's in and What's Art?', *National Trust Magazine*, September 1987.) Dinah Dysart described Kerr's talk as 'marvellous' and that the people who came to the opening especially to hear what she had to say 'certainly were not disappointed!' Letter from Dinah Dysart, 22 April 1987, reproduced in *Documents*, p.180

two hundred people!) who was there felt that they were at a very special event'.¹⁰² Kerr was proud of her participation at the opening, declaring it the most successful lecture she'd ever given, although she tempered this by saying that it was 'because of everyone else's contribution'. Not the least of these was that of artist Vivienne Binns who not only gave an impersonation of 'a professional woman artist then and now' but also treated the audience to some fine singing.

The title of Kerr's talk – 'Complicating the picture' – signified that the exhibition was not so much about 'completing the old established picture' as it was 'demolishing the picture', the 'picture' in question being the environment in which the works in the exhibition had been created. This was not simply the 'well documented male *plein air* painting scene around Melbourne from the 1880s to about 1916' but a space and time that 19th- and early 20th-century women related to personally. For Kerr, this raised several important questions: 'Why then, was boiling a billy in the bush such a seminal experience for these young men of the late 1880s although an accepted part of life for women?' 'Why did open-air painting become such a key issue in the history of Australian painting from the late 1880s?' The answers, Kerr argued, had nothing to do with the myth that these men artists showed the 'real Australia' for the first time and everything to do with *professionalism*, which meant painting like professionally-trained European artists while choosing subjects that were distinctively nationalistic. Her ideas counterbalance Ian Burn's writings on the art of the Heidelberg School. Burn might have introduced new perspectives about the ideological interpretation of the bush by men artists who were visitors to its spaces rather than a place in which they lived, but he reinforced the amnesia surrounding the life of women who lived and worked in the bush – artists and settlers – by omitting them from the narrative.

Indigenous people had not only been omitted from the Heidelberg paintings but also from recognition in most aspects of Australia's publicly recorded social, cultural and economic life. One hundred years after those paintings had been fêted, Kerr was clearly delighted to open *Fluent* at Canberra's Drill Hall.¹⁰³ In a humorous yet inclusive opening gesture she insisted that the exhibition meant

¹⁰² S. H. Ervin Gallery, 14 October 1992; Anne Loxley, letter to Joan Kerr, 5 November 1992

¹⁰³ *FLUENT: Australia's representation at the 1997 Venice Biennale* was on display at the Drill Hall Canberra, 12 March 1998. Artists: Judy Watson, Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Yvonne Koolmatrie

much more than just showing ‘us natives’ the works by Aboriginal women artists that so successfully represented Australia at ‘the world’s oldest and probably still most prestigious international art exhibition [the Venice Biennale]’.¹⁰⁴ She also offered a satirical comment about ‘boring academics’ who talk for so long that ‘some representatives of the gallery do not bother to attend openings’. A pity Kerr observed, as academics ‘sometimes have interesting things to say’.

Because *Fluent* was a belated celebration of International Women’s Day, Kerr wanted to open it in ‘a proper feminist way as an assertion of women’s collective solidarity’. In a theatrical gesture, she called upon the ‘sisters’ who played the major role in bringing the exhibition together – Michelle House, Hetti Perkins, Judy Watson and Nancy Sever – to join with Kerr in ‘saying those traditional ‘white art’ ceremonial words: “We declare this exhibition open”’.

It was an ending rather than a beginning when Kerr delivered the eulogy at the Memorial Service for Tasmanian scholar Geoffrey Stilwell AM (1931-2000) on 17 March 2000.¹⁰⁵ Kerr and Stilwell had been friends and respected each other’s work. The fact that Stilwell had to know where everyone belonged – his ‘great love of historical accuracy for its own sake’ – was for Kerr, one of the key values of civilization.¹⁰⁶ Stilwell was a man who spent his life fighting for what he believed in, sometimes against overwhelming odds – rather like Kerr herself. There was a lingering sentiment that his efforts would not be sufficiently appreciated and she exhorted those present to continue to celebrate his achievements and fight to maintain them – perhaps a foretaste of her own situation.

To continue with the subject of Stilwell and Tasmania, Kerr’s launch of *The National Picture*, a book by Stephen Scheduling, reveals interesting facets of the dynamics of friendship.¹⁰⁷ When asked why Kerr had been chosen to launch the book, Scheduling said he admired her perseverance and the depth of her approach to research, and she was a very good speaker. Her reputation at the time was very high and she had done excellent work on Tasmanian art. Kerr’s good relationship with Geoffrey Stilwell (whom Scheduling had found somewhat difficult) was also an important factor.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ For a discussion on the use of humour and collegiality, see Janet Holmes, *Discourse Studies*, London: SAGE Publications, 2000, p.179

¹⁰⁵ At St George’s Anglican Church, Battery Point, Hobart

¹⁰⁶ Kerr Archive

¹⁰⁷ Vintage Books, Random House, Sydney 2002; launched at Ariel Bookshop, Paddington, 9 May 2002

¹⁰⁸ Steggall, telephone conversation with Stephen Scheduling, 22 May 2008

Yet Scheduling and Kerr had not always been on good terms. In response to an article he wrote in the 1970s in *Nation Review* about the art market and the highs and lows of 19th-century British painting, Joan Kerr had written a critical letter-to-the-editor about Scheduling's 'surprising ignorance about the prices of Victorian Artists'.¹⁰⁹ Later, in the 1980s, Scheduling and Kerr were at an art auction bidding for the same painting and Scheduling was annoyed with Kerr for being the successful bidder. However he soon came to respect her broad range of general knowledge and mentioned her several times in his book, as when trying to come to grips with what he knew about Benjamin Duterrau's lost painting. Scheduling remembered that in 1987, Professor Joan Kerr, a leading expert in Australian colonial art', had written in an article that Duterrau's ambition was not realized, his *National Picture* never eventuating in its final life-size heroic version.

Years later Joan Kerr was less adamant about *The National Picture* 'never eventuating'.¹¹⁰ But at the book's launch Kerr had no intention of revealing whether Scheduling found Duterrau's painting or not. The evidence of 'plain common sense' should prevail. Aiming a sly dig at Scheduling, she asked: 'Does the man who stands before you have the aura of fame and fortune that must accompany the retrieval of a painting worth five million dollars?' Although Kerr thought Scheduling had overrated the painting's monetary value, she conceded that *The National Picture* was not about the money to be made or lost. The search for it was a clever ploy to construct a book that was not only a good read

¹⁰⁹ Stephen Scheduling, letter to the editor, *Nation Review*, 25 May, 1973; Joan Kerr, 'Victorian artists', *Nation Review*, 1 June, 1973: '[It] makes one doubt the validity of his art pundit pose. Had he consulted a *current* review of prices for Victorian paintings he would have discovered that four of his five examples cited have in recent years reached a record (that is, of all time) price in English and American salerooms.

'Burne Jones: *Laus Veneris*, £33,000 1971. Landseer: *Queen Victoria and the Duke of Wellington Reviewing the Life Guards*, £13,650 1966. Maddox Brown: *Jacob and Joseph's Coat*, £2300 1967 – not a record price yet, but I'll bet the next major one that turns up will be...If he'd bought in 1897 he's still be doing well; if he bought in 1958 he'd be laughing himself sick. If he'd like to sell me one of the above at his prices I'll laugh myself sick too. On the other hand there are still many Victorian painters whose prices haven't reached their 1890s peak and possibly never will do so (though I wouldn't bet on it!).

Mr Scheduling's argument can thus be reduced to the trite assertion that some artists are a good long-term investment and some aren't, and there's nothing about that that we don't all know. But even if prices do fall as particular paintings go out of fashion, by analogy with Victorian paintings there's a very good chance they'll make a spectacular comeback. The moral of his article seems to me to be that now is a very good time to buy Australian paintings of the 1920s.'

¹¹⁰ Joan Kerr, 'The status of art in Van Diemen's Land', *Bulletin of the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies*, vol.1, no.3, 1987, quoted in Stephen Scheduling, Chapter 3: 'A small problem', *The National Picture*, pp 28-29

but also a thoughtful and well researched examination of the words and deeds of George Augustus Robinson (Protector of the Tasmanian Aborigines), a man much maligned and misunderstood in the turbulent history of English-settler/Indigenous-Australian relations in the 19th century.¹¹¹

That the narrator 'never preaches about his dawning spiritual enlightenment' but leads the reader through an avalanche of detail precisely recorded, was close to Kerr's own way of working. The following remark shows, perhaps, some frustration (entertainingly disguised) with peer acceptance of her work:

Australian art historians don't have visibility. We read about the lives and foibles of our artists, gallery and museum directors and even odd art critics, but who's ever paid any attention to serious scholars and researchers in the colonial Australian art field, let alone amateur enthusiasts?¹¹²

She found nice irony in the fact that Scheduling – a 'slightly obsessive outsider' – could 'reshape the past and the people connected with it more accurately, thoroughly and convincingly' than anyone had previously done.

Opening *Vainglorious* – an exhibition of the work of two contemporary artists, eX de Medici and Eve Sullivan (Canberra Museum and Gallery, 16 September 2000) – was quite a departure for Kerr. She began by firing a salvo at the egos of mainstream media art critics but softened it to include herself in saying that a 'personal interpretation' of art works was justified by the 'critic's fundamental belief that artists never really understand what they're doing and need art professionals to interpret them'. This was a 'universally accepted dogma among male critics' and probably the only thing she would admit to having in common with John McDonald and Giles Auty. 'Women critics,' she said wryly, 'are far more likely to listen to the artist. But they must learn to overcome such a foolish habit. That's no way to make a reputation!'¹¹³ Kerr's remark that 'it's pretty depressing for an art historian to find that her subject can reel off more relevant sources for her work than she can', might seem flippant but with it she comes close to admitting that she was not on familiar ground.

This chapter ends with a seemingly unremarkable event, Kerr's launch of an exhibition of the work of Thora Ungar at James Harvey Gallery, on 9 November 2002. Not only was it one of Kerr's last public presentations but it also encapsulated a favourite theme of a woman working as a professionally trained

¹¹¹ Kerr Archive

¹¹² Kerr Archive

artist in a man's world, in Ungar's case as a commercial artist on the *Australian Women's Weekly* during World War II, one of only two women employed on the magazine. Unger's *The Kokoda Trail* (cover, 9 January 1943) was a decidedly unfeminine subject and Kerr was delighted to have had the 'great honour' of opening the retrospective of works spanning sixty-three years in the 'presence of the artist and national treasure'.¹¹⁴

Virginia Spate has written that 'many academics submerge their personalities in the neutral language of scholarly objectivity. This was not Joan's way. Without losing intellectual rigour, her writing and her teaching were the direct expression of an individual voice, of a forceful, resourceful and seemingly fearless personality'.¹¹⁵ I would argue that Kerr's way of performing art history – allied to that 'forceful, resourceful and seemingly fearless personality' – goes some distance towards solving the dilemma of how to work, speak and write within the accepted canon of a discipline that is based on prescribed traditions of scholarship, often with quite rigid rules of engagement, yet retain an individual voice.

Joan Kerr has been labelled a 'possum stirrer' – someone who questions the status quo, someone who does not mince her words in the face of unnecessary and overbearing bureaucratic authority. Chapter Five, *Taking the Mickey*, looks at how Joan Kerr combined scholarship with an offbeat, larrikin, sense of humour to present a clear idea of what *she* thought was right, even if it meant waging ideological battles on many fronts.

¹¹³ Kerr Archive

¹¹⁴ Kerr Archive

¹¹⁵ Virginia Spate, 'Eleanor Joan Kerr', *Proceedings*, The Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra, 2004, p.45

Chapter Five: Taking the Mickey

The Spectator newspaper, created in 1711 as a vehicle for politics, culture and social etiquette, set an ideal of what society *should* be like, not what it was like. As with much satirical writing the newspaper was both critical of the current state of affairs, and reformist and utopian about the future it desired.¹ The attitude of being ‘critical of the present state of affairs, and reformist and utopian about the future’ is clearly neither new nor original but it does describe in a nutshell Joan Kerr’s approach to intellectual life in 20th-century Australia. If she was a cool-headed pragmatist when writing grant applications and eliciting scholarly collaboration, she could be a hot-headed idealist about the state of (art) affairs and often used satire to mask disappointment and frustration. Art historian Candice Bruce agrees with this. In addition to being ‘hugely intelligent and eternally curious about everything intellectual’, Joan Kerr was idealistic:

[She] would fight to the death for all sorts of causes and was always very political. [She] *liked* the cut and thrust of it – but was often a bit perplexed I think when others took against her. She had strong opinions about things – justice and fairness were important to her and she was always championing the underdog but she could rub some up the wrong way sometimes (not that she cared much if she did).²

From her days in student politics, Kerr believed she was right and she was, often enough. An observation from Raymond Priestley’s obituary for his colleague and brother-in-law Griffith Taylor could also apply to Joan Kerr:

He was very sure of himself and his opinions and had reason so to be. He was one of those rather infuriating people who are quite certain their own particular view of a problem is the right one and are the more annoying because they are often correct in so thinking.³

In similar fashion Joan Kerr aroused exasperation in friend and foe alike. On the

¹ *The Tatler*, the forerunner of *The Spectator* inaugurated by Joseph Addison in 1709, delivered a gentle, ironic form of satire, poking fun at society and its follies. Markham Ellis, *The Coffee House Form*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2004, pp 188-198

² Email from Candice Bruce, August 2006

³ Sir Raymond Priestley, ‘Griffith Taylor’, in John Andrews ed, *Frontiers and Men: a Volume in Memory of Griffith Taylor (1880-1963)*, Melbourne, F.W. Cheshire, 1966, p.4, quoted in Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford, *Griffith Taylor: Visionary Environmentalist Explorer*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2008, p.10

one hand she was admired for her whole-hearted commitment to a cause, on the other her terrier-like grip on a course of action gave rise to a degree of ruefulness that she could not – or would not – compromise. In a less-than-ideal world most situations require some give and take. An individual can more easily make a choice as to what line of treatment to demand from, and extend to, others at the beginning of an encounter – what is generally understood as ‘getting off on the right foot’ – than he or she can alter the line of treatment that is being pursued once the interaction is underway.⁴ On occasions, Joan Kerr did not get off on the right foot and the ‘interaction’ ended badly.

In these bruising encounters she was always loyally supported by her husband. While this is understandable, it did not always enable Joan Kerr to appreciate other people’s points of view. According to Ernest Goffman, embarrassments and discrediting occurrences can be avoided when a person employs preventive practices, both corrective and defensive.⁵ In lay terms, this means tact, and tactfulness was not one of Kerr’s strong points. In *Pictorial Biography*, Jim Kerr talks about Joan Kerr’s ‘natural capacity to prick pretension and kick against the pricks of perceived injustice’. But whether she was ‘larrikin or crusader, or a combination of both’ was not clear to him.⁶ It is clear that Joan Kerr always did what she thought was right. What is ambiguous is the corollary to this: that she did not worry what people thought of her. Joan Kerr did care, passionately, and that was often the crux of the matter. In each of her major university appointments she left with a feeling of having been treated with a lack of respect for her past achievements in, and future potential for, Australian art history.

Art history is a serious discipline with well-defined requirements for scholarly engagement – a sense of humour not usually being one of them. Yet in 1984 Deborah Bartlett described Joan Kerr’s sense of humour as something that ‘wells irrepressibly into speech, avid enjoyment evident with each new twist of topic’.⁷ In his oration at Kerr’s funeral, Peter Watts remembered how she was ‘such fun’ to be with. ‘She wore her scholarship lightly,’ he said. ‘She disguised it with the brightest of spirits and the wickedest sense of humour. She was irreverent, quick witted and mischievous. She loved the quirky and the absurd.’ Virginia Spate

⁴ Goffman, pp 22-23

⁵ Goffman, pp 24-25

⁶ *Pictorial Biography*, p.135

⁷ Bartlett, ‘Living Interview: Culture with Kerr’

described Kerr's approach to art history as 'characterized by wit as well as the mischievous overturning of stale assumptions'.⁸

In seeking the origins of Kerr's broad-minded attitude to cultural production – serious at the centre, funny around the edges – it is useful to note the strategies Australians have developed in attempting to create an identity differentiated, and distanced, from their British origins, in particular a well-honed sense of satire laced with irony.⁹ This is evident in vernacular expressions such as 'sending up', or 'taking the Mickey out of' someone.¹⁰ Joan Kerr might have enjoyed being something of an outsider in going beyond the confines of traditional history but in using humour and parody to make a point or launch a potentially contentious argument, she was, it seems, typically Australian.

It is now five years since Joan Kerr died and the memorialising of her life is well underway. In that process of rounding off rough corners and smoothing over the interesting, difficult patches that animate human existence, family members would like to remember her as exceptional in all aspects of her life, academic colleagues with the *gravitas* that befits a scholar. Yet this is not the whole picture. In this chapter Kerr's witty and warrior-like personality comes under the spotlight. The examples used to illustrate this are, of course, the biographer's choice and the resulting 'portrait' the biographer's creation. To borrow from Kerr's review of *Fixed in Time: Photographs from Another Australia 1900-1939*, any fixing of the past – in this case Joan Kerr's own life – must necessarily be distorted by being processed in the (21st-century) present.¹¹

Kerr was involved in a series of problematic issues: the rights of junior academics in the 1970s; how to honour the terms of John Power's will in the 1980s; spats with journalists and bureaucrats in the 1990s. These incidents reveal a pattern of conflict driven by Kerr's strongly developed crusader-larrikin nature and although their telling might appear somewhat fragmented the tale is anything but dull when biographer and reader alike follow Joan Kerr as she cuts a spirited swathe through academic life.

⁸ Virginia Spate, Obituary, 'Eleanor Joan Kerr', p.45

⁹ Rose, 'Rupture and the ethics of care in colonised space', in *Prehistory to Politics: John Mulvaney, the Humanities and the Public Intellectual*, Tim Bonyhady & Tom Griffiths eds, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1996, pp 190-215

¹⁰ Rose, 'Rupture and the ethics of care in colonised space', p.207

Crusader:

At Queensland University in the late 1950s, Joan (Lyndon) Kerr was never afraid to voice her opinions. She was passionate about literature and theatre and could not understand why others were not. She was impatient of laziness (inadequate preparation) and weakness (unwillingness to stand firm on issues) and had already developed a sarcastic turn of phrase.

'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable', was the title of an article by 'Crazy Jane' (Joan Lyndon) in *Semper Floreat*, 29 June 1960, in which she reported on a national meeting of the editors of student newspapers. She was critical of those who did not 'bother' to attend and those who were not wholeheartedly committed to their responsibilities. Adelaide, she declared, was represented by 'an attractive female with large, melting blue eyes who unfortunately knew nothing about any student newspaper, especially her own'. Although the conference was being held in Sydney, the editor of Sydney University's *Honi Soit* had not made an appearance. 'However *Honi* staff assured us,' she wrote, 'that they'd seen him twice themselves and they hadn't believed what they'd seen anyway'.

In Joan's eyes, the conference was a 'revolting failure'. She was disgusted at the provincialism that permeated the newspapers, amazed that articles of a 'literary, provocative or frivolous nature' were considered useless and frustrated that *Honi Soit* was not interested in printing articles written and cartoons drawn by students from other universities. She was also vehemently against the proposed new code of ethics for student newspapers especially the need to remain 'unbiased'. The idea that all copy, including advertisements, should conform to canons of morality and good taste was in breach of student rights. '*Semper*, she wrote, 'has always refused to subscribe to any formalised, cast-iron code of illusory ethics for we are not attempting to be just a slick reproduction of the commercial press concentrating on news coverage'. She concluded that the Australia-wide network of student publications was failing its job of assisting communication between students.¹²

By 1961 Joan Kerr was married, living in Sydney and working for the magazine *Weekend* as a very junior journalist. She was not overwhelmed by editor Donald Horne's reputation and stood her ground when he disagreed with

¹¹ *Fixed in Time: Photographs from Another Australia 1900-1939*, The Fairfax Library, Sydney, c.1984, the subject of an ABC Radio broadcast Kerr gave on 5 March 1986; Joan Kerr Archive

¹² *Semper Floreat*, 22 November 1960, reproduced in *Documents*, p.28

her over the date of D.H. Lawrence's visit to Australia. Although 'He called us a weird mob', the first article she had published in *Weekend*, was 'very heavily subbed',¹³ she was correct about 1922 being the year of Lawrence's visit rather than Horne's 1933.¹⁴ In another article, 'Shocked? Or do you think it's a mess? Lawrence's art was once as controversial as his books', Kerr took on Australia's parochial attitude to Lawrence:

Forty years ago when the author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* came to Australia he called it 'crude'. Now the Australian Government is calling the author of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* crude!...If you want to read him you can be regarded as either an earnest student of literature or a searcher after the pornographic.¹⁵

She was received as both when she arrived at the State Library of NSW (SLNSW) and requested *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and a book of Lawrence's paintings. Told that the head librarian had to approve of the borrower, Joan filled in the required form 'looking as innocent as possible' and after a short inquisition obtained the items.¹⁶ However the exercise proved to be an anticlimax as she was not impressed with Lawrence's talents as either artist or novelist:

Other than the fact that none of the figures in the pictures had bothered to dress to have their portraits painted, the main thing I noticed about them was that they weren't very good pictures. And most of the male figures bore a startling resemblance to D.H. Lawrence – a person of whom the painter was very fond. Lawrence once wrote how he despised the people who considered his paintings improper. 'I wish I could paint a picture that would just kill every cowardly and ill-minded person that looked at it. My word, what a slaughter!' he said.

Time seems to be doing the job for him, for there are very few people nowadays who would be disgusted by these paintings. And yet people still think him the naughtiest novelist ever. The truth about *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is that it's dated...The old lady needs a face-lift if she is going to shock anybody. By all means read the book. You'll probably just be bored!¹⁷

Although Kerr's writing here is not particularly memorable the article reveals the youthful enthusiasm of a fledgling reporter willing to take on a controversial subject, and a figure of importance.

¹³ *Weekend*, 8 April 1961, p.5

¹⁴ In 1922, D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frida were in Thirroul on the south coast of New South Wales. Lawrence completed his novel *Kangaroo* while there.

¹⁵ *Documents*, p.43; article not dated but probably around the same time as the previous article since Joan Kerr resigned from the *Weekend* in mid 1961

¹⁶ Most probably *The Paintings of D.H. Lawrence*, London, Mandrake Press, 1929

¹⁷ *Documents*, p.43

A decade later Kerr became embroiled in controversy when she ‘took on’ another figure of importance – her employer, the eminent art historian Professor Bernard Smith – over what she saw as unfair conditions for staff in the Department of Fine Arts at Sydney University. She poured out her frustration in the letters she and Jim Kerr exchanged when he was in York from mid 1972 to mid 1973 undertaking a conservation course.¹⁸

In one letter dated 30 September 1972, Joan Kerr relayed to her husband Smith’s opinion that academic standards in such a new department could not be jeopardised and that an MA for senior tutors and a PhD for lecturers were essential requirements. Kerr pointed out to Smith that this was not necessarily the case in other departments and that staff members in Fine Arts were unofficially carrying out the duties of lecturer and assistant professor without the financial remuneration that went with such posts. It seemed unfair that ‘degrees were everything while performance counted for nothing’ and that staff members were given such heavy workloads that they were left little time to complete their requisite postgraduate degrees. Smith was not amused and more or less told Kerr to mind her own business. She was not one to accept this response meekly, especially as when editor of *Semper Floreat*, she had been accustomed to collaboration and cooperation. She could not understand why Smith should retain ‘complete control’ over everything that went on in ‘his’ department and not allow staff members to have a voice or a vote.¹⁹ Worst of all, these ‘victims’ had no form of redress:

Surely you’d think they’d be able to appeal to their staff association? But guess who is the vice-president of the Sydney University Staff Association! Professor Bernard Smith wearing his other hat. The Staff Association must be the only trade union in Australia, which is made up of the bosses as well as the workers. And, as might be expected, the bosses hold most of the executive positions in the association. Who would be foolish enough to weep about their wicked professor to a group of professors? The Fine Arts staff can do their stipulated jobs or get out. With jobs in Fine Arts in Australia still very scarce they mostly lump it.²⁰

In typical fashion, Kerr ‘went public’ sending detailed information about the inequitable situation to *Honi Soit* for a report being compiled on the exploitation of tutors. Smith must have got wind of this and in October 1972, he approached

¹⁸ *Pictorial Biography*, p.53

¹⁹ NLA Interview, p.29

²⁰ *Documents*, pp 76-78; ‘Fine arts exploits’, typed note, 1972, Kerr Archive

Kerr before a Fine Arts staff meeting and asked if she had read the draft of an article to be published in *Honi Soit*. At Kerr's reply in the positive, Smith became angry, launching veiled threats about future staff appointments for troublemaking junior academics.²¹

Bernard Smith had set up the new department single-handedly and under difficult conditions so it was understandable that he was reluctant to relinquish control of teaching protocols and administration. It could also be said that Smith was a man of his time. As early as 1963, historian Geoffrey Serle had been calling for a return to the traditional idea of a university as a 'community of scholars and teachers in which there is a more even gradation of authority and responsibility, according to status and experience, in place of the existing concentration of power in professors' hands'.²² The arrival of a brash young academic – uncompromising and female to boot – was an affront to Smith's perception of the proper respect due to a professor. 'A difficult personality,' Smith remarked in 2006. 'She could be very forceful and could offend people'.²³

The origins of the controversy that erupted in the second half of the 1980s over appropriate usage of Power Bequest funds can be found in these earlier confrontations. In Kerr's opinion, Smith (in the 1970s) was acting as if the money from the John Power Bequest was 'coming out of his own pocket, he was so mean spending it'. What she did not know at the time was that Smith was under considerable pressure. Power's money was invested in shares in the Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Company (MLC), which although a highly reputable institution, was going through a difficult period and paying low dividends. For Kerr, the idealist, this was of much less importance than the fact that meagre spending on staff, research programs and development of the art collection and its infrastructure meant no vision, no dynamism, no enthusiasm for intellectual enquiry.²⁴

Even if the Department was working on a shoestring budget, the Bequest was steadily appreciating so that by the time serious discussions began in the mid 1980s about transforming the Power Collection into a public museum of

²¹ NLA Interview, p.31; 20 October 1972, *Documents*, p.78. File Note added by Joan Kerr, 6 June 1993: 'An article subsequently appeared in *Honi* in which some of the above was used – tho' the tone was much more deferential to Bernard Smith'.

²² Geoffrey Serle, 'God-Professors and their juniors', *Vestiges: The Australian Universities' Review*, Vol.VI, No.1, March 1963, p.11

²³ Steggall, conversation with Bernard Smith, December 2006

²⁴ NLA Interview, p.30

contemporary art, a sum of money was available (even if considerably reduced from initial expectations), one which many people – artists, academics and curators – were keen to spend. However there was the matter of John Wardell Power's 1939 will, the vital clause of which reads:

I give and bequeath the remainder of my shares in the said Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Co Ltd...to my wife during her life and after her death to transfer the same to the University of Sydney...to be used by them for the foundation of a Faculty of Fine Arts in such University or the further endowment of such Faculty if existing in the manner herein after mentioned that is to say to make available to the people of Australia the latest ideas and theories in the plastic arts by means of lectures and teaching and the purchase of the most contemporary art of the world and by the creation of schools, lecture halls, museums and other places for the purpose of such lectures and teaching and of suitably housing the works purchased so as to bring the people of Australia in more direct touch with the latest art developments in other countries.²⁵

After Edith Power died in 1961, Sydney University received all the drawings, sketches and paintings by her husband that had remained in his studio after his death. In accordance with Edith Power's will, these were to be 'placed in the Public Hall or Gallery of the Faculty of Fine Arts' which her late husband 'by his will provided to be founded and which he liberally endowed by his said will',²⁶ thus reinforcing the view that the Power Collection had to remain at Sydney University. Yet how to adhere to the complex conditions of Power's will proved as difficult a task in the 1980s as it had in the 1960s.

It was not until November 1965 that the Sydney University Senate announced the creation of the Power Institute of Fine Arts, comprising the Power Department of Fine Arts (to provide courses for students proceeding to degrees in the Faculties of Arts and Architecture), the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art and the Power Research Library of Contemporary Art. The Senate would appoint a Power Professor of Contemporary Art (who would also be Director of the Institute), a Curator 'charged with the responsibility for the selection of original works for the Power Gallery' and a Librarian. Bernard Smith was appointed Foundation Director.²⁷

²⁵ quoted in Donna Lee Brien, *Bernard Smith and the Power Institute*. Fine Arts IV – Thesis, Masters Preliminary, Power Institute of Fine Arts, Sydney University, 1988 (Schaeffer Library), p.1

²⁶ Donna Lee Brien, *John Power (1881-1943): Artist and Benefactor*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1991, p.43

²⁷ Donna Lee Brien, Introduction, *Bernard Smith and the Power Institute*, p.15

In June 1967 Smith attempted to speak at a meeting of the Contemporary Art Society (CAS) in Sydney but was heckled by artists who believed that the university was using the Bequest to fill a curriculum gap and that 'a wonderful idea' was slipping (or perhaps had slipped) away. Articles and letters in the press by Smith, members of the CAS and the public fuelled the controversy. Artists who wanted the Bequest to be used for practical art training as well as for purchasing and exhibiting art, suggested that academics and theoreticians were destroying the true spirit of art. Some artists however, welcomed the opportunity to study the history of art and 'some academics were artists and theorists'. More important was the very real possibility of conflict between the roles of administrator and academic, and the question of whether the huge, and at times incompatible, responsibilities of Director-Professor-Departmental Head was a reasonable professional expectation for any single person to fulfil.²⁸

The problem resurfaced in more urgent form in July 1988 when Director of the Institute, Professor Virginia Spate, resigned. She believed that the issue of the directorship fitted into a university-wide problem of 'uncritical emphasis on managerial skills'. While these were necessary, Spate insisted it was equally important not to allow the professional knowledge of academics to be regarded as irrelevant in the face of 'Dawkins's utilitarianism'.²⁹

However that was all in the future and in 1967 Smith was optimistic. Although from vastly different backgrounds, John Power (a doctor of medicine and an Australian artist who participated in the international avant-garde during the 1920s and 1930s³⁰) and Bernard Smith (a recognized scholar in Australian art history) shared a conviction that the proper academic study of Australian art was a vital part of Australia's cultural and intellectual wellbeing. Smith viewed art history as an objective professional science that would lead to 'improved standards of art criticism, more professionalism in art galleries, a higher level of art patronage and connoisseurship...and a better informed body of public opinion'.³¹ He interpreted Power's emphasis on 'the latest art developments in other countries' as absolving the Faculty from the need to promote Australian

²⁸ Brien, *Bernard Smith and the Power Institute*, pp 22-23

²⁹ 'Professor Spate re-appointed Power Institute's Director', *The University of Sydney News*, 13 September, 1988, p.175

³⁰ Donna Lee Brien, 'John Power: a private iconography', *Art & Australia*, Vol.29, No.2, 1991, p.184

art.³² His perception of Australian art as merely 'a variant of the European tradition' was a position with which Joan Kerr would increasingly disagree.

Gordon Thomson (then Deputy Director of the NGV) was appointed curator of the Power Gallery in October 1966 and set a precedent in being allowed 'complete freedom of choice' in the selection of art works.³³ In 1967 Smith began assembling staff for courses to commence in 1968. Donald Brook, 'a sculptor of considerable distinction' and a respected art critic and scholar, and David Saunders, an authority on Australian architecture, were the first lecturers appointed. Terry Smith, who had been Bernard Smith's student in Melbourne, was employed as tutor in 1968. In the same year, Anthony Bradley, a graduate of Melbourne University, was hired as Librarian. In 1970 the Department began employing its own students, the first being Joan Kerr.³⁴

The entire annual interest of the Bequest however could not cover the Department's salaries and expenses, let alone fund the Gallery, Library and any other projects so the John Power Foundation was created to organise lectures, seminars and workshops to generate income.³⁵ Problems notwithstanding, by the mid 1970s the Institute was well established and although emphasis in undergraduate courses was on the study of (mostly international) 20th-century art, postgraduate research was broadening to include colonial Australian art and architecture.³⁶

³¹ Bernard Smith, 'The Power Bequest', of July 1967, quoted in Brien, *Bernard Smith and the Power Institute*, Masters Preliminary, Fine Arts IV Thesis, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1988 (Schaeffer Library), pp 22-23

³² Brien, 'The Power Department of Fine Arts', *Bernard Smith and the Power Institute*, p.27

³³ By the mid 1970s the Power Collection consisted of a respectable four hundred and fifty works, representing two hundred and thirty-five artists, as well as one hundred and forty-five works acquired by gift. There were also John Power's own works: one hundred and forty oil paintings, approximately two hundred oil sketches and over seven hundred drawings. *Dr John Power and the Power Bequest. The Power Institute and The Power Foundation: an Illustrated Survey*, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1976, p.18

³⁴ Brien, 'The Power Department of Fine Arts', *Bernard Smith and the Power Institute*, p.24

³⁵ Brien, 'The Power Department of Fine Arts', p.25

³⁶ In 1975/76 survey of the work of the Power Institute, Joan Kerr is listed as having made a study of Gothic church architecture in New South Wales; David Saunders a study of the architectural situation in Australia circa 1900. Saunders had also been invited to contribute to the research work of the National Heritage Commission in its compilation of buildings and sites throughout Australia meriting conservation; *Dr John Power and the Power Bequest. The Power Institute and The Power Foundation: an Illustrated Survey*, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1976, pp 35-36

In 1984 when the Premier of NSW, Neville Wran, offered the Maritime Services Board (MSB) building at Circular Quay to Sydney University for a peppercorn rent, discussions began regarding the creation of a museum of contemporary art with the Power artworks as the nucleus of a collection. Joint senior curators-in-charge of the Power Gallery, Bernice Murphy and Leon Paroissien, strongly supported the move.³⁷ Although the MSB building had no connection whatsoever with Sydney University, it would be an easy bus, train or ferry ride from most parts of Sydney and the location at the Quay was at the heart of the burgeoning tourist precinct.

From the outset Joan Kerr was vociferously against the proposed move: it was illegal under the terms of John Power's will; it was not in the interests of good teaching and setting up the new museum would cost far more than the money accumulated in the Power Bequest. It was also, for Kerr, in complete opposition to the original intention of the collection as a teaching facility:

That was the whole point. It was a teaching collection. In fact, Jack [Elwyn] Lynn purchased works that weren't great works but were what was happening today...so you could look at what Jack Lynn had gone round the world and thought was important and show it to your students and you'd have lots of prints and cheap works and odd works from a good representative number of countries rather than one or two great art works because it wasn't meant to be a great art gallery but a teaching collection of...the most contemporary art of the world.³⁸

Negotiations dragged on throughout 1986. Fed up with the lack of commitment to Power's intentions, Kerr made a long submission to the Board of the Power Institute in January 1987. Leon Paroissien (to be appointed director of the new museum with Murphy assistant director) responded, acknowledging that 'a great deal of the conflict that burst out late last year [1986] arose from a realization of the financial implications of the envisaged move to Circular Quay'.³⁹ Since this is what Kerr had been trying to make people realize all along, it did little to calm her misgivings.

Early in February 1988 the University Senate rushed through, without notice, a draft memorandum of understanding between the NSW Government and Sydney

³⁷ Joan Kerr, 'Tourist attraction' a travesty', Letters section, *The University of Sydney News*, 1 March 1988, p.4

³⁸ NLA Interview, pp 33-34

University in which significant clauses overrode the views of most members of the Power Institute and its Director, in whose name it was presented.⁴⁰ This, Kerr wrote in a letter to the *University of Sydney News* 'eliminates the Director of the Power institute, the Power Department of Fine Arts and other (non-gallery) parts of the Power Institute from any role in the project'. As proposed, Kerr concluded, this multi-million dollar 'tourist attraction' would be a 'travesty of all that the Power Institute at the University of Sydney stood for'.⁴¹

At the Academic Board meeting of 15 February 1988, the Vice-Chancellor, John Ward, promised to report Kerr's criticisms to the next meeting of the Senate but no response to her report has come to light.⁴² Ward (and later Power Professor Virginia Spate⁴³) placed emphasis, at least in public, on John Power's wish to make contemporary art available to the 'people of Australia', an approach that could override considerations of dubious legality in terms of Power's will. Ward's 'Comment' in the *University of Sydney News* was a considered analysis of the situation that gave no hint of the behind-the-scenes turmoil:

It is the special virtue of the Government's offer of part of the Maritime Services Board building that it makes possible the achievement of so many of Power's objectives, gives the Gallery (and the University) an imposing presence in a historic and famous part of Sydney and challenges the generosity of benefactors and all who sympathise with Power's grand purpose.⁴⁴

³⁹ Joan Kerr, 'The Power Institute at Circular Quay', 23 January 1987, 12 pages, Kerr Archive; Letter, 'First release of Power Bequest finances', from Leon Paroissien, Acting Director of the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, to Dr Pat Lahy (1928-2004), Acting Director, Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1 February 1987, Joan Kerr Archive

⁴⁰ Sybil Jack corroborated this in an email of 1 November 2008: 'Both Virginia [Spate] and Terry [Smith] who opposed the MCA scheme had to make their own accommodation to it when it happened.'

⁴¹ Joan Kerr, Letters: 'Tourist attraction' a travesty, *University of Sydney News*, 1 March 1988, p.4

⁴² Editor's note, *The University of Sydney News*, 15 March 1988, p.22

⁴³ 'Power Gallery moves a step closer to its new site', *The University of Sydney News*, 14 June 1988, p.91:

The Director of the Power Institute of Fine Arts, Professor Virginia Spate, said that she saw the relocation as giving the University the opportunity of at last bringing knowledge and understanding of Contemporary Art to the 'people of Australia'. Not only would the Maritime Services Board site for exhibitions allow the Power Gallery to create major exhibitions of contemporary art and to display for the first time the Power Collection but also would allow for the development of education programs directed to the wider public, Professor Spate said.

The offer of the Maritime Services building not only provides a unique opportunity to display works of art but also to engage in critical inquiry into the visual arts in accordance with a bequest made to the University.

⁴⁴ John M. Ward, 'Power Gallery at Circular Quay', *The University of Sydney News*, 15 March 1988

The proposed transfer of the Power Collection to Circular Quay was the spark that ignited the flame of Kerr's long-simmering frustration. As Associate Professor, Kerr had been either head, or acting head, of the department for many years but she never had any say in the management of Power Institute finances. Spate controlled the Bequest money and she appears to have been as parsimonious as Bernard Smith had been.⁴⁵ Kerr was far from satisfied and said so in no uncertain terms. She was on the board of the Power Gallery Committee and other committee members (Kerr says 'all') voted that she should be removed because she was being so negative:

The whole thing was a disaster because I kept feeling I had to speak out against it. In fact, I had nothing against Bernice and Leon and we've actually got on quite well ever since but, as I said to Leon, 'The problem is you just haven't got the money', and he said, 'Do you think I don't know that, Joan?'⁴⁶

Sybil Jack, Dean of Arts at Sydney University at this time, remembers how the beleaguered Kerr would ring her at any hour of the day or night. Although a sympathetic ear, Jack often felt Kerr butted against rules and regulations that even if old-fashioned and not always fair – as in this particular instance – were necessary for the proper functioning of an institution. As Jack saw it:

The University had not managed the Bequest well and so its value had declined. There were those including Leon Paroissien who when the State Government offered the premises on the Quay to the university for a museum of contemporary art (MCA) for a peppercorn rent, saw it as a major advance. In fact, there was not enough money left in the Bequest to take up this offer and to continue to fund the Fine Arts Department and the public lectures and so on. Nevertheless, various individuals with influence on the highest level of the University...pushed the matter through.⁴⁷

Even though Joan Kerr was correct and, in Sybil Jack's view, had 'quite rightly and courageously' held fast to her principles, a compromise had to be found since the financing of a department of fine arts was something that had never been envisaged by an arts faculty that was itself in a period of acute funding cuts.⁴⁸ Many years later Bronwyn Hanna (a tutor at the time) still maintained that Joan Kerr had been 'absolutely right' to defend the clauses of John Power's will.

⁴⁵ At one stage Kerr demanded an administrative officer be employed and paid for with Power money because both she and Spate were doing 'a ridiculous amount of administration', NLA Interview, p.35

⁴⁶ NLA Interview, p.34

⁴⁷ Email from Sybil Jack to Susan Steggall, 1 November 2008

⁴⁸ Email from Sybil Jack

It wasn't anything personal; it was the issue and it needed much deeper consideration.⁴⁹

Allied to this, the *Dictionary* project begun in 1981 had, by 1988, become a huge undertaking and even after seven years under Kerr's editorship there was no end in sight.⁵⁰ On occasions it had been dismissed as 'Joan's little hobby' and Kerr 'grew bitter and bitchy about feeling that no one valued it'.⁵¹ She saw the discrepancy between the amount of money being spent on the department's one major research project (hers) and that being 'poured down to Circular Quay' as 'just ridiculous'.⁵² For other staff members, even those who respected Kerr's commitment to the *Dictionary*, there were times when the project appeared to be consuming the entire department.⁵³ According to Virginia Spate, the ever-expanding scope of the *Dictionary* was one of the reasons for the Department's financial problems and something that 'undermined' their relationship as colleagues:

It provided the context of Joan's memorandum about the Department's failures to provide resources at a time when it too was subject to financial cuts. In short, the demands of the *Dictionary* continuously expanded while the Department's capacity to meet them decreased...Joan was unstoppable once she had determined her goal – and she had harnessed her extraordinary energy to it.⁵⁴

The situation was clearly out of hand, yet in *Pictorial Biography*, Jim Kerr sidesteps a balanced analysis in favour of statements about Joan Kerr's respect for her colleague-protagonists:

What made the controversy so difficult for Joan was her respect and liking for Leon Paroissien...and her understanding of his unstated reason for a governance of the Gallery separate from the Power Institute and Department...The situation was made even more complex by her undiminished affection for (and irritation with) her Professor Virginia Spate to whom she really did want to give loyal support.⁵⁵

Since Joan Kerr's colleagues could not publicly give *her* that 'loyal support' she felt she had no option but to resign. Yet she did not want to cut all ties with the university – after all there was the *Dictionary* to complete. Having ascertained

⁴⁹ Steggall, Interview with Bronwyn Hanna, February 2008

⁵⁰ See Chapter Six for discussion on the compilation of the *Dictionary*

⁵¹ Murray Waldren, 'The rewriting on the wall', *The Australian Magazine*, pp 19-20, September 1992

⁵² NLA Interview, p.36

⁵³ Steggall conversation with Heather Johnson, 2006

⁵⁴ Virginia Spate to Jim Kerr, 23 December 2005 quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.77

that the History Department would be happy to receive her and her project, she drafted a letter to Vice-Chancellor Ward requesting a transfer from Fine Arts to History. This time before going public, Kerr gave Ward a copy of the draft and called to discuss the matter privately. While she begins the accompanying letter calmly enough – ‘As you know, I have been extremely unhappy about the decision to spend most of the Power Bequest income on an off-campus public art gallery in preference to expanding the scholarly work of the whole of the Power Institute (including a campus gallery)’ – she ends on a melodramatic note:

The situation has recently become unbearable. I am no longer prepared to fight for a vision of a united department, library, public education programs and gallery as a scholarly, intellectually and artistically adventurous Institute when I receive no support from either my Professor or Head of Department. It seems wiser to remove myself from the department than have it split.⁵⁶

‘When I receive no support’ shows not only a considerable level of self-absorption but also a lack of awareness of, and tolerance towards, others’ points of view – a classic example of failure in Goffman’s scenario of the proper management of workplace communications.

Several of Kerr’s colleagues were upset by the fact that she intended to resign and saw her departure as a serious and sad loss for the future of art history education. The day of Kerr’s resignation, 18 July 1988, was seen as a ‘a black day in and for the Power Institute’ by Alan Cholodenko who described Kerr as ‘a brave, loyal, and wonderful colleague, someone who not only encouraged intellectual adventurousness but acknowledged and appreciated such effort, someone who as ‘teacher, scholar, and administrator...set the finest example’. He also acknowledged Kerr’s ‘courageous defence of the Department and the Library amidst the muck and mire of the Gallery issue’.⁵⁷

Michael (Mick) Carter wrote that Kerr’s departure was a tragedy that would leave an ‘irreplaceable’ gap both for students and colleagues and concluded that it was ‘probably best’ for her to ‘walk away from the current mess’.⁵⁸ Yet ‘walk away’ was not in Kerr’s nature, and to even think of doing so indicates how much emotional, intellectual and physical energy she had spent defending her position. Perhaps the phrase was instrumental, even in a small way, in reversing her

⁵⁵ *Pictorial Biography*, p.77

⁵⁶ Joan Kerr to John Ward, 2 June 1988, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.77

⁵⁷ Letter from Alan Cholodenko, to Joan Kerr, 19 July, 1988, reproduced in *Documents*, p.212

decision. As Jim Kerr writes, 'impelled by a sense of loyalty to colleagues and Department and just perhaps out of a bloody minded aversion to admitting defeat, Joan accepted the Vice-Chancellor's suggestion of a year's leave'. And while she did spend July and August 1989 travelling around Queensland investigating art and architecture in country towns, she devoted the rest of her leave to the *Dictionary*.⁵⁹

Joan Kerr did not need Anne-Marie Willis' encouragement to 'continue to put spokes in the wheels of Empire builders at Circular Quay'⁶⁰ and persisted in her opposition to the plan. Perhaps to draw another analogy with geographer Griffith Taylor, Kerr liked 'living on the edge', even if it 'frustrated and distressed her'.⁶¹ Actions might fail but never words and she donned her typically sarcastic mantle in a letter to the *University of Sydney News* in April 1989:

An eccentric dedication to Fine Arts as a scholarly discipline impels me to draw attention to the terms of John Power's will, lost beneath the media exposure that two full-time Public Relations Managers (employed with Power's money) have managed to achieve for the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art at the University of Sydney – now renamed 'Museum of Contemporary Art', *sans* benefactor, *sans* unappealing academic associations, *sans* everything except a view of Sydney Harbour and a wages and acquisitions budget from the Bequest already in the region of \$750,000 per annum.⁶²

According to Kerr, Power did not want 'an entrepreneurial multi-million dollar off-campus art gallery appealing primarily to tourists'; he wanted a Faculty of Fine Arts. Unfortunately, she continued, 'by the time MCA opens, there should be virtually no academic department surviving to embarrass anyone with its impoverishment, despite the several (non-teaching) professors already threatened for Circular Quay'.⁶³ However by 1992 Kerr had become resigned to the new museum and was able to discuss openly her lonely defeat

...as the most active opponent to the creation of the MCA at Circular Quay – indeed as its *only* active opponent until I withdrew, wounded, from a battle lost. (I might mention that although no one else was foolish enough to bear arms in this unwinnable fight, there were plenty of Machiavellian mutterers in the corridors of the Fine Arts

⁵⁸ Mick Carter, letter to Joan Kerr, nd, reproduced in *Documents*, p.213

⁵⁹ 'Application for Permission to undertake a Special Studies Program (Study Leave), nd, reproduced in *Documents*, pp 300-303

⁶⁰ Anne-Marie Willis, note to Joan Kerr, 'Friday', reproduced in *Documents*, p.191

⁶¹ Strange and Bashford, *Griffith Taylor*, p.128

⁶² Joan Kerr, 'Faculty of Fine Arts?', Letters page, *University of Sydney News*, 18 April 1989, p.64

⁶³ Joan Kerr, 'Faculty of Fine Arts?', p.64

Department.)...I realize that as a former protagonist my version of this particular story might sound biased, bitter and bitchy, but that very realization has forced me to overcome my prejudices.⁶⁴

The appointment of Bernice Murphy and Leon Paroissien in 1983 as joint curators of the Power Gallery of Contemporary Art, had created tensions between two quite distinct sets of values, the academic and the commercial. Joan Kerr again:

The academic issues at risk were (most appropriately) power, prestige and control, particularly power. Allied with these was a distaste for university administrators, a conviction that students could not be defined as 'the people of Australia' and a feeling that understanding finance was really rather sordid for an academic. These were complicated by an absolutely disastrous desire to act honourably by everyone and an inability to foresee the consequences of one's actions. It was, in short, an entirely normal professorial position. The opposing values were simpler; the curators simply wanted to get control of the Power Bequest.⁶⁵

Kerr was also critical of the former university bursar, Stephen Harrison, 'who was convinced that money was totally wasted on academics, seen 'merely as obstacles to the successful operation of a university'. She was equally sarcastic about the removal of the name 'Power Gallery' and noted that the contribution of the university and the Power Bequest to the operations of the MCA appeared in its advertising copy in ever-decreasing type size until 'finally disappearing from most places – a rather ironic situation given that the senate's enthusiasm for the project was largely based on the idea that this would be a superb public face for the university'.⁶⁶

Last but not least there was the restaurant. Kerr's remark, 'you can have a great cocktail party there for \$49 a head', is clearly a dig at the MCA's self-styled status as a fashionable function venue. One of the museum's 'appealing aspects' for Kerr was its wry sense of humour, 'particularly, in the placements at the opening lunch. I was seated next to Gough Whitlam. It was the day of the Dismissal, 11 November, and no other J. Kerr was available. We had a long chat about names, and a very short one about money'.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Joan Kerr, 'The story of the Museum of Contemporary Art', seminar given at COFA, 25 March 1992 reproduced in *Documents*, pp 306-308

⁶⁵ Joan Kerr, 'The story of the Museum of Contemporary Art'

⁶⁶ Joan Kerr, 'The story of the Museum of Contemporary Art'

⁶⁷ Joan Kerr, 'The story of the Museum of Contemporary Art'

In hindsight it is clear that the money in John Power's Bequest was enough to dream grand dreams but not enough to turn them all into reality. There were so many competing factions clamouring for funds that it would have been impossible to satisfy them all. Clearly, some sort of broader public solution was necessary even if not completely in accordance with Power's will. Perhaps the real problem was in the way the 'interaction' between academics, curators, university senate members and politicians – 'arguing from different premises' – had been conducted.

Kerr was not done with museums however and at a conference held at the Museum of Sydney in September 1995 she was critical of the museum's inaugural exhibition. Her disapproval stemmed from the fact that the spectacular displays – 'the ultimate set of emperor's new clothes' – hid the lack of a collection and that most of the conference papers were little more than self-congratulatory pieces. Kerr was the only one asking difficult questions.⁶⁸

She was also involved in several sharp-tongued written exchanges, for example her reply to architect Miles Lewis' review of *Gothic in South Australian Churches* by Brian Andrews (*Architecture in Australia*, May 1985). Lewis, Kerr writes,

has a devastating gift for laying waste a wood while praising the trees...While basking in his praise for my Edmund Blacket catalogue, I began to feel the machete he wielded so energetically on my foreword to Andrews' catalogue was being directed well below the belt.⁶⁹

Almost more important to Kerr than Lewis' unfairness was the fact that he had missed the irony in her claim that 'Andrews' book was the most expert and comprehensive work on the Gothic Revival in Australia ever written'. This statement was 'doubly coded' – since Andrews' text was the *only* comprehensive book written on the subject to date. In private correspondence to Lewis Kerr was even less tactful. She once wrote, 'you can be a bloody vicious monster when you get behind a typewriter' – although she admired his work as an architectural historian.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Susan Steggall, Notes from conference held at the Museum of Sydney on the site of First Government House, 24 June 1995; Joan Kerr, 'Exploring cross-cultural Australian history myth-making at the Museum of Sydney', Kerr Archive

⁶⁹ Letter to Tom Heath, editor of *Architecture in Australia*, June 1985

⁷⁰ Letter from Joan Kerr to Miles Lewis, 19 September 1983, Kerr Archive, reproduced in *Pictorial Biography*, p.81

She crossed verbal swords several times with *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic John McDonald, most notably in 1995 with regard to the book *Heritage* and the *National Women's Art Exhibition*. McDonald sarcastically linked the words 'a Great Collaborative Project' (spoken at the Australian Museum launch of *Heritage* in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition *Women's Views – Art, Science and the Environment* on 6 March 1995) to 'Chairman Mao's Great Leap Forward'. According to McDonald, there was an element of collectivization in 'Professor Kerr's program of one hundred and forty-six venues across the nation', which meant that the project should be judged as 'a primarily political phenomenon'.⁷¹ Undaunted by this and amused by the Mao analogy Kerr replied that of course it was political: 'It's political in that any sort of overthrowing of established positions is political.'⁷² Art historian and critic Jacques Delaruelle also took up the theme of collectivism and dubbed Joan Kerr the 'Madam Mao of Australian Art'. Critical of the broad range of artists included in *Heritage*, he wrote: 'In her strangely distorted universe where only the victim can triumph, one has to be nobody to be somebody'.⁷³

The origins of Delaruelle's antagonism are unclear – it could simply have been a case of two very different mindsets or the fact that at the time Kerr was a senior academic at COFA, an institution whose approach to the teaching of art and art history Delaruelle loathed – but Kerr's verbal jousting with McDonald had its origins in 1993 when she reviewed *Peter Fuller's Modern Painters*, a book of essays by British art critic Peter Fuller, edited by McDonald.⁷⁴ Kerr had no quibble with the quality of the writing (she enjoyed Fuller's sharply honed prose) but she questioned the logic of reprinting essays that contributed little to the future enrichment of British – and Australian – art history.

'All were written,' Kerr noted, 'in the 1980s after Fuller's "unconversion" from the Marxism he took up under the influence of John Berger, henceforth depicted as a sinister captain of a band of monsters'. Fuller's sycophantic praise of John Ruskin as 'the greatest critic the world has yet seen' was, in Kerr's view, leading 'backwards into the future'. She was also critical of Fuller's support for British artists whom she considered 'forgettable painters [and] very dreary prophets in

⁷¹ John McDonald, quoted in Anne Loxley, 'Girls' night out', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1995, Spectrum, p.13A

⁷² Judy Friend, 'Subverting the burden of history', *Refractory Girl*, 49 (Spring), 1995, p.54

⁷³ Jacques Delaruelle, *Sydney Review*, April 1995, pp 10-11

⁷⁴ Joan Kerr, 'A master of the malevolent', a review of *Peter Fuller's Modern Painters*, (Methuen) edited by John McDonald, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 June 1993, p.49

the British wilderness'. She wished McDonald had 'resurrected essays on the villains', including the Tate Gallery and the Power Institute. (This sly reference to the Institute as a 'villain' was repeated in the one-sentence 'job description' for the reviewer in which the possum-stirrer could not resist including Fuller's 1989 reference to the *Dictionary* as 'the only worthwhile project ever undertaken at the otherwise-appalling Power Institute of the University of Sydney'.)

According to Kerr, John McDonald wrote 'a pathetic reply' complaining that he could surely expect his former employer (the *Sydney Morning Herald*) to give him a decent review. He also criticised Kerr as unfair and unamusing and called the *Dictionary* 'the most tedious and nitpicking publication of all time', one that 'manages to iron any interesting wrinkles out of artists' biographies, reducing them to bland recitals of facts and figures'. Kerr, he wrote, had created the 'greatest compilation of trivia in the history of Australian art'.⁷⁵

Unfortunately McDonald made a couple of mistakes in his letter, which gave Kerr ammunition for further verbal salvos. His assertion that Kerr managed to leave every colonial sculptor out of the *Dictionary* was incorrect. It was not an oversight but an omission forced on Kerr because of space and financial restrictions and she had already made public her intentions to address this lacuna in a future volume. Reference to Kerr as 'a full Professor of Fine Arts at the Power Institute' and doses of sarcasm such as 'One might as well praise Professor Kerr for her encyclopaedic knowledge of colonial lighthouses, but regret that she has no chapter on Francis Bacon in her Dictionary of Australian artists', only added to Kerr's enjoyment of the situation. The editor gave her right of reply on the same page:

I am not 'a full Professor of Fine Arts at the Power Institute' but an associate professor. Moreover I am retiring from Sydney University on July 30 to become a visiting professor at the College of Fine Arts UNSW (a.k.a. *L'Ecole des Beaux Arts Perdus*) where I shall be compiling another 'perfect cocktail of obfuscation and Political Correctness' – a book on Australian women artists. I mention this, not only to allow Mr McDonald the pleasure of contemplating all his *bêtes noires* under a single roof, but in the hope that his personal attacks won't become as outdated as those on the teaching programs and reading lists at 'our colleges'. Otherwise his letter is a reasonable imitation of Fuller's provocative, entertaining and irrelevant vitriol, merely lacking Peter's originality, stylishness and basic good humour. At the risk of extending this correspondence, may I offer Mr

⁷⁵ John McDonald, A letter to the literary editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 26 June 1993, p.46

McDonald a few words of advice: avoid being pompous.⁷⁶

In her NLA interview Kerr said she was quite fond of John McDonald and found him 'a very readable journo' and a writer of perceptive reviews. However she did not think much of him as anything else and in 1999 agreed to present one of the petitions against his appointment to the NGA as senior curator of Australian art. In June 1999 Kerr wrote to the Chairman of the NGA Council, Kerry Stokes AO, attaching a petition signed by a group of twenty or so high profile curators, academics and artists.⁷⁷ Their main concern was not principally McDonald's lack of professional qualifications but his complete lack of experience:

He has no working knowledge as a curator. He has never worked in either an art museum or art gallery. He has no experience in developing a collection or installing artwork through a gallery complex. Nor has he demonstrated a capacity to manage staff, crucial in such a senior position...As artists, curators, teachers and writers deeply committed to Australian art we fear that Dr Kennedy's 'innovative' employment practices have set in train a process of de-skilling at the National Gallery of Australia.⁷⁸

Stokes' reply to Joan Kerr a few days later indicated that Council had already made up its mind to confirm the appointment of John McDonald as Head of Australian Art at the NGA, from September 1999.⁷⁹ If Kerr and the others who signed the petition were proved right about John McDonald's incapacity to hold such a responsible curatorial post, Kerr was also right about the sensitivity of the issue. No institution or university department had wanted to be officially associated with the petition – a form of censorship Kerr had never before experienced. 'A university,' she said, 'should be a place where you can write as if you're a member of the university' but also speak for yourself. As an academic, she felt it her right – and duty – do this.⁸⁰

Joan Kerr was not political in the sense of toeing any official party line. Rather she defended people's right to speak their minds and often supported an individual whom she respected. In the early 1970s she handed out how-to-vote cards for Australian Senate Communist Party candidate Jack Munday, whom she admired for his work in saving heritage sites in Sydney. Later in York she was

⁷⁶ 'Joan Kerr responds', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 26 June 1993, p.46

⁷⁷ NLA Interview, p.48

⁷⁸ Joan Kerr, letter to Kerry Stokes AO, 20 June 1999, Kerr Archive

⁷⁹ Letter from Kerry Stokes to Joan Kerr, 23 June 1999, Kerr Archive

⁸⁰ NLA Interview, p.49

equally enthusiastic about distributing how-to-vote cards for her host, David Alexander, who was standing for the Conservative Party in local elections.⁸¹ Kerr's penchant for going to bat for causes she believed in was, according to Anne Lanham, something of a family trait. Their brother John Lyndon also fought against bureaucracy and injustice and was very active in environmental issues and often clashed with his local council on the NSW south coast.⁸²

In contrast to her brother's environmental activism Joan Kerr's primary interest lay in buildings. Continuing a tradition inculcated in Kerr by Pevsner in London she regularly took her undergraduate students on field trips to sites of importance, one of her favourites being St. Stephen's in Newtown, which she believed to be Edmund Blacket's finest parish church. Incensed by what she considered inept and inappropriate restoration work she wrote a strongly worded letter to the rector.⁸³ She was particularly concerned by what she considered botched repairs to the east window 'to the extent that the geometrical tracery can no longer be seen as the architect intended'. Kerr was adamant that examples of such rarity and significance as St. Stephen's – 'one of our major European national monuments' – could ill afford to be diminished by well-intentioned but misguided work.

If she had not yet reached the status of national monument herself, Kerr did see herself as someone of importance in the academic world. In their biography of Griffith Taylor, authors Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford describe Taylor as a man who often had a sense of grievance that he was not adequately recognized – a characteristic also evident in Joan Kerr's personality. At an Open Weekend at Sydney University in September 1992 Kerr felt aggrieved at what she perceived as cavalier treatment of senior university staff – herself in particular. In typical fashion she 'went public', writing a furious letter to the editor of the *University of Sydney News*.

If that interminable open weekend was meant to alienate present staff and students as well as future ones it was undoubtedly a success. I arrived to lecture on Saturday in a state of fury, having been turned back at the gate and forced to park in the streets. Few of the handful of enthusiasts who discovered our building were aware that anything

⁸¹ *Pictorial Biography*, p.52

⁸² Interview with Lanham

⁸³ Letter on Department Fine Arts letterhead from Associate Professor Joan Kerr, 15 November, 1990 to the Reverend Don Saynes St Stephen's Church of England, Church Street, Newtown, *Documents*, pp 255-256

was happening in it, such information begin confined to a \$2 booklet which nobody (rightly) purchased.

I seem to be living in an open-mouthed state of disbelief at the crassness, incompetence and meanness of Sydney University these days.⁸⁴

The fact of the matter was that people who were involved in Open Weekend activities were allowed to park without charge on main campus but a special permit was needed, by application and in advance. If areas for free parking were full, participants were to use public car parks in which case payment would be required.⁸⁵

Kerr's photograph had recently been taken at the Burkitt Library to publicise the launch of the *Dictionary* but only after several phone calls and faxes to the Bursar's office and the Librarian, plus two hand-delivered letters, had been needed to authorise the event. She had been annoyed at being told to consider herself lucky not to have had to pay for the privilege and added this grievance to her letter about the parking. 'I am a leading authority on the architecture of the Great Hall,' she wrote, 'yet without payment and/or extensive correspondence I may no longer take people to see it...Here's one academic who won't be around for the next open weekend. It's far more fitting that visitors see only bureaucrats forbidding access, sending memos and demanding more money'.⁸⁶ Kerr was riding high on a wave of public recognition due to the success of *Dictionary*. She had been solicited for interviews on TV and radio and in the press so her response to this off-handed treatment by university bureaucracy was understandable although a cooling-off period might have been wise.

Joan Kerr was now approaching fifty-five – an age at which she would be eligible to take her superannuation and early retirement. Because of her frustration with the Power Institute she was looking for alternatives. As she wanted to keep the Australian art dictionary project going she needed an academic posting and so began negotiations with COFA.⁸⁷ In spite of previous

⁸⁴ Joan Kerr, 'To the Editor: open weekend, bureaucrats and memos', *The University of Sydney News*, 15 September 1992, p.152

⁸⁵ *The University of Sydney News*, 18 August 1992, p.iv

⁸⁶ Joan Kerr, 'To the Editor: Open Weekend, bureaucrats and memos', p.152

⁸⁷ Conversation with Joanna Mendelssohn

differences between Kerr and Ken Reinhart (Dean of COFA) a deal was made.⁸⁸ Beginning in 1994, COFA would give Joan Kerr a base appropriate to her reputation plus the title of research professor and a token salary. Kerr would bring to COFA's fledgling Department of Art History and Theory her impressive academic record and, more importantly, a significant ARC profile including a three-year grant to work on *Heritage*.⁸⁹ She would not have administrative duties nor be obliged to give regular lectures; she just had to be present on campus, and supervise and mark some postgraduate theses. According to Joanna Mendelssohn, Kerr's presence was very important since it gave COFA the credibility as a research school it had so far lacked.⁹⁰

During her time at COFA as Visiting Professor there were no major disagreements between Joan Kerr and senior academic staff – possibly because she had so little to do with the day-to-day management of the Department. Although she was 'extremely happy at COFA' – an environment that proved 'a supportive environment in every way' – she was well aware that a research position was a luxury unlikely to continue in a 'straitened financial climate' and felt increasingly insecure about long-term employment prospects.⁹¹ As Kerr put it: 'I was a nice sort of cherry on the cake but I did feel I couldn't rely on that and I had to keep getting ARC funding'. When, in 1996, she was invited to be part of a new multi-disciplinary centre (the CCR) at ANU in Canberra, her reaction was simply 'Whacko!'⁹²

In 1997 Kerr set out for the CCR with high hopes of producing additional comprehensive dictionaries on under-researched aspects of Australian visual culture. For the first two years work progressed fairly smoothly but in mid 1999 Kerr's section was transferred from the main Centre in the imposing two-storey Old Canberra House to Constable's Cottage – a small terracotta-coloured weatherboard across the street, set amidst a clump of tall conifers and eucalypts

⁸⁸ In the early 1990s, as president of the Art Association of Australia Joan Kerr had confronted Ken Reinhart for exploiting tutors. The meeting was neither particularly cordial nor successful: 'He more or less said to me: "It's a buyer's market, love. Piss off"'. But she did get on well with artist and lecturer Liz Ashburn, who as an ardent feminist, had introduced gender courses in art at COFA and was sympathetic towards Kerr's *Heritage* project, NLA Interview, p.52

⁸⁹ Joan Kerr CV 2003; Kerr Archive

⁹⁰ Conversation with Joanna Mendelssohn

⁹¹ Letter from Joan Kerr (COFA letterhead) to Vice-Chancellor John Niland (UNSW), 28 September 1995, Kerr Archive

⁹² NLA Interview, p.50

and in grounds that were not particularly well cared for.⁹³ Kerr had very idealistic views on how the garden should be restored and which plants should be preserved and took it upon herself to communicate directly with the university's gardening section – something she probably had no authority to do. This resulted in August 1999 in a flurry of correspondence between Kerr and the CCR's administrative officer in which Kerr appeared not to understand why her enthusiasm for the project was not fully shared by other staff members.⁹⁴

At around the same time, Director Nicholas Thomas resigned and the consequent hiatus in the management of the CCR's research priorities and lack of clear guidelines concerning research grants meant that Kerr's relationship with the Acting Director, the Centre's administrative section and ANU's Faculties Research Grants Committee became mired in disputes over allocation of funding, rights and privileges.⁹⁵ Some of the misunderstandings appear to have dated from the very beginning of her appointment when assurances were made and expectations encouraged that were untenable in the financial minefield of university bureaucracy. In 1999 Joan Kerr felt she had been sidelined, physically and intellectually. 'Greetings from Limbo!' is how she began one missive to the Acting Director.⁹⁶

In calmer waters, the recriminative correspondence between Joan Kerr and her colleagues at the CCR, between November 1999 and her departure in February 2001, would not – should not – have arisen. It is clear that on many occasions during this unfortunate episode, Joan Kerr's sense of humour had taken on a 'sharp, even bitter edge'.⁹⁷

Larrikin:

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Joan Kerr was a junior player in the game of art and architectural history and used humour when confronting her seniors to

⁹³ Built in 1913 Old Canberra House was the first substantial dwelling associated with the new capital. As well as being the administrative centre for the Federal Capital Commission it also served as the residence for the first four UK High Commissioners to Australia. Constable's Cottage was constructed in 1913 and served a number of purposes associated with the Federal Capital Commission before it became the residence of the Commonwealth Police Officer sometime before 1936, hence its name. <http://heritage.anu.edu.au>

⁹⁴ Kerr Archive, 1999-2001

⁹⁵ See *Chapter 7: Black, White and Everything in Between* for details of Kerr's work at the CCR, ANU

⁹⁶ Email from Joan Kerr to Iain McCalman, Kerr Archive, late 1999/early 2000

challenge institutional power structures. In the 1990s, she was a respected academic who used humour to put *her* juniors at ease and create a sense of collegiality. She continued to use her wit to challenge poorly developed arguments and fashionable jargon. Integral to this process – and something at which Joan Kerr excelled – is what Janet Holmes calls a ‘smile voice’, in the context of the speaker’s tone of voice, as an important paralinguistic clue for judging that speaker’s intentions.⁹⁸ Friends and colleagues remember clearly the lilt in Kerr’s voice when she was about to embark on either a challenging observation (as the speaker) or a trenchant comment when a member of the audience.

As a result, many people saw Joan Kerr as a woman of seemingly sunny disposition, ever ready with a perceptive quip. Yet others saw her as a workaholic intellectual who grimly pursued almost impossible tasks. Which is correct? Both? Neither? Or something of each acted out some of the time? Joan Kerr had a talent for acting but whether her actions and responses were instinctive or expedient is difficult to decide. It is not to say she was cold and calculating, but she well understood what she was doing, acting out a second nature of impulsive enthusiasm that functioned, like her use of humour, as both weapon and shield.⁹⁹

Sometimes Kerr used humour just for fun and once dyed her hair bright turquoise to inaugurate a large blue shed at the Noosa Long Weekend Festival in 2002.

In explanation, I quote Jim Kerr:

As the shed was blue and the day sunny, Joan improved on the occasion by dyeing her hair a peculiarly obnoxious bright blue...She delivered her talk with such manifest glee and mix of humour, irony and parody that she infected the somewhat startled audience and good humour abounded for the rest of the day.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *Comment on Joan Kerr in Context: A Biography, prepared for Susan Margaret Steggall by James Semple Kerr*, 17 May 2009, p.9

⁹⁸ Janet Holmes, ‘Politeness, power and provocation: how humour functions in the workplace’, *Discourse Studies*, London: SAGE Publications, 2000, pp 159-163

⁹⁹ Holmes, ‘Politeness, power and provocation: how humour functions in the workplace’, p.189

¹⁰⁰ *Pictorial Biography*, p.125



8. Joan Kerr delivering the Big Blue Shed
Opening Address, Noosa Long Weekend, 23 June 2002,
(photographer: Matthew Farrell)

Joan Kerr could not resist saying that the honour of opening the Big Blue Shed had gone to her head. She had opened ‘lots of peculiar things’ in her time, and had once, in 1996, had the honour of opening two filing cabinets at the Stanton Library (North Sydney), but nothing as big as a shed.¹⁰¹ In art-historical mode she expounded on the form and function of ‘shed’, including debate on issues of centre-versus-region and the cultural misogyny and class-based elitism that surrounds discussions of the aesthetic value of utilitarian objects. ‘Neither sheds nor filing cabinets are, or ought to be, confined to secret men’s business,’ she declared. ‘They belong to the world – to all creative souls, male and female – as well as to those tragically pedestrian minds that think of them merely as useful storage spaces’.¹⁰²

Joan Kerr was anything but pedestrian minded, as Jim Kerr signalled in the title of a scrapbook, *Joan Kerr: Documents Relating to the Life of a Teacher, Writer, Wife, Mother and Possum Stirrer 1938-1993* (1994). ‘Teacher, writer, wife, mother’ could describe many intelligent and ambitious women but ‘possum-stirrer’ signals something entirely different. A possum stirrer is someone who likes to

¹⁰¹ The launch of the *Constructive Women: Architecture and Design Archive*, Stanton Library, North Sydney, 1 May 1996, gave Kerr the opportunity to mix business with fun. She said she would prefer to be opening a *building* designed and built by women rather than two filing cabinets but ever the optimist she felt that the occasion ‘may well be a precondition for that more glamorous and dramatic moment’. However, ‘a shed is a much bigger event,’ Kerr said. ‘Like most honours, I got the job through nepotism, but it’s still a high point of my career’. (The shed was built by Kerr’s son-in-law, Ross Annels.)

liven things up and raise issues that others might prefer to leave dormant, combined with an offbeat sense of humour – characteristics evident in Kerr's personality throughout her career.

During the 1960s Joan Kerr's life revolved around children, travel and study, leaving little time for humorous writing but traces of irreverence began to appear in the 1970s. When in York over the 1972-1973 Christmas holidays to visit Jim Kerr who was undertaking a conservation course at the university there, she wrote 'Leaves from my African journal' – a parody of lecturer Derek Lindstrum's three-week trip to Africa to give advice on heritage sites.¹⁰³ The following is a sample of the 'journal' Joan Kerr posted on the university's notice board:

March 18: I am hopeful that I shall soon be capable of perceiving which buildings I am meant to admire and which to disparage, although I must confess to the pages of this journal that one grass hut still looks just like any other to me. Nevertheless I am feeling far more confident about crumbling mud houses than I was initially, and can now manage a five to ten minute conversation on the textual complexities of adobe versus pise – even after an African luncheon.

March 22: I delivered my Conservation lecture today at one of the new Kenyan Universities...I was quite impressed with the efficient and scholarly way the Architecture Department has been organized, although I could not forbear from remarking on how much improvement one might expect when the University manages to erect some buildings.¹⁰⁴

According to Jim Kerr, Lindstrum shrugged it off as a harmless Kerr prank.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps as he later shrugged off the quirky drawing of a 'Goth-puppy' playfully holding at bay the volume number on the introductory page of her D.Phil thesis.¹⁰⁶ Several years earlier, in a similarly quixotic gesture she had included a drawing of ghost-like creatures and a 'Venus arising', emerging from the rooves of three gothic churches on the title page of her MA thesis.¹⁰⁷ There does not appear to be any record of the examiners' reactions (either in Sydney or in York) to these flights of fancy. Perhaps they hoped such frivolity would simply disappear.

¹⁰² *Pictorial Biography*, p.126

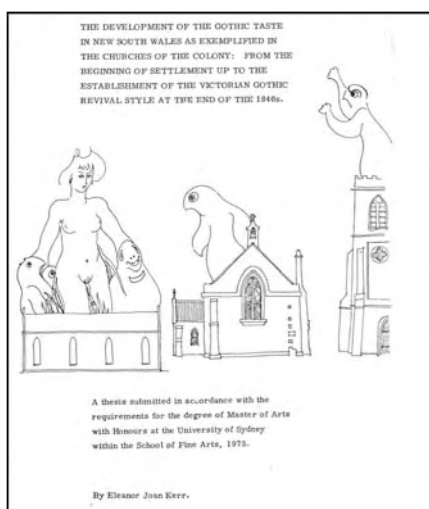
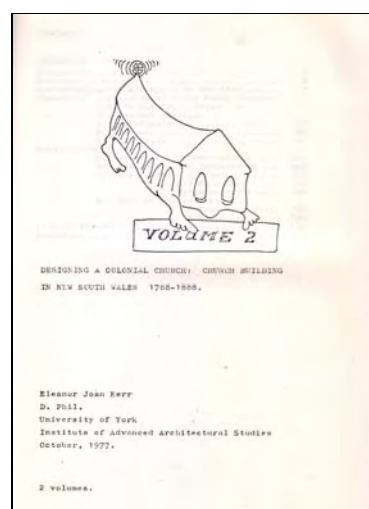
¹⁰³ *Pictorial Biography*, p.53

¹⁰⁴ *Documents*, loose handwritten sheets between pp 99 & 100, 1972/73

¹⁰⁵ *Pictorial Biography*, p.53

¹⁰⁶ Joan Kerr, *Designing a Colonial Church: Church Architecture in NSW 1788-1888*, Wetherby, West Yorks (UK), British Theses in Print (available on microfiche, University of NSW Library, 1978

¹⁰⁷ Joan Kerr, *The Development of the Gothic Taste in New South Wales as Exemplified in the Churches of the Colony: from the Beginning of Settlement up to the Establishment of the Victorian Gothic Revival Style at the End of the 1840s*, MA thesis, Sydney University, 1976

9. Title page, MA Thesis (1975)¹⁰⁸

10. Title page, D.Phil Thesis (1977)

(sketches by, and photographs courtesy of, Jim Kerr)

Nor was Joan Kerr's flair for humorous improvisation confined to the written page. When she arrived in York in October 1975, she enrolled in an embroidery course at the Harrogate College of Art and Adult Studies.¹⁰⁹ She had no intention of pursuing this craft but wanted to attend the course's lectures on the history of embroidery because they were to be held in a house containing tapestries by William Morris. Students had to provide examples of needlework as evidence of skill level and Kerr submitted a piece called *The Prick of Conscience* embroidered in cheap wool on hessian found in a garbage bin. Later she noted: 'I passed, the examiner merely commenting, "Cheeky!"'¹¹⁰ Joan Kerr, a mother of two, was approaching forty years of age and it could be said that these harmless pranks were more appropriate to undergraduate days. Yet she never outgrew this impulsive flaunting of social conventions.

The most basic function of humour is to amuse. But why did Joan Kerr always want to amuse her teachers, students and audiences, especially as it could run the risk of being misunderstood? Not all workplaces encourage humour and the workplace 'joker' could be regarded as disruptive, becoming the focus of

¹⁰⁸ 'Title page of Joan's thesis with JSK's idea of Catholic, Church of England and Presbyterian churches in 1840 together with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Father Therry, a dubious Bishop Broughton and a fulminating John Dunmore Lang', *Pictorial Biography*, p.57

¹⁰⁹ *Documents*, p.91, A three-day course with WREA Head College, 13-15 October 1975

¹¹⁰ *Documents*, p.91

censure.¹¹¹ Censure is perhaps too strong a word but if Kerr's light-hearted approach was appreciated by lay audiences, on occasions it was viewed with suspicion and some bemusement by her peers in art and architectural history. In academic circles one was supposed to be (at least publicly) polite.¹¹² Voltaire's understanding of wit (a combination of intelligence and humour) as the essence of intellectual freedom goes some way to understanding Joan Kerr's lifelong belief in the free play of ideas and the importance of the right to air them.¹¹³

Kerr's first publications on 19th-century Australian architecture were serious and straightforward but she then began to use humour as a contesting strategy.¹¹⁴ In her article, 'Making it new: historic architecture and its recent literature', Kerr criticised architects for cashing in on the rising tide of restoration in Australia:

In the blocked estuary that at present confines the architectural profession, more and more of the struggling marine life are feeding on the restoration business: since commissions for new work have disappeared, the nostalgia boom offers some prospect of survival. Other species have also grown new limbs on this diet.¹¹⁵

Several years after this mildly humorous insult, Kerr gave a paper entitled 'Why architects should not write architectural history' – to an audience of eminent architects and art historians. Her principal reason for this bold assertion was that practitioners in any discipline are 'least capable of seeing the wood for the particular species of tree they happen to be growing amongst'.¹¹⁶ Her prime example of expensive but misguided restoration was Elizabeth Farm at Parramatta, which she likened to 'an aging Hollywood film star, [who had] silicon...pumped into the body for months so the original structure could face the world in rejuvenated, but unaltered form'.¹¹⁷ In an ironic comment on the

¹¹¹ Holmes, 'Politeness, power and provocation: how humour functions in the workplace', p.169

¹¹² Steggall, interview with Judd

¹¹³ Richard Holmes, 'Voltaire's Grin', *Sidetracks: Explorations of a Romantic Biographer*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London, 2005, p.346

¹¹⁴ Holmes, 'Politeness, power and provocation: how humour functions in the workplace', pp 177-178

¹¹⁵ Joan Kerr, 'Making it new: historic architecture and its recent literature', *Meanjin*, 3, 1980, p.364

¹¹⁶ Joan Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', 1984, p.135

¹¹⁷ For Kerr, the building had become a simulacrum of Australia's oldest house. 'Can any modest colonial cottage,' she asked, 'have a million dollars spent on it to keep it looking original and still manage to be just that?', Joan Kerr, *Architectural history papers*, 1984, p.139

redcoration of Elizabeth Farm's interior, she describes how curator James Broadbent had

cleverly emphasized its new nature by furnishing the house in a style that perfectly complemented it. Everything, or almost everything, was a replica – where possible a replica of a known object associated with the house...It is perhaps rather a pity that the original house was not just left and an unashamed replica built next to it.¹¹⁸

Although the NSW Public Works Department had carried out the restoration 'in a very heavy-handed way', to the dismay of the Historic Houses Trust (HHT), some sort of structural strengthening was required as the house was very dilapidated.¹¹⁹ According to Peter Watts (director of HHT at the time) the Trust responded to the 'sanitizing' of the house by creating a 'very soft and gentle – and very accurate – garden around it to try and restore something of the genteel quality the place must once have had'. The decision to fill the house with fakes instead of spending a fortune on authentic furniture was to encourage visitors to 'touch, bounce and lounge' rather than be held 'hostage to conservation pieties'.¹²⁰ So if the reasons for the silicon and the fakes were rather prosaic Joan Kerr preferred to satirize the situation in the interests of livening things up.

She continued her assault on the architectural profession, albeit tempered by humour. In her 1986 conference presentation, 'Architectural history and practice in Australia', she provided definitions for architectural historian, theorist and critic from the as yet unpublished (unwritten) *Australian Architects' Dictionary of Agreed Usages*, in typically satirical terms. Architectural historian she described as 'a supplier of useful adaptable motifs for the new age of creative postmodern eclecticism'. An architectural theorist was 'a person (normally male) who provided an endless stream of impenetrable jargon with which to baffle clients and justify one's arbitrary architectural opinions'. Architectural critic (contemporary version), Kerr declared, 'was simply a euphemism for hagiographer'.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Joan Kerr, 'Why architects should not write architectural history', 1984, p.139

¹¹⁹ Many of the structural roof timbers eaten away by white ants so the Public Works engineers injected them with silicon to give them structural strength. 'It was probably a reasonable thing to do, but they made such a fuss about it - as if they had invented some miracle cure - that it became rather nauseating.' Email from Peter Watts to Susan Steggall, 10 November 2008

¹²⁰ David Marr, 'Playing by Sydney rules', the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18-19 October 2008, p.25

¹²¹ Joan Kerr, 'Architectural history and practice in Australia'. Paper presented at the combined sessions of the Annual Conferences of the Society of Architectural Historians (ANZ) and the Art Association of Australia, Melbourne University, May 1986, p.2 (published in *Transition* 21, September 1987, pp 35-38)

Underlying these witticisms was her disapproval of the too-close relationship between architectural historian and architect and their uncritical devotion to international architectural trends. She was not completely averse to this 'simple kind of historicism erupt[ing] all over the landscape', but was sceptical of what she saw as rampant eclecticism in Australian architectural practice:

An architect today can employ a feature such as Francis Greenway's porch on Old Government House, Parramatta, or a fine Federation verandah, confident that the cognoscenti will recognize it just as readily as they identify the rest of the façade as deriving from, say, Robert Venturi's mother's house, the sitting room from Gaudi's Casa Mila, the dining room from Kings Cross Railway Station and the sauna from Sweden, with ironic references to Versailles in the panelling. The local reference, being so obviously a nationalist symbol, has the power to radically contextualize the rest and you can therefore claim to be regionally subversive in the approved manner...[and] keep abreast of international fashions.¹²²

However, Kerr declared, like one's own offspring – or that of Dr Frankenstein – the results were not always what one would either wish or expect:

By 1988 we should all have a national consciousness that demands Barnett, Blackburn or Barlow in the bedroom, Garlick, Gell or Grounds in the garden and Lenox, Lang or Lewis (Mortimer or Brian) in the loo. Although the Frankenstein monster would only be acquiring a corked hat and thongs under such a programme – or at most, a sophisticated Australian accent – at least this would make him seem more like a member of the family.¹²³

Kerr's fanciful suggestion of creating a bride for the Frankenstein monster instead of continuing to clone him did not mean that the alternative architect *had* to be a woman, just someone who would be at home in both city and country, and have a critically informed understanding of her/his own ancestry.¹²⁴ Allied to an awareness of home-grown history should be a heightened sense of integrity in writing biographies of living Australian architects – something more than flattering 'appreciations' by fellow members of the architects' club. According to Kerr, the inhibited quality of Australian architectural critique had arisen only partly from a conviction that kind words were all you could say about your 'mates'; legal constraints were a far more serious problem:

A single frank phrase about a contemporary architect's work, such as 'his building leaks like a sieve'...appears possible only if sheltering behind parliamentary privilege. If politicians and (sometimes)

¹²² Joan Kerr, 'Architectural history and practice in Australia', 1986, p.4

¹²³ Joan Kerr, 'Architectural history and practice in Australia', p.4

¹²⁴ Joan Kerr, 'Architectural history and practice in Australia', p.12

cartoonists are the only people allowed to publish unflattering architectural opinions – or facts – without losing vast sums of money, then my combined historian, theorist and critic is either going to be impossible, disastrously maimed or very, very rich.¹²⁵

Joan Kerr was none of these but she remained undeterred. If she had very definite views on how architectural history should be written, she had similarly strong views on how images of Australia's architecture should be treated in publications. A good example was a talk she gave on ABC Radio on 5 March 1986 about books on photography, later adapted as 'Manufacturing history for the coffee table', a paper delivered at the conference *Culture, the Arts, Media and Radical Politics, Manuf(r)acturing Australia*.¹²⁶ In both presentations Joan Kerr gave to books on photography the same treatment she meted out to underperforming art catalogues and architectural histories. She urged her audiences to forget the idea that they were writing, illustrating and making a *book* at all. 'What you are doing,' she said, 'is compiling a package', a process that has several simple rules:

- Print cheaply overseas and 'forget the idea that any collection of Australiana should assist 'our troubled local industry'.
- Abolish originality by recycling what your authors have already published on the topic so you don't have to pay them; a bit of solid text looks good on the page and shows 'a convincing seriousness of purpose'.
- Avoid a foreword by anybody who might be controversial and stick to 'reassuring motherhood statements'.
- Avoid paying copyright for images by using old photographs whose legal ownership is difficult to prove.
- Bury all acknowledgements in a 'list at one end of the book set in that typeface normally reserved for printing the Lord's Prayer on a pinhead'.
- Avoid attaching names to photographs as 'this takes a real expert and a lot of time and neither would be available for this exercise'.¹²⁷

In fact Kerr believed the very opposite: to be effective, photographs must have accurate attributions and relate to the text in which they are embedded. If Nikolaus Pevsner influenced Joan Kerr's way of looking at buildings she in turn influenced her students. In a talk at the Mitchell Library in November 2008, Richard Neville clearly espoused his former lecturer's line that historians do not

¹²⁵ Kerr, 'Architectural history and practice in Australia', p.10

¹²⁶ NSW Institute of Technology, Sydney, 25 April 1986

¹²⁷ Joan Kerr, 'Manufacturing history for the coffee table', unpublished (Kerr Archive) pp 3-9

do pictures the justice they deserve and must work harder to integrate images into their texts and interpret them.¹²⁸

Kerr cited *Australian Album – the Way We Were: Australia in Photographs 1860-1920* (1982) as an excellent example of the ‘coffee table’ species of book since it contained many previously unpublished photographs with little chance of the reader discovering where the author found them.¹²⁹ *Fixed in Time: Photographs from Another Australia 1900-1939* – her primary target – was a new member of the club since it did not appear to have an author and was published by ‘Fairfax Library, a hitherto little-known book publisher in Sydney’. Kerr found the selection of photographs in the latter book, ‘most peculiar’ since there were over sixty photographs from the Mitchell and Dixson Libraries even though Fairfax itself owned hundreds of unknown press photographs. Of the one hundred and five images from the Fairfax collection, eighty-six were anonymous with the remaining nineteen works taken by their two best-known staff photographers George Bell and Herbert Fishwick. This was not good enough. ‘Any tribute that can only name two practitioners in thirty-one years of daily newspaper production,’ Kerr wrote, ‘might otherwise have indicated an uncaring employer, as well as a careless researcher’.¹³⁰

According to Kerr, no respectable photographic historian today would argue that an image can be ‘fixed in time’ without informed analysis of its maker, date and original context. Yet the images in *Fixed in Time*, were certainly ‘fixed’ – fixed in ‘a bland new syrup of nostalgia for a past created in 1985’. However she still considered the book ‘scholarly and original when compared with the other runners who had ‘jumped the official starter’s gun in this popular bicentennial competition’.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Richard Neville, ‘Fact and fictions: pictures as evidence’, talk at the Dixson Room, State Library of NSW, 10 November 2008. Joan Kerr and Richard Neville were both Australian contributors to the 1838 volume of *Australians: a Historical Library* (general editors Alan Atkinson and Marian Aveling), Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, Sydney 1987 – a Bicentennial project, in Chapter 2: ‘At the boundaries’ (at the frontier between black and white) in an essay entitled ‘European Images of Aborigines (an account of pictures of Aborigines)’.

¹²⁹ Joan Kerr, ‘Manufacturing history for the coffee table’, p.3

¹³⁰ Joan Kerr, ‘Manufacturing history for the coffee table’, p.4

¹³¹ Joan Kerr, ‘Manufacturing history for the coffee table’, p.5



11. Dr Carmen Lawrence and Professor Joan Kerr helping to support the *Heritage* 'Sky Cake', National Gallery of Australia, 8 March 1995 (Kerr Archive)

Kerr was not averse to taking advantage of significant milestones herself. For the occasion of the launch of *Heritage* on the 20th anniversary of International Women's Day in March 1995 at the NGA, she arranged for the Sydney company, Sweet Art, to make a huge chocolate cake decorated as a 'skyscape' and held aloft by three female figures that represented a professional woman, a classical woman and a 1950s pin-up girl. On the cake sat an oversized replica of the book together with the motto, *Women Hold up Half the Sky*. Kerr's desire for such a spectacular cake was to present 'a stupendous example of this creative women's art as a reminder of its long and popular history'.¹³²

To follow up this initiative Kerr wrote an article entitled 'Cakes for show: the last great undigested art' in which she took as her material the Cake Decorating and Sugar Art Section at Sydney's Royal Agricultural Show. She brought to this quirky topic her academic skills of scholarly analysis and cultural-historical evaluation to write about the 'art' of cake decorating as no one, either before or since, has done (or would think of doing). For Kerr, cake decorating was a fine art comparable in skill and creative vision to painting or sculpture and deserved proper recognition. Unfortunately, she conceded, 'the very few exhibitions of traditional cakes in public art galleries have necessarily been self-conscious eccentricities presented in metaphorical quotation marks to show that the gallery is merely having fun – a tactic known as having one's cake and eating it too'.¹³³ Kerr concluded her article with a tongue-in-cheek reference to that 'cake for the

¹³² Joan Kerr, 'Cakes for show: the last great undigested art', *Artlink*, 15 (4), 1995, p.29

¹³³ Joan Kerr, 'Cakes for show', p.28

masses' anecdote from (French) revolutionary times:

That these same institutions have never seriously attempted to digest the great, crafty, feminine art of traditional cake decoration is regrettable...When future generations visit our hallowed aesthetic halls, let them meet cake!¹³⁴

She gave several talks on the theme of cakes as a popular form of Australian art. On one occasion at the Canberra School of Art, in a mix of humour and homeliness she declared: 'Naturally like so many admirers of the craft, I have no visual proof of my mother's expertise, merely memories'.¹³⁵ Although not a particularly family-oriented person Kerr could call relatives into service when it suited art history's purpose.

In *Heritage*, Kerr had been determined to break the long-entrenched cave-painting-to-Picasso (masterpiece) tradition of art history. In this she was in agreement with Marcia Pointon that

the traditional methods of art-historical study derive from the accumulated cultural experience of the past but they are limited by the narrowly defined parameters of Western art, privileging oil painting over drawing, flat surfaces over three-dimensional objects and fine art over material culture.¹³⁶

It was the privileging of high-art values that Joan Kerr wanted to break down in her prodigious efforts to identify *all* of Australia's visual culture. When she opened the *Art Off Centre* conference in Brisbane in April 1995, she made special mention of two works in *Heritage* that had been made in Boulia, a village in north-west Queensland, a place she described as 'the arse-end of the earth', one that nobody would consider a major centre for art.¹³⁷ One work was by Indigenous sculptor, Kalboori Youngi (born c.1904), but the other 'Boulia' artwork was a small snapshot, '*Across the Red Soil Plains*', near Lucknow, Queensland (1920). The photograph was taken by Iris Rudd (1893-1961) who was simply passing through at the time. Although Rudd might be unknown to the Australian art world, she was very well known to Joan Kerr as she happened to have been her mother-in-law. The inclusion of Iris Rudd in *Heritage* showed Joan Kerr at her most ingenious scholarly best and, some would say, her most irritating. Kerr would have been

¹³⁴ Joan Kerr, 'Cakes for show', p.30

¹³⁵ For example, Art Forum, Semester I exhibitions program at the Canberra School of Art, 5 June 1996

¹³⁶ Marcia Pointon, 'How art historians work', in *History of Art: a Students' Handbook*, Routledge, London & New York, 4th edn, 1997, p.76

delighted at the opportunity to include Rudd to represent a particular kind of woman artist-photographer, but I do not think anyone else would have had the confidence – or the cheek – to do it.

One of the last public examples of Joan Kerr's quirky art history was the *Wombat Manifesto*, presented at the NGA on International Women's Day in March 2000. Kerr, Mary Eagle and Samantha Littlely called themselves the Antipodean Guerrillas for the occasion (a nod to the Guerrilla Girls founded in the USA in 1985) and chanted a manifesto in which 'wombat' was used as metaphor for Australia's embattled women artists:

Wombats are not extinct.
Wombats are not like any other animal.
Wombats are powerful and creative.
Wombat holes will transform Australia if only Wombats keep digging.
And when all the Wombats emerge from their holes –
Wombats will change the world!¹³⁸

Kerr then introduced a definition of 'wombat' that was a far cry from any lexicological conventions:

Wombats are the Women or Womb Artists of Australia.
They are called Wombats because they cry 'WOMen Be ArTistS' and 'WOMen Before ArT institutionS' – and just because the Wombat is a splendid native Australian animal.¹³⁹

Wombats, Kerr said, demand that institutions like the National Gallery of Australia transform themselves into places for all Australian animals and all forms of art:

If art institutions keep on being places that only tolerate wombats provided they don't look or act too wom-batty, it is the institution not the wombat that is in danger of becoming extinct. Australia is full of wombats and other wild creatures who will continue to exist even if all the domestic animals in the farmyard, who believe they are the centre of the universe just because they make the most noise, can't see them.¹⁴⁰

Wombats spend a lot of time digging. This is not the same as pigs rutting, although because so many pigs only recognize wombats as a type of pig, some have encouraged this misapprehension in order to feed themselves and their families – or because they want their

¹³⁷ Joan Kerr, Introduction: art begins at Boulia, in *Art off Centre: Placing Queensland Art*, Glenn Cooke ed, Queensland Studies Centre, Griffith University, 1997, p.7

¹³⁸ Joan Kerr, 'Antipodean guerrillas: the Wombat Manifesto', in Brad Buckley and John Conomos eds, *Republics of Ideas: Republicanism, Culture, Visual Arts*, Pluto Press Australia and Artspace, Sydney, 2001, p.124

¹³⁹ Joan Kerr, 'Antipodean guerrillas: the Wombat Manifesto', p.125

¹⁴⁰ Joan Kerr, 'Antipodean guerrillas: the Wombat Manifesto', p.125

efforts to be praised by pigs – or sometimes because they truly believe that they are actually pigs who can't rut properly.¹⁴¹

Australian artist Margaret Preston (1875-1963) was, according to Kerr, the best 'example of a wombat who encouraged this sort of mistaken identity', one who was 'still chiefly admired for all the wrong things – for her paintings that look like male modernist works even when they had different aims than keeping up with the Braques'.¹⁴²



12. *Presentation of the Wombat Manifesto, National Gallery Theatre, Women's Day, 8 March 2000. From the left: Joan Kerr, Samantha Littlely and Mary Eagle. National Gallery of Australia.*

Unfortunately the presentation of the manifesto was something of an anti-climax. The National Gallery's publicity department had neglected to advertise it and the promised wombat masks did not materialise. 'Generic marsupial masks' were obtained from the Wilderness Society, gallery staff rallied round and the event went ahead with a respectable, if bemused, audience.¹⁴³

Kerr was fond of wombats, as she was of Australian society in all its diversity, even if this diversity complicates any definition of what it means to be 'Australian'. According to Deborah Bird Rose, Australians have 'a wild and contentious sense of place...simultaneously self-mocking and self-affirming', with an irreverent attitude to authority especially when unnecessarily high-handed.¹⁴⁴ Australian irreverence is viewed as having its origins in the way our troops faced up to the horrors of Gallipoli and the Western Front. Closer to home Jessica Milner Davis

¹⁴¹ Joan Kerr, 'Antipodean guerrillas: the Wombat Manifesto', pp 132-133

¹⁴² Joan Kerr, 'Antipodean guerrillas: the Wombat Manifesto', p.133

¹⁴³ *Pictorial Biography*, p.122

has written that the origins of our sense of humour run deeper than that of the Anzacs, or even the convicts, and possibly lie in the 'black' humour of Indigenous Australians.¹⁴⁵ From the early days of white settlement Aboriginal people showed a talent for mimicry, ridicule and poking fun at the settlers' inept efforts to master the land. According to Lillian Holt,

Aboriginal people see the necessity of humour as a tool of everyday existence and a narrative for survival...Laughter pervades even solemn Aboriginal occasions such as funerals, where their talent for mimicry is used to give the deceased a send-up as well as a send-off. That way, family and friends can remember the good parts—and even the bad parts—with humour.¹⁴⁶

And if Aboriginal humour has been sharpened by adversity, so too Joan Kerr's. Severe childhood asthma isolated her from friends, school lessons and university lectures. The somewhat primitive asthma treatments of the 1940s and 1950s left her later in life with further serious health problems. Once, as a teenager, she had to wear a back brace. All this she bore with courage and humour.

However there is an important difference (as William Runyan writes) between claiming childhood experience is *the* cause of later events and arguing that it is a partial or contributing cause of individual behaviour.¹⁴⁷ A biographer does not always have to look for hidden meanings in the patterns of human behaviour – what Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor call 'extra-social imponderables'.¹⁴⁸ As Shirley Fitzgerald writes, 'there can be no final rounding of the story. There remain archives at every stage to be looked into still... and for all the stories woven in there were others not told'.¹⁴⁹

The 'Joan Kerr' who emerges from a wealth of facts and a handful of memories – a woman who made light of some situations yet pushed others to melodramatic extremes – is both tantalisingly close and far away, as elusive as the pot of gold at rainbow's end. What is clear is that her passionate lateral kind of thinking went hand in hand with a maverick quality bordering on eccentricity.

¹⁴⁴ Rose, 'Rupture and the ethics of care in colonized space', 1996, p.207

¹⁴⁵ Shane Brady, 'The joke's on us', (*Summer Herald*), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 2007, p.23

¹⁴⁶ Brady, 'The joke's on us', p.23

¹⁴⁷ William Runyan, 'Alternatives to psychoanalytic psychobiography', in William Runyan ed., *Psychology and Historical Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1988, pp 224-225 & pp 227-239

¹⁴⁸ Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor eds, Introduction, *Escape Attempts: the Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*, 2nd edn, Routledge, London, 1992, p.2

Perhaps, like Griffith Taylor, many of her actions and reactions were the result of someone who 'craved respectable credentials while clinging, simultaneously, to...professional marginality'.¹⁵⁰ Yet Joan Kerr's major works, her two dictionaries, positioned her squarely in the centre of her profession.

In an interview with Murray Waldren in September 1992 she talked frankly about the intellectual, emotional and physical problems associated with the *Dictionary* – a book that took almost thirteen years to complete.¹⁵¹ When asked what she would do once it was established in the public record, Kerr replied: 'I think I'll write another book – a detective novel'. In some ways she had already done just that. In compiling her magnum opus – the *Dictionary* – and subsequently *Heritage*, Kerr tracked down with sleuth-like zeal hundreds of 'missing persons' in the record of Australian art history.

¹⁴⁹ Shirley Fitzgerald, 'Getting it right: telling it well', *Telling Stories: Fact or Fiction, NSW Chapter Papers & Proceedings*, Gretchen Poiner ed, Independent Scholars Association of Australia Inc., 2008, p.30

¹⁵⁰ Strange and Bashford, *Griffith Taylor*, p.116

¹⁵¹ Murray Waldren, 'The rewriting on the wall', p.34. See Chapter Six, *Big Ideas, Grand Ambitions*, for details of the *Dictionary* and *Heritage*

Chapter Six: Big Ideas, Grand Ambitions

When Joan Kerr began the first of her dictionaries in 1981, she was entering the most important phase of her academic career. The *Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870 (Dictionary)*¹ and *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book: 500 Works by 500 Australian Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955 (Heritage)*² were the major achievements of an art historian at the height of her powers. She became the public face of art history, sitting on advisory committees and judging panels (for example, the Sydney City Council Public Sculpture Committee; the Art Workshop Board at the University of Sydney; the Museums Committee, National Trust NSW and one for the National Portrait Gallery; in 1996 she was a judge for both the sculpture commission for the Museum of Sydney and the Heritage Week publication awards), giving advice and speaking on all manner of topics. According to Candice Bruce, Kerr was ambitious, not necessarily through ego but rather in the sense that being at the top was more interesting than being anywhere else.³ If the 1980s and 1990s were decades of many highs and a few lows for Joan Kerr, they were anything but boring.

While Kerr's other major publications were not 'dictionaries' in the strict sense of the term they were, nevertheless, comprehensive, systematic collections of data: *all* the gothic churches in the colony of NSW, *all* the works of one architect (Edmund Blacket), or *all* examples of black and white art ever produced in Australia. She would have liked to do the same for Aboriginal art and photography but time and circumstance were ultimately against her.

Both the *Dictionary* and *Heritage* received glowing accolades at the time of their publication but how they fare today is difficult to say. Both are filed in reference sections in libraries so there are no records of borrowings, only hearsay evidence of their usage. A search for citations in art publication databases has not proved particularly fruitful (although absence is not proof of

¹ Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992

² Craftsman House, Sydney, 1995

³ Email from Candice Bruce, August 2006

non existence) but there are articles in which reference *should* have been made to Kerr's publications. Diana Davis writes that printmaking until the 1950s was a 'slim' tradition practiced by a very few (men).⁴ A glance through *Heritage* reveals at least three important women printmakers of the first half of the 20th century: Dorrit Black (1891-1951), Ethel Spowers (1890-1947) and Eveline Syme (1888-1961).⁵ Joan Kerr compiled *Heritage* to avoid those very omissions. In references to the *Dictionary of Australian Art Online (DAAO)* that has been created from Kerr's two dictionaries, credit is often given to Bernard Smith's preliminary work and sometimes Kerr takes second billing to other scholars.⁶

According to antiquarian book dealer Anne McCormick, Joan Kerr had an open, yet rigorous, way of thinking about art. No one, said McCormick, had looked at the art and artists of Australia's colonial period in the way Joan Kerr was doing, and certainly not within universities.⁷ Candice Bruce agrees that Joan Kerr's non-hierarchical approach seriously challenged long-entrenched principles used to define Australian art so that

[w]hen the *Dictionary* first began there was an atmosphere of academic and visual snobbery and many scholars were quite derisive of some of the *Dictionary's* inclusions but Joan continued on regardless and as a consequence turned the whole thing on its head...I don't think any scholar of Australian 19th-century history now could afford to ignore her work.⁸

If the *Dictionary* would be hailed as an important key to unlocking the patterns and rhythms of Australian colonial life, its compilation was not without difficulty. At times, resources (even stationery) were grudgingly allocated and the postgraduate students working with Kerr accorded little recognition of the value of their work.⁹ Kerr was promoted to Associate Professor in 1985, a post with considerable responsibilities. As a result she often worked on the dictionary at night while teaching by day. Sometimes Jim Kerr joined her, and morning visitors would find him sleeping on the floor.¹⁰ Another reason for Joan Kerr's night-owl working practice was that she could have uninterrupted access to the Department

⁴ Diana Davis, 'The PCA: retrospect and prospect', *Imprint*, Winter 2006, vol.41, No.2, pp 1-4

⁵ Joan Kerr ed, *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book*, pp 314, 453-454 & 459-460

⁶ 'Dictionary of Australian Artists Online (Research Group)', *Research at COFA*, February 2007, p.5; *Art Association of Australia and New Zealand Newsletter*, No.71, February 2007, p.6

⁷ Steggall, interview with Anne McCormick, February 2007

⁸ Email from Candice Bruce, August 2006

⁹ Steggall, telephone conversation with Candice Bruce, 12 May 2009

of Fine Arts' limited computer resources at night. On a less scholarly note, after staff had left for the day Kerr could smoke all she liked without incurring the wrath of her assistants.¹¹ 'It was her one blind spot intellectually,' Bruce writes, 'she was always in denial about the hazards of smoking, right to the end'.¹²

This chapter, *Big Ideas, Grand Ambitions*, charts the coming to fruition of the *Dictionary* and *Heritage*. If it seems excessive to devote a whole chapter to just two projects it is because they involved so many people – whole communities of scholars, professional and amateur – and reached so far beyond the scope of conventional art histories.

A Very Big Idea:

The *Dictionary* had a modest start when, in the mid 1970s, the Power Institute of Fine Arts under Bernard Smith's direction provided eighty or so biographical items on Australian artists whose surnames began with the letter A for a new edition of the German international dictionary of artists, architects, sculptors and engravers, *Thieme-Becker Künstlerlexikon*. Smith thought it a good beginning for an all-Australian dictionary and so initiated the 'Dictionary of Australian art and architecture project' with Eve Buscombe as research assistant. It was expected to take between three and five years to prepare.¹³

A succession of researchers assembled material on artists working from the 1770s to the 1970s, with Buscombe continuing as principal researcher until 1980 when Mary Mackay took over the position.¹⁴ Joan Kerr had barely begun her tenure as lecturer in 1981 when Power Professor Virginia Spate asked her to assume the editorship of the project – a request about which Spate said at the *Dictionary's* launch in 1992, she had 'felt guilt for over a decade':

For I believe no one – including Joan – had any idea how much labour would be involved. Early in the eighties she and I visited an

¹⁰ Interview with Dinah Dysart

¹¹ Telephone conversation with Candice Bruce, 12 May 2009

¹² Email from Candice Bruce, August 2006. Bruce met Joan Kerr in her first or second year at the Power Institute, in 1970 or 1971. Kerr was her tutor in Australian art and architecture and she recommended her for her first art job as a research assistant in 1975.

¹³ *Dr John Power and the Power Bequest. The Power Institute and The Power Foundation: an Illustrated Survey*, Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1976, pp 36-37

¹⁴ David Saunders, Professor of Architecture at the University of Adelaide, became chief investigator after Smith's retirement in 1977. Anne Watson, Heather Curnow, Joanna Mendelssohn and Mary Mackay were sequentially employed as part-time research assistants.

eminent professor of history who has played a central role in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Joan wanted to discuss the issue of comprehensivity – that is, including every artist who set foot on Australian soil. He said this would be impossible, and certainly convinced me, and we left a very pleasant lunch rather gloomily. Still, I'm not sure anyone has persuaded Joan not to do something she believes to be right, so she went on regardless.¹⁵

Spate might have been exaggerating her 'guilt' but she was certainly correct about Joan Kerr's determination. Once Kerr became editor of the initial volume (at that stage future volumes were considered a certainty), she and Mackay decided to make the *Dictionary* 'the most comprehensive and correct art reference possible'. Not content to adhere to a conventional model (something that was to cause her considerable trouble when seeking a publisher), Kerr set her own stamp on the project, believing she had a duty to include every possible example of creative endeavour in Australia. During family holidays she had discovered many obscure artists and photographers, which meant that the focus of the *Dictionary* would need to be expanded well beyond metropolitan elites.¹⁶

Mackay co-ordinated the part-time research assistants (the total research grant initially being less than one full-time salary), as well as discovering and encouraging an increasing band of expert (unpaid) contributors from all states of Australia. The work subsequently had good financial assistance from the Australian Research Council Grants Scheme as well as the support of many foundations, academies, museums, state libraries and other institutions. Yet Kerr was constantly asking for more money, stretching budgets and others' patience. Bruce provides an insider's perspective:

Every time our funding was cut off Joan would send off screeds of paper to convince the ARC to renew our grant. It was her determination, which saw that project through to the end; many others would have given up but not Joan. We did it all on a shoestring but I look back fondly to that small room in the Mills Building where we all sat, for years and years and years, hunched over our research, endlessly scribbling away. Joan would be puffing her ubiquitous cigarette (until one day, much to our relief, the University brought in a smoking ban), and commenting with her usual incisiveness, wickedness and wisdom on the parade of humanity before us. In that room we shared many stories with each other about the living and the dead – mostly the latter – the painters, sketchers, photographers and

¹⁵ *Documents*, pp 352-355. Virginia Spate speaking at the launch of the *Dictionary of Australian Artists*, by Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Emeritus Professor Dame Leonie Kramer, DBE and Emeritus Professor Bernard Smith at MacLaurin Hall, Sydney University, 22 September 1992; also Spate, Obituary, 'Eleanor Joan Kerr', p.46

¹⁶ NLA Interview, p.28

engravers...but also the outsiders of Australian art: the women, the Indigenous, the convicts and criminals, the adventurers, wastrels, ratbags and rascals; the oddballs and eccentrics.¹⁷

Virginia Spate gives an academic's view:

I sometimes thought that the *Dictionary* would devour not only her and the dedicated researchers working with her, but also the whole Department in pursuit of what seemed like an insane ambition. I was wrong. The *Dictionary* transformed our understanding of Australian colonial art...I don't think that it has been sufficiently recognized that the achievement of the *Dictionary* has not been matched in any other study of the European settler colonies around the world.¹⁸

Kerr was well aware that Australia presented a unique situation. 'At least Australia is fortunate in her youth,' she declared. 'Other countries have attempted to compile definitive biographical dictionaries of artists but the span of history has usually prevented the possibility of including *all* artists in *all* the visual arts. With less than two hundred years of European settlement, it seems just possible – even if foolhardy – to attempt to define our entire non-Indigenous heritage'.¹⁹

Bernard Smith has suggested a possible source for Kerr's ideas in the Aristotelian principle that if nature produces itself, art requires a maker so that everything people produce outside of their bodies is art, the objects preserved in museums and galleries merely art given a particular value.²⁰ A major criticism of Aristotle's theory – namely his failure to differentiate between mechanical and fine arts – would not have bothered Joan Kerr at all. Her aim to redefine art as 'an activity within society as an integral part of everyday life, not a rarefied activity separated from it' was a position that allowed Kerr to welcome a quite different range of artists into the 'pantheon of the past', for example William Bligh who was far better known for his roles as governor and principal protagonist in the Bounty mutiny than artist; or renowned author Ernestine Hill who was also a competent photographer.

Artists (in the first stage of the project, around a thousand) must have set foot on Australian soil to gain entry. 'Before 1870' meant that the artist must have completed his or her major Australian work by this time although 'major' did not necessarily mean 'most'. During the first eight decades of white settlement there

¹⁷ ARC – Australian Research Council. Candice Bruce, speech at Government House Dinner, 6 June 2003, Caroline Simpson Library and Research Collection, Historic Houses Trust, Sydney

¹⁸ Virginia Spate, Speech, Government House Dinner, 6 June 2003

¹⁹ Joan Kerr, testimonial letter to various recipients, 20 February 1987, Kerr Archive

²⁰ Steggall, conversation with Bernard Smith, December 2006

was too little patronage to allow a regular livelihood from art so that no distinction was made between 'professional' and 'amateur' except in the case of photographers since photography in the Australian colonies had always been both a career *and* an artistic practice. Engravers were included only if they made work in their own right rather than as professional copiers of other people's sketches.

By August 1984, a working paper entitled *A Dictionary of Australian Artists – Working Paper 1: Painters, Photographers and Engravers 1770-1870, A-H* had been completed.²¹ Of the one thousand copies printed around three hundred were sent to contributors, museums and art galleries to gain feedback. In her talk at the launch on 7 September 1984, Joan Kerr was supremely confident of the scholarly worth of the publication and urged all present to buy a copy and 'stay up all night reading it'. Undeterred by the fact that there were gaps in many of the entries she expected members of the general public as well as those in scholarly institutions to come forward with more information. In declaring, 'It is not a one-way book like ordinary books. It receives as well as it gives', Kerr was, in her own way, pre-empting the phenomenon of inter-activity made commonplace by the Internet revolution.

Director of the S.H. Ervin Gallery, Dinah Dysart, reinforced the two-way nature of the project and its value as a research tool. Visitors, she said, often arrived at the National Trust bearing a watercolour, a photograph, miniature or sketchbook that had been in their family for generations. Hours often had to be spent in the Mitchell Library searching for evidence of the artist's signature or a record of the artist's name to establish attribution. Now, with the publication of the *Working Paper*, most obscure artists had been documented along with known 19th-century artists.²²

The team, in various combinations of part-time researchers (with Joan Kerr as its constancy), set to work to complete the 'I-Z' working paper all the while canvassing amendments and additions to the 'A-H' volume. From 1985, Candice Bruce, Anita Callaway and Jane Lennon were the principal research assistants. In spite of 'individual eccentricities' the three got on well due to an 'unusual level of mutual cooperation'. They divided the work in terms of the alphabet (beginning with 'I' and each taking a letter to work their way through to 'Z') as the most

²¹ *Working Paper I* was launched on 7 September at S.H. Ervin Gallery by Baiba Berzins Mitchell Librarian, *University of Sydney News*, Vol.16, No.26, 18 September 1984

efficient way to avoid duplicating others' research.²³ For six and a half years, Lennon, Callaway and Bruce worked on the project plus 'hundreds of people Joan Kerr found in obscure museums, libraries and societies'.²⁴ In Bruce's opinion, Kerr was a meticulous scholar who could 'knit together the most abstruse and esoteric material into a cohesive whole in a way not open to others'. 'It was exciting working with her,' Bruce recollects. 'We were discovering so much new material that every day was very rewarding'. It was a good team although a very opinionated one, 'all chiefs and no Indians', according to Kerr, and the nature of the work changed regularly, depending on 'who was arguing the loudest and most convincingly at the time'.²⁵ Bruce later said she was 'a bit amazed' when she looked back and saw what they had achieved.²⁶

Kerr intended to have *Working Paper 2: Painters, Photographers and Engravers, 1770-1870, I-Z* completed by mid 1987. The third section was to include architects, sculptors and craftspersons 1770-1870, A-Z. The three working papers were then to be combined to form volume one of a comprehensive *Dictionary* containing complete entries on all known pre-1870 artists, the whole project to be finalised for publication in 1988. This proved to be unrealistic on several counts: the length of the project meant that researchers often moved on, slowing progress; money was scarce and salaries had to be spread thinly; Joan Kerr had teaching responsibilities to fulfil and the Department was embroiled in the controversy surrounding the proposed move of the Power Collection to a new museum of contemporary art at Circular Quay.

In May 1987, Jill Hickson agreed to act as Joan Kerr's literary agent, but 1988 came and went with no end in sight for the completion of the integrated *Dictionary*. By 1990 the manuscript was in sufficiently finished form to approach publishers. Melbourne University Press (MUP) was the first choice since it had a long history of scholarly publications in the arts and John Iremonger was a highly regarded editor. After overcoming so many difficulties, Kerr received yet another blow in the form of Iremonger's response.²⁷

²² Dinah Dysart, Review of *Working Paper I* in the *National Trust Magazine*, April 1985

²³ Email from Bruce

²⁴ *Pictorial Biography*, p.75

²⁵ Joan Kerr, Introductory speech, *University of Sydney News*, Vol.16, No.26, 18 September 1984

²⁶ *Pictorial Biography*, pp 75-76

²⁷ Letter from John Iremonger at Melbourne University Press, 16 August, 1990 to Jill Hickson, Hickson Associates, *Documents*, pp 241-243

His letter to Hickson began cordially enough with formalities regarding the authorisation of the Board of Management of MUP to negotiate with Hickson. However before entering into an agreement, the Board made an important proviso: that the work when published, must be of the same standard of scholarship and presentation as the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (ADB) of which MUP had published eleven volumes and was to publish the twelfth in October 1990. From an examination of the penultimate draft of the *Dictionary*,²⁸ significant amendments were necessary to ensure that the work could be published to the required standard: establishment of word lengths for each entry based on the relative importance of each subject with the excision of 'irrelevant' biographical material such as the names of the subject's children; reduction of bibliographies, references to other dictionaries, encyclopaedias and 'in text' quotations; deletion of disputed or dubious attributions; increased academic rigour in relation to terminology and secondary source material; grouping of anonymous artists and those known only by their initials instead of giving them individual status; attribution of author to entries and the need for rigorous editorial intervention. As the last straw, Iremonger demanded that MUP have the right to appoint an editor of its choosing to carry out the above tasks, and that this editor would be acknowledged on the title page.

Each of Iremonger's requirements raised serious barriers to Joan Kerr's vision for the *Dictionary*: there was no explanation as to what constituted 'importance'; removal of personal biographical material would consecrate the 'artist' as an authorial subject (invariably male) unaffected by life around him; the reduction of supporting material would negate Joan Kerr's aim of providing the most comprehensive and inclusive reference source and deletion of less than definite attributions would discriminate against women and men of non-European origin. As can be seen from Hickson's reply, Joan Kerr was furious.

My client, Dr Joan Kerr, Associate Professor in Fine Arts at Sydney University, has instructed me to terminate negotiations with you forthwith. As the foremost authority on Australian colonial art and editor of the *Dictionary of Australian Artists* for ten years, Dr Kerr considers your letter of 16 August 1990, stating the conditions under which MUP is prepared to negotiate, the most insulting document she has ever seen.

²⁸ There is some confusion as to which 'version' of the *Dictionary* manuscript was sent to MUP. It is difficult to believe that after so many years and so much effort Kerr would not ensure that the very latest, the very best, draft was sent unless she was over-confident of its reception.

The *Dictionary of Australian artists* project was changed from Professor Bernard Smith's 1975 conception only after much thought and a vast amount of original research. The radically new image of the range of art and artists working in colonial Australia which has resulted, is diametrically opposed to the established Anglo-centric patriarchal view of Australian art and Dr Kerr considers it extremely offensive to be ordered to revert to this obsolete model.²⁹

Kerr authorised Geoffrey Serle (former editor of *ADB*) to collect the manuscript and, gathering up a shred of dignity, fired her only salvo: 'If unauthorised copies of any part of the document have been made this material must be destroyed immediately'. Serle's note to Kerr of 22 August 1990 not only vindicated her approach but also poured a little oil on some very troubled waters:

I have spent only a couple of hours on your manuscript, but that is enough for me to come down strongly on your side on the major points...More than most I am in a position to appreciate the huge amount of work involved and the originality. I consider that, given your objectives, trying to enforce the *ADB* example is misguided. The vast majority of entries, of 'unknowns' and 'little knowns' are your main strength...A precise ranking by wordage is not an important objective, given the desirability of providing what available scraps of information there are in a large proportion of cases.

...I cannot see a need for 'rigorous textual intervention'. I agree that the letter is grossly insulting, especially with regard to appointment of a supervising editor with near-equal billing on the title page...There may be a little merit in some of the lesser criticisms, where they do not conflict with your settled policy, especially with regard to reduction of size...I am astounded at the tactlessness of Iremonger's letter and the ultimatum of appointing an over-riding editor. This is not 'negotiating'. Adverse criticism and raising of difficulties, right or wrong, can always be done with a degree of politeness and helpfulness.³⁰

Iremonger contacted Kerr to say he was greatly 'saddened' not only because MUP was now unlikely to publish the *Dictionary* but also because there had been a misunderstanding: his demand that a work of reference be 'authoritative, reliable and accessible' did *not* mean reinforcing the 'established Anglocentric patriarchal view of Australian Art':

Indeed, in as much as this view must be based on a tendentious and partisan approach to historical evidence, a rigorously constructed reference work must subvert it...To pull down the established view, would it not be better to create a reference work proofed against the critics but [showing] the care with which the evidence is handled? [Hickson's] letter suggests that the conditions MUP set would result in

²⁹ *Documents*, p.244

³⁰ Letter reproduced in *Documents*, p.245

an 'obsolete' model of a reference work, but since when has striving for credibility and accessibility been an obsolescent activity?³¹

Iremonger concluded by saying that he raised these points 'in sorrow not in anger', that although MUP's insistence on the standards appropriate to a reference work 'may have been bluntly put...it was never intended to suggest that your commitment to re-interpreting Australia's rich history of artistic activity was anything other than commendable'.³² 'Commendable'? Faint praise indeed.

Joan Kerr composed a letter to Iremonger (although it would appear not to have been sent) in which she said she was not willing to allow her work to be rewritten by an editor over whose appointment she had no say, who was to be paid by her, and who would be listed on the title page of her book in return for relinquishing her/his copyright. 'The copyright of this publication is mine', were her last words to MUP.³³

Once the flak had settled Louise Sweetland at Oxford University Press (OUP) was approached. Preliminary agreement was reached and on 28 February 1991 Kerr was able to write: 'Behold the first fruits have been despatched! The rest should be finished by the end of March'. She still had to 'write the introduction, acknowledgements, list of contributors and informants, exhibitions and abbreviations', but was confident these and the illustrations were well in hand. Her only 'real worry' was the retail price of \$250, which meant considerable expense for volunteer contributors, even with a generous discount. 'It isn't intended for rich collectors,' she fumed, 'and I hate the idea of them profiting from it...while those who would use it more constructively – to remake Australian art history from within – probably won't even be able to read it in their local libraries'. With an eye to promotional possibilities Kerr declared to Sweetland that 'after ten years, the 'marvellous cast of characters – all those amateur sketchers, bankrupt and villainous photographers, rich dilettantes and poor professional painters' – kept getting better all the time. She hoped Sweetland would like their 'massive infant' and would 'enjoy sending it out into the world'.³⁴

Sweetland's reply was short and practical: if Kerr wanted a lower retail price she would have to limit the number of images (colour *and* black and white) and

³¹ Letter reproduced in *Documents*, p.246

³² Letter reproduced in *Documents*, p.246

³³ Letter of late August 1990, reproduced in *Documents*, p.247

³⁴ Letter reproduced in *Documents*, pp 263-264

reduce the text.³⁵ No amount of Kerr's sweet-talking could overcome the fact that the *Dictionary* was going to be expensive to produce. Sweetland probably did drive a hard bargain as the Memorandum of Agreement drawn up between Joan Kerr, Hickson & Associates and OUP on 23 April 1991 reveals, but at least publication was a dawning reality rather than a distant dream.³⁶

Yet Kerr's opening words in a letter to Sweetland in May 1991 – 'Don't panic!' – show that Sweetland was becoming nervous about delays and rewrites.³⁷ Manuscript completion had already been pushed back from February to April 1991 and it was still not ready in May. With only part time staff available to answer OUP's many questions, combined with Kerr's compulsive rewritings and additions – 'I am tempted to "improve" forever but your "riot act" is as the cooing of turtledoves compared to Beryl and Anita's efforts' – Sweetland needed reassurance that Kerr and her team were neither making major changes nor secretly rewriting the text beyond editorial corrections. Kerr's reply – 'We have deleted some incorrect material and substituted a correct text in a *very few* places' – would have done little to instil that reassurance.

Final decisions on number and placement of images could not be made before the text had been completed. Even the title of the book had not been finalised. To say that the tension and drama of the *Dictionary's* creation had all the attributes of a race-against-the clock reality television show would not be wide of the mark. Problems notwithstanding, a formal contract was signed on 17 June 1991 between OUP and Hickson & Associates on Joan Kerr's behalf. One year later the manuscript was ready for printing.

Sweetland had sent Bernard Smith an advance copy of the *Dictionary* and he wrote to Kerr on 14 August 1992 to congratulate her on a 'magnificent piece of work'. 'How proud you must be now that it is published. I can certainly understand your urgent desire to have done with it. Like me and Captain Cook!' Smith

³⁵ *Documents*, p.265. Letter from Louise Sweetland to Joan Kerr, 8 March 1991 re: *Dictionary of Australian Artists, Sketchers, Photographers and Etchers*

³⁶ *Documents*, pp 272-281. All costs for illustrations had to be borne by the author who also had to secure permissions to use images of art works – and provide proof of this to the publisher. The cost of more than 10% corrections had to be borne by the author. The publisher had sole control of all details of production, advertising price, sale and terms of sale of the work. The author was to receive, on publication, six free copies, the author's agent one copy free of charge. There were also clauses about conflicting editions, failure of the author to complete and preparation of new editions, cancellation, additional purchase entitlements, wasting and remaindering.

³⁷ Letter from Assistant Professor Joan Kerr, to Louise Sweetland at OUP, 30 May 1991, *Documents*, pp 286-287

genuinely hoped plans were under way to continue the work and suggested that perhaps Volume II should take it up to 1900. 'Anyway,' he concluded, 'I just wished to show you how much I admire you for having completed the job'.³⁸ In spite of their earlier differences, Joan Kerr must have felt satisfaction at such praise from her former boss.

An expensive publication demanded a strong advertising campaign and Sweetland wrote to Jim Hall at the *Australian Magazine* to ask if he would be interested in the *Dictionary* and its editor. Sweetland's business-like approach provides a concise summary of the book: one million words; 450 black and white pictures, 45% of which have never been published before; 2,500 artists, painters, sketchers, photographers and engravers; more than fifteen years of extensive archival, gallery, library and newspaper research by several hundred scholars, 'one of the largest projects ever undertaken in the humanities in Australia'. Sweetland assured Hall that the book would have general-reader interest, not only because of its dramatic overthrow of the standard definition of colonial art as the province of the Anglocentric male painter but also because the work's impeccable scholarship went hand in hand with good writing in entries that were 'witty, wonderful vignettes'. The very grand claim that the creation of new reputations and the re-evaluation of some old ones would in turn lead to shifts in the market and to new directions for public and private collections, would Sweetland felt, be a clincher.

Her description of Joan Kerr was also spot on: 'Forthright, irreverent, witty (as in her writing), she has terrific stories about compiling the opus and dealing with the vast number of contributors'.³⁹ Kerr had always proved a good interviewee and did not disappoint. Her conversation with Murray Waldren for the *Australian Magazine* was as revealing about the *Dictionary* as it was about Kerr herself. Waldren describes them sitting

in her slightly Dickensian office at the university. Amid an organized shambles of filing cabinets, walls of shelves sagging under the weight of reference books and papers cascading in anarchic piles, we are sharing a illicit cigarette in a distinctly No Smoking zone.⁴⁰

³⁸ Reproduced in *Documents*, pp 323-324

³⁹ *Documents*, pp 321-322. Letter to Mr Jim Hall, *Australian Magazine*, News Ltd, 10 August 1992

⁴⁰ Murray Waldren, 'The rewriting on the wall', *Australian Magazine* 19-20 September, 1992, p.33

Waldren suggests that Kerr's assertions – 'Art did not become fully institutionalised until late in the 19th century' and that the artistic map needed to be redrawn because those 'notorious English eyes found in popular art histories were usually attached to painters who never left home' – were 'fighting words'. This did not faze Kerr. She was adamant that in the first hundred years of white settlement Australians had had a vibrant and energetic art history. 'It was fresh,' she insisted. 'It was performed by people of all backgrounds – Europeans, Americans, even Aborigines.' The rot set in once art schools, galleries and art teachers began to emulate the Royal Academy, leaving little space for the 'lady painter at home or others outside the power clique'. The *Dictionary* was now giving them that space. Extensive use of the 'qv' convention meant that readers could start with one author and follow the network into a whole 'village of people' thus creating a social history as comprehensive as any book travelling officially under that name.⁴¹ Although the question of whether the worth of Australia's early art works lay in their historic or their artistic value had yet to be adequately answered, Kerr was optimistic that state galleries and libraries would now take notice of Australia's colonial artists.

In an article in the *Financial Review*, Terry Ingram asked Kerr what effect did she think the *Dictionary* might have on the Australian market and whether it had changed the way 19th-century art would now be 'viewed' – both by the general public and the art establishment. Kerr replied grandly: 'If the Australian art market operated on the same lines as stock markets, trading would have to be suspended in all pre-1870 Australian artists until the *Dictionary of Australian Artists* was published, so great its potential to make or mar artistic reputations.'⁴²

OUP made dramatic claims for the *Dictionary* in its catalogue: 'the most comprehensive dictionary of its kind to date'; 'an essential reference for gallery and museum curators, art connoisseurs, private collectors and dealers'; 'authoritative, entertaining and original'; 'a major force in the rewriting of Australian cultural history'; 'a grand panorama of Australian cultural life before

⁴¹ An interesting confirmation of the *Dictionary's* importance to Australia's cultural heritage is revealed in Peter Rose's letter to Joan Kerr, advising her that the *Dictionary of Australian Artists* was to be one of four titles selected for inclusion in a pilot study for the Australian National Corpus, to be compiled by the Australian National Dictionary Centre. The purpose of this new resource was to provide linguists, lexicographers and other interested scholars with a comprehensive and eclectic corpus of Australian English, *Documents*, p.327

⁴² Terry Ingram, 'Update of history could rock colonial art market', *Financial Review*, 13 August 1992 (*Documents*, pp 329-330)

and during the first hundred years of European settlement'; 'a large cast of local characters...[that lays] the robust foundations of a hitherto unrealized local tradition', and the oft-repeated 'overthrow of the standard definition of colonial art as the province of the Anglocentric male painter'.⁴³ A reader could be forgiven for mistaking such hyperbole as the promotion for a blockbuster cinematic experience.

Other press releases for the *Dictionary* followed similar lines, singling out the eccentric, the bizarre and the fantastic and proclaiming it a 'radical new art history' free from the 'ingrained prejudices' that isolate popular from high art, amateur from professional, black from white and immigrant from Indigenous.⁴⁴ In emphasising the significance of the project for Australia's cultural heritage, analogies were drawn with the 19th-century component of the fourteen-volume *Australian Dictionary of Biography* for historians; the 19th-century section of the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* for literary studies and the *Australian National Dictionary* for studying Australian English. One piece even claimed that the repertoire of images and hitherto unrealized continuities and traditions established by the text would expand definitions of national identity.

Joanna Mendelssohn reviewed the *Dictionary* on numerous occasions. Her reviews, even if from an art historian's viewpoint, differ little from the others, probably because by the time of the *Dictionary*'s launch, it was becoming difficult to find anything new to say about it. Although Mendelssohn made some grand claims of her own – 'It is rare to review a reference work that was two-thirds sold out before its launch...Rarer still is a book which rewrites history' – she also mentioned the rich cultural life of our colonial ancestors, the interesting link between previously unknown photographers and painters that resulted in a great deal of cross-fertilisation between media, the patterns emerging in famous families, past and present (such as the Allports of Hobart), the many professional and country people for whom art was an amateur but important interest in their lives.⁴⁵ Women artists, of course, were one of the 'great discoveries' of the *Dictionary*. Yet Kerr had already conceded that feminists might have little cause to rejoice about the publication, as only one in six of the artists listed were

⁴³ *Documents*, p.328

⁴⁴ Examples in *Documents*, pp 334-335

⁴⁵ 'The *Dictionary of Australian Artists: Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870*'. Reviewed by Joanna Mendelssohn, 'Joan makes history in Australian art', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 September 1992, p.42

women. The *Dictionary*, Mendelssohn also writes, puts paid to the perception that all Aboriginal art was tribal until Albert Namatjira, by including Biraban of the Awabakal tribe of Lake Macquarie, who made European-style watercolours and Tommy McRae of Corowa and Lake Moodemere, who made transitional works of hunting scenes in a strong narrative style.

While Joan Kerr's own 'strong narrative style' appeared effortless, it was the result of much rewriting to achieve this effect. Those outside Kerr's scholarly circle were probably unaware of just how much she had invested of herself in the *Dictionary* and how much family life she had sacrificed for it. A pen drawing signed, 'Congratulations Mum, with lots of love, Jim' depicts a hunched figure in a long shapeless robe, hair awry, clutching a weighty tome in her right hand, left fist raised in a clenched salute, a look of satisfaction on her face. She is standing on a slab of stone inscribed with 'MY MUM', atop two classical columns supported by a stone base bearing the words, 'Prof "Dictionary" KERR. For service beyond the call of academic duty 1992'.⁴⁶

Mendelssohn reinforces the nobility of Kerr's 'service' in the emotive title, 'A new guide to Australian artists cost its editor time, money – and almost her life', although the catchphrase 'a new understanding of Australian history in a radical revision of how we see our past', had been trotted out many times.⁴⁷ Mendelssohn paints a dramatic picture of a heroic Joan (of Arc) Kerr rescuing the project from decay and even death. Her assertion that 'in a university department that was proud of its theoretical base, it was easy to deride such basic nuts-and-bolts research as "empirical" and therefore unworthy',⁴⁸ might be a slight over-dramatization but her claim that 'by 1988 Kerr felt her colleagues were so lacking in support for the *Dictionary* that she offered her resignation' is not strictly true. At that time the *Dictionary* was a sub-plot in the Power Bequest/MCA drama. Nor was there any need to labour the point about the 'austere circumstances in which this landmark of Australian cultural history was created'. If the scholarship in the book were as impeccable as claimed, then it had no need of such riders. Moreover Mendelssohn and several other reviewers write, erroneously, that Kerr took over the project as editor in 1980. In that year she was a potential

⁴⁶ *Documents*, p.340

⁴⁷ Joanna Mendelssohn, 'The arts: critical matters', *The Bulletin*, 22 September 1992, p.77

⁴⁸ Joanna Mendelssohn, 'The arts: critical matters', *The Bulletin*, 22 September 1992, p.78

contributor but was not yet employed in the Fine Arts Department at Sydney University.⁴⁹

By September 1992 all difficulties were in the past. Ian Stephenson, Curatorial Officer with the National Trust of NSW, wrote that 'the best part' of the *Dictionary's* first launch at Hyde Park Barracks (18 September) was seeing Kerr so happy:

That night you didn't just hear the music of the spheres; rather you were transported body and soul to the stellar regions. I left feeling happy with my station, not that I'm likely to achieve, as you have, something great and grand, but happy in the knowledge that I work in an area where, in a small way, I can shed some light, can pass something on.⁵⁰

His sentiments stand for the several hundred contributors to the *Dictionary*, many of whom have probably not written in similar fashion since. Or perhaps they have, encouraged, as Joan Kerr hoped, to search deeper into their families' cultural past.

The second launch of the *Dictionary* was an august affair at Sydney University's MacLaurin Hall on 22 September 1992. The Chancellor of the University, Emeritus Professor Dame Leonie Kramer, DBE was to do the honours together with Emeritus Professor Bernard Smith. Professor Virginia Spate was not only in charge of welcoming guests and introducing Dame Leonie, but also, on the evening, a replacement for Smith who could not be present due to illness.⁵¹ As the author of *Australian Painting and European Vision and the South Pacific*, no one could have launched the *Dictionary* with more authority than Smith. In an elegant gesture of humility Spate disqualified herself from speaking with that 'authority' as 'someone who has written the kind of book on Australian art which, after the *Dictionary of Australian Artists*, can no longer respectably be written'. She was referring to her 'elderly' book on Tom Roberts – one of the 'great man' kind that 'devoted far too much time to proving that his art derived from that of great artists in Europe – most desirably French of course'.

⁴⁹ A letter to Professor David McNicol, Vice-Chancellor, of 4 February 1993, advising of her wish to resign from her post as lecturer, Kerr pointed out that she had held this teaching position at Sydney University since the beginning of 1981, *Documents*, p.386

⁵⁰ Letter from Ian Stephenson, Curatorial Officer, National Trust NSW, nd to Professor Kerr, *Documents*, p.348

In her speech Spate not only praised Joan Kerr and her fellow researchers but also the many other writers who, 'in an extraordinary co-operative effort [had] unearthed and re-shaped forgotten histories...to give us a new sense of 19th-century Australian society', and

a new sense of the energy, the liveliness, the excitement, the creativity of that society. Who was who; who knew or worked with whom; who lived in what street (which reads as a lament for the Sydney so recently destroyed), who travelled where; who came from what country... who exhibited what... who earned... who went bankrupt... These are the very raw materials of our history.⁵²

Although it seemed unlikely that the *Dictionary's* comprehensivity could be carried far into the 20th century, Spate, like Bernard Smith, felt that something needed to be built on its foundations. She concluded, 'Joan feels – with total justification – that she has given her all to dictionaries...but perhaps she will forgive me if I say in public what I have said in private: that she should think of writing *the* comprehensive book on Australian colonial art. But that is another day'.

The *Dictionary* was also launched at the State Library of Tasmania in Hobart on 8 October 1992 in part because approximately four hundred of the total of two and a half thousand artists were in Tasmania but also to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the curator of the Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, Geoffrey Stilwell without whom the work might never have been finished. Kerr and Stilwell shared a pedant's love of getting things right. As she said at the launch, 'One day Geoffrey will go to Heaven and he will tell God that the Old Testament was not a bad effort, but there are still some mistakes in all those family histories that need correcting.'⁵³

After the excitement of the 'premieres' it was time for some serious analysis of a book that as Janine Burke wryly comments, 'boldly announces itself as "*The Dictionary*"'. Like other reviewers, Burke could not resist highlighting the exotic fauna in the art menagerie who, in addition to the 'bona fide artists', celebrated 'a

⁵¹ *Documents*, pp 352-355. The official Sydney University and 'Professor Virginia Spate Director Power Institute of Fine Arts' invitation to the launch of *The Dictionary of Australian Artists*, by Chancellor of the University of Sydney, Emeritus Professor Dame Leonie Kramer, DBE and Emeritus Professor Bernard Smith at MacLaurin Hall, Sydney University, 22 September 1992

⁵² Virginia Spate, launch speech, *Documents*, pp 352-355

⁵³ Invitation reproduced in *Documents*, p.371; Margaretta Pos, 'Hobart launch of art dictionary', *Hobart Mercury*, 13 October 1992; *Documents*, p.372

raffish and ebullient society'.⁵⁴ At times, Burke writes, 'in this gallery of 19th-century rogues and oddballs, I felt as if I'd wandered into a Peter Carey novel'. Burke found Kerr's zeal to include everything possible about every possible artist 'very nearly pedantic' and Kerr's burning desire to make the point 'that it is not only individual genius that marks a robust society but the contribution of men and women of diverse talents, ambitions and successes' through 'sheer force of numbers', bordering on excess.

Although a 'useful store of up-to-date research and information', and a new and valuable document of cultural history, Burke argues that the lack of a general reference to Aboriginal art and artists make the *Dictionary* a white reading of 'Australian' culture from first contact to 1870, giving a mistaken impression that there were few Aboriginal artists. Yet Kerr had pre-empted this criticism by explaining that it was a dictionary of artists, not art, and that names were needed for specific attributions. Burke also comments on the fact that her own research on 19th-century women artists as well as important work on women photographers had not been cited. She also raises the issue of the absence of three-dimensional art although Kerr had frequently signalled the unavoidable necessity of leaving it out. It would seem that Joan Kerr could not have everything – praise as a writer on art who could reach out to the general public *and* unqualified consecration as an academic art historian.

As with high-budget, high-grossing films few reviewers could resist the *Dictionary's* dramatic statistics – weight, numbers of words, pages, artists and contributors, length of time taken to complete – often with minor variations from one to the next. Reviews seemed to feed off each other. Spate's launch speech and Terry Ingram's article in the *Financial Review*, as well as the promotional piece in the OUP catalogue, were much quoted in subsequent articles.⁵⁵ Dinah Dysart was one of the few reviewers to evoke the idea of re-enactment to describe how Kerr's 'value free selection process' had opened up the history of the visual arts, conferring equal status on 'artists of diverse expertise and differing significance' to construct a comprehensive picture of colonial society as

⁵⁴ *The Weekend Australian*, 3-4 October 1992, *Documents*, p.362

a social history.⁵⁶ John McPhee likened the *Dictionary* to the *Australian National Dictionary: a Dictionary of Australianisms on Historical Principles* (1988) edited by W.S. Ramson, in that it was exciting to read and offered invaluable insights, not only into Australian history and culture but also in capturing something of the personality of the artist'.⁵⁷

In a thoughtful review in *Art Monthly Australia* (October 1992), Andrew Sayers introduces a fresh note by drawing attention to the artwork on the *Dictionary's* cover. *Drawing from Life*, the 1860s painting by John Richardson is 'a fitting illustration, writes Sayers. 'The artist is unfamiliar, the painting obscure (being from a private collection) and the subject not what we might ordinarily expect, being neither a landscape nor a depiction of a historical event, but a domestic interior – the artist's children running amok in dad's studio.'⁵⁸

Sayers enjoys the fact that the *Dictionary* is 'fiercely democratic'. However he criticizes the publisher for having thought it necessary to describe the book as 'lively, entertaining, and often amusing, sound[ing] more like the blurb for a Peter Carey novel than a piece of serious scholarship'. (This is the second reference to Carey's colourfully 'Australian' writing. A matter of art imitating art? One wonders who thought of it first.) Although there are some 'good stories' in the book, its real value for Sayers is 'a distinctly Victorian one – its *usefulness*'. However he is not happy with the claim that the *Dictionary* presents 'a radical new art history'. A dictionary, he argues, 'can either facilitate a new view of history – as this work inevitably will – or it can be based upon a new view of history'. In Sayers' opinion, the view of history underlying the work was a kind of anti-history. Even though a notion of 'high art' could just as easily be dispensed with in the 20th century, not

⁵⁵ For example, S. Ainger, 'Art dictionary a "monumental achievement"', from Melbourne University colleagues who contributed to the vast research effort which led to 'The Dictionary', *The University of Sydney News*, 24/21, 6 October, 1992, p.171; *Power Points*, the Power Institute of Fine Arts, *Newsletter*, Second Semester, 1992; Terry Ingram, *Financial Review*, 13 August, 1992, p.26 in the article 'Publications. Stop Press No.1 Hot off the Oxford University Press', in *Power Points*, the Power Institute of Fine Arts, *Newsletter*, reproduced in *Documents*, pp 366-370

⁵⁶ Dinah Dysart, 'Taxidermists, Musicians, Shepherds: Joan Kerr's *Dictionary of Australian Artists*', in *Art & Australia*, Vol.30, No.3, Autumn 1993, pp 329-330

⁵⁷ John McPhee, 'Review of the *Dictionary*', *The Australian Antique Collector*, 46th edn, July-December 1992

⁵⁸ Andrew Sayers, 'The democratic dictionary', in *Art Monthly Australia*, October 1992, p.24

even Joan Kerr could fit all the makers of art in that century – ‘high’ or ‘low’, amateur or professional – into one reference work.⁵⁹

It must have been gratifying for Kerr to note that in his book *Australian Art* (*Oxford History of Art*, OUP 2001), Sayers lists both the *Dictionary* and *Heritage* as two of the five ‘most useful and reliable dictionaries and encyclopaedias on Australian artists’. In his pairing of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists, his equitable inclusion of women artists and his attempts to break hierarchical patterns, Sayers is clearly acknowledging the debt Australian art history owes to Joan Kerr and her team.

Daniel Thomas describes the *Dictionary* as

much more than a biographical dictionary in that it not only tidies up what we knew already about some early colonial painters and photographers but also presents a radical re-writing of the first hundred years of Australia’s non Indigenous art...More than its eccentricities, it is the re-interpretation of Australian cultural practice which makes the book so valuable.⁶⁰

Contrary to reviewers who took a politically correct perspective he was satisfied with the level of attention accorded to Aboriginal artists. In noting the highly visible presence of women, Thomas draws a nice analogy: ‘In this age before oppressive art museums and institutionalised art schools, the fluidity of role between home duties and artist was paralleled by male crossovers, say between farming and painting, photography and pharmacy, photography and jewellery.’

Thomas, the art historian, argues that it is the four hundred and fifty plates that make the book essential for art history and art theory. ‘The plates do not “illustrate” the texts,’ he writes. ‘The plates are the text...the biographies “illustrate” the works of art’ – Joan Kerr’s point exactly about the relationship between image and text. Thomas was also one of the few reviewers to acknowledge that the inclusion of three-dimensional art would have been unmanageable. He concludes that ‘although it would be a loss if the work done on architects, sculptors and craftspersons is not completed and not published, there should be no regrets. Joan Kerr has already given us more than we knew we needed’.

Christine Downer reviewed the *Dictionary* for the Melbourne press from a librarian’s perspective in emphasising the many years of extensive (often difficult

⁵⁹ Andrew Sayers, ‘The democratic dictionary’, in *Art Monthly Australia*, October 1992, p.24

⁶⁰ Daniel Thomas, ‘Review of the *Dictionary*’, *Artlink*, vol.12, No.4 (Summer), 1992, p.68

and laborious) archival, gallery, library and newspaper research that went into its creation.⁶¹ She recognizes that Kerr was not the first to research Australian colonial art but was certainly now at the forefront. There is little praise for Joan Kerr's individual efforts although Downer does concede that 'without Joan Kerr's knowledge, determination and breadth of vision the project might easily have 'succumbed through lack of funds and inertia'. Downer's criticism that known collections of works had not been looked at for some of the photographers was surely not the case. Rigorous research had been undertaken in all major libraries in Australia, not to mention forensic searches in less conventional repositories of information. Downer was also critical of the production qualities of the book; it was heavy and with little strength in its binding it would soon be damaged by endless photocopying. Librarians be warned.

Reviews continued to appear well into 1993. Erika Esau describes the construction of a history for Australian art as 'a relatively recent phenomenon', one that only began in the 1930s. 'As in other countries with a colonial past,' she writes, 'Australian art historians inevitably have had to confront the dilemma of relating artistic production to the home culture while at the same time considering the unique aspects of an art created in a new and theoretically contradictory environment'.⁶² Esau compared the development of a history of Australian art with that of American art, particularly as to whether one judges Australian art in terms of Eurocentric culture or a supposedly isolated, peripheral society, and whether as imitation or original.

Esau argues that publications such as William Moore's two-volume *Story of Australian Art* (1934) in which 'nationalistic aspirations dominated the arguments', Bernard Smith's *Place Taste and Tradition* (1945) and *Australian Painting 1788-1960* (1962) that placed Australian art in a broader social context, together with the 'acerbic' *The Art of Australia* (1970) by Robert Hughes, demonstrated a unified view of the development of Australian fine art as the product of male artists responding to or operating within a European, mainly British, context. The *Dictionary* was thus a 'stunning refutation and revision' of these conventional attitudes to Australian colonial culture. In noting that all entries were signed by the contributor – something that was 'invaluable for future research' as it 'allows the reader to identify the path of each researcher's scholarship and interests' –

⁶¹ Christine Downer, 'Art in exile, away from that great god overseas', *The Age*, 21 November 1992, *Documents*, pp 379-380

Esau is highlighting, perhaps unwittingly, the interactive process that Joan Kerr intentionally established.

Twelve years later, in a tribute article, Joanna Mendelssohn describes Kerr as ‘armed with a passion for rethinking the very nature of art itself’.⁶³ If there is very little of Joan Kerr’s personal life in this chapter it is because of that passion. During the heavy phases of research and writing, she had very few social contacts outside her work and her one form of relaxation was reading detective novels, in her utility in the university car park or late into the night at home. If asthma was no longer a persistent worry Kerr continued to have serious dermatological problems, as a letter inviting her to attend the annual (1993) clinical meeting at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital (RPAH) indicates: ‘You are obviously a very interesting case, and I think it would be useful to have the views of the senior dermatologists as to your future management.’ Kerr’s postscript added later – ‘viewed by about seventy dermatologists who agreed that my skin cancers were the result of arsenical medicine in youth not a hereditary disease’ – must have been a mixed blessing.⁶⁴

By the time of the *Dictionary*’s publication Joan Kerr was already working on her next project but there had been so many contentious issues at Sydney University (of her own and others’ making) that a fresh start seemed the best option. On 4 February 1993 Kerr wrote to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor David McNicol, to announce that she wished to exercise the option of early retirement. She planned to leave the university at the end of July to continue her research at COFA transferring the remainder of her 1993 (final year) ARC grant to that institution.⁶⁵

To mark Kerr’s retirement, colleagues in the Department of Fine Arts, held a farewell to her on 23 July 1993 as an ‘Evening of Nostalgia’:

Swing to the beat of music from the 60s and 70s. Dress of the ‘era’ is optional but if you still have those flares, mini skirts, false eyelashes

⁶² Erika Esau, Review section, *Art Documentation*, Spring 1993, p.27

⁶³ Joanna Mendelssohn ‘Joan Kerr (Eleanor Joan Lyndon)’, *cofa*, #10, 2004 and ‘Scholar redefined nature of art history, *The Australian*, 10 March 2004, p.16

⁶⁴ Letter from Professor R. Barnetson, Department of Dermatology at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, 22 April 1993 to Joan Kerr, *Documents*, p.405

⁶⁵ Letter from Joan Kerr to Professor D. McNicol, Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Sydney, 4 February 1993, *Documents*, p.386; a total of \$137,500 for the years 1991-93, Joan Kerr CV 2003. Kerr received official approval of her retirement on 12 February (effective from 30 July 1993) – and thanks for her ‘loyal service to the University’, Letter from Jennifer Turner, Administration Officer, Staff Office reproduced in *Documents*, p.388

and pale lipstick, raid your wardrobe and relive those heady years of youthful optimism!⁶⁶

In a department of straightened means, there was also a request to bring food and drink as well as an amusing anecdote or a special message for a file of memorable moments. The organisers were also asking for a contribution towards a gift for Kerr, all of which indicates a high level of affection for her.

Joan Kerr's retirement from Sydney University was effective from 30 July 1993 but this did not mean retirement to hearth and home. She applied to the ARC for a senior research fellowship to continue her dictionary project. The referee's report, dated 1 March 1993, described her as 'a unique scholar in her area of speciality with the tenacity, passion and intellectual strength to accomplish what has never before been achieved in this country and the *Dictionary* as a 'landmark publication'. The report warned that if Kerr were not granted a fellowship, there was a danger that this 'extraordinary beginning' would not proceed beyond 1870.⁶⁷ While Kerr was not granted the senior research fellowship, she did receive an ARC Large Grant for 1994 to 1996, totalling \$205,650 but used this to complete the *National Women's Art Book* rather than advance the *Dictionary* into the twentieth century.⁶⁸

Perhaps the *Dictionary* project was just too big, too voracious, requiring too much devotion by too many people many of whom no longer wished to assume Joan Kerr's aims and ambitions as theirs. More prosaically, there would be little point amassing an equally large database if publishers were not keen to take on another mammoth task.⁶⁹ Unlike Manning Clark's vast and idiosyncratic *History* that in historian Stuart Macintyre's view, far from revolutionising the discipline of history sat outside it,⁷⁰ Kerr's *Dictionary* has been accepted into the canon of Australian art history. Yet like a giant monolith it rears its stately head above the variegated vegetation of Australian art history's plot, alone, not one of the crowd.

⁶⁶ *Documents*, p.432

⁶⁷ Reproduced in *Documents*, p.393

⁶⁸ 'Funding obtained' section, Joan Kerr CV, 2003

⁶⁹ OUP lost all the galley proofs for the *Dictionary*. Most of the corrections were manual so it could only be re-issued by scanning. Kerr and Holder tried to do this in 1994 but the technology was still too poor. Email to Steggall from Jo Holder, 8 January 2009

⁷⁰ Stuart Macintyre, 'Behind the mask', review of *Manning Clark: a Life* by Brian Matthew,

Grand Ambitions:

In the 1970s there were important developments in feminist thinking about women's achievements, including art. 1975 marked the founding of the Women's Art Register (WAR) in Melbourne and the lecture tour by eminent American art historian, Lucy Lippard. 'She was only interested in seeing work by women artists,' said Erica McGilchrist (one of the founders of WAR), 'and women had never been treated this way before. It had an amazing effect...The atmosphere was electrifying'.⁷¹ In the same year, a major exhibition (and Janine Burke's subsequent book) *Australian Women Artists One Hundred Years: 1840-1940* reinstated the work, and reputations, of many artists as did the SLNSW's exhibition *Women Artists in Australia 1830s to 1930s*.

Joan Kerr had travelled the European route into the very masculine world of architectural history (albeit transformed by distance from its mostly British centre) to arrive at the cheerfully eclectic culture of colonial Australia. It was during this phase that Kerr became interested in talented women like Elizabeth Macquarie who designed buildings and gardens. Kerr then began to investigate other creative women of that time and wrote an account of Sophia Campbell (1777-1833) and her niece Marianne (1827-1903).⁷² In a letter to her friend and former host, David Alexander (in York), Kerr talked about how much she was enjoying preparing an article and a conference paper on colonial women. 'It's mostly about their architectural importance,' she wrote, 'and I've had a lovely time examining albums, sketchbooks and scrapbooks to find hitherto unknown views of buildings, etc. It's a good subject.'⁷³

In 1982 Kerr gave a paper to the Canberra and District Historical Society entitled 'Colonial women artists' and in 1984 presented material on Tasmanian artist Mary Morton Allport.⁷⁴ She was also developing an interest in contemporary women artists although a catalogue essay for Narelle Jubelin's 1985 exhibition might have

Australian Book Review, November 2008, p.17

⁷¹ Erica McGilchrist quoted in Jane Sullivan, 'Women's work', *The Age*, 19 February 1994, p.10 (copy in Joan Kerr Archive)

⁷² Joan Kerr and Hugh Falkus, *From Sydney Cove to Duntroon*, Gollancz, London, 1982

⁷³ Joan Kerr, letter to David Alexander, 5 December 1979, Kerr Archive; Conference paper at the Australasian Victorian Studies Association annual conference (subsequently published as 'The architectural importance of colonial ladies' sketchbooks', in *Australasian Victorian Studies Association Conference Papers 1980* ed. N. Hetherington, Newcastle NSW, University of Newcastle, 1982, pp 12-22); paper published in *Art & Australia* 17/4 (1980), pp 356-362

⁷⁴ *Tasmanian Historical Research Association (THRA) Papers & Proceedings* 32/2 (1984), pp 3-17

come about because of admiration for that artist's work (Kerr owned three works by Jubelin), rather than a feminist agenda.⁷⁵ In 1988 Kerr published an entry, 'Ellis Rowan (1848-1922)' in *200 Australian Women*⁷⁶ and a second piece on Narelle Jubellin's work.⁷⁷ She also wrote the Foreword to *More Than Just Gumtrees: a History of the Melbourne Society of Women Painters and Sculptors* by Juliet Peers.⁷⁸ In 1994, she launched several women-centred publications such as *Artlink*'s 'Art and the Feminist project' issue at the NGV and the biography *Georgiana* by Brenda Niall at the National Trust (NSW).⁷⁹

It was the *Dictionary*'s databases that had enabled Kerr to appreciate the breadth and depth of women's creativity in Australia even though artworks made after the cut-off date of 1870 had had to be omitted from the final manuscript as well as material on sculpture, printmaking and craft-based arts. Yet this material was much too valuable to leave collecting dust in files, to be chanced upon by a postgraduate student or two in search of a thesis topic. Emboldened by the success of her unorthodox approach to art history in the *Dictionary*, Kerr decided to push the boundaries of innovation further to write a book in the style of a catalogue of a grand imaginary exhibition devoted exclusively to the work of Australia's women artists.⁸⁰

Kerr now understood that it was public art institutions and patriarchal attitudes, not the works themselves that had reduced women's artistic achievements to 'mere appendages to male art'. Equally important was the fact that even though successful in their lifetimes, women artists and the exhibitions of their work were frequently overlooked by subsequent generations of artists and historians. In a media release for *Heritage* and the *National Women's Art Exhibition* (21 November 1994), Kerr wrote that although hers was not the first attempt to bring to public attention a large group of women artists, she was the first to acknowledge that exhibitions of women's art had historical precedents, for

⁷⁵ Catalogue essay, 'A small reminder: Narelle Jubellin's Hi(s)story Exhibition', Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, 1985, 4 pp

⁷⁶ Heather Radi ed, Sydney, *200 Australian Women*, Women's Redress Press, 1988, pp 53-54

⁷⁷ 'Remaking hi(s)story: Narelle Jubellin's recent work', *Artlink*, 8/3, 1988, pp 29-30

⁷⁸ Dawn Revival Press, Melbourne, 1993

⁷⁹ *ArtLink*, Volume 14 (Art and the Feminist Project'), No.1; Brenda Niall, *Georgiana: a Biography of Georgiana McCrae, Painter, Diarist, Pioneer*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1994

⁸⁰ *NLA News*, March 1995, p.2

example Eveline Syme's survey of Victorian women artists in 1934 and Margaret Preston's of South Australian women artists in 1936.

When referring to the cultural amnesia that surrounded the creative and intellectual output of women, Kerr often quoted artist and lecturer on art, Mary Cecil Allen, who in 1937 declared that, 'we [women] must look to the future as we have no past'. Kerr argued that this lack of recognition by women themselves served to create an effective barrier to awareness of the achievements of previous generations of women artists. More importantly, this denial of women's past-present-future as a continuous living tradition colluded in women's continuing invisibility in the representation of the world.⁸¹

In his introduction to her talk, 'Art and life' at the Silver Jubilee Symposium of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (1994), Professor Harold Love (one of Kerr's contemporaries at Queensland University in the 1950s) described her 'as a woman Orpheus descending to the underground recesses in order to restore the Euridices of Australian art to the world of light'.⁸² Kerr saw her task as no less than having to 'paint a new canvas [for art history] and carve a new frame to fit it'.⁸³ So there was to be nothing modest about *Heritage*. It was going to be big. Heather Johnson remembers when Joan Kerr first put forward the idea of doing such a book:

I must have written and said it was a wonderful idea and that I hoped she'd pull it off, something like that. Because every time I'd see her afterwards, she'd say, 'You didn't think we could do it did you?' I'd laugh and say 'No I didn't Joan!'⁸⁴

Once the project was under way, Kerr found that many women artists oscillated between the categories of amateur and professional depending on the circumstances of their lives. Some women artists made their living through photography, painting and teaching art while others came from well-off backgrounds and never sold a work although competent and prolific. In the face of such confusion Kerr 'cheerfully abandoned any pretence of categorising women artists', concluding that amateur/professional was 'just another irrelevant,

⁸¹ Discussed in Susan Steggall, *To Carve an Identity: an Appreciation of the Careers of Early Twentieth-Century Australian Women Sculptors*, M. Art Theory (research), COFA, 2001, p.17

⁸² Harold Love, Introduction to Joan Kerr, 'Art and life', in D. Schreuder ed, *The Humanities and a Creative Nation*, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra, 1995 (from the 1994 conference of the same name), quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.109

⁸³ Joan Kerr, Introduction, *Heritage*, p.viii

⁸⁴ Steggall, conversation with Heather Johnson. Johnson wrote several entries for

imported, patriarchal distinction obscuring the value and distinctiveness of past women's art'.⁸⁵

Another 'imported' perception was the second-rate status of Australian art. As in her work on Australia's colonial architecture, Kerr again insisted that until Australians had confidence in a distinctive identity for white Australian art – especially historic white art – it would never be more than an inferior adjunct to some unquestioned, unalterable Eurocentric canon to which artists and critics alike clung out of 'familiarity and habit'. 'Matisse,' she declared, 'is rightly glorified in France; he is even quite properly admired as a worthy visit to our shores. Yet while he is always the star and Australian artists forever the chorus, our priorities remain just as inverted as the world map'.⁸⁶

Kerr was quite clear about her own priorities and although there were inevitable frustrations the *Heritage* project was efficiently run and well funded.⁸⁷ Some of the aggravations were eliminated by the measured approach of Jo Holder who, by 1994, was project manager, looking after the raw material in Kerr's databases. Holder was also responsible for processing the information about artworks and exhibitions for the *National Women's Art Exhibition Calendar and Guide (Calendar)*.⁸⁸

Although Candice Bruce worked briefly on *Heritage* it was Anita Callaway and Jane Lennon who were Kerr's principal research assistants. Neither Callaway nor Lennon was given editorial credit in the book, which caused some disharmony (although Callaway is credited as co-author of the biographical section). Another source of tension lay in the fact that Kerr could work easily with outsider and amateur contributors, while her researchers preferred to work with the professionals in their field. According to Jo Holder, the only comparable scholar in Australia today is Vivien Johnson who works from within academia to bring tribal Aboriginal art into the mainstream. 'She too is something of an outsider,' Holder

Heritage but she was never a paid researcher on any of Kerr's projects.

⁸⁵ Joan Kerr, 'Art begins at Boulia', *Art off Centre: Placing Queensland Art*, ed. Glenn Cooke, Queensland Studies Centre, Griffith University, South Brisbane, 1997 (papers from April 1995 conference), p.18

⁸⁶ Joan Kerr, 'Art begins at Boulia', p.20

⁸⁷ Steggall, telephone conversation with Jim Kerr, 2 February 2007

⁸⁸ Jo Holder met Joan Kerr in the 1970s when Holder was a student and Kerr a tutor at the Power Institute of Fine Arts. They met again when Holder was curator at the Mori Gallery at Leichhardt in the late 1980s – a gallery Kerr often visited because she was interested in the work of Narelle Jubellin and Susan Norrie. When Holder left the Mori Gallery (after its move to the city) she and Kerr lost contact but renewed their friendship when Kerr moved to COFA.

says, 'very intelligent but with imagination'.⁸⁹

For Dinah Dysart, Kerr was an entrepreneur: 'She made things happen; she never gave up.' Perhaps scholars like Joan Kerr who embark on very ambitious projects cannot be other than 'team leader rather than a team player'.⁹⁰ Heather Johnson agrees: Kerr had the vision; the others were there to do the work. 'In actual fact they wouldn't be doing anything if Joan hadn't set it up.' From a safe distance, it would seem that the dynamics of chief-editor/team-researcher interactions is an under-explored conflict on the battleground of workplace relations.

By the time the *Heritage* manuscript was nearing completion, all the big-name artists had been covered by big-name art historians so when Joan Kerr gave me several lesser-known sculptors to write about I could not believe my luck. One of them was Wendy Solling who came from my hometown of Maitland (her parents were friends of my grandparents) so I was easily able to arrange an interview with her. I worked as diligently and rapidly as I could. With deadlines approaching, Joan Kerr was complimentary about the prompt arrival and polished state of my pieces.

She and I met on quite a few occasions during her years at COFA. If I close my eyes I can still see her hunched over the computer, adding new information or a corrected name or date to an already voluminous file, a smile of triumph on her face. No detail was too small to claim her attention. Each meeting would start on track about the subject in hand but invariably turn to newly discovered facts, a recently unearthed, long-thought-lost artwork or some bureaucratic obstacle to her plans. Occasionally we would talk of our families, both steeped in sport and high-church Anglican traditions, and about being the odd (scholarly) one out. Sometimes it would be about lack of respect for her achievements. Our conversations frequently continued well beyond the allotted time but I knew instantly when the meeting was over. Kerr would simply turn back to her work as if I were no longer there.

Cut-off date for inclusion in *Heritage* was originally 1945 but since this appeared to support an impression that women's art ceased when men artists came home after the war, another decade was added.⁹¹ Because of Kerr's desire to include as many artists and themes as possible, each artist, however famous,

⁸⁹ Conversation with Jo Holder

⁹⁰ Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford, *Griffith Taylor*, p.208

would be represented by only one work even though many could appear in several chapters. 'Here is an art with which we can all identify,' Kerr writes. 'Every Australian will recognize a family member or friend in this *Heritage*, even if she is not here in person.'⁹² The decision to omit significant artists in the interest of representativeness and variety later attracted one of the few criticisms of the book, namely that a reader coming to art via *Heritage* might gain a limited impression of women artists in Australia.⁹³ However, some artists were omitted simply because contributors failed to deliver their texts. In any event the editor had to write many more entries than anticipated.⁹⁴

The title of the publication was inspired by Mary Edwards' 1932 painting *Heritage*. This large oil canvas, thought to be a self-portrait, shows an elaborately dressed woman sitting on a grassy knoll covered in Australian wildflowers, with dog, cat, sheep and kangaroo at her feet and behind her a panorama of the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. (According to Candice Bruce, the painting is a curious mix of patriotism and nostalgia.⁹⁵) The book *Heritage* is divided into two sections: art first, arranged chronologically within eleven chapters with a 500-word 'catalogue' entry for each work. In the second section there is a similar length biography for each artist (in alphabetical order) plus a portrait if available.

All chapters cover the whole period, from the late 18th century to 1955, but also operate thematically, not only to negate the idea of 'quality' being the sole criterion for inclusion but also to avoid a progressive Eurocentric style ('cave-painting-to Picasso') approach and to challenge 'the old aggressive nationalist story where Australian art equals male aesthetic conquest of gum trees and woolsheds'. 'Exhibitions & Competitions', 'Gender and Identity', 'Happy Families', 'Home Sweet Studio', 'Learning and Earning', 'Social Life and Travel', 'Flora and Fauna', 'Town and Country', 'Grand Themes, Myths & Legends', 'War Work' – the chapters tell a fascinating if unconventional history of Australian cultural and creative life in an astonishing variety of artists and artworks: ceramics, book binding and illustrating, lace crochet, woodcarving, poker work, sculpture, jewellery, plaster modelling, printmaking, wax miniatures, easel painting and watercolours. The last chapter, 'Nationalism and Heritage', begins with an image

⁹¹ Joan Kerr, Introduction, *Heritage*, pp viii-ix

⁹² Joan Kerr, Introduction, *Heritage*, p.viii

⁹³ Interview with Johnson

⁹⁴ Joan Kerr, Introduction, *Heritage*, p.ix

⁹⁵ Candice Bruce, 'Heritage, by Mary Edwards', *Heritage*, p.286

of Cordula Ebatarinja's *Mount Gillen* (c.1955), a light-filled, ruby-and-amethyst Central Australian landscape, and ends with the story of the painting. The artist is Albert Namatjira's niece and in book-ending the chapter thus Kerr imaginatively yet not so subtly reminds us that the land, after all, truly belongs to the first Australians.

Only 605 contributions (of the total of 500 artist biographies and 500 artwork descriptions) had been received by late March 1994. Kerr was determined not to let the project drag on (as the *Dictionary* had done), and reminded recalcitrant contributors in strong terms that the launch date was fixed for 8 March 1995.⁹⁶ Even so it was a race against the clock and the manuscript was submitted to Dinah Dysart (editor of Art & Australia Books) on Christmas Eve 1994.⁹⁷

As with the *Dictionary*, the statistics for *Heritage* are grand: an ambitious title, 500 pages, 730 illustrations with 384 essays and 375 biographies by 214 contributors, 116 essays and 125 biographies by Joan Kerr herself.⁹⁸ No one, in the art world at least, would remain unaware of this dictionary of women artists, nor Kerr's plan to hold a nation-wide series of exhibitions of women's art. The accompanying sixteen-page tabloid-sized *Calendar* provided every possible detail the viewer-reader could want to know about the one hundred and forty-eight participating exhibitions – 'proof that Australian women artists hold up their share of the sky gloriously'.⁹⁹

The press coverage received by the joint launch of *Heritage* and the *National Women's Art Exhibition* at the NGA, was excellent publicity for Joan Kerr but she insisted it was 'a public good' project, in the cause of women', her role of conceiving it 'by far the simplest task'. Kerr always referred to the *National*

⁹⁶ *News Update* 1, 23 March 1994

⁹⁷ In 1992, Dysart left her post as director of the S.H. Ervin Gallery and became the editor of the journal *Art & Australia*. She also had a brief to create *ArtAsia Pacific* magazine and to commission books, that is, to create a small publishing arm for Art & Australia. Oxford University Press had published the *Dictionary* but did not want *Heritage* so Dysart agreed to do it. Interview with Dysart

⁹⁸ Published by Art & Australia Sydney 1995. The biography section was edited with Anita Callaway (Joint Chief Investigator for the large ARC grant that funded *Heritage*). Jo Holder was project manager in the beginning mainly for the exhibition project but took on more dictionary/biography/image responsibilities as the deadline was looming. Anne Ryan (a masters student) worked on copyright and Candice Bruce was responsible for the initial contact with galleries and museums throughout Australia. Kerr and her small team of researchers were determined to cover the widest possible range. Having decided what to include, it was equally important to treat the makers 'with as much respect as if they were all named Michelangelo'.

⁹⁹ Joan Kerr, Introduction, *The National Women's Art Exhibition. Calendar and Guide*, March 1995, p.2

Women's Art Exhibition, as 'a great collaborative exhibition' since it was the work of participating institutions that made 'this ambitious dream a triumphant reality'.¹⁰⁰ An advertising campaign, albeit on a scholarly level, was also required and Dinah Dysart led the charge. As editor of *Art & Australia* she dedicated the March 1995 issue to women artists, with articles that discussed gender, genre and medium through subjects as diverse as cake decoration and the 'girly' feminism of the 1990s. As editor of *ArtAsia Pacific* Dysart dedicated its April 1995 issue to articles about the role of women artists in Asia.

Heritage was favourably received by most art historians, with some puzzlement by a few and with downright hostility by two newspaper critics, John McDonald and Jacques Delaruelle who picked up Kerr's reference to the *National Women's Art Exhibition* as 'a great collaborative exhibition' and ridiculed it in tall-poppy lopping mode.¹⁰¹ Bernard Smith was magnanimous in his praise of Kerr's scholarship, describing it as 'not only a significant challenge to the historical domination by men of the selective procedures operating in the Australian art scene during the past century by means of which aesthetic value has been established but indeed to elitism in general'.¹⁰² He expected (and found) the text 'lively and at times scarifying' – a reference to its editor's penchant for plain speaking. Later in his review Smith refers to 'the somewhat evangelical tone of the text', singling out for comment Kerr's enthusiasm that often bordered on obsession – something to which Kerr herself would cheerfully admit.

Bruce James likens *Heritage's* wide-ranging celebration of women's creative output to a 'rollercoaster ride or a voyage across a lively sea'.¹⁰³ Although generally complimentary James takes Kerr to task for cropping Mary Edwards' painting on the book's dust jacket: 'Alive she'd litigate.' James is well known for a quirky turn of phrase and does not disappoint. 'The cover breaks my heart, but *Heritage* breaks ground,' he writes. 'We should all be jumping for Joy Hester.' On a more serious note he acknowledges that not only would *Heritage* 'make all of us think differently about ourselves, gals and guys in equal degree', it would also

¹⁰⁰ Joan Kerr, Introduction, *National Women's Art Exhibition. Calendar and Guide*, p.2

¹⁰¹ John McDonald, 'Judge women too on their merit', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1995, *Spectrum* p.13A; Jacques Delaruelle, 'Long March to nowhere', *The Sydney Review*, April 1995, pp 10-11

¹⁰² Bernard Smith, 'A magisterial work', *Australian Book Review*, May 1995, pp 56-57

¹⁰³ Bruce James, 'Women artists painted back in', review of *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book*, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1995, *Spectrum*, p.9A (James was art critic for the *Herald*, *The Age*, Melbourne and ABC-TV's *Review* program at the time)

‘up the ante on what it means to be an Australian person’.

He does however have some reservations: ‘Comprehensive it is, exhaustive it is not’ since many significant women artists ‘go missing in action’. He cannot believe that inclusion in *Heritage* was in any way arbitrary: ‘Kerr cannot mean that accident dictated the book. Its intellectual shape is far too satisfying for that, as she would know.’ Yet there is admiration for its editor in his review. Despite her helpers and the ‘unflagging collaboration’ of Anita Callaway, it is Kerr, James writes, who gives *Heritage* its texture and authority. ‘Also its bite...Kerr is partisan, with bells on. Her subjectivity as a writer, creatively at odds with the conventions of dispassionate editorship, ensures a racy ride from settlement to 1955.’ Value for money in his estimation.

Anne Loxley runs with the metaphor of women’s art languishing in the nether regions of art’s house in beginning her review with: ‘The work of some of Australia’s great women artists [is] finally being allowed out of the cellar, thanks to Joan Kerr.’¹⁰⁴ Loxley moves upstairs for a mini portrait of Kerr ‘closeted in her office’, engaged in the mammoth and rigorous task of completing *Heritage*. Although Loxley describes it as a book that will ‘wreak a nasty tear in conventional Australian art history’, she also quotes Betty Churcher who argues that the artists who ‘really make the hallowed halls of fame in the world’ are the those who make a substantial contribution to the way we see ourselves. ‘I don’t believe in the conspiracy theory,’ Churcher is quoted as saying. ‘Margaret Preston and Grace Cossington Smith have never left the gallery walls. If you do something that is astonishing, someone is going to see it and the word will get out.’¹⁰⁵

This appears disingenuous for someone as knowledgeable as Betty Churcher. Throughout history men have always decided that ‘substantial contribution’. The extraordinary, singular woman artist has been recognized on occasions yet seldom her talented sisters. By contrast, there is much art by men artists in galleries that falls far short of that something ‘astonishing’, but it is collected all the same, unquestioningly regarded as ‘the way we [all] see ourselves’. Perhaps if we stopped labelling the themes present in the work of men artists as ‘universal’, women’s art takes on meaning and significance in its own right. Margaret Wertheim’s opinion – that it is not until the less astonishing women are

¹⁰⁴ Anne Loxley, ‘Girls’ night out’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 1995, Spectrum, p.7A

recognized and recorded for posterity like their male counterparts, for there to be anything like parity or equality in history – appears to be as equally valid for artists as it is for the physicists about whom Wertheim is writing.¹⁰⁶

Parity and equality were important goals for Joan Kerr and if the *Dictionary* and *Heritage* stand out from other texts on Australian art, it is at least in part due to her perceptive editing. As Candice Bruce writes:

She took both these texts away from just being about art history, into more complex realms of cultural and human history. In conceiving *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book* as a catalogue for the ultimate imaginary exhibition – an exhibition that, because of its range and scope, could never actually have been mounted – Kerr charted new territory and created a different, unique, kind of landscape. It defied categorization – ‘rather like Joan herself’.¹⁰⁷

In 1995 *Heritage* was short-listed for a Centre for Australian Cultural Studies award for an outstanding contribution to Australian culture and at the 1995 Art Association of Australia's annual conference an entire session was devoted to it, which indicates the high level of interest in the project.¹⁰⁸ However the print run had been a mere 1,750 books and sold out within three months of publication. Since the final manuscript was lost, a reprint was impossible and *Heritage* remains, like the *Dictionary*, a landmark, one-off, record of one art historian's democratic understanding of Australian art.

Past, Present and Future:

Because posterity ‘has an untrustworthy, selective, patriarchal memory’, Kerr requested (in the introduction to the *Calendar*) every ‘interested participant and visitor’ to send in material about the exhibitions in the *National Women's Art Exhibition* – comments, corrections, additions, press reviews, pictures and ‘happenings’ – in order to publish a ‘modest post-partum document’. Once again Jo Holder managed the project, this time given equal editorial billing with Kerr.

Their aim for the book was twofold: firstly as a record for those who were part of ‘that vast national celebration’ and secondly, as a collection of insights into some of its highlights for everyone else. Another important aim was to show the

¹⁰⁵ Anne Loxley, ‘Girls’ night out’

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Wertheim, *Pythagoras' Trousers: God, Physics and the Gender Wars*, Random House, c.1995

¹⁰⁷ Candice Bruce, speech, Government House Dinner, 6 June 2003

¹⁰⁸ According to Anita Callaway (email 4 January 2009) Juliette Peers was session convenor; Callaway gave a paper

'multiple creative ways in which historic and contemporary women's arts interacted' in the 1990s. Juxtaposing evaluations of the contemporary feminist art scene (documentation on the representation and reception of women artists in public collections since 1975) with the current state of feminist art-historical research – 'spot-lighting past and present women artists in tandem' as Kerr put it – would, it was hoped, generate 'fruitful new discussions of feminist art criticism and reveal unexpected sites of feminist activism'.¹⁰⁹ A significant secondary agenda was to encourage Australian museums and art galleries to carry out urgently needed re-evaluations of their exhibition policies. Kerr was concerned that there had been little change in the status quo and that 'women's perpetual re-invention of women's history was continuing at a gathering pace'.

In keeping with Kerr's own brand of 'funny feminism' (one interpretation of which could be that she allowed diversity and inconsistency in her feminist responses depending on circumstance, another that she wanted to establish a 'genealogy' – a tradition for women artists – rather than a theoretical position¹¹⁰), the new book was not intended to present a 'monolithic view of feminism but a pluralistic presentation that would 'entertain, edify and enlighten'.

The result was *Past Present: the National Women's Art Anthology (Past Present)*, launched to much less fanfare than either the *Dictionary* or *Heritage* by Dr Carmen Lawrence at Gleebooks in Sydney on 30 October 1999.¹¹¹ It is a curious book, part balance sheet for the 1995/1996 exhibitions of women's art, part attempt to 'create a new kind of anthology of feminist art writing' in essays on contemporary feminist art, art history, criticism and museum practices in Australia.¹¹² Yet this time, Kerr's ambition for another pioneering 'first' resulted in

¹⁰⁹ Order form and invitation to the launch of *Past Present: the National Women's Art Anthology*

¹¹⁰ Joan Kerr's feminism did not mean automatic support for all art-related feminist initiatives. She received a strongly worded letter from the curators of the *Creators and Inventors: Australian Women's Art in the National Gallery of Victoria* exhibition (NGV), March 1994 because of her adverse criticism of the exhibition on the ABC's Review Segment (c. March 1994). Kerr had thought the exhibition too small with not enough examples of work by individual artists. The curators were particularly offended by the fact that it was they who had put the ABC in touch with Kerr so she could gain some advance publicity for the 1995 *National Women's Art Exhibition*. Letter to Joan Kerr from Jennifer Phipps (Curator, *Creators and Inventors*) and Jane Scott (Co-ordinator, *Celebrating Women* 1994 Program), NGV, 23 March 1994, Kerr Archive

¹¹¹ Published by Craftsman House, Art & Australia Books, edited by Joan Kerr and Jo Holder

¹¹² Joan Kerr, 'Introduction', *Past Present*, pp xi-xii

a heterogeneous collection of essays that did not form a particularly cohesive whole.

In contrast to the *Dictionary* and *Heritage*, *Past Present* received mixed reviews. At the negative end of the spectrum Margaret McGuire takes particular exception to the cover of 'a metallic blue and black with a touch of flesh pink' framing 'a photo of a white serviette folded in the shape of a nun's veil, vacant against the black'.¹¹³ 'A more insensible introduction to a book on art is hard to envisage,' writes McGuire. It is a book that in another fifty years might

be consulted by occasional readers the way the feminist anthologies of the 1930s have been, for a few inclusions, and in wonder at the dominance of the ephemeral, the parochial. Kerr's contribution to Australian art history is prodigious, but the resources which have gone into this prestige publication are in excess of the product. As to the recent art that is its *raison d'être*, why it's hardly here at all.¹¹⁴

McGuire found the grouping of essays in the sections 'Polemics' and 'Case Studies' generally inappropriate, 'not all the essays deserv[ing] the name and some...too slight for chapters'. She cites the chapter on Elizabeth Durack and Eddie Burrup as an example of how the rationale of *Past Present* disintegrates as it tries to link a 'multi-layered past' to the present. McGuire found Kerr's assertion that the future lies with the feminist contributors in *Past Present* who will 'guide us expertly back into it', 'a crude and solipsistic use of time – something that reads most strange in a professional historian'. Aware that *Past Present* was completed in 1997 but not published until 1999, McGuire fires a parting shot: 'The contents should have dated after three years, but sadly haven't. Sadly, much of it already was.'¹¹⁵

Pamela Gerrish Nunn's review is more complimentary in comparing *Past Present* favourably to its sister publication *Heritage*, as 'an invaluable addition to the growing literature on women artists in Australia. For Gerrish Nunn the book represents

much of what has always been best about feminist engagement with artistic questions over the last thirty years: it is a collective endeavour which attains much more because of the length of its cast-list than it could have done if any one or few of those individuals had achieved it

¹¹³ A work from Anne Ferran's exhibition *Secure the Shadow*, at Hyde Park Barracks August-October 1995; Catalogue, Anne Brennan & Anne Ferran, *Secure the Shadow*, Historic Houses Trust of NSW, Sydney, c.1995

¹¹⁴ Margaret McGuire, 'The present limbo', review of *Past Present: the National Women's Art Anthology* Joan Kerr & Jo Holder eds, *Australian Book Review*, August, 2000, p.27

¹¹⁵ Margaret McGuire, 'The present limbo', p.28

alone; it is unapologetically motivated by a clear and constructive political agenda which lends the entire work an invigorating sense of purpose.¹¹⁶

Past Present, Gerrish Nunn observes, includes essays by 'all the usual suspects, in the best sense of that expression', many of them contributors to *Heritage*. However she does have reservations about what, exactly, the brief for the essay-writers had been, so diverse the contributions. Because of the book's obvious link to the numerous exhibitions and events that took place in 1995 under the title the *National Women's Art Exhibition*, Gerrish Nunn surmises that perhaps writers were simply 'asked to do what they do best'.¹¹⁷

She likens the third section of the book to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which yielded a book of its own research that developed an independent life.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the record that *Past Present* intended to establish for the *National Women's Art Exhibition* 'constituted an ambitious and dedicated attempt to inscribe an indelible female presence within the history of Australian art'. However Gerrish Nunn's conclusion that changes made to the definition of Australian art 'derived essentially from a class-conscious and race-conscious feminism which Joan Kerr herself has had a considerable hand in developing and facilitating in the crucial cultural discourse in Australia', seems not only a little too grand but also questionable as Kerr had never been aligned to any overtly feminist platform.

Although *Past Present* completed her project on women artists, extending from the earliest days of settlement up to the late 1990s, Kerr continued to reflect on the implications of what she had achieved. In a rather wistful talk to staff, fellows and students at the CCR on 9 December 1999 she said she had intended to discuss either the book on women cartoonists that she was currently writing or the database of women artists she was working on with Samantha Littlely (a first step in taking the *Dictionary of Australian Artists* project in a new direction). However, Kerr wondered if 'work-in-progress' too often implied 'hope infinitely deferred', especially as her projects never seem to end up as intended, so she decided to postpone the future and talk about *Past Present* – something that was 'well and truly finished'.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Pamela Gerrish Nunn, review of *Past Present* in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, Vol.1, No.2, 2000, p.237

¹¹⁷ Gerrish Nunn, review of *Past Present*, p.238

¹¹⁸ Gerrish Nunn, review of *Past Present*, p.239

¹¹⁹ Unpublished, Kerr Archive

During the years Kerr and her team waited for *Past Present* to appear, journalists and feminist academics 'continued to write articles proclaiming that here at last was the first exhibition or article on some crucial but totally unknown Australian woman artist or artists, most being perfectly familiar to anyone with the slightest knowledge of Australian art'.¹²⁰ Kerr cited Drusilla Modjeska's *Stravinsky's Lunch* as a book 'marred by publicity that claimed Stella Bowen had been entirely forgotten in Australia' when people had been writing about Bowen's work for years and her autobiography had been reprinted several times.¹²¹ Similarly, after Bruce James' monograph, and Daniel Thomas' catalogue, the work of Grace Cossington Smith was well recognized.¹²² Kerr did not claim *Past Present* would 'stop the eternal rediscovery of women's art and artists', but at least it 'fore-grounded this destructive habit'. In her view it was extremely worrying that art institutions, critics, curators, writers and historians still seemed unwilling to explore neglected pasts in order to understand the present better and hence transform the future.

In this same talk, Kerr also discussed the place of art in society, in particular the impossibility of confining art to a formal aesthetic category proclaimed superior just because it had been deliberately separated from the social or useful. With regard to the dominance of the auction houses and commercial gallery sales, it was unfortunate, Kerr observed, that appealing to nationalism was no more likely to succeed with the art commissars than revamping the galleries was until the old system crashed. As she often did, Kerr adopted an utopianist tone in calling for the need for 'more explosive, revisionary mixtures of artists, mediums, chronologies and critics who would offer exciting prospects for the future of more than feminist art'.

¹²⁰ 'The story about *Past Present* lies in the odd imprints for both *Heritage* and *Past Present*. *Past Present* had to wait for funding – from NSW Arts Ministry and Gordon Darling Foundation. Joan wanted Dinah Dysart to publish *Past Present* as the first in a proposed series of Art & Australia Books. Neville Drury did not let Dinah publish *Heritage* under the *Art & Australia* imprint but under Craftsman House, hence it is a Craftsman House Art & Australia Books imprint. It had to do with a power struggle for control over Craftsman House with the Swiss publisher...When *Heritage* sold out, Neville claimed the printer lost all the original negatives...It was an awful experience. The delay with *Past Present* ensured it came out under the Art & Australia imprint with Dinah as the managing editor.' Email from Jo Holder, 8 January 2009

¹²¹ Drusilla Modjeska, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Picador, Sydney 1999

¹²² Bruce James, *Grace Cossington Smith*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1990; Daniel Thomas, *Grace Cossington Smith: a Life: from Drawings in the Collection of the National Gallery of Australia*, The Gallery, Canberra, 1993

Joan Kerr continued to push art history into uncharted terrain and her ideology lives on in the work of many of her former students. However by the late 1990s, it was becoming more and more difficult for Joan Kerr's collaborative way of working to remain compatible with ideologies more ambitious – and more powerful – than hers. It is ironic that her last academic appointment was to a new centre for cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary research – a challenging initiative that should have provided an appropriate setting for her kind of art history.

Chapter Seven: Black, White and Everything in Between

'Everything' in the title of this chapter refers to the eclectic range of Joan Kerr's activities during the last phase of her academic career, not just in Canberra, but frequently in Sydney and often further afield. She reviewed books on subjects as diverse as the *Mona Lisa*, Australian colonial houses and women architects (1900-1950). Her many exhibition reviews ranged over themes of nostalgia, 19th-century love and death, national icons and Aboriginal art both historical and contemporary. Not surprisingly, given her reputation as a wise and witty speaker, she opened many exhibitions: Australia's contribution to the 1997 Venice Biennale; 19th-century life at Elizabeth Farm and Old Government House (Parramatta); contemporary art in cities and country towns. Conference papers and lectures (both academic and public), as well as texts in catalogues (forewords, introductions and essays) and journal articles covered a similarly wide range of themes augmented by Kerr's ideas on cross-cultural research, museology and national identity. A raft of papers (plus a book and two exhibitions) came out of her work on cartoons and she completed her project on Australian women artists with the publication of *Past Present: the National Women's Art Anthology* (co-edited with Jo Holder). Kerr sat on many advisory committees and judging panels, for example, the 'Australian Monument to the Great Irish Famine 1845-1848' competition, the Meroogal Women's Art Prize, *Insite* (UNSW electronic architectural journal) and was a consultant for the National Gallery of Australia's Centenary of Federation exhibition.¹

As well as being convenor/session chair/speaker at an average of three conferences a year she was also supervisor, mentor and marker for many postgraduate students in Australia and New Zealand. Kerr was awarded a Centenary of Federation Medal and in 2003 was made an honorary Fellow of the Royal Australian Historical Society 'for distinguished service in the production, study and writing of Australian history' – the third in a trilogy of similar honours, having been elected a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 1993 and given a National Trust Senior Heritage Award in 1995. In June 2004 she was

posthumously awarded a medal (AM) in the General Division of the Order of Australia for her rewriting of Australian art history and for her support of Australian women artists.² An anthology of Kerr's major essays to be called *A Singular Voice: Essays on Australian Art and Architecture: Professor Joan Kerr*, edited by Candice Bruce, Dinah Dysart and Jo Holder, has been planned in her memory.³

'Black, white' (also in the title) refers, straightforwardly, to Kerr's last major project – a history of cartoon art in Australia – but could equally apply in an ironic sense to Joan Kerr herself. *Nothing* was black and white any more – neither in her workplace nor in her dealings with grants committees and major institutions such as libraries. If ordering and structuring her multifarious activities into satisfactory biographical form has, at times, resembled the duties of ringmaster at a glittering grand parade, then encompassing this last phase of her life and career has often taken on the darker tones of a carnivalesque world of tragedy and farce, with a cast of characters who were not always what they seemed. Instead of enjoying the just fruits of an honourable career, Kerr became embroiled in bitter struggles in which personality clashes, recriminations and words uttered in anger, haste and frustration tarnished the success and respect she had achieved.

In this decade following Kerr's death, an evenly balanced view is difficult since much of the information about the various incidents resides either in sensitive private correspondence (the Kerr Archive) or in silence with protagonists who choose not to speak. While it is not the biographer's task to surmise or take sides, there is, necessarily, empathy with her subject. This chapter charts the path of a much admired, but not idolised, scholar through another turbulent and productive time in her life – never leading along the straight and narrow but through a network of forays and sorties into the cultural life of Australia.

¹ Joan Kerr CV 2003, Kerr Archive

² In 1999 Jim Kerr was awarded a similar honour for 'Service to heritage conservation through organizations including the Australian International Council on Monuments and Sites, and the NSW Branch of the National Trust of Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June 1999, Kerr Archive

³ *A Singular Voice: Essays on Australian art and architecture by Joan Kerr*, C. Bruce, D. Dysart & J. Holder eds, Power Publications, University of Sydney, November 2009

Pastures New:

The Kerrs moved to Canberra in late February-early March 1997 and Joan Kerr embarked on her three-year appointment at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research (CCR) full of optimism for the future of her brand of scholarship.⁴

The CCR, 'co-located' with the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) in the A.D. Hope Building on the campus of ANU, was organized in three overlapping streams: Cultural History – Professor Iain McCalman and Professor Joan Kerr; Visual Research – David McDougall (ethnographic filmmaker) and Contemporary Art and Culture – Professor Nicholas Thomas (specialist in oceanic art and culture and anthropology).⁵ In an article in *Gateways* magazine, 'Australia's first Commonwealth Special Research Centre in the Humanities' (funded to the tune of \$7 million over nine years by the ARC) is described as setting out to offer 'exciting new opportunities to scholars' and to promote 'the old-fashioned idea of the librarian scholar' by encouraging librarians and archivists to consider applying for fellowships at the Centre. According to Nicholas Thomas, one of the CCR's key objectives was to 'unlock the potential' of the rich archives in major libraries such as the NLA and SLNSW and to 'develop collaborative projects with those institutions' as well as focussing on cross-cultural relations between Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.⁶

Research into neglected or barely-remembered archives was an activity close to Joan Kerr's heart so she was a logical choice for a founding professor. However large institutions such as libraries, museums and state and federal art galleries are not simply repositories of the objects in their collections but also sites of human interaction, relying on the commitment (not to mention the ambition) of the people who work therein. Kerr's practice was to lead a team that would carry out exhaustive exploration in a non-mainstream area of research in order to compile the most comprehensive database possible and then decide what *she* wanted to do with it. Collaboration – and cooperation – within the highly structured bureaucracies of the CCR and other institutions entailed more complex processes.

⁴ The Kerrs rented a house at 14 Boolee Street, Reid, ACT, mentioned in a letter from Joan Kerr to Miles Lewis 7 January 1997, Kerr Archive

⁵ 'New centre for humanities to work with NLA', *Gateways*, Issue No. 25, January 1997, p.3

⁶ 'New centre for humanities to work with NLA', p.3

Within months of settling in at the CCR Joan Kerr plunged into organizing and restructuring ('reviving') the ailing Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ) annual conference that was due to be held at the NGA in 1997. The Gallery had decided it was not worth holding since the previous year's conference had not been a success. Determined not to let the Association become completely 'moribund', Kerr combined her academic art historical forces with the visual art background of Gordon Bull, Head of the School of Art (ANU), to organise *Visually Crossing Cultures* as the AAANZ's Annual Conference to be held at Manning Clark House in October 1997.⁷ Historian Greg Denning was invited to give a paper and Nicholas Thomas proposed to give the Franz Philipp Memorial Lecture. Whether, as Kerr says, 'he invited himself' or not, Thomas was an astute cross-cultural choice. The theme clearly struck a chord and art historians from all around Australia participated in pleasing numbers.⁸

More satisfying still to Kerr was that the conference not only reunited factions within the AAANZ but also created a new vital sense that, together with the anthropologists and the art school fraternity, 'we [art historians] would change the world'.⁹ Kerr was not alone in this view. Heather Johnson wrote to thank Bull and Kerr for a 'really superb conference' that had given all those present 'a new lease of life and a headful of ideas'.¹⁰

In her first year at the CCR, in the spirit of crossing cultural fields, Kerr readily agreed to assist editors Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale advance the manuscript of the *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture (Companion)* towards publication, which was promised for 2000. As for her own work, she was planning an ambitious rewrite of the *Dictionary*, involving a total revision (and abridgement) of the pre-1870 volume, with the addition of similarly 'comprehensive and authoritative' entries on painters, sketchers, photographers and print-makers for the following thirty years, and the addition of 19th-century sculptors.¹¹ Kerr was also well advanced in her research on black and white (cartoon) art.

She was certainly not the first to attempt a history of cartoons in Australia. Jonathan King's *The Other Side of the Coin: a Cartoon History of Australia* for example, covered Australia's pictorial history (social, political and military) from

⁷ Email to Steggall from Gordon Bull, 8 January 2009

⁸ NLA Interview, p.55

⁹ NLA Interview, p.56

¹⁰ Heather Johnson, letter to Joan Kerr, 6 October 1997, Kerr Archive

¹¹ Kerr Archive

1776 to 1976.¹² But she was the first to attempt to unearth women and Aboriginal artists working in the genre and of course not many scholars – if any – would want to hold an exhibition on the scale she envisaged. Yet Kerr's ideas for the project were quite conservative. It was to be restricted to black and white images, not only to keep a tight formal rein on the research but also because it was consistent with Kerr's thesis that black and white relations were at the core of Australia's culture.¹³

Kerr's original proposal to senior staff at SLNSW for a major research project had been well received since the Library's collections of black and white art had never been systematically catalogued, nor properly interpreted. When work began in 1996, Kerr's team was, literally, 'going through the cupboards'. Kerr and her assistants, Craig Judd and Jo Holder, were to spend a total of three years on this project, which Kerr aimed to cap off by holding 'a giant exhibition with a proper catalogue'. However problems arose between Kerr's grand vision and the more limited aims of the SLNSW, dismissed by Kerr with: 'the poor old State Library wouldn't know a large catalogue if it bit it in its ear'.¹⁴ This was not the first time she had been frustrated over an exhibition. In 1995 her plan for a three-month-long comprehensive show of the work of women artists at the NGA was reduced to six weeks by the Director, Betty Churcher, on the grounds that overseas tourists expected to see the 'icons' of Australian art (such as Tom Roberts) always on display and that a month and a half was the normal duration for thematic exhibitions.¹⁵

Kerr and her team had selected between three and four hundred black-and-white works to make the SLNSW exhibition 'really big, so it would take over the whole gallery'. Whether any formal agreement had been reached about this, or whether Joan Kerr in her enthusiasm for the project, had willed such an agreement into existence, she was to be bitterly disappointed. About six months before the exhibition was to open, Chief Librarian Dagmar Schmidmaier decided that the colonial paintings must remain in the Library's picture gallery and space had to be reserved for another small exhibition. She allocated Kerr two rooms in the Dixon Galleries so that the exhibition of cartoon art had to be halved.

¹² Jonathan King, *The Other Side of the Coin: a Cartoon History of Australia*, Cassell Australia Ltd, Sydney & Melbourne, 1976

¹³ Interview with Judd

¹⁴ NLA Interview, p.56

¹⁵ Ava Hubble, 'Short run for women's art', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 April 1995, p.13

'Catalogue' now meant 'room brochure' and there was a dispute over funding for it. A meeting with Schmidmaier did not go well; attitudes and expectations on both sides certainly did not conform to Ernest Goffman's ideas of mutually respectful and productive interaction. Schmidmaier was close-lipped and let her assistant do the talking. Increasingly frustrated by the impersonality of responses to her questions, Kerr resorted to larrikin behaviour, jabbing the Chief Librarian in the ribs and joking, 'Come on Dagmar, give us a smile and let me know what you're saying'.¹⁶

Schmidmaier ran a tight ship and was unmoved by appeals to spontaneity and risk taking, which meant no expensive book about Australian black and white art.¹⁷ Kerr lost interest in documenting the exhibition and Craig Judd took over the task of writing the much-reduced catalogue, describing it as a strange experience – 'like working in a vacuum'.¹⁸ After all the excellent research he had done Judd was allowed little input into the curatorial process by designers who, in Kerr's opinion, created an exhibition of 'pretty red lines and pointlessness [that was] just a disaster'.

She now had to find an exhibition venue for the remainder of the cartoons selected. Jo Holder was director of the S.H. Ervin Gallery at the time and she and Kerr persuaded the National Trust to hold it there. In spite of all the setbacks, the two exhibitions did take place: *Artists and Cartoonists in Black and White (the Most Public Art)* at the S.H. Ervin Gallery from January to March 1999 (for which Joan Kerr wrote the eighty-page catalogue as her originally planned general book about cartoon history) and *Australians in Black and White (the Most Public Art)* in the Dixon Galleries, SLNSW, from February to June 1999. The two shows achieved a good overall outcome, Joan Kerr 'behaved like a gent' and conceded that the Trust exhibition was 'great fun'.¹⁹

Lost in these misunderstandings and dashed hopes is the fact that the exhibitions, like all of Joan Kerr's projects, were very important in giving public voice and view to a significant but under acknowledged aspect of Australia's social (art) history. From the decades of satirical convict broadsheets to acerbic late 20th-century images, 'funny and often bitter cartoons and witty artwork

¹⁶ NLA Interview, p.57

¹⁷ NLA Interview, p.56

¹⁸ Interview with Judd

¹⁹ NLA Interview, p.58

revealed the tragi-comedies of Australia's up-market art and lowbrow popular cultures and of her two (black and white) nations'.²⁰

Less than a month later (4 March 1999) Joan Kerr reviewed an exhibition held to mark the official opening of the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) in Canberra. She gave an entertaining overview of the show, underpinned by sharp art-historical insights, aligning herself, as usual, on the side of the interesting-but-not-famous. She also fired a shot at her librarian adversary although few people in the audience would have made the connection:

I can't believe I would ever agree with John Howard about anything, but this particular combination of government and private sponsorship does look like a winning formula. For a start, it allowed the National Portrait Gallery to go against the frightening national trend of public galleries, museums and libraries (with the exception of the Australian Museum and National Gallery of Victoria) of installing chief executives with purported managerial and/or financial skills rather than relevant professional expertise, then letting them rip into dissenting professional staff and supporters who retain any vision for the place untainted by economic rationalism. This is one major exhibition that neither looked as if it had been put together by a committee nor offered as a chief executive's vague idea to helots forced to carry it out with nothing but destructive interference.²¹

When Martin Thomas questioned Kerr in 2003 about the black and white project she opened with the patronising 'Oh dear. I was going to do a giant exhibition with the poor old State Library of NSW' as if softening, for posterity, what she continued to see as a failed enterprise. She still regretted the lack of a single large exhibition of black and white art and could not condone Schmidmaier's closure of the SLNSW's publishing facility.²² Yet other groups were also affected by that closure. The Society of Women Writers NSW Inc. for example, had published an anthology of prize-winning essays in 1996 under the SLNSW Press banner and had a second in the pipeline when the project was cancelled at around the same time as Kerr's 'proper big' catalogue. Although there might have been significant financial considerations involved in that closure Joan Kerr would never see them as obstacles to her plans.

Jim Kerr describes the problems between the black-and-white project and the SLNSW as another productive but frustrating incident that might have benefited from 'an early and explicit letter of agreement' before it became a matter of

²⁰ S.H. Ervin Gallery, *Exhibition Calendar* (January-June 1999), Kerr Archive

²¹ Joan Kerr, 'The possibilities of a national portrait gallery', *Art Monthly Australia*, No.118, April 1999, p.8

wounded pride.²³ It is difficult to believe Kerr would invest so much time, energy and resources without such a letter. But if this were the case, there was nothing she could do and as early as May 1998, she informed Schmidmaier that there was little point in continuing to rehash the story of the library's 'gradual whittling down' of the project. Although the team had 'hitherto accepted all changes uncomplainingly', Kerr herself wanted no further involvement in either the exhibition or its potential publication under such conditions. 'As a senior academic being paid a professional salary to produce significant research,' she wrote, 'I cannot let such a huge mountain of work bring forth such a mouse'.²⁴

Kerr was not about to abandon three years' work meekly and set out, lionhearted, to create her own opportunities. In advance of the exhibitions, Kerr gave a paper at the AAANZ conference in Adelaide (October 1998) to introduce black-and-white art to the academic world. 'On (not) being a cartoonist', took its theme from a remark by British cartoonist, Glen Baxter, that he always called himself an artist, never a cartoonist, because in Britain at least the status of a cartoonist was somewhat lower than that of a sewage worker and if a drawing was labelled a cartoon people always expected it to be funny.²⁵ Yet some cartoonists in Australia, Kerr declared, 'had far greater problems than status. For generations race and gender prevented many from even getting started professionally'. Again her aim was to privilege marginal artists – women and Indigenous – in an already marginal art.

In 'Out of the gutter: colonial cartoons', her keynote lecture for the *Colonial Eye* conference at the University of Tasmania in February 1999, Kerr discussed the problem of selecting works for the cartoon exhibitions. Topics that especially interested her – 'social subversion, malice and sex, preferably in cartoons drawn by women and/or Aboriginal artists' – were hard to find, especially within a 19th-century context. She argued that although a truism, the past in any field must connect with current interests and values in a meaningful way otherwise it would be forgotten.

Compared to other art forms, oblivion was the particular fate of cartoons since they had always been defined as existing primarily of and for the moment in daily

²² NLA Interview, p.59

²³ *Pictorial Biography*, p.133

²⁴ Joan Kerr to Dagmar Schmidmaier, 25 May 1998, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.133

²⁵ Joan Kerr, 'On (not) being a cartoonist', *Artists and Cartoonists in Black and White: the Most Public Art*, Joan Kerr, catalogue and exhibition SH Ervin Gallery, National Trust, 1999, p.9

newspapers. In redefining the 'great Australian black and white tradition' Kerr was proud that she had not only ensured a place for all artists, black and white, male and female, and for original drawings *and* published works, but also revealed a 'greatly expanded body of work'. Regardless of form, content, time or place, Kerr's message was the same: Australian art history needed to be refined to include *all* artists to create an art history that was not only relevant to current interests and ideas about what constituted Australian art but also revealed a heritage that was 'genuinely our own in its odd mix and comprehensive range'.²⁶

Throughout 1999 Joan Kerr found many opportunities to speak about her work on black and white art. It was a rich lode to be mined, both in art-historical and socio-cultural terms, and of course the larrikin element was never far away. She was good at steering her bulky cargo in new directions, trimming the black and white material to feminist issues and even archaeology, combining both in 'Australian women cartoonists', her keynote address at the *Engendering Material Culture*, 5th Women in Archaeology Conference at UNSW in July 1999.²⁷ As an art historian, Kerr had always considered that 'rediscovering the bodies lodged in the cracks of the mausoleum or buried in the wilderness beyond' was the most effective way of transforming the history of any discipline. Despite the efforts of those who had been unearthing women 'hidden from history' since the 1960s, 'the pantheon continue[d] to be full of dead white male bodies'. Kerr argued that although living women were acknowledged as making at least equal contributions to men in all cultural endeavours, too few scholars recognized that these women lacked 'significant predecessors and independent histories'. Disinterring the bodies buried outside the pantheon, Kerr declared, 'may result in alternative histories that give women far greater visibility but discovering and identifying them is a long and arduous job'.

The fact that cartooning was also 'the art most despised and neglected by respectable academic art historians', made it doubly inviting to Joan Kerr. Moreover, within this 'frivolous topic', she was particularly interested in neglected cartoonists such as women and Aboriginal Australians. Cartoons *about* women and Aboriginal people have always been common but cartoons *by* either group were generally considered non-existent. As long as all predecessors (in the history of Australian cartooning) were men, women would continue to be little

²⁶ Joan Kerr, 'Out of the gutter: colonial cartoons', Kerr Archive

²⁷ Joan Kerr, 'Australian women cartoonists', unpublished, Kerr Archive

more than odd, fleeting footnotes in an exclusively patriarchal story.²⁸ Kerr's team did manage to move several women from those footnotes to the main text, for example May Gibbs who is credited with being Australia's first woman cartoonist and the two 'star women cartoonists' on *Smith's Weekly* from 1929, Joan Morrison and Mollie Horsemen, the first women to be employed as full-time, permanent cartoonists on any Australian paper.²⁹ Although Joan Kerr found several Aboriginal men working in the black and white tradition, Aboriginal women remained invisible.

In 'Savages and blackfellas', a paper for *Masquerades and Identities – the Colonisation of the Soul* conference (February 2000) at the HRC, Kerr argued that there were many cartoons about blackfellas being painted white but the obverse – whitefellas being painted black – was less common, 'although the twin-headed Elizabeth Durack-Eddie Burrup monster is by no means unique in Australian art history'.³⁰ Kerr again called upon a favourite image, that of a Janus-like creature, 'not only gazing fearfully forward for more dangerous progeny but also backward for less fearsome ancestors'. The material for this paper – the curious fashion for caricaturing white gentlemen members as black savages in the Savage Clubs formed in England and Australasia in the second half of the 19th century – was so 'savage' and strange, Kerr said, with a kind of black humour of its own that she had no need to embellish it with her own brand of wit. Of course she did just that, poking fun at 'strange chants and welcome songs' such as those composed in Sydney in 'bastard pigeon and sung by hopelessly amateur drunks', and describing the father-figure artist Frederick McCubbin as an 'elderly artist-savage'.³¹

At the AAANZ Conference in Melbourne in October 2001, Joan Kerr's paper "'Will she go to the poll?" cartoons of woman's suffrage in the Federation period' linked feminist concerns and an interest in the post-Federation decade at a time

²⁸ Joan Kerr, 'Australian women cartoonists', pp 2&3,

²⁹ Joan Kerr, 'Australian women cartoonists', p.8

³⁰ Cartoons of well-known Savages as South Sea Island cannibals with cooking pots were published in programs and advertisements for smoke nights, concerts and other festive events. In Sydney and Melbourne the all-white, all-male members were also depicted as 'wild' Australian Aborigines. Many originals still hang in the Melbourne Savage Club, where they are generally regarded as amusing if slightly embarrassing relics to be respected only if created by a major black-and-white artist, Joan Kerr, 'Savages and Blackfellas'. Kerr Archive. The conference was convened by Julie Marcus and Christine Winter and sponsored by the Centre for Cultural Risk Research CSU and CCR, ANU, with Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

³¹ Joan Kerr, 'Savages and Blackfellas', p.6, Kerr Archive

when women were gaining recognition of their talents and achievements, as epitomised in the blockbuster *First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work* in Melbourne in 2007. In Australia, woman's suffrage and Federation movements developed simultaneously in the 1890s, but the former was more sharply polarised into predictable stereotypes by cartoonists on both sides of the debate. Kerr found that all pre-Federation suffrage cartoons published in the 1890s were by men, with those in the Sydney *Bulletin* and Melbourne *Punch* being the most aggressively antagonistic. Illustrated papers in other states were more likely to be 'sedately neutral' towards female emancipation, which meant their cartoons were 'less memorable and witty than those by their fearlessly unfair contemporaries'. The best-known anti-suffrage cartoons – visual gags about ugly harridans demanding the family trousers – were by Hop (Livingstone Hopkins), 'the most consistently anti-suffrage cartoonist in the most consistently anti-suffrage illustrated paper, the *Bulletin*'.³² However a consistently negative attitude towards women's emancipation was not sustained in all Australian publications and pro-and anti- suffrage cartoons could cheerfully co-exist in the same journal. Women cartoonists had no way of publishing their political cartoons in Australian mass circulation newspapers until 1907; nor could they work for impoverished independent pro-suffrage groups. Three Australian women artists – Dora Meeson, May Gibbs and Ruby Lindsay ('Ruby Lind') – helped establish the style of English suffrage cartoons from 1907 until 1915 when, after some success, the campaign was largely abandoned with the advent of World War I.³³

Kerr used her talk 'Collecting cartoons: published and unpublished, past and present', at the Antiquarian Book Fair inaugural lecture series in Sydney (13 October 2001), to explore a definition of 'cartoon', since it was obviously difficult to collect cartoons when there was 'some confusion about what ought to be collected'. Because cartoons are not defined as either the published image or the original drawing, but according to the context in which they are kept and seen, the original drawing is not necessarily an artwork while the printed version is a social document. Kerr preferred to use original drawings in her exhibitions rather than contemporary newspaper prints or modern photographic reproductions since she wanted to establish 'cartooning as an art and the cartoonist as indisputably an artist', and rescue the work from a kind of 'aesthetic limbo' between fine art

³² Joan Kerr, "'Will she go to the poll?' Cartoons on women's suffrage in the Federation period', p.2, Kerr Archive

and commercial art.³⁴ Black and white art had largely been ignored by both conventional art-historians and fashionable theorists of popular culture and Kerr found – as in the cosy relationship between architectural history and architects – that cartoon history and criticism had either been written by other cartoonists or by their journalist mates.

A perception of cartoons as ‘art’ has been hampered because cartoons are chiefly collected in libraries and Kerr concluded her ‘Collecting cartoons’ talk with her opening premise: that cartoons should be understood as both the original artwork *and* the published reproduction but ‘since that combination is almost never seen, perhaps the perfect cartoon exists only as an unattainable platonic ideal’.

The focus of Kerr’s review of Donald Sassoon’s book, *Mona Lisa: the History of the World’s Most Famous Painting* was, as ever, Australian culture. Not surprisingly, she was able to produce an Australian cartoon, one drawn for the *National Times* circa 1978 by Jenny Coopes, in which a topiarist smugly contemplates a tree he has just shaped into a silhouette of the Mona Lisa’s head. ‘Not only is it more amusing than any of the cartoons Sassoon illustrates,’ writes Kerr, partisan to the end, ‘but it can also be read as a witty comment on Sassoon’s unresolved problem about the relative value of popular and high art in the late twentieth century’. Also not surprisingly, Kerr introduced into this review, her core belief that Australian art must be valued on its own terms:

There are obvious advantages in having universal icons – the fact that almost anyone from Japan to Jericho recognizes them helps make the whole world one – but there are also major disadvantages for the losers, those nations and races (and that gender) excluded from global recognition. We need to create more local artistic icons if only for internal consumption. Unfortunately, this has never been a popular activity in Australia. Rooting out tall poppies keeps getting in the way.³⁵

A couple of years before Joan Kerr wrote this, preparations were underway to commemorate the Centenary of Federation in Australia. As far as the visual arts were concerned, especially in major institutions like the NGA, this would consist

³³ Joan Kerr, “‘Will she go to the poll?’” pp 3-4

³⁴ Joan Kerr, ‘Collecting cartoons: published and unpublished, past and present,’ Antiquarian Book Fair, Masonic Centre, Sydney 13 October 2001, p.2, Kerr Archive

³⁵ Joan Kerr, review of *Mona Lisa: The History of the World’s Most Famous Painting* by D. Sassoon (HarperCollins, London, 2001), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3-4 November 2001, pp 10-11

of a celebration of tall poppies, in spite of the efforts of people like Kerr to have it otherwise.

In September 1998, Brian Kennedy (Director of the NGA) sought Kerr's advice and her attendance at a discussion meeting for the proposed NGA exhibition to mark the Centenary of Federation in 2001.³⁶ Kennedy requested Kerr to make a list covering the best-known and/or most significant works, taking into consideration all categories of visual art, by men and women artists, and the many different cultures that are represented in Australian art of the period. All this had to be done within the week because Kennedy and the curator John McDonald were in a hurry to make applications for funding. Kennedy concluded: 'I know this is short notice but it is the type of thing that is perhaps best done with a rush of enthusiasm for the idea.' Kerr's response goes unrecorded but it is not hard to imagine a dose of irony about scholarship demanding something more than a 'rush of enthusiasm'. Her CV reveals that she did participate on the advisory committee in 1999, ever conscious of the need to cast a critical eye over Australia's cultural and social identity.

Craig Judd maintains that most people soon forgot the energy of the 1988 Bicentennial, in particular that questioning about what it is that makes us Australian. Joan Kerr, he says, was one of those people who never gave up searching for the spaces in between the written, conventional, history and never hesitated to embrace cultural and intellectual diversity.³⁷ On paper, Kerr's appointment as one of the founding senior academics at a research centre designed to search those historical interstices would seem a perfect fit.

Crossing Cultural Swords:

Kerr's first year at the CCR and at least half the second were 'exhilarating' so why did it all go disastrously wrong? The answer might lie in the way the CCR was structured. In her 2003 NLA interview Kerr described it as a covert hierarchy in that she saw Iain McCalman as wanting to run the CCR himself. Since McCalman was already director of the HRC he was pressured into appointing thirty-five-year-old anthropologist, Nicholas Thomas. 'Initially the configuration of director and convenors worked well,' Kerr said, 'although it was a bit "If Nick wants to do it", we did it, but it was sort of whirlwind. He had millions of books and

³⁶ Letter from Brian Kennedy to Joan Kerr, Kerr Archive

³⁷ Interview with Judd

conferences and conference papers and things happening around Australia'.³⁸ The cut-and-thrust ambience of 'millions' of activities was clearly one Joan Kerr relished. Mary Eagle gives an account of the vitality and informality of intellectual life at Kerr's quarters in Constable's Cottage on the Acton Peninsula:

Visitors from all over were continually dropping in to continue their on-going conversations face to face for a change. In Joan's milieu scholars mingled with artists and architects...On the verandah the fruitful discussion went on month by month and from one year to another, with people sitting in Joan's cane chairs and on the verandah steps, drinking Joan's wine and gazing into the tangled garden.³⁹

It was a place where Kerr's 'voice and infectious laugh undid any thought of academic reserve'. This informality was also a very effective way to maintain not only 'an immense network of contacts' but also a pivotal role for Kerr in that network. Her extensive use of email and the Internet gave 'support to a conversational style of inquiry and to later forms of research. Her email address list must have numbered in the thousands'.⁴⁰ If Eagle's words paint a picture of a vibrant community of like-minded scholars subtle changes began to appear around the middle of 1999 when Nicholas Thomas left for England. He briefly considered working in both places, which Kerr thought could have been successful, but he was 'pushed out of it' by what she saw as a culture in which the bureaucrats 'ran everything'.⁴¹ Kerr felt out of place in this kind of environment and tensions began to arise on several fronts. In particular she crossed swords with the executive officer for the CCR, Julie Gorrell, who then became Assistant Director and in charge of allocating research assistants. Kerr was the only other woman of any power at the CCR but it seems that neither of them was very good at power sharing.⁴²

In June 1999, Nicholas Thomas wrote from London that although he would return to Australia briefly in July before resigning in August, he did not feel it 'appropriate to be involved in discussions about future policies for the Centre'.⁴³ Does this mean Joan Kerr had already contacted Thomas about her dissatisfaction with the way things were going at the CCR? Or had others been

³⁸ NLA Interview, pp 54-55

³⁹ Mary Eagle to Jim Kerr, 7 September 2005, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.135

⁴⁰ Eagle, in *Pictorial Biography*, p.135

⁴¹ NLA Interview, pp 54-55

⁴² NLA Interview, pp 60-61

⁴³ Nicholas Thomas to colleagues, 3 June 1999, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, pp 130&131

contacting Thomas about their concerns? 'With hindsight,' Jim Kerr writes, 'the wording was ominous and, after the departure of Thomas, the CCR moved rapidly away from the idea that the *Dictionary* project (and its proponent?) were worthy of support'.⁴⁴

Anthropologist Howard Morphy was appointed Director after Nicholas Thomas' departure. Although Kerr considered him a good scholar she felt he was not convinced that the study of visual culture was capable of cross-cultural approaches. She had her own views on what cross-cultural research was coming to mean at the CCR: 'Increasingly at that place [it] meant white fellows writing about black fellows,' she said. 'I disapproved of that. I thought we should have had a few more black faces around for a start.' She also disapproved of what she saw as too much money being spent on administration:

Someone wrote the annual report, someone else maintained the IT systems and someone else would be lent out to people who wanted to do surveys about whether you played cowboys and Indians when you were a child.⁴⁵

Kerr saw her own position as having been affected by this when she was not given adequate research assistance for the *Dictionary*. Although it was supposed to be a core project she saw support for it fading.⁴⁶ In addition Kerr now found herself answering to an autocratic director, as she had done almost thirty years previously to Bernard Smith. To add insult to the proverbial injury, she was abruptly (and, to an outsider inexplicably) removed, not only from access to Part Two of the *Companion*, which she was in the midst of editing, but also from the whole project, while absent on leave.⁴⁷ After an exchange of correspondence, on 8 October 1999 Kerr wrote to Sylvia Kleinert (with a copy to Iain McCalman) that her ill-defined position as a 'sort-of-editor' on the *Companion* had become impossible:

I either have to be in or out. In retrospect I do think it was a mistake not to have agreed to be formally appointed as one of the editors when Nick [Thomas] suggested it. There is still an option if you and Margo want me to be. However I doubt if either of you want this, and it's not my preferred option either. The alternative is to be out of the *Companion* altogether except as a board member, contributor,

⁴⁴ *Pictorial Biography*, p.131

⁴⁵ NLA Interview, p.61

⁴⁶ NLA Interview, p.61

⁴⁷ Sylvia Kleinert, one of the *Companion's* editors, was deputised to ask Kerr not to continue editing; letter from Sylvia Kleinert to Joan Kerr, 29 September 1999, Kerr Archive

(acknowledged) reader of the final manuscript...The fact that my name was used to get the Getty and Darling money is covered by the verso page acknowledgement that we have long agreed on: "A Dictionary of Australian Artists Project", general editor Joan Kerr'. I don't care if it's in five-point type with two hundred other sponsors but it has to be there.⁴⁸

'However judging by the result,' Jim Kerr observed, 'no decision-maker at the CCR except Joan though that a necessity'.

Joan Kerr had also insisted on proper recognition of the *Companion's* major sponsors (\$313,000 from the Getty Foundation and \$30,000 from Gordon Darling Foundation⁴⁹) in the prominent inclusion of their logos. After a series of quite farcical confrontations and cover-ups, the elusive designs appeared, correctly placed in the manuscript, thus vindicating not only Kerr's respect for proper procedure but also her respect for those who provided the funds needed to bring such projects to completion.

Jim Kerr's version of Joan Kerr's time at the CCR differs slightly from her own.⁵⁰ He writes that 'early in 1996 she began discussions with Nick Thomas about her potential contribution to his proposed new Commonwealth funded Special Research Centre', helping him 'plan its development and providing 'very informed pen pictures of relevant scholars they would wish to attract'. This gives an impression that she was more instrumental in the setting up of the CCR than perhaps she actually was, particularly as Kerr had joked in her NLA interview that she was Nicholas Thomas' second choice (after Bernard Smith).⁵¹ According to Jim Kerr, 'Joan's purpose in going to the CCR was to find a long-term home for the *Dictionary* project and a successor to carry it into the future'. This might not have been the CCR's intention since it would have meant two mammoth publishing projects (a new volume of the *Dictionary* and the *Companion*) being undertaken at the same time, even though, as Jim Kerr writes, Nicholas Thomas had given 'clear identity' to both projects by establishing a 'Program in Australian Art' to be convened by Joan Kerr. However, once she had 'assumed overall responsibility' for the *Companion*, Kerr agreed that her *Dictionary* project would

⁴⁸ Quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.131

⁴⁹ Letter from Joan Kerr to Vicki Sara, 4 February 2001, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.131. Kerr also sent copies of the letter to at least ten senior academics, librarians and art gallery directors – all members of the ARC Advisory Board.

⁵⁰ 'Joan at the ANU', *Pictorial Biography*, p.130

⁵¹ According to Joan Kerr, when Thomas invited her to join the CCR he said, 'If Bernard Smith had been younger I'd have got him', NLA Interview, p.54

‘not intensify’ until the ‘*Companion* had been completed’.⁵² According to Jim Kerr, Joan Kerr was happy to work on the *Companion*. In reality, she may have had little choice in the matter.

Kerr’s appointment to the CCR was one occasion when, as Jim Kerr puts it, her ‘aversion to the necessity of formal agreements did not have positive results’. It is difficult to understand such ‘aversion’; she was very good at dotting i’s and crossing t’s in grant applications and she read formal documents such as John Power’s will with meticulous attention. If the arrangements made with Nicholas Thomas were ‘informal’ (McCalman would later say Thomas did not even have the authority to make them) they were equally informally abrogated after his departure – and no one told her. Again, it is difficult to believe that someone as street smart as Joan Kerr would live in such ignorance, happy or otherwise.

She managed to have her three-year contract extended for one year, to the end of February 2001, in the hope of securing resources to revive the *Dictionary* project but by November 2000 she had few illusions that this would happen and wrote somewhat melodramatically to the Director: ‘I’m not asking you to renew my contract when it expires at the end of February...I finally accepted that there never was going to be any place for me and my *Dictionary* in your new CCR when I read your Strategic Plan’.⁵³ Jim Kerr describes the vital clause in this Plan, concerning the principle that academic staff members were expected to find funding to support their own research from sources other than the CCR itself, as a ‘Catch 22 situation’. Since Joan Kerr’s name had been used in applications for substantial sums of money, she was unlikely to obtain more until existing grants had produced results. This proved to be the case and in February 2001 she advised her contributors to the *Dictionary of Australian Artists* that the project would cease to exist within the month. ‘The new Director,’ she wrote, ‘has decided that the CCR can no longer afford to support large collaborative projects. Obviously I cannot agree with his decision nor with the direction the CCR has now taken. I am therefore leaving the CCR and will be moving back to 39 Murdoch Street, Sydney in April’.⁵⁴

It would seem that Joan Kerr had expected the relative freedom under which she had always operated to continue in Canberra. At Sydney University her

⁵² CCR Annual Report, 1998 pp 5,17 & 18, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.130

⁵³ Joan Kerr to Howard Morphy, 19 November 2000; CCR, Research Support for Academic Staff, Howard Morphy, 31 March 2000, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.132

⁵⁴ *Pictorial Biography*, p.132

assumption of the editorship of the Dictionary had given her considerable academic freedom and at COFA it was taken for granted she would research and publish as she saw fit. This was obviously not an option at the CCR, a showcase research centre with ambitious scholars and administrators working within highly stratified bureaucratic and financial systems, in a city that operated under a similarly hierarchical civil service tradition.

Obversely, perhaps those at the CCR who had hired Joan Kerr did not truly understand what, and who, they were taking on. Reflecting on her tenure at the CCR several years later, Kerr regretted what she saw as a waste of her time and that it was a pity the cartoon project and her relationship at the CCR 'went sour together'. It was 'very belittling' she said to Martin Thomas, to be in a set-up where 'you're being told you can't do this, you can't do that, everything's sort of piddling, and that personal ambition is so destructive of other people around'.⁵⁵ Joan Kerr's frustration was understandable yet she was as ambitious as the next ambitious scholar and it is to be regretted that in summing up her career, she was not able to confront this with a greater level of self-awareness.

In a letter to myself in 2001, Joan Kerr revealed how 'very bitter' she had been feeling about the death of the *Dictionary of Australian Artists* project after 'false promises of a permanent home for it'. She also felt that her appointment as convenor of the Australian Art Program had been 'invented to use her name and reputation to obtain ARC Special Research Funding for the CCR' and that her programs were 'never intended to be implemented if they cost a cent beyond [her] salary and got in the way of anyone else's ambitions'.⁵⁶ It became, Kerr admitted, 'a bit of a race to see whether I was chucked out or left, and it was not a happy farewell'. By the time of Kerr's departure from the Centre early in 2001, all lines of communication between herself and her colleagues there had broken down and she was forced to take legal action to sort out an increasingly tangled and accusatory problem about severance pay.⁵⁷

The misunderstanding between Joan Kerr and the CCR creates problems for a biographer who is attempting to confront her subject's personality squarely. As Brenda Niall writes, sometimes a biography 'begins in idolatry and ends in disillusionment, even dislike. The whole range of human relationships is here in

⁵⁵ NLA Interview, p.62

⁵⁶ Letter from Joan Kerr to Susan Steggall, 29 April 2001; Steggall conversation with Joan Kerr, February 2002

⁵⁷ Letter from Joan Kerr to Susan Steggall 29 April 2001

distilled form, with irritation and boredom, as well as affection and amusement, as part of the biographical transaction'.⁵⁸ This 'biographical transaction' began in a state of relatively uncritical admiration, the biographer siding with Joan Kerr in her difficulties with the various institutions where she worked. However as the biography evolved, a pattern of repeated confrontation emerged, supported by Kerr's husband, condoned by her colleagues (often by their silence), something which, while never evoking dislike, has shown the need for some critical distance, as suggested by several reviewers of *Pictorial Biography*.⁵⁹

Such condonation by family and colleagues also has resonance with Niall's thorny issue of 'protectiveness'. She cites as example her own too-careful respect for Martin Boyd's reserve and its effect on her discussion of his sexuality when she wrote his biography in 1974.⁶⁰ If she were to re-write *Martin Boyd* she would say more about the complexities of the question. In Joan Kerr's case, 'protectiveness' is equally, but differently, complex: her relationship with the CCR was clearly a minefield. Many people who admired and respected her were distressed at the unfortunate way her tenure there ended but nevertheless endeavoured to skirt around the issue. As Mary Eagle writes: 'Official responsibility for students bypassed Professor Kerr in due course (though students ensured that she continued in the role of advisor) [and] various official snubs conveyed the message that Joan was not central to CCR policy and practice'.⁶¹ In his memoir Jim Kerr writes that he is aware his account is a 'pared down' version of events since earlier 'attempts to do justice to the situation made this chapter too long, too tedious and unpublishable'. His only, and brief, comment which might indicate less than rational behaviour on Joan Kerr's part is that she was 'suffering from increasingly frequent episodes of acute abdominal pain' – a condition kept from all except herself and her spouse.⁶²

⁵⁸ Brenda Niall, *Life Class: Education of a Biographer*, Melbourne University Press, 2007, p.175

⁵⁹ John Thompson, review of James Semple Kerr, *Joan Kerr: a Pictorial Biography 1938-2004*, 2006, in *Art Monthly Australia*, No.200, June 2007, pp 33-34; Juliet Peers, 'Unfinished Business', review of *Joan Kerr: a Pictorial Biography 1938-2004*, *Artlink*, vol 26, #4, December 2006, pp 102-103. See *Overtures*, pp 7-9 for more discussion of these.

⁶⁰ Niall, *Life Class: Education of a Biographer*, p.175

⁶¹ Mary Eagle to Jim Kerr, 7 September 2005, in *Pictorial Biography*, p.135

⁶² *Pictorial Biography*, p.132. Joan Kerr remained a heavy smoker all her adult life and frequently flouted 'no smoking' rules in the work place, showing not only little regard for her own health, but also seeming indifference to that of those around her – something more serious than the 'naughty smell' of cigarette smoke that Eagle describes.

Although the 'relevant correspondence' is contained in Joan Kerr's papers that are to be lodged at the NLA, Jim Kerr does not 'recommend anyone spending time on this depressing material' (perhaps something for future scholars to decide). His subsequent remark that 'it is retained in case it ever became desirable to consider the events from Joan's point of view', appears to suggest a potential for criticism of Joan Kerr's conduct in the affair. From an outsider's viewpoint, there do appear to have been serious misunderstandings at the CCR and grounds for believing that some people there did subject Joan Kerr to 'petty vindictiveness'. It is true she had been used to getting her own way but she always operated fairly and above board. Perhaps her failing, in this instance, was that she simply did not understand people who acted differently.

When news spread that Joan Kerr was leaving the CCR Greg Denning wrote to her to say how much he appreciated her work and support:

It really won't be the same place without you there. I know how much you will be missed by the graduate students too. Thanks for all you did with them and in my visiting Scholars' Program and in the colloquia. Your questions were always the most pertinent and constructive; your advice to the students always precious.⁶³

The respect was mutual and several times Kerr reciprocated by acknowledging her debt to Denning, as in her introduction for the *Challenges to Perform: Seeing* seminar, part of his Visiting Scholars Program (May-June 2000) at the CCR. Kerr began by saying she wished she had 'had Greg around to tell me that writing a doctorate could be enjoyable', in which case she might have chosen a topic other than the sober one of 19th-century colonial church architecture.⁶⁴

Denning was an unusual scholar: a historian dedicated to working on the multi-layered pasts of Australia and its Pacific neighbours, a charismatic speaker, a persuasive writer and something of a maverick. In 1997 he took up a position as Adjunct Professor at the CCR to act as an intellectual catalyst and guide to the fledgling organization. In 2002 Iain MacCalman wrote that Denning's work, together with that of Bernard Smith, were the models to be emulated in programs at the CCR.⁶⁵ No mention of Joan Kerr. In this privileging of Bernard Smith, is she

⁶³ Greg Denning to Joan Kerr, 23 January 2001, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.135. The annual Visiting Scholar programs consisted of intensive two-to-three week thematic teaching courses for postgraduate students from all around Australia.

⁶⁴ Joan Kerr, 'Challenges to perform: seeing', nd but most likely 2000, Kerr Archive. A second, very similar, text labelled 'For Greg Denning' is among Joan Kerr's papers lodged at UNSW. Denning may have been in the audience.

⁶⁵ Iain MacCalman, *Journal of the Academy of the Social Sciences*, 2002, p.23

being written out of the master narrative, much like her perennial favourites, Australia's women artists?

In Between and in the Meantime:

Joan Kerr gave several lectures to art history-theory students at COFA during her time at the CCR. While words printed on a page can only hint at the power of the experience the version of one lecture that remains – eleven exercise-book pages of notes in Kerr's handwriting, mostly in point form, with a detailed list of slides – has an immediacy that impersonal typewritten text cannot replace. It is a nice conceit to conjure up an image of Joan Kerr working late into the night, surrounded by books and files, computer at elbow, as she develops her ideas for an art history not always up for grabs by the most powerful voices. She was especially targeting those 'larger than life white male heroes hung in white modernist art galleries designed to house them, usually in cities with art historians academically framed to appreciate them only'. A couple of examples must suffice. To subvert gender stereotypes, Kerr compared Frederick McCubbin's *On the Wallaby Track* (1896) with Anne Zahalka's 1985 photomontage *On the Wallaby Track*. When Kerr changed the genre to cartoons, Michael Leunig's *Ramming the Shears* (1980s) came into focus instead of Tom Roberts' *Shearing the Rams* (1888-1890). Kerr had a seemingly endless list of similarly fascinating comparisons and it would have been well nigh impossible to fit them all into what was probably a one-hour lecture – one of those 'head reeling' experiences for the students.⁶⁶

Another major theme in Kerr's lectures and papers in the second half of the 1990s was the idea of 'quotation' – that process whereby most Australian art historians (in fact most Australians) – evaluate their visual culture with reference to someone else's. According to Joan Kerr it was 'absurd to pretend that we are or have ever been no more than exiled Europeans...forever condemned to inhabit some irrelevant, Antipodean limbo'.⁶⁷ She had been preaching this message ever since her work on Australian colonial architecture in the 1970s and now applied it to the visual arts, particularly women's art and especially Indigenous women's art, as needing to have their own genealogies with heroines

⁶⁶ 21 May 1997; Kerr Archive, Eleanor Joan Kerr, General Chronology File, 1997

⁶⁷ Joan Kerr, 'Past present: the local art of colonial quotation', in Nicholas Thomas & Dianne Losche eds, *Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.231

and villains, great and not so great artists. Kerr rarely invoked feminist theory *per se* in her work. Rather she relied on a barrage of examples collected over more than twenty years of exhaustive first-principle research to prove her point.

The first of her papers on the theme of quotation – ‘Colonial quotations’ published in *Art & Australia* in 1996 – was linked to ideas on how this operated cross-culturally.⁶⁸ A similar talk, ‘Past present’, at the CCR on 9 December 1999 appeared as ‘Past present: the local art of colonial quotation’, in an anthology of work on art and colonial histories in the Pacific.⁶⁹ A core tenet of Kerr’s thinking was that it was ‘hardly a post-modern invention’ to have the original recognized as an essential part of the meaning of a new work when an artist copies an image. Rather, Kerr argued, ‘It was the inevitable outcome of the historical awareness which accompanied European modernity’. She used the example of Augustus Earle’s portraits of Captain John Piper (the British establishment) and Bungaree (the Aboriginal outsider) as ‘doubly coded references’ that typified this sort of post-modern quotation. ‘The fact that an image is “colonial”,’ she said, ‘defines it as belonging to a national oppressor who is internationally oppressed – simultaneously coloniser and colonised – a paradox which doubtless encourages love/hate quotation’.⁷⁰ Kerr concluded:

Identifying colonial visual quotations is just one way of forging links between a forgotten past and an unconscious present. This has always been the art historian’s job, although finding sources in Australian art has hitherto been confined almost exclusively to spotting similarities with famous European paintings...Colonial quotation-spotting proclaims the existence of a rich visual heritage which is barely known even to professional art historians. Our artists however, have long appreciated it.⁷¹

In ‘What is this thing called cross-cultural research?’ Kerr linked her thoughts on Aboriginal art to reflections on what ‘cross-cultural’ might truly mean. Rather than the informal (and frowned upon) ‘once upon a time cross-cultural research meant whitefellas writing about blackfellas’ or the more polite ‘non-Indigenous people researching indigenous ones’, she proposed a politically correct version as: ‘people of different races, types and/or genders writing about one another’.

⁶⁸ Joan Kerr, ‘Colonial quotations’, *Art & Australia*, Vol.33, No.3 Autumn 1996, pp 376-387. The article was published posthumously as ‘Colonial quotation’ in *Radical Revisionism: an Anthology of Writings on Australian Art*, Rex Butler ed, Institute of Modern Art, 2005, pp 295-302

⁶⁹ Joan Kerr, ‘Past present: the local art of colonial quotation’, pp 231-251

⁷⁰ Joan Kerr, ‘Colonial quotation’, p.295

⁷¹ Joan Kerr, ‘Colonial quotation’, p.301

However this was too ‘anthropological’ for Kerr since cross-cultural research had for ‘some years moved well outside the anthropologist’s embrace’, even if only to become more fashionable than French theory.⁷² A scholar, she says, only becomes cross-cultural by actively responding to research that takes into account more than just the dominant gender and culture. If a subject by history and definition encompasses white male protagonists only, then that subject needs to be redefined – as Kerr was trying to do in the 1999 cartoon exhibitions that included some ‘splendid cartoons by Australian women and Aborigines’. Even so, she said, an exhibition is not cross-cultural just because it adds Aborigines, women, workers, members of the underground, street artists or other ‘outsiders’ to the canon, that canon must be exploded in the attempt.

Joan Kerr liked the idea that cross-cultural research was basically ‘for misfits, for the square pegs who remain uncomfortable in the holes proved by traditional disciples even after their teachers have knocked off their rough edges until they simulate conformity flawlessly enough to get first-class honours’. In the 1970s and 1980s, Kerr encouraged her students to adopt an open way of thinking about art and draw from that to evaluate culture, and society, and make their own judgements even if it meant not toeing the required line.⁷³ Ever the optimist, Kerr concluded with a rallying cry: ‘I think we shall continue to stake out the cross-cultural landscape while we remain such a brilliant and diverse bunch, all willing and able to learn from one another.’

Yet on occasions this steady optimism faltered as in her April 2001 paper entitled ‘Dead women in museums’ at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. Frustrated by what she saw as a lack of follow-through after the *National Women’s Art Exhibition*, the tone of her paper was quite negative, the humour grim. She suggested three methods by which dead Australian women could be put back into public museums and art galleries. The first was to create separatist histories with displays of exceptional women’s arts, crafts, objects and/or lives kept together to tell stories that were different from but equal and parallel to men’s. However, Kerr argued, nobody in power really believed that displays of women’s work would attract the numbers of visitors needed at museums to justify public funding. Worse, many museum personnel still thought

⁷² Draft of talk, undated but around the time of the exhibitions of black and white art in 1999, and probably a talk at weekly or fortnightly CCR gatherings, Kerr Archive

⁷³ Interview with Judd

there weren't enough exceptional works by dead women to create such competitive displays.⁷⁴

Kerr's second method was to add exceptional 'masterpiece' objects and stories by and of women to existing patriarchal, masculinist, 'great art' and 'significant object' collections, for example paintings by Margaret Preston and Emily Kame Knywarre, with 'stories of women like Caroline Chisholm, Bessie Reischbach or Jessie Street' (to bring her discourse back to the topic of museums). Yet the results still look like tokenism because far too few 'great mistresses' are acknowledged (or even known) as of equal importance to the proclaimed old dead white masters of the nation.

The third method – to create new narratives in which dead women and men have more or less equal representation – would be the hardest to do successfully as museum curators tended to assume that new narratives about the past would more successfully include women if the exhibits told stories about the everyday and ordinary rather than the exceptional. For Kerr this spelt disaster: 'The results are too often boring and trivial displays of generic objects and undistinguished subjects, unable to proclaim the importance or even the existence of unique women's achievements.'⁷⁵

She did not advocate abandoning 'everyday, ordinary objects like toys, clothing, decorative household items or subjects like motherhood, home activities or domestic service' but wanted museums to 'proclaim the stories of outstanding mothers and homemakers – with names, identities and stories as valuable and enticing as any man's'. It is not surprising that one of Kerr's favourite artworks in *Heritage* is Ethel Stephens' portrait of Mary, Lady Windeyer (1836-1912) that hangs in the entrance hall of the Women's College at Sydney University. The painting shows a grey-haired woman knitting – a quintessentially domestic activity. Yet Mary Windeyer was dedicated to women's suffrage and worked tirelessly for recognition of the contributions women made at all levels of society. Kerr enjoyed the irony in the fact that Windeyer was 'known precisely for *not* knitting'.⁷⁶

Joan Kerr's sense of mission was evident in her Museums Australia paper as it was in so many of her presentations. In his address at her funeral, Roger Benjamin singled out this sense of mission as being 'especially clear in her

⁷⁴ Joan Kerr, talk for Museums Australia, Kerr Archive

⁷⁵ Joan Kerr, talk for Museums Australia, Kerr Archive

gargantuan labours to recover the works of neglected Australian artists, some of them never before honoured with the epithet “artist”. But calling Joan Kerr a ‘giant’ in the field of feminist art history (here Benjamin is quoting Caroline Jordan⁷⁷) is perhaps an exaggeration. Kerr most certainly promoted a ‘broad-church’ approach to studying the visual field, one that opposed entrenched hierarchies of value [and] grasped the big picture of women’s place in art history, and could write terrific polemical essays to support it’, but her approach was egalitarian. She was interested in all art, not just that by women.

Although in her journalism days, it did strike Kerr as unfair that women could not cover politics or serious issues, she only became ‘politicized’ in the 1970s with the celebration of International Women’s Year, the Australian lecture tour by Lucy Lippard and the attitudes of Kerr’s own students.⁷⁸ At the Government House Dinner in June 2003 Kerr was reminded of the occasion when she had been asked if she considered herself a feminist. Her response – ‘I don’t think they would have me!’ – shows the complexity of such a label. Like artist and friend Vivienne Binns Joan Kerr rejected what she saw as a one-size-fits-all manifestation of feminism. Both women always believed in a broad-minded attitude to changing the status quo with regard to men and women – one that was about discovery and investigation rather than overt confrontation and accusation.⁷⁹

In this spirit of discovery and investigation, Kerr set out to solve the mystery of the origin of a series of small carvings executed in the 1930s. She gave (and published) a number of papers on these sculptures that have been attributed to indigenous artist, Kalboori Youngi. The stone carvings resembled nothing in the expected range of Aboriginal sculpture and the fact that an element of mystery surrounded them only made Kerr more determined to succeed. She embarked on a ‘pilgrimage’ to look at all known works by Youngi and her followers that were held in museums and galleries in Sydney and Brisbane and visited Youngi’s country around Boulia. By talking about the works in different venues she hoped to gain new information from her audiences.

⁷⁶ Angela Philp and Joan Kerr, *Portrait of Lady Windeyer*, c.1900, Plate 61, *Heritage*, p.40

⁷⁷ Roger Benjamin, Address, *Record of Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr* (1 March 2004), compiled by James Semple Kerr, 6 March 2004, p.9

⁷⁸ NLA Interview, p.27

⁷⁹ Steggall interview with Vivienne Binns, October 2007

‘Pieces of Boulia: sculpting Kalboori Youngi’s past or myths of mullenduddy’, was one such paper delivered at the CCR *Lost in the Whitewash* Conference, in December 2000.⁸⁰ Earlier in the year, Kerr had argued that including Indigenous work as a continuous, integral part of the history of Australian art nicely complicated the agenda for cross-cultural art theorists. ‘It’s a crucial project,’ she said. ‘Aboriginal art has a Janus-like face, responding both to its own, largely collaborative and anonymous heritage as well as to the European individual genius myth.’ Kerr of course was quite ready to challenge that anonymity and in this talk explained how and why she was using ‘conventional western art-historical methodology on a group of small carvings made in the 1930s and 1940s by Pitta Pitta people from the Boulia district of Queensland in order to give them “national treasure” status’.⁸¹

In ‘Pieces of Boulia: the “primitive art” of Kalboori Youngi’ (given late 2000 or early 2001), Kerr discussed the possibility of a ‘Chinese factor – even a partner’ – as influencing the evolution of Youngi’s detailed carving that recalled for some critics the art of ancient Egypt and Assyria.⁸² Also unresolved was Youngi’s ‘well-documented isolation’, both from the Pitta Pitta people in Boulia and fellow artists Linda Craigie and Nora Nathan. Kerr suspected that around 1936 Youngi was dying and since under Aboriginal lore, her body would have contaminated the place where she died, she might have removed herself to a distant humpy. After her death, and once white admirers turned up wanting more carvings, Nathan took over creating the sculpture, giving it her own stamp. Yet the mystery remained and Kerr was unable to unearth any influence – Chinese or otherwise – to explain Youngi’s distinctive style; nor could she explain why Youngi had sold her collection of works. ‘Many people would say such questions are academic because the works remain and are outstanding whoever did them and whatever their influences,’ Kerr said, ‘but this academic was ‘remarkably stubborn once on

⁸⁰ A later version is titled ‘Modernist myths in mullenduddy: the “primitive art” of Kalboori Youngi’

⁸¹ Kerr Archive

⁸² Joan Kerr, ‘Kalboori Youngi, *Heritage*, p.479; Kerr quotes a *Sydney Morning Herald* article of 28 October 1936

a trail'.⁸³ In paraphrasing the title of a Paul Gauguin painting to summarise Youngi's story – Where did she come from, who was she, where is her reputation going? – Kerr underlined her conviction that these were 'still some of the most important questions we can ever ask about an artist'.

In summing up Joan Kerr's working practice several motifs emerge: a process of two-way communication, which involved sending out information to the public (such as the Edmund Blacket exhibition catalogue or *Working Paper 1* of the *Dictionary*) and expecting to receive more in return; searching for *all* examples of a particular art; her love affair with language (as in 'Australian accent'), and the concept of a 'Janus-faced' quality – standing in the present, looking back to the past to face the future, whether it be lighthouses, women cartoonists or contemporary Aboriginal women artists with their links to the Indigenous past and mainstream Australian art history simultaneously.⁸⁴ This meant Kerr's work was never complete; there was always something more to add and another detail to embrace to bring past achievements to present attention. She also liked to think big – those 'magnificent lists' – and always envisioned grand exhibitions and large publications often beyond the resources of the host institutions and publishers.

Perhaps it is drawing a long bow to liken Joan Kerr's local, particular, scholarship to Charles Darwin's work that changed forever the way we think about the natural world, but there are parallels in their empirical practice. In an essay entitled 'The history question: who owns the past?' Inga Clendinnen quotes Darwin's conviction that his 'industry has been nearly as great as it could have been in the observation and collection of facts'.⁸⁵ Clendinnen then calls on E.P. Thompson to explain the transformative power of Darwin's empiricism: 'We cannot come away from any account of Darwin without the conviction that a respect for fact is not only a technique it can also be an intellectual force in its

⁸³ Youngi's works collected by R.H. Goddard were exhibited in Sydney in 1936. Joan Kerr's paper, 'Pieces of Boulia: sculpting Kalboori Youngi's past or myths of mullendully [sic]', was delivered at the CCR *Lost in the Whitewash* conference, December 2000. A later version is titled 'Modernist myths in mullenduddy: the "primitive art" of Kalboori Youngi'; see also Joan Kerr, 'Pieces of Boulia': Chinese connections in the primitive art of Kalboori Youngi', c. early 2001

⁸⁴ Joan Kerr, opening speech for *Fluent: Australia's Representation at the 1997 Venice Biennale*, Drill Hall Canberra, 12 March 1998

⁸⁵ Inga Clendinnen, 'The history question: who owns the past?', *Quarterly Essay No. 23*. Black Inc, Melbourne, 2006, p.67

own right.⁸⁶ It is this intellectual force – ‘devotion to intelligent observation’ as Clendinnen puts it – that Joan Kerr brought to her work on Australian art and architecture, not on the margins of any genre or theory but at the very centre of her country’s cultural traditions.

In the End:

And so in 2001 the Kerrs moved back to Sydney, to their old house in Cremorne. The drama of Joan Kerr’s departure from the CCR was quite unknown to me and I unwittingly provided a ray of light in the gloom when, in April 2001, I wrote to ask if I could write her biography. But it was a solitary sunbeam. Now that she no longer belonged to a formal network of scholars – being outside the academic system for the first time since 1978 – Kerr found it increasingly difficult to obtain sponsorship for her projects and avenues for publication. Yet she did not give up the fight and together with fellow art historian Joanna Mendelssohn began looking for ways of broadening access to her *Dictionary* databases.⁸⁷ The Internet was clearly the best option – something Kerr had already been exploring while at the CCR. Mary Eagle writes:

A sign of her undying hope for the future, Joan also spent long periods of her time with IT buffs and nerve-racking computer processes, keeping the OUP *Dictionary* database up to speed with a rapidly evolving software and with new research.⁸⁸

With Joanna Mendelssohn acting as go-between, Joan Kerr was appointed Visiting Professor at COFA for three years, from 2003. As part of this arrangement, Kerr was to give occasional lectures to art history-theory undergraduates but her major task was to try and obtain an Australian Research Council grant to set up the *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online*.⁸⁹

Kerr was scheduled to give the first of her talks to undergraduates on a Monday morning in March 2003. She and her husband were already in the

⁸⁶ Inga Clendinnen, ‘The history question: who owns the past?’, p.68, quoting E.P. Thompson, ‘The peculiarities of the English’ in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin Press, London, 1978, p.61

⁸⁷ Interview with Joanna Mendelssohn. On 25 November 2003 there would be a meeting in the Library of UNSW (included Margy Burns from the NLA), Roger Butler, Roger Benjamin and other significant scholars in Australian art history. Vivien Johnson, UNSW Global Professor, was to be brought on board for her expertise and reputation with regard to Aboriginal art. Kerr signed off on the papers but was unable to attend the meeting although as late as Boxing Day 2003 Mendelssohn was able to discuss with Kerr whom she wanted to be on the boards of the various committees overseeing the *DAAO* project.

⁸⁸ Mary Eagle to Jim Kerr, 7 September 2005, quoted in *Pictorial Biography*, p.135

⁸⁹ Joanna Mendelssohn, ‘Joan Kerr (Eleanor Joan Lyndon)’, *cofa*, issue 10, 2004

lecture room when I arrived (I was attending as course tutor). Joanna Mendelssohn was also there. The students straggled in, hardly glancing at the figure at the front of the room. Kerr treated us to an hour of fascinating insights into the work of obscure and well-known Australian women artists backed up by her customary cornucopia of images.⁹⁰ Her delivery was not quite as sparkling as I had remembered it from previous occasions but, as usual, she drew effortlessly on her memory's overflowing storehouse of facts and anecdotes. A couple of the more diligent students were paying attention but I suspect it was Mendelssohn and myself who benefited most from the lecture. The fact that Jim Kerr was hovering attentively in the background did not appear noteworthy, given the closeness of the Kerrs' personal and intellectual relationship.

After the lecture Joan Kerr drew Joanna Mendelssohn aside to inform her of her recent diagnosis with cancer. Although it was thought to be widespread, she was to undergo exploratory surgery. Treating it as just another inconvenience, as she had done throughout her life when faced with illness, Joan Kerr said she regretted the fact that she would not be able to give any further lectures. Mendelssohn and I were stunned. There was nothing for either of us to say other than 'don't worry about the classes. Hope it's not as bad as... Get well'. Hope...

⁹⁰ The lecture was based on Kerr's paper, "'Same but different': women artists in colonial Australia", in *Local/Global: Women Artists in the Nineteenth Century*, D. Cherry & J. Helland eds, Ashgate, London, 2005

Epilogue: Farewell to a Woman of Words

It was a little after six o'clock on the evening of 6 June 2003 when I set out to catch the Manly ferry to Circular Quay to attend a dinner organized in honour of Joan Kerr who was now gravely ill. The invitation was formal, as for a wedding or a 21st-birthday party; only this evening was not a celebration of a life opening towards the future but a farewell to a woman of wide-ranging interests and many acquaintances. So many friends and acquaintances that the grand but relatively modest-in-size ballroom at Government House where the dinner was to be held meant that the guest list had to be limited to one hundred and forty people. As a very junior (in experience if not in age) member of Australia's art history fraternity, I had been delighted to receive an invitation.

At the sound of a cheerful voice next to me in the passenger queue saying 'Like your ear-rings', I turned to find a smartly-dressed woman with a mass of curly red hair standing next to me. 'Oh, thanks' I replied, then, looking at her more closely, added hesitantly, 'You don't know me but I think I know who you are: Julie Ewington? Art history?'

'That's right', she said, 'and you?' My reply in the affirmative about my links to art history brought the obvious question: 'Are you going to Joan Kerr's dinner?'

Julie Ewington had known Joan Kerr from her student days at Sydney University in the early 1970s when Kerr had been her lecturer and tutor.¹ Ewington was clearly much further advanced in terms of career and reputation than I so when she suggested we go to the dinner together, I readily agreed, glad not to have to arrive alone at what I suspected was going to be a very august gathering of art history's clan.

From Circular Quay we turned into Albert Street, then right into Macquarie Street to walk the short distance to Government House. Beyond the brightly lit ground floor, the crenellated outline of the grand 160-year-old Gothic Revival building was silhouetted against the ink-blue sky. At the front door, Peter Watts and Dinah Dysart were welcoming guests and asking them to sign the good wishes book located on a table in the Main Hall. Most, like myself, hesitated not

quite ready to do so, perhaps not sure of how the evening would unfold. Yet there was already a sense of anticipation in the air, fuelled perhaps by an uneasy but very potent mix of emotions. Guests were streaming in so we obeyed the command to move into the next room.

Joan and Jim Kerr, together with Jill Wran (Chairman of Historic Houses Trust of NSW) and members of the Kerr family were already present in the Inner Hall. Peter Watts has described the Kerrs as the perfectly devoted and mildly eccentric, intellectual couple,² but that night they looked regal as well. Joan was resplendent in a black shift (by Carla Zampatti), its only ornamentation a small white flower offered by her grand-daughter Anika Annels and pinned on her left shoulder, and a large brooch attached centre neckline. The brooch, a farewell gift from the CCR, had at its centre an art deco figure of an angel standing on an orb with stylized wings outstretched against a backdrop of an actual scallop shell.³ The oval perimeter of the brooch was bounded by a series of identical badges taken from souvenir spoons, each depicting a stereotypical Aboriginal man in warrior mode. In its combination of elegance and subversion, it was easy to understand why Joan Kerr had chosen it.

As with all material possessions – from the 19th-century black-and-white floor tiles, door hinges and handles in her home to the artworks she collected and the clothes she kept long after they had gone out of fashion – it was the personal association that objects, apparel and jewellery represented rather than conformity to fashion or financial value that Kerr treasured.

According to Richard Holmes, biography often has difficulty in dealing imaginatively with the mundane, particularly when it is central to a life – as in a happy marriage, or a long and constant friendship. ‘How does one describe ‘twenty years of tender, ruminative breakfasts?’ he asks.⁴ I could ask the same question about the more than forty years of the Kerrs’ shared companionship and scholarship. However there was no time to ponder this further as the first course of finger-food hors d’œuvres was being served. Smoked chicken and green mango, small Gruyère cheese pastries, prawn dumplings, roasted spiced butternut pumpkin, crab salad in cucumber cups: elegant food in elegant surroundings.

¹ Email from Julie Ewington, 19 November 2007

² Peter Watts, *Record of the Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr*, 1 March 2004, p.6

³ Created by Pierre Cavalan

⁴ Richard Holmes, ‘Inventing the truth’, p.19

The ground floor of Government House consists of the dining room, drawing room and ballroom, each displaying impressive collections of 19th- and 20th-century furnishings and decorations in styles that reflect the tastes of the Governors of NSW and their wives. With its glittering swoops of chandeliers highlighting the intricate patterning on pale green and apricot wallpaper, paired wall mounted lights illuminating the many large imperious portraits and heavy gold draperies framing the floor-to-ceiling windows, it was a splendid setting for the occasion.

At half past eight dinner was announced and guests filed into the ballroom. Each table was embellished with a floral centrepiece arranged by James Broadbent and Ann Toy in 'a uniquely rustic Gothic style'.⁵ The menu, doubling as order of proceedings, set out the evening in precise detail, including a summary of Joan Kerr's career, major publications, associations and affiliations, and her longstanding and close relationship with the Historic Houses Trust.

There was a sense of expectancy as Peter Watts asked guests to stand while the official party made its way into the room to the strains of *Hail the Conquering Hero Comes* played by Ian Jack from a handsome mezzanine at the southern end of the room. Vivienne Binns then sang *If I Should Plant a Tiny Seed of Love in the Garden of Your Heart* – oddly sentimental for a couple of warrior-women art veterans like Binns and Kerr. Although a very formal entrance, with a standing ovation that lasted a good five minutes,⁶ the wide smile on the face of the guest-of-honour dispelled any trace of protocol formality.

Before the main course of roast filet of veal was served, Jill Wran stood to welcome the Kerrs and their family – daughter Tamsin and her husband Ross, son Jim and wife Fiona and several of Joan's brothers and sisters. Wran also welcomed all the other guests – 'Joan's special friends' – chosen from Kerr's initial list of over five hundred people. In the spirit of the evening Wran began with words fitting for the occasion:

Joan is a very special person to us all. No doubt in different ways to each of us – as a teacher, curator, scholar, friend, mentor, advisor, enthusiast, confidante, mother, sister, expert, wife...Through all her work, infectious enthusiasm and encouragement Joan has inspired

⁵ Peter Watts, Eulogy, Government House Dinner archive, Caroline Simpson Library, Historic Houses Trust Head Office, Sydney, 2003

⁶ Peter Watts, Eulogy, *Record of the Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr*, 1 March 2004, p.3; reproduced in 'Joan Kerr: a tribute (1938-2004)', *Art Monthly Australia*, No.169, May, 2004, p.18

an enthusiastic generation of younger people to follow in her footsteps.⁷

At exactly 9.15 pm (given the unacknowledged but known-by-all state of Joan Kerr's health a long evening was inadvisable) Peter Watts rose to introduce the speakers all of whom represented the different phases and achievements in Kerr's life. They were limited to five minutes each, since 'it wasn't a conference or lecture series but a dinner at which conversation was expected to flow'.⁸ It was appropriate that James Broadbent spoke first as Joan Kerr's earliest collaborator when they curated the *Colonial Gothick* exhibition together in 1979.

The next speaker, Virginia Spate, could have been expected to concentrate on Kerr the scholar and teacher, but instead spent time talking about Joan Kerr's colourful personality and how the corridors of the Department of Fine Arts echoed with her laughter. 'If this laughter is of any god,' Spate declared, 'it is I think the laughter of the anarchic gods of Greek myths, forest-mischievous, unpredictable, creative, Dionysian rather than Appollonian'. Spate revealed how she and Kerr sometimes laughed at how lightly both of them had taken on the great *Dictionary* in 1981, little knowing what a mammoth task it would prove to be. Spate also talked of the 'extraordinary privilege of great teachers' in having the 'satisfaction of knowing that their ideas, their ideals, their practice will live on in their students'.⁹

Candice Bruce highlighted Kerr's 'tremendous physical and mental energy', her precise photographic memory and generosity of spirit. 'Joan was always an inspired and inspiring teacher,' Bruce said. 'All one needed to do was to point her towards a slide projector and away she would go with a breadth and depth of knowledge that few could rival.' Yet it was Kerr's wicked sense of humour that always made being with her so much fun. 'Joan,' she said, 'has an unparalleled enjoyment of the absurdity of life. She is a true eccentric [who] always looked outside the square' to challenge the conventional geometry of Australian art history.¹⁰

⁷ Jill Wran, Government House Dinner archive, Caroline Simpson Library, Historic Houses Trust Head Office, Sydney, 2003

⁸ Peter Watts, preparatory notes dated 27 May 2003, Government House Dinner archive, Caroline Simpson Library, Historic Houses Trust Head Office, Sydney, 2003

⁹ Virginia Spate, in 'Joan Kerr: a tribute', *Art Monthly Australia*, 169, May 2004, pp 18-19

¹⁰ Candice Bruce, Government House Dinner archive, Caroline Simpson Library, Historic Houses Trust Head Office, Sydney, 2003

Bruce was followed by three speakers who worked with Joan Kerr in very different aspects of her career. The first, Vivienne Binns OAM, a pioneer of the women's art movement in Australia, was very proud that in Joan's opinion, many Australian women artists found 'Binns' visible practical example more inspiring than Germaine Greer's absent theoretical one'. Next was Jack Munday AO, the Chairman of the Historic Houses Trust for the last four or five years of Joan Kerr's term as Trustee.¹¹ He talked of the mutual respect he and Kerr held for the other's position although they frequently sparred across the table at meetings. Dinah Dysart and Joan Kerr had worked on heritage projects together for at least twenty years so it was natural for Dysart to highlight Kerr's involvement (direct and indirect) with exhibitions on architectural themes. 'I think the trick is her ability to inspire amazing confidence in those people she works with,' Dysart said. 'And, of course, she has just the right degree of disregard for conventions and bureaucratic constraints. So she can make things happen.'

By the time Joan Kerr stood up to speak the atmosphere of good will was palpable. There was also a sense of amazement that there *was* so much good will among such a group of tough-minded people. In spite of this slightly incredulous, almost naïve (considering the professional experience of most of those present), emotion no one was in any doubt why she or he was there, nor that they would be charmed and moved by the words they were about to hear, many people probably for the last time.

Joan Kerr's opening words – 'I still feel overwhelmed at being guest of honour at this glorious event...the most magnificent tribute ever held to a member of that minor subspecies of an almost forgotten race, the Australian art historian' – set a gently ironic yet inclusive tone. She continued in this vein with a typically quirky comparison between the magnificence of the current dinner with its 'decades of memories of the Great Historic Houses Trust' and meals shared over the years with colleagues – meals noted more for their camaraderie than their cuisine. Her first example was from the time when she and James Broadbent were preparing their exhibition at the newly restored Elizabeth Bay House. Broadbent lived there, Kerr almost, and their working days stretched from mid-morning to late at night. At 6.30 pm they would break for a gin and tonic. Kerr gleefully declared that her

greatest achievement throughout those weeks was not the challenge of working out how to do an innovative successful and accessible

¹¹ Jack Munday (b.1929): former leader of the Builders' Labourers Federation, become environmental activist

exhibition about a virtually unknown colonial style in Australian architecture – though we finally did a great job, mainly thanks to James's designer skills. Far more demanding was to teach James...to grill cheese on toast to accompany the gin.

A year later, after the launch of the book *Gothick Taste in the Colony of New South Wales*, Kerr and a group of colleagues went to a 'fashionable and thankfully short-lived restaurant at Woollahra where the staff took hours to provide a first course then disappeared'. They subsequently found the restaurant staff playing cards downstairs and asked to order desert. The chef refused, claiming it was far too late. By this time the Government House dinner guests were laughing with Kerr as she turned a difficult and potentially embarrassing situation into an amusing, all embracing anecdote.

The next gastronomic adventure was one Kerr organized in 1981. After the opening of *In Memoriam: Tombstone and Cemetery Art in NSW* (again at Elizabeth Bay House) she herded ten people into the back of the Kerr utility and instructed her husband to drive to Harry's Café de Wheels (in Woolloomooloo Bay) for 'tea, a pie and mushy peas'. The newly appointed Director of Historic Houses Trust, Peter Watts, seemed somewhat shaken by this informal dinner and Kerr promised him they'd go somewhere with chairs on the next occasion.

Instead of plunging into a lecture on art, architecture and the historical peccadilloes of both, Joan Kerr preferred to remember the people who had contributed to the good times – her own enthusiasm for life's great experience in no small way creating the ambience in which those good times could flourish. It was the exhibitions she had organized and the people with whom she had worked and shared stories that she treasured most. She was gratified and somewhat surprised that supporters had outnumbered opponents in her life – 'quite a tribute to you all'.

Kerr skimmed lightly over the stormy times when she was compiling the *Dictionary* by praising Virginia Spate's cleverness in turning her (Kerr's) 'pig-headed determination' to have her own way into a gracious (if rather equivocal) compliment. 'Nobody,' Kerr said, 'had ever stopped me from doing what I thought was right [although] this has, I admit, led to a number of noisy clashes with people – especially bureaucrats – and institutions whose values and actions I abhorred'.

Kerr's closing words summed up her life's philosophy:

I was lucky that I could count on the support of so many friends, family and institutions, notably everyone here tonight as well as the whole of the Historic Houses Trust. It's comforting to think that so many share my belief that art, architecture and visual culture must be especially treasured because they offer us lasting positive values that can change the world – that even minor acolytes and supporters can have a role in transforming the selfish materialism that seems to dominate Australia in 2003.

There was a moment's silence when she sat down then rousing applause and another standing ovation.

Long after the excellent honey bavarois dessert, coffee and petit fours Joan Kerr's words lingered in conversations. The evening was drawing to a close yet no one wanted it to end. Many guests now queued in buoyant mood to sign the farewell presentation book, chatting to those in front and behind. Others wandered out onto the colonnaded sandstone terrace where magnificent garden beds, a skilful mix of colour even in late autumn, were just visible against a backdrop of spreading native fig trees and tall mature pines. The harbour and its shimmering lights added a special charm to the experience for those who were taking their time over a last glass of wine, already reminiscing about the evening, as if to fix it in memory, not wanting it to become the past. As one guest wrote in the book, it was 'a golden moment I will cherish'.

Later, in his tribute to Joan Kerr, Peter Watts summed up the dinner thus:

Never was there such an outpouring of spontaneous affection, generosity of spirit, wit, scholarship and sheer good fun as there was that evening...I know that the night brought her enormous pleasure, and also pleasure to all who were there. It was a wonderful celebration of a life led to the full.¹²

The evening finished well after the scheduled time. Julie Ewington and I left Government House in cheery mood, intoxicated as much by the ambience as the excellent wine. Were we too late for – or just in time for – the last ferry? Or did we share a taxi? It doesn't matter now.

A Book of Memories:

At that dinner many strands of Joan Kerr's life came together: professional and personal, public and private. Reading comments in the farewell presentation book

¹² Peter Watts, 'Joan Kerr: a tribute', p.18

several years after her death was a moving experience.¹³ Tributes were warm, funny, affectionate and respectful and while it would be improper to name names and quote individual guests, taken as a whole they provide further insights into the woman who was Joan Kerr.

Many guests were very pleased the dinner had actually taken place as a 'tribute to an admirable woman' and thanked Joan Kerr for the privilege of having been invited, considering it, unanimously, a special honour. Their enjoyment of the evening was expressed in words and phrases such as 'a magic night', 'a wonderful night of wit and gaiety (in the best sense)', 'love n laughter n scholarship', 'a night to remember', 'a terrific, fabulous night', 'the 'coolest' party in the grandest room for a most generous scholar', 'a splendid party what did you right proper honour!' 'Great food, great speeches, great company and great surrounds – all in all one of the best "dos" I have been to', 'a wonderful night – it was fabulous, funny, stylish and quirky just like you!' 'A proper party and a bit of a nostalgia trip'. 'Gothic arches, Victorian parlour songs, good friends and company.'

Some simply thanked Kerr for her friendship, her stories and infectious enthusiasm for art and life: 'I see your smile and feel joy in the interests and initiatives we've shared.' Tamsin Kerr wrote: 'To a wonderful mother, mentor and friend. Thanks for being such a great role model in my life for your imbibing of visual acuity, and praise for intellectual life.'¹⁴ Other members of her family wrote brief simple messages, some surprised perhaps at the intensity of feeling surrounding their mother and sister.¹⁵ Friends outside the world of art and architecture were also delighted to have been included, glad to 'put faces to the stories' Kerr had told them over the years.

Kerr's many ex-students thanked her, not only for her endless generosity, good will and dedicated support but also for her 'hard slog' in 'creating great work and causing many people to think', for being a most important mentor and helping to form their intellectual take on the world. 'I am inspired to do more' appeared several times. Ex students also hoped to do her legacy justice: 'Every time I nebulously shape an idea you have been there before me – but firmer and

¹³ The 'Good Wishes Book', Caroline Simpson Library, Historic Houses Trust Head Office, Macquarie Street, Sydney, 2003

¹⁴ Tamsin Kerr, quoted in the *Record of the Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr*, 1 March 2004, p.6

¹⁵ Within her family circle Joan Kerr was modest about her achievements. Her sister Anne Lanham said later that the dinner was a 'real eye-opener for them', Interview with Lanham

sharper. Every time I grasp at some shocking or irreverent concept you tell me to push it further – make it more radical and more daring'; 'You are my inspiration – may I prove worthy'; 'Thank you for inspiring community interest in neglected subjects now commonly embraced'; 'Thank you for the robust discussions, sometimes for ages over the veracity of one small fact'. One over-worked mature-age student who often missed lectures thanked Kerr for the loan of excellent notes: 'It seems like yesterday I was lined up behind you to register for Fine Arts – a lucky day for me.'

Colleagues also reflected on Kerr's generosity of spirit and the privilege it had been to work with her. They wrote of their admiration, not only for her groundbreaking books but also for all the help and advice she had given on numerous projects, successful and not so inspiring: 'You were a godsend'; 'I have relished our talks, being drawn up in to the vortex of that sharp mind of yours. Thank you for believing in me.' Simple and direct, sophisticated and erudite – Kerr's colleagues were struggling to maintain intellectual dignity while genuinely wanting to show their appreciation: 'Joan of Art is simple irresistible! (never a martyr but)'; 'You are in my all time pantheon of the best Australian "high" culture with Roy and HG, John Clarke and the rest'; 'I would certainly inscribe you in the Register of the National Estate as a National Treasure.' 'Thanks for your friendship and guidance, shoulder (to cry on occasionally!), ideas, encouragement and support and much more.' 'Your support, light-heartedness, capacity to buck the system and impish anti-authoritarianism has stayed with me.' 'A rare light that will never be extinguished.' 'A wonderful friend and an inspiring colleague.' '*Merci mille fois*' for having 'saved my face, my bacon and my life more times than could possibly be decent.' 'You are and continue to be inspirational and I am privileged to have known you; honoured to have been a contributor as well as an enthusiastic reader.'

Guests appreciated her vitality, wit, encouragement, 'irascibility and reality'. They thanked her 'for showing everyone the strength of someone who stands by their convictions' and 'for speaking and writing on the maligned arts with such colourful potency. Of all these gifts, I envy this the most'. 'Dear Joan with whom I laughed more than it seemed feasible and whose expertise and savoir-faire never fail to daunt me.' 'Thanks for the wicked laughter, the integrity and the scholarship and friendship. Keep being perverse and keep appreciating the same.'

Some were more specific: 'what bliss to discover someone who shared a passion for the ecclesiastical. You, surely, must be the Australian Pevsner!' 'Many thanks for your work on Gothick, and Victorian architecture over a quarter of a century.' 'Thank you for being the champion of the Children's Chapel.' Artists also presented tributes: 'All artists should have a Joan Kerr in their lives. I'm glad to be one of the lucky ones'; 'Thank you for trusting an artist!' One formal collective tribute from staff at the AGNSW summed up this outpouring of affection: 'Joan, you will be remembered for your unflinching commitment in conquering the mountain of Australian art history with flair, wit, insatiable intellect and remarkable collegiality and generosity of spirit.'

Few mentioned Kerr's increasingly critical state of health beyond: 'Hang in there'; 'strength and much love for the times ahead'; 'our hearts are with you'. Some entries were quirky in the spirit of Joan Kerr's character: a pen portrait of her with huge glasses; a space left blank 'for a big warm hug'; a query as to the date of the coronation. One eminent Sydney historian wrote a light-hearted ditty that contained admiration and respect for Kerr's straight talking, grace and a wicked grin that cut through 'the bull' to get to the point. The poem ended with the words: 'the space at the table will not go unnoticed'.

That 'space at the table' was never again to be occupied. The dinner was Joan Kerr's final public engagement. It was the last time I saw her, although I sent several emails and cards, always insisting I needed no reply. Her time was more valuable to those better qualified and closer to her. There was much work to be done to catalogue Kerr's papers and prepare the ground for the *Dictionary of Australian Art Online*, but that is another story, sadly not one involving Joan Kerr's expert guiding hand.

Her last major 'project' was an interview she gave for the Oral History Program at the NLA. When Rosemary Block, oral history librarian at the SLNSW, learnt that Joan Kerr was so ill, she realized it was imperative to have her oral history recorded. The State Library had no budget for commissioning interviews, but the NLA did. Block contacted Martin Thomas, a Harold White Fellow at the NLA who had some experience with the oral history program, to ask if he'd be prepared to interview Joan. He said he would if Joan agreed. She did, so the interview went ahead.¹⁶

¹⁶ Email from Martin Thomas, December 2006

The first meeting between Joan Kerr and Martin Thomas in the late 1980s had been inauspicious. As a young postgraduate, Thomas had begun to write art reviews, one of the first being on the exhibition *Bond – Towers of Torture*, at the Tin Sheds Gallery in 1988, organized by Martin Munz and several staff members of the Power Institute.¹⁷ In keeping with the general anti-Alan Bond sentiment at the time, the exhibition purported to show connections between Bond's plan (never realized) to build the tallest skyscraper in Australia and his investment in a telephone company in Chile, then under Pinochet's dictatorship. Although Thomas had no affection for Alan Bond he thought the show very superficial:

But it had become a *cause célèbre* because the Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University made an ineffectual attempt to ban it, which of course created loads of publicity. I guess my review was a disappointment, since it poured cold water over the event by pointing out that the art was rather ordinary and that the organisers were a trifle sanctimonious in the way they trumpeted their political credentials.¹⁸

Joan Kerr had been invited by the editor of *Art & Text* to write about the exhibition – a strange commission in Thomas' view, because she was part of the institution that had organized it. Perhaps Kerr also had a similar problem with the quality of the art in the show as she devoted much her review to attacking Thomas' piece.

About six years later when Martin Thomas was giving a lecture about his research on the Blue Mountains, he was questioned 'very intelligently' by an older woman in the audience about photographer Ernest Brougham Docker's famous stereograph of the Three Sisters. 'Of course it was Joan,' he says. 'She came up and introduced herself afterwards and we shook hands.' They laughed off the earlier confrontation and she offered to let Thomas look through material gathered for the *Dictionary* for images of the Blue Mountains. 'That incident,' Thomas writes, 'said quite a lot about Joan's personality. She could be quite vicious at times, but she was always ready to let bygones be bygones'.¹⁹

The interview sessions were recorded at the Kerrs' home in Cremorne in the latter part of 2003. Jim Kerr would go out for a walk while they were recording, frequently returning with a bottle of white wine and oysters to be enjoyed at the

¹⁷ Thomas, 'Forbidden pleasures', *The Age Monthly Review*, October 1988

¹⁸ Email from Martin Thomas

¹⁹ Email from Martin Thomas

end of each session. 'I was very touched by this,' Thomas says. 'He was taking every opportunity to spoil her.'²⁰

On reflection, Martin Thomas felt that in some ways the recordings were deceptive. In them Joan Kerr came across very much like her old self and her phenomenal visual memory was still very much in evidence. Her voice was strong and there was frequent laughter (even her signature gleeful 'cackle') with no hint of how ill she really was. Yet she was in a great deal of pain and found each interview session exhausting. Later Jim Kerr told Thomas that Joan's only regret about the oral history interviews was that she had not toned down some of the ruder remarks she made about people but Thomas was glad those things were on record. He found Kerr's candour very valuable. 'It was part of her style', he writes. 'Some people won't say anything bad about anyone, and therefore become rather anodyne. That she was prepared to speak her mind about the likes of Bernard Smith was typical. She was fearless, and she had a big heart.'²¹ Yet even Joan Kerr's 'big heart' could not stop the inexorable spread of the cancer.

A week before she died Joan Kerr told Dinah Dysart that she only wished it were possible to choose when to go. She would be ready after she had seen Tamsin and James who were coming to Sydney for her 66th birthday on 21 February 2004. She wanted the whole family to be together one last time. Her wish was granted and she died the following day.²²

It was fitting that Joan Kerr's funeral be held at St Stephen's Church in Newtown – the Edmund Blackett church she wrote about and lectured on so many times.²³ On the Funeral Service leaflet, below the details of where and when, was a sympathetic Sandy Edwards photograph of Kerr, chin resting on her raised right hand, a wry smile on her face, her eyes framed by large black glasses, as her body was framed by shelves crammed with books. *Heritage*, lay on the table in front of her. Inside the leaflet the order of service was laid out in precise detail. The simple time-honoured ceremony, based on the Anglican Church of Australia's *A Prayer Book for Australia* of 1995, was anchored by the substantiality of scholarship and tradition but infused with the lightness of Joan Kerr's touch on that scholarship and tradition.

²⁰ Email from Martin Thomas

²¹ Email from Martin Thomas

²² Watts, *Funeral Oration*, St Stephen's Church, 1 March 2004

²³ Monday 1 March 2004

The Reverend Peter Rodger greeted the congregation. Tamsin Kerr read the last three paragraphs of her mother's talk at the Government House dinner.²⁴ Peter Watts described Joan Kerr as his friend, fellow board member at Historic Houses Trust, guest curator, mentor, critic and colleague in arms, declaring that he 'cherished her' like he cherished few others. I liked this next bit:

Joan was a friend to us all. She was always one to live in the moment. She sparkled the whole time. She seemed invincible. She engaged you. You felt energized in her presence. She stretched your imagination. She challenged your ideas and beliefs. She sometimes left you exhausted – but always exhilarated, and seeing through more clearly focussed eyes.²⁵

Although Watts then summarized Joan Kerr's life – school, university, courtship and marriage, children and travel, then her studies in art and architectural history and her higher degrees – again, as in the Government House speeches, Kerr's character was more important. In particular it was her face and the way her sense of humour shone through, 'especially if she was about to burst a pompous bubble of puffery, self delusion or aggrandisement'. Her laugh was 'her signature [and] it should have been bottled and preserved in the National Archives':

She was particularly generous with her time and knowledge. She gave and gave and gave – as any of her students will testify. She seemed to have an inexhaustible reservoir of good will to draw upon. She had an exceptional capacity to engage with the young, to support and encourage them, and inspire them with confidence in their own abilities. It was no wonder she was such an inspired, and inspiring, teacher.

Joan was the Professor of Prefaces, Introductions and Reviews for so many of her former students. They invariably acknowledged her contribution in their publications...Unlike most in her chosen profession she had the ability to comfortably straddle the historic and the contemporary – and in doing so enriched the study and understanding of both.²⁶

For Watts it would have been impossible to talk about Joan Kerr without her life's partner. 'They were really two halves of a very complete whole,' he said. 'Their lives were intertwined for forty-eight years – not just personally – but also professionally...they drew strengths from one another and supported each other's weaknesses. Each had a huge impact on the other.'

²⁴ Tamsin Kerr, *Record of the Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr*, p.1

²⁵ Peter Watts, *Record of the Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr*, p.3

²⁶ Peter Watts, *Record of the Funeral Service for Eleanor Joan Kerr*, pp 5-6

‘But above all,’ Watts continued, ‘their love was built on the deepest respect and affection for each other – and for humanity. They were not just husband and wife. They were truly the very, very best of mates’. By the time Watts said ‘we are all richer for having shared your friendship. You left us too early. But then again, you always were ahead of your time’, there was not a dry eye in the house.

Full Circle:

I began the first chapter of this biography with my request to Joan Kerr to write her biography. I end the last chapter with her warm and positive response:

Your letter arrived while I was in the midst of the hell of trying to pack and plan how to put thirty years of books, files and papers from an academic office into a house already crammed with books. Naturally, I assumed that it would be drawing attention (with your usual tact and delicacy) to one more of my many sins of omission. What a joyful surprise to be transformed into a woman with an interesting and worthwhile past instead! You have quite altered my plans for the future. I’d love you to write my biography – what an honour! Jo Holder and Dinah Dysart have been talking about working with me on a collected volume of my essays and I’ve decided to concentrate on both projects when I get back to Sydney (after I get unpacked, which will probably be sometime next century).²⁷

She was angry about what she perceived as cavalier treatment of her work at the CCR and perhaps her ready acceptance of my proposal was because I represented a neutral corner in art history’s conflicts. She was frustrated that academe was no longer a place for a scholar ‘since the administrators took over’ and considered it a gross inequity for many younger scholars and teachers to be on short-term contracts while administrators (academic as well as general staff) had continuing appointments. She was also bitter about the way she had had to fight for research funds, not only after years of successful grant applications but also the outstanding projects that had resulted from these:

You’ll understand why your letter was so welcome. It made me realize that I don’t have to start all over again to prove my worth but actually have done some work of lasting value. Odd letters of support written to the ARC from all sorts of people...have also cheered me up...My life has been a lot more interesting than this, thank God!

Your letter clearly could not have arrived at a more appropriate moment...I very much look forward to our collaboration ...I’ll be in touch when I get back...I’ll also be feeling far more confident that I can survive without the ANU than I was, thanks to you. It’s a pity the *Dictionary* is dead, but there was no point hanging around trying to

²⁷ Joan Kerr, letter to Susan Steggall, 29 April 2001

ignore the stinks emanating from the killers, not the corpse. Love,
Joan²⁸

In Context:

It is perhaps too soon after Joan Kerr's death to answer with certainty questions of how much influence she has had on the art history of her time and where posterity will rank her achievements. She completed her postgraduate studies and began her professional career in the late 1970s when the rediscovery of women's intellectual and creative heritage was well underway. Following Bernard Smith's groundbreaking work in the art of the Pacific peoples and its influence on European 'artistic vision',²⁹ the time was ripe for Australians to take pride in their own culture and shake off the perception that it was second best and derivative. However no one before Joan Kerr had delved into so many unlikely places and sources to reveal the richness of Australia's artistic and architectural heritage.³⁰ In so doing, she influenced not only several generations of Australian art historians but also the way in which antiquarians, heritage conservationists and librarians viewed such a cultural treasure trove.

Kerr once referred to herself as a 'contextualist', meaning she always aimed to embed an artwork in its time and place. This biography has aimed to locate Joan Kerr as a woman and a scholar of *her* time and place although the latter is something she frequently sought to subvert – travelling in life, an intellectual path far from her family's origins in middle-class Queensland and embracing in her work, a unique wide-ranging approach to art and architectural history. She sought respect and peer acknowledgement from the intellectual establishment yet chose to position herself, and lead her projects, if not exactly on the margins, then from a place of her own choosing – ex-centric rather than eccentric. A sharply honed sense of the ridiculous that enabled her to see humour and irony in many situations gave her *entrée* to an elite band of maverick women intellectuals.

The databases for the *Dictionary*, *Heritage* and the black-and-white art project are now safely ensconced in the electronic labyrinth of the *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online*. But whether Kerr's distinctive brand of wry observation

²⁸ Joan Kerr, letter to Susan Steggall

²⁹ Bernard Smith, *European Vision in the South Pacific, 1768-1850: a Study in the History of Art and Ideas*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1960 (3rd edn, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989)

³⁰ Interview with Anne McCormick

has made the transition, is debatable. In her obituary for Kerr, Virginia Spate wrote that 'there was something peculiarly Australian – or Australian of an era that may be passing – in her work as writer, teacher and administrator'.³¹ With Joan Kerr's passing, Australian art history might be more earnest and sedate but not nearly as much fun.



³¹ Virginia Spate, Obituary, 2004, p.45

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- 1976 'Pop Art in England', *Connoisseur*, 192, p.242
- 1978 'Aspects of Australian art 1900-1940', *Art & Australia*, 15/4, pp 352-353
- 'Mr John Verge', *Art & Australia*, 16/1, p.34
- 'Genesis of a gallery – Part II' (NGA), *Art & Australia*, 16/2, pp 130-131
- 1979 'Act I' (Arts Council, Canberra), *Art & Australia*, 16/4, pp 320-321
- 'Walter Burley Griffin', *Art & Australia*, 17/1, pp 36-37
- 1980 'Sydney International Exhibition 1879', *Art & Australia*, 17/4, pp 330-331
- '*Converting the Wilderness* (AGDC exhibition)', *Art & Australia* 17/4, pp 330-331
- 'Colonial Gothick', *Australasian Antique Collector*, 20, p.143
- 1981 'William Hardy Wilson', *Art & Australia*, 19/2, pp 145-146
- 1987 'New Classicism? (Ten Melbourne Architects)', *Praxis M*, 17, pp 42-43
- 1989 'Bond: Towers of Torture' (Tin Sheds, Sydney University), *Art & Text*, 31, pp 90-93
- 1997 'Not just simple nostalgia' (on *Archives & the Everyday*), *Art Monthly Australia* 105 (November), pp 24-26

- 1999 'Stop laughing...this is serious', *Muse*, 191 (December-January), p.15
- 2002 'Love and Death: Art in the Age of Queen Victoria', *Art & Australia*, 40/1 (Spring), pp 59-61
- 2003 'Dorothy Napangardi', *Art & Australia*, 40/4, (Winter), p.678

g) Major Conference Papers:

- 1980 Australasian Victorian Studies Association Annual Conference, 'Ladies' sketchbooks'
- 1982 Australian Photographic Archives Network Inaugural Conference, sole keynote speaker
Canberra & District Historical Society, 'Colonial women artists'
Tasmanian Historical Research Association (THRA) Annual Conference, 'Early Tasmanian art exhibitions'
- 1983 Art Association of Australia (AAA) Annual Conference, 'Australian women artists'
THRA Annual Conference, Eldershaw Memorial Lecturer
National Trust (NSW), six lectures on E.T. Blacket & 19th-century architecture
University of Western Australia, Octagon Lecturer
- 1984 Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now IATSIS), annual conference paper on European images of Australian Aborigines (repeated at Sydney University Anthropology and Historical Archaeology Departments 1984 & 1985)
Society of Architectural Historians of Australia & New Zealand (SAHANZ) Inaugural Conference, 'Why architects should not write architectural history'
- 1985 *Women in Architecture* Conference, Melbourne University, Annual Lecturer (three papers on recent Australian architecture)
History of Australian Science Conference, Sydney, 'Early Sydney scientific buildings'
- 1986 Australiana Society, 'Colonial artists in the *Dictionary of Australian Artists*'
AAA Annual Conference paper
SAHANZ Annual Conference paper
- 1987 *Authenticity & Conservation* Conference, Sydney University, 'Authentically Australian Gothic'
NSW Education Department HSC Australian Art seminar, paper delivered at Sydney, Kempsey and Lismore
- 1988 Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Launceston, Bicentennial Lecturer
Adelaide Festival, Artists Week, 'Blockbuster exhibitions'
Australiana Society paper
Australian Bicentenary Seminar, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne
University, 'Bicentennial exhibitions'
- 1989 National Trust (NSW), Australian Colonial Art Conference, sole keynote speaker

- 1992 Art Historians of Great Britain Annual Conference, 'British themes in Australian colonial art' (and another version delivered at AAA Annual Conference)
AAA Annual Conference, Franz Philipp Memorial Lecturer
- 1993 Historic Houses Trust (HHT), Elizabeth Farm Bicentennial Seminar, opening address
- 1994 Australian Academy of the Humanities (AHA), Silver Jubilee Symposium paper
- 1995 Australiana Society, paper on Women's arts and crafts
Queensland Art Gallery Centenary Conference, sole keynote speaker
Second Annual Heritage Month Lecturer, Liverpool (NSW), 'Colonial art of the region'
'Redressing the balance', National Conference on women and minority representation in museums, Australian National Maritime Museum, sole keynote speaker
- 1996 6th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, University of Adelaide, 'Researching women's art'
Re-imagining the Pacific, conference in honour of Bernard Smith, 'Colonial images in contemporary Australian art'
Australian Anthropological Society Annual Conference, 'Australian art in international exhibitions', convenor of museums session and chair of art session
Canberra Institute of the Arts ANU, Annual Lecture, 'Death and art in Australia'
- 1997 Museums Australia Annual Conference, Darwin, keynote speaker (on historic images in the Channel 2 series *Frontier*
Co-convenor (with Gordon Bull), AAA Annual Conference *Visually Crossing Cultures*, ANU
- 1998 Inaugural Lyceum Club Lecturer, Brisbane, 'A new art history for Australia'
Annual Conference, Adelaide, Convenor of cartoon session and paper on Australian women cartoonists
- 1999 *Colonial Eye* Conference, University of Tasmania, keynote speaker, 'Australian colonial cartoons'
Women in Archaeology Annual Conference *Engendering Difference*, UNSW, keynote speaker
University of Canterbury, Christchurch (NZ), public lecture 'Past present: quotation in contemporary Australian art'
- 2000 *Masquerades and Identities* conference, ANU, 'Savages and Blackfellas'
International Women's Day Lecture, NGA, 'Antipodean guerillas – the Wombat Manifesto'
Asling Society (Sydney) guest lecturer, 'Irish artists in Australia'
ANU *Lost in the Whitewash, Aboriginal-Chinese Encounters from Federation to Reconciliation* Conference, 'Pieces of Bouliia – sculpting Kalboori Youngi's past'

- AAANZ Annual Conference, Queensland University of Technology, 'Myths in mullenduddy'
- 2001 Museums Australia Annual Conference, Rural museums & metropolitan professionals'
- National Gallery of Australia, seminar paper in conjunction with *Australian Women Modernists* exhibition
- National Trust (NSW), *Women Artists and Art History* Centenary of Federation seminar, 'Women artists as historians'
- AAANZ Annual Conference, University of Melbourne, 'Australian women cartoonists and the Woman Suffrage Movement'
- Nation/State Conference, University of Adelaide, plenary speaker, 'Centenary of Federation funding: an artless heritage'

h) Select Public Lectures:

- Antique Collectors' Society, Wagga Wagga (NSW), lectures on Australian art
- Art Gallery Guides National Conference 1993, guest speaker (with Philip Adams)
- Art Gallery NSW, Bicentennial seminar paper 1988, 'Women and Victorian art' lecture 2002
- AGNSW Society, public lectures 1970-75, 1988, 1993 & 1995
- Australian Antiquarian Book Fair inaugural lecture series, 2001, 'On collecting cartoons'
- Australian Centre for the Decorative Arts, lecturer 1981-89
- Australiana Society, Australia Day speaker 1992, lecturer 1995 (see *Australiana* 17/3, 63-64), 1999; 'Australian Art Before Federation' conference paper, Government House, Sydney 2001
- Bunbury Regional Art Gallery (WA) 1995, public lecture on *National Women's Art Exhibitions*
- Bunker Cartoon Gallery, Coffs Harbour, lecture on women cartoonists, November 2002
- Christie's Australian Art History, 3 lectures (colonial, post-colonial & women's art), 1995
- Friends of First Government House Site, Heritage Week lecture 1987, Foundation Day, 1991
- International Women's Day Lecturer, Sydney University Tin Sheds 1993, National Gallery of Australia 1999, Vanessa Wood Fine Arts Gallery (Mosman NSW) 2002
- La Trobe Regional Art Gallery, lecture for *National Women's Art Exhibition*, 1995
- National Association for the Decorative Arts, lectures Sydney 1985-1986, Canberra, 1988
- National Trust (NSW), lectures 1973-74, 1982-84, 1988, 1995, 2001. AGM guest speaker, 1986; *Completing the Picture* seminar 1992, 'Celebrity Expert' Heritage Week (with Margaret Whitlam et al.) 1993; *Native Title Now* seminar 1998; Black & White Art Forum, 1999

Newcastle Region Art Gallery, public lecture on women artists in the collection, 1995

NSW Society of Women Writers, public lecture on Australian women artists, 2002

Manly Arts Festival, 'Leader of Opposition' v. 'PM' Bronwyn Bishop, Celebrity Debate, 1995

Penrith Regional Art Gallery, 'New directions' guest speaker (with Rodney Hall), 1991

Royal Australian Institute of Architects: public lectures 1974-75 (NSW), 1986 (Qld)

S.H. Ervin Gallery, 'Contemporary art in a post colonial world', *Australian Visions* lecture series February-April, 1988

State Library NSW, 'Rage for Curiosity' panel discussion (with Bernard Smith & Richard Neville), 1997

Sydney Festival of Medieval Music & Architecture, Blacket Memorial Lecture, 1982

Various lectures to Australiana Society, Historic Houses Trust, Hunters Hill Trust, Women Pioneers Association, Australian Federation of University Women, 1985-2001

i) Radio and Television:

ABC Radio National: interviewed on *Books and Writing* 1985-86; 1992, *Arts National* 1988-90, 1992-96, 1999; *Late Night Live* with Philip Adams 1990 & 1995; *Comfort Zone* with Alan Saunders 1998 (on the Gothic Revival), evening arts programs 2002-3 (on art auctions and monochrome paintings), *Bush Telegraph* 2002 (on Aboriginal cartoonists); participant in *Radio Eye* features on 'Australian Gothic' 1994 and on paintings in the Art Gallery of NSW 1997. Plus various discussions on colonial art, women's art and de-accessioning art including ABC National News 1999, ABC Hobart (on conference keynote paper) 1999, ABC Canberra 1999-2001

Channel 2: interviewed on *Sunday Afternoon* 1992, 1995, 1999, *Review* 1994-95 and *7.30 Report* 1995-96; consultant for Joy Hester film 1996; picture consultant for *Frontier* 1997

SBS: participant in two bicentennial art programs 1988, Sydney architecture program 1989

Channel 7 *Sunday* interview on Judy Cassab 1998, NGA, 2001

Channel 9: interviews on *Nightline* (on art in the National Library 1992) and evening news program (on the National Women's Art Exhibition 1995)

Channel 10 (ACT) interview on *News* (re NGA, 2000)

2SER-FM and regional radio on various aspects of Australian art 1994-96, 1998-99, 2001

3. Other Works:

- Alexander, Peter. *Les Murray: a Life in Progress*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000
- Armstrong, Judith. Review of *Australian Gothic: a Life of Albert Tucker* by Janine Burke, in *Art Monthly Australia*, May 2002
- Art Gallery of NSW, *Checklist of the Australian Collection*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, c.1988
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- Banville, John. *The Untouchable*, Picador/Macmillan Publishers, London, 1997
- Barnes, Julian. *Flaubert's Parrot*, Picador edn (Pan Books Ltd), London, 1985
- Bartlett, Deborah. 'Living interview: culture with Kerr', *Vogue Living*, August, 1984
- Batchelor, John. *The Art of Literary Biography*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1995
- Bennie, Angela. 'The facts of life', *Spectrum*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 21-22 May 2005
- Blake, Robert. 'The art of biography', in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, St Martin's Press, New York, 1988
- Bradbury, Malcolm. 'The telling life: some thoughts on literary biography', in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, St Martin's Press, New York, 1988,
- Brady, Shane. 'The joke's on us', (*Summer Herald*), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 2007
- Brien, Donna Lee. *John Power (1881-1943): Artist and Benefactor*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1991
- Brogan, Hugh. 'The biographer's chains', in *The Troubled Face of Biography*, Eric Homberger & John Charmley eds, St Martin's Press, New York, 1988
- Bruce, Candice. 'Heritage, by Mary Edwards', in *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book, 500 Works by 500 Australian Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955*, Joan Kerr ed, Craftsman House Art & Australia Books, Sydney, 1995
- Buckley, Brad and Conomos John eds. *Republics of Ideas: Republicanism, Culture, Visual Arts*, Pluto Press Australia and Artspace, Sydney, 2001
- Bullock, Alan, Stallybrass, Oliver and Trombey, Stephen eds. *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, Fontana Press 2nd edn, HarperCollins, London, 1988
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- Butler, Rex ed. *Radical Revisionism: an Anthology of Writings on Australian Art*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2005
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- Carl, Frederick. 'Joseph Conrad', in *The Craft of Literary Biography*, Jeffrey Meyers ed, Schocken Books, New York, 1985

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- . *Australian Humanities Review*, vol 24, Dec-Feb, 2001-2002
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- Clendinnen, Inga. *Dancing with Strangers*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2003
- . 'Plenty Humbug', *Agamemnon's Kiss. Selected Essays*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 2006
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- Donaldson, Ian. 'Introduction' in Ian Donaldson, Peter Read & James Walter eds, *Shaping Lives: Reflections on Biography*, Humanities Research Centre, Monograph Series, No.6, Australian National University, Canberra, 1992
- Downer, Christine. 'Art in exile, away from that great god overseas', *The Age*, 21 November 1992
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